

Research and strategic studies center

Raison D'état (cardinal de Richelieu)

The Strategy of Regional states

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Introduction:

Europe was the traditional cradle of foreign policy making concepts. The wars, peace times, intellectual and industrial revolutions turned political thought into applicable theories. From Grotius, Machiavelli, Richelieu to Bismark, politics were reinvigorated to better serve the interests of the state. This essay contemplates the resurrection of the term “raison d’état” that Armand Jean du Plessis, the famous cardinal in the series of the three musketeers, introduced in France and survived as a guide after his death to all Europe.

Raison d’état is the guiding lantern that benedicts to use all means, even if malicious, in advancing the interests of the state, especially the need for survival and prosperity. With this concept, Richelieu, a catholic himself, frees himself from the chain of Catholicism when it comes to achieving what is best for his country.

In this prospect, he allies with the traditional enemy of Catholic church, the protestants, to prevent the encirclement of France. He also subsidized factions in Germany and Spain to thwart their attempts to be a worldwide hegemon, mainly thinking in terms of balance of power. At the local scene, he deprived nobles from many privileges, seized and destroyed their castles, and prohibited duels in order to minimize their influence on the populace and reduce their challenge to France’s monarchy. Richelieu also thought of diplomacy by forging alliances when necessary to buy time, until France possessed a sizeable army and a blue water navy to resurrect the hegemon role of France.

This essay also tries to link the concept of “raison d’état” to other contemporary terminologies like “realpolitik”, “national interest” and “balance of power”. In this context, Richelieu is compared to Machiavelli and Kissinger, his long-time admirer. But to better understand his thoughts, it is imperative to understand the European environment at the time and its major players and tensions, while also looking at the background of Richelieu, his family and childhood. Therefore, the essay is divided into two parts, the first talks about Europe in the 17th century and Richelieu the man and his idea. The second part tries to understand what innovation he brought and how he influenced Kissinger and Bismark, in order to comprehend how every era generates surviving political concepts.

Situation in France before Richelieu:

France, before Richelieu came to power, was plagued by multiple internal and external factors. Internal religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics, the local nobles attempt to gain more power and the external threat coming from Spain and the Holy Roman Empire tore France apart and prevented it from playing a regional role. Kings were mostly guided by religious beliefs which made the clergy highly involved in political matters. Even though many philosophers and thinkers of that time sensed the urgency to revive national interest based on secularism, their words never echoed in the royal palace or between the walls of the statemen.¹

The conflict between Protestants and Catholics started earlier in the 16th century and led to the devastating wars of religion. At that time, Protestantism witnessed reforms that led to many European citizens converting to it, which stirred the anger of the catholic church. Catholicism saw in it a threat to the church’s hegemony over Europe, not only as a religion but also as a proxy to England and the Dutch state. Fury was then translated into battles between 1562 and 1598 which ended with the edict of Nantes that granted limited freedom of worship for protestant

¹ Rehman, Iskander. “Raison d’Etat: Richelieu’s Grand Strategy During the Thirty Years’ War”. Texas National security review, Volume 2, issue 3. 2019.

practitioners in France. Despite that edict, tensions still simmered beneath the surface few years before Richelieu took office and later with Louis XIV revoking it with persecution and bloodshed.¹

The noble family's ownership of vast French lands contributed also to the weakening of the French Kings. They knew the monarchy relied on them to fund the wars or to pay the debts of war torn France. In instances where the king tried to nationalize some of their lands, they fought him through court lobbying or by serving the interests of foreign powers or band wagoning against him. France was highly politicized at the time and bribery was rife. Therefore, the court often ruled to their favor, thereby neutralizing the king's decisions. In addition, they often resorted to foreign nations, such as Spain, England or the Holy Roman Empire to fund and equip their local armies, in return of tactical allegiance that often disrupted the overall security landscape. In other circumstances, they allied with the French king only to serve their interests when it clashed with other feudal princes, for a very limited time where they showed again their refusal to fall under the French monarch's leadership.²

On the regional scale, Spain, Sweden, England and the Roman empire were major players who benefited from a weak France. Their interests resided in a weak France, confined to its borders and stuck in the mud of local politics and conflicts, to compensate for the larger cultural influence it previously enjoyed as natural leader of Latin speaking countries.

Spain was an imperial state with territories spanning modern united states of America, the Philippines and north Africa, which provided the mainland with vast resources and wealth. Their army was well trained and equipped. The navy, especially the Spanish armada that was defeated by England in 1588, still maintained presence in many high seas and exerted effective control of the Mediterranean. With its military stretched all over the world, Spain controlled important trade routes and resources making it a de facto actor in Europe's politics.

