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International Interventions and Normative Prudence as a ‘Forgotten’ Virtue of Statecraft

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Abstract

Nearly thirty years on from Alberto Coll’s call to revive normative prudence as ‘a tradition of statecraft,’ this paper presents a case for making this virtue key to the debates concerning international interventions and statebuilding. Though prudence has a rich conceptual history, contemporary IR literature seems to have forgotten it. Assessments of recent international interventions use the language of prudential reasoning without making this concept their starting point. Similarly, IR theories engage with the concept of prudence indirectly but they do not acknowledge it explicitly. This paper addresses these gaps by putting forward four yardsticks of prudent statecraft. They include deliberation and reasoning; caution and circumspection; foresight and the ability to imagine the consequences of one’s actions; and knowing the limits of one’s abilities. These yardsticks are then applied to the cases of the NATO intervention in Kosovo (1999) and the American invasion of Iraq (2003) to make the following two points. First, we argue that once developed systematically in the context of international interventions, the concept of normative prudence provides a singular platform for assessing interventions. Second, we assert that if employed robustly, normative prudence can help those undertaking these interventions to prepare for the ‘day after.’

Keywords: prudence; reasoning; deliberation; foresight; intervention; caution; responsibility to protect

Introduction

Writing in the pages of *Ethics and International Affairs* around thirty years ago, Alberto Coll made a case for employing normative prudence as ‘a tradition of statecraft’ (Coll 1991). Coll rightly argued that the virtue of prudence had a rich conceptual history but its potential in conducting assessments of pertinent political decisions was underutilised. Though he was writing just after the end of the Cold War, Coll was thinking ahead of his time: the world was about to face a number of global political challenges for whose analysis the virtue of prudence might help tremendously. International intervention is one such challenge.

The idea of international intervention has changed meaning in the last thirty years. The emergence of ‘humanitarian intervention’ has gradually given way to the ‘Responsibility

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to Protect.’ Interventions, undertaken by the states or multilateral ‘Coalitions of the Willing,’ have also attempted to affect regime change in third states. We have also witnessed interventions intended to protect international peace and to uphold international law. Given the significance of some of these interventions, it can be rightly suggested that they should be assessed on the basis of their longer-term impact upon the intervener, the intervened-upon and the wider international community.

A cursory glance at the assessments of these interventions shows that a variety of scholars discuss them using the language and context of prudential reasoning without specifically acknowledging the concept. For example, observers may ask how prepared the interveners were for the aftermath of such interventions. However, normative prudence is not often employed as a single concept that can help in assessing the outcomes or destructive impacts of these interventions for the wider international society. Though the discussions skirt around this idea, the concept does not serve as their starting point. Thinkers and theorists of the past dedicated much attention to the virtue. For example, Nicholas and White (1979, 374) argued that without prudence ‘political actors will be either thoughtlessly complacent, purely self-interested or inhuman, merely irrelevant to the ongoing life of their society, or the cause of mindless or groundlessly hopeful destruction or violence.’ However, contemporary empirical and theoretical writings do not seem to have utilised the concept of normative prudence to study the impacts of major decisions on the matters concerning the wider international community along with the intervening actors.

One reason for the under-utilisation of the normative potential of prudence (as far as the matters of international politics are concerned) is that we do not know enough about a cohesive set of characteristics of a ‘prudent action’. Scholars occasionally refer to the benchmarks of prudence, but there does not exist a holistic understanding of what the concept stands for. For example, Wilson says that a prudent decision-maker would at least plan for unpredictability of human behaviour which might inadvertently derail one’s planning (Wilson 2003, 2). A decision-maker may have good intentions but they would still have the obligation to prepare well for the aftermath of their action. However, this and other writers give us scant details of how to act prudently when a decision has significant international political ramifications. In particular, how should a state or group of states act to be described as prudent when undertaking an international intervention in the name of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ or to defend international peace?

A literature review on the subject highlights two gaps. First, though scholars have employed different aspects of prudence, no research exists that looks at the rich history of this tradition to unpack the concept to understand its different components. In other words, we do not know enough about the key dimensions of prudence. Second, writings concerning prudence are clustered in the domains of foreign policy analysis, military policy or literature on leadership and decision making. There is a gap in the international politics literature which takes the virtue of normative prudence as its starting point and employs its different components as yardsticks to assess the impact of an intervention beyond the level of a state. Put differently, in the agent-structure equation, where there exist studies on prudence focusing on the ‘agent’ side, surprisingly little literature incorporates prudence within the ‘structure’ dimension. Due to these reasons, normative prudence remains an under-utilised concept in international political literature.

This paper bridges these gaps by making two points. First, we argue that once developed systematically in the context of international interventions, the virtue of normative prudence provides a singular platform for the assessments of international interventions from an international political angle. Second, we assert that with a clearer idea of what it means to act prudently, the virtue of normative prudence can provide useful guidance to anyone assessing the impact of an intervention on the broader international community. The utilisation of the concept in these matters will help with the increasingly global concerns of international peace, ‘Responsibility to Protect,’ post-conflict reconstruction and statebuilding.

