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THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL INTEREST IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

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Abstract: *This thesis analyzes the formation, content, and theoretical interpretations of the concept of national interest within international relations theory. The study employs a comparative analytical approach to examine the role of national interest across realism, liberalism, neoliberal institutionalism, as well as critical and feminist perspectives. In particular, it explores Hans J. Morgenthau's power- and security-centered understanding of national interest; the institution- and domestic-preference-based approaches articulated in the works of Robert O. Keohane and Andrew Moravcsik; and the critical positions advanced by Robert W. Cox and Cynthia Enloe.*

The thesis also considers the practical significance of the concept of national interest in the contemporary international system, its role in states' foreign policy decision-making, and the mechanisms for coordinating interests within regional and international organizations. Using Uzbekistan's foreign policy as an illustrative case, the study highlights the conceptual foundations of an open and constructive approach grounded in national interests. The findings demonstrate that the concept of national interest is not a singular or immutable category, but rather a dynamic notion shaped by historical, institutional, and social factors.

Keywords: *national interest, international relations theory, realism, liberalism, neoliberal institutionalism, foreign policy, international institutions.*



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XALQARO MUNOSABATLAR NAZARIYASIDA MILLIY MANFAATLAR TUSHUNCHASINING EVOLYUTSIYASI

Maxmudova Zulxumor Ikromjon qizi

Jahon iqtisodiyoti va diplomatiya universiteti

2-bosqich tayanch doktoranti

Annotatsiya: Mazkur tezisda xalqaro munosabatlar nazariyasida milliy manfaatlar konsepsiyasining shakllanishi, mazmuni va nazariy talqinlari tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot doirasida milliy manfaat tushunchasining realizm, liberalizm, neo-liberal institutsionalizm hamda tanqidiy va feministik yondashuvlardagi o'rni solishtirma tahlil asosida yoritiladi. Xususan, H. Morgenthau tomonidan ilgari surilgan kuch va xavfsizlikka asoslangan milliy manfaat talqini, R. Keohane va A. Moravcsik ishlarida ifodalangan institutlar va davlat ichki preferensiyalariga tayangan yondashuvlar, shuningdek, R. Cox va C. Enloe tomonidan taklif etilgan tanqidiy pozitsiyalar tahlil qilinadi.

Shuningdek, tezis milliy manfaatlar tushunchasining zamonaviy xalqaro munosabatlar tizimidagi amaliy ahamiyati, davlatlarning tashqi siyosiy qarorlarida uning roli hamda mintaqaviy va xalqaro tashkilotlar doirasida manfaatlarni muvofiqlashtirish mexanizmlari ko'rib chiqiladi. O'zbekiston tashqi siyosati misolida milliy manfaatlarga asoslangan ochiq va konstruktiv yondashuvning konseptual jihatlari ham yoritiladi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, milliy manfaatlar konsepsiyasi yagona va o'zgarmas kategoriya emas, balki tarixiy, institutsional va ijtimoiy omillar ta'sirida shakllanuvchi dinamik tushuncha hisoblanadi.

Kalit so'zlar: milliy manfaatlar, xalqaro munosabatlar nazariyasi, realizm, liberalizm, neo-liberal institutsionalizm, tashqi siyosat, xalqaro institutlar.

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The concept of national interest is one of the central notions in international relations theory and serves as a fundamental principle guiding states' foreign policy decision-making¹. It encompasses the political, economic, military, and ideological objectives that a state seeks to achieve in the global arena. However, when these objectives are articulated, the question of which interests—and whose interests—are being represented remains complex and contested. National interest is not a monolithic concept; rather, it reflects a range of competing priorities within the state. These priorities are shaped by diverse actors, including political elites, economic groups, military institutions, and civil society².

In international relations theory, national interest refers to the goals and aspirations that shape a state's foreign policy. These interests encompass economic prosperity, security, and ideological values. However, the question of “whose interests?” becomes increasingly complex depending on a country's domestic political dynamics and the structure of its political system.

