

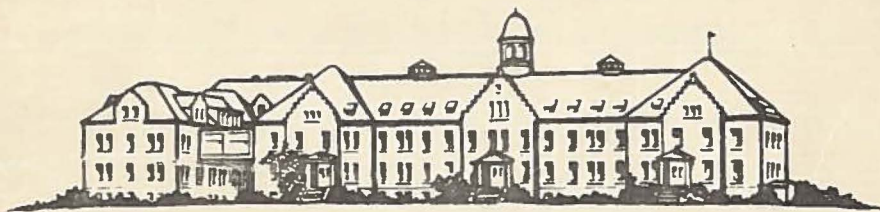
THE UNITED STATES NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

PRINCIPLES OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

A lecture delivered
at the Naval War College
on 21 September 1955

by

Professor Hans Morgenthau



PRINCIPLES OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

A lecture delivered
at the Naval War College
on 21 September 1955

by
Professor Hans Morgenthau

The very title of this lecture, Principles of International Politics, raises a problem. For it is not generally recognized that there is such a thing as objective principles of international politics which are valid regardless of time and place. Certainly, the popular approach to international politics assumes that politics in general, and international politics as well, is nothing more than a kind of guessing game that you can play by ear; something which anybody can understand and can have a judgment about who is able to read a newspaper.

Let me say here, somewhat dogmatically since I do not have the time to prove the point, that international politics is subject to objective principles as much as military or naval strategy is. In a sense you can say that the principles of warfare form part and parcel of that overall sphere of understanding and action which we call international politics. I do not need to remind you of the dictum of Clausewitz, which establishes exactly that relationship. In other words, there can be no science or art of warfare without consideration of the overall context within which warfare must operate--and that is international politics.

What you are doing here--and what the Army and the Air Force are doing--makes sense only from the point of view of international politics. If there were no international politics, if there were no problems of international politics which under certain conditions can not be solved by peaceful means, military preparations would be superfluous and we would not even need military establishments. We must then put our military principles and problems in the context of the principles and problems of international politics, which, under certain circumstances, require solutions of a military rather than a diplomatic, peaceful character.

This trend of thought leads me to a consideration of what international politics is all about. Here, again, we are in the sphere of controversy. It seems to me that international politics--and domestic politics--is in its essence a struggle for power. That is to say, the power of one nation is pitted against the power of other nations. Each nation aims to gain a competitive advantage over the others. Of necessity, three manifestations of this struggle for power on the international scene emerge. There are three objectives which a nation can pursue through the struggle for power on the international scene; a nation can either aim at maintaining the power it has; or it can seek to augment the power it has at the expense of other nations; or it can try to demonstrate the power it has.

Three types of foreign policies correspond to these three objectives of international politics: (1) the policy of the status quo which tries to preserve the power a nation has, which tries to maintain the distribution of power either in the world as a whole or within a certain region; (2) the policy of imperialism, which tries to overthrow the distribution of power as it exists within a certain region, within a certain continent, or in the whole world; (3) on a lower level of importance, the policy of prestige which tries to demonstrate the power a nation has and which is generally at the service of either a policy of the status quo or of imperialism.

Out of this struggle for power engaged in by sovereign nations--that is to say, by nations which have no secular authority above them--emerges the central concept of international politics: the balance of power. Here, again, we are in the field of controversy. Not so long ago, it was generally believed--and especially in this country--that the balance of power was one among several policies a nation could pursue. You will remember the statement of President Wilson to the effect that the First World War would make an end to the balance of power and initiate a new period of international politics, in which the balance of power would be replaced by a community of power. You will also remember that much later, with much more experience behind him, Secretary

of State Hull repeatedly declared--even in his memoirs--that the United Nations would make an end to the balance of power, alliances, the armaments race, spheres of influence; that is, to all those typical manifestations of the struggle for power and the balance of power on the international scene.

This philosophy assumes that a nation has a choice between a balance of power policy and some other kind of policy not tainted with the stigma of power. I believe (and I think that most observers, today, believe) that such a choice does not exist. Certainly, there is for a nation which wants to maintain its very identity no rational choice between a balance of power policy, or power politics as such, and a different, more harmless, more innocuous, more moral type of policy. Either a nation pursues a balance of power policy or it commits suicide as a nation.

