

# Multilateral Diplomacy in the 21st Century

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Paper prepared for ACUNS Annual Meeting at LUISS University, Rome, July 12-14, 2018

Diplomacy can be viewed as "an institution characterized by great resilience and adaptability"; "diplomacy has adjusted to changing circumstances and has sometimes been instrumental in affecting these changes" (Jönsson and Hall, 2005: 164). The 21st century has already brought remarkable changes in the international order, in global communication and in the legitimacy of liberal democracy. To what extent do these changes represent challenges to diplomacy in general, and multilateral diplomacy in particular?

In this paper I will focus on three areas of transformation: the evolution from club to network diplomacy; problems of representation; and the digitization of communication. This is by no means a comprehensive list of potential areas of change, but they have figured prominently in a recent series of discussions among practitioners and academics.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016-2017 I had the privilege of participating in a series of seminars on the topic of "Diplomacy in the 21st Century," arranged by the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin and with participants from both the academic and the diplomatic community.

## **From club to network diplomacy**

Diplomatic recognition, the "ticket of general admission to the international arena" (Krasner, 1999: 16), has been granted to states or state-like entities, and not to other influential international entities, such as multinational corporations or financial actors. Will this state-centric pattern persist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or are there signs of potential change?

The traditional "states only" approach to diplomacy is eroding, even though we are still far away from formal diplomatic recognition of other actors. Today we need to take into account a variety of potential diplomatic agents beyond the state. As Keith Hamilton and Richard Langhorne (2011) remark in a new edition of their classic textbook: "Participants in diplomacy have inevitably changed over time. The contemporary shifts only seem so remarkable because the primacy of states lasted a long time, shifted visibly only recently and has thus been the widely shared source of the common assumption about what diplomacy is and who does it."

Another student of diplomacy, Brian Hocking (1996: 41), argues that diplomacy has become "not a segmented process presided over by undisputed gatekeepers but a web of interactions with a changing cast of players interacting in a variety of contexts depending on policy issues, interests and the capacity of actors to operate in a multilevel political milieu that transcends conventional distinctions between subnational, national and international arenas." Geoff Wiseman (1999) has suggested the term "polylateral diplomacy" to catch the consequences of this fragmentation for diplomatic practice.

In today's "hybrid diplomatic arena" the individual diplomat needs to be an "orchestrator" of a broad range of voices and interests. Interactions require an abandonment of the "club" model in favor of a "network" model of diplomacy. In the club model diplomats meet primarily with government officials, fellow members of the club, with whom they feel most comfortable. In the network model diplomats interact with a vastly larger number of players, many of whom are far from "the rarefied atmosphere of the salons and private clubs the diplomats of yesteryear used to frequent." Thus, "diplomacy is becoming 'complexity management' to a degree earlier master practitioners like Cardinal Richelieu would not have imagined" (Heine, 2008: 273; cf. Heine, 2013).

The added complexity of contemporary diplomacy derives not only from the growing number of diplomatic actors, but "is also due to its much broader scope (the vast array of public policy issues it now includes) and the many policy levels (local, domestic, national, bilateral, regional and global) it entails" (Heine, 2013: 57).

Diplomatic networking, in other words, is multidimensional. Let me dwell on the subnational, supranational, transgovernmental and transnational dimensions.

*The subnational dimension.* Traditional diplomacy presupposes centralized control of interaction across state boundaries. Regions and cities are then not recognized as diplomatic *personae* with representation of their own. Nor are constituent states in federal governments. Yet today the terms "micro-diplomacy" and "para-diplomacy" are sometimes used to refer to the cross-border activities of subnational units.

Today, some authors speak of a renaissance of cities as international actors (see Nijman, 2016). City governments engage in a variety of international activities and receive increasing recognition for this role. The increasing engagement by local

governments in peaceful areas or countries in helping their counterparts in more troubled regions received special attention at the First World Conference on City Diplomacy in the Hague in 2008 (Sizoo and Musch, 2008: 7). City governments have organized themselves in one general NGO, United Cities and Local Governments, which has observer status with the United Nations.

