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1/14/25

An Unrealistic US Foreign Policy

Can Buddhism Speak to Realpolitik?

As some of you know for a number of years I taught politics, including international relations in an Arab country, Qatar. Essentially I taught the struggle for power among sovereign states, the use of diplomacy and force, and how to analyze the conflicts that broke out. Earlier in my career I had become interested in Buddhism. For a while I learned the practice of mindfulness, emphasizing the paths and practices for living at peace with other living beings, in the natural world. This included clearing the mind of stress and appreciating the fleeting moment we were living in, without allowing our wandering thoughts of the past or future to obscure the present moment.

Clearly these poles in my life—teaching IR and silent meditating were both distinct and distant from each other. But I come from a tradition with a core belief that God is One and that an underlying unity can be found in our lives and philosophies. I wondered whether any of the insights in a mindful acceptance of life and its suffering could be applied to the cunning, conflicted world of modern international politics. Did mindfulness provide clues for evaluating the leaders practicing the dark arts of war and diplomacy? Or were these alien traditions, impossible to connect? I am still not sure. But I'd like to share my attempt to draw a few simple lessons from one world, so unlike today's politics, to apply to the other. Arguably they provide citizens of a modern superpower some spiritual guidance for judging their leaders' conduct in foreign affairs.

What I taught

On rare occasions I would find myself speaking to the parents of my college students. They were often curious about what I taught, perhaps too polite to allude to what exactly they were getting for the considerable American tuition they paid. I

would assure them that if I could sum up in a short talk what I teach, I wouldn't be much of a teacher.

Nonetheless for my International Relations class the simple answer was that I taught mistakes: WWI, WWII, Cold War, Vietnam, Arab-Israeli conflicts, the invasion of Iraq, the Afghanistan war, and many of the events in between. Leaders and followers drawing the wrong lessons from history, misapplying them to the challenges they faced and causing great pain and destruction. Worse yet, most, not all, of the leaders making these mistakes were well intentioned. They were smart, they wanted the best for the people they represented. And they believed in the decent goals they talked about. They were not evil men. That to me made the results even more depressing. And pushed my asking what we can learn from this swamp of unavoided horrors.

How do we at the end of the day judge our political leaders and their policies? How can teachers of international politics assist students and citizens in approaching conclusions about the rightness of policymaking? What makes some decisions good and others bad?

Even to pose such questions is to risk being branded naive, unaware of the complexity of the policy process (rational or irrational) and the uncertainty of results (short or long term). Students in the field generally avoid this quagmire of moral judgments; policies may be mistaken rather than wrong; ineffective rather than immoral. Ethical judgments, if made at all, are often dressed up in the language of realpolitik.

There's justification for this stance. The pose of a detached scholar coolly assessing foreign policy behavior is comforting. The alternatives echo a more primitive era of social science when approaches reflected religious convictions, ideological rigidity or academic innocence. And when it comes to judgments of right or wrong, scholars have no more credibility for drawing moral conclusions about the rightness of political actions than any other citizen.

From within the field not much ethical guidance is available. Students of international politics have their hands full merely

assessing the effectiveness of policy, the cost-benefits of attaining the goals of policymakers. Describing historians as prophets looking backward, reminds us that *when* we evaluate the consequences of actions, may alter our conclusions. A quick military victory in Afghanistan in 2001 at low costs was a success for several years afterward. But flash forward 2 decades, finds policymakers candidly regretting a futile war of death, destruction and defeat, justified by lies and cover-ups.

Schools of Thought: Realism vs Liberalism

Two great schools of thought help students and policymakers organize both the study and practice of International Relations—**Realism** and **Liberalism**. Realists elevate the security of the state and the advancement of its interests as the unavoidable necessity for sovereign nations acting in the international arena. Liberals more flexibly enhance a nation's individual security needs with those of building a peaceful global community, promoting international trade and encouraging steps toward democracy as legitimate objectives for states' behavior.