The balance of power is not the invention of some evil and stupid or good and wise statesmen. Rather, it is the inevitable result of the very conditions which exist--and must exist--on the international scene. As such, it is not limited at all to international affairs. Wherever you find--domestically or internationally--a number of autonomous units desiring to maintain their autonomy and pitted against each other in a struggle for power, you are bound to find either a system of checks and balances--as we call it in our constitutional affairs--or a

system of the balance of power--as we call it in international affairs. Wherever a multiplicity of such autonomous units exists, each unit must strive to counteract the power of the other units in order to maintain its own autonomy. It must do it in certain typical ways, which, again, belong to the principles of international politics; there is no change with respect to them, and there could not have been any change, since the beginning of history.

Let us take, for instance, the most primitive configuration where Nation A opposes Nation B. Nation A must increase its power until it at least equals the power of B, and B must do the same with regard to A. At this point, there arises already a very significant problem which occurs and reoccurs in the most primitive and in the most complicated international situations: you can never be absolutely sure when such a balance of power is actually reached. You never know with any degree of exactitude whether you have now reached a state of equality with B, or whether B is now somewhat superior or somewhat inferior to you. It is for this reason that all nations, while aiming at a balance of power, must take into consideration a certain margin of error. They must aim at a certain superiority in order to make sure, if they should have been mistaken in their power calculations, that when it comes to the actual test of arms they will have at least equality with,

if not superiority over, the other side. This is one way of pursuing a balance of power policy--to maintain your own strength and increase it.

However, within the international society as it is actually constituted, there are more than two politically active nations. In recent centuries, the state system has known ten, twelve, or fifteen, as the case might have been, active members of approximately equal strength. So A, in addition to B, must also take into consideration the attitudes and the power and policies of C, D, E, F, G, H, and so forth. Thus, a balance of power policy in a multiple state system of necessity develops into a system of alliances and counter alliances. No single nation can afford to increase its own strength indefinitely until it equals or surpasses the strength of all its prospective opponents. Due to greatly increased productivity, the industrially most highly developed nations, such as our own, have much more leeway for using a bigger slice of the national product for purposes of foreign policy than was at the disposal of even the most powerful nations in times past. But even with us, obviously, there is a limit beyond which we cannot go without endangering the political, economic, and social foundations upon which our national existence rests. So it becomes a national necessity to look for outside support for a nation's policies in order to supplement one's own national effort by combining it with

the national resources of other nations. It is here that alliances become a national necessity in the political world as it is presently constituted.

How do you get an alliance? You have to detect if you can, and if you cannot, then create a community of interests which makes it possible for Nations A and C to fuse their national resources against B in an alliance for certain purposes. It is here that diplomacy--that is to say, the day-by-day operations of foreign policy--appear to be of utmost importance. Take, for instance, such an instrument as NATO, which is in its essence an alliance. NATO is based--and it is its only effective basis--upon the political convictions of all of its members that they must merge certain of their economic and military resources against the common danger of outside military attack and domestic subversion.

Take the political objectives of this community of interests away or weaken it, and you will by the same token have destroyed the alliance itself--or, at least, you will have weakened it. Thus, it is not sufficient to add up mechanically the military resources of the members of an alliance: NATO has so many divisions today and it will have so many divisions next year as over against so many divisions of the Soviet Bloc. What is more important from a strictly military point of view--not to speak of the political considerations, of course--is to be

concerned about how strong are today the political foundations and the community of interests, how strong they will be tomorrow; for this community of interests is the very life blood of the alliance. You can test the truth of this statement against the events of very recent times. Take, for instance, the fact that France has moved a number of her divisions to North Africa, a unilateral action taken without consultation with the NATO authorities. As another example, take the actual reduction of military service in a number of members of NATO and the forthcoming reduction in others. The weakening of the fear of foreign attack upon the NATO members has as its direct concomitant a weakening of the military alliance psychologically--and even materially. This is a typical example, which could be multiplied many times, of the interdependence of military and political considerations. I should say right away that this is also an example of the paramountcy of political over military considerations.

Let me say in this connection, just as an aside, a word about the relationship between international politics and international law. There has been in recent times a very strong tendency to regard international law as a kind of self-sufficient entity which somehow, by its own force, could compel international relations--and, more particularly, international politics--to conform to its commands. No legal system--domestic or

international--has such force.

