ETHICS

What role do ethical considerations play in the calculations of policymakers? To what extent the consideration of right and wrong, good and evil, influence their decisions? Are moral issues and value questions raised just for propaganda purposes, or do they really have an impact on the people who make policy? These are some of the questions which are asked while discussing the role of ethics in international relations.¹

Ethics are often important in the formulation of long range goals, particularly those dealing with the kind of international system one hopes will develop. Ethical factors will also influence the selection of specific policies considered to be appropriate in achieving such objectives. Various policymakers have advocated and sought to achieve a system of equal, free, and self-determining nationalities, each organized in its own state and living peacefully side by side. Ethical considerations such as these may influence long range desires and be in the back of the policymakers mind in their daily routine, as such they will be persistent component in the policymaking process, although their impact will vary with time and circumstances.²

Ethical concerns also affect the self image one possesses. Many state's policymakers apparently come to assume that their nation is a repository of all moral virtues and other states are just waiting in line for enlightenment. This is the case with many states, be it our own country, or America, Britain, Japan or Germany or any other state. Somehow people feel that "our way" is ethically superior and other states will surely see this and request us to share our bounty. In such a situation the policymaker's approach to all situations will be conditioned by his or her ethical self image.
Lest one may misunderstand, however it should be recognised that this phenomenon is not the province of any one state but instead is rather common. Each party tends to see itself as the most virtuous, both in general terms and in the context of each particular situation. This is not a new phenomenon, of course. As John Stoessinger pointed out in his study of all developments leading to the First World War, the major policymakers of all belligerent states in the conflict tended to see themselves as honourable, virtuous and pure. For example the policymakers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire believed that they were fighting to protect what in their eyes was the Bastion of European Civilisation. Thus they did not even consider the possibility that their attack on Serbia would be an act of aggression. Austro-Hungary as they saw it, was preserving what was good and virtuous, and they were not only doing what was necessary to achieve their objectives; because they were the most ethical party, and they had an obligation to act, and to act successfully.

Ethical considerations may also provide the catalyst for action, or make the action much more intense. This would be either because of the substance of what was done or because of the manner in which the actions were carried out. Both these factors had an impact, for example on the American policymakers and their decision to enter the First World War. When President Wilson said that the United States entered war to make the world safe for democracies, ethical considerations were critical in his mind. The real resentment was aroused by Germany's violation of American rights and the gentlemanly code of international ethics and decency. In the American view German policy was deliberately and unalterably inhumane, autocratic, militaristic, expansionistic, and utterly barbaric, in it's standards of international conduct. On the other hand, they were convinced that the preservation of American ideals, interests and civilisation itself depended on British victory.

Finally and rather critically, ethical concerns often act as a constraint; certain objectives or means are modified or rejected for ethical reasons. Take the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, where Americans were considering an alternative of surgical air strikes, surprise bombing raids on Cuba. But it reminded them of the surprise attack on the Pearl Harbour, and so America rejected the option of bombing.
The fact that the policymakers often take ethical factors into account when formulating and implementing policy seems established beyond doubt. But this simple statement, while very important, does not give the whole picture. For one thing there are cases where this does not occur, such as the Katyn Forest massacres of Polish Officers, or the Nazi slaughter of Jews in the Second World War. One must be aware of the fact that ethical statements are deliberately used to rationalise and/or hide unethical behaviour. It also seems apparent that the people seek to interpret their behaviour in a way that seems just and correct, and are often able to manipulate facts and situations to this end. Sometimes, if considering ethical issues would be inconvenient or embarrassing, policymakers may just ignore them or refuse to deal with them.

Another difficulty is the natural psychological tendency, to interpret the same behaviour as ethical if "we" do it and unethical if "they" do it. When the Japanese bombed the Chinese cities in the 1930s killing non-combatants, they were condemned for immoral behaviour. Germany's massive attacks on Coventry, London and Rotterdam received similar disapproval. However the Allies presumed their actions to be justified when the massively bombed the German cities or even when they dropped the Atom Bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Since there is no sense of community and no central governing institutions in international politics, each party is the definer and interpreter of the ethical factor in any situation. Given the differences in perception, objectives, and means it is obvious why so many differences arise.

