# The ethics of foreign policy: A framework

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*Despite the numerous frameworks for assessing ethical issues within foreign policy, more general accounts on the ethics of foreign policy that unite these various areas have not yet emerged. This article therefore aims to sketch a general framework for the ethics of foreign policy, which I call the “Pragmatic Approach”. In doing so, it considers why Just War Theory is not suitable as the basis for a framework for the ethics of foreign policy. It also shows how the Pragmatic Approach can be used to make judgements on three different foreign policy issues: the ethics of signing a new trade deal, the ethics of negotiating with unfriendly states, and the ethics of launching drone strikes.*

**Introduction**

The past three decades have seen a rapid expansion of the field of international ethics. Numerous issues have been subject to sustained and detailed analysis, including the ethics of war and humanitarian intervention, the duty to tackle global poverty, the responsibility to mitigate climate change, the legitimacy of international institutions, the ethics of humanitarian aid, and the global responsibility toward migrants.[[2]](#endnote-1) However, despite the countless frameworks for assessing particular issues within foreign policy, more *general* accounts on the ethics of foreign policy that unite these various areas have not yet emerged. This is to a large degree because given the complexity of the debates surrounding issues in international ethics, scholars often choose to focus on specific issues.[[3]](#endnote-2)

The aim of this article is to sketch a general framework for the ethics of foreign policy. I present what I call the “Pragmatic Approach”. As we will see, this framework is pragmatic in that it gives significant weight to instrumentalist concerns, accounts for the non-ideal nature of the contemporary global system, and focuses on contingent rather than necessary features.

In what follows, I first consider the best existing candidate to form the basis for a general framework for the ethics of foreign policy—Just War Theory—and show why it does not work in this role. I then outline the Pragmatic Approach, which highlights five central considerations. These considerations form the basis for seven more action-guiding principles. In the final section, I show how the Pragmatic Approach can be used to make judgements on three different foreign policy issues: the ethics of signing a new trade deal, the ethics of negotiating with unfriendly states, and the ethics of launching drone strikes.[[4]](#endnote-3)

# Just War Theory and the Ethics of Foreign Policy

The leading framework in international ethics comes from Just War Theory. Just War theorists offer a clear set of principles to govern the resort to war—the principles of *jus ad bellum—*and its conduct—the principles of *jus in bello*.[[5]](#endnote-4) These principles have been widely discussed and invoked, including by leading politicians, such as in the U.S. presidential debates.[[6]](#endnote-5) They have also informed other frameworks. For instance, these principles inform the “precautionary principles” of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) that first proposed the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine.[[7]](#endnote-6)

The following six principles are widely thought as central to *jus ad bellum*:

(1) There must be just cause for resort to war.

(2) Those waging war must have the right intention.

(3) Those waging war should possess the legitimate authority to do so.

(4) There must be a reasonable chance of success.

(5) War must be a proportionate response.

(6) War should be the last resort.

There are three central principles of *jus in bello*:

1. Force must discriminate in targeting between combatants and non-combatants.
2. Any harm to non-combatants should be proportionate to the military advantage expected.
3. Any harm to non-combatants should be necessary to the pursuit of the military objective.

These principles have several attractive features, which make them a potential candidate for the basis of a foreign policy ethics in general. First, despite the numerous formulations of these principles, they are largely determinate, with a clear sense of what they require. Second, they are also clearly relevant, at least to war. Third, they have fairly wide appeal; many of them are distilled into international law and concern features that are widely highlighted in debates about warfare. These principles have also been used to tackle other areas of foreign policy. These include, most notably, the ethics of sanctions and other forcible measures to address aggression. These applications have had some degree of success, especially when the focus is still on dealing with a particular threat or aggressor.[[8]](#endnote-7)

However, the standard Just War Theory criteria face two notable limitations as a broader basis for the ethics of foreign policy. First, these criteria are less relevant *when war is not the issue* and, more broadly, when there is not a threat and the use of force is not at stake.[[9]](#endnote-8) This is particularly clear regarding the principle of just cause, which is often viewed as the most important principle of *jus ad bellum*. Why does there need to be a just cause to engage in seemingly noncoercive foreign policy decisions? It seems clear, for instance, that the Trump administration did not need to meet a just cause condition to engage in recent diplomatic meetings with North Korea. Likewise, Canada did not need a just cause to negotiate its trade deal with the European Union (EU) in 2014.

