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Understanding Diplomacy in the 21st Century

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Diagnosing the Crisis of (State-led) Diplomacy or Trying to Save It?

The project Diplomacy in the 21st Century, initiated and organized by a retired ambassador and former political director of the German Foreign Office, can be understood as a manifestation of the lingering crisis of traditional state-led diplomacy as well as a potential vehicle for designing effective remedies. These two different understandings, the notion of crisis symptom as well as crisis treatment, could serve as normative axes around which the project’s research agenda might rotate, respectively. With regards to the first normative axis, the analytical focus would be to formulate a precise crisis diagnosis. This could be achieved by analyzing the increasing social and political participation of diverse actors in international relations coupled with rapid technological advances in communication as well as infrastructure sectors that taken together decisively impact the traditional practice of state-led diplomacy. With respect to the second normative axis, the project’s agenda could focus on providing analytically-backed arguments for why state-led diplomacy could remain relevant despite the profound social and political transformation.

Regardless of the normative Erkenntniseresse, any inquiry into the theory and practice of diplomacy in the 21st century must take into account the evolution of the understanding of diplomacy during the latter half of the 20th century and the plurality of analytical perspectives it has spawned. As a consequence, analytical perspectives based on the traditional concept of state-led diplomacy might be useful for providing potential remedies for the challenges of this particular practice. In contrast, other perspectives that broaden the hitherto narrowly defined concept beyond the interaction among nation states could in fact better account for the marginalization of diplomats by rival state as well as transnational actors.

Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the empirical and normative implications of conceptual choices. In the first part, I provide a brief survey of the evolution of the concept of diplomacy based on two analytical perspectives on its empirical manifestation. In the second part, I try to combine both perspectives by focusing on the increasing use of economic statecraft in the form of international sanctions. Doing so might help to equally provide a concise crisis diagnosis while offering some hints at how it could be remedied.

Two Analytical Approaches to Understand Diplomacy

Etymologically, the term diplomacy most likely derived from the ancient Greek word diploun (for twofold or double) that was used in connection with diplomas (special documents carried by religious envoys that were supposed to ensure a safe journey). Beginning in the sixteenth century, the qualifier “diplomatic” came to refer to the science of codifying handwriting that was needed to authenticate the validity of diplomas issued by religious authorities. After the British parliamentarian Edward Burke replaced what had previously called negotiation by diplomacy at the end of the 18th century, the subsequent understanding of diplomacy would significantly depart from the original meaning of the term. In the course of an advancing modernity, diplomacy in theory the idea that diplomacy is whatever diplomats do, but it quickly falls apart again around the question of who are the diplomats. As a consequence, analytical perspectives based on the traditional concept of state-led diplomacy might be useful for providing potential remedies for the challenges of this particular practice. In contrast, other perspectives that broaden the hitherto narrowly defined concept beyond the interaction among nation states could in fact better account for the marginalization of diplomats by rival state as well as transnational actors.

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This is of utmost importance because choosing any of these different analytical perspectives has profound empirical and normative implications for how the practice of diplomacy will be conceived, evaluated and justified in the 21st century. In fact, different perspectives provide different answers to the fundamental question emphasized by Paul Sharp that “when it is that people begin to recognize aspects of their relations as diplomatic, why they do so, and with what consequences.” According to him, this can be attributed to “an uneasy consensus around

2 Murray, »Consolidating the Gains Made in Diplomacy Studies: A Taxonomy«; Bjola/Kornprobst, Understanding International Diplomacy: Theory, Practice and Ethics.

3 Sharp, Diplomatic Theory of International Relations, pp. 75-76.

4 Leira, »A Conceptual History of Diplomacy«.

5 Berridge, »Introduction«, p. 6, fn. 3.
and practice came to be understood as peaceful conduct of between consolidated political entities such as kingdoms and nation states. Toward the end of the 20th century, the prevailing conceptualization of diplomacy got substantially broadened which blurred the analytical focus.