Subnational levels of federal nations constitute a special case. US states ranging from California and Florida to New York and Massachusetts have representation in various foreign capitals, as do Canadian provinces, such as British Columbia, Quebec and Ontario. Scotland, Wales, Catalonia and Bavaria are other examples of regional diplomatic representation. Transnational partnerships and participation in multilateral organizations and networks are examples of diplomatic activity by federated entities (Cf. Criekemans, 2010; Pigman, 2010: 47).

While the diplomatic representation of subnational actors is still relatively marginal, it is not farfetched to anticipate that their role will be enhanced in 21<sup>st</sup> century diplomacy, given their critical role in the global economy.

*The supranational dimension.* At the other end of the spatial scale, at least one supranational diplomatic actor has to be taken into account in 21st-century diplomacy. The recognition of the European Union as a diplomatic actor is an anomaly in the sense that the EU is not a state. It is even debatable whether the EU itself lives up to the rather strict criteria it has adopted for recognizing a new state. Yet already in 1972, the Commission's delegation in Washington obtained full diplomatic status. The Commission's external service expanded from 50 delegations in 1980 to representation in 130 states by 2004. It was then the fourth largest diplomatic service in the world. And over the years an expanding number of states

established diplomatic missions in Brussels (see EC 2004). With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009 the European Union as such, not just the Commission, has acquired a diplomatic *persona*.

The EU “foreign minister,” the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, is assisted by the European External Action Service (EEAS). The recruitment process has not been unproblematic. Some 1,600 officials were transferred to the EEAS from the Commission and the Council Secretariat on 1 January, 2011. In addition, staff is recruited among member-state diplomats. The representational function of EU delegations is well established, and EU diplomats take an active part in the local *corps diplomatique* (see Koops and Majac, 2015; *Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 2012).

One problematic aspect of supranational European diplomacy concerns the persistence of traditional, national diplomatic representation among the member states. The emergence of the EU as a diplomatic *persona* has not replaced, but merely added a new layer to, traditional diplomacy. To represent a conglomerate of states, which all have individual diplomatic representation, is no easy matter.

The EU is an active participant in multilateral diplomacy. It is represented in a large number of international organizations (IOs), including UN bodies, as well as such fora as the G20. There are legal and political obstacles preventing EU membership and full participation in IOs, and in most cases the EU enjoys various levels of participation rights short of full membership. Its status often reflects its level of competences in the areas covered by the organization. Thus, “the EU’s full membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO) corresponds with its exclusive competence in the field of common commercial policy” (Wouters et al., 2013: 2).

Problems also originate from parallel EU and member states membership, for instance in the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and WTO (Wouters et al., 2013: 5-6). The EU does not consistently "speak with one voice," and its diplomatic participation has added complexity and a bewildering pattern of external representation to multilateral diplomacy.

*The transgovernmental dimension.* Increasingly, relations across state borders are not handled exclusively by foreign ministries. This is particularly evident in the European Union. Member-state permanent representations in Brussels are inhabited by bureaucrats from a diverse range of government departments. Today officials from domestic ministries constitute the majority in the permanent representations. Thus, "other government officials increasingly are called upon to function as diplomats" (Pigman 2010: 43).

Not only have European foreign ministries lost their former monopoly of government contacts across national borders and "found that the policy milieu in which they work is inhabited by bureaucrats from an ever more diverse range of government departments" (Hocking 2002: 3), they have also become more permeable. The trend is toward specialization and secondment to foreign ministries from other ministries. This is not unique to the European Union. For instance, more than 60 percent of those under the authority of US ambassadors and other chiefs of mission are not State Department employees (Leguey-Feilleux 2009: 142). Foreign ministries, in short, have lost their traditional role as sole manager of government contacts across national borders.

