



America's Pragmatic Orientation in Foreign Policy and Some Models of International Relations

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Abstract

This work examines the problem of the international consequences of the pragmatic model of American foreign relations currently in application world-wide. As a guiding principle the pragmatically inclined US foreign policy suggests the belief in rule of the strong and might is right as determinants of US relations in the world order. We find that this situation triggers a crisis of turbulent and disruptive global relations between North and South, East and West, that has brought the problem of world peace to the front burner. Wars, conflicts and uprisings in different regions specifically the Middle East, Asia and Africa arouse reflections on our international relations models. Hence the quest for peace understood as creating enduring atmosphere of social justice, negotiation for all in the world. We recommend a more ethical or moral foundations of the present and future role of America as a global player in the search for peace. As such we are concerned with the international aspects especially the ethical dimensions of US leadership features that could enhance world peace.

Keywords: America, Peace, International Relations Leadership, Foreign Policy

Introduction

A crucial international relation question before us is to determine the ways by which the pragmatism of America can be defined as a guiding principle of the US foreign policy and then, if possible, serve as a way of ushering the US and the world out of this almost unending crisis of turbulent global relations so that the prospect for world peace can be brighter. We are concerned with the international relations aspects of US leadership and the way this can enhance peace in the world. Some scholars have drawn attention to this issue. Nobel laureate Soyinka in the work *A Climate of Fear* has drawn attention to the challenge facing American world leadership agenda. The idea is "that the United States has the capacity for technological, military and economic leadership is not in dispute; what the United States lacks is philosophical leadership, despite its formidable reserves of original thinkers" (Soyinka 2004).

So, the question arises: How do we push for a world leadership based on moral sense, which in turn does not send contradictory signals to world peace and stability due to its pragmatic bent? To understand what makes America a really powerful and influential presence, a leader in the international order, we must recourse to the origins of the normative and conceptual basis of that society (Thatcher, 1997, p.48). The American philosophy can inevitably be understood in terms of a set of values. According to Bush "the values of the heartland are engrained in the hearts of America, freedom, responsibility... These values shape our conviction that the promise of America is open and available to all who are willing to work to achieve the American dream" (Bush 1997:7).





It is true that problems facing the global world today have considerably worsened due to the activity of globally pervasive subversive elements at the state and non –state levels that are challenging human values and institutions in an unprecedented manner. This situation has compelled a global leadership response and control that has seemingly jettisoned the culture of dialogue, accountability and respect for consensus on divergent, views and perspectives. This situation is seemingly characteristic of United States foreign policy that has assumed imperialistic and absolutist tones that give rise to ethical shortfalls and geopolitical imbalances. Other parts of the world are thus locked in the throes of two unpalatable alternatives: paternalism or domination, which suggest dependency and incapacity. We are in need of a more fundamentally analytical and philosophical understanding of the dynamics of global discontents and complexities. The research problem is how do we address gaps in human dignity and justice arising from ethical gaps on world leadership?

America's Pragmatism in International affairs

The quest for an American concept of international relations for a changing world must begin by seeking the foundations of American political and ethical life. The belief is strong that if knowledge is to be seen as meaningful then it must be seen as having practical consequences. This is a basic element of pragmatism. The American idea of pragmatism is clearly defined within the outlook of American naturalism. Rajchman (1985: xxv) holds that “pragmatism was widely assumed to be a native American philosophy that grew out of and expressed specifically American traditions: Fordism, Taylorism, American ingenuity, American experimental and entrepreneurial spirit, American exceptionalism”.

The major exponents of American pragmatism were Charles Sanders Pierce, William James and John Dewey (Russell 1995:770). The principle of pragmatism as enunciated by C.S. Pierce implied that, in thinking about an object, we should look at the practicality (Sontag and Roth, 1987, p.321). Rorty (1986,p.214) depicts the possibility of a distinctly American philosophy, but also expresses joy in its existence. Hence, according to West (1985:267), “Rorty's neo-pragmatism is a form of ethnocentric post humanism. He is unashamedly ethnocentric in that he holds that no other civilization is worth choosing over the modern West”. Usually, there exist debates over the strengths and weaknesses of particular cultural traditions. The American philosophical tradition suggests the recollection of pragmatism and liberalism, and the freedom and wealth that have attended these social and cultural values (Rajchman, 1985, p.25).

