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# The Reinvention of Diplomacy

Are international negotiations becoming more democratic?

By Lora Anne Viola

Diplomacy is the quintessential tool of modern statecraft. It is the means, short of force, through which foreign policy is negotiated and executed. But what happens to diplomacy when the state whose craft it practices is no longer at the center of international relations? Processes of supranationalization and transnationalization are relocating powers that once unambiguously rested with the modern state to new types of political actors, such as supranational bodies, private entrepreneurs, and NGOs. What does this transformation of the state imply for the process by which international politics is practiced?

Modern European diplomacy begins with the invention of the permanent resident ambassador in Renaissance Italy and the rise of the sovereign state. Three characteristics of the permanent resident ambassador enabled the systematization of diplomatic relations in Europe.

First, the ambassador is the first official dedicated by the sovereign for the sole purpose of representing that sovereign in its relations with foreign powers. This is in contrast to envoys which in the Middle Ages had an unspecialized role, carrying out all types of transactions on behalf of various principals of different standing; any actor – private citizens, companies, cities – with enough power or money could send and receive envoys. Second, unlike envoys who were sent abroad to deliver specific messages and then return as speedily as possible, the new ambassadors were to provide permanent contact between two sovereigns. In contrast to the ad hoc nature of the earlier envoys, this facilitated the establishment of stable continuous relations. Third, the ambassador was to establish a residence on foreign soil, known as the chancery. Residency allowed ambassadors to become local experts in the domestic and foreign policies of a particular land. By the 17th century the elements that we recognize today as modern diplomacy were already in place and remained virtually unchanged until the early 20th century.

## Democracy and the „New Diplomacy“

Many scholars consider the 19<sup>th</sup> century to have been the golden age of diplomacy. Indeed, popular images of elegant dinner parties and smoky backrooms where well-bred diplomats negotiate over the fate of international affairs can be traced to this period. But this style of diplomacy and the role of the career diplomat were to be criticized as decadent and devious in the wake of World War One. For many contemporaries, the devastation of WWI was a failure of diplomacy. Some critics directly blamed diplomacy for the war, arguing that behind-the-scenes deal-making enabled risky policies such as secret alliances which favored war. Others indirectly blamed diplomacy, arguing that it had failed to prevent the war because it was inept and poorly organized; the elite diplomatic corps was based on class rather than on talent, was out of touch with the needs of the people, and unfamiliar with the new technologies of the age.

Woodrow Wilson, proposing that the old diplomatic system be revised, called for “open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind, but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.” At the heart of the Wilsonian vision for a “new diplomacy” was the democratic conviction that the public was driven by reason to prefer peace and, if allowed to influence politics, would oppose war. Thus, in response to the perceived failure of ambassadorial diplomacy, the new diplomacy was to be exposed to the tempering effects of public scrutiny.

Liberalism built this new machinery of international cooperation in the form of the League of Nations. The League was an attempt to transplant democracy from the national to the international context and, although it was not the first multilateral conference, it was the first universal attempt to address political problems on the basis of democratic rationalism. This institution, as well as its successor the United Nations, was meant to constrain aggressive foreign policy, to subject states to legal constraints, and to make it impossible for a few elite men to determine the fate of many. Although it did not fully replace the old ambassadorial system, the diplomatic center of gravity was shifting away from the embassies of capital cities to these new universal institutions.

But the liberal democrats, whose utopianism historian E. H. Carr bitterly critiqued, would have to wait more than another half century for their ideals to come close to realization. The League failed catastrophically and its reincarnation, the United Nations, became paralyzed by the Cold War. Only after the end of the Cold War and the unfreezing of the UN did another transformation take place which opened the door for democratic diplomacy.

### State transformation and its consequences

The end of the Cold War and the spread of globalization created unprecedented forms of interdependence in the international system and enabled new actors to enter international politics. These processes have led to a transformation of the state characterized by the weakening or relocation of traditional pillars of state power, such as the monopoly on force and the monopoly on legal regulation. The end of the Cold War allowed supranational and transnational actors to take on increasing responsibility for global governance which was once the exclusive burden of states. Now states operate increasingly in partnership with supranational bodies, private entrepreneurs, and civil society actors to regulate global public goods. This transformation in the role of the state has been accompanied by a change in the nature of diplomacy as well. The content of diplomacy has become more complex; the context of diplomatic action is no longer concentrated in the embassies of Moscow or D.C., but in Kyoto, Seattle, and Doha; and while ambassadors are still appointed to capital embassies, a growing field of diverse actors from civil society is participating in diplomacy.

During the Cold War, most negotiations were dominated by the relationship between the two superpowers, but in the last two decades a larger number of states have demanded an independent voice in global governance. At the same time, rapid globalization meant that a larger range of problems could only be solved by multilateral cooperation. Trade, the environment, and global health, for example, have become sites of increased global governance activity with a large number of stakeholders addressing challenging substantive problems. This combination of increased multilateralism and issue multiplication raised the complexity of diplomatic negotiations. In the 1960s, for example, the GATT Kennedy Round saw 62 countries participate in three-year-long trade negotiations. In contrast, the latest Doha Round of the WTO trade talks included more than double that number of country participants negotiating over seven years and producing tens of millions of pages of documentation.