Second, several Just War Theory criteria may be morally problematic, particularly if they are seen as moral principles that should *ideally* govern war (and foreign policy more generally). For instance, why should war be the last resort if other options, such as economic sanctions, can cause even more harm? In addition, why should war both have a reasonable prospect of success *and* be a proportionate response, when these criteria duplicate the emphasis on consequences? Indeed, the central principles of *jus in bello* have been challenged recently by “revisionist” Just War Theorists.[[10]](#endnote-9) The revisionist challenge has been perhaps the most important theoretical shift in international ethics over the past decade. Let us briefly consider this challenge, as an analysis of revisionism in Just War theory will help provide guidance on establishing a general framework for the ethics of foreign policy.

In brief, revisionists argue that the ethics of war is not *sui generis*. That is to say, war is not a special domain with its own moral rules. Instead, war is governed by the same moral principles that govern other areas of moral and political philosophy, most notably the ethics of interpersonal self-defense. Therefore, the principles of Just War Theory should be congruent with the principles that underpin other areas of moral and political philosophy. Accordingly, revisionists argue that just as innocent individuals are not liable to force in the ethics of self-defense, innocent combatants should not be viewed as liable in the ethics of war. Conversely, those who are morally responsible for posing an unjust threat can be deemed liable, even if they are civilians. This notion challenges one of the shibboleths of Just War Theory: that the *jus in bello* principle of discrimination should distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, particularly in the “*deep* *morality*” of war, the ideal principles that should govern war.[[11]](#endnote-10)

Revisionists tend to admit, however, that although these claims might be correct *ideally*, they would be very problematic if put into practice. For instance, soldiers could increase their targeting of civilians whom they deem as “liable.” Accordingly, some revisionists endorse maintaining the standard conventions of *jus in bello* in practice.[[12]](#endnote-11) For instance, Jeff McMahan argues that non-combatant immunity should be maintained because if just combatants are permitted to use force against non-combatants who are liable, combatants may also use force against non-combatants who are not liable.[[13]](#endnote-12) Revisionists argue that their proposed principles should only apply to the deep morality of war, at least initially. To that extent, revisionism lacks practical relevance, at least for the immediate principles that should govern warfare.[[14]](#endnote-13) However, revisionist Just War Theory has two major *theoretical* implications that are useful for developing an ethics of foreign policy more generally.

First, the central revisionist claim that war is not *sui generis* suggests that a unified theory of the ethics of foreign policy is necessary. Therefore, the principles that govern warfare should be the same as the principles that govern other areas of foreign policy. These principles should be continuous with other areas of moral and political philosophy.

Second, revisionist analysis has also prompted a re-evaluation of the central principles of *jus ad bellum*, which is useful for examining the ethics of foreign policy.[[15]](#endnote-14) More specifically, ensuing from the revisionist analysis of both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, it seems clear that there are not, in fact, six central principles for *jus ad bellum*, but rather only two, at least *ideally*. These are *proportionality* and *necessity* and they govern both the resort to war and its conduct. All of the other central principles of Just War Theory, as Seth Lazar argues, can be explained in terms of these principles.[[16]](#endnote-15) Proportionality compares the use of force *to not launching force* (e.g. inaction).[[17]](#endnote-16) Necessity, on the other hand, compares force to other measures to *address the situation at hand*.[[18]](#endnote-17) Together, necessity and proportionality can capture the relevant moral issues at stake in war.

Examining proportionality and necessity does not only entail comparing the efficacy of war to inaction and other options. It also requires weighing the reasons *for* and *against* going to war with inaction and other options. These reasons not only include the efficacy of these measures, but also other considerations highlighted by Just War conditions. As Lazar notes, the “other elements of the ethics of war contribute to the evaluation of proportionality and necessity.”[[19]](#endnote-18) For instance, whether the decision to go to war has legitimate authority is, under the necessity principle, compared to whether other measures also have legitimate authority. If war does indeed have legitimate authority and other measures, such as arming rebels, do not, then this condition favours war. This reason will be added to the balance of reasons for going to war and weighed against the reasons for not going to war. Alternatively, consider the principle of discrimination in *jus in bello*, which requires combatants to avoid targeting innocents*.* If war will likely lead to greater harm to innocents than other measures, such as diplomacy or inaction, then in the overall assessments of necessity and proportionality, war should not be favoured. Proportionality and necessity can, therefore, capture the central aspects of Just War Theory by making overall assessments of the underlying reasons for and against going to war.[[20]](#endnote-19)