Examples of transgovernmental diplomacy abound. Suffice it to point out that the establishment and entrenchment of specialized international agencies within and

outside the UN system contribute to strengthening the cross-border links between individual government ministries and agencies beyond the control of foreign ministries. By eroding the exclusive authority of foreign ministries and diplomats to act on behalf of the state, the transgovernmental dimension represents a movement away from territorial toward functional differentiation of political authority. Authority over portions of space is overshadowed by authority over distinct functional domains or issue-areas.

*The transnational dimension.* Transnational actors (TNAs) are individuals and groups who act beyond national borders yet are not controlled by governments. These include NGOs or civil society organizations, advocacy networks, party associations, philanthropic foundations, multinational corporations, and the like. International relations today involve a broad set of transnational actors and processes, which have come to play an increasingly important role, especially in multilateral diplomacy.

Given their enhanced role, TNAs of various kinds have begun to claim, and are increasingly granted, access to various diplomatic fora. For instance, some 3,000 NGOs now have consultative status with ECOSOC, as compared to 41 in 1948. The openness toward NGOs has subsequently spread to other parts of the UN system, generating a pattern where few or no UN bodies remain entirely closed to TNAs (cf. Tallberg and Jönsson 2010). In the mid-1980s international negotiations on ozone depletion attracted only a handful NGOs, and not a single environmental NGO was present at the signing of the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer in 1985. In the 1990s and early 2000s, by contrast, NGOs typically outnumbered states at key negotiations dealing with climate change.

States and international institutions are engaging TNAs as policy experts, service providers, compliance watchdogs, and stakeholder representatives. A new dataset, containing information on formal TNA access to 298 organizational bodies of 50 international organizations during the time period 1950-2010, shows that, while hardly any of these organizations were open in 1950, more than 75 percent provided access in 2010 (see Tallberg et al. 2013).

In addition to gaining access to diplomatic fora, TNAs can enact diplomatic roles by means of informal networking. Prominent examples of networking between states, NGOs and international organizations include the processes leading to the Ottawa Treaty banning landmines and the creation of the International Criminal Court.

In global health governance the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has emerged as a major player. Actors behind popular digital platforms, such as Google and Facebook, have a considerable political impact in how they organize our access to information. While they have not become actively involved in diplomatic processes thus far, their central position in today's world will inevitably draw them into the diplomatic realm before the end of the century.

In sum, one may speak of a transnational turn in diplomacy. Senior diplomats admit that traditional bilateral and multilateral diplomacy has been "progressively supplemented by transnational issues which may or may not involve government-to-government activity" (Hamilton and Langhorne, 2011: 267). However, TNA representation is problematic. Whereas TNAs typically claim to represent a "global civil society," a disproportionate number of them are based in North America or Europe. "As of 2007, 66 per cent of the then 3,050 NGOs with consultative status at the ECOSOC came from North America or Europe" (Dany, 2013: 8). This imbalance

seriously reduces the legitimacy of their claims to represent the underprivileged and give voice to the voiceless. The crucial question is whether TNAs from the poor half of the world will acquire the necessary resources to be represented in international forums in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In sum, in the 21st century the "dialogue of states" (Watson, 1982) is giving way to a complex conversation between a variety of subnational, supranational, transgovernmental and transnational voices.

### **Problems of representation**

Representation, in terms of standing and acting for others, is a core function of diplomacy. Historically, diplomats represented individual rulers; today they represent states. For centuries, the fact that diplomats represented venerable principals – from powerful monarchs to established states – guaranteed their protected and privileged status. Whereas long-standing rules of diplomatic immunity and privileges by and large continue to be upheld in interstate relations, popular perceptions of diplomats have changed in recent decades. To the extent that diplomats are perceived as symbols of disliked countries, religions or "-isms," the quality of standing for others has been transformed from a rationale for diplomatic immunity to a rationale for political violence. No longer inviolable symbols, diplomatic representatives have increasingly become highly vulnerable symbols.

