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1 Origins and Antecedents

Before the ‘formula’ of the national interest, to use Charles Beard’s perceptive expression, can be placed in a range of theoretical contexts within the discipline of International Relations, it is important to recognise and understand its evolution as a term of political discourse. The intellectual origins and history of the idea of ‘the national interest’ are virtually inseparable from how rulers came to define their justifications for state policy.

This chapter will trace its development from Rousseau’s conception of the ‘general will’ and the earlier doctrine of ‘raison d’état’ most closely associated with Machiavelli, to its use as a term of modern diplomacy. The key components of the national interest will also be outlined. The chapter begins with a brief etymological analysis.

Etymology and epistemology

In the discourse of politics, the concept of interest is a contested and problematic idea (Connolly 1974). Though it has a range of meanings, ‘interest is a significant example of a word with specialised legal and economic senses which, within a particular social and economic history, has been extended to a very general meaning’ (Williams 1983, pp. 171–3). Although its etymology is complex and difficult to trace, it is possible to use the word ‘interest’ in both its objective sense (a general or natural concern, having an objective right, claim or stake in something) and its subjective sense (a general curiosity or having the power to attract curiosity or attention). This is a distinction now preserved in the negatives disinterested (not affected by objective involvement in a matter – impartial) and uninterested (not being attracted to something or having no power to attract – a subjective judgement).
From a political perspective, it is significant that ‘our most general words for attraction or involvement should have developed from a formal objective term in property and finance [the Latin derivation is *interesse*, meaning (i) compensation for loss, and (ii) an investment with a right or share]’, so that conflicts of interests can be seen as contests which stem from the very structure of our society and, specifically, matters of property (Williams 1983, pp. 171–3). The state of ‘having an interest’ can therefore mean holding an objective and/or subjective stake in something, but also, crucially, *being affected either positively or negatively by that stake*. Both usages of ‘interest’ are relevant to this analysis (see Hirschman 1986, ch. 2).

According to Beard, when secularism and political economy displaced theology as the principal concern of intellectual elites in the late fifteenth century, ‘interest shrank to an economic conception in writings and negotiations involving policy, statecraft, and social affairs generally’ (Beard 1935, p. 155). A key moment, therefore, is the word’s etymological shift from a spiritual to an objective material conception, now meaning ‘a gain in wealth as measured by the prevailing economic standards – a gain in land, houses, material capital, money, credits, and exchangeable commodities’ (Beard 1935, p. 155). Beard also noted a residual subjective dimension to the term, given that interest also involves human perception and interpretation. The question, ‘how can I maximise my interests?’ may not always be successfully answered by those who pose it, but it remains an aspiration, a conscious thought process.

As has been noted, the materialist conception of interest in its plural form – *interests* – can be divided into two related senses, property and property owners. Beard argues that this often leads to definitions of the *national interest* which amount to either the sum total (or cumulative aggregation) of particular property interests or the most important and significant interests amongst many.

It is used to describe outward realities such as material plant and equipment, or aggregations of plants and equipments. . . . The term is also applied to the *owners* of such tangibles, as for example, when we speak of utility interests, railroad interests, shipping interests, and aviation interests . . . . There is a tendency in practice to regard the national interest as a mere aggregation of particular interests, or to interpret it in terms of the most active and dominant interests, even though they may be in the minority – considered either as the proportion of persons or corporations involved or as the proportion of capital measured by pecuniary standards. (Beard 1935, p. 156)
In policy discussion where the *national interest* is central to decision-making, it is the owners of property – *property interests* – who are actually being considered. According to Beard, this can never be an objective or quantifiable process because interests cannot be separated from human motive and concern. There is no such thing as an objective reality called *the national interest*. Considerations of *the national interest* is an ineluctably subjective assessment:

As far as policy is concerned, interest inheres in human beings as motive or force of attention, affection and action. As motive or force, it cannot be defined absolutely, or isolated, or fully comprehended by the human mind . . . . Those who merely discuss policy likewise bring their interests to bear, consciously or unconsciously, and their interests, both intellectual and economic (salary, wages, or income), are affiliated with some form of ownership or opposition to the present relations or operations of ownership . . . The intellectual impossibility of isolating and defining interests in absolute terms is responsible for a large part of the confusion that reigns today in discussion of policy. (Beard 1935, pp. 156–7)

Nor, according to Beard, can ideas and material interests be separated. They are inextricably bound to one another.

Interest, subjectively considered, may take the form of an idea, and every idea pertaining to earthly affairs is attached to some interest considered as material thing and is affiliated with social relationships. Neither can be separated from the other in operations called ‘understanding,’ ‘appraisal’ or ‘measurement.’ . . . There are, to repeat again and again, no ideas without interests, and no interests without ideas . . . . (Beard 1935, pp. 157–8)

This claim has important implications for all analyses of *the national interest* which attempt to disaggregate its component parts. In particular, it represents a challenge to claims (by classical realists) that permanent, fixed national interests can be identified as objectives which should determine the conduct of the foreign policy of states. It also means that *the national interest* cannot be reduced to its component parts for scientific measurement and assessment.