The emergence of these two central principles provides key insight into the ethics of foreign policy. Proportionality and necessity are, I posit, also the two central principles for thinking about how states should conduct themselves across a range of foreign policy domains, not only regarding the use of force. As applied to the ethics of foreign policy, proportionality and necessity are simple. Proportionality examines whether or not a state should launch a foreign policy measure. Necessity concerns whether a state should launch a particular foreign policy measure compared to another. These two assessments weigh up the reasons for and against a particular foreign policy measure. For instance, if South Africa is deciding whether or not to invest in the oil sector in South Sudan, it should analyse whether investing will lead to a better outcome than not investing and whether investing will be better than the other potential options that achieve the same end, such as, for instance, investing in another state instead.

To that extent, Just War Theory in its revisionist form provides the basis for an ethics of foreign policy. However, on its own, this framework is bare. It does not provide a detailed, substantive, and plausible account of the relevant reasons to make assessments about which foreign policies should be launched and which should not. Indeed, Just War Theorists have often struggled with this problem.[[21]](#endnote-20) When revisionists do make more substantive claims about war, they often give far too much weight to deontological considerations, stemming from deontological claims in the morality of self-defense. That is to say, revisionists can veer towards pacifism, which seems implausible when faced with few options to tackle serious external aggression or mass atrocities.[[22]](#endnote-21) In addition, revisionist Just War Theory is heavily idealised and often very abstract. The accounts of war presented tend to assume a large degree of compliance with moral norms (apart from the original aggression) and often fail to seem relevant to contemporary foreign policy decisions. This brings us to the Pragmatic Approach.

# The Pragmatic Approach

I have developed the Pragmatic Approach in greater detail as a framework for assessing the alternatives to war in my book, *The Alternatives to War: From Sanctions to Nonviolence*.[[23]](#endnote-22) My aim in this article is to show how the Pragmatic Approach can go beyond the alternatives to war and act as a general guide to the ethics of foreign policy.

The Pragmatic Approach is pragmatic, first, in that it holds that the *effectiveness of a measure is the most important consideration*, often outweighing deontological concerns. Effectiveness refers to a measure’s effects on basic human rights. I will go into greater detail below. Second, it is pragmatic because, unlike revisionist Just War Theory, it significantly reflects the *non-ideal features of the contemporary international system*. That is to say, it takes into account the likelihood of very high degrees of non-compliance compared to how states would behave *ideally*. These non-ideal featuresinclude the lack of capacity to act without harming someoneby action or inaction, significant epistemic limitations in determining who is morally responsible, and frequent attempts to abuse moral norms (e.g., by attempts to justify self-interested interventions in the name of “humanity”). Third, it is pragmatic in that it considers both the *necessary* features of foreign policy issues as well as their *contingent* ones. The Pragmatic Approach does not focus only on the features of foreign policies that are *always* present. Rather, it reflects on whether these features are *likely* to emerge, which depends on current contingencies.

To understand why these three features are important, it helps to consider alternative approaches, which might be viewed as more “principled.” One alternative form of a principled approach would be to hold that there are absolute deontological principles that should *never* be transgressed. For instance, it might be held that states, in their foreign policies, should *never* do harm to innocents, even if this measure will save many more lives. Indeed, it can be argued that it is far worse—impermissible—to *do* harm than it is to *allow* it. This argument draws on the central deontological notion that there is a stronger prohibition on *doing* harm than on *allowing* it (which is sometimes framed in terms of the prohibition on *killing* compared to *letting die*).[[24]](#endnote-23) Yet it does not seem plausible to insist that states can never *do* harm since instrumental considerations can outweigh deontological ones when the number of lives at stake is very large. For instance, if France could save 50,000 lives by conducting a bombing campaign in Niger, which would *do* harm to 10 innocents civilians, the campaign would still seem permissible under the Pragmatic Approach— despite the fact that France would be doing harm—given the number of lives that it would save.

Another principled approach would be principled in the sense that it provides *idealised guidance for the ethics of foreign policy*. It would be akin to the revisionist Just War Theorists’ “deep” morality of warfare (in this case, a deep morality of the ethics of foreign policy). It would describe how states should behave if the circumstances would allow, such as if it were possible to accurately determine individual moral responsibility in war. However, this approach would lack contemporary relevance because like the deep morality of war, it would fail to take into account likely non-compliance and unfavourable circumstances in the current international system (as noted above). Basing the ethics of foreign policy on such an approach would not provide much guidance for our messy, complex, and troubled international system.

