

## **Machiavelli, Kissinger and realism in 21<sup>st</sup> century international relations**

There is a well-known maxim in diplomacy that countries do not have friends, just interests. The conduct of international relations when all states are simply pursuing their own self-interest can seem chaotic, fraught with danger, and quite often arbitrary; where the strongest prevail over the weakest. All states have to balance between the competing forces of idealism and realism. Whilst realism was for some time out of fashion, it is now making a comeback due to the increasing volatility in the international system. Both idealism and realism need, however, to be kept within bounds, and this is best done through a multilateral approach and a rules-based international system.

When discussing realism in diplomacy, the names of two men come to mind. They lived centuries apart from each other, but their ideas are often linked – Nicolo Machiavelli, advisor to the leaders of city-state of Florence at the end of the fifteenth century, and Henry Kissinger, US academic and diplomat who served as Richard Nixon's Secretary of State and National Security Advisor towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Both are credited by some, damned by others, for justifying the excesses of their leaders, and propagating a realist policy that put exigency before moral idealist considerations. Machiavelli, whether or not you agree with him, is considered an intellectual giant. Kissinger cannot be put in the same category, but the fact that he led the diplomacy of a modern superpower at a turbulent time in history, makes his thinking highly relevant for current circumstances. For many who believe politics, leadership and diplomacy need to be guided by a moral compass, Machiavelli and Kissinger were evil men who caused the world much suffering. That, however, may be an oversimplification, since a closer look at their writings shows that they were much more nuanced in their thinking.

### **Machiavelli and *The Prince***

Nicolo Machiavelli lived in Renaissance Europe, when the continent was emerging from its dark ages. His most famous book, "*The Prince*", was meant as a handbook for the Prince of Florence as he embarked on the business of ruling the city state and guiding its foreign policy in what was then a rather turbulent neighbourhood. In the book, Machiavelli appeared to excuse all sorts of excesses that the prince could embark on – from violence to

extermination; from deceit to bribery – whilst also coining the phrase, “the ends justify the means”.

But some disagree, saying that even the famous phrase was a mistranslation, and that in fact Machiavelli was a humanist who was only dismissing fake morality, which instead of bringing progress and harmony was used to justify misery and backwardness.

Perhaps even more pertinent is the fact that is sometimes missed in the study of Machiavelli – that he was propagating a system of government that was based on rules. This was at a time when feudalism was starting to make way to statehood. Florence, and other cities like it, were transforming from feudal fiefdoms into modern princely states and this was neither an easy nor a simple process – neither internally nor in the process of the conduct of their foreign policy. It was in this context that Machiavelli justified the actions of his prince, unsavoury as they were, and the need to always keep the end in sight.

On Machiavelli, Columbia University Professor Philip Bobbitt says that, “there remain a number of controverted questions about even the most basic of Machiavelli’s views. Was he a forthright totalitarian, or a human rights respecting republican? ..... Was he a Renaissance humanist or a neo-classical realist?” Bobbitt comes to the conclusion that he was essentially a constitutionalist. He was not advocating unlimited power to the Prince, but rather was advising the prince to work within a system based on rules, and based on a system of checks and balances.

Thus, Machiavelli was not an apologist for power, but a threat to established thinking of the time. No wonder the Catholic Church – the ultimate power at the time in Europe – put *The Prince* on the list of prohibited books, the infamous *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

### **Henry Kissinger, in theory and in practice**

Similarly, the contemporary historian, Niall Ferguson, in an article in *Foreign Policy* in 2015 invites us to look again at Henry Kissinger – the Harvard professor whose tenure as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State left an indelible mark on American foreign policy, and consequently people tend to focus on his actions in office, rather than his writings over the years. Those actions triggered controversies that continue to rage on decades later.

The historian Alistair Horne in his book about Kissinger's most memorable year, 1973, describes him as "the most controversial of all Washington's public servants".

One episode that continues to haunt Kissinger was the coup in Chile in 1973.

Under his watch, and apparently with his blessing, the democratically elected president of Chile, Salvador Allende, was removed from office in a bloody coup during which Allende was killed trying to defend himself in Santiago's *La Moneda* Palace in September 1973. The drama of this episode left an impact on a whole generation of young liberal and left wing activists and students, who saw Kissinger as the symbol of everything that was bad and evil with American foreign policy. Until this day, this moment in *La Moneda* can still get this generation – now middle aged and middle class – agitated. It also partly explains why Kissinger remains such a controversial political figure, even though he is now in his nineties.

Kissinger is not so liked by the other side of the political spectrum either. His belief in *realpolitik*, and essentially, on the need to keep your enemies divided, led him to seek *détente* with the Soviet Union despite the opposition of anti-communist hardliners. And his masterminding of Nixon's historic opening to China, a topic that as we are increasingly seeing re-emerge, remains contentious.

To what extent was Kissinger driven by realism? Ferguson claims that Kissinger, "far from being a Machiavellian" was "from the outset of his career an idealist". He argues that Kissinger's thinking can best be understood "as an innovative critique of *realpolitik*", and to make his point he highlights four key elements in it: "History is the key to understanding rivals and allies; one must confront the problem of conjecture, with its asymmetric payoffs; many foreign policy decisions are choices between evils; and leaders should beware of the perils of a morally vacuous realism." Yet, all empirical evidence suggests that Kissinger in office essentially practised the doctrine of the end justifying the means; ironically, in a way that Machiavelli himself did not, since he was never actually in office after he wrote *The Prince*.

Yet Kissinger also strongly believed in a "legitimate international order", which according to Horne, he considered essential for stability, and even for the conduct of diplomacy itself.