A parallel change is the increasing number of non-governmental actors engaged in diplomacy. The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is one of the most important avenues through which NGOs gain formal access to the international diplomatic apparatus. In 1946, 41 NGOs were granted consultative status by ECOSOC, by 1992 this number rose to over 700, and today more than 3,000 organizations have consultative status. NGOs are also increasingly accredited to participate as observers in conferences, summits, and ministerial negotiations. In 1996, for example, the WTO for the first time allowed NGOs to attend a ministerial conference. 108 NGOs representing environmental, development, consumer, business, and farm interests were present. Over subsequent years the number of NGOs attending ministerial confe-

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### Summary

Diplomacy is the quintessential tool of modern statecraft. But what happens to diplomacy when the state is no longer at the center of international relations? The transformation in the role of the state has been accompanied by a change in the nature of diplomacy as well. The content of diplomacy has become more complex, the context of diplomatic action is no longer concentrated in capital embassies, and a growing field of diverse actors from civil society is participating in diplomacy. The diplomacy of the 21st century seems to be growing beyond the state. But there are reasons to worry that the combination of partial institutional openness and civil engagement is not necessarily making diplomacy more democratic.

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rences rose dramatically, reaching 812 at the 2005 Hong Kong conference and over 750 at the 2008 Geneva conference. Furthermore, hundreds of NGOs have established working relations with particular departments, programs, or specialized agencies of the UN. Finally, even NGOs without formal access to diplomacy can apply for association with the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) which offers them a regular means of disseminating information to member states.

NGO diplomatic activity ranges from serving as advisers on government delegations, to accreditation as official observers, to lobbying, to mobilizing public opinion, to information servicing. And while NGOs typically do not have a formal voice in negotiations, they are nevertheless re-shaping how diplomacy is done. Although diplomacy grew out of the state, the diplomacy of the 21st century seems to be growing beyond the state.

First, diplomats were traditionally viewed as experts offering their countries specialized knowledge about a region or topic. But today the expertise necessary to handle complex negotiations is increasingly provided by other actors, especially NGOs. NGOs can often provide states and their negotiators with the local knowledge and compiled information that was once the job of the diplomat. Second, NGOs are creating new forms of governance by taking on watch-dog roles before, during, and after policy negotiations. When NGOs receive accreditation to participate as observers in a negotiating round's formal plenary meetings, for example, they usually have the opportunity to address government delegates on the record. They are also entitled to information on the proceedings of the negotiations, which they can then publicize and criticize. In this way, NGOs can put diplomats under a new degree of public scrutiny and pressure. Third, NGOs and celebrity diplomats such as Bono are able to mobilize public opinion and raise awareness, thereby allowing civil society to influence the foreign policy agenda.

#### New actors, new forms of communication

The transformation of the state has led many commentators to wonder if the state as we know it is withering away. We could ask the same about diplomacy: do these latest reinventions spell the end of diplomacy as we know it? The answer is certainly yes; the old ambassadorial diplomacy is no longer the main tool of statecraft. At the same time, political communication among states and between states and citizens has never been so important to international politics as it is today. This political communication is happening in a variety of new settings – intergovernmental institutions, multilateral conferences, ministerial rounds – and with a range of new actors from government and civil society. But the older forms of diplomacy are not simply being substituted by new forms; traditional diplomatic methods are merging with and working side by side with new methods and actors. So it seems that the old diplomacy has found a way to integrate the new diplomacy.

But is this combination a solomonian solution or a devil's bargain? Proponents of democracy presume that any improvement in transparency and civil society engagement always advances the public good. But there are at least two reasons to be sceptical. First, public scrutiny changes the way negotiators act, and this might not always be beneficial. Second, in a world of only partial public access, the general public good risks being trampled by special interests.

Recent research has shown that in private negotiations diplomats tend to be more flexible, open for creative solutions, and more likely to entertain hypothetical solutions to a negotiation problem. For these reasons, negotiation done out of the public view increases the likelihood of an agreement being reached. The negative effect of closed negotiations, of course, is that it makes public influence on the course of the proceedings impossible and limits political accountability to the outcome phase. This is exactly where opening up to civil society can play a helpful role.

But while public influence can be positive, it can also negatively alter the nature of negotiation. Research has also shown that public scrutiny creates incentives for government negotiators to posture, take uncompromising positions, and to avoid entertaining trade-offs perceived as politically risky. This is because government negotiators fear appearing weak and act more conservatively in order to forestall public criticism. This negotiating stance, in turn, makes reaching agreement less likely.

Putting negotiators under public pressure certainly is not a problem if the outcomes – even failure to reach agreement – reflect sensitivity to the general will. The problem arises when such outcomes instead reflect sensitivity to specialized interests at the expense of overall social welfare improvement. All too often NGOs in a position to influence international diplomacy do not represent a broad public base but rather a small but highly mobilized special interest. Moreover, NGOs are themselves not democratically accountable beyond their base, and sometimes not even within their base. Many NGOs which claim to represent the interests of the South, for example, are in fact run and organized in the North. The potential problem here is that negotiators who represent governments are constrained by groups that have no broad public mandate.

In order for public activism in diplomacy to contribute to general social welfare, mechanisms need to be in place which foster fair representation and broad legitimacy. By opening up to only some NGOs, and even then only partially, international diplomacy is sidestepping the deeper question of the democratic accountability of global governance. This is particularly problematic given the far-reaching nature of contemporary international negotiations. The next stage of the transformation debate needs to consider how to best design democratic access to diplomatic institutions in order to improve social welfare. True democratic legitimacy will most likely entail a deep reform of international institutions.

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