

# IS IT POSSIBLE TO CONDUCT AN ETHICAL FOREIGN POLICY?

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## ABSTRACT

Ethical considerations are frequently used to justify or condemn foreign policy actions. This paper considers if it is possible to conduct an ethical foreign policy, and how ethical foreign policy is perceived across political and ethical frameworks. First, it is argued that across theories of International Relations, there is a recognition that foreign policy actions can be ethical. Second, this paper argues that the meaning of ethical foreign policy depends largely on the framework through which ethical action is understood. Humanitarian intervention is used as a case study to demonstrate how one issue is interpreted through different understandings of ethics. Third, this paper argues that foreign policy actions are inherently contradictory, but that these contradictions should be recognised as part of the decision making process.

*Keywords: Foreign Policy, Ethics, Humanitarian Intervention, Nuclear Deterrence*

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy decisions and their ethical implications regularly feature in public and political discourses in the UK and around the world. As the UK government seeks to identify and define the country's place in the world following its exit from the European Union, foreign policy decisions have been prominent in recent reactions to, and discourses around, the place of ethics in determining the UK's actions on the world stage. Among the most pertinent of these issues are arms exports to Saudi Arabia amid the ongoing war in Yemen (Al Jazeera, 2021), sanctions on Chinese officials over human rights violations in Xinjiang (McGuinness, 2021) and reductions in the overseas

aid budget (McVeigh, 2021). Beyond the UK context, there are also prominent international discourses around ethical foreign policy issues, including Sweden's explicitly feminist foreign policy (Vogelstein and Bro, 2019), foreign interventions in the Syrian civil war (Tisdall, 2018) and multilateral attempts to limit Iran's nuclear programme (Pourahmadi, 2021). The ethics of foreign policy thus appears to be a salient, contested issue which must be fully explored and understood. The fundamental question which these issues raise, and this paper seeks to address, is whether it is even possible to have a foreign policy guided by ethical considerations and, if so, how might this be formulated? As such, this paper will forward three primary arguments. First, it will argue that an ethical foreign policy is possible, and that this premise is supported across theoretical perspectives. This will be demonstrated with consideration of three prominent schools of thought in International Relations (IR) – realism, liberalism and feminism – which can be used to support the role of ethical considerations in foreign policy. Second, this paper will argue that, while an ethical foreign policy is possible, there is no consensus over how – or indeed, if – ethical frameworks should be applied to foreign policy decision making. This is an argument against moral universalism; depending on one's position, the source of ethical actions and the implications for foreign policy vary widely. Three different perspectives on humanitarian intervention will be used to demonstrate how these disparate approaches can affect foreign policy choices. Finally, this paper will agree with Dan Bulley's (2010) argument that ethical foreign policy decisions are intrinsically contradictory. Ethical considerations will rarely, if ever, be the singular concern behind foreign policy action, but this does not negate the ethical nature of such decisions. There will always be inherent contradictions in ethical responsibilities to

different groups or interests, but this should be recognised and embraced as part of the foreign policy decision-making process.

## ETHICAL FOREIGN POLICY & IR THEORIES

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The question of ethics in political theory and IR is not new. For centuries, theorists and philosophers have debated the role of ethics in the political decision-making process. The first section of this paper will argue – through an examination of realism, liberalism and feminism – that a framework for ethical foreign policy can be drawn from all of these theoretical perspectives. Of course, these three perspectives do not represent the full spectrum of IR theory, but their breadth will demonstrate that ethical foreign policy is not restricted to one school of thought.

