

Return to reason: reviving political realism in western foreign policy

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To know that nations are subject to the moral law is one thing, while to pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations among nations is quite another.

Hans Morgenthau

Francis Fukuyama's thesis that history ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has exercised a subtle but enduring impact upon western foreign policy thinking. Its influence reached its apogee in the period leading up to the Iraq War of 2003. Fukuyama argued that western liberal democracy had triumphed over communism and fascism and thus constituted the 'final form of human government'.¹ One consequence of this 'ideological evolution' was that large-scale conflict between the Great Powers was 'passing from the scene'.² Fukuyama's vision of the future complemented fellow neo-conservative Charles Krauthammer's contention that the US should 'lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them'.³ As John Mearsheimer observed in 2011, 'U.S. grand strategy has followed this basic prescription for the past twenty years, mainly because most policy makers inside the Beltway have agreed with the thrust of Fukuyama's and Krauthammer's early analyses'.⁴

The attempt to impose a liberal, democratic, rule- or norm-based global order appealed across party political lines and found enthusiastic adherents among key US allies. Thus, along with US Democrats such as Bill Clinton, Tony Blair's New Labour and, in Australia, John Howard's Liberal coalition government also promoted, by various means, global democratic peace, as did their twenty-first-century Republican, Conservative and Labor successors: George W. Bush in America, David Cameron in the United Kingdom and Kevin Rudd in Australia. As Tony Blair's favourite intellectual, Tony Giddens, observed in 1998, given that developed states were 'without enemies', and large-scale war was 'unlikely, it was no longer utopian to connect issues of national and global governance'.⁵ Whether they adopted, with Blair and Bush, a more abrasive neo-conservative stance or,

¹ Francis Fukuyama, 'The end of history?', *The National Interest*, no. 46, Summer 1989, pp. 3–18.

² Fukuyama subsequently replaced the question mark with a full stop in the book that evolved from the 1989 *National Interest* article as the idea became less contingent and assumed growing influence and plausibility. See Francis Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

³ Charles Krauthammer, 'The unipolar moment', *Foreign Affairs* 70: 1, 1990–91, p. 33.

⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, 'Imperial by design', *The National Interest*, no. 111, Jan.–Feb. 2011, p. 16.

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The third way: the renewal of social democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 140.

like some of the critics of these two leaders, a more emollient ‘liberal imperialist’ posture, maintaining ‘that running the world requires the United States to work closely with allies and international institutions’,⁶ western political elites and democratic governments, as well as a number of democratic peace theorists, subscribed to some version of this world-view. This single, overarching western grand strategy increasingly replaced a more sceptical and realist assessment of the state or national interest and prompted interventions—humanitarian or otherwise—in Asia, Africa and the Middle East in support of what was increasingly assumed ‘to be a universal normative orientation’.⁷

Even though the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan after 2001 exposed the limits of attempts to impose the end of history by military means, the values associated with that attempt lingered on in the wake of the assassination of Osama bin Laden, the brief Arab Spring of 2010 and the UN-sanctioned overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 under the rubric of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine.⁸ Somewhat problematically, the results of this strategy have been widely interpreted as disastrous. Mearsheimer, for one, lamented: ‘The United States has been at war for a startling two out of every three years since 1989, and there is no end in sight.’⁹

Is it, in this context, possible to revive a more limited and prudential strategic vision that, in Morgenthau’s words, promotes a realist view of the national interest and assumes that ‘universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation, but ... must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place?’¹⁰ In order to address this question we shall first identify the limitations of the liberal normative or axiomatic approach to war and peace and its impact upon the fragmentation of the global order since 2010. We shall then consider how a European tradition of theorizing about the ‘supreme virtue in politics’, prudence, that weighs ‘the consequences of alternative political actions’¹¹—a tradition that dates from the emergence of the modern state system in the sixteenth century—might usefully inform the conduct of contemporary western foreign policy.

Central to this approach, we shall argue, is a re-evaluation of the policy associated with the late sixteenth-century ‘reason of state’ theorists, in particular the neglected Dutch humanist Justus Lipsius, who did much to establish the practice of early modern statecraft. Lipsius evolved a concern with an impersonal state interest that provided, and still provides, a useful corrective to the pious moralism that informed the Christian and, more recently, the cosmopolitan normative tradition.¹²

⁶ Mearsheimer, ‘Imperial by design’, p. 19.

⁷ We thank our second anonymous reviewer for this phraseology.

⁸ James Kitfield, ‘After bin Laden: is the war on terror winding down?’, *National Journal*, 7 May 2011, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/magazine/after-bin-laden-is-the-war-on-terror-winding-down--20110505>, accessed 11 Aug. 2015.

⁹ Mearsheimer, ‘Imperial by design’, p. 19.

¹⁰ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace* (New York: Knopf, 1978), p. 1.

¹¹ Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 4.

¹² See Noel Malcolm, *Reason of state: propaganda and the Thirty Years War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 100.

History transcended or history restarted?

Fukuyama's thesis concerning the end of history was informed by a nineteenth-century historicist teleology. According to this, progress occurred via a dialectical process of conflict; and in Fukuyama's account capitalism and the free market ultimately triumphed over rival economic models and alternative ideologies.¹³ Following the collapse of communism in Europe, liberal market democracy appeared to be the 'only game in town'.¹⁴ It also afforded the possibility of reforming capitalism's more unjust and inequalitarian outcomes. History, in this progressive understanding, would witness capitalist democratic states transformed through their participation in cosmopolitan, post-national constellations such as the United Nations and the European Union.¹⁵ These state-transcending organizations and their norm entrepreneurs would facilitate transnational justice, economic redistribution and the observance of human rights throughout the international system.¹⁶

In the aftermath of western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, this historicist teleology has come up against unanticipated and countervailing consequences. Unforeseen but immovable obstacles have appeared in the path of a normative and emancipatory transformation of the interstate system. The recrudescence of identity politics, Russian irredentism in the Caucasus, the civil war in Ukraine and China's emergence on the world stage as a great but authoritarian power, together with the continued turmoil in the Middle East, including the rise of the so-called 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (ISIS), intimate not the end of history, but the 'revenge of the revisionist powers' and the 'return of geopolitics'.¹⁷ History, after a brief nap, has reawakened, requiring states to reassess how they conduct themselves in an uncertain, anarchical international system where only three verities prevail: diplomacy, alliances and war.¹⁸

Faced with this changed reality, western powers, and regional institutions, appeared in the second decade of the twenty-first century, commentators bemoaned, 'distracted [and] weak'.¹⁹ They were consistently outmanoeuvred on the international stage by Russia and China, states with an apparent capacity to

¹³ Fukuyama, *The end of history*, pp. 287–340.

¹⁴ Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation: southern Europe, South America, and post-communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 5. See also Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the olive tree* (London: HarperCollins, 2000). Friedman further simplified historical teleology with his Golden Arches Theory of development that assumed no two countries with McDonald's would ever go to war: p. ix.

