

**Torbjørn L. Knutsen, Halvard Leira and Iver B. Neumann,  
Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Idéhistorie 1890–1940**

(Norwegian Foreign Policy and its Ideational History)  
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The study of foreign policy is slowly but steadily moving out of the shadow cast by the discipline of International Relations and its ‘great’ debates. From 2003 a new journal, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, published on behalf of the International Studies Association signalled, if not a paradigmatic shift, then at least a renewed interest in explaining and understanding foreign policy. This interest has been documented by a steady stream of books and journal articles on theoretical, empirical and (to a lesser extent) conceptual aspects of the foreign policy of countries around the world, but mainly in Europe, North America and East Asia. The study of foreign policy tends to focus on policy and decision-making, and developments in the field have remained mainly within these confines, still viewing Graham Allison’s 1971 book *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* as the iconic text of the field.

Consequentially the history of ideas and the study of foreign policy remain largely separate domains as does the history of ideas and international relations in general. This was not always the case. Classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr drew extensively on political theory and the history of ideas in their reflections on international relations and foreign policy as did Kenneth Waltz’s *Man, the State and War* from 1959. However, by the time Waltz published his second major work, *Theory of International Politics* in 1979, ‘Man’ and ‘State’ and realist thought had been abandoned in favour of neorealist theory. This was part of a general scientification of the study of politics and international relations leaving room for the rigorous study of the role of leader images, group think and perceptions in foreign policy-making but little time for reflection upon the origins of the ideas in which these images and perceptions were embedded.

*Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Idéhistorie* by Thorbjørn L. Knutsen, Halvard Leira and Iver B. Neumann is a welcome attempt to link domestic and international developments of ideas to foreign policy without losing sight of the material context of the development of ideas and policy. The book focuses on the formative phase in Norwegian political history in the years leading up to and succeeding Norwegian independence in 1905. It shows how liberal ideas came to dominate Norwegian political debate and societal developments and discusses how ideas from alternative traditions of thought (conservatism, socialism) were either marginalised (if they were

too radical) or incorporated into a specific brand of Norwegian national liberalism constituting the framework for foreign policy thinking and action. The authors understand Norwegian foreign policy as the sum of decisions and negotiations related to Norway's relations to the world outside Norway, most importantly other states (p. 11). Their ambition is not to analyse specific relationships (e.g. the relationship between Norway and the United Kingdom) or policy areas (e.g. defence policy), but to identify a Norwegian culture of foreign policy, that is to discuss the ideas and images that allow decision makers to make sense of the international realm and to position their own country within that realm.

With this ambition as their starting point, the authors structure their argument in three main sections. The first section of the book focuses on the ideational and material international contexts of Norway's political development in the late nineteenth century. It discusses how industrialisation and economic development, changes in the balance of power, specialisation and professionalisation (including the development of specific brands of social science), a media revolution (including a large rise in the number of people reading and contributing to public debate and an increased awareness of developments abroad) and political democratic developments (including mass organisation and parliamentarianism) in Europe created fertile conditions for the rise of liberalism within European states and the spread of liberal ideas across European societies. Increased trade created an awareness of the challenges and opportunities of interdependence and the political and economic costs of war underpinned the quest for avoiding military conflict for the individual state (e.g. by pursuing a neutral foreign and security policy) and by international society in general. In this international environment, the Norwegian political, economic and cultural elite engaged in a state building project, which entailed the simultaneous transposing of ideas from Europe and the quest for identifying what was particularly Norwegian; making Norway better than and different from Europe as well as from Denmark and Sweden. Most importantly, Norwegians distinguished themselves and their way of doing politics as based explicitly on the will of the people and in opposition to the expedient power politics and war making of the great Powers on the European continent. Thus, the goals of Norwegian foreign policy came to be formulated in opposition to European realism and focused on peaceful relations, the rule of law, international institutions and collective security.

The second section of the book focuses on how this trend towards a liberal understanding of world politics and Norway's role in the world was positively influenced by ideas from the outside in the formative years before independence; particularly from the leading sea Power of the world, the United Kingdom. Liberal internationalist ideas about how trade and democratisation could lead to a more peaceful world influenced Norwegian thinking on the foreign policy. The authors show how these ideas were given a specific Norwegian formulation in elite debates over the role of Norway in the world as they were linked to Norway's position as a small state with a particular responsibility and opportunity to influence the world positively. The Norwegian perspective on peace and how it is achieved was developed and underpinned by both public debates, with a prominent role for the poet, author and playwright Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, and institutional developments, not least the foundation and development of the Nobel Institute.

The third and final section of the book discusses the development of ideas from 1905 to 1940. This is where ideas were turned into practice as Norway is now an

independent state fighting for international recognition. The book shows how the international peace movement and the Rockefeller Foundation in different ways influenced Norwegian thinking on foreign policy, and how the transformation of the Norwegian Labour Party into a mainstream party allowed for an adjustment of Norwegian policies, but also a grand coalition developing Norway's liberal internationalist perspective. This perspective was influenced, but not subsumed, by a stronger focus on social responsibility, which combined well with liberalism and Christian altruism. In contrast, ideas on *Realpolitik* were not incorporated into foreign policy discourse and largely absent from foreign policy debates.

*Norsk utenrikspolitisk idéhistorie 1890–1940* is an important book. Its writing style is engaging and it provides us with an important corrective to the conventional story of Norway's role in international relations. In the international relations literature, Norway is typically seen as part of a Nordic cluster in international relations. Although the golden days of Nordic cooperation ended with the Cold War and the branding of Scandinavia as a 'Third Way' between East and West, the Nordic countries continue to share concerns for issues such as peaceful conflict resolution, environmental sustainability, human rights and global development. Even though Norwegian writing on Norway's international role tends to emphasise what is uniquely Norwegian, Knutsen, Leira and Neumann move beyond this observation to explain how a geopolitical location on the margins of Europe combined with a specific political history and selective incorporation of ideas from abroad allowed Norway to develop a liberal foreign policy profile largely uncontaminated by ideas on the value of power and pragmatism. Norway's international history and trajectory is markedly different from that of Sweden and Denmark. Whereas Sweden and Denmark competed for leadership over Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea area for centuries, Norway suffered the destiny of being the primary pawn of the Nordic security complex. It was part of a union with Denmark for more than 400 hundred years (the 400-year night) until Denmark's steady decline and defeat in the Napoleonic Wars in 1814 forced the Danish king to cede Norway to Sweden under the Treaty of Kiel. An important argument in the book is that the Union with Sweden allowed for the development of separate Norwegian domestic institutions, while foreign service and foreign policy was a common (primarily Swedish) task until the peaceful dissolution of the Union in 1905. Accordingly, Norway's liberal political culture and identity developed in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century sheltered by its union with Sweden.

The book would have benefitted from a more comprehensive discussion of the conservatism and realism absent in the Norwegian culture of foreign policy. What is meant by realism remains elusive throughout the book, and one is left to wonder if it is the inability to speak the language of power rather than the unwillingness to maximise national interest, which characterises Norwegian foreign policy then and now? After all, Norway seems to be a successful player in the various games for power and prestige in international relations. Perhaps, the authors come close to answering this question in the concluding chapter. Looking through the lens of the national liberal Norwegian foreign policy culture, there is really no discrepancy between the two, and no contradiction between maximising Norwegian interests and creating a better world. Norway is seen by its own political elite and people as a model for the world and accordingly maximising Norwegian national interests is an effective way of working towards global development and a better world. In Norway doing good and doing well go hand in hand.