The Traditional Perspective on Diplomacy

The traditionally narrow perspective on diplomacy focuses on those actions by specially authorized personnel which are concerned with the professional management of cross-border activities among different kinds of political communities such as tribes, kingdoms, empires, or nation states. Those actions encompass different means short of physical force. Firstly exercised by aristocrats, diplomacy had been increasingly practiced by the emerging bourgeois class since the 19th century. This homogenous cast of diplomats eventually exercised a more or less unrivalled intellectual hegemony over how diplomacy would be conceptualized.6 In this respect, they declared diplomacy among sovereign entities as the norm while regarding themselves as the only “real” diplomats, a powerful epistemic claim backed up by the symbolic and material resources provided through the institution of the nation state as well as a unique set of responsibilities.7 For a long time, these traditional diplomats could credit themselves for possessing superior knowledge about the art of diplomacy. Their practical wisdom left its mark on academia providing the intellectual springboard of the emerging discipline of International Relations.8 Consequently, their writings spawned a vast veteran’s literature chronicling encounters and achievements which long dominated the surrounding discourse on the concept of diplomacy.9 This state-centric bias was deeply entrenched in the traditional perspective on diplomacy as the “professional management of relations across sovereignties.”10 Furthermore, this traditional perspective on diplomacy emphasized its non-violent means11, official character12, and the many representative13 as well as communicative functions. According to Geoff R. Berridge, diplomacy’s “chief purpose is to enable states to secure the objectives of their foreign policies without resort to force, propaganda, or law.” Due to its non-violent character, diplomacy appeared as “the most important institution of [the] society of states.”14

Painting a rather historical picture of the conduct of state-led diplomacy, this traditional perspective long dominated the IR sub-discipline of Diplomatic Studies which remained largely immune to outside theorizing by academics.15 Instead, the practice of state-led diplomacy mainly determined its theory.16 The long dominance of this narrow perspective on diplomacy was mainly responsible that “the study of diplomacy remains marginal to and almost disconnected from the rest of the field [of IR theory].”17 As result, “rigorous theoretical and careful empirical work on diplomacy […] is extremely sparse.”18 Hence, examples of further theorizing diplomacy along the lines of domi-

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6 Such as the famous definition that “[diplomacy is the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states, extending sometimes also to their relations with vassal states.” Ernest M. Satow, Satow’s Guide to Diplomatic Practice, 5th ed. London: Longman, 1979 [1917], p. 3.


8 “In the early days, the discipline [of International Relations] was not there to produce knowledge; already-existing (practical) knowledge produced its discipline.” Stefano Guzzini, The Ends of International Relations Theory: Stages of Reflexivity and Modes of Theorizing, p. 523.

9 de Wicquefort, The Ambassador and His Functions; Francois De Callières, The Art of Diplomacy; Henry A. Kissinger, Diplomacy.


11 Watson, Diplomacy: The Dialogue Between States, XVI.


13 Sending, Introduction, p. 6.


15 Murray, Diplomatic Theory and the Evolving Canon of Diplomatic Studies.

16 Adler-Nissen, Conclusion: Relationalism or Why Diplomats Find International Relations Theory Strange.

17 Sharp, For Diplomacy: Representation and the Study of International Relations, p. 34.

18 Rathbun, Diplomacy’s Value: Creating Security in 1920s Europe and the Contemporary Middle East, p. 22.
nant IR paradigms remained marginal in the field of Diplomatic Studies. After the Cold War, this previously one-way interaction between the practice and theory of diplomacy would gradually become more mutual due to innovative theoretical interventions and fundamental social changes.

Broadening the Concept of Diplomacy

As James Der Derian argued that “it could well be that diplomacy has suffered from theoretical neglect to the extent that power politics has profited - in theory and practice. When diplomacy is construed as a continuation of war by other means, as is often the realpolitik case, then little intellectual energy needs to be wasted on the illumination of power’s shadow.” Starting in the late 1980s, a new generation of (post-positivist) scholars, including Der Derian, set out to uncover the powerful intellectual forces that had successfully fixed the uniform meaning of diplomacy as interactions among sovereign entities. Their critical interventions signaled the beginning of a decisive change in conceptualizing diplomacy beyond the traditional state-centric perspective.