¹⁵ The best-known examples of this genre are Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics', *International Organization* 46: 2, 1992, pp. 391–425; Alexander Wendt, *The social theory of international politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Taking stock: the constructivist program in international relations and comparative politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 4, 2001, pp. 391–416. See also Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

¹⁶ See, *inter alia*, David Held and Anthony McGrew, eds, *The global transformations reader: an introduction to the globalization debate* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); Peter Katzenstein, *A world of regions: Asia and Europe in the American imperium* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Walter Russell Mead, 'The return of geopolitics: the revenge of the revisionist powers', *Foreign Affairs* 93: 3, 2014, pp. 69–79.

¹⁸ Martin Wight, *Power politics* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. III.

¹⁹ 'A lurch onto the world stage', *The Economist*, 28 Feb. 2015, p. 35.

assert their national interests without inhibition.²⁰ In the context of the Ukraine crisis of 2013–2015, European policy-makers clung to the ‘false hope’ that dialogue, law and judicious sanctions could achieve a solution. Yet ‘to be credible strategy requires a full toolbox’; and European ‘diplomacy without arms’, as Frederick the Great observed, ‘is like music without instruments’.²¹ Consequently, while the EU considered ‘the whole notion of geopolitics old-fashioned and unappealing’, geopolitics happened on its doorstep.²² As Charles Powell, former foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, argued, the ‘false doctrine of soft power’ and ‘creeping legalism’ made it increasingly ‘hard to galvanise democratic societies to meet new threats’.²³

While Russia’s violation of the ‘integrity of the Ukraine’ threatened ‘the entire legal order that governed Europe’,²⁴ the fallout from the Iraq and Syrian civil wars raised the problem of the internal and external security of European democracies in a different but equally acute form not evidently amenable to internationally mediated legal solutions. Such new, and not so new, threats to the international order suggest a need not for abstract norms but for a strategy conducted on a case-by-case evaluation of the merits of intervention together with a careful assessment of its practical and moral limitations.

In the light of the recent dramatic changes in the character and conduct of international affairs, we would do well to reconsider how the political realist contention that ‘the concept of interest defined in terms of power’ might save us ‘from both ... moral excess and political folly’.²⁵ Grand strategy, from this perspective, requires the systematic pursuit of objectives that reconcile economic and military means with a reasoned appreciation of what is feasible in a dangerous world.²⁶ As Hans Morgenthau claimed: ‘There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action. Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity with the moral law; political ethics judges action by its political consequences.’²⁷ In the following analysis, we shall contend that state-interested, historically particularist and prudentially calculated policy thinking might serve the western democracies better than the prevailing predilection for abstract, universal, axiomatic norms.

Grand historical narratives and the limitation of cosmopolitan norms

The dissolution of any prospect for enduring stability, whether in the Middle East, Africa or central and east Asia, exhibits a condition of great complexity. What

²⁰ Edward Lucas, ‘Ukraine protests: we’re letting Putin win’, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 Feb. 2014.

²¹ ‘A lurch onto the world stage’, p. 36.

²² Lucas, ‘Ukraine protests’.

²³ Charles Powell, ‘The West will pay for losing its backbone in Iraq and Ukraine’, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 June 2014.

²⁴ ‘A lurch onto the world stage’.

²⁵ Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 12.

²⁶ See e.g. Gen. Donn A. Starry, ‘Syria: one more reason for a return to grand strategy’, Information Dissemination, 27 Aug. 2013, <http://www.informationdissemination.net/2013/08/syria-one-more-reason-for-return-of.html>, accessed 11 Aug. 2015; Patrick C. Doherty, ‘A new US grand strategy’, *Foreign Policy*, 9 Jan. 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/09/a-new-u-s-grand-strategy/>, accessed 12 Aug. 2015.

²⁷ Morgenthau, ‘Imperial by design’, p. 12.

does this complexity disclose about how European states and the United States might respond? First, it should be recognized that the search for a single root-cause that identifies a singular answer is futile and counter-productive. Monolithic solutions present themselves in a variety of forms, ranging from pacifist utopianism through cosmopolitan transformational idealism to cynical conservative pessimism. Yet even a superficial examination of international problems negates such one-dimensional explanations. For example, the intense sectarian and tribal divisions and rivalries affecting very different societies in the Middle East or across the wider and more diffuse 'Muslim world' exposes the practical limitations of any all-encompassing rationalist or normative solution.²⁸ Indeed, the diversity of Islam both in its heartlands and across its diaspora illustrates the difficulty of trying to establish an abstract monocausal explanation that magically reveals a hidden interconnection between very different issues and conflicts.

Moreover, the fact that a number of cosmopolitan approaches to political and international relations theory 'do not do war' further amplifies this misunderstanding. As Cécile Fabre observes, 'cosmopolitans ... have tended to focus on defending principles of distributive justice, as well as normative guidelines for world governance, but have not devoted much attention to articulating norms for the use of military force'.²⁹ Much European policy, both past and present, and much scholarly enquiry into international relations, came to assume that violence is mainly a form of distorted communication, the solution to which is uncoerced dialogue.³⁰ According to James Aho, social scientists increasingly sought to 'extricate, not selectively but completely, all aspects of realpolitik from its [social scientific] conceptualizations of social conflict'.³¹ 'Generally speaking,' he argued, 'they have tended to avoid the whole subject of strategic thinking and have expended their energies on postulating the basic processes of tension reduction to prevent especially war and revolution from breaking out.'³²

To correct this understanding, which has, albeit indirectly, influenced European diplomatic culture,³³ we argue that in place of the promulgation of abstract norms, a return to a more prudent, politically realist, appreciation of the need for balance and order in world politics is required. A pragmatic, rather than an ethicist, foreign policy necessitates a case-by-case analysis of the merits of intervention together with a prudent reassessment of the doctrine of the lesser evil. Voices articulating this approach are increasingly heard in policy circles. Britain's former chief of the defence staff, General Sir David Richards, for example, speculated whether it would be 'better to back a victory for President Assad in Syria's civil war if the international community is not prepared to act in concert, because the alternative is chaos'. Provocatively, he stated that 'Assad poses

²⁸ See e.g. Ernest Gellner, *Muslim society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

²⁹ Cécile Fabre, *Cosmopolitan war* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 3.

³⁰ David Martin Jones, 'Peace through conversation', *The National Interest* 79: 1, 2005, pp. 93–100.

³¹ James Alfred Aho, *German realpolitik and American sociology: an inquiry into the sources and political significance of the sociology of conflict* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1975), p. 20.

³² Aho, *German realpolitik*, p. 21.

³³ Thus in negotiations over Ukraine in February 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel 'believes it is always better to keep talking than to stoke conflict': 'A lurch onto the world stage', p. 35.

no threat to the UK's national interest'. He further maintained that the national interest properly understood 'cuts through muddle'.³⁴ Analogously, the former Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown perceived that the contemporary obsession with 'kinetics rather than context' meant that the West had forgotten the Clausewitzian doctrine that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means'. In the Middle East, Ashdown postulated, it might be necessary to bring Russia into the coalition against ISIS.³⁵

What, beyond prudent calculation, would such an interest-based and context-driven approach to foreign policy entail; and how would it differ from utopian aspirations for a universal normative regime that seeks to transform the world into a morally acceptable, cosmopolitan and just global order? Ambiguity sits at the heart of the international legal regime. Use of force is deemed appropriate only in cases of extreme violations of human rights; it must meet criteria set down in the UN Charter and refined in the Responsibility to Protect doctrine adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2009.³⁶ Preoccupied with universalizing normative values presided over by an abstract international community, has western foreign policy lost sight of the contingent factors that affect all political action?