Ethics of Pragmatism in American Foreign Policy

Let us now connect foreign policy issues with America's pragmatic philosophy of society. Pragmatism in the context of foreign policy suggests a normative instability that ensures that rules and actions retain fluidity in their basic motivations and executions. This is worrisome because it can breed double speak, double standards, deceit and manipulation as the front line of the attack on core human values. What are the effects of “an innate American optimism about the human condition and a view that even complex international problems would eventually prove amenable to rational solutions?” (Dobriansky 1990: 68). How can we reconcile the above view, and its pragmatic insinuations, with the more consequential statement that “a pro-American





authoritarian government battling insurgents should be urged to liberalize but not pressured (through U.S. sanctions) to the point that it collapses” (Dobriansky 1990:670) According to Dobriansky (2003, p.142) “our policy towards a given country is shaped by a variety of considerations, including security concerns, economic issues, and human rights imperatives. The most difficult task of our state craft is to strike the right balance among these imperatives” Beres (1982:109). It is thus clear from the above that there is no specific human value that is central in the pursuit and application of the foreign policy of the USA.

One also wonders about the view that something is true simply due to the fact that it has been done in a particular way for a very long time. If we grant the existence and recognition of core universal values how can we escape from the real fact that as “universal values become more part of the foreign policies of nations, those policies will still be ridden with contradictions and hypocrisies?” (Gelb and Rosenthal 2003: 7). It is difficult to reconcile ourselves with the Machiavellian morality and pragmatic utilitarian impetus of a foreign policy presumption of a world leader who shows by example an inexplicable lack of constancy in respect of identifying the core universal human values that all must uphold. It seems that economic and ideological considerations have emerged to truncate all proper moral sense in foreign policy matters. Let us recall the procedures of labeling and attacking real or imagined dissenters (at home and abroad) as communists just to undermine them, and the more recent concocting of dubious data on military weapons in order to attack and remove a perceived hostile government of another country to pave the way for economic extraction.

Such a situation has social, psychological and cultural consequences. Carothers has expressed this critique most lucidly. In the case of south east Asia “the willingness of the U.S. government to enter into a partnership with a security force that just a few years ago was involved in a horrendous campaign of slaughter and destruction against civilians sends a powerful negative message throughout the region and beyond” (Carothers 2003:89). According to Carothers (2003:145) “Dobriansky’s insistence that there is no tension, and her relentless portrait of the united states as a country uniquely devoted to democracy promotion, is part of rhetorical overkill by administration officials that weakens rather than strengthens this country’s credibility in the eyes of people.” Such unnecessary grandstanding or brinkmanship will not get anyone near to the important issue of re-situating the role of US foreign policy for effective global leadership in the modern age. America must escape from the dual dilemma or murky morass of instrumental valuation and overestimation. Instrumental value will suggest a capacity for mercantilism and unreliability, while overestimation will suggest a perturbing ignorance and essential lack of preparation to take on the daunting responsibilities of the modern global situation.

The above statements clearly suggest some sort of uncertainty or vacillation in respect of the vision and mission of US foreign policy. This vision is specifically, the manipulation or the use of states or groups to serve purposes, which are strictly beneficial to US strategic or national interest. If this is the case the maximum that the US can claim, is a kind of egoism. To this effect, other states are equally obliged to be egoistic to any other state(s). More so, the ascendancy of the US on the pedestal of egoistic conduct denies it of any supposed moral high ground or leadership in the affairs of the world. This point is important because, the USA has sustained or





supported regimes in Africa whose leaders were tyrannical, despicable and killed a lot of African citizens for no just cause, in so far as these rulers (military or civilian) served the interests of the US.