As the academic field further expanded and compartmentalized, the different analytical perspectives on diplomacy were increasingly shaped by the mutual interaction of scholars and practitioners. This interaction was mainly driven by the loosening of the intellectual hegemony of state-sanctioned diplomats over the discourse about the concept of diplomacy. This loss of intellectual hegemony was in turn spurred by fundamental social and technological transformations in international relations which had grown more inter-connected since the 1970s and even more rapidly after the end of the Cold War. The sources of this sea change were twofold: Firstly, many cross-border social exchanges were increasingly managed by a multitude of other state as well as non-state actors. Coupled with a host of transnational challenges such WMD proliferation, transnational violent extremism, climate change, and unregulated migration flows, this increasingly complex landscape required new forms of international cooperation well beyond the capacities of single nation states and thus traditional state-led diplomacy. Secondly, the fundamental transformation in international relations was in addition driven by rapid advances in communication technology. In fact, the emergence of modern mass media had already allowed a greater number of ordinary folks, including journalist as well as academics, to gaze behind the curtain of the Arcanum of state-led diplomacy since the late 19th century. After the end of the Cold War, however, the expanding numbers of actors and their access to information - again accelerated by the advent of the digital age - made the use official channels to secretly and thus confidentially negotiate hidden from public scrutiny much harder. Taken together, these social and technological changes reduced the prerogative of state-led diplomacy as main mediator in international relations. The increasing acknowledgement of the importance of non-state actors undermined the exclusive application of the concept of diplomacy to politically authorized officials acting on behalf of nation states. As the understanding of diplomacy was broadened, conceptually it evolved into a kind of umbrella term for describing a wide-range of activities undertaken not only by state but any kind of non-state actors including businesses, civil society groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and supra-national institutions. Looking at the contemporary field of Diplomatic Studies, there now exist an elaborated academic discourse based on multiple theoretical perspectives on what diplo-

19 Steiner, »Diplomacy and International Theory<.
21 Der Derian, On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement; Der Derian, Antidiplomacy: Spies, Terror, Speed, and War in International Relation; R. B. J. Walker, Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory; Constantinou, On the Way to Diplomacy.
22 Bjola/Holmes, »Introduction: Making Sense of Digital Diplomacy«, p. 4; Copeland, Guerrilla Diplomacy: Rethinking International Relations; De-Wei, »Public Manifestations of Backchannel Diplomacy: The Case of the 2013 Iranian Nuclear Agreement«.
macy “really” is. This plurality of analytical perspectives emphasizes different processes and actors that can be conceptualized as being diplomatic. Costas M. Constantinou and Paul Sharp offered a useful typology of these different perspectives on diplomacy as: (1) specific instrument of consolidated political communities such as nation states or international organizations to create and maintain peace, (2) medium (context for solving interstate conflicts) or (3) mixture of both. Another typology is provided by Christer Jönsson who differentiated diplomatic practices as (1) the content of foreign affairs [foreign policy analysis] (2) the conduct of foreign policy [theories of statecraft], (3) the management of international relations by means of negotiation [theories of bargaining], (4) the use of diplomatic personnel or services, (5) a particular manner of behavior or habitus, (6) a craft including a set of skills of diplomats.

Any of these different perspectives on diplomacy has profound empirical and normative implications. For example, scholarly accounts in the tradition of the English School that emphasize the role of diplomacy as an institution of international society undermine the outstanding role of traditional diplomats in international relations. As summarized by Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, such a perspective would regard “diplomacy as an institution of international societies, not of individual states” which would be “crucial in forging compromise” among universal and particular propensities of different societies. Such a broad conceptualization of diplomacy is also adopted by other leading scholars of the field. Paul Sharp defined diplomacy as “[t]he way in which relations between groups [including state as well as non-state actors] that regard themselves as separate ought to be conducted if the principle of living in groups is to be retained as good, and if unnecessary and unwanted conflict is to have a chance of being avoided.” In his magisterial 2009 book, Sharp came close to equating diplomacy with tolerance and a peaceful coexistence among groups of people.