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, this paper is structured as follows: the second section, below, shows how the concept of prudence has a rich intellectual history. It outlines how a variety of thinkers – from Plato through today – have employed prudence and how the understanding of what it means to be prudent has changed over time. The third section shows how literature concerning foreign policy analysis, military and security policies and the literature on decision making has made some use of this concept to conduct ‘agent-centric’ studies (albeit in a simplistic way and without defining the key ingredients of a prudent action). There has not been much focus on the ‘others’ outside a state who might be impacted by one’s decisions. That purpose could only be achieved by bringing the virtue to the domain of international politics. The third section also shows how major international theories skirt around the idea of prudence but neither develop the concept nor formally utilise

it in the matters of international politics. The fourth section starts by delineating what it means to be prudent normatively. We state the writings of scholars working in the domain of prudence repeatedly point to four key qualities of a prudent action. They are: deliberation (and reasoning); caution and circumspection; foresight and the ability to imagine the consequences of one's actions; and knowing the limits of one's powers. The fifth and sixth sections provide examples of how the concept of prudence can be employed in the international political domains when we are concerned with the interest of the intervened upon and the broader international community as well as the interveners. The fifth section applies the concept to the Kosovo intervention of 1999. Though not a perfect case, we argue that Kosovo signifies a situation in which those in power acted *somewhat* prudently using the basis of the yardsticks of normative prudence. The sixth section, on the other hand, studies the invasion of Iraq in 2003 which outlines the severe, negative implications of acting imprudently for the intervener as well as the intervened-upon. The conclusion summarises the argument and outlines avenues for future research on this valuable concept.

Here it important to provide justifications for focusing on the cases of Kosovo and Iraq. The case of Kosovo is significant because it is a clear manifestation of the international community's resolve to undertake an intervention for humanitarian reasons even if it breaches international law (Murray and Hehir 2013). The Independent International Kosovo Commission concluded that the intervention in Kosovo was 'illegal but legitimate' (see Newman 2002, 115) given the global consensus supporting the action. The repercussions of Kosovo cannot be understated for a variety of contemporary discussions concerning humanitarian intervention, 'Responsibility to Protect,' international law and sovereignty. Similarly, the invasion of Iraq has had significant repercussions for matters of international peace, great-power responsibility, balance of power and hegemony. The two cases feature among the most critical international interventions of the last two decades with major implications for the dynamics of contemporary international politics.

This paper's contributions to the literature lie in its re-imagining of the concept of normative prudence in the context of international politics and in conceptualising the connection between the nitty-gritty of the process and its outcome on broader international political issues.¹ Along with calling for a revival of the 'forgotten' virtue of prudence in international politics, it makes a case for further utilisation of this concept to help assess major international interventions.

Prudence as a concept

Prudence has frequently been dubbed the most important of the ‘chief’ intellectual virtues since Classical Greece (Wyllie 1965, Houten 2002, 271, Hariman 2003, vii). The concept of deliberation has been linked to prudence for millennia. The roots of prudence as one of the classical intellectual and moral virtues (Sloane 2001, 637-40) can be traced back to the times of Plato, who declared prudence as the most important virtue a statesman could possess (Hariman 2003, vii). This understanding of prudence, however, is different from theoretical wisdom as it is concerned with deliberation about ‘contingent affairs’ (Hariman 2003, viii). In this context, Aristotle declared prudence to be different from both scientific knowledge and art; ‘not science because that which can be done is capable of being otherwise, not art because action and making are different kinds of things. The remaining alternative, then, is that it is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man’ (Aristotle 1998, 142).

The idea of prudence (*phronesis*, or practical wisdom in Aristotle) is associated with the ability to engage in reasoning and to be able to deliberate well (Aristotle 1998, 142–143). During the times of the Roman Empire, thinkers like the orator Cicero discussed prudence as an art of deliberating well for the greater good of all, and not just for one individual (Sloane 2001, 638–639, and generally 637–640). In the Thirteenth Century, St. Thomas Aquinas discussed the Aristotelian and Ciceronian ideas from the perspective of faith and allowed the possibility of reasoning within the framework of faith (also see Wyllie 1965).

When discussing prudence, Thomas Hobbes pointed to the importance of experience in the process of prudent decision-making. He described prudence as one of the main ‘intellectual virtues’ (Houten 2002, 273). In *Leviathan*, Hobbes points out that prudence is ‘a Praesumption [sic] of the Future, contracted from Experience of time Past’ (Hobbes 1991, 23; Houten 2002, 267). To decide about something in the present or future, man ‘thinketh of some like action past, and the events thereof one after another; supposing like events will follow like actions’ (Hobbes 1991, 22; quoted in Houten 2002, 267). For Hobbes, in order to make prudent decisions in new circumstances, past experiences ‘confronting apparently similar circumstances’ serve as the foundation stones (Houten 2002, 267). This idea of experience is central to Hobbes’s conception of prudence, namely because his image of ‘mentall [sic] discourse’ and prudence refers to this capacity of ‘predicting the future by

moving from one image or set of images to another, which are often presumed to be the effects or results of some previous set of images...Hobbes believes that those with more experience have had more “experiments”, which are the “remembrance of the succession of one thing to another, that is, of what was antecedent, and what consequent, and what concomitant” (Houten 2002, 267).

