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Author(s): Sasson Sofer

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Old and new diplomacy: a debate revisited

SASSON SOFER

Expressions such as 'Old Diplomacy' and 'New Diplomacy' bear no relation to reality.

Jules Cambon

There are two popular claims about diplomacy in the modern history of international relations. According to the first, World War One constituted a decisive turning point in the modern era, marking the emergence of a new diplomacy, distinct in both essence and style from that which had existed previously. The second maintains that diplomacy is in a state of continuous decline. This study proposes that the distinction between old and new diplomacy is simplistic and inaccurate, and that the argument regarding the decline of diplomacy is not a valid one. Raymond Aron's observation that 'diplomacy, in the traditional sense of the term, functions up to a certain degree between allies, but hardly any longer among enemies, or even between the blocs and the neutral nations,'¹ is only partially correct, and reflects its time of writing at the height of the cold war.

The analysis will emphasize continuity and evolution, rather than revolution, in the development of diplomacy. While routines, procedures, and settings have been modified, the basic principles of diplomacy as the basis for negotiations between nation states have an enduring validity. Moreover, the resilience of the diplomatic system has been remarkable in the twentieth century which has seen such change in technology and in the structure of world order.

The very term 'new diplomacy' is problematic. Diplomacy is a modern phenomenon. The establishment of a resident embassy and a separate bureaucracy for foreign policy constitutes one of the most important innovations of European civilization. Resident embassies were first introduced in the mid-fourteenth century. Foreign ministries evolved at a later stage; the initial codification of diplomatic protocol was consolidated in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna.² It may be seen, therefore, that the 'old diplomacy' is a relatively new development, despite the tendency to dismiss it as part of a defunct culture associated with a privileged minority.

The article will first identify the sources of the concept of new diplomacy, examining whether it possesses foundations distinct from those of traditional diplomacy. A detailed analysis of the elements referred to in the literature as characteristic of the new diplomacy will follow, particularly cultural and ideological influences, the expansion of international society and the challenge of a multitude of new states, the significance of open diplomacy, and the changes which have occurred in international relations since the onset of multilateral diplomacy and summit conferences. The final section will discuss the argument about the decline of diplomacy.

Definitions of diplomacy abound; that of Hedley Bull is precise and complete,

relying upon Satow, Nicolson, and the Oxford English Dictionary. According to Bull, diplomacy is 'the conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means.'³ In addition to this it is useful to make two distinctions: between diplomacy and the use of force, and diplomacy and foreign policy. The first of these marks an integral part of diplomacy as being the attempt to produce compromise without the use of force. The second is more complex, and is the source of much misunderstanding. Foreign policy incorporates the formulation of policy regarding political, constitutional, and bureaucratic processes and the definition of the fundamental principles and national interests of each state. Thus, it assumes a continuous interaction between domestic considerations and the external arena. Diplomacy constitutes only one element of foreign policy, though one of essential importance. It implements foreign policy through negotiation, making policy understood and if possible accepted by other nations. Interests, aims and concepts of foreign policy may change, while in diplomacy what usually changes are only the methods of implementation and the repertoire of persuasion. However, the dividing lines between diplomacy and foreign policy are not always easily drawn. By providing necessary information, presenting a choice of alternatives and as a result of its quality and style, diplomacy can influence policy making.⁴

The discussion of diplomacy is somewhat marginal in international relations theory.⁵ Diplomacy 'exists' within international theory, but is rarely analysed or extensively explored. In addition, the conceptual wealth of the literature on diplomacy is quite limited and, to a great degree, divorced from the development of political theory. Diplomatic history itself tends to be descriptive rather than analytical.⁶

There are two conceivable reasons for the paucity of debate on diplomacy. The first is the scientism which views diplomatic literature as redundant and anecdotal. The second is a direct result of that reading of the era of the cold war, which has the threat of force as the essential foundation of viable foreign policy. According to the strategic approach and theories of bargaining, relations among nations constitute a system of mutual deterrence, tacit agreements, and coercive diplomacy, in which messages and signals are transmitted between heads of state. The diplomat is rendered a message-carrier who plays no part in the making of national policy. In foreign-policy analysis and organizational models, where the diplomat is a viable actor, he is usually portrayed as the victim of his timidity or bureaucratic routine, succumbing to the policy of other branches of government.

Political realism which perceives force as a permanent means of maintaining world order, still contends that, at any given time, the state must employ the most suitable means of achieving the national interest. Diplomacy is the sovereign's art of conciliating between contradictory interests and a manifestation of prudence in international politics, while the diplomat himself is assigned a secondary role in the world of power politics.