In a polarized world diplomats and diplomatic facilities have become soft targets for terrorist attacks. For instance, out of all terrorist attacks targeting the United States between 1969 and 2009, 28 percent were directly against US diplomatic officers. In 2012 alone various diplomatic institutions were attacked 95 times, of which more than

one-third targeted UN personnel (Ismail, 2016: 139). As a consequence, embassy security has become an overriding concern. Some embassies today have the appearance of fortresses or penitentiaries, with barbed wire atop and alongside high walls without windows. CCTV surveillance, turnstiles, metal detectors and crash proof barriers are but a few examples of security devices at embassies and consulates. One veteran US diplomat speaks of “creeping militarization,” as embassy security has become influenced by military priorities and requirements (Bullock, 2015). The military connection is also reflected in the fact that embassies and diplomats representing governments with ongoing military operations are particularly vulnerable.

This raises the question whether there are non-militarized ways of restoring the protection and security of diplomats that have been a hallmark of diplomacy throughout centuries. The tendency toward increasing insecurity and vulnerability not only impedes diplomatic tasks but also threatens to render the recruitment of qualified personnel more difficult.

Standing for others can be understood in another, more literal sense. To what extent do diplomats need to mirror the social and ethnic composition of the societies they represent? For most of recorded history, diplomatic envoys have represented individual rulers rather than whole communities and have not necessarily come from the same country as their rulers. Well into the nineteenth century diplomats were aristocrats, who could easily change from one monarchical employer to another. The idea that diplomats should be an accurate reflection or typical of the society they represent is quite recent. With increasing migration, many – if not most – states will have a multiethnic and multicultural character in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In countries with substantial immigration, such as Sweden, governments have recently made efforts to

influence recruitment policies in order that the diplomatic corps better mirror the multiethnic character of these societies.

The standard objection to taking measures to safeguard representativeness in this sense is that diplomats are supposed to represent national policies and values rather than the social and ethnic composition of the society they come from. However, the question needs to be raised how important the symbolic value of accurately reflecting their society might be in the perceptions of relevant audiences. Another consideration concerns the potential value of individuals with multiple cultural background and understanding in diplomatic negotiations with relevant counterparts. For instance, could diplomats recruited from the Muslim population in Germany or Sweden play a constructive role in negotiations with Arab countries?

Gender is another debated dimension of representativeness. In many diplomatic establishments around the world there is an ongoing quest to end formal and informal barriers and bring about gender parity, which will no doubt pervade the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite positive developments in recent years, diplomatic infrastructures still tend toward masculinized norms, homo-social environments and gendered divisions of labor (see Aggestam and Towns, 2018).

The representative role of professional diplomats hinges on the predominance of states in international relations.

When states become weaker, so do those who represent and derive authority from them. As the trend continues towards global decision-making for the big global issues on the one hand, and greater localisation and individualisation on the other, where does a state's representative fit in? (Fletcher 2016: 14)

Whereas members of the profession represent a weakened yet still highly significant entity in contemporary network diplomacy, it also makes a difference what kind of regime they represent. According to classic liberal internationalist thinking, there is a link between democracy and diplomacy, especially multilateral diplomacy. The League of Nations rested on two assumptions: "that the age of democracy had arrived, providing a sufficient number of soundly democratic states to unite in an organization for maintaining world peace; and that the democratic method of arriving at agreement by civilized discussion rather than coercive dictation could be applied to relations of democratic states as well as to those of individuals" (Claude, 1964: 47). In this view, the shifting balance between democracies and authoritarian states in the 21st century represents a setback for multilateral diplomacy.

Moreover, among democracies there is a rise of populist parties and leaders. Populism represents a democratic representation problem. Populists claim to represent "the real people" or "the silent majority." By implication, those who do not share the populists' views and notion of "the people" are no legitimate members of society. Populism is essentially anti-pluralist, which is in contradiction to the norm of coexistence – of "live and let live" – on which both democracy and diplomacy rest (cf. Jönsson, 2019).