But men are not endowed with the power to isolate ideas from interests, to assign mathematically measured values to them, and to discover
which is more potent than the other in the stream of occurrences called history . . . . So we return again – ideas and interests are known to exist, if anything is known; they cannot be isolated in fact; they cannot be measured; they cannot be separately appraised, for appraisal is a form of mathematical valuation; but a realistic view of the world must include both. (Beard 1935, pp. 158–9)

Here, Beard’s remarks echo Marx and Engels in a famous passage from The Communist Manifesto, and in a less well-known extract from The German Ideology, where it is claimed that all ideas have a material reality as interest, and each can only be understood in the context of the other. For Marx and Engels, the material reality of ideas are expressed as class interests.

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man’s ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class. (Marx & Engels 1998, pp. 58–9)

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, of a people. (Marx 1974, vol. 1, 1A).

In a remarkably prescient observation, Beard is led to conclude that any analysis of the national interest must entail an inquiry into the ideas which express and represent the interests to be considered. It will be subsequently argued that these are the key questions behind critical perspectives of the national interest contained in Marxist and anarchist theory.

The only operation that seems appropriate when ‘interest’ is mentioned is to inquire: what ideas are associated with it? And when an ‘idea’ is mentioned, to inquire: what interests are associated with it? (Beard 1935, pp. 157–8)
How, then, does Beard proceed with his account of the national interest if a scientific and quantitative analysis will not reveal anything very meaningful? If ideas and interests are inseparable phenomena and the whole process of articulating and determining the national interest is unavoidably subjective, on what basis can an examination of the ‘formula’ go forward? Beard’s answer is that any serious inquiry must focus on the documentary history within a particular national setting. As we might expect from a historian, the national interest can only be truly revealed in retrospect.

The question – what is the national interest? – can be answered, if at all, only by exploring the use of the formula by responsible statesmen and publicists and by discovering the things and patterns of conduct – public and private – embraced within the scope of the formula. (Beard 1934; 1966, p. 26)

The general will

At the very basis of claims for the national interest is an assumption that a political community can speak with a common voice. This is only possible, however, if the various expressions of particular individual interests which comprise all complex societies are suspended when those societies need to take collective decisions which are binding on all members.

Rousseau was one of the first people to think systematically about the common expressions of a political community, and in particular what happens when the common and particular interests within a society cannot be easily reconciled. The term he gave to the legitimate basis of common political expression was ‘the general will’:

only the general will can direct the powers of the State in such a way that the purpose for which it has been instituted, which is the good of all, will be achieved. For if the establishment of societies had been made necessary by the antagonism that exists between particular interests, it has been made possible by the conformity that exists between these same interests. The bond of society is what there is in common between these different interests, and if there were not some point in which all interests were identical, no society could exist. The bond of society is that identity of interests which all feel who compose it. In the absence of such an identity no society would be possible. Now, it is solely on the basis of this common interest that society must be governed. (Rousseau, Book II, I, 1960 p. 190)
It is common within political philosophy to regard Rousseau’s idea of the general will as constituting the outlines of early democratic theory and government by legitimate consensus or majority view. This is not in dispute here. However, it also possible to view Rousseau’s notion as forming the basis upon which later ideas about the national interest have been constructed. For Rousseau, societies have common interests which should form the basis of decision-making and policy. In fact they are the binding forces which keep society from disintegrating into antagonistic groups and individuals.

Rousseau claims that ‘sovereignty . . . [is] no more than the exercise of the general will’ (Rousseau, Book II, I, 1960 p. 190) and that the general will ‘is concerned only with the common interest’ (Rousseau, Book II, II, 1960 p. 193). Here, as we shall observe later, Rousseau’s words are almost indistinguishable from claims made by contemporary realists in the discipline of International Relations. Although he doesn’t elaborate on the forms which these common interests take, he has no doubt that they exist and that they form the very basis of legitimate behaviour by political communities. Once the French Revolution effectively redefines the state as the instrument of the nation, a key moment in the definition of the nation’s interests has been reached.

Just as importantly for the subject under analysis here, Rousseau is fully aware of the dangers of allowing particular interests to dominate the common interests of society:

the general will, if it be deserving of its name, must be general, not in its origins only but in its objects, applicable to all as well as operated by all, and that it loses its natural validity as soon as it is concerned to achieve a merely individual and limited end, since, in that case, we, pronouncing judgement on something outside ourselves, cease to be possessed of that true principle of equity which is our guide. (Rousseau, Book II, IV, 1960 p. 196)

Rousseau’s warnings about the dangers of private interests capturing the apparatus of state anticipate the basis of critical objections to the national interest. As we shall see later in the study, critical conceptions of the national interest argue that dominant private interests within society will direct state policy to advance their particular circumstances. For critical perspectives of the national interest, the claim that a complex society can have common interests is largely a myth which serves the interests of dominant groups. In the following passage, Rousseau is not conceding that the triumph of particular interests is
likely, but is nonetheless clear about the implications of elite dominance for the welfare of the community and the very survival of the state.