On the other side, Sweden, under the rule of Gustavus Adolphus enjoyed also a prominent army and navy. They enjoyed a technical advantage with the invention of muskets and mobile artillery. Also, their navy skillfully protected and controlled the majority of ports on the Baltic Sea. Compounded by brave leaders, Sweden's military was a formidable one, allowing their rulers to exercise efficient bureaucracy and instill political stability with the control of territories west of the Atlantic in modern day Delaware and Saint Barthelemy in the Caribbean Sea.

England also, enjoyed a great regional status. Their strong merchant class and textile industry increased the social status of its citizens. In addition, they had multiple colonies in the Americas which provided them with infinite resources and wealth to secure a great deal of stability. In addition, they were able to swiftly project a credible navy all over the world with also a well-trained army. Their imperial overstretch was furthered by their ability to pay for mercenaries who stirred the pot in neighboring countries especially in France, to keep them stuck in their internal state matters and unable to play at the regional or international scene.

Finally, the holy Roman empire, even though his decline started in the 16th century, still participated in Europe's foraging policy making through multiple factors. The emperor represented the idea of a unified Christian Europe, which was France's worst nightmares. Although his power was intangible, the idea of a unified state surrounding France terrified Richelieu. The religious common factor of Catholicism made it easier to forge alliance that helped

1 Andre, Marie. "The Edict of Nantes, Wars of Religion, and Damnable Nationalism". Available on the web at: <https://catholicism.org/the-edict-of-nantes-wars-of-religion-and-damnably-nationalism.html>. Date visited 12/4/2023

2 Wood, James B. "The Decline of the Nobility in Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Century France: Myth or Reality?". *The Journal of Modern History*. Vol. 48, No. 1, On Demand Supplement (Mar., 1976), pp. 1-30

the fractured states, who once formed the holy empire, bandwagon into a hostile front facing France. In addition, their alliance with Spain and Austria made them the enemy that surrounded France from all land borders.

It was from the previously cited factors that Richelieu saw the necessity of separating the church from the state matters, and the need to assert control of the French king over all his territory at the expense of local princes and to search for a balance of power that ensures France's primacy in Europe's politics.¹

Richelieu:

Armand Jean du Plessis, widely known as "cardinal de Richelieu" in the three musketeers' tale, is a French politician and clergyman. He was born in 1585 to a family of politicians and hitmen. His father, served as Henry III assassin and personally oversaw the executions of those termed as "enemies of the state". He later pledged loyalty to the successor, Henry IV but soon succumbed to fever and passed away when his son was five. Richelieu pursued education to compensate his physical frailty, therefore he joined the Bishopric of Lucon and soon started climbing up the political level occupations. He became chief minister only two years after his appointment as secretary of state.

When Richelieu became prime minister, France was in a deplorable situation both internally and externally. The rule of the king was often checked with the ambition of smaller rulers and the credible threat posed by the Habsburgs. Richelieu managed his political disagreements with his king Louis XIII to ensure a viable French state through a balance of power in Europe. For this end, He sought to suppress local revolutions, prevent the rise of strong nations neighboring France and aimed to restore the natural historical dominant role of France. Richelieu was catholic himself like the king and the majority of the French population. However, he understood the need to separate the religious ties from governance.²

To eradicate any local pressure on the King, Richelieu started restoring order inside France. The Huguenots, mostly influenced by England, threatened to be a disloyal enclave because of the terms of the Edict of Nantes that granted them a certain autonomy. Richelieu sieged "La Rochelle" until their complete surrender despite that England dispatched a fleet. He ordered to destroy all the fortresses and confiscate all the weapons of the nobles and clergymen on the French territories, to prevent any coup against the king. These measures centralized power in the hands of the king at the expense of local monarchs. These actions caused the dissent of the bourgeoisie, but he later exempted them from burdening taxes he imposed on the poorer classes to fund a sizeable army and navy instead of the disloyal mercenaries of the time.