The controversial conception of democratic representation domestically translates into a diplomatic representation problem externally. Exploiting growing mistrust and suspicion among voters, populist leaders target diffuse and undefined forces, such as "the establishment" or "experts" who have ostensibly undermined the democratic system. Along with journalists, diplomats are typically included in these categories. The fact that xenophobia often is a component of populism does not make the situation easier for diplomats. This raises the question of how to represent a principal

who distrusts you. The United States under Trump is a case in point. The president has openly declared his lack of confidence in the State Department and proposes to cut its budget. A number of important ambassadorial appointments have been postponed. Among US diplomats there is widespread distress, and some have chosen to leave the service.

Another, related problem concerns deeply divided societies. Two prominent examples are Britain after the Brexit referendum and the United States after the election of Donald Trump as president. These countries are virtually split into two halves of similar strength, with opposing views on issues diplomats have to deal with. On the one hand, this would seem to grant diplomats more leeway. But, on the other hand, the lack of firm and consistent policies, standpoints and instructions complicates life for diplomats significantly.

The lack of a firm consensus can be a serious liability in international negotiations, as the other side may try to exploit internal divisions and opposing standpoints. One common dynamic, well-known from repeated Cold War occurrences, is that hard-liners of both sides tend to reinforce each other's position. The Brexit negotiations will be a significant test case to see whether old patterns hold in the new 21<sup>st</sup>-century environment. Their unique character of an encounter between a deeply divided society and a coalition of a large number of dissimilar states makes for interesting observations concerning representation in the contemporary world.

In sum, representation is no simple and static concept, but a complex and dynamic one. Changes in the parameters of diplomatic representation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century warrant reflection among practitioners and students alike. As symbolic representatives of states, diplomatic agents face challenges in terms of increased

vulnerability and demands for reflecting multiethnic societies. The problems of acting for others, discussed here, pertain to the difference between democratic and authoritarian states and the specific complications associated with divided states and populist politics.

## **Digitization**

The digitization of communication permeates not only diplomacy but virtually all aspects of public and private life. In the 21st century, the speed with which information is communicated is close to real-time. Moreover, the amount of available information is virtually unlimited. And diplomats can have a conversation on various platforms with theoretically any other human being using the same platform (cf. Stanzel 2017: 1). Furthermore, the rapid acceleration of innovations within digital technology has to be taken into account.

However, the entry into the digital era entails more than the provision of additional and refined communicative tools. The depth and extent of digital technology has, in effect, created a new environment or landscape, in which diplomatic actors communicate and conduct relations. Digitization has generated a new relationship dynamic that is colliding with old diplomatic routines. For instance, Samantha Power, US ambassador to the UN, at one point during the negotiations in 2016 about ceasefire in Syria tried to persuade the Saudi ambassador to take part in a virtual reality experience of a refugee camp.

Adapting to this new environment, diplomacy is undergoing operational as well as institutional shifts (cf. Wagner 2017: 3). Operationally, the digital transformation forces diplomats to go beyond the traditional preference for closed spaces and

physical encounters (Melissen and de Keulenaar 2017: 4), "requiring diplomats to regularly look outside their once closed doors, and perhaps more importantly, for the first time, allowing citizens to look in" (Bjola 2017b: 6). Diplomatic communication in the 21st century will increasingly mean connecting with a wider public: "as power continues to move towards the individual those 'in power' will have to insure that their message is connecting with the public," and the role of a diplomat will be "not just representing a government to a government but representing a people to a people" (Fletcher 2016: 156, 195). If earlier history has seen a change from the "orator" diplomat of the Greek city-states to the "trained observer" of the 19th and 20th centuries, as proposed by Sir Harold Nicolson, diplomats in the 21st century are evolving from trained observers to proactive initiators and modern orators (Heine 2013: 66).