Diplomacy comes in for sharper criticism from scholars who view the nation-state system as the major cause of inequality in world order. Modelski argues that, 'reduction in the role of diplomacy may be a necessary condition for world order'. Galtung adopts a completely utopian outlook, stating that the 'true world' of tomorrow will consist of a web of 'associations and organizations', a world where bilateralism will become insignificant and free from the 'structural violence' built into the system.⁷ Diplomacy, then, is described as technologically redundant and politically harmful for the international society.

The origins of the new diplomacy

In 1815, 1918, and the early 1960s, diplomatic protocol was formulated and modified by the international community. In 1815 and 1918 these changes followed wars which altered the balance of power and the nature of European society. While 1815 established the foundations of nineteenth century statesmanship, building on diplomacy's past achievements, 1918 constituted an endeavour to fashion a new diplomacy on the basis of a utopian and revolutionary vision. The United Nations Conference on Diplomatic Relations in 1962 closed the historical circle: the diplomatic code was not challenged, despite profound differences among nations.

The concept of new diplomacy was not a product of the deficiencies of the diplomatic method; rather, it was precipitated by the crisis in the system of the European balance of power that elevated the United States and the Soviet Union to prominence. The new diplomacy was ushered in by a country with a legacy of isolationism and a regime which had declared war upon the social, political, and ideological order of European society.

Ironically, the champions of the new diplomacy imparted great importance to traditional diplomacy by rendering it a central cause of the outbreak of World War One. The proponents of the new diplomacy contended that foreign policy must be based upon popular control and that national policy could not rely upon a balance of power encouraging an arms race, trade wars, and colonial rivalries. War was no accidental failure; the entire system was culpable inasmuch as it was undemocratic and served the strong. The new diplomacy would bring about disarmament, free trade, and self-determination.⁸ No persuasive explanation was forwarded for the long period of peace in Europe secured by the balance of power system and 'secret' diplomacy. The offensive against the old diplomacy failed to focus on the real causes of the First World War; at most, it was an assault on one of its byproducts.

The concept of new diplomacy gained historical importance when US President Woodrow Wilson introduced it towards the end of the first world war as the doctrine that would govern the norms of international behaviour and the nature of the peace conventions. In terms of intellectual history, Wilson's ideas originated in the eighteenth century.⁹ The attitude of the founding fathers toward the Old World was ambivalent; yet, the only diplomatic tradition available and familiar to them was that of Europe. Their natural inclination was towards the English rather than the conventional tradition, particularly not that of the *ancien régime*. According to Felix Gilbert, the *philosophes*' criticism of the *ancien régime* and its diplomatic practice had a crucial impact upon the development of American diplomacy. The *philosophes* denied that the maintenance of peace could be a direct result of the balance of power and refused to accept that it was a function of the whims and moods of the absolute monarch. Eighteenth century diplomacy was viewed as a conspiracy which must be replaced by open diplomacy resting on moral principles. Hence, the diplomacy of the new republic was formulated out of the internal tension between the principles of the Enlightenment and the *Staatsraison* of European politics at its height.

The liberal tradition, particularly the influence of John Locke and Thomas Paine, shaped the fundamental principles upon which the attitudes of American society toward international politics were based. Diplomacy was regarded as an immoral institution and identified with war and intrigue.¹⁰ A utopian perception of international society emerged, analogous to the ideal civil society. If all societies were democratic, a family of nations would evolve, along with a new world order which would guarantee peace, thus rendering diplomacy superfluous.¹¹

In the light of this interpretation, Wilson's views towards the end of the first world

war were a globalization of the American school of liberal thought. His speeches reflected the liberal criticism of European diplomacy and the balance of power system. The solution was thought to be contingent upon the creation of 'a community of free nations' headed by a permanent, sovereign institution that would manage it according to desirable moral standards. Wilson's plans suffered from two salient drawbacks. Though the liberal criticism of European diplomacy was consistent with the isolationist credo,¹² the implementation of the new approach required massive US intervention in world politics, contrary to the desire of the American public. Secondly, the statesmen of the allied countries, who would become Wilson's partners to the peace accords, still supported the concept of the balance of power and the methods of the old diplomacy.

Diplomatic history presents an entirely different picture from intellectual history. Wilson's appeal for open diplomacy derived not only from an abstract, idealistic vision, but from 'realistic diplomatic origins'.¹³ The Fourteen Points contained nothing which contradicted the political interests of the United States. They were directed towards the United States' Western European allies as well as against the Soviet Union, constituting, *inter alia*, a counterweight to Bolshevik diplomacy and compelling Britain and France to reconsider their traditional style of diplomacy. This inevitably led to a reassessment of their national interests as great powers.