Realism is the theory of IR which is most often criticised for rejecting the role of ethics in international politics in favour of amoral considerations of power and self-interest. In the introduction to their edited work *Ethics and Foreign Policy*, Karen Smith and Margot Light (2001: 2) argue that policymakers are “steeped in realism” and “scoff at normative theory”. This implicitly positions realism as a framework which is antithetical to ethical considerations. Classical realism emphasises the centrality of power politics in the organisation of the international system, and often rejects the role of ethics entirely. That the name Machiavelli – whose ideas are foundational to political realism – is synonymous with unethical plotting and dishonest conduct is a case in point. Moreover, some prominent realist thinkers such as E. H. Carr (1946: 153) and Hans Morgenthau (1954: 9) explicitly argue that ethical standards are not applicable to actions between states. Furthermore, neorealism has also been criticised for being too bound to a rationalist-statist vision, which leaves no room for ethical considerations (Ashley, 1984: 238-240). However, a more nuanced reading of realism does, in fact, reveal

a consideration of ethics which, despite often being presented as subordinate to structural pressures, is nonetheless present. While concerns over national interests and survival in the international system are central to realist theory, survival is rarely the singular motivation behind foreign policy decisions. As a result, many realist thinkers recognise the limits of power politics and the need to consider ethical dilemmas (Lebow, 2016: 34). Across the spectrum of realist theory, there is widespread recognition that certain ethical standards do apply to states, such as not committing extreme violence against civilians or other states (Donnelly, 2008: 151-156).

Alongside realism, liberalism has historically been the other most prominent perspective in IR. While liberalism’s long history and diverse strands make it difficult to define succinctly, it is widely understood to centre around a cluster of values and ideals, including freedom from oppression, egalitarianism, individual freedom and the fair rule of law (Richardson, 1997: 7-8). Whereas realism stresses the need to respond to the anarchic nature of the international system, liberalism is inherently more optimistic, arguing that “politics can be a force for good [and] that power can help bring about the good” (Vasquez, 2005: 310). In his work on moral and political philosophy, prominent liberal theorist John Rawls (1999) proposes a “Society of Peoples” – as opposed to a society of states – whereby peoples from around the world can interact with each other based on common principles. These principles develop liberal notions of justice and fairness and include human rights, independence, the right to self-defence and adherence to treaties. Peter Lawler (2005: 439) makes the case for classical liberal internationalism, which endorses the notion of the “Good State”. In the framework of classical internationalism, the “Good State” embodies an ethical stance in its foreign policy commitments to other states and the international system (Lawler, 2005: 441-442). Liberal internationalism thus ascribes the state with moral agency. It can thus be seen that, across liberal thinkers, there is a

recognition that ethical conduct is possible in foreign policy actions.

In recent years, feminism has become an increasingly influential perspective within international relations, as evidenced by the fact that since 2014, at least four countries have launched explicitly feminist foreign policy frameworks (Thomson, 2020). Feminist theories of international relations often ascribe a role for ethics in foreign policy, albeit in different ways. Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond (2016: 323) propose that feminist foreign policy is, by its nature, an ethical framework which is guided by cosmopolitan norms of justice and peace. To support this, the authors highlight Sweden's feminist foreign policy which is committed to "ethical principles of inclusion and human security, gender cosmopolitanism, and empathetic cooperation" (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016: 326). Responding to the above argument, Fiona Robinson (2021) argues that a liberal, cosmopolitan approach to feminist foreign policy in fact reproduces existing power relations including gender and racial hierarchies. Robinson (2021: 20-30) instead proposes a "critical ethic of care" which would avoid culture blaming in favour of "situat[ing] practices and traditions in a broader, relational geopolitical and geo-economic context." This approach rejects the equation of ethical foreign policy with universal, moral principles as antithetical to feminism, while still arguing that feminist foreign policy should be based on a more nuanced understanding of ethics (Robinson, 2021: 21).

Evidently, across the diversity of IR theory there is recognition that an ethical foreign policy is, indeed, possible. While there is vigorous debate within each of these schools of thought, the possibility of an ethical foreign policy is evidently supported across a variety of perspectives. With this premise in mind, it is now worth discussing how ethics is defined and understood with regards to foreign policy.

