

Idealism against
realism in
international policy
politics essay



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The history of the modern political science is to a great extent the story of continuing struggle between the two paradigms, the two belief systems on the basis of international order and means of stabilizing international relations. Representatives of one of them, the tradition of which dates back to Stoic philosophy and the biblical postulates of the unity of the human race, the views of the medieval theologian F. de Vitoria and outstanding thinker of the 18th century Immanuel Kant, believe that a stable international order can be built and maintained only in the light of universal moral principles and based on these laws (Pijl 3-34). In practice, this political paradigm – the paradigm of political idealism – finds its fullest expression in the policy developed under the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson, particularly in his program of permanent universal intergovernmental organization – the League of Nations, which was to become a guarantor and an instrument of the new international order after the First World War. Further, the paper covers the idea that the political views of Wilson significantly differed from the postulates of realism and need to become more realist in applying them to the contemporary politics.

The main ideas of a paradigm of political realism Wilson opposed can already be found in “The History of the Peloponnesian War” by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, the views of the Italian political philosopher Machiavelli, English philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his theory of the natural state, his fellow countryman David Hume, who asserted a theory of political equilibrium, German General Carl von Clausewitz and others (Pijl 3-34). Already in 1932, American theologian R. Niebuhr in his book “Moral Man and Immoral Society” criticized the pacifism of idealists and their short-

sightedness in the face of imminent danger of fascism. A relatively independent branch of this area of political thought in the beginning of World War II becomes geopolitics (by Mackinder, Spykman, Mahan, and others) (Keohane and Nye 72-80). The founding father of the theory of political realism is considered to be the University of Chicago professor Hans Morgenthau. Already the first edition of his book “ Politics among Nations. The struggle for Power and Peace” in 1948 caused wide interest in science and the political environment not only in the U. S. but also in other Western countries (Pijl 3-34).

In contrast to political realists, Woodrow Wilson and other representatives of the idealist direction are convinced that the states are not only non-singular, but also not major international actors. They believe that this role is played by international organizations (in this case, intergovernmental). At the same time, among the main problems of the theory and practice of international politics, realists point out the problems of implementation and protection of national interests, rivalry and balance of power in the global arena, strategies for achieving and maintaining state power (not least in its military dimension), conclusion and revision of interstate unions, depending on changes in the geopolitical (geostrategic) situation, etc. Idealists emphasize the existence of universal, human interests, values and ideals, the inalienable rights of human beings, the need for a comprehensive system of collective security in order to preserve and protect them. And while the political realists insist that the major international processes are conflicts, the idealists are talking about negotiations and cooperation. Finally, according to political realists, the immutability of human nature and the

whole experience of international relations show that the hopes for changing their nature and the creation of a new world order based on the rule of law and respect for the individual's interests are no more than a utopia. Idealists, by contrast, believe in achieving world harmony, the deliverance of mankind from the deadly and devastating armed conflict in the creativity of universal morality and international law (Keohane and Nye 113-142; Pijl 3-34; Mead).

However, the confidence in the fact that the United States is intended to serve as an engine for spreading of democracy, free markets and individual freedom is the stable foundation for the interaction of the USA with the world. The fact that such bitter rivals as President Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt equally widely considered American interests in the world, believing that the fate of the United States is inextricably linked to the character and conduct of countries around the world, underlines the prevalence of this ideology. Woodrow Wilson declared that all the nations are engaged in the life of the whole world, whether they like it or not; and thus, anything that affects mankind is inevitably our affair (Kennedy 81-84).

Roosevelt's idea of the global role of the USA was equally far-reaching; he stated that the country should accept the idea of international morality, and thus, be committed to doing everything possible to achieve fairness and integrity of the humanity as a whole, but should also feel obliged to judge all other nations by their actions in each separate case (Mead). This is, however, a clear evidence that the nature of American foreign policy is determined by serving to ideals, i. e. by incorrigible idealism, which can only be a part of a dynamic and complex process, while American foreign policy must constantly be balanced with sober strategic imperatives.

Still, it can be said that sometimes Wilson's idealism was factually combined with the hard realism. For example, regretting over the reports on mistreatment of Armenians by Turks, Wilson resisted loud demands to declare war on the Turks, fearing to endanger the American missionary presence in the Middle East. Indeed, the reluctance of the United States to send American troops to support the nascent Armenian state after World War I contributed to the rapid collapse of Armenia (Mead). The way Wilson conducted the war also ruled out any hint on his starry-eyed idealism, as it was necessary to give effect to the power of the American military machine or the principle of power without limits and without measure proclaimed by Wilson. Thus, in the American involvement in World War I, we can see a strategy built by a hybrid of narrowly defined interests and deep-seated American principles (Kennedy 97-101).

But in general, the very name of Woodrow Wilson has become a synonym to American idealism. His intention "to make the world safe for democracy" stimulated the American community, when the isolationist nation entered World War I. His speeches for self-identification generated deep resonance among nationalists throughout the world, and Wilson himself was considered as practically messianic figure (Kennedy 213-15; Mead).

Modern Wilsonians believe that the U. S. should deal with international problems in close cooperation with other states and within the strict framework of international law. U. S. should also promote and disseminate widely the idea of democracy (Fukuyama 55-59). The process of globalization has played in this case the crucial and positive role. Wilsonian ideology is nowadays shared by most congressional Democrats. The modern <https://assignbuster.com/idealism-against-realism-in-international-policy-politics-essay/>

interpretation of this school (neo-liberalism or transnationalism) is associated with the works of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye. In neoliberal version, the major attention is focused on the processes of interdependence in the modern world and the growing role of non-state actors in world politics.

Finally, we should rethink the question of what place should be taken by the spread of democracy in U. S. foreign policy. Perhaps the most false interpretation of the lessons the war in Iraq would be a complete rejection of neoconservative ideas, coupled with a tendency towards isolationism and realism in its cynical interpretation, because as a result, U. S. allies would consequently be friendly-minded authoritarian regimes (Fukuyama 134-37). Woodrow Wilson's idealistic policy, which builds international relations taking into account how other countries treat their own citizens, should generally be recognized correct, but should also be provided with greater realism, that was still lacking at the beginning of the 21st century.