Theoretical approaches offer differing perspectives on the formation of national interest. From a realist standpoint, the anarchic nature of the international system leads states to define their primary interests in terms of the pursuit of power and security. Liberal theory, by contrast, emphasizes that national interest is shaped by domestic politics, public opinion, and factors of international cooperation³. In practice, however, national interest often reflects the priorities of political and economic elites rather than those of the broader public⁴. This raises questions regarding the inclusiveness and legitimacy of the concept of national interest. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the

¹ National Interest in International Relations: Whose Interest?,” *IDEAL International Journal of Igbo Scholars Forum* 17, no. 4 (2024).

² Steve Smith, “The Concept of National Interest,” in *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513–553.

⁴ Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126–155.



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topic “National Interest in International Relations: Whose Interests?” requires a thorough analysis of the roles of domestic and external actors, as well as the power relations that influence the formation and implementation of national interest. The concept of national interest is a decisive factor in shaping states’ actions and decisions in the international arena. However, the question of “whose interests?” often remains contentious. National interest is generally interpreted as encompassing common state objectives such as security, economic prosperity, and political stability. In practice, however, certain political elites may present their own objectives as being synonymous with the “national interest.”⁵ Furthermore, policies pursued under the banner of national interest often conflict with principles of global justice, international cooperation, and human rights. Politicians may use national interest as a tool for domestic political legitimization, potentially bypassing the needs of vulnerable segments of society. In many cases, the national interest aligns more closely with the objectives of political or economic elites⁶. The idea of national interest is considered one of the core concepts in the field of international relations. It represents a state’s strategic goals and objectives in the global arena, through which the state’s survival, security, and prosperity are ensured. Hans Morgenthau, a representative of classical realism, primarily defines national interest from the perspective of power, as states operate within an anarchic international system where survival is the highest priority. According to Morgenthau and other realist scholars, national interest is objective and universally oriented toward ensuring power and security.

Subsequently, scholars have criticized the static and purely power-based conception of national interest, arguing that it is dynamic and may vary depending on domestic politics, leadership, and changing international

⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1948).

⁶ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

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conditions⁷. This allows for the consideration of how various domestic actors—such as political elites, corporations, and civil society—play a role in shaping national interest.

Different theoretical approaches within international relations interpret national interest in distinct ways. From a realist perspective, classical realists view national interest primarily in terms of power and security. Neorealism, as advanced by Waltz, emphasizes that the structure of the international system and states' relative positions within the global hierarchy determine the consistent pursuit of national interest.

Liberal theorists, such as Keohane, argue that national interest cannot be confined solely to power; according to them, it also encompasses the promotion of cooperation, institutions, and economic interdependence. From this perspective, states can collaborate to achieve common interests, thereby expanding the narrow, power-based interpretation of national interest.

Constructivist scholar Wendt views national interest as a social construct, shaped by identities, normative standards, and ideas. From this standpoint, national interest is not fixed or materially objective, but rather a fluid concept that evolves as state actors reinterpret their roles.

Marxist and critical theorists do not consider national interest to be a neutral concept. They argue that it often reflects the interests of dominant economic or political elites rather than the broader public. This approach places the question of “for whom national interest is formed” at the center of analysis.

A central debate in the study of national interest remains the question: “whose interests are being represented?” Scholars from various traditions have questioned whether national interest truly reflects the collective will of the nation or whether it primarily serves narrower groups, such as political elites, economic actors, or the military-industrial complex. According to elite theory,

⁷ Rosenau, J. N. (1966). *International Politics and Foreign Policy*. New York: Free Press.



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national interest is shaped and dominated by a powerful group or institution. From this perspective, the state acts as an agent of elite interests rather than public interests. The concept of the “power elite” elaborates on this idea in detail, illustrating how corporate, political, and military leaders in the United States shape national policy to serve their own interests⁸.

Democratic theorists argue that, ideally, national interest should be shaped through the will of the people and democratic institutions. At the same time, scholars such as Chomsky and Moravcsik contend that public opinion is often manipulated or marginalized by powerful interest groups. Pluralist theories view national interest as the outcome of negotiation and compromise among various interest groups within society, emphasizing democratic processes, while acknowledging that some interests may take precedence over others.