Whereas pragmatism from the American side may well have worked for decades or centuries as the case may be, the modern realities and challenges of the world no longer conform to the crudeness of survivalist pragmatism. Pragmatism, for the sake of argument can be viewed from a perspective that it can lead to a certain concern for operational capacity and performance arising from ability. But the problem with pragmatism is that the modern world is too large, too full of nuances and too complicated to be defined by a directing principle that is strictly speaking a defense of utilitarian propensities or mercantile proclivities. The idea that the world can be ruled by crude egoistic and utilitarian disposition will surely not get anyone anywhere.

If pragmatism is reviewed then it may suggest a denial of core values or essentials that can form the basis of universal or shared norms. It smacks of some kind of egoistic and utilitarian disposition that may not go down well with the diversity and agitation that we see in the world today. Simply put, pragmatism must now seek to reconcile itself with the dictates of morality as seen in the demand for fair treatment, justice; common good and mutual respect across the world. An insincere pragmatism will breed manipulation and defiance that will lead to mistrust, hostility and tension. So, we are looking for more stable and viable models of international relations.

Some International Relations Models for World Order: Plato Hobbes and Machiavelli

Some orientations take it as an axiom that “the name of the game in international politics is power, and there are no moral rules in this game, only the “rules” dictated by prudential self-interest” (Aiken 1982:95). It bears restating that “no nation, no people, no society can achieve and indefinitely retain power, prosperity, influence, and leadership except on the basis of a sound and unshakable moral standard” (Greene 1961, p.381). A long time ago Paton (1942,p.293) had made it clear that “those who say that politics has nothing to do with morality are explicitly denying the doctrine that part of life, namely life as a statesman, is exempt from all moral obligation.” Is it the case that the public realm, political affairs at any level are devoid of morality?

This claim if answered in the affirmative should really be a source of worry for any state. The main reason is that it erodes the possibility of reciprocally or mutually obligatory conduct as well as erases the baseline of minimally acceptable norms. The dilemmatic repercussions of this position of affirming ‘no moral obligation at all’ may well lead to individual and collective mistrust and will make cohabitation impossible. When we take the argument further to the realm of the morality of globalization that is currently in the service of domination and discontent, we see the need for a reassessment. Slater (1977) has put it more boldly when he says that “there can be absolutely no doubt that the rich countries, particularly the United States, could and should have done more, much more, to help the Third World countries develop” (Slater 1977,p.9). Why did they not do this?

Let us quickly observe that there have been different approaches to understanding international affairs. One of these is the cultural theory of international politics of Wendt (1999).





This theory examines the ways in which states view each other either as enemies, rivals or friends, and the consequences of these. These typologies are characterized as cultures of anarchy and described as Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian respectively (Wendt 1999, p.247&257). While recognizing the merit of the above paradigm, this essay adopts a different pathway of analysis as we see below. It employs a different array or cocktail of philosophical theories as an explanation of the international affairs for global justice. The global politics of justice that underlies the American relation with the rest of the world is in need of clarification.

If it is accepted as true, and it is agreed upon, that US internationalism is an indispensable ingredient for US prosperity and global stability then we must interrogate the conception of justice that the US seeks to apply in the world as we know it. From the graphic accounts of the United States foreign policy given earlier, it is clear that the global philosophy of justice currently perpetrated by the USA is defined as “justice is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger” (Johnson 1985:37). This view lends credence to the idea that rulers (national or international) rule in the self-interest. But we also know from history that “the source of all instability in the community lies in the fact that rulers tend to think first of their own families or property interests” (Laing 1933,p.412). In other words, the primary basis of the search for political community at all levels is to define the ways by which individuals (persons or states) can rise above the natural and primordial self-interestedness. This situation is something that must be repudiated, because it will lead to negative results on the long term. There are two immediate consequences of this truncated notion of justice. There will be stultification and stagnation of the exercise of human genius and enterprise, which it is often, claimed that the USA is interested in fostering.

This situation is reminiscent of aspects of the Platonic state or social order defined by a core rigid and totalitarian configuration. The idea of the state and its operations in the modern world order can be understood in terms of core philosophical thinking. Valuable insights in international relations can be discerned from a classical philosopher- Plato. Within the imputed purview of an international quest for order, Plato in his construction of the human order insisted on the vital roles of justice and division of labor as the critical drivers of society. According to him, “justice is doing one’s own business. Justice is having and doing what is one’s own or what belongs to one” (Plato cited in Sommerville, 1963, p.18). The state is organized on the basis of justice “when the trader, the auxiliary and the guardians each do their own business” (Plato cited in Sommerville, 1963,p.19). Therefore, a state is seen as just when “the three classes (namely, the guardians, auxiliaries and artisans) in the state perform their specific functions” (Plato cited in Sommerville, 1963,p.20).