Another problem for policymakers is that it is often terribly difficult to determine what is or is not ethical in a specific case. For example in September 1938 the British Prime Minister Chamberlain agreed to allow certain territories of Czechoslovakia to be taken over by Germany, at the Munich Conference. He believed that the German claims were somewhat justified on ethnic grounds and that this agreement would ensure long term peace. The Second World War began a year later. His actions were surely unwise, were they also unethical? One can argue for both sides of the question with valid arguments. Or take the case of the Korean War, which began in June 1950, by mid 1951 the fighting had stabilised and the armistice negotiations began. Most issues were resolved quickly but the question of returning prisoners of war stalemated
the talks. The U.N. insisted that no one should be forced to return to his country against his will, surely an ethical question. But the Chinese resisted, they held that everyone should be returned irrespective of their wishes. While the talks were floundering the killing and maiming and wounding went on. The dilemma is: Was the U.N. position more ethical than if it had agreed to return the P.O.Ws and stopped the carnage? Again valid arguments could be given for both point of views.

Another facet of this problem arises because of the fact that there are no Universal Standards of Ethics. Different people have different cultures and social structure, and different cultures and social structures spawn different ethical questions. What is considered good or bad varies from state to state. Policymakers' conception of what is just and ethical are at least partly shaped by their culture and social structure. Because of these facts policymakers from different states will almost inevitably have different conceptions of what is or is not ethical. It is hard enough to find agreement on what is ethical between people from the same culture and social structure. Thus when cultural and structural variations are added the problem is compounded.

An eternal ethical question is: To what extent does the end justify the means? Is it ethical to help a dictatorship survive if it helps oneself? Was Churchill's willingness to ally with Stalin in order to defeat Hitler ethical? To what extent are bombing raids, that kill innocent people too, justifiable if one believes one is fighting a just war? Was the atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed more than 100,000 people justified? It was justified on the ground that one million lives were saved, which would have been lost if Japan were to be occupied by the strength of conventional weapons only. Was the decision to use the Bomb ethical, and the related question if bombing both the cities was required? Or take the recent example of the war with Iraq, was such widespread destruction of civilian areas justified? Another important point to be noted is that, in many situations in which the decisionmakers involved do not even ask the question, because to them the answer appears to be self evident. For example, in the Second World War American policymakers did not even discuss whether the atomic bomb should be used, they discussed only when, where and how. As they saw it, given the objective it was obvious that it should be dropped, that the end justified
The question of the extent to which the end justifies the means is raised with particular poignancy by the use of terrorist tactics by national liberation organisations. Such organisations are seeking to create a new state and/or obtain control of one. In their quest to attain this objective frequently the policymakers of national liberation organisations have determined that tactics of spectacular violence would prove useful to move towards achieving the end. In their own eyes they are freedom fighters or patriots, involved in a war for independance as such innocents of course, will get hurt, but this is war and the cause is just. Thus if the I.R.A plants a bomb in London and civilians are killed or the P.L.O. hijacks an Israeli airliner, or the Punjab Militants blow an Indian airliner, it is simply a necessary part of the struggle. Obviously the targets view it differently. Is it ethical to seek to harrass one's opposition, to increase social and political disunity, to wear down the adversary, to focus world attention to one's cause, by methods that are deliberately calculated to kill and wound civilians? Here does the end justifies the means?

How does one compare one act with another? Which was more ethical or unethical, the starving to death of over a million Russians by the German siege of Leningrad in the Second World War, or the British-American raids over the German city of Dresden, in which 135,000 lives were lost? Is the high altitude bombing more ethical than face to face gunning down of more than 100 Vietnamese peasants by the American troops at Mylai or the mass execution of South Vietnamese by the Viet Cong around the city of Hue in the 1968 Tet offensives? Was American action of pumping sophisticated arms into Pakistan, in the guise of helping, leading to great bloodshed not only in Afganistan but also in the Indian states of J&K and Punjab, or the training and arming of L.T.T.E. cadres by the Indian Government during Indira Gandhi era?

Policymakers find themselves confused and in troubled waters where ethical factors are concerned. It is clear enough that questions of right and wrong enter into a wide range of calculations but it is also obvious that sometime they don't and sometimes ethics is deliberately used to rationalise or hide what really is happening. Additionally, it is unfortunate but true that each party tends to think that it is
the most ethical one. Finally very often it is just not clear what is or is not the most ethical thing to do. This being so all a policymaker can really do is to analyse carefully the specific situations with those considerations in mind, and attempt to ascertain what elements characterise the particular case.

IDEOLOGY

Ideology can be defined as the more or less coherent and consistent sum total of ideas and views on life and the world, that guides the attitudes of actual, or aspirant power holders. This concept, the complex of ideas that supposedly explain past and present plus providing guidelines for the future. They are also known as belief systems, doctrines, or social myths. Regardless of the label on it, it roughly translates as one's world views. Generally the policymakers are concerned with the operational effects of this phenomenon. To what extent do these ideas and views on life and world, influence the actual formulation and implementation of foreign policy? Are they primarily only general idea systems that effect long range goals only or do they impinge upon specific details too? Are they more or less important than other considerations such as law, ethics, capabilities etc. or less so? These and similar questions may be critical as the policymaker tries to understand and anticipate the actions of his opposite numbers. Unfortunately there are seldom any clear cut answers.