In sum, contemporary scholarship in the field of Diplomatic Studies finds diplomats as “the traditional ‘gatekeepers’ [to be] struggling to maintain relevance and [to be] reforming in a bid to hang on to the keys to the gate.” This challenge to traditional diplomatic practice has been traced by the increasing incorporating of many non-traditional diplomatic tasks as well as multifaceted other duties. Nevertheless, such broader conceptualization of diplomacy bid farewell to the sole prerogative in conducting international relations in the face of the rise of a multitude of non-state actors transacting on different issues and regions on the basis of what has been described as polylateral diplomacy (Geoffrey Wiseman). Seen from these broader perspectives on the concept of diplomacy, the long-term prospects of an entire profession seem to be at stake.

Combining the Two Perspectives

As Alexander Stagnell has rightly warned, adopting such broad perspectives on the concept of diplomacy inevitably blurs the analytical focus. Doing so will ultimately diminish our understanding of key dynamics and processes of international relations. To prevent this outcome, both ana-

24 Constantinou/Sharp, »Theoretical Perspectives in Diplomacy«, p. 18.
25 Jönsson, »Theorising Diplomacy«, p. 15.
26 Most prominently, those include Martin Wright who conceived of diplomacy as “the master-institution of international relations.” Martin Wright, Power Politics, p. 113.
lytical approaches to study diplomacy should be combined by keeping the traditional concept of diplomacy as interaction among sovereign entities while at the same time broadening the conceptualizations of the means and ends involved. In fact, theoretically-informed accounts of the means and ends of state-led diplomacy are still rare. This seems especially troublesome with respect to the changing nature of statecraft. This change in the global patterns of how statecraft is conducted has been characterized by the declining utility of the use of military force. This is mainly due to three trends: Firstly, any use of military force among major powers possessing nuclear weapons would be overshadowed by a mutual assured destruction. Further, it is exacerbated by the emergence of post-heroic societies across Western countries where material affluence correlates positively with post-material values including a high intolerance, if not allergy, to casualties.\(^3\) Finally, a rapidly growing political and economic inter-dependence\(^4\) has fuelled what has been termed an “illicit globalization.”\(^5\) It associated unconventional threats such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, trans-national violent extremism as well as crime, and human trafficking cannot be effectively addressed by the use of military force.

As the political utility of the use of military force declined dramatically, the importance of economic statecraft has been greatly elevated in the 21st century in which markets will most likely emerged as the main battlefields of international relations. Diplomats embodying a sovereign, is much more of a withdrawn manager of politics similar to the modern bureaucrat (...) So if diplomacy on the one hand is expanded in order to encompass every international relationship in which there is need for mediation and representation, while on the other it is enlarged to include every communicative relationship crossing a border (sometimes not even limiting diplomatic communication to being international) one is inclined to ask what diplomacy is defined against.” Alexander Stagnell, On Diplomacy as Ideological State Apparatus, p. 55.

\(^3\) Münkler, Der Wandel des Krieges: Von der Symmetrie zur Asymmetrie, pp. 310-354.


\(^5\) Andreas, »Illicit Globalization: Myths, Misconceptions, and Historical Lessons«.

In fact, the use of economic sanctions is now the preferred policy option to effectively address a wide range of threats to national security. This is due to the fact that the use of economic sanctions is economically as well as politically less costly than military force but can be much more invasive than negotiations and propaganda. In particular, the use of financial sanctions turned out to be the go-to option to confront a vast array of conventional and unconventional challenges after the end of the Cold War.