This thinking not only highlights the importance of experience in prudent decision-making, it goes one step further by declaring prudence to be the “‘the end of’ mental discourse’ (Oakeshott 1991, 250; quoted in Houten 2002, 267n). If experience is vital to a prudent decision-making process, history emerges as a key ingredient. The study of history can ‘instruct and enable men, by the knowledge of actions past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future’ (Hobbes quoted in Houten 2002, 268-9). In this way, the study of history is a way to equip oneself with the instruments of prudent decision-making. Hobbes describes inexperienced men as ‘short-sighted’ as these are the men ‘whose imprudence results from their failure to carefully consider more than the simple immediate consequences of some action and to look to the larger, long-term implications. The importance of inexperience here should be clear; the inexperienced have had less chance to observe the long-term consequences of a variety of actions’ (Houten 2002, 271). Along with experience, Hobbes specifically pointed out the importance of ‘fancy’ (imagination) and ‘judgement’ to be virtues of a similar nature, emphasising that good judgement is an essential ingredient of prudence (Houten 2002, 273). However, for Hobbes, we cannot be certain that reasoning conducted utilising the lessons of experience are going to be conclusive, as every situation is new and bound to have some unique features of its own. On the whole, history provides some guidance regarding how one should proceed to do things in certain situations. This involves looking at each case in its own light and according to its specific requirements. Along the same lines, Robert Jackson has referred to the ethics governing statecraft as ‘situational ethics’ (Jackson 1995.) These ideas acknowledge prudence to be a faculty of foresight and discipline. Being prudent means being alert and knowing very well what is at stake (Jackson 2000, 152-3). In critical circumstances, prudence can help in two ways: *jus ad bellum* (to act or not to act) and *jus in bello* (how to act).

This tradition of charting the history of prudence in the light of principles articulated by the writers of Classical Greece continued in the Eighteenth Century when philosophers such as Burke reaffirmed the importance of prudence as a practical virtue. He defined it as

such – and in political terms – because a politician is very much a ‘philosopher in action’, (Francis and Canavan 1959, 62) whose judgement will involve ‘not only predictions of what will happen, but the comparison of values, some of which must be sacrificed to others, and a decision about which values are to be preferred’ (1959, 66). However, Burke believed that there are no universal laws of prudence, and that norms concerning this issue are quite flexible. He wrote, ‘[the] rules and definitions of prudence can rarely be exact; never universal’ (quoted in Francis and Canavan 1959, 68). In this case, this does not mean that the rules of prudence are valueless, just that it is not possible to know any of these rules for certain. The rules concerning prudence have ‘certain usefulness if it is remembered that they are practical rules intended for the guidance of action and adjustable to the demands of particular situations, and not premises from which conclusions applicable to all situations can be drawn with strict logic’ (1959, 69). According to Francis and Canavan, a prudent statesman will know that principles alone are not sufficient to conduct the affairs of state. They should be guided by prudence. Burke argued:

Things are right or wrong, morally speaking, only by their relation and connexion [sic] with other things. A statesman never loses sight of principles, is to be guided by circumstances; and judging contrary to the exigencies of the moment he may ruin his country for ever. (Francis and Canavan 1959, 77).

Edmund Burke also drew a distinction between ‘true prudence’ and selfish prudence. According to Burke, true prudence is also described as enlarged prudence that is concerned with the good of the whole and which takes within ‘its purview a larger, long term view of things’; selfish prudence is ‘that little, selfish, pitiful, bastard thing, which sometimes goes by the name and which is little more than cleverness or cunning’ (cited in Coll 1991, 46).

The concept of prudence underwent a drastic change during the European Enlightenment, as in this period prudence was stripped (Sloane 2001, 637) of its intellectual and ethical qualities by thinkers like Kant and Machiavelli, who associated it with simple shrewdness and cautious attainment of selfish interest (Beiner 1983, 63-4). Machiavelli’s ideas draw a distinction between morality and prudence –the former being subservient to the latter (Mapel 1990, 434). These thinkers linked prudence more with cleverness and using shrewdness to get one’s way than with morality. This perspective held prudence as a value used by states to further their selfish interest without entertaining that prudence was a value

to keep the interest of the whole in mind, and not just the acting state. The writings of Kant and Machiavelli discuss this perspective of prudence in great detail (Garver 2003). Kant ‘struck a decisive blow against prudence by separating it from morality and associating it with maximising self interest’ (Sloane 2001, 640). The association of the idea of prudence with mere ‘caution’ and ‘cleverness’ gave it a far-from-ideal meaning (Nicholas and White 1979).

Current thinking in this field has attempted to restore prudence to the Aristotelian pedestal, imparting it with greater depth and value than in the Enlightenment. In recent times, different scholars (Uyl 1991; Hariman and Beer 1999, 205-30) have moved to recover ‘previous ethical, intellectual and practical dimensions of prudence by returning to its earlier use in Greek philosophy’, away from the ideas of some modern thinkers who equated prudence with simple shrewdness, selfishness or cleverness (Sloane 2001, 638, see also Beiner 1983, 63-4). We refer to the concept of ‘normative prudence’ to refer to this very understanding of prudence developed in the Classical Greek philosophy.

