

Concepts and International Conflict—Sample Essay

Following al Qaeda's terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States and its NATO allies launched a war in Afghanistan. The goals of these military operations were to root out al Qaeda, defeat the Taliban, and establish a democratically elected government that would be able to maintain order in the country and prevent both the resurgence of the Taliban and the return of safe havens for terrorist networks such as al Qaeda. In this essay, I apply the theories of realism and liberalism, as well as the concepts that constitute just war theory, to the war in Afghanistan.

In many ways, the war in Afghanistan presents a problem for proponents of realism. The rationale for the war was consistent with some of the central tenets of the national security strategy that the Bush administration crafted following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Among other things, this strategy emphasized the problems associated with "failed states" in the international system, particularly that such states could serve as breeding grounds for terrorists and safe havens for terrorist networks. In its emphasis on power politics, realism chiefly focuses on conflict, both political and military, among great powers. Realism has little to say about the role of small, weak, and failed states in the international system. However, the war in Afghanistan demonstrates that these are crucial issues in contemporary international politics. Not only is the previously described rationale of addressing the problem of failed states at odds with realism's focus on great power politics, but the protracted conflict between US-led NATO forces and the considerably weaker tribal armies in Afghanistan is evidence that there are key elements in contemporary international conflict that are not addressed by realism.

Liberalism emphasizes the role that international institutions can play in mitigating the conditions of international anarchy, and this approach is instructive concerning the case of Afghanistan. First, the very concept of a “failed state” underscores the role of institutions in mitigating the conditions of anarchy, though here we are talking about mitigating anarchy within state borders, not the international system. Paradoxically, the fact that Afghanistan fell into this state serves as an example of the failure of contemporary international institutions. However, the continued NATO operation in Afghanistan demonstrates the durability of international institutions. While NATO was formed to counter the Soviet threat during the Cold War, it remains a venue for international coordination and cooperation decades after the Cold War ended. However, as the war in Afghanistan drags on, we may see the ties that bind the member countries to NATO tested, and its effectiveness questioned.

Our understanding of the war in Afghanistan and the way it has been conducted are also informed by the concepts of just war theory. Indeed, President Obama invoked these very concepts during his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech to make the point that some wars are worth fighting to further broader ideals. Just war theory entails three main concepts. The first is *jus ad bellum*, which translates to “the right to go to war,” and states that wars are just if the reasons for engaging in them are just. The war in Afghanistan had a great deal of support both within the United States and the broader international community. Many viewed the war as an appropriate response to the Taliban’s government and support of terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda, thus satisfying the “right intention” element of *jus ad bellum*. Another element is that of *competent authority*, or the idea that just wars can only be waged by duly constituted public authorities. While the US government would certainly fall in this category, the fact that the war was officially a NATO action lends further support under this criterion.

Despite NATO's overwhelming military superiority, some might question the "probability of success" element of *jus ad bellum*, especially in hindsight, as the conflict has turned into a protracted asymmetric war. Finally, given that the war was started after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, many would argue that it satisfied the "last resort" element of *jus ad bellum*.

Second, *jus in bello* refers to how combatants should act during the war. A particularly salient element of this concept is the notion of "proportionality." One might criticize the US and NATO on these grounds, particularly concerning the use of drones to attack suspected militants. Not only do such attacks often kill innocent civilians—which, it can be argued, is disproportional—but they also allow the US military to do so without putting its own troops in harms way.

Finally, the concept of *jus post bellum*, or "justice after war," remains to be seen in the war in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, we can use this concept to consider what issues might be important with regard to how the war in Afghanistan ends. Many elements of *jus post bellum* are similar to *jus ad bellum*, such as *right authority* and *right intention*. One potentially tricky element, in terms of satisfying *jus post bellum*, is that of *discrimination*, which calls for the victor state to distinguish between political and military leaders and between civilians and combatants. Indeed, the uncertainty surrounding these distinctions pervades the conduct of the war itself, as it is often difficult to distinguish civilians from combatants in a protracted, asymmetric war. This issue calls into question whether the concept of just war theory is even appropriate in modern international conflicts, or if it is a relic of an outmoded understanding of the international system.