The brief period subsequent to the Bolshevik revolution, particularly that between November 1917 and March 1918, during which Leon Trotsky served as the People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs, is important in order to understand Wilson's reactions and timing. The Russians had formulated their own definition of open diplomacy which they were about to present at the Brest-Litovsk talks. They made public the secret treaties of the Allied Powers and adopted several principles of liberalism, such as the right to self-determination, seeking to direct the new diplomacy against the Allies. At the same time, in countries like Germany, Austro-Hungary, France, and Great Britain, support grew for the principles of the new diplomacy. Wilson had to announce the platform of the new diplomacy immediately and to direct it against the Central powers, so that the Germans would not benefit from the accord with the Russians. At the same time, he had to pressure France and Britain to approximate his views regarding the war's termination, thus precluding a Bolshevik ideological monopoly in the establishment of European order.¹⁴

Wilson's speech of 8 January 1918 was his most important peace address, clearly showing the impact of the challenge of the Bolshevik revolution and of Brest-Litovsk upon his thought. Its early timing indicates that the speech was not intended to constitute a basis for the negotiations; it was, rather, a means of propaganda directed more towards Europe than towards the American people.¹⁵

At the outset of 1918, Wilson failed to assess correctly the significance of the Bolshevik revolution, and even tended to believe that Lenin and Trotsky sought to implement the principles of the new diplomacy. Only US Secretary of State Robert Lansing cautioned Wilson against responding to the Russian challenge. He disagreed with the overall Wilsonian policy, maintaining that British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, French President Georges Clemenceau, and Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando had outmanoeuvred the President at the peace conference.¹⁶

Examination of Wilson's behaviour reveals that he chose somewhat undistinguished participants for the United States delegation to the conference, not including a single senator. During the course of the conference he demonstrated incompetence in leading the delegation, concentrating obsessively on the idea of the League of Nations.¹⁷ The president anticipated the extensive support of the American and European publics; yet, these responded positively to general, abstract principles,

showing little interest in the details of the negotiations. There was a substantial divergence between the goals which he set out to achieve and the tactics of actually attaining them. It ultimately emerged that Wilson neglected the consolidation of the political and constitutional support which might have secured the success of the new diplomacy. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson described the miserable repercussions upon US diplomacy during Wilson's administration: he 'left the State Department a shambles'.¹⁸ Harold Nicolson, who served as Lloyd George's secretary at Versailles, criticized Wilson both as a statesman and a utopian. He perceived the refusal of the United States to join the League of Nations and to ratify the Treaty of Versailles as one of the great failures of the new era. Nicolson's shock at Wilson's surrender to popular opinion, waiving the products of patient diplomatic negotiations, was considered a manifestation of what would henceforth become a permanent phenomenon in international relations.¹⁹

Challenges to the old diplomacy

Apart from this liberal criticism, the diplomacy of the twentieth century has been confronted by three major ideological challenges: (1) Bolshevik revolutionism; (2) the totalitarianism of the radical right; and (3) the accession of new, non-Western states to international society. The common denominator was the tendency towards revisionism and the opposition to the existing world order. Towards the end of the century, it can be determined that the principles of European diplomacy persisted, despite the fact that international society had become universal and was characterized by a diversity of cultures.

Reservations must be raised regarding the assumption that the stability of traditional diplomacy was contingent upon the cultural homogeneity of the European ruling class. Raymond Aron, among many others, writes that 'the homogeneity of the system favours the limitation of violence'.²⁰ This premise is exceedingly general, and does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the conflicts which nevertheless took place. Values and ideology were not the main determinants of Europe's system of alliances; indeed, it is highly unlikely that cultural affinity played an important role in the formulation of the grand coalitions of the European wars.

Ideology has been regarded as both incompatible with diplomacy and one of the elements of change in the structure and style of the post-1919 European diplomacy.²¹ The inter-war period is portrayed as a series of master plans directed by totalitarian powers, eventually rendering Europe an ideological battlefield. In fact, ideology played a secondary role in amending the style and practice of professional diplomacy. The content and style of inter-war diplomacy underwent a metamorphosis, but its organization and proceedings withstood the change.

The totalitarian regimes succeeded in temporarily neutralizing professional diplomacy and, in the case of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, even established alternate organizations that dealt with foreign policy. The diplomatic bureaucracy remained relatively stable, as the foreign offices did not appear sufficiently strong to threaten the new regimes. Most professional diplomats were able to continue to serve their country, be it Spain, Italy, Germany, or the Soviet Union.²²

The right-wing dictators

The right wing dictators perceived foreign policy as the heart of their leadership; to a large extent, they were their own diplomats, at a high price to their nations. The Bolshevik élite exercised greater caution and, after a revolutionary period, ultimately mastered the diplomatic craft.²³