Prudence in contemporary scholarship

Prudence in state-centric debates:

In contemporary scholarly literature, certain concepts are utilised or developed in parallel within the broader International Relations writings as well as within the ‘agent-centric’ debates. For example, the concept of ‘balance of power’ has a rich history in International Relations but the idea of ‘soft balancing’ (Pape 2005; Paul 2005) is now being increasingly employed in foreign policy literature. However, this concept is more extensively discussed within the international politics literature than in Foreign Policy Analysis literature. The literature on Foreign Policy Analysis studies how states may use soft balancing to achieve certain aims such as countering a hegemon.² Similarly, the concept of ‘identity’ also features in both domains: International Relations as well as Foreign Policy Analysis. The issue of identity and its effect on foreign policies of states is increasingly a key concern of scholars in Foreign Policy Analysis and is set to be one of the main agendas for future research in this field (Kaarbo 2003, 159). Scholars have looked at how several states’ concerns about their identity have influenced their foreign policies. They include Russia (D’Anieri 2002), China (Ripley 2002), Germany (Lantis 2002) and India (Pavri 2002). Given the dual use of several concepts in the agent-centric as well as the structure-centric debates, it is rather curious that

the concept of prudence has primarily featured in mostly agent-centric discussions and remains largely absent from the broader international politics literature.

Foreign Policy Analysis

Several authors have engaged with various dimensions of prudence when dealing with matters concerning states' foreign policies. For example, Jervis (1976, 35 and 41) has looked at how risk aversion features in statesmen's foreign policy decisions. He has also examined the significance of foresight in such matters (Jervis 1976, 166 and 329). The idea of 'deliberating well' also appears in foreign policy-related writings (Jervis 2017, 160 and 213). Scholars have also analysed how the idea of 'caution' features in states' foreign policies (Kowert and Hermann 1997). Dobel (2010, 63) has looked at how groupthink can hinder an administration in prudent decision making. Kowert (2002) has compared the decision-making within the Eisenhower and Reagan administrations from the perspective of groupthink arguing that an excessive focus on groupthink can lead to deadlock.

Military and security policy

The concept of prudence has also been employed by those studying the military and security policies of states. Reichberg (2010 and 2016) studies the writings of Thomas Aquinas on 'military prudence.' He argues that Aquinas's utilisation of the concept is helpful in providing 'an inner compass for decision-making amid the uncertainty and confusion of the battlefield' (Reichberg 2010, 262). This view holds that exercising virtuous judgement in the battlefield is different from 'governing a polity in peacetime' and that is why Aquinas considered military prudence to be a separate category of prudence (Reichberg 2010, 269; Reichberg 2016, 74). According to this reading of prudence, good intentions on their own are not enough to guarantee the moral quality of actions. They must be based on a 'reasonable estimation of the good or bad consequences that are likely to result from them' (Gorman 2010, 252). Nielsen (2007) also studies prudence in the writings of Clausewitz. While invading the enemy territory, Clausewitz advised caution and restraint and spoke against 'senseless destruction' (Nielsen 2007, 220).

Debates on leadership and personality

Prudence also features in the literature on leadership, personality and decision making. Dobel (1998) asserts that political prudence can help leaders bridge the gap between moral

aspirations and the demands of political achievement. The volume edited by Kane and Patapan (2014) examines how prudence can be a guide to the leaders of contemporary democracies to ward off certain negative challenges facing them such as the rise of populism. Finally, prudence has also been a subject of personality-related discussions (Haslam and Baron 1994).

Though prudence is often discussed in the above-mentioned fields, these studies are lacking when it comes to the key concerns of this paper. First, the different strands of literature mentioned earlier are primarily agent-centric and do not help much with assessments of the outcomes of decisions on the wider issues of international politics. Contemporary international society is home to states, non-state actors and international organisations, and a focus on prudence only from the perspective of a state (as opposed to the perspective of the international society) will not be of much help for those who are outside the intervening state(s) but are seriously affected by an intervention. The discussion of the normative side of this virtue is also somewhat lacking in these writings, especially if normative prudence is defined through the perspective of ‘other-regarding’ prudence denoting ‘others’ as those who are outside the intervening state(s). As we will see below, in the international political context, that refers to those outside a state who might be affected by the decisions undertaken by a state. Second, these discussions lack a clearer idea of what it means to be prudent. Given a proper understanding of the key dimensions of prudence, the virtue has not been systematically employed as a tool of analysis.

Prudence in international political theory:

Interestingly, numerous political theories have ‘skirted around’ the idea of prudence without systematically incorporating the concept into their folds. Below we outline three such examples.

The Critical Theory

The virtue of prudence has been at the core of some of the writings of Critical Theory and theories relating to human emancipation. For example, while discussing the importance of prudence, Booth (1994, 58) identifies two types of prudence: rhetorical prudence and technical prudence. Rhetorical prudence employs the concept (normally by great powers) for selfish reasons only. Technical prudence, on the other hand, has elements of self-interest alongside the interest of others. According to Booth, quite often when a state claims that it is

being prudent, its use of this term is rhetorical; it employs this terminology to protect power and privilege. What it does not take into consideration are the ‘others’ who might be affected by its actions.

Booth argues that great powers often employ rhetorical prudence by saying ‘we acted prudently’, thereby using (rhetorical) prudence ‘to excuse a failure or to deepen a success’ (Booth 1994, 58). But he poignantly argues that prudence without reference to ‘other-interested behaviour’ is the opposite of virtuous: ‘we presumably do not want prudent aggressors or prudent rapists’ (Booth 1994, 58). Hence Booth says that what is virtuous is rational behaviour in the service of others: a duty consisting of what you ought to do – whether you want to or not. The need is thus to be prudent technically and not merely rhetorically. ‘A duty done imprudently may be a duty failed’ (Booth 1994, 58).