The term ideology may be viewed as a self contained and self justifying belief system that incorporates an over all world view and provides a basis for explaining of reality. All ideologies proprot to embody absolute truths, reinforced with certain supernatural justifications. Thus adherance to the system is not only a rational but also a moral act.

There is usually a mixture of both ideology and realist appraisals, though it is varying in degree, in the formulation of the foreign policy by almost all states. Every state is equipped with a priority system for the determination of foreign policy goals and tactics. There are
certain types of decisions in which either ideology or pragmatism predomi-
•
•
•

nate, and between these extremes some sort of a balance is sought to

be achieved. Ideology plays the smallest role in situations where the

choices are most restricted, but becomes increasingly effective when

there is great freedom of choice of alternative action possibilities.

Ideology and national interests both have their roots in a system

of values, but they differ in how they dictate action. Ideological formul-

ations make generous use of concepts of inevitability or impossibility, and

lead to one dimensional foreign policy thinking. On the other hand,

pragmatic national interest is fixed only in its view of the future,

and is infinitely flexible in its intermediate goals and objectives

and in the tactics adopted for their achievement.9

Ideology may of course, become the basis for formulating national

interest and long range goals. If these aspirations are deeply rooted

in the social dynamics of a people, and if the government is adept at

tactics, a successful foreign policy is possible. But if ideology intrudes

into situational analysis and state action is made dependent on impressi-

ons of belief, statecraft in the classical sense is left helpless.10

National Prestige

To be well thought of, a state must decide the characteristic with which

it wishes to be favourably identified. It may elect to acquire prestige

by military strength, by a reputation for astute diplomacy, by a high

standard of living, by an advanced cultural and or technological level,

or by conspicuous dedication to certain abstract principles such as

freedom or justice. It may elect several of these to make up a prestige

package.

There are different ways by which high prestige may be demonstrated.

Does the state wish to be respected, feared, admired, loved, emulated

or disliked. All are, given appropriate circumstances equally valid

ways of demonstrating high prestige. Which one, a state chooses depends

largely on the policy results it wishes to achieve.

Contemporary concerns with matters of prestige and status in world

politics has led to a concern with the "image" a state projects in the

course of carrying out its world role.11 Each self conscious state tends

to formulate the most desirable ego image, and then seek to project

it and gain its wide acceptance abroad. These images vary widely according
to the views and values each society prizes. One state may project strength another culture, a third moral integrity, a fourth cunning and resourcefulness and so on. Dissemination of the controlling image and its manipulation for the state's policy purposes are the major tasks of mass media in foreign affairs.

Image projection is an elusive business even within a homogeneous society with a stable value code and the available resources of the communication industry. In world affairs the image that one state holds of another is only partially the result of deliberate projection by the government concerned. It is also made up of historic impressions, random and uncontrollable events that come to symbolise the state, unintentional propaganda and the image of that particular state which other governments, for their own purposes, choose to project.

National concern with image projection has had a clear impact on the formulation and conduct of foreign policy. Many states insist on adhering to their image in performing the routine and special tasks of foreign policy. A state committed to the image of strength may overlook the opportunities for successful compromise. A state conceiving itself as superior in culture may be caught in irrelevant posturing with no policy content. The dangers of "imagery" in foreign policy frequently overshadow whatever gain it may promise.

RELEVANCE OF MORALITY IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

When we consider the role of morality, ethics or a standard universally recognised code of behaviour for states while operating in the international arena, we are confronted by a particularly ticklish problem. However a few observations can be attempted.

First of all, the conduct of international affairs is the responsibility of a government. For purely practical reasons, this is unavoidable and inalterable as such what we are talking about, when we attempt to relate moral considerations to foreign policy, is the behaviour of governments, not of individuals or the entire people.

Second, we must recognise that the functions, commitments, and moral obligations of the government are not the same as those of an individual. Government is an agent not a principal. Its primary obligation is to the interests of the national society it represents, not to the moral
impulses that elements of that society may experience. The interests of the national society for which the government has to concern itself are basically those of its military security, the integrity of its political life and the well being of its people. These needs have no moral quality. They arise from the very existence of the state in question and from the status of national sovereignty it enjoys. They are the unavoidable necessities of a national existence and therefore may not be subject to classification as either "good" or "bad". When it accepts the responsibilities of governing, implicit in that acceptance is the assumption that it is right that the state should be sovereign, that the integrity of its political life should be assured, that its people should enjoy the blessings of military security, material prosperity and a reasonable opportunity for the pursuit of happiness. For these assumptions the government needs no moral justification, nor need it accept any moral reproach for acting on this basis.