So long as a number of men assembled together regard themselves as forming a single body, they have but one will, which is concerned with their common preservation and with the well-being of all. When this is so, the springs of the State are vigorous and simple, its principles plain and clear-cut. It is not encumbered with confused or conflicting interests. The common good is everywhere plainly in evidence and needs only good sense to be perceived. Peace, unity and equality are the foes of political subtlety.

But when the social bond begins to grow slack, and the State to become weaker; when the interests of individuals begin to make themselves felt, and lesser groups within the State to influence the State as a whole, then the common interest suffers a change for the worse and breeds opposition. No longer do men speak with a single voice, no longer is the general will the will of all. Contradictions appear, discussions arise, and even the best advice is not allowed to pass unchallenged.

Last stage of all, when the State, now near its ruin, lives only in a vain and deceptive form, when the bond of society is broken in all men’s hearts, when the vilest self-interest bears insolently the sacred name of Common-Weal, then does the general will fall dumb. All, moved by motives unavowed, express their views as though such a thing as the State had never existed, and they were not citizens at all. In such circumstances, unjust decrees, aiming only at the satisfaction of private interests, can be passed under the guise of laws. (Rousseau, Book IV, I, 1960 pp. 269–70)

In the space of a few words, Rousseau not only provides a philosophical basis for what will become a key term in the study of international politics, he also identifies the principal objections which will arise to the integrity of such an view – an idea which in the context of eighteenth-century thought was on the radical fringes of legitimate expressible philosophy.

Perhaps Rousseau had in mind Thucydides’ remark that an ‘identity of interest is the surest of bonds whether between states or individuals’ (Thucydides 1954; 1972, p. 107)? Though it is not spelled out in detail by Rousseau in the context of the general will, that which ‘men assembled together regard . . . as forming a single body’ – the binding force which
enables them to express a common interest or general will – is what he called ‘civic religion’. Civic religion or loyalty was necessary to generate social cohesion and patriotism, to inculcate the idea that citizens had special ties and held a shared commitment to a common political association. Though it is misleading to claim that by ‘civic religion’ Rousseau was actually referring to nationalism in its modern form, there can be little doubt that he had unwittingly anticipated nationalist sentiment emerging to fill the binding role that he had outlined. This is a key moment in the history of modern state formation and International Relations theory.

In more contemporary parlance, Rousseau was emphasising the importance of the process by which people come to see themselves as members of an imagined community, with a common language, cultural mores and practices, as well as a shared historical experience (Hobsbawm 1990, p. 85). The development of national consciousness and the subject of nationalism generally is a vast topic which has been widely and thoroughly examined (see for example, Carr 1945; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Anderson 1991; Gellner 1997). Each study wrestles with the definition of nationalism as much as it debates its causes and origins. Some emphasise the importance of nationalism in defining a people’s political identity. Others stress peoples’ collective imagination and solidarity, their shared feelings of a common fate, their sense of place, belonging and attachment to a homeland, and the process of bonding together by the exclusion of outsiders. Nationalism has also been studied as a process of industrial modernisation, a product of recently invented mythical traditions and as a political movement which articulates the aspirations of a group who wish to be governed in common.

This study will confine its focus to the political expression of Rousseau’s ‘general will’ which, in the modern era, has been appropriated by nationalism. It will be argued here that growing nationalist sentiment, the redefinition of the state as the instrument of the nation, combined with the idea of the general will, forms a very powerful force in the discourse of contemporary international politics – the idea of the national interest.

**Raison d’état**

Beard’s investigation was stimulated by Meinecke’s study of the origins and transformation of the interests of princes and estates into *raison d’état* up until the rise of the modern nation-state (Meinecke 1998).
Meinecke’s examination began with Machiavelli and from there went to Richelieu, Grotius, Frederick the Great, Hegel and to Treitschke. Beard sought to extend Meinecke’s investigation of the continental European experience in the Age of Absolutism by tracing the transformation of *raison d’état* into the *national interest* within the Anglo-Saxon world (Vagts 1966, pp. xiv–xv).

According to Meinecke, the origins of *raison d’état* lie with the beginnings of the social contract, and can be traced back to two sources, ‘firstly, to the personal power-drive of the rulers, and secondly to the need of the subject people, which allows itself to be governed because it receives compensations in return’ (Meinecke 1998, p. 10). In return for surrendering some of their freedom to the state, individuals receive an undertaking from the state that it will act in the common interest of the society.

