Foreign policy and human rights
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Foreign policy
and human rights

Issues and responses

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Preface

The question of human rights has come to occupy a more important place in modern international relations than it once did. This is partly due to what critics would dismiss as ephemeral forces, such as the Carter Administration’s attachment to human rights as a means of recovering American self-esteem after reverses at home and abroad. Whatever is of interest to a super-power, the same critics would add, naturally becomes of interest to all other powers, including other super-powers. But the assumption of greater importance bears witness to something deeper than this. The year that is often taken to begin the present era, 1945, might come to stand in the tradition of 1776 and 1789: the truths that were self-evident, the men who were born free and equal in rights, then the peoples of the United Nations reaffirming faith in fundamental human rights. Human rights might come to be interpreted as having the same relationship to an international revolution in the twentieth century, as natural rights did to national revolutions in the eighteenth. Whatever shape future interpretations may take, we can observe now a slow change in international society by virtue of which the rights of individuals and of groups other than states are coming to be thought of as having a legitimate place in the world of states rather than being the domestic concerns of states with which outsiders had no business.

Accordingly, it is now harder for the makers of foreign policy to shrug off human rights as things that it would be nice to take seriously but which play no great part in the reality of international politics. So the intrinsic importance of the subject now has some worldly recognition. This is reflected in the attention paid to the subject by political scientists in recent years: human rights are no longer the preserve of lawyers alone, and there is now a considerable literature on human rights in world politics. But one of the features of this literature (apart from its Americanness) has been its division into a concern with issues on the one hand (‘dissidents in the Soviet Union’, ‘multinationals in Latin America’, ‘civil rights in South Africa’), and with
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what our response should be on the other (‘US foreign policy and human rights’). This book seeks to bring these two concerns together, so that issues and responses are discussed in one place rather than passing like ships in the night.

Most of the chapters of the book were presented first as papers to a conference at the University of Keele. I am grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for making this conference possible. I am grateful also to William Wallace of the Royal Institute of International Affairs whose idea it was that a volume of case studies might well accompany my own book for Chatham House on human rights in international relations and whose encouragement and support has been invaluable. I should also like to thank Betty Appleby, Maureen Simkin, and Kath McKeown for their secretarial help. Pauline Wickham at Chatham House, and Sheila McEnery at Cambridge University Press, worked very hard on a difficult manuscript. I acknowledge with thanks their substantial contribution.

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