A third principled approach focuses solely on the *necessary* features of various foreign policies. However, this approach would be very bare and, again, lack relevance. It would miss the numerous *contingent* facts that are important in determining how states should behave. For instance, if states are to consider whether they should hire private military and security companies (PMSCs) to perform an operation, focusing only on the *necessary* features of PMSCs would fail to provide relevant guidance. This is because there are few necessary features and, moreover, the contingent features seem crucial. These contingent features include the likely effectiveness of PMSCs, their current regulation, the degrees of democratic oversight, the likely treatment of contractors, and the broader negative effects of an international market for force on the international system.[[25]](#endnote-24) To that extent, the empirical details will be crucial.

Thus, a framework for the ethics of foreign policy needs to include instrumental factors (thereby avoiding absolutism), address the non-ideal features of the international system (thereby avoiding idealism), and account for the contingent features of the foreign policy choices (thereby avoiding being too narrow). This is why the Pragmatic Approach is attractive.

# Five Central Values

There are five central considerations on the instrumentalist, non-ideal, and contingently-focused Pragmatic Approach.[[26]](#endnote-25) These considerations are used to determine whether a particular foreign policy measure will be proportionate and necessary, helping to weigh the reasons for and against a measure.

The first concerns the *effectiveness of the measure*. This not only refers to the effectiveness of achieving the goals of a particular foreign policy, such as promoting trade, condemning aggression, or challenging an authoritarian regime. Rather, effectiveness concerns, more specifically, the aggregate effects of the measure on the basic human rights of affected individuals both within the states’ own borders and in other affected states. We can call this “morally valuable effectiveness” to distinguish it from the effectiveness of achieving other goals. Although priority might be given to fellow citizens, it is important that the effects on the basic human rights of one’s own citizens are not given undue weight in such calculations. This approach follows from the seminal accounts in international ethics noted at the start of this article, where it is widely held that states have certain cosmopolitan responsibilities and therefore must take the basic human rights of citizens beyond their borders into account.

The second consideration concerns how *fair* the measure is by assessing the distribution of harm following the decision. What is a fair distribution? Ideally, those who are culpable should bear all the costs, in proportion to the degree to which they are liable. However, this is, of course, highly unlikely in the non-ideal international system, given that it would be too difficult to know who is liable and ensure that they are precisely targeted. It seems inevitable that a few innocent individuals would have to bear the costs of foreign policy decisions, ranging from individuals injured during the bombing campaigns of humanitarian intervention (such as in Kosovo in 1999 and Libya in 2011), to Russian civilians affected by the E.U.’s sanctions regime, to those harmed in small Pacific island-states and elsewhere by inaction on tackling climate change, to those affected in South and North Korea by ongoing tensions between these states. In this non-ideal context, the burdens of any foreign policy decision should be assigned to those who first, *agree* (i.e., consent) to them and, second, who are *privileged*, in order to reduce the inegalitarian effects of a policy. For instance, economic sanctions should be directed at the wealthier sections of society where possible.

It is worth pausing here to further discuss consent. Consent captures the notion—sometimes discussed in the ethics of humanitarian intervention—that those burdened must welcome the action.[[27]](#endnote-26) In the same vein, if a foreign policy aims to help a particular group of individuals, they should welcome it, even if it burdens them as well. If that is the case, states should favour this foreign policy option because those burdened have consented to it. In practice, of course, it may often be difficult to accurately obtain consent from those affected, particularly if, for instance, the foreign policy is implemented in response to a civil war. However, it is also possible in other cases to assess the preferences of affected individuals, such as by speaking to certain NGOs, the local media, and the diaspora.

The third consideration concerns how the measure will fare according to the central deontological *doctrine of doing and allowing.* On this doctrine, as noted above, it is worse to *do* harm than it is to *allow* it. Foreign policy measures that directly *do* harm themselves, such as bombing campaigns and comprehensive sanctions regimes, should be *somewhat* (but not *fully*) disfavoured, even if this would allow more harm overall, such as when a bombing campaign would save several lives but also do harm to innocent civilians.

The fourth consideration relates to the third: it concerns “intervening agency,” that is, whether any negative consequences caused by the foreign policy measure will be *mediated*, i.e., also the responsibility of others. When consequences are mediated, the wrongness of a foreign policy measure *doing* harm decreases. For instance, suppose that in response to a further extension of the E.U. sanctions regime on Russia, Russia cracks down on human rights even further. Because Russia’s intervening agency caused the negative consequences, the E.U.’s responsibility for extending the sanctions regime would be reduced. The E.U. would not itself be *doing* so much harm and therefore would not be as responsible for increased harm to affected individuals.

