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# Will There Be a Future for Diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?<sup>1</sup>

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If diplomacy is about the realization of the enlightened self-interest of politically organized collectives in interaction with others, then its prospects in the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not look promising. There are two major reasons for this: the trajectory of technological change, and the revolution of rising expectations among peoples.

- 1) Technological change, driven by the advances of scientific knowledge and their application for practical purposes of problem-solving and gratification of human desires, has produced exponential growth in all kinds of social interactions within and across borders. We call this “globalization”. Globalization has deepened interdependence and vulnerabilities between individuals and societies, and seems destined to continue to do so in the future. Interdependence involves division of labor, often in very long and complex chains. It holds enormous potential for benefits, but also poses risks. Both benefits and the costs of insurance need to be distributed fairly if interdependence is to retain legitimacy. The consequence of this are rising demands addressed by societies to politics and polities. For all those reasons, interdependence needs to be managed politically, it needs to be embedded within frameworks of political order if it is to remain sustainable and avoid degenerating into violent regression.

This secular logic has been operating since the Middle Ages and throughout the rise of the modern state.<sup>2</sup> Its dynamics seem to accelerate with the rhythm of scientific advances. It has transformed the state and continues to do so: what it takes to be an effective, rather than a failing or failed state, is very much a moving target that more and more states (that often have been “quasi-states” to begin with,

<sup>2</sup> Reinhard, Wolfgang: *Geschichte der Staatsgewalt, Eine vergleichende Verfassungsgeschichte Europas von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, München: C.H.Beck 1999.

anyway<sup>3</sup>) have difficulty reaching. Yet that logic also operates beyond the nation-state, and if it has transformed politics within the nation-state, it also will transform the requirements for politics beyond the state. Briefly, the logic of technological change seems to demand international politics of the density and quality that so far has been confined to domestic politics, while domestic politics itself is pushed towards transformation into new, effective forms of embedding technological progress politically.

- 2) The second secular trend affecting diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the revolution of rising expectations. Again, this is a phenomenon that has been recognized for a long time, but one that continues to operate powerfully, and perhaps also in ways that imply a new quality. Expectations are subjective, and they reflect knowledge about what is possible to expect, but also norms about what individuals are entitled to expect. They are also socially induced, however, and in that sense collective. Expectations concern material benefits as well as normative or ideological aspirations. The dominant forces driving collective expectations today are the promise of material growth and the ideology of what Yuval Harari calls “humanism”: the centrality of the individual in our conceptions of society.<sup>4</sup> Both forces are expansive. On top of this, there is the rising number of people living on this globe, and the rising levels of individual empowerment through education and knowledge. Expectations are therefore rising rapidly, probably exponentially. Again, this puts pressure on politics, within and between states, and therefore also on diplomacy: individuals will get together with other, like-minded people to organize themselves and address their demands to those they see in a position to

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, Robert, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Harari, Noah Yuval. *Homo Deus, A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London: Harvill Secker 2015, pp. 220-277.

do something about them.

- 3) The ability of politics to respond to the rising needs and expectations has probably in many instances also grown, though there have no doubt been cases of regression (such as state failure), as well. Technology has enhanced power in all its forms, and will continue to offer opportunities for more effective governance, including governance by diplomacy. Yet there exists a fundamental mismatch between the realities of interdependence and rising expectations, on the one hand, and the political organization of international order, whose central component continues to be the sovereign nation-state, on the other. It is the concept of sovereignty, or more precisely the way that concept is understood and practiced, that most powerfully inhibits the transformation of international politics along the lines in which it is pushed by the twin dynamics of technological change and the revolution of rising expectations. This mismatch is hardly coincidental, however: politics and polities also have to respond to expectations and demands for security – that is, for continuity, rather than change – and therefore will inevitably carry a conservative bias, an inherent resistance to change, let alone transformative change. Sovereignty provides the shorthand metaphor for this resistance to change, and the nation-state is where those who demand security and stability look for it.

This rift between what is expected and needed from politics, on the one hand, and its capacity to deliver, on the other, has for some time begun to affect, and potentially degrade, politics within states.<sup>5</sup> This has been visible within Western liberal democracies; their model consequently has lost some of the attractiveness that it had enjoyed at the time of the end of the Cold War. It also has been in evidence, however, in autocracies and even

in a totalitarian system such as North Korea, which has been unable to sustain the collective welfare of its people. It has been apparent even in the People's Republic of China, the country whose leadership has been the most determined to modernize its governance in line with those requirements of technological change and rising expectations. Nevertheless, the "China model" of modern authoritarian governance will probably supply the yardstick against which the performance of other models will be held.