Feminist scholars critique the assumption that national interest is gender-neutral, highlighting that women’s perspectives in foreign policy are often overlooked. Cynthia Enloe demonstrates that the formation of national interest reflects patriarchal structures, privileging male-dominated institutions such as the military and sidelining gender-related issues⁹.

Postcolonial theorists, such as Said and Spivak, critique the concept of national interest for having historically served the purposes of imperial and neocolonial states. They argue that in Western countries, national interest often conceals expansionist and exploitative policies under the guise of security or economic development.

Mearsheimer and Ikenberry, in their analyses of U.S. foreign policy, demonstrate that national interest is frequently directed toward maintaining global hegemony and securing access to global markets. From a realist

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⁹ Enloe, C. (1989). *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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perspective, Mearsheimer emphasizes the United States' pursuit of preserving its hegemonic position, while Gowan highlights that U.S. foreign policy serves corporate interests, particularly in the defense and energy sectors.

In the context of the European Union, scholars discuss the alignment of national interests with broader European objectives. Moravcsik points out that national interests are negotiated within the EU's institutional framework, requiring member states to harmonize their domestic goals with regional policies.

In the Global South, national interest is often interpreted as resisting external domination and promoting economic development. However, critics note that national interest can be adapted by ruling elites or authoritarian regimes to serve their own agendas.

Thus, while national interest remains a central concept in international relations, it is highly contested. Realism, liberalism, constructivism, and critical theories provide different interpretations of national interest and shed light on whose interests it serves. Accordingly, studying “whose interests” are advanced under the banner of national interest requires analyzing power dynamics both within and between states.

National interests constitute the central priorities of state policy, guiding both domestic and foreign activities. They aim to preserve state sovereignty, ensure economic stability, strengthen security, and enhance societal welfare. Today, a major challenge in implementing national interests lies in the constraints on sovereignty. For instance, EU member states retain sovereignty in political and economic domains, while national defense, foreign energy relations, justice and internal affairs, migration policy, and education remain under national government control, reflecting the primacy of national interests.

Public opinion also plays an important role in shaping national interests. In a 2011 survey conducted by the European Commission, 42% of respondents

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identified primarily as citizens of their own state, 37% occasionally felt European citizenship, and 7% primarily considered themselves EU citizens. This illustrates the practical significance of the national interest concept. In pursuing national interests, states consider general societal interests and allocate certain powers to coordinate domestic and foreign policies. For example, in imposing sanctions on Russia regarding the Ukraine issue, states protected their national interests while making collective strategic decisions. John Monnet notes: “If states prioritize national sovereignty above all else, maintaining peace and stability becomes difficult, as they cannot effectively manage economic and political independence.”

The implementation of national interests depends on the following conditions:

1. Internal and external political stability
2. Effective management of state resources
3. Balance within political and economic systems
4. Support from the population and political elites
5. Preservation of national culture and historical roots
6. Strategic measures against national defense and external threats
7. Coordination and long-term planning of national interests

Principles of national interests include:

- **Equity** – decisions should be fair for all social groups
- **Voluntariness** – decisions should be made freely and consciously
- **Mutual trust** – strengthening trust between state institutions and society
- **Commitment to universal values** – national interests should consider international laws and norms

National interests are not only central in domestic policy but also in a state's international activities, serving to preserve sovereignty and ensure



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strategic advantage. They define a state's long-term strategy and guide political, economic, and social decisions. By implementing national interests, a state strengthens domestic stability while enhancing its position in the international arena. Accordingly, national interests play a key role in all areas of state policy, including defense, economy, education, culture, and foreign relations.

