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Q1(e)

National Interest is an essentially contested concept. Comment.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · PSIR GS 2 · 10 marks · Key concepts in International Relations

Key concepts in International Relations: National interest, Security and power; Balance of power and deterrence; Transnational actors and collective security; World capitalist economy and globalisation.

Core demand of the question

- National Interest is an essentially contested concept. Comment
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Gallie's essentially contested concepts fit national interest.

Morgenthau tried to fix it as power; **Carr** showed it as ideology of the strong.

Keohane and liberals thicken it with institutions and absolute gains.

Wendt and Marxists relocate it in identity or class.

Policy still uses the word; analysis must unpack it.

Introduction

National interest is the working phrase of foreign policy. **W. B. Gallie** called some concepts essentially contested: the dispute is about meaning, not only about facts. National interest is one of those concepts.

Body**Why it is contested**

- Hans **Morgenthau** presented interest defined as power as an objective compass. Even he admitted that the concrete content changes with time and culture.
- E. H. **Carr** showed that great powers dress their interest as the interest of the international community.
- Liberals and Robert Keohane's institutionalists include absolute gains, trade, and regimes inside "interest." Realists keep relative power and survival first.
- **Constructivists after Alexander Wendt treat interest as socially made:** identity tells a State what to want.
- Marxists treat the official national interest as often the interest of a dominant class or of capital.

Practice

- In India the same word covers Panchsheel, the 1971 treaty tilt, the 1998 tests, and later Quad consultations. Each government claims continuity of interest.
- Security, welfare, prestige, and values compete. There is no single algorithm that ends the argument.

What follows for analysis

- The concept is indispensable and unstable. The scholar's job is to name whose interest, which time horizon, and which theory is being smuggled in.

Flow diagram

National interest -> Realist power survival

National interest -> Liberal gains regimes

National interest -> Constructivist identity

National interest -> Marxist class

Conclusion

National interest is essentially contested because power, welfare, identity, and class offer rival contents for the same word. Morgenthau's compass is a starting claim, not a settlement.

Facts & figures

W. B. Gallie

Described essentially contested concepts as terms whose proper use is endlessly disputed among informed users.

Morgenthau

Interest defined as power was meant to discipline moralism in foreign policy.

Carr

Showed how status-quo powers present their interest as universal morality.

Wendt

Anarchy is what states make of it: interests follow identities, they are not given by the map alone.