Institutionally, a dense digital environment favors networks over hierarchies and bureaucratic structures (cf. Bjola 2017b: 5). Some have even predicted the end of physical embassies, and a few virtual embassies have been established with limited success (see Gilboa 2016: 544). Digital presence, in any case, amplifies the accountability of individual diplomats, who have to react both in real-time and in depth and assume direct responsibility for all published statements.

Presence in social media has quickly become a necessary element of diplomacy. By 2016 there were 793 Twitter accounts belonging to heads of state and governments in 173 countries, representing 90 percent of all UN member states (Bjola 2017a: 3). With Carl Bildt and Hillary Clinton as pioneers, ministries of foreign affairs have become replete with "tweeting Talleyrands" (Fletcher 2016: 8). Once diplomats enter the realm of social media and practice "Facebook diplomacy" or "Twiplomacy" (Gilboa 2016: 541), they expose themselves to new conditions of work. Social media

offer transparency and emotional impact. To take advantage of these media, “diplomats have to appear as individuals, have to offer insight in at least some private aspects of what they are doing, and allow an exchange over policies that may become emotionally charged” (Stanzel 2017: 3). A dry bureaucrat cannot expect followers. Diplomats need to “entertain and engage, create genuine emotional connections, and take risks” (Fletcher 2016: 166). This means “removing the once held dear structures of formality and secrecy, with diplomats instead today being expected to engage in highly public conversations, with their messages informal and short in tone” (Bjola 2017a: 3-4).

Digitization entails dangers as well as advantages for diplomacy. The share of conversational exchanges in social media that are done by web robots or bots rather than people is increasing, and when artificial intelligence overtakes humans in the population of digital users, the possibility of diplomats to develop meaningful relationships with online public will decrease drastically. The “dark side” of digital technologies, such as disinformation and infowar tactics, has proved to be the most fertile soil for the proliferation of bots (Bjola 2017b: 6-7). Whereas the success of future diplomacy may depend on the successful use of digitization, the future development of digitization may produce effects that undermine successful diplomacy (Stanzel 2017: 5).

Whereas many foreign ministries initially “siloe off” digital diplomacy, with a few departments such as press office, public policy or technology policy departments designated as responsible actors, mainstreaming will no doubt develop in the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Every desk officer and every ambassador will need to have at least a basic understanding of how digital technology applies to their specific context (Wagner 2017: 5). Today senior diplomats are digital “tourists,” looking at awe and

trying to take in the new landscape; younger staff are digital “immigrants,” learning but not yet fully integrated into the new culture; the next generation of diplomats will be digital “natives,” fully versed in the new technology and taking it for granted. Only then will the full impact of digitization be discernible.

## **Conclusion**

The three areas of change in 21st-century diplomacy identified in this paper are obviously interrelated. The transition from a “club” to a “network” model is conditioned by the digitization of communication. Digitization entails limitless connectivity. A multitude of potential diplomatic actors become involved, not least in multilateral diplomacy, and claim increasing participation in international affairs. As representatives of states, professional diplomats can no longer claim a monopoly on contacts across state borders.

These transitions are not likely to be free from hitches or risks. Digitization entails not only opportunities but also threats. Social media can be used to facilitate as well as destroy diplomatic solutions, to mobilize “coexisters” as well as “wall builders.” The vulnerability of diplomats representing disliked states is increasing in the digital era. If nationalism and populism continue to spread and authoritarian regimes continue to expand at the expense of democratic ones, multilateral diplomacy threatens to become ever more intractable. As functional differentiation tends to overshadow territorial differentiation, the position of foreign ministries will weaken in relation to other ministries and agencies. The transnational challenge to diplomacy can be met only by giving voice to civil society while countering “uncivil” society. The 21<sup>st</sup> century,

in short, promises to be an era of unprecedented complexity and uncertainty for diplomacy.

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