A curious consistency exists in the attitude towards the European dictator between the two World Wars. He is simultaneously viewed as the executor of an innovative diplomatic style and as the modern and efficient archetype of traditional diplomacy. For the historian, Italy is more readily judged than Germany. Until the ouster of Foreign Minister Dino Grandi in July 1932, Italian diplomats were granted greater room to manoeuvre. The transition to *tono fascista*, manifested by militant rhetoric, limitations upon diplomats, and policies of concealment and obfuscation, was no invention of diplomatic tradition. Rather, it was an opening for future foreign policy failures headed by Benito Mussolini and Count Galeazzo Ciano, who led Italy into the May 1939 pact of steel, subordinating Italy to German policy in the absence of any real guarantees. Departure from the line of *combitioni* which had characterized Italian diplomacy restricted the previous room for manoeuvre.²⁴

Despite the fact that Hitler controlled his bureaucracy more tightly than did Mussolini, his attitude towards Wilhelmstrasse was different; the Neurath period featured a large degree of continuity. Hitler utilized old methods in order to conceal his revolutionary concept of foreign policy, employing public rhetoric in order to conduct diplomacy of surprise.²⁵ However, the initial success of Hitler's foreign policy in the 1930s, often contrary to the advice of his diplomats was prejudicial to the prestige of Germany's foreign service at a crucial period in European diplomacy.

The Soviet Union and the new diplomacy

The Soviet Union seemed likely to be the first of the European powers to apply the rules of the new diplomacy. Bolshevik decrees of November 1917 announced that, henceforth, negotiations would be conducted 'absolutely openly before the entire people'. Diplomatic titles were abolished by Trotsky, and the Brest-Litovsk talks were portrayed as the antithesis of secret diplomacy, a manifestation of the capitalist superstructure. The Soviet leadership claimed that Bolshevik diplomacy was unique in its openness, fairness, humanitarianism, and peaceful orientation.²⁶

The Soviets were soon disillusioned, reverting to traditional methods of diplomacy. The failure of the revolution abroad, particularly in Germany, coupled with the need to defend it at home, had a sobering effect.²⁷ In fact, the writings of Marx and Lenin could hardly constitute a useful guide for the conduct of Soviet diplomacy. Marx's approach toward international relations was fragmentary and lacked prominence in his writings.²⁸

George Chicherin, a Menshevik of aristocratic descent who joined the Bolshevik party only after the Revolution, succeeded Trotsky as the head of the Narkomindel in March 1918 and served as Commissar for Foreign Affairs for a longer period than any other foreign minister of his time. The Commissariat returned to the practices of professional diplomacy, producing first-rate diplomats. Soviet diplomats became 'sticklers for diplomatic etiquette'. Chicherin applied the Czarist diplomatic tradition to the new regime, thus assuring a degree of continuity in Russian foreign policy. He even proposed that diplomats study Czarist diplomacy in order to comprehend the problems of the Soviet Union.²⁹

Russian diplomacy successfully coped with the demands of traditional diplomacy and the representation of a revolutionary regime by clearly separating the Foreign Ministry from the Comintern. As early as the negotiations with the Germans towards the conclusion of the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922, the Soviets demonstrated their ability in conducting secret diplomacy. The Soviet leadership could always draw upon Byzantine diplomacy, a manifestation of the continuity of the Czarist heritage that relied upon centralism, dogmatism, orthodox faith, and bureaucracy.³⁰

The path was short from the defence of the Soviet Union as the centre of the Communist revolution to the security of Russia as a nation-state and renewed identification with its historic interests. This stage, defined as tactical, pending the achievement of the goals of the revolution, returned the Bolsheviks to traditional diplomacy and a balance of power strategy. Soviet diplomacy came full circle with Andrei Gromyko and Anatoly Dobrynin, cited by a former US ambassador to Moscow as exemplars of the professional diplomat.³¹ It may be seen, therefore, that while ideology is essential to the understanding of a regime's structure and general conception of foreign policy, this does not necessarily hold true regarding diplomatic practice.

Diplomacy and the new states

The twentieth century is characterized by the unprecedented expansion of international society. This took place as a result of the ever weakening European dominance and of the dispersion of the universal values of European culture and thought. Prime among these was sovereignty, expressed by the right to self-determination and the principle of equality between nations. The increase in the number of states rendered the international system far more complex, precluding the consolidation of extensive consensus on international issues. None the less, although the accession of new states to the world order led to different formations of thought and behavioural norms, diplomatic rules contributed more to cooperation than to conflict. The variance between the West and the East and between the North and the South was greater in terms of the nature of society, regime, and domestic structure than in the external domain.³²

The objection of the Third World to diplomatic rules is often attributed to a manifestation of the revolt against the West; the rules were perceived as representative of the European legacy and tutelage from which they had broken free.³³ However, this factor is rendered marginal by the real problems with which the Asian and African countries had to cope, deriving from the great tension between their formal equality in international relations and the low levels of socio-economic development which fostered their inferiority in world order. From the onset of the 1970s, their struggle focused upon the policy of the New International Economic Order, despite the considerable differences among the countries of the Third World in terms of interests and other political demands. This policy served as a source of unity, after the fundamental objectives of anti-colonialism and independence had been achieved.³⁴ The chosen means of struggle included regional organization, the establishment of a parliamentary bloc in international organizations, and an attempt to amend the international agenda and order of priorities in order to attract greater attention to the resolution of Third World problems. The results of the struggle had little impact on diplomatic procedures and failed to precipitate significant change in the plight of the Third World countries.

