

National interests and the global environment: a review

Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*

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There has long been a goodly crew of international relations specialists who have felt that Professor Arnold Wolfers is the most profound student of that subject in the United States, the true “dean” of the profession. Only the recognition of the impropriety of insisting that others are bound to agree with my evaluation restrains me from declaring that the publication of *Discord and Collaboration*, a collection of Wolfers’ essays written over a period of approximately two decades, leaves no room for doubt that he deserves that accolade. In all modesty, I must restrict myself to the prediction that this book will greatly enlarge the circle of Wolferian enthusiasts, and strengthen the conviction of the veterans among them. Happily, the professor is under no compulsion to show the same deference to the views of his students as to those of his professional peers; while I reluctantly concede the right of the latter to treat this book with indifference, I shall

sternly insist that no fledgling scholar in the international field deserves to be regarded as a serious aspirant until he has come to grips with Wolfers in this volume.

Most of the essays have been published before, but that is no matter; these are pieces that demand—and reward—repeated reading. They are difficult, not in the manner of much contemporary writing in this field—Wolfers has absolutely no talent for obfuscation—but in the sense that they contain too many ideas and insights for rapid and complete absorption. Indeed, absorption is only the beginning of the process of profiting from this book; reaction to its stimulus is the payoff. There is not much knowledge to be gained from it, but there is the much more vital gain of having one’s mind set into motion by the encounter with the wisdom of Arnold Wolfers. The author has made admirable use of the most important research tool available: a disciplined, analytical, critical, reflective mind.

He deals with the central issues of international relations, analyzes the major schools of thought on these matters, and manages throughout to be critical without becoming polemical and theoretical without becoming pretentious. The book is all the more impressive because its parts were written at intervals over the years. One finds here a striking demonstration of what can be accomplished by the sustained performance of a highly sophisticated mind.

Much of the value of the book can be subsumed under the general proposition that Wolfers goes far toward rescuing the Realist-Idealist debate from the confusion of ambiguity and the sterility of polemicism. To remedy the oversimplifications of the "pure power politics model" of international relations, he develops the concept of the amity-enmity continuum, which accommodates the full range of relationships that prevail in the multistate world—recognizing the mutual trust of Canada and the United States as no less a part of reality than the mutual antagonism of Communist China and the United States. He exposes alike the emptiness of the national interest dogma and the illusory quality of the expectation that representatives of states will consistently pursue the general interests of a global community. Treating the international system as fundamentally multistate in character, he emphasizes that the component states of the system are multipurpose organizations, confronted not with sheer necessity but with the necessity for choice. From this viewpoint, state behavior is not dictated by a national interest derived from the situation and the system, but decided by a process which involves the weighing of the relative values attached to various purposes and the costs and risks associated with the corresponding pursuits. Thus Wolfers ends up in a far happier situation

than the Realists. They finish the assembly of the clock of international relations theory and find themselves holding, with some embarrassment, the cogwheel of moral responsibility, which they admit should have been included in the assembly but for which they have found no appropriate place or feasible means of insertion. By contrast, Wolfers ends up with no leftover parts; unlike the Realists, he fits the cogwheel of moral responsibility into the mechanism—and, unlike the Idealists, he does not mistake this cogwheel for the mainspring of the international clock.

Following up his emphasis upon the multipurpose character of the state, Wolfers develops a number of categories for analysis of the objectives which states pursue. In his essay on "The Goals of Foreign Policy," he first clears the ground by distinguishing between aspirations and genuine policy goals, and notes the danger that may arise from the confusion of these two. He then introduces the broad distinction between possession goals and milieu goals, the former relating to the maintenance or the augmentation of particular national values, and the latter to the shaping of environmental conditions. Next he contrasts direct national goals, benefiting the state as a corporate entity, with indirect ones, sought on behalf of individuals or groups within the state. He concludes the essay by drawing a line between ideological or revolutionary goals and traditional national goals. In the next essay, "The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference" (written at least a decade earlier), Wolfers classifies the objectives of foreign policy as goals of national self-extension, self-preservation, and self-abnegation—and emphasizes the point that states are frequently not in a position to gear their policy to independently established objectives, but are pressed to act in

response to the goal-pursuits of other states. Thus he acknowledges the interaction of necessity and choice.

