



Realism and National Interests

By: Daniel Larison - June 17, 2013

Noah Millman uses last week's decision on arming rebels to ask a broader question:

Is there a convincing realist explanation for America's Syria policy? And if not – if American policy is being driven by forces divorced not only from the national interest but from a clearly-discernable parochial interest of the regime or powerful interest groups – then what are the implications for realism as a descriptive theory of foreign affairs?

In practice, a government has its own definition of the national interest, and that definition may or may not be correct. Many of our political leaders define U.S. "vital interests" so broadly that there sometimes seems to be nothing in the world that doesn't involve them. Related to this is the widely-shared conceit that the U.S. must exercise "leadership" in response to virtually every crisis and conflict, and this responsibility to "lead" is usually justified by referring to the many interests that the U.S. supposedly has in the surrounding region that the conflict threatens. When critics of this hyper-activist foreign policy express the desire for the U.S. to behave as a "normal" country, we are saying that this overly broad definition of the national interest needs to be scrapped and a much more focused, limited one put in its place. Like anything else in political life, the meaning of "national interest" is contested, and the definition we give to it determines the kind of foreign policy we have.

According to the extremely broad definition, the U.S. has an interest in inflicting damage on Iran and its allies as part of a competition for influence in the region, and to that end the U.S. is supposed to aid anti-Iranian forces wherever they might be found. It treats Iran as if it were a major threat whose influence has to be rolled back. There is some internal coherence to this view, but its core assumptions are delusional. They are based on an obsession with limiting Iranian influence that doesn't actually seem to promote U.S. or regional security, and as I believe we're seeing in Syria this obsession is contributing to making the U.S. and the region less stable and secure. That is what many Syria hawks think the U.S. can and should be doing, and to the extent that the administration agrees with their underlying assumptions that is what explains Obama's very bad decision.

Of course, the phrase "national interest" can be abused and its meaning stretched beyond the breaking point. Most supporters of the Iraq war believed or claimed to believe that launching an illegal invasion and overthrowing a weak dictatorship on the other side of the planet was vitally important for U.S. security. Judged by a less expansive definition of national interest, this seemed and still seems completely wrong, but if you accept a whole host of bad assumptions it might start to seem plausible. Governments can perceive a "national interest" in a foreign conflict or in another part of the world where none exists, and one reason for this is that governments can and do perceive foreign threats that aren't real. For instance, because Britain wrongly perceived a Russian threat to its empire in South Asia, that dictated that Britain usually take a very pro-Ottoman line on the Eastern Question, attack Russia in support of the Ottomans,

and engage in a senseless rivalry with Russia for more than half a century. British fears were ultimately unfounded and its rivalry with Russia was unnecessary, but provided that we accept that the British government perceived a real threat from Russia it makes a good deal more sense.

Adding to the potential for confusion is the broad spectrum of foreign policy views that are commonly described as realist. Justin Logan observed last week that no realists appear to support the Syria policy that is supposed to be characterized by Realpolitik, because they don't share the strategic goals of Syria hawks in trying to inflict damage on Iran. Then again, the realist label often often misleadingly applied to any number of people that probably don't qualify as such in Logan's reckoning. As he suggests, realist is a name that other people give to a policy when they don't like its implications or when they don't know what else to call it, and realism is then blamed for policies that almost all realists oppose.