Both these reasoned approaches speak to a vision of international relations and are limited by that. Realism sees an anarchic world of independent states attempting to increase or preserve their physical security, ultimately through force of arms. This often produces restrained policies aimed at a contest for power between similarly motivated states. Realism limits its goals to 'realistic' objectives of <u>stability</u> as reflected in balances of power among competing states. Realists are incrementalists. Their moral claim lies in accepting the world as it is and not embarking on crusades to upset it.

Liberals are more ambitious. They aspire to build a world of peace and increasing interdependence, seeking greater economic ties, amidst the spread of democracies. They accept the goal of moderating state behavior through encouraging democratic changes in other countries, using international agreements, like arms control and free trade zones, as well as membership in global organizations. Leaders are important to this liberal vision. They can be reasonable and cooperative.

Both schools accept the boundaries of international relations as drawing the limits for their judgments. In assessing policies they match them against their vision for international politics--The security of the state for one; the spread of democracy for the other. The idea of individuals acting toward other human beings, while acknowledged, is not central to the conclusions drawn by these schools of thought. (Though each contains a view of human nature—power-seeking vs potentially cooperative--that premise how states behave.) Institutions act with consequences for other institutions. The impact on individuals is of secondary importance. Yet as the African proverb reminds us, 'When two elephants fight, the one who suffers is the grass.'

Indeed, how people treat other people is basic to an ethical life. How these broad approaches to international politics reflect human nature and with what consequences for actual people premises the approaches. Yet seldom do they figure in the assessment of the results of the policies. Nor do they provide much guidance for observers drawing conclusions as to the values that are furthered by the policymaker's decisions. Instead citizens outside policy circles are left to draw conclusions based on their ideological beliefs or their national loyalties. This tends to devolve into 'them vs. us' judgments in which we only have to determine which side we're on to conclude who is right. While this may work for baseball games, the consequences of serious political actions are far more deadly, and the fans are not always humanitarian judges of their home team's play.

Drawing From Other Traditions

Buddhism seems very far afield from either of these approaches to international politics. Yet we were still discussing how leaders thought and acted, with great consequences for *humanity, the natural world and future generations. There should still be a way that citizens, analysts and observers could hold their complex behavior to some standards. Without elevating the exercise to a distant and somewhat smug sermon, I was seeking a way that citizens of the modern world's leading superpower might judge their leaders' actions in an arena where lives and even the future of the planet was at stake.*

I found hints of such simple standards in a group of Buddhist monks in SE Asia who living in their secluded community have taken vows of silence unless their speech can pass through three gates. Before they speak, what they have to say must pass three thresholds. Is the speech Necessary*; is it True; and is it Kind. The monks' practice may suggest insights applicable to the world of international politics. These may be positioned as guardrails for policies to stay within. Let's see.*

NECESSARY For the monks talk that is necessary is speech that is needed to preserve life. Before they speak --which means interacting with others in their community--they must consider how necessary the words are in terms of theirs and others lives. This is quite a high standard for all of us. What I am speaking now may be important to me, and hopefully to some listeners. But it is hardly necessary for either party. What is necessary is that we are breathing, that we are alive as we share these few moments of communication, about topics we hope help others' lives.

We may believe our lives are blessed if we are religious, privileged if we are political or lucky if we are cynical, but however we view our own existance, life is a basic value. Saving a life or at least not endangering one is equally basic to justify political actions. From this perspective taking a life for reasons of differences of religion or race or nationality or territory is not permissible. Belief, even for the preservation of faith is not worth the sacrifice of a life. This imperative is clearly a call to minimize violence and destruction in our politics.

Much of what leaders and groups do and say in the public arena can hardly be considered necessary. They may be important to interested parties or to serve policy goals, but are they necessary to save lives? This is the sort of caution for international politics that we apply to doctors in their traditional injunction, 'First Do No Harm'. Minimize deadly involvements, limit coercive interventions, restrain assertions of military power. Blessed are the peacemakers.