The author makes little effort to integrate these various sets of categories, although it is obvious that they can be meshed to some degree. Under the rubric of possession goals, one may list goals of national self-preservation and self-extension, and this entire category may be viewed as synonymous with traditional national goals. Milieu goals would certainly seem to include ideological ones, and possibly goals of national self-abnegation as well. Direct and indirect national goals do not fit easily into this scheme; they may cut across the possession-milieu dichotomy.

If the difficulties and uncertainties of fitting all the varieties of goals distinguished by Wolfers into one well-ordered classificatory scheme do not result simply from my own intellectual incapacity, it would appear that Wolfers is at fault in presenting too many categorizing devices, without adequate regard for their compatibility. Other readers will have to judge this issue for themselves.

My central criticism of Wolfers' analysis of foreign policy goals, however, relates not to his proliferation of categories, but to his neglect of his own concept of milieu goals. This valuable insight, that states may act with a view to promoting certain international systemic conditions, does not appear to be consistently held in view or given its due by the author. In discussing self-abnegation, he describes it as including "all goals transcending if not sacrificing the 'national interest,' in any meaningful sense of the term," and attributes this sort of goal to "those who place a higher value on such ends as international solidarity, lawfulness, rectitude, or peace than they place even on national security and self-preservation,"

as well as to those who, "at the expense of the nation as a whole," attempt to turn national policy to the support of narrower interests than those of the whole national society. Thus he lumps idealistic and self-ish goals, those inspired by considerations which transcend or undercut the values of the state, under the heading of national self-abnegation (Wolfers, 1962, p. 93).

What has happened to the concept of milieu goals? Why is this concept, rather than that of idealistic self-abnegation, not applied to a policy aimed at promoting the orderliness of the multistate system? In my view, such policies ordinarily represent not the abandonment or the subordination of concern for basic national interests, including self-preservation, but the adoption of the position that these interests can best be served by improving the context within which the state must function; in short, they are aimed at milieu goals. While, in a given instance, pursuit of this kind of goal may fail to promote world order or even prove dangerous to national security, I would insist that, in principle, devotion to system-oriented objectives is an absolute requisite for the long-term preservation of the most basic interests of states. Moreover, I would add to the proposition that the most rational way to support the national interest in the long run is to promote world order, the thesis that the best hope for world order derives from the enlightened pursuit of national self-interest by representatives of states. If we are ever to have a reliably ordered international system, we will achieve it through the efforts of statesmen who have come to believe that milieu goals are of fundamental importance to the national interest, not of statesmen who have abandoned the national interest in a fit of self-abnegation.

Wolfers passes up more than one op-

portunity to make use of his concept of milieu goals. For instance, he echoes the oft-repeated allegation that Woodrow Wilson, after World War I, and Franklin Roosevelt, in the latter stages of World War II, displayed inadequate concern for American national security interests, when he might well have raised the question whether the policies adopted in those instances did not in fact reflect the view that national security demanded primary concentration upon milieu goals. If this was the case, one might still stress the fact that the milieu objectives were not attained, argue that their unattainability should have been recognized, and deplore the judgment of those who gave priority to their pursuit. This would reduce the charge against the leaders in question from the allegation that they did not try, to the assertion that they failed, possibly because of a faulty choice of means, to protect and promote the national interest. Such a position would certainly be more charitable, and it might be more accurate. It is understandable that polemical Realists have shied away from it, for the victims of their disdain must be shown to be unrealistic, not simply mistaken. It is less easy to understand why Wolfers, who introduces the concept of the milieu goal, should fail to consider its application to cases where statesmen have appeared to attach great importance to reform of the international environment.