Fifth, it matters whether the foreign policy measure will punish or benefit those who *deserve it*, that is to say, those whose behaviour has been praiseworthy or blameworthy.[[28]](#endnote-27) Epistemic limitations will, of course, sometimes preclude this determination. However, it may still be possible at certain times. For instance, it may be clear that a trade deal launched by Brazil will benefit firms in the extractive industry that do not deserve to be benefitted, given their culpability in polluting the environment. Alternatively, it may be clear that Botswana’s decision to support an international criminal prosecution will help to punish those who should be punished for human rights violations.

These five considerations can be used to inform the underlying assessments in the ethics of foreign policy and, in doing so, flesh out answers to the questions of both *proportionality*—of whether a measure should be launched compared to not launched—and *necessity*—of whether a measure should be launched instead of other measures. The most important of these considerations is effectiveness, given that foreign policy decisions typically affect a large number of individuals’ basic human rights.[[29]](#endnote-28)

However, these considerations are still fairly abstract. To be fully relevant, we need a guiding set of principles that can be more easily adopted by decision-makers. It is to these principles that I now turn.

# Practical Principles

In this section, I will outline seven principles that can inform foreign policy decision-making more directly. The underlying justifications of these principles ensue from the five considerations outlined above. The principles can be seen as heuristics or rules of thumb for decision-making, which can help to bring about the five central considerations. Although they might not always bring about the values highlighted in these considerations, looking to them will *generally do so*. Therefore, these principles help us determine, more practically, how well a foreign policy measure will do compared to not launching it (proportionality) and to other measures (necessity).

1. Effectiveness: This follows directly from the above. Again, effectiveness concerns the aggregate effects of the measure on the basic human rights of affected individuals. In short, is the measure likely to do more good than harm, conceived in terms of basic human rights?
2. Fairness: Again, this follows straightforwardly from the above: if there are burdens on civilians, are they likely to be borne by those who are privileged, such as elites in rich states? If those who are underprivileged will bear the burdens, launching a measure should be reconsidered.
3. Consent: Have those who will bear the burdens of a foreign policy decision agreed to them, as best as can be reasonably determined? If so, this is a reason in favour of the policy.[[30]](#endnote-29)
4. Noncoercive: Is the policy significantly coercive? If so, it is more likely to *do* harm, especially to civilians. Coercive action should often be the last resort. If there is a coercive response, there needs to be sufficient cause—just cause—for this response. Otherwise, the response may lead to more harm than good, again, in terms of basic human rights.
5. Democratic control: Is there public support for the action? If so, this is a reason to favour it since, in general, foreign policy under democratic control is more likely to be constrained (and effective in the long run). This is because the public often has to bear the costs of the action, such as through increased taxation, lower public services, and sometimes the loss of life.[[31]](#endnote-30) To be sure, not all foreign policy actions need to have democratic support. What matters instead is that the public is supportive of the *general goals* of foreign policy, even if they are unaware or do not clearly support particular actions.
6. International legitimacy: Is there international support for the action? If so, this is again a reason to favour it. This consideration takes into account whether or not an action is legal under international law, since a legal action is be more likely to be viewed as legitimate. International support matters because the greater the support for an action, the more likely it is that this action will be effective, since it can gain material and reputational support from other states.[[32]](#endnote-31)
7. Right intention: Will the foreign policy be launched to achieve morally valuable goals? These include, most clearly, advancing the basic human rights of those within the state’s borders and those beyond them. The pursuit of national interest may be acceptable here, to the extent that the national interest concerns the basic interests of civilians (such as in matters of national security). Why does this matter? In short, intentions can signal likely consequences. As such, if a state has a right intention, it can indicate the likely effectiveness of the foreign policy measure, judged in terms of the protection of basic human rights. For instance, a potential measure that is launched to reduce gender inequality will be more likely to be effective at promoting human rights than a measure that aims to promote the economic interests of a small elite.

# Three Examples

The discussion thus far has been rather theoretical. It will help now to see how the principles apply in practice by considering three potential cases, which range across foreign policy decisions.