Does this dictate no use of the military in every international crisis? No, but this value does provide some guidance for judging military interventions, past and present. It

may even counsel early use of arms. Arguably a quicker armed response that might have countered the rise of fascism in 1930s Germany and Italy before WWII may have preempted the mass carnage that followed. Would an American or international military intervention in Ruanda in 1994 as 700,000 Tutsis were being butchered by their Hutu neighbors have prevented the genocide that occurred? President Clinton thought so, afterward. At some point the lengthy war in Afghanistan exceeded its original purposes at a cost far beyond any rational calculation. The war grew beyond any of the initial motivations, while offers to negotiate by the Taliban to end the conflict were ignored.

Reducing suffering and saving lives underlies the value of 'necessary' in evaluating actions in international affairs.

TRUE Is the action or policy based on an accurate understanding of the situation on the ground? Does it reflect clear thinking by policymakers? Or are we being lied to?

Policymakers, academics and others often fall in love with their own concepts of the world and allow them to substitute for an honest appraisal of the on-the-ground reality. Their ideas for shaping reality substitute for reality. We become comfortable with the neatness and coherence of our own ideas, often with a sugary icing of the hubris of power. We become as Thoreau put it, 'tools of our tools.'

The self-interest of the agencies of national security, and of political leaders may underly this intellectual distortion of the facts. Gaining an increase in your office's budget, settling old scores with longtime adversaries, advancing career interests, or simply the inertia of ongoing commitments are some of the motivations that may distort clear truths.

Once again, group thinking, intellectual arrogance and ideological blinders, substitute for the humility that is needed in uncovering truths. Yes, our enemies may have a grasp on what's real at times, including insights about us. We need to be open to their truths. We are often wrong; often mislead. Many times we simply don't know in time.

Humility means giving other people's views a fair hearing. We can learn from adversaries. We may need to be silent, to develop the underdeveloped art of listening, a skill much harder than speech. Our best leaders are open to others' truths; our best leaders cultivate the art of listening.

Truth is often staring us in the face. As George Orwell put it, "Life is a constant struggle to see what is in front of one's nose." This means getting past the ideologies, the motivating commitments and resentments, that obscure a clear picture of what is happening. This also means not settling for the 'close enough' *'truthiness'* that comedian Stephan Colbert describes as close enough to be true for the time being. Admittedly getting a clear picture of a current situation is a difficult task that requires an openness by various participants in the decisions, as well as the passage of time.

Repelling Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991 rested on the correct analysis that a larger more powerful country wanted to annex a smaller wealthier neighbor, whatever the historical claims obscuring the issue. (And limiting US involvement to repelling that invasion was GHW Bush 's admirable restraint to only what force was necessary.) Further back in history, whatever attractions appeasement and isolationism held for leaders in the 1930s, it was based on a false vision of Hitler as a conventional German leader trying to restore the status quo ante bellum. Even a committed pacifist like Albert Einstein was willing to forego his principles to halt the insatiable Nazi aggression he feared.

More recently our wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan were sustained by a torrent of cover-ups by officials unwilling or unable to communicate the truth on the ground. On the latter conflict we went into Afghanistan to defeat Al-Queda, but stayed to fight the Taliban, a group of religious zealots, with goals limited to their own nation. We expanded our goals to nation-building and not embarrassing ourselves by withdrawing. That went on for 20 years. Our leaders refused to confront the evasive reasons for the war or debate that truth.

KIND To be kind in our actions is to be life affirming. Does a policy help or harm the people who bear the consequences of our actions? Does it reduce or increase suffering? It is not impossible to judge leaders' actions in international relations on this simple, arguably naïve, guide.

Aid to the poor or those suffering is kind; seeking peace between warring groups is kind; preserving the environment and halting the global pollution endangering life on the planet is kind; establishing public institutions to foster democratic participation among powerless minorities, and enhancing health and education among impoverished populations are all acts of kindness. On the other hand, promoting hatred between groups is not kind; restricting migrants' economic opportunities or limiting their rights to freedom or separating them from their families is not kind; using our privileges and power to impose ideologically rigid, self-interested solutions while resisting compromises is not kind.