## **The importance of history**

Both Machiavelli and Kissinger believed in the importance of history in forging the policy of a state. Machiavelli strongly advised the intensive study of the past, particularly regarding the founding of a city (state), which he felt was a key in understanding its latter development. Fergusson cites Kissinger's doctoral dissertation (1957) in which he says that "the memory of states is the test of truth of their policy. The more elementary the experience, the more profound the impact on a nation's interpretation of the present in the light of the past", adding that "what 'really' happened is often less important than what is thought to have happened".

History tampers with realism. Whilst some are inclined to believe that history is important and we need to learn from its lessons, in fact many nations, and their leaders, are not really interested in learning from history, but rather in harnessing history in support of a national narrative in order to explain the present and predict the future. Far from being a realist tool, it becomes a trap, limiting a nation's ability to act, and a leader's ability to conduct a foreign policy that is most conducive for the national interest but which contradicts the historic narrative hole that the nation might have dug itself into. There are plenty of examples of this in the Middle East, the Caucasus and Europe.

The revisiting and re-assessment of Machiavelli and Kissinger is far from being a simple academic discussion. The thoughts and ideas that underpinned their writings are particularly pertinent in the present juncture of global politics and international relations when rivalry between big powers threatens once more to turn into outright hostility.

## **The limits of soft power**

Over the last four decades we have seen the emergence, rise and fall of soft power as a tool in international relations. It was argued that nations or groups of nations such as the European Union, can project power not only through military means but also through "soft tools" such as economy, culture, language, development aid, and even more controversially, values.

Tony Blair's first Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, announced that Britain was to have "an ethical foreign policy". For a nation that had perfected the notion of "gunboat diplomacy",

this was quite a statement. Cook resigned from Blair's government ahead of the second Gulf war. Realism had prevailed.

But it has been the European Union that over the years has become the symbol of soft power, partly because for a long time it had no hard power to project. It had no standing armies, and its endorsement of values, such as respect for human rights, made it a beacon for many.

That is now changing. The pendulum is slowly but surely swinging back towards the realist approach. Some argue that Europe's idealist approach was both self-defeating and hypocritical. Europe had enough problems of the present and historical baggage of the past to deal with before it could start preaching to others. On the other hand, European leaders were frustrated that despite the EU being an economic superpower, it had to struggle to be heard on many global issues. Even in its immediate neighbourhood, especially when faced with assertive competitors such as Russia and Turkey, the EU appeared impotent. Ursula van der Leyen's ambition to make her Commission geo-strategically relevant is an admission of the limits of soft power.

### **The madness of hard power**

Yet if soft power has failed, no one can say that hard power has won. It has been seventy-five years since the end of WWII. In this period there has hardly been one moment of complete peace in the world. When the coronavirus pandemic erupted the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, made an appeal for a global cease fire during the pandemic. His call was not only universally ignored in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Nagorno-Karabakh and other conflict zones, but the pandemic appeared to trigger a new set of confrontations, in the South China Sea, over the Himalayas and elsewhere. The madness that is war continues unabated

Realists will argue that this proves the need for strength, and ruthlessness when necessary, in dealing with foreign policy. But it is this reliance on strength and ruthlessness that has resulted in the world drifting from one conflict to another, from one humanitarian crisis to another, with the constant fear that one crisis may spiral out of control, returning the world to the abyss of global war.

## **Multilateralism and a rules-based international system**

The world is entering a challenging period in international relations, with the rumblings of war within earshot of most of the world chancelleries. Some will argue that this is not time for naïve morality. Others say that it is the lack of morals in international relations that is the cause of the problems. It is a centuries old argument which is not going to be resolved soon. In the meantime, the current challenges need to be managed, and for this, a pragmatic approach is needed – one that is inspired by values, but which is delivered with a heavy touch of realism. Nations need to learn how to negotiate, which is not always easy, because according to Kissinger, “negotiation is an admission of finite power”.

In the post WWII settlement it appeared that the multilateralist approach was working. Despite its shortcoming, the United Nations maintained a semblance of global order. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, and threatened to wipe one nation off the map, the world community intervened in an unprecedented show of unity. Yet, when twenty-five years later, Russia tore Ukraine apart, and annexed Crimea, the global response was much weaker. The problem is both institutional and political. International organisations are in crisis for a variety of reasons – some, such as the United Nations, no longer reflect the power reality of today; others, such as the OSCE, are dysfunctional, even if they are needed now more than ever. There has been in recent years a deficit in political support for the international institutions, and a lack of appetite by politicians and diplomats to invest time, political capital and resources to reform and bolster international institutions that are necessary if a multilateral approach is to be adopted. A multilateral approach can only work if the international system is based on rules, to be followed by both the strong and the weak. This is necessary, not only to preserve, or in some cases restore, world peace, but also because the challenges facing humankind, from climate change to pandemics, require a common effort in a system with rules.

Multilateralism and a rules-based international system keep both the moral agenda and the realist approach within bounds and tame the excesses of zealots on both sides of the debate.

Former British Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, wrote: “The world is run on a paradox. On the one hand the essential focus of loyalty remains the nation state, and there are nearly two hundred of these. On the other hand no nation state, not even the single super power, the United States of America, is capable of delivering to its citizens single handed the security, the prosperity and the decent environment which the citizens demand”.

The debate about whether Machiavelli and Kissinger are realists or idealists is therefore far from being simply academic. Their thinking and their actions are controversial, sometimes appearing to be contradictory, because they were trying not only to reconcile realism and idealism in the execution of statecraft and foreign policy, but also trying to keep them within bounds. That is also today’s challenge.

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