The core doctrine of *raison d’état* is conventionally associated with Machiavelli’s reflections on sixteenth-century statecraft. In *The Prince* and elsewhere, Machiavelli argues that the survival of the state was the paramount political consideration for rulers – an end in itself. Overcoming threats to the state by whatever means are necessary, both moral and immoral, is the first duty of the prince who is charged with a special responsibility for its preservation. In other words, the means necessary to achieve this goal are less important than the end itself:

> if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must be prepared not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need . . . . he must not flinch from being blamed for vices which are necessary for safeguarding the state . . . a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things which give men a reputation for virtue, because in order to maintain his state he is often forced to act in defiance of good faith, of charity, of kindness, of religion. And so he should have a flexible disposition, varying as fortune and circumstance dictate. As I said above, he should not deviate from what is good, if that is possible, but he should know how to do evil, if that is necessary. (Machiavelli 1961; 1999, pp. 50 & 57)

As a formula and guide for rulers, *raison d’état* is strikingly simple: ‘Thus *must* you act, if you wish to preserve the power of the State whose care is in your hands; and you *may* act thus because no other means exists which would lead to that end’ (emphasis added, Meinecke 1998, p. 10). According to Wight, the doctrine of *raison d’état* implied ‘that statesmen cannot be bound in public affairs by the morality they would respect in
private life [and] that there is a “reason of state” justifying unscrupulous action in defence of the public interest’ (Wight 1986, p. 29). According to Craig and George, *raison d’état* was,

the idea that the state was more than its ruler and more than the expression of his wishes; that it transcended crown and land, prince and people; that it had its particular set of interests and a particular set of necessities based upon them; and that the art of government lay in recognising those interests and necessities and acting in accordance with them, even if this might violate ordinary religious or ethical standards. (Craig & George 1983, p. 5)

If the self-preservation and well-being of the state is the ultimate value and goal, and the maintenance and extension of power the means, *raison d’état* requires a high degree of rationality and expediency in political conduct (Meinecke 1998, p. 6). In fact it represents a direct challenge to claims that there is a universal moral law governing human behaviour, especially in politics and diplomacy. The doctrine of *raison d’état* invariably invokes a separation of power and ethics and, therefore, commensurate conflict between them. Much of the debate surrounding Machiavelli and the doctrine of *raison d’état* centres on this very controversy, the struggle between political necessity and ethical virtue.

At the basis of *raison d’état*, and subsequently the ‘national interest’, are a defence of the state as both a moral good and a unit of political organisation. According to Treitschke, ‘the State is in itself an ethical force and a high moral good’. ‘Moralists must . . . recognise that the State is not to be judged by the standards which apply to individuals, but by those which are set for it by its own nature and ultimate aims’ (Treitschke 1916, pp. 106 & 99). According to *raison d’état*, the preservation of the state is a moral imperative and it cannot be judged against the criteria used to assess individual conduct.

At a time when the state is under pressure from various directions, including economic globalisation and the rise of humanitarian intervention as a challenge to traditional notions of sovereignty, it is worth recalling what contemporary International Relations scholars have offered in its defence. According to pre-eminent neo-realist Kenneth Waltz,

States perform essential political, social and economic functions, and no other organisation rivals them in these respects. They foster the institutions that make internal peace and prosperity possible. In the state of nature, as Kant put it, there is ‘no mine and thine.’ States
turn possession into property and thus make saving, production and prosperity possible. The sovereign state with fixed borders has proved to be the best organisation for keeping peace internally and fostering the conditions for economic well-being. (Waltz 2000, p. 51)

Leading English School theorist Hedley Bull has also offered a lengthy and powerful defence of the ‘state’s positive role in world affairs’. According to Bull, the state plays an essential role in the promotion of international order and remains the preferred and pre-eminent form of political community, even for secessionists, nationalists and aspiring revolutionaries. It is, says Bull, the ‘common political form experienced by the whole of mankind’.

According to Bull, the growing number of states and the expansion of their economic, social and political functions has been overlooked by those who regard the state as the principal obstacle to higher levels of international justice, peace and progress. Against charges and claims that the state is in terminal decline, Bull makes the following points:

- war, economic injustice and environmental damage have deeper causes than a particular form of political organisation and would not be eradicated by the replacement of the state;
- the modern state – as a government supreme over a particular territory and population – has provided order on a local scale;
- the sovereignty of states and their reciprocal recognition is the basis of international order – the states-system ‘holds anarchy at bay’;
- states have formed an international society of common interests for the purpose of peaceful co-existence, thus limiting and constraining their conflict and rivalry;
- states maintain important monopoly powers which limit conflict and advance co-operation (the legitimate use of violence, the capacity to adjudicate in disputes between citizens, a monopoly of taxation, the command of a citizen’s loyalty, the authority to represent and bind citizens in international negotiations, etc.);
- no viable alternative forms of political community have been produced, no higher political authority than the state exists, and the states system has shown that it can be reformed (Bull 1977, 1979, pp. 139–56).

The preservation of the state, of which the doctrine of raison d’état is the ultimate expression, therefore remains a foundation principle for conventional theories of International Relations. The state is not just a principal actor in international politics, it is an essential one if
peace and order are to be found in political life. Its external behaviour, now often characterised in national interest terms, is based on an assumption that its preservation is not just obligatory but positively desirable.

On the other hand, the opposition to *raison d’État* and the pacifying influence of the state can be found in a variety of quarters. For example, in his seminal study of European state formation Charles Tilly observed that over the last millennium, ‘war has been the dominant activity of European states’, for an obvious reason: ‘The central tragic fact is simple: coercion works; those who apply substantial force to their fellows get compliance, and from that compliance draw the multiple advantages of money, goods, deference, access to pleasures denied to less powerful people’ (Tilly 1992, p. 70). For Tilly, states and coercion are inseparable.