Although diplomacy is a product of European culture and tradition, new states, even those professing a revolutionary ideology, tend to accept its rules and, ironically, to espouse its formal, ceremonial, and traditional roles. The diplomatic protocol which was ratified by the 'reactionary powers' of the Holy Alliance is perceived as the gateway to legitimization and participation in international society. New nations have not proposed substantial changes in diplomatic practice. The Communist bloc, like the former colonial states, claimed equality of privilege, considering the rules of diplomacy as a formal expression of sovereignty.³⁵ In fact, rather than repeal, the new states sought reform of the rules within the framework of

existing diplomatic institutions. Their chances of being harmed from international anarchy were greater than those of the established states; the reinforcement of diplomatic norms, therefore, was in the interest of the Third World. As Cornelia Navari notes, 'To weak, self-regarding states, fearful of intervention, whose governments are continually attempting to legitimize their expanded prerogatives, all the traditional instruments of external legitimacy have proven useful.'³⁶

The international community has bestowed unprecedented status upon the small states: new norms recognized their equality before international law and the sovereign rights of states over their territory; international organizations, particularly the United Nations, became an institutional manifestation of the principle of equality. The results were, nevertheless, somewhat equivocal. The ability of the new states to take advantage of the rules of parliamentary diplomacy enabled them to initiate comprehensive 'legislation' regarding matters important to them. However, rhetoric, abuse, and bloc voting, led to a decrease in the importance of the international institutions.³⁷

The new states successfully influenced the debate on international issues such as colonialism, apartheid, foreign aid, and the economic order, but failed to become a significant third force capable of changing the rules of the international system. Many of these states retained the marks of their imperial past and were often economically and politically unable to break free of their mother countries. Some of them encountered great difficulty in the establishment of extensive diplomatic representation and lacked stable, professional bureaucracies to deal with foreign policy matters.³⁸

Elements of the new diplomacy

Open diplomacy

From its inception, the new diplomacy was viewed as integrally linked with the concept of democracy. This was an expansion of the changing nature of international relations and a recognition that factors such as economics, the totality of war, and qualitative components of national power—for example, leadership, governmental structure, and the degree of social consensus and unity—are related directly to the conduct of foreign policy. None the less, parliamentary supervision of foreign policy and the impact of public opinion do not necessarily lead to a demand for changes of diplomatic rules or facilitate control of foreign policy.

The first of Wilson's Fourteen Points is highly ambiguous regarding the diplomatic practice which would follow from open diplomacy. Stipulating that 'diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view', the clause fails to specify what the public's role is to be. Is the diplomat obliged merely to publicize the results of negotiations, as Wilson suggested in a letter to Secretary of State Robert Lansing, or must he reveal each stage of the talks in which he takes part? Nicolson's contention that 'there was all the difference in the world between "open covenants" and "openly arrived at covenants",' that is, between policy and negotiation, hardly requires further elaboration.³⁹

The notion of open diplomacy seemed to go along with the expectation of an outcome that was both moral and effective; 'secret' was perceived as immoral and prejudicial to the outcome of the talks. Diplomats have claimed, however, that secrecy actually enhances the objectivity and rationality of the parties' positions, concluding that the prospects of achieving an international accord are directly proportionate to the level of confidentiality maintained.⁴⁰

The recording of thousands of international treaties by the League of Nations and the United Nations has had little impact on the course of international diplomacy, although these agreements were ostensibly exposed to public scrutiny. In democratic societies it is the norm that the outcome of the diplomatic process must become public knowledge. In terms of the general populace, the success or failure of the negotiations is of the utmost significance.

Nicolson has criticized 'the irresponsibility of the sovereign people', the transfer of domestic political methods to the international arena, and the irrationality of the public in considering international issues.⁴¹ Walter Lippman writes that the 'unhappy truth is that the prevailing public opinion has been wrong in the critical junctures'.⁴² Historical experience, however, does not always vindicate these concerns regarding the negative role of public opinion.⁴³ In fact, it is difficult to establish any direct relationship between public opinion and the conduct of diplomacy. It is also a mistake to assume that public opinion became an influential force only subsequent to World War One. It had already gained prominence in the late nineteenth century; and élites and interest groups had played a significant role in influencing foreign policy even earlier.