Before restoring France's strong position, Richelieu navigated the violent environment through astute diplomacy to buy time until his alliances were forged and his forces were combat effective. He resorted to a web of spies, covert support to rebellions and active foreign diplomacy to counter the Habsburgs who surrounded him from the west in Spain, from the north east in the Netherlands, to the east in Milan and Bavaria and from the South in Sardinia and Naples. For example, in Bavaria who was subject to the Habsburgs rule, Richelieu's agents led by father Joseph, vetoed the election of Ferdinand II son as is successor and managed to throw away the best of their army commanders. He also launched many limited skirmishes to bleed out the Germans until he was able to launch a

1 Kissinger, Henry. "Diplomacy". Simon and Schuster. April 1995. Page 74.

2 Kaplan, Robert. "Cardinal Richelieu's Unconventional Morality". Available on the web on: https://www.realcworld.com/articles/2014/05/29/richelieu_unconventional_morality.html. Visited on 9/4/2023

campaign that seized the strategic Lorraine area. The point was to create a sustainable strife that prevents the unification of Germany under one ruler.¹

Raising a large army and a navy was vital to protect the interests of France. By 1635, the French fleets were of equal power for the Spanish counterpart and surpassed England. The army rose from a shy 16000 to a 100000 and later 210000 soldiers at the edge of the war with Spain. The large and well-trained forces served as a deterrent and also a credible threat to surrounding mercenaries of France's opponents.

To check the ambitions of the Habsburgs, he allied with the protestants against the Spanish who were Catholics like him. This move surprised the king of France, but Richelieu's loyalty was to the French state and not to the papal decisions. He saw in a larger Spain or a united roman empire a threat to France despite common religious affiliation.

Raison d'état:

Raison d'état provides the basis of thought of Cardinal de Richelieu in his approach to foreign policy and survival of the French state. It is his argument when he put aside religious and moral considerations in his pursuit of the national interests of the state. Oxford dictionary defines it as "It means that there may be reasons for acting (normally in foreign policy, less usually in domestic policy) which simply override all other considerations of a legal or moral kind".² The Merriam-Webster dictionary explains it as "justification for a nation's foreign policy on the basis that the nation's own interests are primary".³

For Iskander Rehman, raison d'état was a philosophy "which sought to transcend confessional divisions in favor of domestic unity and international strength." For that to be achieved, monarchy would be the best form of governance, where the King embodies the state as a divine agent of the power of reason. His decisions were based on the pure interests of the state than the "passions of his soul".

In Richelieu's words "Man is immortal, his salvation is hereafter; The state has no immortality, its salvation is now or never". Therefore, he detached the ruler's personal views on religion from the fixed needs of the state and put the latter on a higher standard. For him, it was imperative to follow the interests of France even if it contradicts with the prevalent system of church rule that crossed the political boundaries of the state.

Despite fighting the ethnic influence exercised by Catholicism on the French state, Richelieu had realist ambitions that exceeded the political borders of France. As a proponent of the Heartland theory way before it was first enunciated, he understood the importance of the geographic location of France for Europe and had reasonable fear of the rise of a big nation around it that could gradually choke France and dip it in a mud of internal strife. Therefore, he meant to engage in limited wars with the Spanish, or drain their economy in a war of attrition and even nourished the seeds of disaccord between Spain and the Holy Roman empire.⁴ He initially benefited from having Spanish held territories to his east and west to cut their lines of communications and later through contesting their maritime access points with his formidable navy. For example, Richelieu subsidized the protestant Grisons in the

¹ Fagniez, Gustave. "La Mission du Père Joseph à Ratisbonne 1630," *Revue Historique* 27, no. 1 (1885): 38–67.

² "raison d'état." *Oxford Reference*. ; Accessed 8 Apr. 2023.
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100402296>

³ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "raison d'état," accessed April 8, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/raison%20d%27%C3%A9tat>.

⁴ Rehman, Iskander. "Raison d'Etat: Richelieu's Grand Strategy During the Thirty Years' War". *Texas National security review*, Volume 2, issue 3. 2019.

Valtellina pass in the Alps, and later when it completely fell to the hands of the Spaniards, Richelieu dispatched troops after secret negotiations held with the Swiss to expel the papal custodians and renegotiated the terms with Spain to guarantee France equal rights of transit and restored his Grisons allies.

Even though the cardinal often looked beyond France's borders, he did not restrict his approach to hard power only. On the opposite, he stressed the need to carefully craft his foreign policy through astute diplomats who granted him vital alliances and bought him irrecuperable time he needed. He was the first to create the ministry of foreign affairs in 1626 and subordinated it to the king to ensure their loyalty and to control their moves. He stated in his works "Secrecy is the first essential in affairs of state", "Cunning may be employed to deceive a rival, anything is permitted against our enemies".¹

Richelieu devotes a great deal of his book to describing the prerequisites of a statesman and providing tips for negotiators. He stresses the importance of wisely choosing the king's representatives who were at the time the state secretaries. He warns the king about choosing according to favoritism instead of competence and merit. Those selected should have endless loyalty to the cause and the state, not be blinded by personal interests and work tirelessly because negotiations, in the words of the cardinal are "innocuous remedies which never do harm." Richelieu had large expectations from France's ambassadors as stated in his book "he who negotiates continuously will find the right instant to attain his ends, and even if this does not come about, at least it can be said he has lost nothing while keeping abreast of events in the world, which is not of little consequence in the lives of states." Richelieu wanted active diplomats who can enlighten him on the situation abroad, buy him time, and spread a web links he can upgrade to alliances in times of war.²