Strategy, especially in conditions of war, whether civil or interstate, inevitably fails to meet normative standards. In the post-Cold War era, western policy-makers have neglected the conflict between abstract norms and political practice and, as the former diplomats, political leaders and soldiers cited above have noted, this has created policy confusion in the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns and fostered weak responses to ISIS, Russian irredentism and China's assertiveness in the South China Sea.

It might, therefore, prove timely to revive a practice of statecraft that explicitly eschews abstract panaceas.³⁷ As Hans Morgenthau might have discerned, the political realism evinced by the likes of Richards and Ashdown 'is not unaware of the existence and relevance of standards of thought other than political ones'. Nevertheless, they necessarily part company with conceptual, universal norms when the latter impose standards, appropriate to other forms of human activity, upon the political sphere. Indeed, 'it is here that political realism takes issue with the "legalistic-moralistic" approach to international politics'.³⁸

A return to a prudent rhetoric of reasonableness, especially in foreign policy debates, could restore the balance that has been disturbed by theoretical rationalism and its preoccupation with certain abstract rules. In a world of uncertainty and complexity, abstract rationalist rigour is less appropriate than the sixteenth-century scepticism of figures such as Michel de Montaigne, who exhorted his readers to live with ambiguity and without judgement. As Stephen Toulmin has

³⁴ David Richards, *Taking command* (London: Headline, 2014), cited in Tom Coghlan, 'A maverick goes into battle one last time', *The Times*, 6 Oct. 2014.

³⁵ Paddy Ashdown, 'We must embrace Putin to beat Islamic State', *The Times*, 30 Sept. 2014.

³⁶ United Nations General Assembly, *Implementing the responsibility to protect: report of the Secretary-General*, A/63/677, 63rd session, agenda items 44–107, 12 Jan. 2009, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/63/677, accessed 11 Aug. 2015.

³⁷ Stephen Toulmin, *Return to reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 117.

³⁸ Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 15.

argued, an updated practical ethics, or casuistry, can still have value in resolving doubtful cases ranging from war to euthanasia in the twenty-first century.³⁹

In this respect, it might perhaps be worth reappraising how the early modern European theorists who first identified the concept of state sovereignty and the limits of abstract morality understood what this entailed in terms of politics and the strategic use of force. Contemporary studies of international relations invariably ignore this dimension of statecraft. Yet a close reading of writings in the sixteenth-century 'reason of state' genre disclose a practical form of reasoning still relevant to modern western democracies and their internal and external defence.

Between 1550 and 1648 early modern Europe experienced widespread internal and external war, and from Prague to Edinburgh witnessed the often brutal severing of traditional political and religious allegiances—to the extent that religious, dynastic and civil war can be said to have destroyed European Christendom.⁴⁰ By the seventeenth century, Europe's trauma formed part of what Geoffrey Parker identifies as a burgeoning 'global crisis'.⁴¹ More particularly, the Thirty Years War (1618–48) touched all of Europe and affected 'the course of the continent's history'.⁴² Although the consequences of the war varied across time and space, the most judicious recent assessment notes that its impact was 'overwhelmingly negative'.⁴³ As a result of war and pestilence the population of Bavaria, for example, fell by between 23 and 69 per cent depending on the district, while in Nuremberg the birth rate did not return to its pre-1618 level until 1850.⁴⁴ And in 1621, as economic and financial collapse accompanied population decline, Europe felt the beginning of 'the western world's first financial crisis'.⁴⁵

From the religious strife that eviscerated European Christendom emerged the state in something approaching its modern form; and with it, what Brendan Simms termed the struggle for supremacy in Europe and the concomitant state practice of *realpolitik*.⁴⁶ This was accompanied by a sceptical view of morality, extrapolitical sources of authority, and natural and canon law. The congeries of philosophers, lawyers, rhetoricians and historians who defined what came to be known as *raison d'état* or 'reason of state' offered a distinctly realist political vision. Beginning with diplomats and statesmen such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini in Florence in the first decades of the sixteenth century, and extending to French jurists such as Jean Bodin and northern humanists such as Joost Lips (Justus Lipsius) in the last, this *politique* style dismissed ethical abstraction when it came to addressing difficult political decisions in contingent circumstances. Its proponents offered instead advice founded on reason rather than rationalism, and on practical experience (*phronesis* or *prudentia*) when faced with ambivalent moral and political cases.

³⁹ Toulmin, *Return to reason*, p.117.

⁴⁰ See Mark Greengrass, *Christendom destroyed: Europe 1517–1648* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).

⁴¹ See Geoffrey Parker, *Global crisis: war, climate change and catastrophe in the seventeenth century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 211–54.

⁴² Peter H. Wilson, *Europe's tragedy: a new history of the Thirty Years War* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), p. 9.

⁴³ Wilson, *Europe's tragedy*, p. 800.

⁴⁴ Wilson, *Europe's tragedy*, pp. 784–95.

⁴⁵ C. P. Kindleberger, 'The economic crisis of 1619–1623', *Journal of Economic History* 51: 1, 1999, pp. 149–75.

⁴⁶ Brendan Simms, *Europe: the struggle for supremacy 1453 to the present* (London: Penguin, 2014).

What, then, was the character of this practical case analysis, and what implications does it have for contemporary statecraft and strategy? To recover this prudential view we must first establish how a distinctive approach to difficult cases of obligation emerged in the sixteenth century as a response to confessional fragmentation and the disintegration of a unitary Christendom. This approach emerged as humanist scholars and statesmen adapted classical sources—Aristotle’s *Rhetorica* and *Nicomachean ethics*, Cicero’s *De officiis*, and the histories of Tacitus, Polybius and Livy—to furnish a practical case ethics and a set of maxims to address questions of politics, economy, war and peace. In the process of interrogating the classical world for advice on political conduct, they advanced a novel realist understanding of statecraft.

Revisiting the Machiavellian moment

It was the counsellors to the wealthy and ambitious, but militarily weak, Renaissance Italian city-states of the cinquecento who first articulated the burgeoning disparity between abstract Christian morals and the kind of policies a republic or a principality might have to exercise in order to survive. In the contingent circumstances of the invasion of the peninsula by ‘barbarian’ French, Spanish and Imperialist forces between 1494 and 1527, a discrete school of humanist thought identified the problem of the state (*lo stato*) and its requisite craft. One of its leading proponents, Guicciardini, discerned in his *Ricordi*:

Before 1494 wars were long, battles involved very little bloodshed, and the method of besieging towns was slow and cumbersome ... Hence it was practically impossible for anyone who had a state to lose it. The French came to Italy and introduced into warfare such speed of execution that ... if one lost the surrounding country one lost the state.⁴⁷

This idea of the state and how to maintain it has obvious, but invariably overlooked, contemporary ramifications. As Guicciardini’s more radical Florentine contemporary, Machiavelli, declared, in order to preserve the state in a sea of insecurity a ruler ‘must learn how not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need’.⁴⁸ This was the capital with which the prince or chief minister entered politics. More particularly, to ensure peace a principality or republic must prepare for war; rulers ‘must have no other object ... nor acquire skill in anything, except war, its organization and its disciplines’.⁴⁹ As J. R. Hale stated, war was Machiavelli’s ‘particular hobby horse’.⁵⁰ He contended that ‘without good military organization, there can neither be good laws or anything else good’.⁵¹ Effective rule, and the stability of a political republic, in other words, demanded a particular type of *virtu*.⁵²

⁴⁷ Francesco Guicciardini, *Selected writings*, ed. Cecil Grayson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 20.