Within the context of open diplomacy the analysis of public opinion is usually one-sided, taking into account only the impact of something called 'the populace' on the statesman, the diplomat, or the military leader. Public opinion, however, is not an autonomous force; it is frequently organized by voluntary organizations or a specific political group. And in most instances, public opinion is divided. It is as subject to manipulation as it is capable of influencing decision-makers. Thus, it is not surprising that politicians sometimes prefer to negotiate with authoritarian rulers, inasmuch as they presume a rigid control of public opinion.⁴⁴

Determination of the desirable proportion between openness and secrecy in the conduct of diplomacy is not a matter of quantity regarding the number of issues or details to be hidden from the public, but a question of fundamental values. The promise of national accord on policy is also tied to the relationship established with the general populace and with specific interest groups. Extensive consensus increases the chances that international agreements will withstand the trial of time.⁴⁵ None the less, in terms of the role and impact of both public opinion and the media on foreign policy, the experience of the twentieth century has been most ambivalent. These two forces have enjoyed unprecedented and comprehensive expression; nevertheless, this has been a century of great strategic and diplomatic surprises, and one in which the opportunity to manipulate public opinion has increased.

The practice of new diplomacy

Among the most salient aspects of the new diplomacy is the appearance of multi-lateral diplomacy and the institution of summitry; these ostensibly altered the practice and nature of diplomacy. It has been claimed that today's rapid means of communication and transportation have rendered certain elements of traditional diplomacy obsolete. In fact, the ambassador's influence has not been mitigated. Orders are transmitted promptly, and the diplomat can dispatch reports and recommendations to a wider range of targets.⁴⁶

Frequent sojourns to foreign capitals by heads of state and foreign ministers do not necessarily detract from the diplomat's importance. Politicians are no substitute for the accumulative experience of professional diplomats abroad. Agreements concluded between top-ranking statesmen must be maintained, nurtured, and subjected to periodic reassessment.

In the past, the lack of direct communication between the embassy and the home capital did not, in itself, augment the diplomat's importance or his autonomy to act without authorization. While eulogizing the professional diplomat of the twentieth century, Nicolson allows that:

most ambassadors during the period of slow communications were so terrified of exceeding their instructions or of assuming an initiative that might embarrass their home government, that they adopted a purely passive attitude, missed opportunity after opportunity, and spent their time writing brilliant reports on situations that had entirely altered by the time their despatches arrived.⁴⁷

Furthermore, the contention that summit meetings and conference diplomacy constitute a unique twentieth century phenomenon which has changed the nature of modern diplomacy is not accurate.⁴⁸ Indeed these institutions might indicate a return to a more conservative convention, whereby the ruler resumed a decisive and active role in the formulation of foreign policy. Summit meetings are most logical and suitable for the absolute ruler, and are not necessarily the product of democracy or public diplomacy. It is true, however, that summitry perhaps appears innovative in the American tradition, when one considers that the November 1906 visit of US President Theodore Roosevelt to Panama made him the first chief executive to depart the United States during his incumbency.⁴⁹

The significance of summit meetings is much debated. Strong opposition to the practice of summitry is voiced by some American diplomats. Malcolm Toon, for example, writes: 'I have never regarded meetings at the summit as a satisfactory way of conducting diplomacy, and certainly those in which I have played a role did little to improve mutual understanding.'⁵⁰ Summit meetings may entail tremendous loss of prestige in the event of failure, and often lead to inexactitude and misunderstanding, owing to logistic difficulties of interpretation, as well as improvisations due to time pressures. Moreover, the assertion that only heads of government have the requisite authority to make 'on the spot' decisions might only exacerbate the apprehension of the professional diplomat about errors made out of haste.

Prolonged negotiations between diplomats usually precede the conclusion of an agreement's final details by heads of state. Rather than signalling a new era, conference diplomacy may be viewed as the climax of traditional diplomatic activity. Rapid transportation is not the sole reason for meetings of world leaders. Nor is there any direct correlation between the importance of summitry and the decline of professional diplomacy. European conferences, from the Conference of Westphalia in 1648 to the Congress of Berlin in 1878, were certainly as significant in determining the course of international relations as those of the twentieth century.

