

Hans J. Morgenthau had a point! - Knud Erik Jorgensen



Lessons learned - before or during World War II - prompted different scholars to draw different conclusions. In *A Working Peace System* (London 1943), David Mitrany prescribed functionalism without the federalist obsession with constitutions and without regional specificities. Moreover, in a state of philosophical agony, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Amsterdam 1947) that the catastrophe was embedded in the Enlightenment, that is, what was supposed to represent progress had produced the opposite. Finally, on a canvas, consisting of World War II, European thought, American optimism and personal life as an émigré scholar, Hans J. Morgenthau presented in *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (1946) an all-out critique of liberalism and reason as well as an appraisal of power politics, seen as an etched in stone feature of international affairs. Observing the fall of France in 1940,

Morgenthau concluded that liberalism-informed foreign policy had failed big time. Encountering social scientists in the United States, eager to base their science on the natural sciences, assumptions of rationality and positivism, Vienna Circle style, Morgenthau warned that the full package would be misleading at best and disastrous at worst.

Some of the reviewers of Morgenthau's book were not impressed. Reid Bain wrote, in a somewhat offensive style, "Such mumbo-jumbo juggling of reified abstractions gives aid and comfort to nascent fascists, worshippers of the *führer prinzip* and other varieties of nation-state totalitarians, despairing liberals, and half-baked intelligentsia." (Bain 1947, 473). On the same book Vienna Circle positivist Ernst Nagel (1947) was not less critical, though he used a more academic language than Bain. Bain, intriguingly, points out that both the prudence of statesmen and the balance of power politics, features cherished by Morgenthau, failed utterly during the 1930s. Nonetheless, Morgenthau had a point, and the point remains valid and compelling today. Unfortunately, it is somewhat hidden behind Morgenthau's over-stretched generalizations, vague concepts and bold statements, "In Germany, Bismarck knew what foreign policy was about and did not sacrifice Russia's friendship to Polish nationalism." (1947, 56). Likewise, Morgenthau criticised 'scientific laws' yet promoted 'eternal laws' and thereby timeless wisdom.

What is the point? With the introduction of just a dash of specification, Morgenthau's argument is that distinct currents of thought within the liberal tradition have weak foundations and therefore provide inadequate responses to the contemporary predicament of international power politics. Acknowledging this more limited argument does not imply accepting everything Morgenthau put forward in *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* or, even less, realist approaches to war. Thus, it is well-known that Morgenthau's realist brother in arms, E.H. Carr (1939), had a problem with appeasement, a problem that seemingly is repeated by John Mearsheimer (2014, 2022). Previously, John Mearsheimer (1993) made the case for a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent; he also prescribed a German nuclear deterrent (Mearsheimer 1990). By contrast, Morgenthau's approach to the Vietnam War and John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's (2003) approach to the Iraq War are based on balance of power theory and thus different

from making the case for appeasement. While realist approaches to appeasement and war remain intriguing and thus worthwhile analytical endeavours, the following sections will be devoted to an application of Morgenthau's (specific) critique to Europe's response to contemporary power politics.

For decades, the EU's conduct of foreign relations had all the liberal characteristics Morgenthau criticised and warned about. The EU conducted foreign relations on the basis of the functional-technocratic premises we find in Mitrany and Haas' thinking. Foreign policy doctrines were wrapped in terms like partners, cooperation, soft power and multilateralism, while terms like self-interest, coercion, rivals, autonomy and threats were avoided. Strategic dependence of the US was seen as the prime condition under which EU member states could engage in foreign policy coordination. Likewise, EU member states were leaning towards principled dependence on UN authorization of peace keeping operations, thus accepting inaction in case of a veto. Much academic energy is devoted to either defend the EU's status quo ante liberal orientation or present the EU as an imperial power, the anti-thesis to Morgenthau's position.

By contrast Wolfgang Wagner (2017) argues that the EU, quintessentially, is a liberal power. More than less, the EU is a union of democratic states, is characterized by high levels of interdependence and a high degree of institutionalization. Applying the logic of second-image approaches, Wagner then argues that the EU is bound to conduct a foreign policy with liberal characteristics. In other words, the nature of the polity determines its objectives and international behaviour. The problem is that the EU case, similar to other cases, foremost demonstrate the limits of second image approaches. Two perspectives explain why. First, as demonstrated by Gourevitch (1978) second-image approaches do not take the second image reversed approach into account. Costa and Jørgensen (2012) applied this perspective to the EU. Second, the second image approach tends to be indeterminate, blunt, and thus unable to explain variation in the foreign policy of liberal powers. At best, the second image approach needs to be refined, for instance asking under which conditions it is likely that a liberal power will pursue a foreign policy direction X, Y or Z? The liberal tradition is sufficiently rich to allow for all three foreign policy directions. Indeed, Wagner (2017: 1404) argues that, "The promotion of democracy and

human rights, international institutions and law as well as market economy and free trade are all policies one can expect of the European Union as a liberal power.” Importantly, he also argues that a liberal power might find itself in a situation that calls for confrontation or even war. Five years after the publication of the article, Russia created such a situation. While space does not allow for a thorough analysis, space does allow five claims.