⁴⁸ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The prince* (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 91.

⁴⁹ Machiavelli, *The prince*, p. 87.

⁵⁰ J. R. Hale, ‘War and public opinion in Renaissance Italy’, in E. F. Jacob, ed., *Italian Renaissance studies* (London: Faber, 1960), p. 116.

⁵¹ Machiavelli, *The art of war*, cited in Hale, ‘War and public opinion’, p. 120.

⁵² Niccolò Machiavelli, *The art of war*, trans. Henry Neville (Mineolo, NY: Dover, 2006).

Machiavellian frankness was too abrasive for official consumption. Nevertheless, the understanding of statecraft that he and his humanist contemporaries pioneered influenced a later generation of European rulers and advisers facing analogous problems of civil and religious disorder.⁵³ They adopted the Machiavellian perspective, but moderated its flavour to render it more palatable. Modified Machiavellism tried to reconcile the need for ethically dubious actions with acknowledgement of the moral virtue in sustaining peace and the public good.⁵⁴

Somewhat ironically, by the start of the seventeenth century it was the pliable Jesuit philologist Justus Lipsius who was crystallizing this understanding for an elite European audience that included statesmen as various as the Earl of Leicester in England and Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin in France.⁵⁵ By the middle of the century, Lipsius's *Politica* (1589), a digest of maxims or *sententiae* taken from classical authors and woven together in the distinctive form of a cento, had gone through 90 editions and been translated into the English, French, Spanish and Italian vernacular languages.⁵⁶

The *Politica* constituted the primer for prudent counsellors to rulers in early modern Europe. Along with Machiavelli's *Prince* and *Discourses*, it was principally concerned with the state, reason of state and the character of war. Lipsius, in other words, instructed the early modern political elite of Europe on how to address the problems of conflicted allegiance and what we might today term religious fundamentalism. Significantly, despite their religious differences, both Protestant and Catholic monarchies and their counsellors valued Lipsius's redaction of classical insights, largely drawn from the Roman historian Tacitus.⁵⁷ More precisely, Lipsius's presentation of Tacitus gave credibility to the idea of politics as 'a complex and ruthless' game, that required skilful counsel if it was to be

⁵³ Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 55–6.

⁵⁴ Giovanni Botero's *Della ragion di stato* (1589) shares this concern with prudence and the desire to secure and expand the state. See Giovanni Botero, *The reason of state and the greatness of cities*, trans. P. J. and D. P. Waley (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), esp. ch. 2, pp. 34–72.

⁵⁵ The most significant twentieth-century treatment of reason of state thinking, Friedrich Meinecke's *Machiavellism: the doctrine of raison d'état and its place in modern history* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), mentions Lipsius but accords more space to less influential thinkers in the genre such as his Venetian admirer Traiano Boccalini (see ch. 3).

⁵⁶ Justus Lipsius, *Politiorum sive civilis doctrinae libri sex* (1589). All references are from Justus Lipsius, *Politica: six books of politics or political instruction*, ed. Jan Waszink (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2004). Contemporary interest in Lipsius can be traced to Gerhard Oestreich's 1989 German study of Lipsius. For a detailed account of Lipsian scholarship, see David Martin Jones, 'Aphorism and the counsel of prudence in early modern statecraft: the curious case of Justus Lipsius', *Parergon* 28: 11, 2011, pp. 55–85. See also Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the early modern state* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jacqueline Lagrée, *Juste Lipse et la restauration du stoïcisme* (Paris: Vrin, 1994); Gilbert Tournoy, 'Justus Lipsius and Isaac Casaubon', in Marc Laureys, ed., *The world of Justus Lipsius* (Rome: Institut historique belge de Rome, 1998); Jacqueline Lagrée, 'Lipse, l'âme et la vertu', in Gilbert Tournoy, J. DeLandtsheer and J. Papy, eds., *Justus Lipsius Europae lumen et columen* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999); A. A. Long, 'Stoicism in the philosophical tradition: Spinoza, Lipsius, Butler', in Brad Inwood, ed., *The Cambridge companion to the Stoics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The Tacitist dimension and Lipsius's place within it are discussed in Giuseppe Toffanin, *Machiavelli e tacitismo* (Padua: A. Draghi, 1921); Peter Burke, *The Italian renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Quentin Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Quentin Skinner, *Visions of politics: Renaissance virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Robert Bireley, *The Counter-Reformation prince: anti-Machiavellianism or Catholic statecraft in early modern Europe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

⁵⁷ On the centrality of Tacitus to this understanding of politics, see Jan Waszink, 'Introduction', in Lipsius, *Politica*, pp. 93–8.

practised in such a way as to ensure stability and order. In this context, the advice that could be gleaned from Tacitus' *Annals* and his histories of the Julio-Claudian *imperium* offered an important but neglected resource. As Lipsius explained, Tacitus 'presents kings and monarchs to you, in a word, in the theatre of our life today ... He should be in the hands of those in whose hands are the rudder and tiller of state.'⁵⁸ What then did such realist counsel involve and how might it apply to contemporary statecraft?

State right trumps human rights

Statecraft taught rulers their interest, the dangers attendant upon religious and political extremism, and how extremism might be curtailed. These concerns and their remedy interestingly resemble the internal and external political and theological dilemmas that confront European democracies in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In order to address them, Lipsian counsel acknowledged the importance of rhetoric in the new media age of the printing press,⁵⁹ and the need to persuade subjects to view a controversial political policy in the best possible light. This practice of justification, to a local or international audience, might be described as a presentational art. To be effective it deployed the prevailing ethical and legal vocabulary, a vocabulary that included a range of positive terms including *ius*, *lex*, *auctoritas*, *pax*, *conscientia* and *virtu*, along with key maxims such as *salus populi suprema lex esto* or *bonum publicum*.⁶⁰

Presentational discourse drew upon this vocabulary to define the policies needed to address political or religious contestation in a post-medieval world order as well as to justify proportional violence to achieve perceived legitimate goals. Problematically, however, such a presentation opened itself to a counter-discourse drawing upon the same vocabulary but offering an opposed interpretation. At the same time, skilful counsel distinguished this rhetorical contestation, so central to seventeenth-century political self-understanding, from the related but dissimilar practice of deliberative reflection. In the deliberative phase, counselors and advisers to the prince or republic came to arrive in council at particular decisions, for example to declare war, burn heretics or raise taxes.