The anti-state argument has long been led by the anarchist tradition which regards the artificial barriers imposed by the establishment of nation-states as a principal cause of moral estrangement within the species. Anarchists believe that wars are largely a consequence of the imposition of the states system, which they regard as an unnatural social formation that is normally instituted by violence. So, for example, European and North American attempts to impose states systems in conquered territories after the collapse of the colonial system are seen by some anarchists as the principal source of most violent conflicts in the modern world, especially in the Middle East, Southern Europe, Central Asia and East Asia.

Michael Bakunin was not a particularly systematic thinker, however his critique of the state from an anarchist perspective and, in particular, his attack on the doctrine of *raison d’État* represents an important counterpoise to arguments in support of the state by realist and English-School thinkers.

According to Bakunin, freedom and peace could only be achieved through the dissolution of all states and the creation of a universal federation of free associations. States are oppressive, illegitimate, imposed systems of autonomous power – by nature they are evil. Their authority negates liberty and exploits the species by denying human beings the capacity to realise their true potential. In a withering critique of the state and the doctrine of *raison d’État* subtitled ‘A Critique of Rousseau’s Theory of the State’, Bakunin warns against claims that the state has interests which enhance human freedom and should therefore be maintained and strengthened. It is worth quoting him at length to fully demonstrate the extent and dimensions of anarchist hostility to the state and the interests that are invoked in its name.
On the amorality of pursuing state interests:

whatever conduces to the preservation, the grandeur and the power of the State, no matter how sacreligious or morally revolting it may seem, that is the good. And conversely, whatever opposes the State’s interests, no matter how holy or just otherwise, that is evil. Such is the secular morality and practice of every State. (Dolgoff 2002, p. 132)

On the dangers of exclusionary political communities and the endemic conflict inherent in state formation:

The existence of one sovereign, exclusionary State necessarily supposes the existence and, if need be, provokes the formation of other such States . . . We thus have humanity divided into an indefinite number of foreign states, all hostile and threatened by each other. (Dolgoff 2002, p. 132)

On the division between insider and outsiders, the included and the excluded, and the ways in which state (and later national) interests shortsight each community, discouraging them from pursuing obligations to the whole of humanity:

The State, therefore, is the most flagrant, the most cynical, and the most complete negation of humanity. It shatters the universal solidarity of all men on the earth, and brings some of them into association only for the purpose of destroying, conquering, and enslaving all the rest. It protects its own citizens only; it recognizes human rights, humanity, civilization within its own confines alone. Since it recognizes no rights outside itself, it logically arrogates to itself the right to exercise the most ferocious inhumanity toward all foreign populations, which it can plunder, exterminate, or enslave at will. . . . the State can have no duties toward foreign populations. (Dolgoff 2002, p. 133)

On the immorality of raison d’état and the dangers of patriotism:

This explains why, since the birth of the State, the world of politics has always been and continues to be the stage for unlimited rascality and brigandage, brigandage and rascality which, by the way, are held in high esteem, since they are sanctified by patriotism, by the transcendent morality and the supreme interest of the State. This explains why the entire history of ancient and modern states is
merely a series of revolting crimes; why kings and ministers, past and present, of all times and all countries – statesmen, diplomats, bureaucrats, and warriors – if judged from the standpoint of simple morality and human justice, have a hundred, a thousand times over earned their sentence to hard labor or to the gallows. There is no horror, no cruelty, sacrilege, or perjury, no imposture, no infamous transaction, no cynical robbery, no bold plunder or shabby betrayal that has not been or is not daily being perpetrated by the representatives of the states, under no other pretext than those elastic words, so convenient and yet so terrible: ‘for reasons of state’. (Dolgoff 2002, p. 134)

On the criminal nature and logic of Machiavellian statecraft:

The great Italian political philosopher Machiavelli was the first to use these words, or at least the first to give them their true meaning and the immense popularity they still enjoy among our rulers today. A realistic and positive thinker if there ever was one, he was the first to understand that the great and powerful states could be founded and maintained by crime alone – by many great crimes, and by a radical contempt for all that goes under the name of honesty. … Machiavelli concluded from these facts, with a good deal of logic, that the State was the supreme goal of all human existence, that it must be served at any cost and that, since the interest of the State prevailed over everything else, a good patriot should not recoil from any crime in order to serve it. He advocates crime, he exhorts to crime, and makes it the sine qua non of political intelligence as well as of true patriotism. Whether the State bear the name of a monarchy or of a republic, crime will always be necessary for its preservation and its triumph. (Dolgoff 2002, p. 135)

The purpose of these extracts is twofold: 1) to highlight the division between those on the one hand who promote the state as a structure which, amongst other benefits, pacifies human society and remains a vital, albeit imperfect form of political organisation and those on the other who view it as existentially evil; and 2) to demonstrate that many of the arguments for and against the national interest prefigure the concept itself, and can be found in debates surrounding Rousseau’s idea of the social contract and Machiavelli’s doctrine of raison d’état. Importantly, these arguments extend beyond what are said to be the pernicious domestic consequences of state formation. They reach to the consequences
of forming bounded exclusive political communities for international order and peace.