- 4) The paradigm for the future of the international order, and hence of international diplomacy, may be what has been happening to European integration. The EU represents a political space within which interdependence has assumed a density that makes it comparable to interdependence within societies; it tries to organize this space politically on the basis of a new concept of sovereignty – "shared sovereignty". Unfortunately, in recent years the EU provides much support for a sceptical perspective on governance beyond the nation-state. The heightened pressure on politics seems to have resulted in a shift of attention by governments towards domestic politics and towards short-term expedience (a phenomenon that I have compared in a previous paper with a metaphor borrowed from psychology but also cybernetics, to "autism"). Effective governance in the EU will be impossible without an approach to politics that gives space to mutual empathy, a willingness to compromise and accommodate other interests, and a conceptual framework (e.g., an understanding of sovereignty) that is compatible with those requirements. Under conditions of democratic politics, this needs polities that are solidly behind by a basic pro-European consensus and a commitment to democratic alternance only within the parameters of this consensus. To survive and prosper, the EU may therefore be dependent not only on effective national governance but also on a certain kind of governance – notably on robust public support for concepts of national identity, sovereignty and politics

<sup>5</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*, New York: Profile Books 2014

that allow policies that plausibly can foster the enlightened self-interest of the EU's peoples. This implies political choices that need to be made against a background of great uncertainty and unpredictability, and will not only distribute benefits but also involve burden sharing. Yet it is far from clear whether those political conditions exist in all member states.

To the extent that the national foundations for European politics will be problematic, European diplomacy will have difficulties to realize the common good, or even the enlightened national self-interest. This situation has produced a series of crises in the European Union that, taken together, threaten its future viability, perhaps even its existence "as we know it".<sup>6</sup> At the core of this problem lie deficiencies within, and deep ideological and identitarian differences between the polities that make up the European Union. The differences recently have been exacerbated by migration pressure.<sup>7</sup> Those crises at bottom appear to reflect the tensions identified above between the forces of globalization and political efforts to channel and domesticate them. While the nature of the crises may demand major change, it is quite unclear whether the decision-making capacities of the EU are capable of such change; incrementalism along a downward slope towards minimalist policy adjustments seems much more likely.

- 5) This troubling story of European integration over the last decade or so may well also encapsulate the future trajectory of world politics, which faces a comparable conundrum of rapidly deepening (if uneven) interdependence and integration, rising expectations but weakening or at least

<sup>6</sup> Bouin, Olivier, »The End of the European Union As We Know It«, in: Manuel Castells (ed): *Europe's Crises*, Oxford: Polity 2017 (forthcoming); Gillingham, John R., *The EU, An Obituary*, London & New York: Verso 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Krastev, Ivan, *After Europe 2017*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2017.

insufficient response capacities for governance at the national and, even more so, at the international level. What also supports this sceptical prognosis is the troubled state in which many (other) international organizations find themselves, starting with the United Nations. International politics – and with it, diplomacy – may therefore find itself more and more constrained in its scope and ability to promote change through arguments. Superior power is not that likely to compensate for those growing constraints, for several reasons. First, to mobilize sufficient power to affect the vulnerabilities of specific target countries in a controlled way will not be easy. Second, even if that were successful, target governments may use nationalism to resist external pressure. Third, the autistic qualities of national politics may also work against accommodating external pressure through effective internal adjustments: political decisions may respond to imagined, rather than to the real problems at hand.

- 6) Finally, there also is the issue of who diplomacy actually is to represent. Who is the collective whose enlightened interests are to be guarded and furthered? The traditional answer is: the collective that the nation-state represents – that is, the nation. Yet part of that nation now are individuals that carry multiple identities and belong to transnational elites as much as to their specific politically organized collective. They may hold several passports, too. Other members of the nation will have a migration background, representing a different culture that needs to be reconciled and integrated with that of the home nation. A recent comparative analysis of European approaches to integration of non-European migrants concludes that none of the different approaches taken has been particularly successful.<sup>8</sup> The populist nationalist backlash against a situation in which the question "who are

<sup>8</sup> Hill, Christopher, *The National Interest in Question, Foreign Policy in Multicultural Societies*, Oxford: Oxford UP 2013.

we?” becomes more complicated to answer is likely to continue.

- 7) What are the implications of this analysis for diplomacy in the 21st century – or, more modestly, for the next two decades? If the essence of diplomacy is indeed international politics, that is: the resolution of conflicts over who gets what between countries through reasoning and mutual adjustment guided by enlightened self-interest, then it seems likely to be squeezed badly by the contradictory trends of interdependence and rising self-assertiveness of individual and narrow collective interests. Of course, this definition of diplomacy is demanding and does not exhaust the broad variety of functions that diplomacy serves and diplomats carry out. States will continue to exist, and probably continue to play the principal role in international politics. Their governments will continue to interact with each other through diplomacy. There will no doubt also continue to be situations where the respective domestic win-sets on foreign policy issues still overlap enough to enable common positions and even common solutions to problems together with other governments. While the overall scope for diplomacy in its essential functions may indeed be squeezed, there will be opportunities for diplomacy and diplomats to exploit the remaining political space more thoroughly; coalition building will be a key element in this endeavor.<sup>9</sup> Yet diplomacy also likely will be affected by the autistic introversion of national politics and policies. It may be expected to serve as interpreter and megaphone for national concerns and engage in posturing, while its role as a constituency for empathy with others and reasoned compromise will likely suffer. This, in turn, would affect the recruitment of

diplomats and their professional ethics. Will it be: right or wrong, my government? or: helping to put my country on a good track?

<sup>9</sup> Eisentraut, Sophie, »Coalition building and compromise are the future of global leadership«, *Out Of Order*, GMF U.S., <<https://outoforder.gmfus.org/coalition-building-and-compromise-are-the-future-of-global-leadership-heres-why-4d34b2d353dd>> (accessed on 20.9.17).