Their subsequent justificatory presentation, of course, was successful when its auditors accepted it. But a failure in effective messaging occurred, then as now, when a particular policy presented in an axiomatic or normative rhetoric of moral rightness could be countered with charges of self-interestedness or hypocritical behaviour. Europe in the 1580s was a highly combustible environment, riven by religious and dynastic wars that characterized the struggle for supremacy. As Lipsius remarked of this time: 'O better part of the world, which fires of strife

⁵⁸ This appeared in his dedication to his 1581 edition of the *Annals*. See Mark Morford, 'Tacitean *prudencia* and the doctrines of Justus Lipsius', in T. J. Luce and A. J. Woodman, eds, *Tacitus and the Tacitean tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 138.

⁵⁹ See Stephen Greenblatt, *The swerve: how the Renaissance began* (London: Vintage, 2012), pp. 226–41.

⁶⁰ This list could be translated into a vernacular idiom as: right or justice, law, authority, peace, conscience, the safety of the people as the supreme good and the public good.

has religion [or the pursuit of moral theological truth] not ignited in thee!⁶¹ In these conditions, statesmen who depicted their policies in too abstract or ideal a form laid themselves open to a counter-presentation that subverted their claims to legitimacy.⁶²

The problem of contested presentational exposition, moreover, engendered a context for additional and different responses. First, those whose ethical rectitude is questioned may reply by more forcefully reasserting their purity of purpose and identifying their interlocutors as corrupted or misled. The radically alternative and more realistic rejoinder instead differentiated dimensions of human intercourse, permitting them distinct and often dissimilar standards of behaviour. It was those 'state casuists',⁶³ working within a 'reason of state' idiom through a synthesis of early modern canon law, case ethics or casuistry, with examples drawn from the classical historians, who pioneered this radically distinctive perspective.

In this developing mode, actions of a political character could be advocated, not because of their 'justness' or 'rightness', but because they were necessary, timely or prudent.⁶⁴ Indeed: 'You must decide separately on every occasion, if it is not better to close an eye than *to provoke offences by untimely remedies*.'⁶⁵ The emphasis on the contingent and the practical in matters of statecraft acknowledged the problem that the promotion of abstract norms dissolved into alternative and often conflicting choices when confronted by the facts of quotidian experience.

Such diplomatic statecraft, pejoratively characterized as cynically obsessed with power at the expense of morality, is often maligned, particularly in the contemporary International Relations theory discourse concerning ethics, as we will elucidate below. Such misunderstanding reflects, in part, the fact that the English term 'reason of state' offers only a partial translation of the French *raison d'état* and the Italian *ragion di stato*. This is unfortunate; for in the French and Italian understanding, the term implies not only the *reason* of state but the *right* that the state has to preserve itself and sustain the public good.⁶⁶

The right of the state, moreover, may be expressed in terms of both its right to survive and its right to sustain the political order or constitution. In sum, a political realism infused with 'reason of state' emphasizes two features of policy-making: the presentational dimension, which draws upon the prevailing moral and political vocabulary available to make a convincing case; and the deliberative justification for a policy that occurs in the council chamber and not in public. Material used in the deliberative process, moreover, might be suppressed in the subsequent public presentation.

⁶¹ Lipsius, *Politica*, 3.3, p. 391.

⁶² See Brendan Simms, *The struggle for supremacy in Europe 1453 to the present* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), pp. 7–42.

⁶³ E. Hyde, 'Of conscience', in *A collection of several tracts of Edward Earl of Clarendon* (London: T. Woodward and J. Peele, 1727), pp. 162–3.

⁶⁴ Lipsius, 'Preliminary matter', *Politica*, p. 231.

⁶⁵ Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.3, p. 395 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁶ See J. H. Hexter, *The vision of politics on the eve of the Reformation* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 168. Bireley writes that 'the term *reason* carried a particular implication for him [Botoero]. He argued that the ruler who sought a powerful state did best to seek the well-being of his subjects in a fashion that was moral and so reasonable.' See Robert Bireley, *The refashioning of Catholicism, 1450–1700* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 183.

Probabilism, casuistry and mixed prudence

Lipsius and his humanist contemporaries framed the state's right in the context of the interplay between the implacable force of Providence, 'that great Mind of the world', Necessity, which 'overcomes all things', and the requisite prudential response.⁶⁷ As in the Graeco-Roman world,⁶⁸ Lipsian counsel acknowledged Prudence—*phronesis* or practical reason—as the ruling principle in politics. Political *virtu* could not exist without it.⁶⁹ Lipsius defined prudence in terms of how to understand and choose what should be looked for or evaded in both the public and the private sphere.⁷⁰ It was 'useful in all human affairs, but most of all in government'.⁷¹

Such prudential counsel also drew upon the ethically fashionable casuistry that the Jesuits evolved, and Protestant divines adapted, in the course of the Counter-Reformation. This form of ethical reasoning had evolved in the medieval Church as the branch of moral theology that addressed cases of conscience. It constituted the technical method for resolving cases 'when conscience is in a strait between two or more courses' of action.⁷² In this activity it exhibited a concern with practical reasoning that had implications for the evolution of reason(s) of state. Responding to the moral 'variety of persons and situations',⁷³ the casuist attended not only to the general rule, that, for example, 'thou shalt not kill', but also to the extenuating circumstances that might apply in a particular case of homicide.⁷⁴

Thus rhetoric, prudence and casuistry came together in a compelling politico-theological package in the course of the sixteenth century. In this period, and under growing Jesuit influence, casuistry 'applied the general principles of natural and divine law to specific cases, and merged seamlessly with ... controversies'.⁷⁵ Problems of statecraft, resistance and allegiance, like any other practice or activity, fell within its burgeoning grasp. Moreover, despite the polemical tone of political debate, which saw casuistry 'deplored in name and deployed in spirit', the denominational divide between Catholic and Protestant case divinity 'was deceptively negotiable'. Indeed, for Catholic and Protestant alike, 'the rules and criteria, the meta-language used to appraise ordinary and extraordinary cases, were likely to lead to probably right and wrong courses of action'.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Justus Lipsius, *On constancy* (Bristol: Phoenix, 2006; first publ. 1595), p. 58.

⁶⁸ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean ethics* (London: Penguin, 2004).

⁶⁹ Lipsius, *Politica*, 1.7, p. 283 (initial capitals in original).

⁷⁰ Lipsius, *Politica*, pp. 283, 233–62.

⁷¹ Lipsius, *Politica*, 3.1, p. 347.

⁷² R. M. Wenley, 'Casuistry', in *The encyclopaedia of religion and ethics*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1910), p. 239.

⁷³ Cited in Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The abuse of casuistry: a history of moral reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 130. See also T. C. Potts, *Conscience in medieval philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁷⁴ Jonsen and Toulmin, *The abuse of casuistry*, p. 2. The case of murder and the circumstances governing it regularly featured in books of case divinity. See Dwight Cathcart, *Doubting conscience: Donne and the poetry of moral argument* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), p. 35.

⁷⁵ Harro Höpfl, *Jesuit political thought: the society of Jesus and the state, c.1560–1630* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 5.

⁷⁶ Conal Condren, *Argument and authority in early modern England: the presupposition of oaths and offices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 174.