Examples of national interests in practice include:

- **United States:** National interests focus on domestic security, economic stability, strategic resources, and global political influence. Domestically, U.S. national interests are coordinated between federal and state levels, ensuring stability through effective management of economic resources. In foreign policy, participation in NATO, the UN, and other international alliances advances strategic and military objectives. Decisions in the Middle East and control over global energy routes serve U.S. sovereignty and security, aligning domestic and foreign strategies to maintain global stability.
- **China:** National interests aim at economic stability, territorial security, and strategic influence. Domestically, economic growth, social stability, and resource management advance national interests. Externally, the Belt and Road Initiative promotes China's global economic and strategic interests. Military and political decisions regarding the South China Sea and Taiwan focus on territorial sovereignty, while international trade and energy routes protect economic interests. China implements national interests through long-term planning and resource optimization, strengthening both domestic and international stability.
- **Russia:** National interests center on military security, control over energy resources, and geopolitical influence. Domestically, Russia ensures national interests through economic and political stability. In foreign policy, decisions regarding Ukraine and Georgia protect territorial security and



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sovereignty. Strategic control over energy resources and relations with Europe serve Russia's economic interests while reinforcing its global position. National interests in Russia are implemented through coordination of domestic and foreign policies, ensuring state sovereignty and security.

- **India:** National interests are safeguarded through strategic security, economic growth, and regional influence. Domestically, economic stability and social cohesion maintain national interests. Externally, military presence in the Indo-Pacific and strategic cooperation with neighboring states strengthen national security. Decisions in energy, transport, and trade align with national interests, enhancing India's global economic standing and supporting long-term stability through harmonization of domestic and foreign strategies.

- **Turkey:** National interests focus on regional security, economic growth, and geopolitical influence. Domestically, economic stability and support from the political elite are key for advancing national interests. Externally, policies related to Syria and Iran strengthen territorial security and strategic position. Turkey also plays a strategic role in transport and energy routes between Europe and Asia, promoting its national interests. Implementing national interests requires internal stability, political cooperation, and alignment with global economic strategies.

- **Uzbekistan:** National interests are considered strategic priorities in domestic and foreign policy, encompassing sovereignty preservation, stable economic growth, security, international standing, and societal welfare. This concept is reflected in official documents, state strategies, and foreign policy, guiding Uzbekistan's actions as an independent state.

At the core of Uzbekistan's diplomacy and international relations strategy lie state sovereignty and independence, which constitute the most important elements expressing its national interests. According to official

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sources, Uzbekistan's foreign policy is guided by the principles of "openness, mutually beneficial, and constructive cooperation based on national interests," aiming to enhance sovereignty, strengthen security, and ensure stability¹⁰.

One of the theoretical principles underlying national interests is sovereign equality, meaning that Uzbekistan retains the right to make independent decisions in its domestic and foreign affairs. Official authoritative documents consider national interests as a central element of foreign policy, and these interests are supported by domestic legislation, the Constitution, the Law on Foreign Policy, and international treaties.

In the realm of foreign policy, national interests are expressed through several key objectives. First, Uzbekistan prioritizes strengthening its sovereignty and independence, including ensuring the inviolability of state borders and regional security. Official documents indicate that Tashkent supports non-alignment with military blocs, opposes the establishment of foreign military bases on its territory, and aims to resolve conflicts through peaceful means¹¹.

The second direction is strengthening Uzbekistan's position in global and regional integration. This national interest serves to enhance both economic and political stability. For instance, Uzbekistan actively participates in numerous international organizations, including the European Union, Central Asian states, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the United Nations, aiming to promote a peaceful and prosperous environment in the region¹².

Third, economic national interests are closely linked to Uzbekistan's growth strategies. National interests are pursued not only through the

¹⁰ Milliy manfaatlarga asoslangan ochiq va konstruktiv tashqi siyosat tamoyillari haqida — O'zbekiston hukumati rasmiy portali ma'lumotlari.

¹¹ Tashqi siyosatning asosiy maqsadlari va suverenitetni himoya qilish tamoyili haqida — O'zbekiston tashqi siyosatining rasmiy tavsifi.

¹² O'zbekistonning xalqaro tashkilotlarda ishtiroki va mintaqaviy hamkorligi — ilmiy maqola tahlili.

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management of energy resources and the expansion of export markets but also via economic reforms aimed at attracting foreign investment. For example, the state implements major strategic projects with the participation of several international investors¹³. These initiatives align national interests with internal stability and competitiveness in the international economic arena.