Compassion toward others is the key value here. We attempt to understand others, their history, perceptions and actions in the world. It is not impossible to believe that we change the world by changing our own behavior. We improve the world by improving what we do in the world. Someone said that we stop wars when we stop hating our enemy. If this is not a comprehensive explanation of wars, there is still a kernel of truth there. We, as a great power *can* make international affairs better by acting better.

An adversary may undertake a socially beneficial medical inoculation program for a neighboring country's school children. Are we to reject such a 'kind' program because we suspect the motives of the donor? Perhaps. But we may be allowing our own fears cloud a decent effort to both repair relations with a neighbor and aid needy kids. We may conclude that the ultimate impact of the program on the populations of the countries will be negative and therefore the program should be opposed. But in the case of disaster relief or a raging epidemic the necessities of the situation are so dire that the benefits of aid compensates for whatever complex of motives lie behind it.

Our Unrealistic Practice

The difficulty of applying these values in practice doesn't undermine their usefulness. We may need to choose among values. In the fall of 2021 we wanted a Ukraine that was independent, democratic and aligned with NATO. In November of that year we signed a Charter on Strategic Partnership committing us to defense cooperation with Ukraine and pledging support for it to join NATO. That same month Putin ordered the buildup of troops on the border followed by an invasion 3 months later. Negotiating for a Ukraine, armed, independent, democratic, *and neutral* might have avoided a war for NATO membership. But as shown by their reluctance to intervene in a collective defense against the Russians, NATO members never supported Ukraine's membership. We might ask what was necessary among our goals, and how much we gave up to allow Russia to belligerently blunder into a bloody costly war.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 managed to fall outside all our parameters of values. It was based on falsehoods, whether intended or inadvertent. There were no weapons of mass destruction nor was Saddam's regime aiding the terrorists responsible for 9/11. It was hardly necessary for American interests or stability in a region where Iran actually loomed as our major threat, a threat enhanced by this weakening of its rival, Iraq. Only a questionable kindness that the overthrow of the regime would lead to an improvement in the lives of Iraqis, could provide a hint of justification.

The Afghanistan war managed to fall outside any of our trifecta of values. It was never a war necessary for regional security or national interests. It became America's longest war, a $2 trillion venture maintained by a series of lies and spins over twenty years by officials of both parties and multiple civilian and military agencies. (See Craig Whitlock, The Afghanistan Papers, 2021) Kindness can be argued to oust a repressive Taliban regime that would persecute minorities and women. But at the end, retaining a small military force—recommended by allies and military leaders—to save the lives of our Afghan supporters, was not enough of a 'kind' motive to add to decades of costs and casualties.

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Guidelines and goals aren't the same as attempts to provide an overall analysis of international politics in the 21st Century. Persistent values at the heart of our religious traditions may also be called on to preserve a world we want to live in and that we want to pass on to coming generations, who also deserve recognition in our policies.

The dilemma of being the world's leading superpower is that we are not constrained by the same dynamics as 'ordinary' states. No conceivable coalition of states can counter-balance our military and economic dominance, bolstered by alliances with other developed democracies. Our paramount economic and military standing in the world requires discipline and transparent, tolerable reasons for acting. We need to be better than the others because we are so much bigger than the others.

However foreign policy has never been limited by the checks and balances applying to domestic politics. The executive is dominant, and within that branch, the aptly named 'mandarins' control national security. As recent elections have shown this leadership elite no longer has the support of a citizenry who remain excluded from seldom understood policy decisions.

Being 'realistic' does not mean refusing to live up to norms and standards that help shape a world that is secure, healthy and peaceful. These ancient values reflect and explain acceptable behavior across many different cultures. They complement and enhance our nation's power, they don't undermine it.

We are being watched and judged by millions; we should believe what we say, what we do. (Woodrow Wilson put it, 'We must believe the things we teach our children.)' These values—necessary, true and kind—or similar ones, provide a simple way of explaining , shaping and limiting our great global powers. Our recent election makes these ideas less likely and more needed.

Applying 'unrealistic' values in a realistic way remains the task of statesmen. Ours as citizens is to hold our leaders to these 'unrealistic' standards.