The answer appears to be that Wolfers has a significant bias against milieu goals, in that he tends to regard the pursuit of them as representing the neglect of basic national interests or, at best, an unsatisfactory means of safeguarding those interests. In objecting to the pursuit of milieu goals, he displays a preoccupation with the short-range success of American foreign policy that marks him, in certain basic respects, as a policy-oriented rather than a

system-oriented thinker, despite his brilliant contributions to analysis of the international system.

This comes out rather clearly in his essays bearing upon collective security. Wolfers seems to me to overstate the degree to which collective security has been built into the present international system and adopted as official doctrine by states, including the United States. He refers repeatedly to the existence of a collective security system under the United Nations (and to its failures to deter aggression), and to the consequent commitment of states to undertake collective action against any aggression. He suggests that the United States has sought constantly to broaden and strengthen collective security under the organization, and has taken the initiative in promoting "a reinterpretation of the Charter which would permit the veto-free General Assembly to recommend police action and make such recommendations binding upon United Nations members" (Wolfers, 1962, p. 202). I know of no such initiative by the United States—the *Uniting for Peace* Resolution, to which he presumably refers, does not purport to make Assembly recommendations binding upon states—nor does the record suggest to me that the United States has shown serious interest in the institutionalization of collective security in any genuine sense. This country has valued the possibility that the United Nations might be used to confer international approval upon such military ventures as we and our allies might feel impelled to undertake in reaction to Communist moves, but it has displayed little enthusiasm for authorizing the organization to determine when we should or should not resort to force. In short, we have looked to the United Nations for legitimizing support of our collective defense measures, not for the effectuation of the collective security concept.

In my view, there simply is no collective security system, nor has the United Nations ever represented a serious intent to construct one, in the sense of creating an arrangement for the collective suppression of aggression by any state against any other state. What exists, rather, is a sort of ideological residue of twentieth-century thinking about collective security, a vague devotion to the general principle as distinguished from a disposition to create, or a willingness to accept the implications of, a working system of collective security.

If Wolfers exaggerates the degree to which collective security has taken hold, this may be explained by the fact that his intent is to deplore and warn against this phenomenon; collective security is eligible for attack only if it has attained real significance. Wolfers makes clear his critical attitude toward collective security, whether viewed in his terms as an existing system or in my terms as an ideological deposit. I have no quarrel with this; collective security is a highly vulnerable target, and Wolfers scores effectively. What is significant, however, is that he criticizes collective security from the vantage point of a United States foreign policy analyst, not that of a theorist concerned with the international system. He might have developed an analysis of the implications—favorable or unfavorable—of collective security for the global political milieu; instead, he restricts himself to making the case that collective security has implications detrimental to American policy in the Cold War situation.

This same feature of policy-orientation characterizes Wolfers' treatment of neutralism in Chapter 14, and in this case it tends to prejudice the quality of the analysis. He identifies two groups of states falling between the American and Soviet alliance systems: the genuine neutrals of the tradi-

tional variety, and the "neutralists," characterized by more or less marked pro-Soviet or anti-Western orientation. One misses, in this breakdown, the category of Westward-leaning neutralists; the implication, surely subject to factual challenge, is that there are no such states. It appears that Wolfers exaggerates the valid point that new-style neutralism has anti-Western tendencies because he begins with a bias against neutralism. He is hostile toward neutralism on the ground that it tends to interfere with United States defense policy, by posing impediments to the construction of a continuous line of containment around the Communist world. This preoccupation with the short-term effects of neutralism upon American interests seems to preclude Wolfers from giving serious and objective consideration to the implications of this phenomenon for the general stability of the international system.

In short, when he discusses neutralism as when he discusses collective security, Wolfers functions as something other than a system-oriented analyst of international relations. This is entirely legitimate, of course, but it limits the value of his work as a general theoretical contribution to international relations. Perhaps more important, it is symptomatic of Wolfers' failure to exploit the potential value of his concept of milieu goals. This concept represents an invitation to integrate the consideration of national interest and of international order, to examine the manner in which concern for the improvement of the global environment may be fitted into a state's concern for its own basic security and welfare. To a disappointing degree, Wolfers has declined this invitation.

REFERENCE

- WOLFERS, ARNOLD. *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1962.