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The most common starting point when analysing international politics is to argue that decisions are framed by 'national interests' and 'reasons of state'. Academics, analysts, and journalists alike do it. The basic assumption here is that the external forces exerting themselves on states (usually connected to security) are the key factors in determining what a government chooses to do, and not do, in its foreign policy. Only a fool would deny the importance of challenges from other powers, the threat of refugee flows, and the need for a secure neighbourhood. However, other perspectives do exist. One of the more persuasive centres upon the domestic high politics of foreign affairs. By that I mean the way in which domestic political pressures and ambitions can influence decisions taken in foreign policy.

In this framework, foreign policy should be seen as not only a device for safeguarding national interests, but also as a means of advancing the personal agendas of political leaders – perhaps irrespective of what that might mean for those broader 'national interests'. A recent STRATFOR essay speculated that Barack Obama may choose to escape from his domestic political problems by focusing on the realm of foreign affairs, using his constitutional freedom of action in that realm to make a bold move. The purpose would be to rebuild his credibility, appear tough and 'Presidential', and seek a high-stakes 'win' that might just be enough to turn the electoral tide and secure Obama a second term in the White House. How would he do this? By waging a successful war against Iran.

This may sound outlandish to some; but there are plenty of reasons to believe that such considerations do shape foreign policy. It is often feared, for instance, that the regime if Beijing was faced with major internal problems that threatened its hold on power, the government might seek to provoke a foreign policy crisis – probably over Taiwan – in order to rally domestic support and shore up its crumbling base.

People are instinctively patriotic – Guardian-reading 'metrosexuals' aside – and so playing the populist nationalism card can have tremendous appeal to politicians. For instance, there is a powerful case that from the 1850s onwards Britain departed from the traditional grand strategy that had served it so well for centuries – staying out of European affairs except in time of war – and began to stick its nose into continental affairs at every opportunity. Why was this? Because leading politicians – first Palmerston, and then Gladstone and Disraeli – came to recognise the way in which the cheap, mass circulation press could impact the average patriotic voter. As a result there were major domestic political incentives for appearing tough in international affairs, standing up for British values, and waving John Bull's fist in the face of Johnny Foreigner. 'Slurs' on British honour, real or manufactured, could not go unanswered lest one's career be torpedoed on the grounds of a want of patriotism. Palmerston, Gladstone, and Disraeli understood that being seen to stand up for Britain against the world's dictators and tyrants, or expressing moral outrage at the latest act of barbarism in the Balkans by Johnny Turk, was

integral to their political fortunes. Indeed, patriotism and the defence of British values became critical components of political language. Jon Parry has argued that politicians came to be judged by how persuasively they could claim to wear the mantle of patriotism. Rhetorical posturing, and sending in the Royal Navy to sail around menacingly offshore, was the result.

What did all of this matter? Existing in this kind of environment, the British political classes became instinctively geared towards a highly activist and interventionist foreign policy. It became a habit for Britain to be involved in regions and problems where there was no genuine national interest. Fights were needlessly picked, causes vocally supported without good reason, and territory gobbled up that perhaps shouldn't have been. Lord Salisbury, one of Britain's greatest Prime Ministers and arguably the last successful Tory to inhabit Downing Street, recognised the dangers of the game played by Palmerston, Gladstone, and 'the Jew' Disraeli. During his time at the top, beginning in 1885 and ending in 1902, he largely kept Britain isolated from the affairs of the continent. Joe Chamberlain's schemes for an alliance with Germany did not arouse the interest of Salisbury, because he could not see the point of allies when there was no need for them. Allies are often a liability, reducing one's freedom of action. Better to sit back and see what happens, Salisbury reasoned.

But Salisbury was just an intermission in a long-term shift in how British politicians approached foreign policy. In the end, this activist streak saw Britain saddled to the Entente and at war with Germany. As the diplomatic historian John Charmley put it, 'the sky did not fall in' when Prussia defeated France in 1870 – so why would it fall in if Germany had won in 1914? It wouldn't have. And yet Britain went to war anyway, despite the fact that Germany was a declining military threat relative to France and Russia, and that the German Navy was light-years away from being able to compete with the Royal Navy. From Britain's perspective, in terms of national interests, it is arguable that the First World War was a waste of time, money, and human life. British power was broken by the effort needed to prop up two hopeless allies and defeat Germany, never to recover. No national interest was served by the war.
Did Britain learn these lessons in 1914? Of course not! Because politicians now understood the value of international politics to their own personal fortunes. Lloyd George used the winning of the war as a platform to replace Asquith in 1916, in doing so completing his transformation from an opponent of the Boer War in 1899, when it would boost his fortunes in the Liberal party, to a super-jingo when it would help him get into Downing Street a quarter of a century later. In the 1930s, Winston Churchill and other enemies of Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain used the charge of weakness abroad in order to give themselves a platform they would otherwise have lacked. They accused the National Governments of cowardice in 'appeasing' Nazi Germany, in doing so constructing the Western world's most powerful political myth. Unfortunately, this was all rhetorical political posturing by Churchill and co., who had absolutely no coherent proposals for an alternative to appeasement! When pressed, Churchill's proposals looked remarkably like those of Chamberlain – only the mood music differed.

Chamberlain – who had the keen sense of national interests that most other Prime Ministers since Salisbury have lacked – was determined to stay out of Eastern Europe, where Britain had no vital interests. But he was bounced into a tougher foreign policy by his domestic critics, and the result was that Britain ended up in another conflagration that, once again, hardly reflected British interests. Chamberlain's original plan, to stay out of Eastern Europe and allow Hitler and

Stalin to tear each other to pieces, was perfectly workable; and Hitler did not seek war with Britain. Domestic carping, and a culture of activism that saddled Britain to the hapless French, prevented a sensible bid to safeguard British interests from coming to fruition. This time, the war was the death knell for Britain as a world power. Only the need to maintain the comforting national myth that the sacrifice was somehow 'necessary' still prevent wider recognition of the truth about British involvement in the two World Wars.

In more recent times, it is arguable that George W. Bush chose to invade Iraq because he felt that the relatively easy routing of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan did not make a statement dramatic enough when set against the 9/11 atrocities. And it may very well be that Israeli security policy towards Hamas and Hezbollah is similarly influenced by the domestic need to be seen to 'do something'. Foreign affairs thus offer a platform for elites to demonstrate their strength and attack opponents; to signal toughness, patriotism, and virtue; and pick up a 'win'. Foreign policy can also be fatal if weakness is advertised. Politicians can be judged by how vigorously they uphold the interests and honour of the nation. Could Margaret Thatcher have survived if she hadn't retaken the Falklands, allowing a military junta to get away with sullying Britain's honour? Definitely not. And the Argentine government decided to invade the Falklands in order to secure a victory in the eyes of a domestic audience, miscalculating the British response. In Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson was so politically invested in the war that escalation was the only viable means of saving himself – and he failed dismally. During the Cold War, regimes in the Third World competed to acquire superpower support not because their geopolitical situations demanded it, but because American or Soviet arms and money offered a route to power. And Ronald Reagan used foreign affairs as a vehicle to force the Republican party to the Right – even while Nixon and Ford were still in the White House – and made himself its kingpin.

Now, we should not push this too far; there are prudent limits to everything, even cynicism. No-one is overlooking the fact that in supporting the invasion of Iraq, Tony Blair gravely damaged his own political career. In doing so, he was attending to old-fashioned national interests. Thus, not every decision is motivated by Machiavellian calculations of political advantage. But, that said, it would be naïve to think that foreign policy is always about outside forces. International affairs are decided by politicians, and they usually have other things – particularly themselves – to think about.