## DEFINING ETHICS

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The way in which ethics is defined has a significant effect on how foreign policy actions are understood and constructed. There are a variety of philosophical frameworks from which moral principles are drawn and ethical behaviour is, in turn, based. For instance, deontological frameworks prescribe adherence to a clearly-defined set of moral rules, which may be based on human reason, divine religious revelation, or another code such as the Kantian 'Categorical Imperative'. Consequentialist frameworks determine ethical conduct by the outcome instead of judging specific acts as intrinsically ethical or unethical. For example, utilitarianism promotes actions which will have the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people (Brown, 2001: 20).

Discussions of humanitarian intervention demonstrate how one issue can be disparately understood in a variety of ethical frameworks. Interventions have raised some of the most significant ethical foreign policy questions in recent years, given the growing prevalence of interventions with cosmopolitan, humanitarian justifications since the end of the Cold War. Since the start of the 21st century, these foreign policy decisions have increasingly been framed in the language of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which emerged following NATO's controversial use of airstrikes in the former Yugoslavia in 1999 (ICISS, 2001). The R2P framework proposes redefining our understanding of sovereignty, such that states have a responsibility to protect their own citizens from extreme violence and oppression and, where unwilling or unable to do so, the international community has a responsibility to intervene, with the coercive use of force if necessary (Chesterman, 2021: 809-814). However, this has led to criticisms of justifying the neoliberal, neo-colonial policies of powerful, Western states (see Mahdavi, 2015; Mamdani, 2010). There is thus a conflict between liberal and post-colonial views as to whether or not humanitarian intervention is ethical.

Consequentialism offers yet another view of the ethics of humanitarian intervention. A

consequentialist interpretation assumes that an ethical outcome maximises human security and reduces suffering to the greatest extent possible (Heinze, 2009: 33). However, there is an inherent contradiction in intervening militarily, in that coercive military action will inevitably produce more short-term violence and death. Furthermore, intervention can produce unforeseen, long-term issues such as political instability and spillover effects into neighbouring countries (Pattison, 2011: 274-275). Therefore, based on consequentialist logic, intervention can only be ethically justified by the existence or likelihood of extreme suffering which is greater than the probable outcome of the intervention itself (Heinze, 2009: 34-35).

While constructivism generally shies away from normative propositions in favour of descriptive accounts, Ralph (2018: 174) proposes that “the constructivist emphasis on the historical and social contingency of a norm does not rule out ethical standpoints but suggests instead a ‘pragmatic’ ethic”. This pragmatist approach shares with the above consequentialist view a commitment to practical judgement and assessment rather than a stringent attachment to a moral principle. Applying this framework to the case of R2P in the Syrian Civil War, Ralph (2018: 192-194) argues that a pragmatic, constructivist approach would reject claims of certainty about the possible outcomes of intervention. The R2P norm was invoked by Western members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) essentially to mean regime change, and this led to a stalemate within the UNSC and ultimately to the lack of any meaningful action to stop atrocities and protect the Syrian population. This is not to argue that regime change would or would not have been the most ethical goal, but to argue that the R2P framework was invoked wholesale, rather than alongside a more pragmatic, historically contingent approach which could have led to a more ethical foreign policy outcome.

Besides this, assessments of humanitarian intervention could also be based on the ethical framework of just war theory. The just war doctrine proposes that while war is undesirable, if certain

conditions are met prior to war (*jus ad bellum*) and during war (*jus in bello*) then it can be ethically justifiable. Nicholas J. Wheeler (2000: 33-34) proposes four criteria under which interventions can be considered ethical: just cause, last resort, proportionality, and high probability of success. In this argument we can see elements of deontological ethics (the cause of solidarity and responsibility is itself just) as well as consequentialism (the outcome must justify the means). The way in which ethics is defined thus has a significant impact on the interpretation of foreign policy decisions.