First, the contemporary language of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EEAS High Representative Josep Borrell seems to suggest a change away from liberal orientations. After all, words like geopolitical and geopolitics are not part of traditional EU discourse. However, the employment of these terms does not imply a return to the worldviews of Karl Haushofer’s mythological Institut für Geopolitik in Munich. Instead, the employment might inadvertently suggest that both von der Leyen and Borrell are unfamiliar with issues of power politics and international order for which reason they opt to go pop with terms that in everyday language are widespread. Their inexperience would be easy to explain. Both officials represent an institution that for a long time was built on Mitrany’s functionalist-technocratic vision, translated via Haas’ *neofunctionalism* and Jean Monnet’s political practice concept *engrenage*. It is a union of states that regard for instance internet governance as merely a technological communication policy issue, not as the security issue it is in American perspectives often is. Thus, the new language suggests a changed situation analysis but that is perfectly possible within the spectrum of liberal orientations.

Second, the decrease of declarations about the promotion of democracy, human rights and other liberal values does not necessarily signify a retreat from liberal internationalism. The decrease might signify that the EU acknowledges that the conditions for the promotion of liberal values have changed, not for the better but for the worse. The EU’s soft or normative power peaked around the time the Obama administration chose not to make democracy promotion a priority. Therefore, a continuation of policy, highlighting liberal values, would increasingly be symbolic or declaratory and limit the opportunities of achieving other important policy objectives. Among EU foreign policy analysts, the values-at-all-costs segment felt betrayed, and the EU’s subsequent adoption of principled pragmatism functioned as salt in the wound.

Third, the question about the EU's liberal credentials is excellent to highlight the contested meanings of liberal internationalism. Some take a shrug-the-shoulders, accommodationist approach and mix it with a principled attitude that rule out the use of force, thereby unintentionally confirming Mearsheimer's caricature of the liberal tradition. Others regard liberal internationalism as fully compatible with the use of force, not as a kind of first move but also not a principled abandonment of it, if need be. Perhaps we can call this position the Madeleine Albright doctrine.

Fourth, the members of the European Council have for 25 years repeatedly confirmed their adherence to the vision of strategic autonomy. For years, it was a position without much consequence. While strategic autonomy first surfaced during the transatlantic and intra-European row over Iraq, it was the Trump administration and Russia's increasingly confrontational foreign policy, that moved strategic autonomy from a background vision to an operational issue. While the *primus inter pares* principle might have been suitable for NATO and thus for bipolar politics during the Cold War, the international system is no longer in a bipolar configuration. Hence, arguments that claim a contradiction between alliance solidarity and strategic autonomy essentially make the case for continuity in Europe's strategic dependence on the United States. Arguments that, in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, highlight Europe's current de facto dependency on the United States seem to be unable or unwilling to make a distinction between tactical and strategic considerations. Hence, it would be a weak alliance that is unable to comprise two partners which each enjoy strategic autonomy. After all, the United States has enjoyed strategic autonomy since the Second World War and created and maintained the infrastructures it takes worldwide (military bases, satellites, ICBMs, intelligence networks etc.). Moreover, while the United States is open for incoming FDI, some sectors are closed for business that is funded from abroad. Likewise, strategic autonomy does not equal a principled anti-interdependence stance. The EU continues to be a prime promoter of international trade but aims at taking critical infrastructures out of the equation, infrastructures that reduce the risk of existential threats. This is an example of prudent statecraft in a nutshell and something all major powers do.

Fifth, the above refinements have significant consequences for our assessment of continuity and change in EU foreign policy. Did the EU's foreign policy paradigm change? Did the foreign policy towards distinct states or international institutions change? A forthcoming book, *Europe's World* (2025), argues that it generally does not make sense to talk about the EU's foreign policy paradigm in the singular. Instead, we should diversify, not least because foreign policy is an umbrella term that comprises an entire palette of policies towards states and institutions. Hence, when the EU's foreign policy paradigm towards Russia changes, the foreign policy paradigms guiding policies towards Japan, Brazil or the United States might well enjoy continuity. Likewise, while the United States during the Cold War managed to pursue bilateral strategies towards East Asia, multilateral strategies towards Western Europe and confrontational strategies towards the USSR, the epicentre was liberal power America. If we compare to the EU, liberal power Europe might well have a liberal *Grundnorm* but a range of foreign policy paradigms and strategies that each are tailored to distinct targeted states and institutions. It is from within Europe's emerging strategic culture that deliberations about paradigms and strategies will appear; hence the rationale of revisiting Morgenthau anno 1946.



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