The English School

Several English School authors have also referenced prudence but none has conducted work to systematically incorporate the concept within its folds. For example, Robert Jackson has argued that using prudence is crucial in the decision-making process of the great powers (Jackson 2000, 153). Similar to Booth, Jackson (2000, 153) identifies two dimensions of prudence: self-regarding prudence and other-regarding prudence. Self-regarding prudence is ‘personal or egocentric prudence’ that ‘looks ahead and proceeds with caution in the anxiety that otherwise something unwelcome or something terrible might happen to me’ (2000, 153). Thus, when ‘the self is simply me personally and nobody else’, then this prudence would be instrumental prudence: that which is entirely self-regarding (2000, 153).

On the other hand, if self includes ‘somebody else and becomes we and not just me alone – joint selves or a collective self – as it almost always does in the activities of politics and war, then prudence is no longer entirely self-regarding’ but becomes other-regarding, this can be described as normative prudence (Jackson 2000, 153). If the great powers pursue their selfish interests and call their actions ‘prudent’ then that, according to Jackson, would be instrumental prudence. On the other hand, if a great power acts to uphold the greater international interest and is driven by the concerns of others, not only its own, then its actions would be justified through the lens of normative prudence. Hence Jackson (2000, 20) argues that prudence becomes ‘a normative concept when it concerns others besides’ us: ‘it is a political virtue to take care not to harm others’ and a ‘cardinal virtue’ when it concerns

politics and especially the great powers. By using the principles of prudence, a great power can make difficult political decisions. Prudence can help a state's leader understand the reality of the situation and imparts a degree of foresight to decisions, enabling them to foresee the consequences of their actions (2000, 20 and 154). Prudence will help this leader envisage the possible courses of action by helping it decide how to act in order to promote the common interest of society of states. Focusing on the use of prudence by the great powers, Jackson says that 'the great powers have often refrained from acting in many cases in which they should have acted or vice versa by using prudence as an excuse. In fact, it is not normative prudence which they employ but instrumental prudence which is the use of prudence for their own aims' (Jackson 2000, 153).

John Vincent also dedicated considerable attention to the link between prudence and principles (Vincent 1987). He asserted that the requirements of prudence may not determine the moral agenda of a state's leader, but 'they do condition its treatment' (Vincent 1987, 124). Dunne built on Vincent's work when he stated that the survival of international society always depended on a mix of moral obligation and prudence (Dunne 1998, 175). According to Linklater, Dunne believed that 'understanding the relationship between the two has long been fundamental to English School analysis' (Linklater 2011, 1180).

Classical Realism

Similar to other approaches, authors of Classical Realism also often concerned themselves with the matters of prudence (Lieven and Hulsman 2006). For example, Hans Morgenthau hit hard at those who believed that applying Christian ethics and natural law (laws inherently granted to the mankind by virtue of being human) in the matters of statecraft would solve every problem. He believed that application of such laws without incorporating the virtue of prudence would result in a failed political action (Morgenthau 1960). That is because natural laws either do not provide a guide to political action because of its generality or 'they provide a particular political position with an ideological rationalization and justification.' That means that an appeal to natural law on its own becomes 'either meaningless or suspect' (Morgenthau 1960, 7).

Discussing the ethics of realism, Jack Donnelly also points out that realism is 'best read as a cautionary ethic of political prudence rooted in a narrow yet insightful vision of international politics' (Donnelly 2010, 150). Rynning (2011, 31) asserts that Classical

Realism is inherently prudential because it came into being as a proper ‘school of thought’ in opposition to ‘modernity’s blazing advocates of progress – a progressive effort that according to [C]lassical [R]ealist accounts culminated in two world wars’ (Rynning 2011, 31).

Lieven and Hulsman also refer to prudence when discussing the ideas of ‘ethical realism’ (Lieven and Hulsman 2006). They continue to separate the ethics of intentions from the ethics of consequences when they argue that the ethical dimensions of realism direct towards an international strategy based on prudence, implying a ‘concentration on possible results rather than good intentions; a close study of the nature, views, and interests of other states, and a willingness to accommodate them when possible’ (Lieven and Hulsman 2006, xvii).

Scholars within Critical Theory and the English School have made contributions to the literature on prudence by highlighting the importance of ‘other-interested’ behaviour when discussing normative prudence. However, they or Classical Realists have not paid attention to the concept with a view to systematically incorporating it into International Relations theory. Realist thinkers attach major significance to prudence but their writings cannot help in matters at the core of this paper such as ‘international interest’ and the ‘international society’ because, as Brown (2004, 11) would contend the notion of an ‘international society makes little sense’ to them.

How to think prudently?

When developing the concept of prudence to use in matters of intervention and statebuilding, it is pertinent to first specify certain key qualities of a prudent action. These qualities may serve as yardsticks for labelling interventions as prudent or otherwise. The literature on a prudent action has repeatedly emphasised four ingredients of a prudent action: it involves sound deliberation; it is undertaken on the basis of foresight; it is rooted in caution and circumspection; and, finally, those undertaking such a step must know the limits of their power.

Deliberation and asking the right questions

Numerous authors have placed deliberating well at the heart of prudence. For example, Burke thinks good judgement to be a crucial ingredient of prudence. He suggested that one should

use ‘prudential judgment of practical reason by which the principle is applied to the actual situation’ (Francis and Canavan 1959, 78). In keeping with Aristotle’s ideas, St. Thomas Aquinas also stated that a prudent person should be a ‘good reasoner’ (Coll 1991, 42). For him, the idea of reasoning refers to close enquiry, discussion and deliberation (Coll 1991, 42).