Raison d'état vs Realpolitik

The term realpolitik soon emerged with the rise to power of Otto von Bismark who had ambitions to unite Germany and a very expansionist view with the German state as an empire ruling over much of Europe. While both terms of Realpolitik and Raison d'état agreed on the separation of the church from the state and on the balance of power, many other aspects differ. Richelieu in his raison d'état thought of the defensive means to prevent the domination of a state on another as a deterrent to limit a conflict, while Realpolitik thought of legitimizing covertly the expansion of the state by seeking power, much like an offensive strategy.

The principle of raison d'état needed consensus among like-minded rulers who faced negligible internal pressure and driven by national interests of the state. That consensus was amplified by the decline of the church's influence on the matters of the state until the final separation after the peace of Westphalia. On the other side, Realpolitik is a contest to strength where rulers thought of invading swiftly other nations before the rise of a nationalist sentiment that could create a considerable resistance. It is the survival of the fittest disregarding the balance of power the raison d'état is trying to create. The strongest would prevail trying to seek a unipolar world at least in the larger geographic area.

Finally, raison d'état is an end to a purpose which is mainly preserving peace through a balance of power. This end is deprived of any moral values and solely based on national interest. Raison d'état might have Machiavellian

¹ Unknown author. "Kautilya, Machiavelli, Richelieu and Mazarin - 2d part : the "raison d'Etat" (national interest)". Available on <https://lesmaterialistes.com/english/kautilya-machiavelli-richelieu-and-mazarin-2d-part-raison-etat-national-interest>>. Accessed on 8/4/2023.

² Beaty, Olivia. "Diplomacy as the Art of Continuous Negotiations: Cardinal de Richelieu and the "Political Testament". Available on: <https://classicsofstrategy.com/2022/05/27/diplomacy-as-the-art-of-continuous-negotiations-cardinal-de-richelieu-and-the-political-testament/>. Accessed on 10/4/2023.

approaches if they can reach the ultimate goals. On the other side, Realpolitik represents the methodology that crowns a certain state as the sole hegemon disregarding the situation of other states even if they were neutral.¹

Richelieu and Machiavelli

A lot of people attribute the origins of *raison d'état* to Niccolò Machiavelli, the Florentine diplomat. In fact, this is related to the similarity between them in many aspects. Both seek power; "The Prince" was a book dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino in order to grant him a governmental position. Richelieu's writing was to materialize his ideas on the state and balance of power even after his death.

Religiously, Machiavelli urged the king to be secular, but religious belief for citizens was instrumental to keep the state in order. In addition, the fear of God should be replaced by a fear of the king. To the contrary, Richelieu was a believer himself and never called for atheism. Instead, by separating the Catholic influence from the interests of Catholic France, he believed that the submergence of a strong France is better for Catholicism than the rise of a catholic union that could dwarf the role of France. But the separation of the state from church was mostly attributed to the legacy of Richelieu and not Machiavelli. Therefore, as Rehman noted Richelieu developed "a pragmatic, yet religiously inflected, foreign policy ethos".²

Machiavelli was meticulous in crushing any internal pressure on the monarch in order to prevent any revolt. And for this reason, unethical measures are justified, and even more, preferred. Richelieu agreed with the need to "recover France's strategic solvency by strengthening its state apparatus, dampening internecine hatreds, and crushing perceived political threats to the monarchy." He prohibited dueling in order to deprive local princes from a traditional honor. He crushed the minorities' local attempts to create a *de facto* rule in their area. He ordered to seize and abolish all castles not essential to the defense of France. However, Richelieu was very aware of the importance of shaping the public opinion. Despite being hated himself, he was instrumental in controlling media and covertly fought opposing journals. He thrived to rally and mobilize the public opinion under notions of France's "grandeur" and "divine role". His loyal theorists and legalists nourished their newspapers with propaganda wars to mitigate the dissent caused by unpopular taxes needed for subsidizing mercenaries beyond borders.

Raison d'état and national interest

The shrewd US secretary of state Henry Kissinger finds almost no difference between the term "*raison d'état*" and "national interest". In his book titled "on Diplomacy", he argues that European states, after failing to unite under one ruler due to ethnic and religious divergence, searched for a justification to build new alliances. This search for common purpose or converging benefits was made clearer by Richelieu's attempt to circumvent the prevailing mentality of his king, who couldn't put France's needs before Catholicism's needs. The *raison d'état* back then was the notion of national interest that overrode "universal morality". The Habsburg attempt to re-establish the Catholic religion was a geopolitical threat to France's security. Therefore, France's supreme interests were in preventing Catholics unity.

