

Ethics in Foreign Policy: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice

The years following the end of the Cold War have been marked by a renewed interest in ethical considerations, which many believe should be the driving force behind foreign policy. At the same time, a new willingness has been forged in the international community to intervene in other states' internal affairs using ethical justifications for their actions. Ethics, meaning the application of morals to human conduct, has always been a contested topic, but when linking the term to 'foreign policy' one enters a conceptual and practical minefield. This is nevertheless a discussion worth having because it attempts to reconcile interests and ideals, and at the same time contains many paradoxes. In many ways, this discussion also captures the essence of contemporary international relations.

The aim of the section is to reconcile theory and practice when studying the role of ethics in foreign policy. To this end, the following articles explore this role in general, and illustrate through particular case studies the limits of an ethical foreign policy. Included within this debate are several in-depth assessments of theoretical issues concerning the role and evolution of ethical norms and their influence on states, non-governmental organisations, and international organisations. Studies of practical issues of ethical interest, such as landmines and the role of NATO, complement these articles.

When Robin Cook added an ethical dimension to British policy in 1997, in many ways he was asking for potential conflict. In his contribution, the former Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs examines what was accomplished during the four years after 1997 when the new Labour government placed the promotion and protection of human rights at the heart of its foreign policy. Mr Cook's public attempt to anchor policy in morality was a brave and creative step. However, as the contribution from Daniel Thomas demonstrates, ethics and policy have a 'boomerang' quality, often striking back at the attempt to link ethics and policy. Such is demonstrated by the contribution by Paul Williams, who assesses the rise and fall of the 'ethical dimension' in New Labour's foreign policy from a more general viewpoint.

Still, the ethical dimension to international relations is here to stay. In her contribution, Annika Björkdahl analyses the theoretical aspects of the importance of use of norms in foreign policy. The article demonstrates that the concept of norms is useful as an analytical tool and likely to become a lasting element in international relations theory.

Ambassador Dahinden places a key emphasis on non-governmental organisations and the ethical limits of warfare. From this vantage point he goes on to explore aspects of the international response to the worldwide humanitarian crisis brought about by the presence of landmines. From a more pragmatic perspective, Jamie Shea, on the contrary, argues that ethics in international affairs does not end with fine principles and stern moral judgements. In his

contribution he stresses the importance of credible organisations and security capabilities to ensure that democratic values are upheld, and that NATO is and will remain indispensable to this effort.

Ultimately, the saliency of this topic remains. Among other long-standing dilemmas, the US-led 'war against terrorism' once again has brought the role of ethics in foreign policy to the forefront of the international relations agenda.

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