In political terms, adjusting policy to the times, then as now, necessitated a probabilist casuistry. This assumed that doubt regarding the correct answer to a moral or political dilemma permitted a course of action that allowed that one particular probable response was right. It facilitated a situational ethics that ‘pays closest attention to the specific details of particular ... cases and circumstances’.⁷⁷ More precisely, political probabilism required a particular type of prudence (*prudentia mixta*). The ruler practised this in order to ‘bridle’ or manipulate an otherwise wilful populace.⁷⁸ Such prudence necessarily fluctuated in response to circumstances. It selected and combined ‘things which relate to each other now in this way, then in that way ... It takes time, place, and people into consideration and changes with the slightest change in them.’⁷⁹ Nevertheless, it possessed ‘two parts; Civil and Military’. The first was concerned with ‘EVERYDAY GOVERNMENT WHEN THINGS ARE PEACEFUL’ and the other was ‘applied in WAR AND TIMES OF UNREST’.⁸⁰ The first branch was further subdivided into religious and secular aspects.

It was here that princely counsel adjusted rules to the requirements of the times and the people. Specifically, the people were unpredictable, unruly and ‘affected by emotions’.⁸¹ They ‘ignored the interest of the Commonwealth’. Hence the prince and his advisers, who were responsible for the common interest, had to use a prudence that mixes ‘the honourable and the useful’. Consequently, if the harbour of good government cannot be reached ‘by sailing straight, you do it by a different course’. Shifting metaphors, Lipsius contended that ‘wine does not stop being wine when it is mixed with water, nor does Prudence cease being Prudence when it is mixed with a little drop of deceit’.⁸² Thus, in conducting affairs of state, Lipsius observed—cautiously referencing Machiavelli—there is something honourable and praiseworthy in cunning.⁸³ In this context ‘civil planning’ might depart ‘from virtue or the laws in the interest of’ political order.⁸⁴

Military, even more than civil, prudence required recourse to such practice. Lipsius thought this ‘necessary for a Prince before everything else’.⁸⁵ As with Machiavelli, all military prudence concerned war, of which there were two kinds: ‘foreign and civil’. Lipsius identified three aspects of all types of warfare:

Starting it, Waging it, and Ending it. If you neglect any of these or execute it wrongly, you are most unlikely ever to celebrate a good outcome. In starting a war, I urgently admonish you to take these two things to heart: that it happens without all Injustice and all Rashness.⁸⁶

Ultimately, for any realist, war was ‘safer than an unreliable peace’ and peace could be ‘made stronger by war’.⁸⁷ In this context, moreover, effective command

⁷⁷ Jonsen and Toulmin, *The abuse of casuistry*, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Lipsius, *Politica*, 3.2, p. 349.

⁷⁹ Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.1, pp. 383–5.

⁸⁰ Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.2, p. 387 (capitals in original).

⁸¹ Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.5, pp. 403–409.

⁸² Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.13, p. 509.

⁸³ Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.13, p. 511.

⁸⁴ Lipsius, *Politica*, 5.1, p. 513.

⁸⁵ Lipsius, *Politica*, 5.2, p. 539.

⁸⁶ Lipsius, *Politica*, 5.3, p. 541.

⁸⁷ Lipsius, *Politica*, 5.19, pp. 657–9.

achieves more ‘by strategy than by force’. In particular, Lipsius noted, ‘nothing is more useful in war than deceit’.⁸⁸

Lipsius constructed this guidance not for a gullible public but for political advisers, individuals who, ‘experienced of men and human affairs’, give government ‘beneficial insights in peace and war’.⁸⁹ Timely advice leads to wise decisions. Consequently, a prudent ruler requires deliberative counsel that adjusts morality to political circumstances. This political flexibility contrasted with the loyalty required of the state’s subjects, which sustained the practice of prudent governance.

Maxims, not axioms: the implications of Lipsian casuistry for modern diplomatic ethics

In the seventeenth century Europe’s counsellors came to understand, often through bitter experience, that sustaining the state’s interest might require the casuistic adjustment of general rules. Wary of popular emotion and fashionable enthusiasms, they looked to careful deliberation to effect long-term policy goals. In what way might such a mixed prudence deal with current dilemmas in international politics?

Early modern statecraft of a *politique* nature, like contemporary European diplomacy, confronted the moral difficulty of framing policy in an unpredictable milieu of contingency and mutability. The prudential view is acutely aware of the difficulty of applying abstract rules to the moral ambiguity of political experience. Early modern political advice books, unlike modern post-Kantian ethics, thus considered maxims of the kind offered by Lipsius in his compendium a better guide than ethereal norms or axioms for rulers confronted with political decisions not amenable to clear-cut moral decisions. While an axiom is a proposition derived from science and abstract reason, a maxim is distilled from experience and offers a practical guide to conduct. Practical, not abstract, reasoning and historical knowledge should thus inform the counsel offered to princes and republics in difficult cases concerning public morality or war in contingent circumstances. Such counsel, which may or may not be followed, contrasts vividly with the contemporary legalistic–moralistic approach that, from the perspective of international law and cosmopolitan justice, requires the application of axioms to all moral cases, for example in respect of the violation of human rights, in a *theoretical* manner; rules, that is, are to be applied as theorems.

The prudentialist approach, on the other hand, is distinctly practical, emphasizing statements that are concrete and limited in time, and presume a specific and particular knowledge.⁹⁰ International relations, in contrast to the physical sciences, is perhaps more amenable to a practical reason that treats particular and often anomalous world events via a mixture of deliberative judgement with presentational acumen.

⁸⁸ Lipsius, *Politica*, 5.17, p. 645.

⁸⁹ Lipsius, *Politica*, 3.4, p. 355.

⁹⁰ Jonsen and Toulmin, *The abuse of casuistry*, p. 27.

Growing awareness of the difficulty of applying abstract norms to modern warfare has inspired a number of contemporary analysts to re-examine the theory and practice of just war. The late David Fisher, for instance, contended that western foreign policy-making should have greater recourse to classical ethical and political thinking, modified by sixteenth-century Jesuit scholarship on just war and Fisher's own version of virtue consequentialism, when dealing with contemporary hard cases. In our 'challenging period of confusion and change', he declared, western diplomacy needed to apply early modern just war principles modified by rule-utilitarian consequentialism to contemporary wars of choice.⁹¹ Fisher's intent was 'to make war just' and to engage only in 'just war'.⁹²

For Fisher, however, a just approach to intervention forbids what he considers realist, or 'reason of state'-driven, international practice.⁹³ Instead, he proposed that just war today must meet criteria that expand upon the principles first outlined in the late thirteenth century by St Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa theologiae*.⁹⁴ All recourse to war, therefore, requires a just cause, and a competent authority must legitimate the correct intention. It may only be undertaken as a last resort and with the probability that more good than harm will result from its successful prosecution. Meanwhile its conduct should be discriminatory and proportional, minimizing casualties to non-combatants. Finally, it should conclude with a just peace.⁹⁵

The difficulty with Fisher's modified Thomism, as with the counsel offered by the medieval Church, is that it could never be fully realized in an imperfect world.⁹⁶ It demands universal ethical consistency, embodied most recently in the Responsibility to Protect agenda, which 'assumes that intervention can and should be applied universally, regardless of the weight of circumstantial evidence against such a strategy'.⁹⁷ Such virtuous consequentialism might actually lead to a course of inaction, regardless of whether the matter is urgent, because policy-makers have to ensure their interventions satisfy abstract moral tests of legal competence, last resort and just cause. Or, alternatively, the axiom may require a too precipitate rush to action, regardless of circumstance and timing, 'brushing aside the sovereignty of the offending state when confronted with gross abuses of human rights'.⁹⁸ Acting axiomatically, then, occludes the complex, contingent realities of a particular case, leading frequently to less than ideal outcomes.