Summit meetings are suitable and desirable in times of crisis; however, they cannot serve as a permanent substitute for traditional diplomacy. They are of symbolic and constructive value in publicly noting turning points in international relations, but not in continuous diplomatic activity. The great complexity of international issues suggests caution about the prospects for a solution in meetings between heads of state. International relations the professional diplomat might argue, should not be based upon the capriciousness of friendship or hostility or upon changes of government. Intimate acquaintance does not necessarily foster understanding; on the contrary, new information and awareness of intentions often augment controversy. The reduction of the chances of diplomatic success to the level of the individual sovereign is a risk to be taken only infrequently, when absolutely requisite. To a large extent, summit meetings constitute an uncontrolled diplomatic process which allows

sudden impressions of short-term validity to gain precedence over comprehensive and careful assessments. Finally, politicians participating in the conduct of diplomacy have great difficulty detaching themselves from considerations of domestic political utility.⁵¹

The permanent existence of multilateral diplomacy and international organizations is one of the major innovations of twentieth century diplomacy. But this change is the product of tendencies visible long before the outbreak of the First World War.⁵² The institutionalization of these phenomena is more a reflection of the expansion of the international system than a qualitative change in the structure of international society. Traditional diplomacy flourishes within these new frameworks, which have neither increased understanding among nations nor mitigated the intensity of bilateral diplomacy. Multilateral diplomacy complements traditional diplomacy; it does not replace it. The two certainly are not mutually exclusive alternatives between which states can choose.⁵³

International organizations, particularly the United Nations, constitute the most significant attempt to make the principle of the sovereign equality of states coexist with the absence of parity witnessed in reality. The actual implementation of this principle, however, would bring the great powers to an inconceivable procedural inferiority. The conflict between the superpowers is an additional factor in the diminished impact of the United Nations. The organization retains a certain symbolic importance, but is devoid of any real strength in terms of a community of nations acting together to maintain the principle of collective security. As Abba Eban writes: 'the devotees of international organizations have been more successful in criticizing the balance of power cult than in developing a convincing alternative.'⁵⁴ Apart from the first years subsequent to World War Two, most of the achievements of international diplomacy have been attained independently of the United Nations.

Conference diplomacy is a more frequent occurrence, but it too represents no real change in international relations, and makes no great impact on the pattern of power politics. Multilateral meetings for the resolution of conflict provoke the fear that radical states will create difficulties in achieving an accord which could be more readily facilitated in a limited framework. For small states, the image of the conference is one of concession and coercive agreement. The absence of cooperation at the bilateral level can hardly be expected to give way to collaboration in the multilateral framework.⁵⁵

The decline of diplomacy?

The introduction of new diplomacy was the product of the belief that traditional diplomacy was on the decline; in the words of Vansittart, the professional diplomat was 'technologically obsolete, politically superseded, and placed in a position where [his] own trained judgments mattered less and less'.⁵⁶ Taking the narrowest definition of diplomacy as the work of the diplomatist according to traditional protocol, with its broadest characterization as the conduct of foreign policy in its entirety, one does not witness decline, but rather a logical, requisite, historical change. This is not a diplomatic revolution, but a continuous process of organic development and adaptation that dates back to the Renaissance.

A central supposition of this argument is that the foreign ministry has lost its prominence inasmuch as both the formulation of policy and the conduct of negotiations are handled by heads of state. Diplomacy has moved 'from the court to the cabinet'; the politician has assumed the role of the diplomat, whose services are no longer in demand. With the increase in appointments of non-professionals, the

foreign ministry has been reduced to the level of technical apparatus.⁵⁷ Accordingly, statesmen and politicians accuse diplomats of lacking a comprehensive conception of foreign policy and espousing a parochial and unrealistic viewpoint. Military leaders and commentators claim that diplomacy is secondary to strategic imperatives, and at times prejudicial to the national interest. Careful perusal of these allegations will reveal both inaccuracy and inconsistency.

The need for structural changes in foreign ministries became apparent even prior to World War One and the call for a new diplomacy. From the end of the nineteenth century until the mid-1920s, the foreign ministries of the major European countries underwent organizational reform, serving as a model for other states. This trend gradually faded out, ostensibly due to the economic crisis.⁵⁸ It was not, however, necessarily the by-product of a new conception of the nature of diplomacy. Even the United States, the champion of the new diplomacy, enacted the Rogers Act in 1924, establishing its diplomatic career service.⁵⁹

Foreign ministries drew barrages of criticism after World War Two, mainly on the grounds of inefficiency and waste of public funds. Other governmental bureaucracies continued to assume functions entrusted previously to foreign ministries. In fact, although censured as 'wasteful aristocratic reserves', foreign ministries were among the most economical of governmental departments, relative to the constant increase in national budgets and rising military expenditures.