In the view of St. Thomas, human beings are incapable of grasping the truth by simply relying on their insights ‘because their understanding is deficient and contingent [sic] world is less than fully intelligible to our intellect. Indeed, moral and political matters are full of uncertainty about such matters, we have to engage in reasoning’ (Coll 1991, 42). One way of engaging in such reasoning and deliberation is by asking the right questions in such situations. That, according to Hobbes, would come close to the idea of good judgment.³ Furthermore, being prudent normatively would mean deliberating well for both oneself as well as the others affected by one’s actions.

Caution and circumspection

Caution and circumspection constitute another set of characteristics of a prudent action. Several authors have asserted that a statesman must be cautious when acting in a position of authority. Reckless and rash action can be an enemy of prudence. In certain cases, it may be that ‘a means good and suitable in the abstract becomes bad and inopportune owing to a combination of circumstances’ (Coll 1991, 43) in a specific situation. ‘A prudent statesman applies moral principles with due regard for their context’ (Coll 1991, 43).

Time and circumstances make a great difference in the moral appropriateness, or lack thereof, of applying a particular principle (Coll 1991, 45): ‘...in every question of moral and political prudence, it is the choice of the moment which renders the measure serviceable or useless, noxious or salutary’. (Edmund Burke quoted in Coll 1991, 45)

For Coll (1991, 46) this does not mean denying the significance of principles, but rather asserting the importance of prudence as a mediator between general moral principles and the infinitely variable and complex circumstances to which those principles must be applied. When making a cautious decision, one needs to control one’s emotions (Dobel 1998, 75) to avoid an abuse of power in the absence of constraints. Accordingly, it has been argued that without prudence, ‘political actors will be either thoughtlessly complacent, purely self-

interested or inhuman, merely irrelevant to the ongoing life of their society, or the cause of mindless or groundlessly hopeful destruction or violence' (Nicholas and White 1979, 374). The steps taken by statesmen should thus be driven by reflection and not by reactive emotions that might affect those at the receiving end of one's actions (Dobel 1998, 75).

Knowing the limits of one's abilities

Awareness of the limits of one's abilities directs one towards establishing a proper calculation and alignment of the means and ends (Dobel 1998, 76). A prudent statesman will try to adjust the means and ends in the best-calculated way (Mapel 1990, 433). Some have argued that there are three dimensions to this (Dobel 1998, 78). The first is finding the right means to the right ends; a misfit between means and ends can result in failure. Second, the means used should be proportionate to the ends sought. Third, a prudent leader recognises that means employed profoundly affect how these ends emerge. 'Ends achieved with morally problematic means can be undermined by the illegitimacy, resentment, and anger that are the moral residuals of excessive and immoral methods to attain goals. The means used can also rebound and affect the quality of humanity of the people pursuing the policy' (Dobel 1998, 78).

Foresight and the ability to imagine the consequences of one's actions

Several scholars have also cited the ability to predict or foresee (the consequences of one's actions) as a crucial component of prudence. According to Coll (1991, 43), prudent statesmen are not solely concerned with having the right intentions; they also carefully weigh the consequences of their actions for themselves as well as for those outside the state who might be impacted by their actions.

In the paradigm of prudence, it is important to draw a distinction between the intentions behind an action and its consequences. The use of prudence should not be confused with the ethics of intentions. A statesman simply stating 'my intentions are good', does not necessarily guarantee a prudent action. A political action needs to be analysed objectively and certainly not solely from the subjective point of view of the statesman involved. For example, M. J. Smith has written about Kissinger

In Kissinger's account of Vietnam, and indeed of all his foreign policy, his confidence in his ability to judge consequences is so great that the ethic of consequences in effect

merges with the ethics of intentions. To say ‘trust my calculations of consequences- my sense of responsibility is beyond question’ differs very little from saying ‘trust me- my intentions are good’ (Smith 1986, 216).

If the consequences of an action have a key role to play in determining its quality, then ‘there can be no political morality without prudence; that is without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral actions’ (Morgenthau 1993, 12; see also Jackson 1998, 6).

The statesman or -woman would have to fully consider the consequences an action may entail for everyone who is affected by that action. The good intentions of a leader do not make an action into a prudent one. Rather, ‘the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions’ must accord with prudence, which is considered to be ‘the supreme virtue in politics’ (Morgenthau 1993, 12). This suggests that being prudent means being informed. Recklessness and miscalculations can become, in such cases, the greatest political vices (Jackson 1994, 126).

Some might think it unfair to judge a statesman by consequences that would have been extremely difficult to foresee. Consequences of action are often unforeseeable: ‘[s]ince political actors cannot wait on events, they always have to act more or less in the dark’ (Nicholas and White 1979, 374). That may be so, but one would still be wise to ask if the statesmen involved paid enough attention to the consequences of their actions for everyone involved and not just themselves. Hence would it not be inappropriate to judge them for the long-term costs of their ‘deceptively brilliant short-term achievements’ (Coll 1991, 49)?

The ethics of responsibility require leaders to attend to the consequences of their actions for their own state as well as the wider international community and those intervened upon (Dobel 1998, 75). These ethics enable leaders to think through the situations where negative consequences of an action might outweigh the good sought (Dobel 1998, 76). ‘Although everyone is dead in the long run, this discipline of reflection focuses upon issues of durability and legitimacy and drives prudence beyond the narrow self-interest of a particular person’ (Dobel 1998, 77).