We must note that there are no internationally accepted standard of morality to which a government could appeal if it wished to act in the name of moral principles. It is true that there are certain words and phrases sufficiently high sounding, that most governments when asked to declare themselves for or against, will cheerfully subscribe to them, considering that such is their vagueness that the mere act of subscribing to them carries with it no danger of having one's freedom of action significantly impaired. When we talk about application of moral standards to foreign policy, therefore we are not talking about compliance with some clear and generally accepted international code of behaviour. If the policies and actions of a government are to conform to a moral standard, those standards shall have to be its own. That is they would have to be the standards of justice and propriety of the society of the state, to which the particular government belongs. Secondly, when other fail to conform to these set of principles, and when their failure to conform has an adverse effect on the particular state's national interests, the state has every right to take retaliatory action. What the state cannot do is to assume that its moral standards are also acceptable to its opponents, and to appeal to those standards for its grievances.16

Machiavelli's observations regarding "good faith" are equally applicable to international morality:
"How laudable it is for a prince to keep good faith and live with integrity, and not with astuteness, everyone knows. Still the experience of our time shows those princes who have done great things who have had little regard for good faith, and have been able by astuteness to confuse men's brains and have ultimately overcome those who made loyalty their foundations. Therefore, a prudent ruler ought not to keep faith when by doing so it would be against his interest, and when the reasons which made him bind himself no longer exist. If men were all good, this precept would not be a good one, but as they are bad, and would not observe faith with you, so you are not bound to keep faith with them."

This is not to say that morality and ethics have no place in international relations. Though states ought to follow moral standards of their own making, but they should do so with prudence and care and must not allow the idea to bowl them over. For example Nehru was bowled over by the moral standards set by Indian independence movement. He did not realise that all states did not accept their validity. This oversight caused him to pay insufficient attention to, and allot inadequate resources to national security, resulting in the debacle of 1962, causing loss of national prestige, confidence besides territorial losses.

Nevertheless, certain welcome changes, seem to be taking place. The world is increasingly becoming a smaller and smaller place, given the advances made in communications and transportation technologies. In the recent years there has been a rebirth of an intellectual moral consensus. An international moral consensus is a necessary prerequisite of, and hopefully a precursor of building up of a universally acceptable International Standards of Behaviour.

A world divided into a set of sovereign states, each busily perfecting and promoting its own nationalistic morality, has long been held incapable of mustering adequate agreement to permit formulation of International morality. Ideologies cutting across national and ethical lines, provide a broader base of moral action than state morality, but ideological conflict represents a movement away from consensus rather than toward it.

The modern technologies that has made war so destructive has also brought states into closer physical contact with each other. Especially
in the United Nations and other international meetings and conferences. Individuals and governments are jointly exploring the larger issues of the age and discovering, often to their surprise, that their moral judgements are astonishingly similar. From this new awareness of their common interest in a single destiny, has emerged a beginning of a true International Morality, or at least we hope so.

Any international morality must necessarily weaken the narrow bonds of nationalism. Although this is still a highly nationalistic age, the character of mass national identifications is perceptibly changing. In some areas a clear decline has set in, in others nationalism is still seeking new directions, and in still others it continues to seek larger units of loyalty.

The new force of international morality, a force that is as yet peripheral, is given form by means of an international consensus. Whether expressed formally in the General Assembly of the United Nations, or informally by the intangibles of the world opinion, collective moral judgement is now a situational factor that policymakers must take into account.

International moral restraint is, of course, powerless to prevent great powers from taking single overt step or even from launching a particular policy. It probably never will be an instrument for casting an effective vote on a unique event. Its role up to the present has been to help condition the climate of decisionmaking for both large and small states by developing clearer and more restrictive limits within which the state system can move. Nor is it likely that its negative restraining function will ever be overtaken in importance by a positive and goal-postulating role. Morality may define the permissible for states, but not the mandatory.19

However the logic of technology and the evolving mutual awareness of individuals have combined to make moral judgements again relevant to the course of world politics. The recognition of mutual vulnerability has created a newly born international criteria of evaluation available to individuals elsewhere. Its usefulness so far, although admittedly limited, argues for its continued and more extensive application. Morality, international as well as internal, will continue to be a limitation on state action, difficult to define but increasingly impossible to ignore.