Fourth, security and social welfare play a crucial role in Uzbekistan's national interests. This is particularly reflected in maintaining domestic political stability, combating crime, terrorism, and extremism, as well as developing education and cultural sectors. The concept of national interests also encompasses principles of social justice and sustainable development, prioritizing the well-being of the population in state policy.

In conclusion, Uzbekistan's national interests constitute a comprehensive strategic direction aimed at strengthening independence, safeguarding sovereignty, enhancing international standing, ensuring economic stability, and promoting social welfare. These interests serve as the main guiding principle not only in domestic policy but also in international activities, influencing every strategic decision of the state.

Based on the analysis of the above theories, it becomes evident that separating internal and external actors in the theory of national interests is insufficient; an integrative model that combines them is necessary. This approach merges the priorities of political, economic, and military elites within the state, the legitimacy demands of the public and civil society, global geostrategic conflicts, international institutions, and normative and ideological values, allowing for a more complete and complex understanding of national interests.

Analyzing national interests while accounting for interlayer dynamics

¹³ Milliy manfaatlarni iqtisodiy yo'nalishda amalga oshirish misollari (investitsiyalar va yangi iqtisodiy loyihalar).

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yields more precise and practically reliable results than simple realist or liberal approaches. For instance, U.S. strategic decisions in the Middle East integrate internal elite priorities, public opinion, and the global security context. China's "Belt and Road" initiative is shaped by the alignment of domestic economic stability, global trade routes, and normative values. In this way, each decision connects with all layers of national interest, distinguishing it from static or stereotypical approaches.

National interests should be viewed not merely in domestic or external contexts but as a four-layered integrative system. These layers are dynamically interrelated, and each plays a crucial role in shaping and implementing national interests. This approach differs from classical theories that oversimplify national interests and aligns with the complex nature of state decision-making.

1. Internal elite layer. This layer includes the priorities of political, economic, and military elites. It shapes the official political and strategic decisions representing national interests. For example, U.S. policy in the Middle East not only ensures global security but is also closely linked to domestic economic sectors and congressional decisions. Thus, elite priorities integrate strategic and domestic political stability in shaping national interests. Similarly, Russia's decisions regarding Ukraine and Georgia are directly tied to the priorities of internal military and political elites, serving their strategic objectives.

2. Public and societal layer. This layer, composed of civil society, media, and public opinion, defines the legitimacy and inclusiveness of national interests. For instance, China's "Belt and Road" initiative promotes not only external economic and strategic interests but also domestic public and social stability. Without this layer, national interests risk being aligned solely with elite priorities, resulting in decisions with low legitimacy. In Uzbekistan, foreign policy conducted through international cooperation and regional

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integration is reinforced by economic and social stability measures that involve public participation.

3. Global context layer. International institutions, the global economic system, and geostrategic conflicts ensure that national interests align with foreign policy and strategic positioning. For example, Uzbekistan's active participation in the SCO and the European Union strengthens global security and economic stability. This layer allows national interests to be shaped not only by domestic priorities but also by strategic decisions derived from global circumstances. India's military presence in the Indo-Pacific region and strategic cooperation with neighboring states are also shaped by this global geostrategic layer.

4. Normative-ideological layer. Identity, values, and historical experience serve as an ideological and normative foundation for shaping national interests. Turkey and India's regional strategic decisions are made considering their historical identity and national values. This layer prevents national interests from being confined solely to power or economic gains, adapting them to the country's national historical and cultural context. In this regard, Russia and China's territorial security policies are also shaped by the normative-ideological layer.

This model differs from classical theories by integrating the dynamic and multi-layered interactions among internal and external actors and normative values rather than restricting national interests to power or economic gains. For example, Russia's strategic decisions concerning Ukraine and Georgia simultaneously consider the security priorities of the internal elite layer, legitimacy demands of the public layer, global geostrategic conflicts, and historical normative standards. Consequently, the model reveals the true, dynamic, and context-sensitive nature of national interests, preventing the assessment of state decisions as solely based on stereotypical power or

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economic contexts.

Through this approach, national interests are understood as an integrative, dynamic, and multi-layered system, highlighting the interconnectedness of each decision with internal and external layers, normative values, and the global context, in contrast to other theories.

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