Confronted with these changing patterns of how statecraft is being conducted, diplomats find themselves in a subordinated role in yielding its powerful economic instruments. At the same time, other actors within diplomat’s own governments, most notably officials from finance and economics ministries with no or only very little diplomatic experience and related skills, have encroached upon their formerly exclusive competencies.\(^6\) This ongoing marginalization might be a path-dependent result of the widespread disregard of economics that traditionally prevailed within the diplomatic corps, comprised mostly of aristocrats who viewed the emancipation of the merchant middle class with utter disdain.\(^7\) Regardless of its sources, the declining role of diplomats exhausts itself to serving as mere “orchestrators.” As such, they are tasked with organizing international coalitions of the willing in order to enhance its effectiveness for creating economic pain for those who are targeted. However, the much more important task of designing and implementing these economic measures is being done by a new cast of “financial warriors” who

\(^6\) Blackwill/Harris, War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft.

\(^7\) In this regard, Sir Robert F. Cooper correctly pointed out that coercive “[d]iplomacy is partly Newtonian physics - power, pressure and leverage - but it is also about what people want.” Robert Cooper, »Ukraine and Iran Vindicate Ashton’s Def Diplomacy«.

\(^8\) This encroachment can even extend to sub-national officials who employ economic means. Noé Cornago, »(Para)diplomatic Cultures: Old and New« p. 183.

\(^9\) Werner Sombart’s influential book Händler und Helden might serve as the prime example of the low regard for economics in the supposedly “high politics” involving only war and peace.
increasingly merge in their actions the responsibilities of diplomats as well as soldiers. So when the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution that contained multilateral sanctions against the financing of terrorism in December 2015, only economic and finance ministers participated in the session. After 9/11, the U.S. State Department has struggled to keep the initiative in designing and implementing anti-terrorism sanctions vis-à-vis the National Security Council (NSC) within the White House as well as the Office for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI) within the U.S. Treasury Department. In February 2015, Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Intelligence David S. Cohen, one of the main architects of the severe financial sanctions against Iran, assumed the post of Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Up until now, there remain only two institutionalized career paths for institutional positions in the conduct of statecraft, namely those of soldier and diplomat. In order to account for the rising importance of economic statecraft, the two must either be complemented by a third career path or the existing education and vocational training of diplomats must be supplemented by theoretical and practical knowledge about how to best use economic instruments. Currently, both alternatives more or less lack required knowledge given the dearth of literature on those economic instruments of diplomacy which can be employed coercively in negotiations. In fact, existing scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on diplomacy’s relationship to the use of military force as a “diplomacy of violence.” Coercive diplomacy as a concept is not geared at defeating an adversary or enemy but to change its behavior. This is supposed to be achieved by relying on “threat-based bargaining process. [...] defined as the deliberate and purposive use of overt threats to influence another’s strategic choices.” For Alexander George, the concept of coercive diplomacy would be entirely defensive as thus different from Thomas Schelling’s strategy that must therefore be more accurately termed as compellance.

As the literature on coercive diplomacy privileged the threat or limited use of military force, it has little to say about the economic instruments of statecraft. This neglect is mirrored in the recent “practice turn” in IR theory and Diplomatic Studies has produced insights into what diplomats normally do or what forms of diplomatic knowledge exist. In addition, recent scholarship has produced anthropological accounts of the various diplomatic roles or “scripts” official state representatives fulfill. While these findings might enhance our understanding about what is going on behind the walls of foreign ministries, it tells us little about the how state bureaucracies decide about the processes and actors that are involved in yielding economic instruments of statecraft coercively.