Since Rousseau claimed sovereignty for the ‘general will’ and the French Revolution displaced absolutist with popular sovereignty, the ‘people’s sovereignty’ embedded in the concept of the nation has dominated sovereignty theory and practice. With the French Revolution the modern world entered an era that naturalised and universalised the nation-state. In so doing, the idea of the national interest was born.

**The interests of nations**

In the discourse of international politics, the concept of ‘the national interest’ is commonly employed in two separate, though related ways. It is used to shape political behaviour, by serving as a means of defending, opposing or proposing policy. And it is employed by students of international relations as an analytical tool for describing, explaining and assessing the adequacy of a nation’s foreign policy. Underlying both usages are implied assumptions about what is best for a national community, in both domestic and foreign domains (Rosenau 1964).

Until the French Revolution the term ‘nation’ referred to a racial or a linguistic group and, according to E.H. Carr, had no political significance. The nation was identified with the person of the sovereign, so that international relations were essentially relations between royal families (Carr 1945, pp. 2–4). This conception of the nation was illustrated by the policy of mercantilism, which was designed, not to promote the welfare of the community and its members, but to augment the power and wealth of the state, of which the sovereign was the embodiment. Because export markets were thought to be fixed in size, the only way for a nation (defined in terms of the ruling elite) to expand its wealth was to capture it from other nations, if necessary by waging trade or colonial wars. According to Carr, ‘mercantilism was the economic policy of a period which identifies the interest of the nation with the interest of its rulers’ (Carr 1945, pp. 5–6).

The doctrine of *raison d’état*, which is usually traced back to the writings of Machiavelli, referred to the interests of the monarch and the royal court. Thus Louis XIV’s famous remark, ‘L’état, c’est moi’ (‘The state – it’s me’), had both symbolic and substantive meaning when it came to defining the state and its interests. However, in the eighteenth century, Rousseau rejected the idea that the embodiment of the nation could be found in the person of the sovereign or the ruling group. In what was to become a fundamental principle of both the French and American
revolutions, Rousseau identified the ‘nation’ with ‘the people’ (Carr 1945, p. 6). Henceforth, it came to be accepted that nations or national groups, rather than individual rulers, had a right to political independence and statehood. The ‘democratisation of nationalism’ in the nineteenth century, a process largely driven by the middle classes of Europe, led to the idea, and subsequently the stated right, of national self-determination. The principle of self-determination became defined in terms of the rights of national groups to be governed in common and to comprise an independent political community: sovereignty, previously understood as the power and interests of the monarch, would be vested in the nation. International relations would now ‘be governed not by the personal interests, ambitions and emotions of the monarch, but by the collective interests, ambitions and emotions of the nation’ (Carr 1945, p. 8). The citizens of the state claimed a right to be consulted about the affairs of the political community to which they belonged. This change was driven by the rising power of the emerging middle classes of Europe after the industrial revolution.

In needs to be said that in the wake of the French Revolution the ‘nation’ comprised the most powerful groups or classes in society. It was only in the twentieth century with the extension of universal suffrage that the ‘nation’ was again redefined to include those sectors of society whose interests had earlier been excluded: women, the working class and ethnic or racial minorities, for example. To the extent that the assertion of national interests is therefore an authentic expression of the welfare of the entire community, it is a consequence of political democratisation and therefore a relatively modern claim.

According to Beard, this is the period when claims made in the name of ‘the will of the prince’, ‘dynastic interests’ and ‘raison d’état’ lost their efficacy. New political allegiances to new political entities were soon reflected in the language of politics. Political actors had made claims on behalf of the national interest as early as the sixteenth century in Italy and the seventeenth century in England; however it became commonplace from the time the US Constitution was drafted (Beard 1966, pp. 22–6). With the exercise of sovereignty shifting from the personal control of the sovereign to eventually that of a popular representative body, the emergence of the nation-state system, and the expansion of international economic relations, the stage was set for the birth of the modern conception of ‘the national interest’.

As the twentieth century unfolded and political participation spread to all classes, the objectives of national policy in the newly industrialised societies became defined as advancing the economic and social welfare
of all members of the nation. By the early decades of the century, wages, conditions of employment and the question of unemployment, became the concerns of national government policy. These were the interests of both the middle and working classes, ‘and must be asserted, if necessary, against the national policies of other countries; ... this in turn gives the worker an intimate practical interest in the policy and power of the nation’ (Carr 1945, p. 19). Thus the projection of national policy outwards to the rest of the world became broader than simply the question of national security. The economic welfare of the whole nation became an integral focus of the nation’s foreign policy. In the democratic era, national policy was founded on the support of the whole population. The quid pro quo was ‘the loyalty of the masses to a nation which had become the instrument of their collective interests and ambitions’ (Carr 1945, pp. 20–1).

