

DEFINING NATIONAL INTEREST

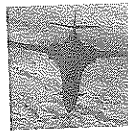
Underlying the behavior of nations is the concept of *interest*. Used in this context, interest means advantage or benefit. The concept of national interest can be likened to a person's *self-interest*.

Most people act out of self-interest. They base their actions on what will be to their benefit or advantage. However, not all people define self-interest the same way. For example, some individuals value financial success more than anything else, so they base their actions on increasing personal wealth. Others value religious ideals and act according to their faith. Still others value power and seek ways to increase their authority over others. Most people act according to their own perception of what is best for them.

On the national level, citizens look to their leaders to carry out policies that promote their nation's self-interest, or *national interest*. At first glance, the idea of national interest may seem fairly simple: It is what is best for a particular nation. But not all citizens of a nation agree on what is best. Perceptions of national interest vary from person to person and evolve over time.

National interest is a combination of the security, economic, and ideological concerns of a nation. Even though every nation in the world tries to meet certain basic needs so it can survive and develop, each nation is unique and has its own set of concerns. Some countries, such as Chad or Bangladesh, are concerned primarily with survival—with feeding their people or protecting themselves from attack. Others, like Niger or Malaysia, seek to develop their natural resources so they can trade them for food and other commodities. Nations such as Japan and the United States have relatively little difficulty feeding their people and are more concerned with the continued growth of their industrial economies. Although every country in the

world has a unique perception of its own national interest, all share three broad concerns: security, economics, and ideology.



SECURITY INTERESTS

The most basic interest of any nation, from the tiny island state of Grenada to the giant People's Republic of China, is ensuring its physical survival. National governments form armies to protect themselves from attack and join military alliances to ensure protection against more powerful foes.

A nation's concern about security depends on its perception of the threat against it. For example, Israel maintains a large, well-equipped army because it is surrounded by hostile neighbors. In contrast, Austria has a small army because of its neutrality during the Cold War, its friendly relations with all European nations, and the protection provided by the Alps mountains on its western and southern borders.

But security interests mean more than just protection against outside attack. A nation must also make sure that social order is maintained and that its citizens are safe from violence and crime.



ECONOMIC INTERESTS

Most countries seek to promote the economic welfare of their people. Economic interests of nations vary according to the availability of resources and the development of those resources.

Developing countries, like many in sub-Saharan Africa, need to procure the basic necessities of life—food and water, shelter, and health care—for their people. They lack the agricultural methods or the manufacturing industries that would enable them to move beyond basic survival. Because they are unable to pro-

duce enough food for their people, they trade raw materials or cash crops for food and advanced technology.

Other nations, such as Germany and Japan, are highly industrialized and turn out a variety of products, including food, industrial machinery, automobiles, computers, and clothing. Developed countries usually produce more than they need. They then export these products, mostly manufactured goods, to other nations in exchange for needed raw materials, other finished products, or money.

The economic growth of many nations depends on their ability to buy and sell products abroad. Their economic interests are determined by the wants and needs of their citizens, the types of products they have to sell, and how developed their economies are.



IDEOLOGICAL INTERESTS

Security and economic concerns alone do not explain why nations behave the way they do.

Ideology—a combination of the beliefs, values, culture, religion, and historical experiences of a nation's people—also plays a role. All nations are interested in protecting their way of life at home, and many try to promote it abroad.

For example, U.S. leaders encourage people around the world to hold free elections because they believe democracy is the best form of government. Iran, on the other hand, believes that governments—particularly in the Middle East and North Africa—should follow the religion of Shi'ite Islam. Iranian leaders encourage other nations to adopt forms of government based on Islamic values and beliefs.

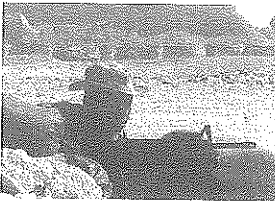
National Interest Concerns

Although every nation has a unique perception of its own national interest, all nations share three broad concerns: security, economics, and ideology. To determine its national interests, a national government assesses threats to its security, the health of its economy, and the strength of its ideology.

NATIONAL INTEREST

SECURITY INTERESTS

- Protecting natural borders
- Maintaining relations with allies
- Ensuring the safety of citizens from violence and crime



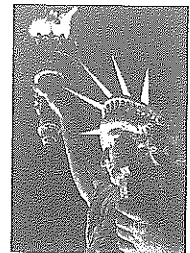
ECONOMIC INTERESTS



- Providing citizens with an adequate standard of living
- Ensuring economic development and growth
- Establishing trade relations with other nations

IDEOLOGICAL INTERESTS

- Supporting a way of life at home and promoting it abroad
- Protecting the cultural and religious heritage of a nation
- Promoting a system of government



These three concerns—security, economics, and ideology—do not exist independently. Often, an economic or ideological concern is also a security concern. For example, if people do not have enough to eat, the stability and therefore the security of their government may be threatened. Some leaders believe that the physical security of their nation depends on adherence to a particular religion. Such leaders encourage their citizens to do

whatever is necessary—including going to war—to defend ideological beliefs.

The responsibility for defining the national interest falls to a nation's political leaders. In each country of the world, a national government assesses threats to its security, the health of its economy, and the general well-being of its citizens to determine its national interest.