The domestic legal system operates within a social context, from which it receives its vitality. Take that context away, and the legal rules remain a dead letter. We have, today, on our statute books many laws dating back centuries which nobody observes, for which nobody cares, because the social context will neither demand nor tolerate the application of those legal rules. In other words, there is a great difference between the written law--the law of the statutes and of the textbooks--and the living law. This is particularly so with regard to those branches of law which operate within a political context, such as constitutional and international law. You could not know what the Constitution of the United States means today as a living legal organism by consulting the text of the Constitution of the United States or even the first twenty or fifty volumes of the Supreme Court reports. You can only understand what the Constitution means as living constitutional law by consulting the contemporary decisions of our Federal courts and, more particularly, those of the Supreme Court, and by looking at the constitutional practices of the different branches of the Government.

This being so with regard to domestic law, it should not be surprising that the same is true with regard to international

law. The provisions of treaties from which international lawyers quote mean very little in so far as the actuality of international law is concerned, that is with respect to the effect which the rules of international law have upon the actual behavior of States. Take as a classic example, which demonstrates certain characteristics of both constitutional and international law, the Charter of the United Nations. You could not even guess what the actual practices of the United Nations are today, the way in which, for instance, the General Assembly operates or the Security Council does not operate, by consulting the Charter of the United Nations. What the Charter of the United Nations tells you about the organization is but a caricature of what the United Nations has actually become. You have to look at the minutes of the General Assembly, you have to read the records of the Security Council in order to understand how completely the political weight of the United Nations has shifted from the Security Council to the General Assembly, and to what extent, in consequence, the intentions and the philosophy of the Charter have been disavowed by the actual development of the United Nations.

The same is true of the general rules of international law. Take the rules of war. Look at the textbooks, look at Oppenheim and Lauterpacht and read about the rules of maritime warfare, which allegedly are valid rules of international law. Then

look at the practices engaged in by all maritime nations in the two World Wars and note how few of those rules are still observed, and how few of those which have been violated are actually enforced through sanctions. In a period of history, which finds the system of the balance of power in a crisis, its inflexibility being much greater than it was before, international law is correspondingly in a state of crisis; and its traditional rules are much less of a guide to understanding and assessing the actions of State than they were in times past.

I should say, again in passing, that this relationship between the very existence and the very effectiveness of international law on the one hand, and the balance of power as the basic principle of international politics on the other, was recognized in certain periods of history. I have made a comparison between the early editions of the famous textbook of Oppenheim and compared them with those which later on have been edited by Judge Lauterpacht. The difference is surprising, in so far as the references to the balance of power are concerned.

Oppenheim makes the point several times and with great emphasis in his original work that the balance of power is one of the cornerstones of international law. Only when there was a relatively stable and relatively equal distribution of power amongst several nations could the rules of international law be enforced by one nation against the other. In the relations

between a very powerful and a very weak nation, international law cannot be enforced, obviously, against the powerful nation. The weak nations, unassisted by strong ones, will not dare to violate international law, and the powerful nations can violate it with impunity. It is only where there exists a certain balance, a certain equilibrium, that you have the social environment conducive to an effective system of international law. In the succeeding editions of Oppenheim's work, all such references to the balance of power have been omitted. International law appears now as a self-sufficient system, which, in some miraculous way, can impose its own rules upon a recalcitrant reality without any reference to the social environment.

From our consideration of alliances and counteralliances another principle follows with absolute inevitability: that is the principle of the armaments race, which is simply another word for the competitive increase of power on either side of the alliance scheme. It follows that the stopping of the armaments race and the consequent reduction of armaments is not a technical but a political problem. In the same way in which the armaments race is a mere symptom of fundamental power-political configurations on the international scene, so disarmament is a mere symptom of the abatement of the struggle for power among certain nations.

It seems to me that this is theoretically incontrovertible,

and it is also borne out by the history of disarmament itself. There are a few instances in which disarmament has been actually successful. Where it has been successful, it has been so only as a by-product of a political detente which preceded it. It has been successful in the relations between the United States and Canada, manifesting itself in the demilitarization of their common frontier and in the naval disarmament of the Great Lakes, after the outstanding political problems had been settled. It has been successful--temporarily, it is true--in the relations amongst the great naval powers, codified in the Washington Treaty of 1922. The naval disarmament agreed upon at the Washington Conference was the technical by-product of a political understanding which dissolved the Anglo-Japanese alliance and brought Great Britain over to the side of the United States, in so far as the affairs of the Pacific were concerned. It was this new power constellation which allowed the Anglo-American Powers to impose a naval inferiority upon Japan and codify it in an international treaty. But you will notice that at the very moment when, in 1931, Japan felt strong enough to challenge that political settlement, it also denounced the Washington Treaty of 1922. It seems to me that the present attempts at disarmament are bound to fail if they are undertaken before a political settlement has removed the very causes of the armaments race.