40 Acheson, »The Eclipse of the State Department« in: Foreign Affairs; Zarate, Treasury’s War: Unleashing a New Era of Financial Warfare.
41 Atlas/Mayeda, »When Money Is a Weapon: How the Treasury Got Into the Spy Game«.
42 Schelling, Arms and Influence, p. 3.
43 George/Simons (eds.), The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy; Byman/Waxman, The Dynamics of Coercion; Art, »Introduction«; Jakobsen, »Coercive Diplomacy«.
44 Friedman, »Strategic Coercion«, p. 3.
45 For George, compellence would include “exclusive or heavy reliance on coercive threats to influence an adversary” in order “to persuade a victim to give up something of value without putting up resistance.” In contrast, coercive diplomacy would be entirely defensive and thus primarily intended to “persuade an opponent to stop and/or undo an action he is already embarked upon.” For George, the term coercive diplomacy would “emphasize the possibility of a more flexible diplomacy that can employ noncoercive persuasion and accommodation as well as coercive threats.”
46 Pouliot/Cornut, »Practice Theory and the Study of Diplomacy: A Research Agenda«; Sending/Pouliot/Neumann, Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics.
47 Constantinou, »Between Statecraft and Humanism: Diplomacy and Its Forms of Knowledge«.
48 Neumann, »To Be a Diplomat«; At Home with the Diplomats: Inside a European Foreign Ministry.
Theorizing the Economic Means of Diplomacy

The theory and practice of diplomacy as related to economic statecraft has not been adequately dealt with in the discipline of IR, including its sub-field of Diplomatic Studies. Whereas some conceptualizations of economic diplomacy surely exist\(^49\), such perspectives commonly focus only on its non-coercive aspects. Those are related to the promotion of business interests, the negotiation of trade agreements and institutions of economic governance\(^50\) as well as foreign aid.\(^51\) In this vein, scholars identified a trend toward a privatization of diplomacy through the spread of the multinational company and the intrusion of influential business groups into the policy-making process.\(^52\) However, the use of trade and financial sanctions as one of the most public and consequential part of “economic diplomacy” is often neglected.\(^53\) This is remarkable, given that Western as well as non-Western countries have frequently used their economic exchange relationships with other nations as means of coercive diplomacy.\(^54\)

Therefore, practitioners must look to other social science disciplines such as International Political Economy to find insightful treatments of the economic means of statecraft, although these accounts tend to be less interested in the conduct of statecraft.\(^55\) Also, there still exists great conceptual disorder in the study of the economic means of diplomacy commonly lacking a clear differentiation of instruments from the processes of their application as well as from descriptions and value judgments about the produced outcomes. While David A. Baldwin has masterfully avoided these common pitfalls in his seminal book Economic Statecraft, he regretfully shied away from connecting his superb analytical framework to the discussion about the concept of diplomacy, arguing that such a move “broadens the concept of ‘diplomacy’ so much that it makes it difficult to think in terms of diplomatic alternatives to economic techniques.”\(^56\) Baldwin rightly critiqued the overtly simplistic typology of the techniques of statecraft as either pertaining to war or diplomacy.\(^57\) But by rejecting the concept of diplomacy, however, his insightful thoughts failed to gain the attention of diplomats. This is unfortunate as his book can be read as a manual for diplomats who might want to regain lost ground in the conduct of economic statecraft.

\(^{49}\) Pinder, »Economic Diplomacy«; Okano-Haijmans, »Conceptualizing Economic Diplomacy«; Okano-Haijmans, »Economic Diplomacy«.

\(^{50}\) Seabrooke, »Economists and Diplomacy: Professions and the Practice of Economic Policy«, p. 641; Seabrooke, »Diplomacy as Economic Consultancy«.


\(^{52}\) Hocking, »Privatizing Diplomacy?«.

\(^{53}\) Bayne/Woolcock, »What is Economic Diplomacy?«, p. 4. For the mutual neglect of the political economy in international relations see Susan Strange, The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy.

\(^{54}\) For the example of Russia see Adam N. Stulberg, Well-Oiled Diplomacy: Strategic Manipulation and Russia’s Energy Statecraft in Eurasia, pp. 13-14.


\(^{56}\) Baldwin, Economic Statecraft, p. 35.

\(^{57}\) ibid., pp. 12-13.
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