

Working Paper

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Diplomacy as a Mindset for Societal Practice¹

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In the 21st century, diplomacy is becoming the preferred integrative instrument and intellectual as well as emotional practice of international society.

The transformation of diplomatic practice through political and social macro-processes of vacillating inclusions and exclusions can be described by 3 phases. They are all but linear, sequential or successive, nor exclusive or exhaustive, but rather

- confluent and overlapping;
- simultaneous and contemporaneous;
- concurrent as well as competing against each other.

1) Traditional diplomacy driven by the interaction of «national interests»

Traditional diplomacy as a norm-based activity provides an array of tools for managing «national interests» among states. It is basically seen as an effective statecraft instrument to peacefully attain foreign policy goals. Diplomatic practice is marked by ethically principled, enlightened pragmatism. Diplomacy as such is not a computer game, science or a theory, it is an art of behavioural practice directed towards efficient, sustainable and therefore legitimate problem-solving, beyond merely «complexity management».

Traditional diplomacy involves presentation of interests and actions of the state (strategic interactions and public statements as business of state). It operates at the boundaries between politics and law. Diplomacy as a social practice shapes the state's needs or choices in the normative framework and language of international law.

While there is a functional shift arising from state practice to space shared by states and non-state actors, moving from statecraft to society-craft, from management to peaceful change, the core task of traditional diplomacy is still seen to be the pursuit of «national interests».

This political notion of «national interest» needs to be demystified: Politicians present and defend their preferred policy to be in the «national interest». This terminology is in fact empty of substantive content: It is not

an intangible given of a state (as an absolute truth) and cannot to be found in the DNA of any nation, nor is it incorporated in any constitution; but is simply derived from the international legal principles of independence and national sovereignty, used as justificative rhetoric to elevate a preferred choice of policy to the level of collective and rational legitimacy.

National interests are, in fact, subjectively defined by the governing regime and can be changed in response to shifts in domestic politics and international circumstances. They reflect a constant and deliberate re-writing of national purpose. Any state is internally made up of competing societal interests and pursues externally multiple goals simultaneously. Within this multitude, the authoritative government eventually and responsibly presents and justifies its preferred choice of the day as the «national interest». In fact, instead of rational calculations of selfinterest and need, states (and non-state actors alike) more often base their decision-making process on relational circles as backdrop for action. It is these relationships that make the world go around. Nevertheless, the so defined concept of «national interest» remains part of the political discourse as a form of social practice.

2) Enlightened partnership diplomacy

Community processes (such as the EU for example) led to a rethinking of the notions of national sovereignty, identity and legitimacy and a reconceptualization of diplomacy. The many «national interests» of member states were confronted to common interests and – through integration of national representations – merged into a collective identity.

«National interests» properly understood shifted emphasis from national to common (European) ones, interlocking relationships between self and others and working for a common cause and the common good. National objectives were constructed to be – at least to a minimal extent – compatible with common (European) ideals as part of a collective polity, thus respecting linkages across issues and regions.

This practice of thinking about interests in a different, more inclusive and reconciling policy-making way created increasingly complex webs of a post-sovereign/enlightened **partnership diplomacy**, balancing among different sectors, groups and nations to harmonize them with communitarian interests (global governance diplomacy). The result of this silent revolution of national diplomacy was a nascent sense of collective moral responsibility (as a new ethos) for common concerns in the EU and the International Community in general, demanding a continual harmonization between interests of states («raison d'état») and those of the International Community («raison de régime»). This partnership and global governance diplomacy in a multi-societal world works in many different policy areas and between growing numbers of actors of transprofessional diplomacy.

3) Human/societal diplomacy

Changing needs of European integration and enlightened diplomacy revealed democratic challenges and deficits and a lack of the participatory role of the people, their public expectations and self-expressions. Due to missing practical influence these publics felt more and more marginalized and excluded from the decision-making process. But the growing recognition and empowerment of civil society spurred the appetite for active participation in shaping and controlling foreign policy.

For a reinvigorated diplomacy to meet the challenges of contemporary life it is supposed to represent not only interests of states but of their publics (civil society) and broaden their dialogue among states to the people (**diplomatic pluralization**).

Such an engaged diplomacy extends to the understanding of social and political tendencies with regards to critical humanist concerns. At its best, diplomacy is about empathetic human imagination leading to shared responsibility, about seeing a complex and tense situation from multiple points of view (otherness). Diplomacy shifting from its democratization to humanization is fulfilling its socializing mission. The

practice of diplomacy as a human activity with humanistic dimensions serves the diplomatization of a wider social realm. This whole of society diplomacy is now labelled as «**societal diplomacy**».

Such a sociological perception of diplomacy presents a breeze of fresh air in the interdisciplinary understanding of the social context, dependency, development and operation of diplomacy as a flexible social practice in international life. The outward appearance of diplomacy depends on a given social and historical situation (social dependency of diplomacy), since reality is socially constructed.

Diplomacy is the means of connecting governmental as well as other actors and providing them with a constant dialogue ; as part of the nature and dynamics of processes driving social change and change in society as well as, consequently, of the changing nature and role of diplomacy itself. This (bottom-up) « societal diplomacy » is also enlarging the space of civil-society actors. Diplomatic spaces become entangled with public spaces.

«Societal diplomacy» and the underlying shifting from state rights to human rights is supplemented by a movement from state sovereignty to popular sovereignty taking into account the participatory role of the people and their perceptions and commitments. This movement corresponds to another paradigm shift of sovereignty: from territoriality (and «domaine réservé») to functional connectivity and specific identity.

Recommendations for governments:

Due to the growing public expectations of openness, efficiency and a networked participative leadership practice in the 21st century diplomacy, the internal culture, environment and mindset of its bureaucracy need the following changes:

- From traditional hierarchical structures to more inclusive decision-making processes, using emotional cognition and intelligence instead of «rational pragmatism» ;
- From linearity of communication to more flexibility, transparency and tolerance of

competing opinions without losing relative authority and secrecy (from »need to know« to »need to share«);

- From stringent control to more trust, personal agency and staff empowerment, based on participatory engagement and voluntary cooperation instead of hierarchical command;
- Liberation and activation of the creative potential of the best, brightest and most motivated human resources in order to generate and create orientation knowledge for practical decision-making.

About the author

Wilfried Bolewski was a German Ambassador and Chief of Protocol for Chancellors Schröder and Merkel. He closely observed international diplomatic practice at the highest level. As Professor of International Law and Diplomacy he has been teaching at Freie Universität Berlin, Sciences Po Paris, the American University of Paris and the American Graduate School in Paris. He is an Associate Editor of the new journal »Diplomacy and Foreign Policy« (Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy).

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