*Trade deal*: The first example is negotiating a new trade deal, such as the U.K. in a post-Brexit scenario. The state should look to the likely aggregate effects determining whether the trade deal will do more good than harm in terms of the basic human rights of those affected, including beyond the state’s borders. For instance, will positive effects of the trade deal outweigh any harm to, for instance, farmers? If it does have negative effects, who are these borne by? That is to say, are they borne by the relatively privileged, say, French farmers as opposed to farmers in sub-Saharan Africa? The relatively privileged might be unlikely to consent to these burdens, but it might still be fair to burden them due to their privilege. The policy is likely to obtain sufficient democratic support, presuming that the public supports advancing the state’s economic interests without significantly harming those beyond its borders. It would also be noncoercive. Additionally, as the policy would likely be legal according to the rules of the World Trade Organization, it would also likely be perceived as legitimate by the international community. The policy should also be launched for the purpose of assisting those within the state to secure their basic interests, rather than to secure the interests of powerful members of elite groups from within the state.

*Relations with enemy states*: The second example concerns the option of re-establishing diplomatic ties with a state that has long been viewed as an enemy, such as those deemed as part of the “Axis of Evil” by the George W. Bush administration. Again, effectiveness in terms of the consequences for basic human rights is key. A policy might, for instance, facilitate an improvement in the human rights situation in the “enemy” state. The burdens of such a decision may be small, so issues of fairness may not arise as much. It would also be noncoercive and the goals of establishing friendly relations should have democratic approval. It would also likely be legal and legitimate and should be implemented for the right reasons, rather than, for instance, to bolster the public image of the head of state.

*Use of force short of war in response to terrorist threat*: The third example concerns the use of force short of war—and specifically drone strikes—in response to a terrorist threat, such as in Pakistan or Syria. The strikes would need to do more harm than good both in terms of the tackling the terrorist threat and more broadly, in terms of basic human rights. Although the threat to basic human rights might be reduced by the drone strikes for those within the state’s borders, it may have significant—and likely negative—effects for those in the target state. Individuals burdened by such a strike might be underprivileged and opposed to drone strikes, for example, civilians in the poor villages where terrorist groups are based. If there are noncoercive options that could tackle the threat and avoid doing harm, they should be launched. The policy would also need to have democratic approval, which may not be likely for a public that is highly skeptical regarding the use of military force, and international support, which may again be lacking because strikes are of dubious legality. The strikes should be intended for the right reason—to actually reduce the terrorist threat—rather than, for instance, to appear to be “doing something” in response to the pressure to tackle terrorism.

# Conclusion

In this article, I have sketched a framework for an ethical foreign policy: the Pragmatic Approach. As we have seen, this approach is in large part instrumentalist, focuses on the non-ideal, and takes contingencies seriously. The Pragmatic Approach emerges from Just War Theory, but moves beyond it, fleshing out two central issues that have developed in thinking about the ethics of war—proportionality and necessity—that help us frame what the ethics of foreign policy should look like.

Let me finish, however, with a note of caution. As we have seen, the more action-guiding principles of the Pragmatic Approach are aimed at addressing a very wide range of potential foreign policy issues. This has the benefit of unifying the responses to foreign policy issues rather than treating each response separately. However, it may be judicious to develop specific principles *for each particular domain* as well. There could be principles governing, for instance, humanitarian intervention, economic sanctions, trade policies, diplomatic negotiations, cyber-security, and the use of force short of war, in addition to war itself.[[33]](#endnote-32) The more specific principles—the rules of thumb—that would develop may be better heuristics than the Pragmatic Approach’s seven principles that concern the whole range of foreign policy decisions. The more specific principles may therefore better capture the five underlying considerations. For instance, when providing criteria to govern specifically the resort to war, it may be better to include the specific criteria of just cause and last resort, given the destructiveness of warfare, as Just War Theory does. Any accounts of such specific criteria should, of course, remain tied to the five central underlying considerations.

The fact that there is also a case for specific criteria governing particular domains does not undermine the general case for developing a more general framework for the ethics of foreign policy *as well*. The general framework can help with ensuring that all foreign policy areas are covered. It can also help to ensure that accounts of criteria for specific domains are plausible, to the extent that they are linked to the general account of the criteria and the five underlying values of the Pragmatic Approach. In doing so, the framework can ensure that there is coherence between different accounts of criteria.