Plato’s insistence that people and structures fulfill their set objective is set against the backdrop of the fact that if one part does not do its own function well then there can be problems of dis-equilibrium, imbalance and destabilization of the human order. Although Plato implies rigidity in the structure of the society so that each individual or group is carved into a social class, yet this position is suspect. Plato’s idea did not give the opportunity for vertical growth and social mobility among the segments of the human society. Plato had insisted on a deterministic, totalitarian and rigidly configured society that would operate almost in a mechanical manner, with immutable configurations of social classes and activities. This idea was contrary to the



known human ability to exercise choice and variation as characteristic features of human nature and human endeavors.

The global vision of ‘might is right’ in so far as it derives from either conquest or contract, will not be tenable because it will translate into a precipitously high rate of ethical decline, violence, mistrust, instability and turbulence in the world order. Arising from this view of sovereignty by conquest is the necessary corollary of an eventual institutionalization of injustice. In this circumstance, even the rich, strong or progressive cannot survive for any lengthy period of time. It will translate into a reversal to the persistent disorder of a Hobbesian state of nature.

Hobbes in his theorizing offers the leviathan immense and illimitable powers over men and materials as a way of guaranteeing security. Hobbes made it clear that the security offered by the leviathan becomes imperative due to the low life expectancy, ominous danger to life and possessions in the state of nature. This state is one of uncertainty and disorder. There is a conception of the international arena as a place where “the purpose and function of the state is to maximize its citizen’s interests (by promoting their welfare and protecting them from harm) over against the interests of those in other associations. This results in a view of nation-states as Hobbesian individuals in a war of all against all” (Aiken 1982, p.99).

For Hobbes, the state of nature is the state of war. It is the state of the violence and anarchy of every one against the other. In this state, every man is against every man. Hobbes informs us that “worst of all, there is a continual fear and danger of violent death. In short, the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes 1963:143). This condition of life is typified by the inability to guarantee survival and peace for any reasonable length of time. The realization of the shortfalls of the state of nature would pave the way for the emergence of the Leviathan. This is because the equality of men gives rise to a condition of mutual destruction in which no man can be sure of emerging victorious or subsisting for a reasonable length of time (Hobbes 1963:142).

Against the background of the absence of a common power, law, notions of justice and injustice, right and wrong in the state of nature, Hobbes says that the passions and the reason of man lead him to search for peace. Man’s quest for peace arises from his fear of death, and his desire for those resources necessary for adequate living. By desiring peace and co-operation, man uses reason to fashion some convenient articles of peace out of the right and law of nature. For Hobbes, contract is the name given to the mutual transfer of rights among men. It is the basis of the commonwealth, which exists in order to ensure that lives are preserved and made happy. Hobbes notes that “this common power can be one man or an assembly of men” (Hobbes 1963:148). Indeed, the commonwealth is the aggregation of an institutional arrangement of a multitude that has covenanted through the social contract to form and live in the society in order to assure themselves of mutual defense, peace, progress and protection from internal and external dangers. The power of the sovereign, conceived as either the ruler or the society, is central to attaining order. Hobbes’s theory did not fully account for the dangers arising from the illimitable powers that were bestowed on the sovereign as ruler.

Hobbes did not reckon with the fact that these powers would pave the way for dictatorship, primitive accumulation, misappropriation, authoritarianism and the eventual denial



of security of lives and property. In short, there would be a descent into Machiavellian proclivities, where no man is substantially sure of the motives and conduct of others. For some scholars the philosophical analysis of the Hobbesian state of nature is not a conceptual or theoretical construction. It may well be practical. It has been opined that at a particular time in human history that is not so far away “the state of nature so gloomily described by Hobbes as the condition out of which men have emerged, seems to be embodied in the international situation as it actually exists” (Paton 1942, p.291).