To some extent, understanding how nations came to assert common political interests presupposes the idea of the nation as both an independent political community and as the sole legitimate agent in international affairs. In earlier periods, political communities had been based on empire, colony, city-states and theocracies. However, since the French Revolution the principle of self-determination has entitled a group of people to constitute themselves as an independent political unit, with a number of attendant rights and obligations. Invariably, the form and extent of this political unit has coincided with a national community: the nation has come to be seen as the natural basis of the state, although there have always been exceptions such as the multinational state.

Although widely conflated, ‘nation’ and ‘state’ are nevertheless quite different agents.

The state, whether we think of it as the apparatus of government or as the field in which the apparatus works, is the unit of political power. The nation is a community of men; and though modern usage restricts it to communities of a political character or having political aspirations, the nation is still a community of human beings, not a territory or an administrative machine. Hence the state may, in a loose way, be described as ‘artificial’ or ‘conventional’, the nation as ‘natural’ or ‘organic’. (Carr 1945, p. 39)

The concept of the ‘nation-state’ is therefore a marriage of two quite separate concepts which are now routinely conjoined in political discourse.
The principle of self-determination forms part of the process of democratisation, in particular the right of self-government. It is an expression of political freedom and implies that individuals have a right to be consulted about the affairs of the political unit to which they belong as well as the form of that political unit (Carr 1945, p. 37). Since the end of the eighteenth century, the principle of self-determination has been almost universally interpreted as meaning that “states” and “nations” ought to coincide, that states should be constituted on a national basis, and that nations ought to form states’ (Carr 1945, p. 39). However, as Carr argues, ‘self-determination is not a right of certain recognised and pre-determined nations, but a right of individual men and women, which includes the right within certain limitations to form national groups’ (Carr 1945, p. 47). This is often forgotten by students of international relations. Debates within International Relations have become accustomed to thinking of nation-states as the only viable expression of political association at a global level when the forms of political community which express people’s political aspirations have changed, and continue to change, over time.

By customarily accepting the nation-state as the only legitimate form of political association in the international realm it is possible to ignore or dismiss the suggestion that special groups within it are in fact key agents in the conduct of international relations. As will be seen, this argument is the departure point for critical conceptions of the national interest.

It is important, however, to recall that the emergence of what might be called interest-governed behaviour in diplomacy was a progressive development from the period of unconstrained violence and competition. As Hirschman says, ‘genuine hope arose that, with princely or national interest as a guide, statecraft would be able to produce a more stable political order and a more peaceful world’. Hence Bismarck’s famous distinction between legitimate *interessenpolitik* and more malignant *Machpolitik* (Hirschman 1986, p. 38).

‘The national interest’: essential ingredients

At the beginning of the previous section it was noted that ‘the national interest’ is commonly employed in two related ways, first to describe, justify or oppose foreign policy and secondly, as an analytical tool for assessing and explaining the external behaviour of nation-states. This book will primarily assess the adequacy of the national interest as a conceptual tool by examining it from a range of theoretical perspectives.
Underwriting this assessment are a number of assumptions about what the national interest is thought to be, which are generally accepted by supporters and critics alike: that is to say, the claims are acknowledged even if their validity is challenged. It is important that these be noted before separate theoretical assessments are made.

First, at the very basis of the doctrine is the claim made by states that, however major their differences, the members of society have a number of crucial interests in common. For example, they have the same interest in protecting their national sovereignty and territorial integrity from external attack. Or more broadly, they have a common interest in ensuring that their capacity to administer their own affairs is not infringed upon by those outside the community. States normally give the highest priority to survival, or what is technically described as national security. This is defined as the capacity for deterring a military attack and military defence in the event that an attack from outside materialises.

The national interest therefore presupposes a process of bonding by exclusion. It works by dividing the world into insiders and outsiders: those whose interests are attended to (the nation) and those whose interests can be ignored (aliens, the rest). This assumption remains a powerful obstacle to cosmopolitan and universalist approaches to international politics.

Secondly, states argue that certain national interests are permanent and do not change with transient governments. For example, they may argue that specific national assets, either strategic (maritime routes, port access) or economic (resources), are always likely to be coveted by external powers and that the state therefore has a permanent national interest in securing them for ‘insiders’.

States whose security has been threatened via traditional invasion routes, for example, factor this into their strategic doctrine and defence force structure. Even the neutralisation of proximate threats – maintaining good relations with neighbours in crucial geo-strategic locations – is an assumption that is not open to political reinterpretation. This is simply a fact of diplomatic life and does not alter with a change of government. The national interest in this sense demands political bipartisanship. Few governments or politicians allow themselves to be characterised as being a threat or in contradiction to the national interest, which in contemporary political discourse is the ultimate measure of patriotism. Bipartisanship on foreign policy in democratic states is a good indication that there are national interests above the cut and thrust of partisan politics.
The perceived permanency of national interests is also enhanced by the high levels of secrecy and confidentiality surrounding military and security matters. The special trust that is granted to intelligence agencies in liberal democracies, for example, presupposes their unshakeable commitment to the pursuit of agreed national interests. This is the only basis upon which their activities – frequently extra-judicial – can be legitimately shielded from media scrutiny and parliamentary oversight.