There is an additional reason why a framework for the ethics of foreign policy is vital that I have not considered thus far. It concerns the opportunity costs of foreign policies. When states launch a particular measure, they use resources that they cannot then spend pursuing another action. To give a simple example, the millions of pounds spent on going to war might mean that there will not be resources available for humanitarian aid.[[34]](#endnote-33) In addition, time and effort spent pursuing one foreign policy goal can mean that there is less time available to pursue others. States have to prioritise their foreign policy agenda, given their finite—and often insufficient—resources for international matters. It is therefore vital that they compare potential foreign policy actions in order to prioritise among them. In order to make these types of decisions, states need a general framework for assessing the various options, rather than a series of specifically-focused criteria. Indeed, states need a framework for comparing, for instance, the policy option of a military response to a terrorist threat in one state and the policy option of using the resources to instead deliver humanitarian aid in another state. They also need to assess the severity of the situation that the foreign policy options would address. For instance, is it more important to tackle a humanitarian crisis in one state or a terrorist threat in another? This requirement could be included as a further criterion for the framework of the ethics of foreign policy: states should assess the severity of the situation, which should be judged predominately in terms of the likely effects on the basic human rights of individuals.[[35]](#endnote-34)

Thus, a general framework for the ethics of foreign policy is crucial. The Pragmatic Approach is, hopefully, a helpful attempt to provide such a framework.