One of the immediate shortfalls of the Platonic and Hobbesian view of the international affairs is the spectral descent into the Janus-faced nature of the first principle of Machiavellianism. Note that the ultimate end of Machiavellian outlook is the collective security of all. Yet the question is: where do we draw the line, in the quest to achieve the good of all? The Machiavellian view states that “the ruler must make use of both the beast and the man in human nature; he must appeal to reason and be prepared to use force or fraud if that fails” (Adams 1975, p.378). The Manichean foundations of the dual ordinances appropriated in the clarification of the US relations with the rest of the world especially Africa, will only crystallize into “thinking in terms of opposed extremes. This is certainly what has happened when we start positing a United States of America which is either virtuous and inept or wicked and efficient” (Adams 1975, p.367). The effort has been to analyze these general philosophies that we have found objectionable as foundations of a viable global leadership and explanation of the ethical basis of world affairs. Another aim has been to show the inherent failures of US domination and foreign policy in relation to Africa. We must now examine the ethical and normative implications of the neoliberal capitalist ideological basis of the American pragmatic posture in globalization and world relations.

Values and the Quest for World Peace

From the above analysis we must draw attention to the view that the United States must develop “a realistic sense of the strengths and limits of its power” (Nye 1990:3) and that an “effective U.S. foreign policy has to be grounded in considerations of both security and morality” (Huntington 1976, p.7). This time, the considerations must be for all affected and not exclusive to some privileged groups. These points are important in view of the desire to forestall or avoid failure, generate hostility and arouse the intent to subversion of its internal and international interests. It has been rightly observed by Greene (1961:388) that “a destitute, hungry and troubled multitude can hardly be expected to pay much heed to ‘codes’ of any kind, moral, ethical, or religious.” This multitude is none other than the rest of the developing world, especially the bulk of the inhabitants of parts of Africa, Middle East, Asia and Latin America plagued by nationally and internationally induced crisis. It ought not to be a surprise that we are experiencing the peculiar entrenchment and exportation of variants of transnational social problems such as terrorism and violence from the Arab world, fraud and drug issues from Africa, forced immigration and drugs from Latin America and human trafficking and sex slavery from Asia.

These problems have heated up the global polity to a high level that is severely threatening the security and peace of the north Atlantic countries especially America. As Beres (1982, p.129) aptly put it “it is no longer possible to cite as “realistic” a foreign policy of national





advantage that is at cross purposes with the spirit of worldwide dignity and well-being. The significant defects of these approaches to US relations with the world will hopefully lead to the realization that “unless the United States begins to recognize that its own interests must be defined from the standpoint of what is just for the system as a whole, these interests will not be sustained. For the United States and for the rest of the world, survival requires a renunciation of the principle of everyone for himself” (Beres 1982, p.129). The idea of everyone for himself must be seen in the limitations of its dual interpretations of everyone either choosing to become islands unto themselves through isolation or rigid domination or even through every one becoming overly aware of their self-interest to the detriment of others in an inter relation. It is paradoxical that the dual problem of evident moral shortfall in the US internal and external policy, and interconnections between these, must inevitably breed a countervailing, but repugnant immorality or amorality on the part of the marginal parts of the world. Little wonder then that we have spectral terrorism, human trafficking, fraud, criminality, drug dealing and other deficits that collectively threaten the rich and the poor countries today.

Conclusion

As things stand, the preceding analysis serves to establish the need for an international moral order that focuses on the “world importance of values such as democracy, freedom and justice, and the importance of agreement about the meaning of values in many lands and among many peoples” (Bell 1994, p.18). It has become imperative that in seeking a more sustainable and fair global development, there must be a linkup between global peace and justice in order to ensure that all parts of the world benefit. The need to promote social justice and global responsibility is more urgent than ever as we become more acutely aware of the limited nature of the world’s natural resources and the need for sustainable development. The great task before man today is to transmit among men, more humane, just and progressive value systems and social orders through which they can more easily realize their fullest personal and social development in atmospheres of dignity, responsibility and security.

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