Thirdly, governments are the agents which interpret and articulate the national interest. As they do, they assert a sovereign right and a monopoly power. But they also muster enormous persuasive influence which attempts to exclude alternative claims made on behalf of the citizens of the state. Whether or not the interests of a national community are always maximised through their promotion as a national unit is a matter of debate which is only occasionally permitted to enter the national political dialogue. It cannot be assumed, for example, that whatever policy or decision is said to be ‘in the national interest’ is axiomatically true or that addressing an issue from a national perspective is always best for a particular group of nationals. If it was, regular claims for secession by ethnic, religious and cultural minorities across the world would not be made.

After all, why should ‘our’ interests be privileged when the group is a state but not when it is either a smaller or a larger group? Do our interests always count for more than the interests of others, providing we can conclusively define who we are (Donnelly 2000, p. 165)?

It cannot always be certain that the national interest has primacy in international diplomacy. Although states are reluctant to grant outsiders rights to ‘interfere’ in their ‘domestic sovereign affairs’ or concede that they have obligations to humanity which override their national concerns, states must now wrestle with competing rights asserted by the international community which may be, overall, in the best interests of the national community. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the obligation to provide permanent settlement to political refugees and the emerging norm of intervention to relieve a humanitarian crisis are contemporary illustrations of this challenge. The national interest as a formula on which to base diplomacy is under threat on a number of fronts.

The national interest: means or ends?

According to Rosenau it was the Second World War and the implications of ‘total war’ for the masses that clearly demonstrated the public’s vital stake in foreign affairs and the conduct of diplomacy. From this
moment, analysts of international relations began to focus on the national interest ‘as a concept which could be used to describe, explain, and assess the foreign policies of nations’ (Rosenau 1964, p. 35). In other words, the national interest came to be seen as an explanatory and evaluative tool.

Rosenau describes the first group of scholars to elevate the concept of the national interest to the forefront of their concerns as ‘objectivists’ because they believed that ‘the best interest of a nation is a matter of objective reality and that by describing this reality one is able to use the concept of the national interest as a basis for evaluating the appropriateness of the policies which a nation pursues’ (Rosenau 1964, p. 35). The objectivists were not especially concerned with explaining the methodological or philosophical basis of their approach because ‘the correspondence between their descriptions and the objective situation is self-evident’ (Rosenau 1964, p. 35). This argument was uncritically adopted by Frankel in his major study (Frankel 1970).

But is it? According to Rosenau, the national interest is ‘a standard that is just as misleading and unempirical a means of explanation as any moral principle or legal precept’. It is ‘merely a label that may denote the entire spectrum of human wants and needs and thus in no way differentiates the circumstances that are likely to lead a nation to define its wants and needs’ (Rosenau 1969, p. 157). Thus for Rosenau, the national interest is merely a way of describing the ends to which foreign policy should be directed.

Other theorists make a crucial distinction between means and ends. In any political community, says Bull, individuals have common interests in the primary goals of social life which are sustained by order. These include common interests in ‘restricting violence’ (to maximise personal security), ‘respect for agreements’ (because of their interdependence for material needs), and ‘the stabilisation of possession’ (as a consequence of scarce resources and limits to human altruism). These common interests might be driven by fear or enlightened and rational self-interest, but they emphasise the difference between process and outcome or means and ends (Bull 1977, pp. 53–4). According to Bull,

the criterion of ‘national interest’, or ‘interest of state’, in itself provides us with no specific guidance either in interpreting the behaviour of states or in prescribing how they should behave – unless we are told what concrete ends or objectives states do or should pursue: security, prosperity, ideological objectives or whatever. Still less does it provide us with a criterion that is objective, in the sense of being independent
of the way state ends or purposes are perceived by particular decision-makers. It does not even provide a basis for distinguishing moral or ideological considerations in a country's foreign policy from non-moral or non-ideological ones. (Bull 1977, p. 66)

Bull argues that to say that something is in someone’s interest is merely to say that it ‘serves as a means to some end that he is pursuing’, a matter of objective fact. But whether or not something actually is in someone’s interest will depend on the ends that he is pursuing. Thus the idea of interest ‘is an empty or vacuous guide, both as to what a person does do and as to what he should do. To provide such a guide we need to know what ends he does or should pursue, and the conception of interest in itself tells us nothing about either’ (Bull 1977, p. 66).

Once the ends of state policy are agreed and defined, however, the conception of national interests becomes more meaningful. It then represents the political means most likely to realise the policy ends. The national interest comprises a ‘rational plan of action’ to achieve agreed ends, which can be contrasted with policies based on sectional interests, the interests of alliances and international organisations, or the ad hoc and uncritical pursuit of established policy (Bull 1977, p. 66–7).

The various ways in which the national interest has been understood and used as an explanatory and evaluative tool in international politics can be best illustrated by examining it from a range of theoretical perspectives, both conventional and critical. The first of these theories, the realist tradition, has done more to define and promote the term than any other approach.
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