**Notes**

1. James Pattison is professor of politics at the University of Manchester. He is the author of three books, including *Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: Who Should Intervene?* (2010), which was awarded a Notable Book Award in 2011 by the International Studies Association’s International Ethics section, and *The Morality of Private War: The Challenge of Private Military and Security Companies* (2014). His most recent book, *The Alternatives to War: From Sanctions to Nonviolence* (2018), examines the ethics of the leading alternatives to war, including economic sanctions, diplomacy, nonviolence, positive incentives, and accepting refugees. He also co-edits the Routledge book series *War, Conflict, and Ethics*, and has published various articles on the ethics of force, including in the *British Journal of Political Science*, the *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Theory*, the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, and the *Review of International Studies*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Seminal works include Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, Fifth Edition (USA: BasicBooks, 2015); Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Fernando R. Tesón, *Humanitarian Intervention: An Inquiry into Law and Morality*, Third Edition (New York: Transnational Publishers, 2005); Stephen Gardiner, “Ethics and Global Climate Change,” *Ethics*, 114/3 (2004): 555–600; Jennifer C. Rubenstein, *Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Joseph H. Carens, *The Ethics of Immigration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. The leading example of a scholar who has written across several areas of the ethics of foreign policy is Cécile Fabre, who has authored major works on just war, post-war conflict, economic statecraft, and recently, on espionage. Cécile Fabre, *Cosmopolitan War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Cécile Fabre, *Cosmopolitan Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Cécile Fabre, *Economic Statecraft: Human Rights, Sanctions, and Conditionality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018); Cécile Fabre, “**The Case for Foreign Electoral Subversion,” ​**Ethics & International Affairs,**32/3 (2018): 283–92.** In addition, several important works tackle a range of issues in international ethics, although these do not propose a clear, unified framework for foreign policy as a whole. Important works in this regard include Gillian Brock, *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Simon Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Michael Blake, *Justice and Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) might be considered an exception (i.e. as a piece that does focus on the ethics of foreign policy, but is more about global justice than foreign policy). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Note that this article will focus on the foreign policy of states. There are also foreign policy issues that apply to other actors, such as NGOs and international organisations. The framework that I propose is, to some degree, applicable to them as well. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. For helpful overviews of Just War Theory, see Christopher Finlay, *Is Just War Possible?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), Steven Lee, *Ethics and War: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Brian Orend, *The Morality of War*, Second Edition (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Daniel Brunstetter, “Trends in Just War Thinking During the US Presidential Debates 2000–12: Genocide Prevention and the Renewed Salience of Last Resort,” *Review of International Studies* 40/1 (2014): 77–99. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. See, for instance, Adam Winkler, “Just Sanctions,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 21/1 (1999): 133–55; John Lango “Military Operations by Armed UN Peace-keeping Missions: An Application of Generalised Just War Principles,” in Th. A. van Baarda and D.E.M. Verweij (eds), *The Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare: Counter-terrorism, Western Values and Military Ethics* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2009), 115–33; Eamon Aloyo, “Just Assassinations,” *International Theory* 5/3 (2013): 347–81. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. On the problems of applying Just War Theory to economic sanctions, see Elizabeth Ellis, “The Ethics of Economic Sanctions,” The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2017, www.iep.utm.edu/eth-ec-s/. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
10. Two leading revisionist accounts are Fabre, *Cosmopolitan War,* and Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. Fabre, *Cosmopolitan War*, 12; Jeff McMahan, “The Ethics of Killing in War,” *Ethics* 114/4 (2004): 693–733. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. See, most notably, Jeff McMahan, “The Morality of War and the Law of War,” in David Rodin and Henry Shue (eds), *Just and Unjust Warriors: The Legal and Moral Status of Soldiers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 19–43. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. McMahan, “The Morality of War and the Law of War.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
14. To be clear, revisionist Just War Theory has longer-term relevance, that is, it can provide moral guidance for reform of the systems that govern warfare. See James Pattison, “The Case for Nonideal Just War Theory: Beyond Revisionism vs. Traditionalism,” *Political Theory* 46/2 (2018): 242–68. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
15. See, for instance, Jeff McMahan, “Just War,” in Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit, and Thomas Pogge (eds), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Second Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2017): 669–77. For instance, Goodin, Pettit, and Pogge question whether legitimate authority is necessary, since it could preclude individuals from defending their basic human rights if they are not under a legitimate authority. Cécile Fabre, “Cosmopolitanism, Just War Theory, and Legitimate Authority,” *International Affairs* 84/5 (2008): 963–76. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
16. Seth Lazar makes this point in his survey of Just War Theory, “War,” in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Winter 2016 Edition, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/war/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. Jeff McMahan, “Proportionate Defense,” *Journal of Transnational Law and Policy*, 21 (2013–14): 1–36. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. Seth Lazar, “Necessity in Self-Defense and War,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 40/1 (2012): 3–44. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
19. Lazar, “War.” [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
20. Just cause might be thought to be an exception, but this would be mistaken. Just cause indicates whether proportionality is likely to be met. There needs to be a sufficiently bad situation for war to be a justified response, in order to do enough good to outweigh the likely harms of war. Lazar, “War,” and Pattison, “The Case for Nonideal Just War Theory.” [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
21. I argue elsewhere that there should be an applied, non-ideal Just War Theory to accompany the revisionist focus on the “deep” morality of war. Pattison, “The Case for Nonideal Just War Theory.” [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
22. Seth Lazar, “The Responsibility Dilemma for Killing in War: A Review Essay,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 38/2 (2010): 180–213. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
23. Pattison, *The Alternatives to War.* [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
24. See Samuel Scheffler, “Doing and Allowing,” *Ethics* 114/2 (2004): 215–39. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
25. James Pattison, *The Morality of Private War: The Challenge of Private Military and Security Companies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
26. To be sure, there may be other considerations. I focus only on those that are most relevant. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
27. Fernando R. Tesón, “Eight Principles for Humanitarian Intervention,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 5/2 (2006): 93–113. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
28. As noted above, if those who are culpable fully bear the costs, this would be an ideal, fair distribution. My point here concerns instances when this is not fully possible. The fact that a foreign policy might *somewhat* benefit or harm those who deserve it is a reason in favour of it. This fifth consideration might, then, be viewed as part of fairness. I leave it as a different consideration for reasons of clarity. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
29. Fairness is also very important when it concerns the *ongoing* distribution of burdens and benefits over several generations, such as when major economic agreements are adopted (in contrast to the one-off benefitting or burdening of individuals, which seems less weighty). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
30. If not, the policy might still be justified if (2) is met and the burdens are fairly distributed, such as if they are placed on those who are otherwise privileged. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
31. There may also be some intrinsic importance to democratic control. See James Pattison, *Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: Who Should Intervene?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Chapter 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
32. Pattison, *Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect*, Chapter 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
33. Indeed, there are some specific accounts of principles for these areas (and not only for war), most notably for the use of force short or war and the principles of *jus ad vim*. See, for instance, Daniel Brunstetter and Megan Braun, “From *Jus ad Bellum* to *Jus ad Vim*: Recalibrating Our Understanding of the Moral Use of Force” *Ethics & International Affairs* 27/1 (2013): 87–106. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
34. The opportunity costs of war are considered by Kieran Oberman, “War and Poverty,” *Philosophical Studies* 176/1 (2019): 197–217; Benjamin A. Valentino, “The True Costs of Humanitarian Intervention: The Hard Truth about a Noble Notion,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2011 60–73; James Pattison, “Opportunity Costs Pacifism,” draft paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
35. I consider this in relation to warfare in Pattison, “Opportunity Costs Pacifism.” I propose that this be included as part of a principle of what I call “holistic necessity.” [↑](#endnote-ref-34)