Operation Allied Force: prudence in action?

After outlining the key ingredients of normative prudence, we study the case of Operation Allied Force (NATO's bombing of Serbia to deter its ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians in 1999) as an example of prudent statecraft. Some authors have indeed criticised Operation Allied Force for a variety of reasons (Ignatieff 2001, 179 and 203). Our argument is that though not perfect, the case comes close to an example of a prudent action. Indeed in matters of international politics, it is not possible to find a 'perfect' example of a prudent action but Kosovo is a case that generally satisfies the four dimensions of normative prudence.

Deliberation and reasoning

The NATO leadership conducted serious reasoning prior to authorising airstrikes; they were keen to explore other alternatives and prepare for the scenario if these strikes failed to achieve their desired objectives (Clark 2007, 202;8). They believed that discussing multiple options and evaluating their pluses and minuses was crucial to move forward prudently (Blair 2011, 229; Albright 2013, 380). This question-asking process continued from the beginning to the end. Some of the questions included: Would bombing make Milosevic halt the campaign of ethnic-cleansing? How could NATO move forward without breaking the political consensus within the organisation or breaking the alliance altogether (Jackson 2007, 230; Daalder and O'Hanlon 2001, 141; Albright 2013, 395 and 415)? Most importantly, how to link the bombing with the political objectives of conflict resolution (Clark 2007, 211)?

A cost-benefit calculation of using the ground forces made the complications surrounding their use quite clear (Jackson 2007, 235). Serbs could have inflicted much more damage on Kosovar Albanians by the time the ground forces were in place (Albright 2013, 407; Clinton 2005, 851). The likelihood of the civilian casualties was also higher if the ground forces were deployed. Clinton (2005, 851) writes that this assessment made him drop the idea of using ground forces. He would have considered it as a last resort to deter Milosevic but the latter budged before it was needed (Albright 2013, 414-5; Clinton 2005, 859).

Reasoning was also conducted by those in-charge concerning what came after Milosevic's forces were evicted from Kosovo (Clark 2007, 202; Albright 2013, 383; and 394 Blair 2011, 229). That reasoning focused on the return of the refugees, clearing the minefields, rebuilding homes, providing food and shelter (Clinton 2005, 860). An important

concern was that there would be reprisal attacks against the Serb minority of Kosovo. The interveners made plans such as disarming the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and providing security to the Serb enclaves within Kosovo with the help of the UN (Albright 2013, 420, 426). They also discussed the need to stop the forces of ‘virulent nationalism’ to disrupt European peace in the future. The West needed to provide longer-term assistance to the democracies of the Balkans similar to the Marshall Plan (Albright 2013, 411).

Caution and circumspection

Though NATO leaders wanted to use force in an impressive way to make Milosevic back down, they were also aware that coercing Milosevic would mean frightening their own citizens who would see the heavy use of force as a surreptitious slide towards war (Clark 2007, 204). The phrase ‘political risks of military planning’ or its variations appear often in their memoirs, showing the cautious nature of the venture. Their circumspection was also due to the worry that the alliance itself might unravel: a number of member-states were unwilling to annoy Russia by supporting a larger ground campaign (Clark 2007, 209). The US leadership also worried that they did not know much about the region (Albright 2013, 395; Clark 2007, 209). Where this lack of knowledge made them cautious about their actions, we will see in the case of Iraq that such a paucity did not lead to similar results.

Knowing the limits of one’s abilities

The writings of those in-charge of the Kosovo operation are replete with references to the limits of military power (see Blair 2011, 236). They considered the military force to be only one of the many tools available in their hand. General Wesley Clark, NATO Supreme Commander at the time, wrote that prior to using force, leadership was keen to emphasise that NATO’s objectives were to accomplish a political and diplomatic solution and that force was to be used in support of that objective. The use of force was not an end in itself and the threat of NATO air strikes was used to ‘empower a serious diplomatic effort to engage and weaken Milosevic’ (Clark 2007, 195; 199; 202). He refers to his dialogue with the then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in which he made it clear to her that ‘bombing alone wouldn’t do it. You have to give Milosevic a way out through negotiations’ (Clark 2007, 202).

Foresight and the ability to imagine the consequences of one's actions

The decision-makers constantly worried about the consequences of their (in)actions. Albright and Blair believed that if left unchecked, the trend of ethnic cleansing could eventually spill over into other parts of Europe (Daalder and O'Hanlon 2001, 12; Blair 2011, 228; Albright 2013, 406). For Clark, the threat of force was more significant than its use (Clark 2007, 207; Hehir 2019, 589). Nations were 'jittery' that their use of force might make things even worse on the ground and wanted NATO to use a 'calibrated' and 'limited' bombing campaign wherever possible (Clark 2007, 208). The US National Security Advisor, Sandy Berger, believed that the US Congress and several European nations would not have sanctioned any form of military action unless its limits had been made clear (Kampfner 2004, 45; Albright 2013, 405). They chose the targets cautiously because the political leaders were worried about the unintended consequences for everyone involved (Blair 2011, 236; Clark 2007, 214).

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the failure to think prudently

Though not perfect, Kosovo is an example of a relatively prudent action. Operation Iraqi Freedom, on the other hand, is a case where the principles of prudence were all but abandoned. No planning was made for the 'day-after' with severe, negative consequences for the intervener and the intervened-upon.