Allegations regarding the diminishing role of the foreign ministry in the formulation of foreign policy and its preoccupation with tactics, rather than strategy, fail to take into account that most organizational frameworks suffer from the same ills; reform, in the final analysis, is subject to political decision. Initiative and innovation are demanded from the bureaucrat/diplomat at the same time that he is required to execute the orders of his political superiors.⁶⁰

The foreign ministry constitutes a stable and permanent bureaucracy which functions regardless of political attitudes. Foreign policy cannot be conducted without the assistance of a professional diplomatic apparatus. The authority of rulers over this bureaucracy, both at home and abroad, has been exaggerated greatly. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has confessed that, as national security adviser, he frequently circumvented the State Department out of fear of its 'cumbersome machinery'. As secretary of state, however, he soon learned 'that one could not in the long run bypass the Department of State'.⁶¹

Diplomacy was never the exclusive preserve of diplomats, with rulers confined to the sidelines. Foreign policy decisions are not made solely by diplomats. Moreover, diplomats are often discriminated against by an arbitrary system of political appointments. The decline in the status of the ambassador as an independent professional and the advantages granted to the ruler's favourites are essentially a return to the court of the past. However capable, no individual or small group has the ability to cope with the myriad of complexities involved in foreign policy decision-making. Politicians, for their part, tend to focus upon limited issues of foreign policy and to neglect their wider contexts.⁶²

Contemporary international relations demands knowledge of an extensive range of spheres—economics, science, political and military. Hence, the participation of 'non-professionals' in the diplomatic process is somewhat inevitable. The status of every participant in the decision-making process has taken a plunge, not only that of the diplomat. If 'diplomacy today is too important and too complicated to be left to the professional diplomats',⁶³ this is equally true of the economist, the scientist, and the military leader. The diplomat is the liaison between the various perspectives, ensuring the primacy of political considerations in relations among nations.

Despite the increased prospects of circumvention, there is no substitute for the diplomat in the context of day-to-day international activity. The professional diplomat accumulates and evaluates the accuracy of information requisite to the formulation and execution of policy, expertly assessing the various options available to his or her government. The ambassador is a symbolic representative of his or her country's sovereignty, and controls the most important environment of its bilateral relations. Permanent residence facilitates the rectification of errors and unexpected misunderstandings. Even when heads of state are personally acquainted they cannot be knowledgeable about the extensive periphery which influences foreign relations, such as the parliament, political parties, the economy, and the media. Furthermore, the ambassador enjoys several advantages in explaining his or her country's policy. In the event of an error, the damage is less than that incurred by a declaration of a head of state. His or her explanations are construed as the voice of a professional authority uninhibited by considerations of domestic politics and popular rhetoric.⁶⁴

The continuing value of diplomacy

International politics have undergone a marked change over the course of the twentieth century. The erosion of international understanding, the emergence of a bipolar system, and the addition of an unprecedented number of new nation-states are all phenomena which cannot be easily dealt with. They necessitate not the abandonment but the careful observance of several rules of traditional diplomacy.

The universal international system developed out of the common values of the European *res publica christiana* and on the basis of recognition of international law. The diplomatic method was spread throughout the world, expressing the *raison de systeme* and constituting an integral part of the minimal conditions securing the existence of international society.⁶⁵ Diplomacy bloomed during periods of pluralism, espousal of the principle of the equality of states, and consensus regarding the rules and practices governing international relations. The absence of diplomacy would represent a revolution in international society, inasmuch as it is the primary apparatus of maintaining stability and significant relations among nations. The contention that the decline of diplomacy is inevitable is dangerous, given its potential as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Such a trend would entail far-reaching changes in the structure of international relations. Diplomacy's fate is bound up with the acceptance of political norms and rules of behaviour which make international society a meaningful reality.

Revisions of the diplomatic method have had less impact than the asymmetry between the progress of military technology and its accompanying destructive capabilities, on the one hand, and statecraft, on the other. The legacy of the inter-war period is that, to be effective, diplomacy must be backed by palpable force. It would be illusory to presume that the use of force repudiates the importance of diplomacy. Twentieth-century dictatorships, however, have associated diplomacy with weakness, concession, and failure.

In an age of fundamental conflicts of interests and cultural cleavage between states, and under the omnipresent threat of nuclear weapons, diplomatic norms remain one of the few stable foundations of international society. If the relationship between ends and means appears irrational in the nuclear age, this serves to reinforce diplomacy's importance as the only alternative to total destruction.

Throughout the ages, the main functions of diplomacy have remained the same. The qualities demanded of the professional diplomat have not changed since their formulation by Francois de Callieres at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Monumental developments in international relations notwithstanding, the second attempt at codification of diplomatic procedures was made as long as 150 years after the Congress of Vienna. As Zara Steiner notes: 'despite differences, the older forms proved to be surprisingly resistant to change'.⁶⁶ So while the diplomat may have declined in power and status, and been joined by other servants of the state for the proper fulfilment of the diplomatic function, it is a function which continues, and may have become more rather than less entrenched with the expansion of international society. It would not be surprising if this era was to be characterized not as the age of diplomacy's decline, but as the century of diplomacy.

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