When we speak of power politics, the struggle for power, the balance of power, we use the concept of power--especially in its application to international politics--as though its meaning were self-evident, as if we knew what power means, what the elements of power are, what the different factors are which fall into the equation of a nation's power. Indeed, in a sense we know. In a sense, we are in the position in which St. Augustine found himself when he was asked what "time" is. He said: "If you don't ask me, I know; if you ask me, I don't." We almost instinctively have a general conception of what power means. But when the question is actually raised and we are asked to give a definition of "power," or a description of the elements which go into the power equation, we are easily embarrassed.

Let me say first of all, and in a very elementary way, that national power is not identical with material power. Certainly the number of military personnel which a nation possesses and the quality and quantity of military equipment are a very important aspect of the power of that nation. Yet, an army can be quantitatively and qualitatively superior to the armed forces of another nation and still be inferior in actual battle. Obviously, there are intangibles in the power equation which are not reflected in the material forces which are at the disposal of a nation.

The quality of political and military leadership is

certainly one of the decisive aspects of national power. But here, again, a distinction must be made. A nation can have the most brilliant and successful military leadership--successful within the technical limits of the operations of the military establishment--and it may still be unsuccessful, in so far as the objective of the military effort is concerned, if it lacks adequate political leadership. Here again, I am not talking in strictly theoretical terms but I am referring to examples of very recent history.

From the American point of view, take the military victories achieved in the First and Second World Wars. Compare the brilliance of those victories, reflecting the excellence of the military establishment in all of its manifestations, with their political results. Consider in particular the relationship between political leadership and military effort on the part of the United States in the Second World War. The controversies between the American government and the British government about the conduct of the war, especially in 1944 and 1945 concerning the demarcation of the spheres of military occupation in Germany, revolve around that very problem of the relationship between political and military leadership and the need for political direction to the military effort.

Certainly many of the problems and many of the risks and

liabilities which confront us today on the international scene could have been avoided, or at least minimized, if there had existed in this country in the last years of the Second World War a quality of political leadership commensurate with the quality of our military leadership. A nation can have all of the prerequisites of national power--favorable geographic location, natural resources, intelligent and numerous population, an excellent military establishment--but if it has no political leadership commensurate to the task before it, it is like an enormous body with a small head or no head at all. It cannot move intelligently on its own account. It needs that direction from the political head which conceives and directs the national effort and at the same time imposes limits upon the different operations of which the national effort consists.

National power is a much more complicated phenomenon, a much more subtle conglomeration of a number of tangible and intangible elements than one is inclined to think when one uses for the first time the term "national power." I should say a word in this connection not only about political leadership in foreign affairs but also about political leadership in domestic affairs, that is, what we may call the "overall quality of government." Here again, the pages of history are replete with instances of nations which had all of the qualities--human and material--that go into the making of national power, but which

were consistently or temporarily lacking in good government in their domestic affairs; therefore, they descended from the summits of power, or never reached them.

Take--what is to me, at least--a classic example: the example of Spain, a nation which is endowed with many attributes that go into the making of power but which has been a weak nation for centuries because, primarily, of the consistently poor quality of its government. The overall and, more particularly, the moral quality of domestic government becomes doubly important in a period of history when much of the struggle for power is carried on not through the traditional media of diplomacy and war, but through the more subtle medium of the struggle for the minds of men; a period in which much of the struggle for power among nations--or civilizations, if you wish--aims at the allegiance of hundreds of millions of people through the instrumentality of persuasion. For in such a situation whatever a nation does, or the government of a nation allows to be done within the confines of its territory, has a direct impact upon the power of that nation abroad. For it either improves or diminishes the position which that nation occupies in the competitive struggle for the minds of men.

I have only been able to give you (as you fully realize) some tidbits--really, some fragments--of the topic of this lecture. But I shall conclude with the same thought with

which I started; for I am convinced that without the recognition of the truth of that thought no fruitful theoretical study of international politics is possible. That is the assumption upon which I started--not only today, but in all of my work in this field--that there is such a thing as objective principles in international politics, as there is such a thing as principles of economics or principles of warfare which men can understand and learn to apply, and which they disregard only at their peril.