In this context, Fisher is wrong to condemn reason of state as amoral. On the contrary, as we have seen, it takes a mixed prudential stance to address the predicament of rule in a contingent and uncertain world. An updated Lipsian manual of advice would provide not Thomistic axioms, but general rules and examples

⁹¹ David Fisher, *Morality and war: can war be justified in the twenty-first century?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 258.

⁹² Fisher, *Morality and war*, p. 247.

⁹³ Fisher, *Morality and war*, p. 253.

⁹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, 'On war: question 40, articulus I, Secunda Secundae', *Summa theologiae* (1274). See also Thomas Aquinas, *Aquinas: political writings*, ed. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 239.

⁹⁵ Fisher, *Morality and war*, p. 247.

⁹⁶ Fisher, *Morality and war*, p. 62.

⁹⁷ Jack Spence, 'Does morality matter in security policy? A reply to David Fisher', *Survival* 55: 5, 2013, p. 151.

⁹⁸ Spence, 'Does morality matter in security policy?', p. 151.

based on historical awareness. These might be adapted and applied differently to each case that troubles the conscience of the international community, whether it might be Putin's expansionism or the ethical and political consequences of not intervening in Syria's civil war.

In an era of political turmoil, a contemporary Lipsian would advise leaders of western democracies that prudential statecraft requires a situational morality that directs action to 'the public good'.⁹⁹ Ethical flexibility applies particularly in the international sphere, where unstable emotions and distorted images often shape global public opinion. Prudent counsel would also recognize the gullibility and fecklessness of the masses in an age of social and mass media: 'Because what we call Prudence [here] is in reality ... changeable in every respect.'¹⁰⁰ This constrains the modern democratic state's ability to conduct international relations. Sustenance of the national interest, in these circumstances, requires a *prudencia mixta* that responds to the power shifts in an interconnected but increasingly fragmented world. Such responsiveness is essential to cope with the instability in international politics, where to practise 'strict moral correctness' may actually harm the common interest. Prudent policy instead requires a combination of expediency and dissimulation to maintain peace and stability. Indeed, a political leadership that does not know how to dissimulate does not know how to rule. In the 'troubled sea' of politics, keeping the ship of state afloat requires 'clever planning' and must occasionally depart 'from virtue or the laws'.¹⁰¹ In difficult cases, therefore, policy will necessarily deviate from international norms.¹⁰²

While political action requires both virtue and prudence, it is prudence that must direct conduct.¹⁰³ It is prudence that adjudicates cases of war or peace. Prudence 'regulates the present, foresees the future and remembers the past'.¹⁰⁴ Here it is knowledge of international and political history, together with diplomatic experience, rather than the axiomatic legalist-moralist approach, that is conducive to informed policy decisions. Lipsius emphasized that history was the source or resource from which 'political and prudential choosing flows'.¹⁰⁵

Somewhat problematically, however, in the post-Cold War era western democracies, political elites and international organizations have studiously neglected political and diplomatic history, with what a prudentialist would view as predictable and catastrophic consequences.¹⁰⁶ Inattention to history leads to a failure to appreciate, for example, the long-term strategic goals of rival powers like Russia and China in their spheres of regional interest.

By contrast, the historically informed statesmen of seventeenth-century Europe were conscious of the fact that framing policies in terms of abstract ideals

⁹⁹ Lipsius, *Politica*, 2.6, p. 309.

¹⁰⁰ Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.1, p. 383.

¹⁰¹ Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.14, p. 513.

¹⁰² Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.14, p. 517.

¹⁰³ Lipsius, *Politica*, 1.1, p. 261.

¹⁰⁴ Lipsius, *Politica*, 1.7, p. 285.

¹⁰⁵ Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.1, p. 385.

¹⁰⁶ Such nescience peaked when David Miliband, Foreign Secretary in the Blair government, decided to close the Foreign Office diplomatic archive.

could lead to a disastrous loss of authority. Similarly, a modern Lipsian, observing current problems in statecraft, would be acutely aware of the historical difficulty in achieving a balance of power in Europe and would have advised caution in expanding NATO into eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, while recognizing Russia's strategic interest in the Crimea and the Black Sea. The 'pretence' of moral absolutism in such cases may only reignite 'the fires of strife'.¹⁰⁷

From the perspective of prudential counsel, a president or prime minister, faced with difficult policy decisions in the Middle East, eastern Europe or Pacific Asia, would recognize that statecraft requires what is 'necessary in practice'. In such circumstances, western political leaders should avoid hyperbole or 'what is beautiful to say'.¹⁰⁸ The ignorance of the conduct of war exhibited by western political elites and their advisers in these troubled times would astonish a seventeenth-century observer. Neglecting military prudence could only lead to the inept use of force and inevitable political failure.

Ultimately, the democratic conduct of foreign policy requires far greater sensitivity to the particular character of hard cases and the need to adjust policy casuistically to changing circumstances. Such an approach, as writers from Machiavelli to Hobbes noted, recognizes the distinctive mystery or 'arcana' of statecraft and its differentiated ethical practice. A reason of state informed by the Roman disposition to an active political *virtu* that defends the common interest, rather than Fisher's abstract virtue consequentialism, might more prudently address the issues raised by our 'troubled condition of confusion and change'. Given that early modern political realism eschews an abstract rationalist approach to foreign policy and instead prefers historically grounded and prudential counsel,¹⁰⁹ how would it address a case such as that of ISIS, which threatens the stability of a region close to Europe but which increasingly seems less strategically relevant to the United States?

Reason of state and ISIS

ISIS's key strategic thinker Abu Bakr al-Naji maintained that the West, like Islam, is by no means a monolith. The *kufir* West is, he observed, 'vitiating by self-interest'. In *The management of savagery: the most critical stage through which the umma will pass*, the guidebook to ISIS's strategic thinking,¹¹⁰ al-Naji quotes the dictum of the nineteenth-century British statesman Palmerston that states have no permanent friends, only permanent interests, to support the view that the West may dissolve along state or ethnic lines. According to al-Naji the purpose of violence, whether in Europe or in Raqqa, is to facilitate this fragmentation and secure the borders of ISIS.

¹⁰⁷ Lipsius, *Politica*, 3.2, p. 391.

¹⁰⁸ Lipsius, *Politica*, 4.14, p. 531.

¹⁰⁹ 'How often have statesmen been motivated by the desire to improve the world, and ended by making it worse?': Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 4. See also Meinecke's *Machiavellism*. The German title more accurately conveys Meinecke's concern: *Die Idee der Staatsrason in neuen Geschichte* (1924).

¹¹⁰ Abu Bakr al-Naji, *The management of savagery: the most critical stage through which the umma will pass*, trans. William McCants (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). See also Hassan Hassan and Michael Weis, *ISIS: inside an army of terror* (New York: Regan, 2015).