Deliberation and reasoning

Reasoning and deliberation are the key components of a prudent action. However, studying the events leading up to the invasion of Iraq reveals a serious lack of such deliberation at the level of the National Security Council (NSC) (Pfiffner 2009, 374-376). Ten members of President Bush's war cabinet had called for a 'regime change' in Iraq before Bush's election (Moens 2004, 163). They floated this proposal in the first meeting of the Bush cabinet and pushed hard for it after the invasion of Afghanistan (Suskind 2006, 26). Burke (2005, 559) states, deliberations were 'turning to issues of "how" and "when", not "why" or "whether"' (see also Pfiffner 2009, 376). Richard Haas, the director of policy planning at the State Department before the invasion of Iraq, suggested, the White House was not interested in listening to the misgivings others had regarding war (Packer 2005, 45). He recalled, 'a decision was not made – a decision happened' (Packer 2005, 45). The Bush administration

also marginalised and ridiculed those who asked realistic questions (such as the need of more ground troops) and presented alternative scenarios, closing the doors of deliberation (Fallows 2004).

Caution and circumspection

A cautious approach would be based on reflection which would instruct that like events will follow like results. The war planners should have paid attention to the history of Iraq to prepare for potential future problems. The country went through a phase of looting soon after the fall of Saddam. Tellingly, this looting was not without historical precedent. After the Gulf War in 1991, Iraqi Shi'as and Kurds revolted against the regime of Saddam Hussein. In that chaos, some Iraqi cities experienced a looting spree (Mariner 2003). Some have argued that the bloody violence and insurgency that Iraq saw soon after the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom had its roots in the chaos from 1991 (Ricks 2006, 151). In the absence of serious planning to address this problem, the only way to deal with the ensuing sectarian violence was to use force (Judis 2004, 9).

Knowing the limits of one's abilities

A key pillar of a prudent action is knowing the limits of one's abilities (Bridoux 2011, 58). However, that was not the case with the Iraq War planning. Those highlighting the limits of the military power were sidelined very quickly. For example, Meghan O'Sullivan, a State Department employee, suggested in a paper that the use of military power was only one of the many levers of power (Haas and O'Sullivan 2000). A successful strategy would rely on *all* levers of power – diplomatic, economic and cultural influences. O'Sullivan was thereafter excluded from the planning of war (Woodward 2008, 127). Where a clear identification of one's ends is an integral part of a prudent action, they were not clear in this case. Washington did not fully comprehend that the end of the campaign was 'liberation and occupation' and not 'liberation' alone (Fallows 2004, 52-77).

Foresight and the ability to imagine the consequences of one's actions

A prudent statesman should distinguish between the ethics of intentions and the ethics of consequences. US policymakers cannot be forgiven if they say simply that they acted with 'good' intentions – such as the intention of liberating Iraq (Moses, Bahador and Wright 2011, 359). The question is whether they prepared for the consequences of their actions.

The US State Department had conducted a study for post-war Iraq called the 'Future of Iraq Project' that involved 200 Iraqi exiles and experts (US Department of State a 2002). The study stressed that 'the period immediately after regime change might offer...criminals an opportunity to engage in acts of killing, plunder, looting, etc' (US Department of State b, 2002). It also called for utilising the Iraqi Army for reconstructing and stabilising Iraq, and insisted the de-Baathification must not be conducted in a way that may 'lead to a total abolition of the current Administration, since, in addition to its role of social control, that structure does provide a framework for social order' (US Department of State c, 2002, 60).

Despite this advice, Paul Bremer, the first civilian administrator of Iraq, ordered a complete de-Baathification and demobilisation of the army (Dodge 2006-7, 163; Bremer 2006, 35). Quite a few Iraqi army officers and soldiers opposed this view but the US created 400,000 new enemies by adopting policies it was warned to avoid (Galbraith 2006).

Conclusion

This paper's primary objective has been to systematically develop the virtue of normative prudence with a view to incorporate it within the IR discipline. Doing so would help scholars harvest its potential to provide unique insights into the decision-making concerning international intervention. The virtue of prudence has a rich history and though a number of theories focus on it indirectly, the concept has remained somewhat underdeveloped in the context of international politics and, particularly, international intervention and statebuilding. Through the cases of Kosovo and Iraq, we show that once developed and employed, it has the ability to provide valuable guidance to statespeople on how to act. Furthermore, the concept can provide useful tools for academics and other analysts to interpret the actions of their leaders.

The lessons of prudence in terms of international intervention dictate that policy-makers cannot be let off the hook if they merely asserted that certain interventions were necessary to tackle threats to international peace or to protect lives and any alternative would be better than the scenario they faced. Accepting that logic would free them from the obligation of using force prudently and responsibly. Those in power have a responsibility towards their own citizens as well as towards those in whose name an intervention is undertaken.

This article will pave the way for future research on the subject of normative prudence. In particular, there is a critical need for the theories of International Relations to engage with this concept more systematically, making space for it within their folds. Doing so will extend Coll's call to make full use of prudence as a true virtue of contemporary statecraft.

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Notes

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² I am thankful to Leslie Wehner for this point.

³ This is one feature of prudence defined by Hobbes. However, Hobbes's ideas of prudence are closer to Machiavellian tradition than Aristotelian tradition of prudence. For opinion on Hobbes' idea being more in-line with Machiavellian tradition see Dobel (1998, 76).