## ETHICAL DILEMMAS

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Finally, this paper will argue that ethical foreign policy decisions inherently involve political decisions and contradictions, but this does not negate the ethical nature of such actions. As such, this paper supports the argument of Dan Bulley (2010: 454), who states that ethical foreign policy is “no different from other areas of social life.” What Bulley means is that foreign policy decisions will always encompass competing commitments to different groups and interests. Even within the political and ethical frameworks discussed thus far, the question remains: to whom does the state have responsibility in its foreign policy actions? The view that foreign policy actions must be ethically “pure,” without any regard for self-interest, has been branded as “bizarre” given that it is not supported by any framework of political ethics (Brown, 2001: 23). The first section of this paper demonstrated that across the spectrum of IR theory, there is widespread recognition that it is possible for states to include an ethical component in their foreign policy actions. However, it would be reductive to understand any of these schools of thought as solely promoting ethical action at the expense of all other considerations. For example, the realist notion of prudence recognises competing interests and advocates picking the lesser evil in any given situation (Donnelly, 2008: 157-159). Furthermore, the liberal internationalism promoted by the New Labour government in the UK from

1997-2010, which sought to project domestic political values onto foreign policy action, contains within it an “eternal moral dilemma” (Bulley, 2010: 452) between domestic and international commitments.

Thomas Doyle (2013: 160-163) has discussed the ethical argument surrounding whether or not liberal democracies pursue nuclear deterrence. The competing responsibilities of adhering to international disarmament obligations and of preserving the security of liberal democracy from adversaries present an intractable ethical dilemma. On the one hand, the international legal system is predicated on a set of norms to which, in order to cooperate, states must assume that other states will adhere. The norm of *pacta sunt servanda*, whereby states are obligated to adhere to their voluntary treaty commitments, is one such norm (Doyle, 2013: 163). If liberal democracies assume that other legal norms such as territorial integrity and adherence to trade procedures are inviolable, then overlooking commitments towards nuclear disarmament risks accusations of hypocrisy when promoting other norms of ethical conduct. However, arguments against nuclear proliferation assume that more weapons of mass destruction inherently make the world more unsafe and unstable. On the other hand, however, if we assume that the state can act in a moral capacity, then protecting the safety and security of its own citizens is perhaps the most fundamental ethical responsibility of a state. While the notion of self-interest is more pronounced in realism than other schools of thought, it is ethically incumbent upon those acting on behalf of the state to act in the interests of its citizens (Donnelly, 2008: 156). Therefore, the argument for preserving nuclear weapons as a deterrent can, similarly, be constructed as ethical.

As can be seen from this example, opposing positions can be accepted or rejected on the basis of ethical considerations. However, moral universalism, which argues that there is only one possible ethical outcome, is reductive and unhelpful to considerations of foreign policy. There is, in fact, a wide variety of ethical frameworks which must be

considered if a nuanced reading of ethics and foreign policy is to be achieved.

## CONCLUSION

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This paper has forwarded three primary arguments to support the claim that it is possible to conduct an ethical foreign policy. Firstly, three prominent theoretical frameworks in IR – realism, liberalism and feminism – were used to demonstrate that across schools of thought, there is widespread recognition that an ethical foreign policy is possible. Despite mostly being associated with the rationalist-statist approach, a more nuanced understanding of realism reveals acknowledgement of ethical principles, even if subordinate to other considerations; liberalism’s commitment to the values of equality and fairness demonstrates an ethical element at the core of this school of thought; and feminism’s goal of gender equality and emancipation for women is an expression of a normative, ethical standpoint. Secondly, it was argued that different understandings of political ethics lead to disparate perspectives on what constitutes an ethical foreign policy. As a case study, humanitarian intervention demonstrates that the ethical frameworks of consequentialism, constructivist pragmatism and just war theory frame this foreign policy issue in very different ways. Finally, this paper argued that ethical foreign policy decision-making is a contested political process, but this does not negate ethics from being a part of the process. Foreign policy actions inherently contain competing ethical responsibilities to different interests and groups. In summary, it is possible to have an ethical foreign policy, but the plurality of ethical frameworks and considerations mean that the conduct of foreign policy cannot be judged in binary terms as ethical/unethical based solely on a singular ethical perspective.

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