A contemporary Lipsian would perhaps recognize, and take seriously rather than dismiss, the tactics and strategic vision that ISIS advances and develop the means to contain and defeat it. ISIS strategy is deeply realist and not obviously amenable to dialogue with those European policy elites who promote abstract norms through a communicatory, cosmopolitan global public sphere. In seeking to countermand Islamism, the prudent state and its diplomatic corps should evolve a strategic response that would necessarily differ from any devised to contain a revisionist Russia.

In the context of the Middle East, an acquaintance with post-Ottoman history and the bitter experience of failed interventions since 1990 would counsel against direct intervention on the ground to advance western ideological preferences. With the rise of ISIS, US policy in particular has undergone something of a volte-face, making common cause with Iran. Yet this also seems imprudent given that Iran seeks regional hegemony, antagonizing, in the process, the Sunni majority states of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, which although inimical to ISIS consider it a useful buffer against Iranian expansion. Alliance with Iran would intensify ethnic and sectarian cleavages rather than resolve them. Furthering the regional ambitions of a potentially nuclear-armed Iran is thus, one might argue, inimical to the interests of the West. European state interest in the Middle East, in contrast perhaps to that of the United States, is best served by stability rather than democracy promotion. In retrospect, and somewhat ironically, this is precisely the line taken by an autocratic Ba'athist Iraq under Saddam, balancing as it did against Iran's expansionist post-1979 revolutionary theocracy.

The re-creation of balance in the Middle East will require, therefore, the exercise of patience and a mixed prudential practice of dissimulation, undoubtedly involving some strange bedfellows. In this context, Renaissance diplomacy recognized 'the benefits of time', facilitating an acknowledgement that the issues that fuel the millennial certainties of ISIS will not be quickly resolved.¹¹¹ In particular, a coherent strategy to undermine such certitude would work in the shadows, deploying propaganda and psychological measures to cast doubt in the minds of those who believe their actions cannot be doubted.

As a number of commentators have argued, ISIS has made effective use of social media to promote its message. The West has failed to produce a counter-narrative. This would surprise a counsellor to an early modern state, who would scrupulously attend both to the gathering of intelligence (the modern practice of spycraft began with Elizabeth I's privy councillor Sir Francis Walsingham) and to the images and pamphlet literature necessary to advance the cause of the state against its internal and external enemies.¹¹² After all, if you cannot destroy your enemy quickly or easily, a worthy alternative is always to spy on it, infiltrate it and, over time, seek to manipulate it, control it, undermine it and eventually collapse it from the inside. You just need patience and a degree of long-term political commitment.

¹¹¹ Garrett Mattingly, *The Armada: the defeat of the Spanish Armada* (New York: First Mariner, 1987), p. 49; Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance diplomacy* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 47.

¹¹² See e.g. Stephen Alford, *The watchers: a secret history of the reign of Elizabeth I* (London: Penguin, 2013).

Further, given the strategic ambition of the new 'caliphate' in Mosul, a counsel of prudence would also recognize that instability in the Middle East raises Europe-wide security concerns that cannot be assuaged by a policy of non-intervention.¹¹³ ISIS attracts jihadist recruits, notably from Europe and Australia. 'Generation jihad' in the diaspora communities of the West finds in the new caliphate the equivalent of the utopian counter-culture movement of the late 1960s that radicalized a generation of western students. In the Islamist case it possesses the added attraction of licensing transgressive violence that not only contributes to regional instability, but also threatens the integrity of open societies such as Australia, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, through the cultivation of home-grown radicals or returning jihadist fighters.

A prudent counsel would therefore recognize that external conditions affect civil peace. *Raison d'état* regards national security as a first-order concern. In this regard, minorities who reject the state's foreign policy have, in democracies, the right to dissent, but not the right to decapitate fellow citizens in the name of a transnational ideocracy. Moreover, if the citizens of a democracy commit themselves to an enemy entity like ISIS by joining its jihad, they necessarily forfeit the rights of a political citizenship that assumes consent as the basis of the legal rights they enjoy as members of a secular democracy.

In the late sixteenth century, the early modern English state faced a transnational politico-religious threat not dissimilar to that facing the modern state. Confronting foreign invasion and internal resistance, counsellors to the crown such as Francis Walsingham and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who studied Lipsius's *Politica*, expanded the treason statute and imposed tests of allegiance on those subjects whose loyalty to the political condition seemed doubtful.¹¹⁴ Only as ISIS strategy and the practice of its western adherents became all too apparent did the UK government announce belated measures to close extremist mosques and require those seeking visas to enter the UK 'to sign a declaration that they will respect British values'. The Muslim Council of Britain and the Islamic Human Rights Commission considered even these limited attempts at national security 'a shameless expression of hate and bigotry'.¹¹⁵

Yet in an anxiety-prone durable disorder where global interconnectedness by no means presages integration, a secular democratic market state requires at least a shared public morality to sustain the national interest as expressed through domestic legislation. This civil association applies equally to all citizens and may require an active foreign policy to secure its interests and values both at home and abroad. Neither indifference nor a legal rationalism that, while theoretically open to intervention, sets unrealistic universal standards of consistency, addresses the complexity of Europe's besetting dilemmas.

¹¹³ Matthew d'Ancona, "'None of our business' is no answer to Islamist terror", *Daily Telegraph*, 5 July 2014.

¹¹⁴ See David Martin Jones, *Conscience and allegiance in seventeenth-century England* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1999), pp. 14–62.

¹¹⁵ 'Mosques harbouring Islamic extremists to be closed down', *The Times*, 24 March 2015.

Conclusion

A revised reason of state adapted to increasingly volatile interstate relations that are not evidently amenable to international legal management by no means guarantees order. In real time, as Lawrence Freedman makes clear, policy-makers function in a fallible realm full of vicissitudes, where ‘consistently high strategic performance is extremely hard’ to attain, let alone maintain.¹¹⁶ The search for a grand master strategy is therefore as illusory as the quest for grand utopian schemes of cosmopolitan justice. Unlike normative grand theorizing, however, prudent statecraft adjusts morality and law as circumstance and interest dictate.

As a consequence, a strategic appreciation of what constitutes the national interest and how it can be maintained must be premised on the state’s right to self-defence. In the disordered world of states, para-states and failed states, policies based on an abstract ‘international community’ that promotes universal norms of conduct cannot achieve coherence, let alone order. Interstate political diplomacy requires instead a prudent appreciation of history, culture and past precedent. In the end, *pace* Fisher, ‘our troubled condition of confusion and change’ promises only an uncertain and dangerous world. In this perilous condition abstract, normative theorizing presents nothing but a grand illusion. Modern western diplomacy could thus do worse than revisit some of the insights established by early modern political thinkers on European statecraft. They configured a system of thought and counsel around the imperfect world they saw about them. The realities they perceived were nothing but complex and contingent. Indeed, in their world contingency ruled. Arguably, in this respect, little has changed. Contingency represents the only true, lasting, norm in the international system.

¹¹⁶ Lawrence Freedman, ‘The master strategist is still a myth’, *War on the Rocks*, 14 Oct. 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/10/the-master-strategist-is-still-a-myth/>, accessed 11 Aug. 2015.