Despite the complete removal of any ethical value from the national interest, Kissinger still saw some morality in the US national interests as illustrated in the National security council document 68, upon the fall of Czechoslovakia to communism in 1948. National interest was then maintained in the survival on the free institutions in Europe. However, even if there was no direct material loss from that event, the US lost a state who can mirror its economic model and promote the same interests and values, because back then the legitimacy of the system was based on the

¹ Cassels, Alan. "Similarities and Differences of *Raison D'état* and Realpolitik". Available on <https://newyorkessays.com/essay-similarities-and-differences-of-raison-detat-and-realpolitik>. Accessed on 9/4/2023

² Rehman, Iskander. "Raison d'Etat: Richelieu's Grand Strategy During the Thirty Years' War". Texas National security review, Volume 2, issue 3. 2019.

economic model and not the ethnic views such as in the days of Richelieu. Therefore, one can also agree with Kissinger's notion of the large similarity between *raison d'état* and national interest.¹

In fact, it was Richelieu's policies who created a revolution in state affairs and diplomacy in Europe, where the needs of the states took precedence over collective needs that crossed the political boundaries of the state. Nevertheless, alliances based on ethnicity or not were still a tool of *raison d'état* to approach the ends drawn by policymakers in Europe.

Balance of power as the desired end state, *raison d'état* as the justification

Richelieu's pursuit of sole France's interest created a precedent in European foreign policy making. It was the survival of the state and not the religion that mattered the most. For centuries after, matters of the state were the drivers of diplomacy, replacing the Pope's rule. The pursuit of ends through *raison d'état* seduced Louis XIV to bolder expansionist ambitions. Therefore, France's policies were seen as offensive and aggressive. Richelieu was the orchestrator of France's elements of national power. He knew when to buy time by negotiation and when to crush his enemies, in order to crown France as the sole hegemon on Europe.

Only Richelieu could achieve this by preventing the rise of a large state around France, either by preventing the universalism of Catholicism from consolidating in one entity, or by keeping Germany dismantled into warring states. In fact, German speaking territories counted more than 300 provinces each seeking for independence and warring amongst each other. This rivalry forced these small provinces into pleading France's protection and patronage, thereby extending its spheres of influence. France remained the largest and scariest player in Europe, only until Bismarck realized Richelieu's worst fears and united Germany. Three decades after him, Germany sought to control Europe and topple the existing balance through the Von Schlieffen Plan and WWI incursions.

Not only Germany sought to reverse Europe's balance. UK also played a historical role in checking France's control in Europe. It was also to the interest of UK to prevent the rise of France as more than a regional player. That's why UK supported William of Orange in his battles against France. The monopoly on European resources by one power could threaten the British nation of annihilation. British *raison d'état* then justified why the latter threw its weight anywhere to counter France's attempt to assert its control.

Conclusion:

In the end, to sum up, Europe's politics before Richelieu was driven by the interests of religion and the aspiration of ambitious kings and princes who benefited from the absence of strong leaders in other countries to invade them and expand their empire. They set the tone for a weird discipline of thought domesticated by the lash of the church. Richelieu came to overcome these barriers only aiming to advance France's interests at the expense of anything else. He saw in the rise of a strong Catholic alliance between Spain and the Holy Roman Empire and threat to the survival of his beloved country. Therefore, he allied with the Protestants, to prevent being surrounded. He also worked to delay German unification because he foresaw the rise of an ambitious and capable power at his borders. His fears materialized years after his death with the Von Schlieffen plan that prearranged a swift occupation of France. Richelieu also aimed to buttress the king's rule over his territories by weakening local feudal lords and war princes and cutting their ties with neighboring countries. He upgraded Machiavelli's thoughts and influenced Kissinger a lot. While Machiavelli's book aimed to give him a chance to be appointed a political occupation, Richelieu's confessions wanted to give life to a school of thought that put the interests of the state above all others. While navigating his ways to achieve France's primacy, Richelieu tuned the balance of power in Europe, and worked to

¹ Kissinger, Henry. "Diplomacy". Simon and Schuster. April 1995. Page 69.

achieve peace through state strength and national will. A mixture of realpolitik and soft diplomacy crowned him as the father of all foreign ministers and their utmost influencer. Richelieu's thoughts and ideals absolutely survive till this day.