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Diplomacy in the 21st Century – What Needs To Change?[1]

Presentation of the main findings of SWP's "Diplomacy in the 21st Century" project
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Introduction

Henry Kissinger once said the art of diplomacy is not to outsmart the other side, but to convince them of either common interests or disadvantages. In the face of the many contemporary changes in international politics, must the fundamental principles of the art of diplomacy be adjusted?

In times of profound change in the international realm, a policy-advising institution such as the German Institute for International and Security Affairs also needs to look at the methods and instruments of foreign policy – that is diplomacy. Two years ago – with the financial support of the German Federal Foreign Office and the ZEIT-Stiftung – the SWP set up the working group "Diplomacy in the 21st Century". It has teamed up with German experts who observe diplomacy through their profession, as well as researchers from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Canada, Australia and the United States for its research purposes. The Federal Foreign Office has analysed German foreign policy comprehensively with its review process in 2014, also scrutinising the Foreign Office's organisational structure. The work of the SWP has been conducted within a similar context, but with a narrower focus. The core question tackled in a number of workshops was: Which factors are changing the nature of diplomacy to an extent that foreign policy must adjust its diplomatic tools to ensure continued functionality?

The results of the working group as well as comments, remarks and ideas on how to possibly continue this research project were presented semi-publicly on the 13th of December 2017 at SWP Berlin.

Three Challenges of Diplomacy in the 21st Century

The presentation covered three areas that are increasingly challenging society and politics: 1) the steadily increasing number of organised and institutionalised actors active in the international field; 2) the publics, which – traditionally unaffected by foreign policy – in part are now networking nationally and internationally, calling for consideration of their concerns, including diplomacy; 3) the progress and implications of digitisation.

(1) New Actors and Legitimacy
One of the main challenges of the 21st century is interacting with new partial, pseudo and quasi-state actors, which have begun to evolve decades ago. Amongst these are sub-organizations of the UN (IOs), transnational corporations (TNCs), civil society actors, such as NGOs, and criminal or terrorist organizations that are internationally active.
IOs have their own interests vis-à-vis states and may even occasionally dispose of cross-border influence in the form of coercion. As a result, governments have to collaborate with them "diplomatically".

TNCs share important interests with governments, such as the desire for stability or the ambition to fight corruption. In the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) they are often direct partners of governments and even may be involved in the provision of public goods. NGOs can be allies of governments such as during the climate negotiations but are some-times on the opposite side, when for example advocating against the abuse of Human Rights in China. While the moral authority of IOs stems from the international community, NGOs receive moral authority from the public by committing to specific values that the public con-siders relevant.

While the idea of statehood is still defined traditionally, the influence of new actors on information flows and the design of political agendas as well as their involvement in negotiating positions, leads to a fragmentation of traditional diplomacy. Diplomacy shares its sphere of activity with new, non-state actors and thereby becomes more fluid.
The multiplication of actors in the international arena has fundamentally changed diplomatic work: One might call this phenomenon disintermediation.

To counter the tendency towards disintermediation, governments might consider to (a) promote mutual "socialisation" of traditional diplomatic bureaucracies and new actors e.g. through systematized personnel exchanges and cross-participation (and therefore increased transparency). In an increasingly "undiplomatic" world, removing the limits on traditional diplomacy through institutional exchange could be an effective solution. The experience of the Global Diplomacy Lab has shown that diplomacy should be inclusive. "New" actors should receive equal consideration, but also carry equal responsibilities. Interactions should be open and transparent.

To move on from reacting to acting, diplomacy could become something resembling a public-private partnership, putting actors above goals as well as encouraging staff exchanges between organizations on the working and leadership level. In a time where the state monopoly on diplomacy is ending, institutional exchange can help tearing down the borders between traditional diplomacy, non-state actors and the public. On the other hand, governments could also consider establishing a new international consensus on how different actors in the international sphere cooperate (or are combated), possibly establishing more authoritative international order structures.

Facing a weakening of the multilateral, shrinking spaces for NGOs and the rise of authoritarian regimes, the question arises whether the world is about to experience the "end of globalisation" and the "beginning of a new era" in which a different set of rules applies. Companies facing this change are increasingly asking the government for assistance, because they are confronted with state intervention abroad and globally acting state enterprises.

(2) Publics
The dissolution of boundaries between publics and the related delimitation of identities leads to uncertainty across global societies. While identities become uncertain, individuals are increasingly in search of narratives that reassure them of their identities. These delimited publics have the possibility to digitally gather and communicate their in-securities and negative or positive sentiments across borders. New emotionally driven social ties are formed and shared digitally, reaching millions within the briefest span of time. In other words, due to digital technology, diplomacy in the 21st century is taking place in a new diplomatic space.

Despite new tools and actors, diplomats will also have to understand the composition of new diplomatic spaces, which – although mostly taking place online – have offline consequences. These consequences include volatile phenomena such as Brexit, Trump or anti-immigrant sentiments. The new diplomatic space is highly personalized as people can build personal online net-works which sometimes reflect a distorted view through content bubbles. Furthermore, it is infused with emotion as digital media allow for a transmission of emotions that can be directly experienced by audiences. As a consequence, groups of people are able to identify with others through the transmission of emotion. Here, a prime example is populism, which feeds on emotion. Personalised emotions thus

become hallmarks of identity and create a sense of belonging amongst virtual public spheres.

Finally, the new diplomatic space is story-driven. Since stories have more emotions than facts, powerful stories, such as Trump's tweets, can sometimes overwrite facts.

Digital space has created a post-truth, hyperemotional world in which conflicts of identity are taking place in the public space. Society perceives rational politics as an inadequate response to their grievances as they convey a lack of empathy on the part of their representatives. The pragmatic nature of traditional diplomacy prevents it from employing a similarly emotional response. In the eyes of socially engaged publics, this delegitimises traditional diplomacy.

While these highly diverse and fluid publics emerge via digital networks, their foundation are personal ties. Accordingly in order to regain legitimacy and the trust of publics, governments as a whole and diplomacy in particular have to open up to platforms that have not been relevant for the foreign policy domain very much so far. "Townhall Meetings", Open Situation Rooms, Citizen Workshops and "Außenpolitik live" as well as other projects such as the "Global Diplomacy Lab" are examples of the Federal Foreign Office's first experiments with new formats of engagement.

A cultural change that allows for more transparency of decision-making and – insofar as confidentiality is possible – involvement of the interested public can be a way to lead to at least limited participation enabling dialogue and thus a chance for diplomacy to regain trust and legitimacy.

(3) Digitisation

While personal relationships remain important, digital tools can help with analysing voices commenting on a government's policies. They can be used to be present, analyse trends and influence digital spaces. With mass data analysis, they can help forecasting crises and speed up research. As France has shown, digital embassies can foster relationships with tech companies, to increase Internet governance and risk assessment.

In the field of digitisation, user attention constitutes one of the greatest challenges for diplomacy. Information consumes attention and wealth of information creates a lack of attention. Digitisation has created the possibility of an exchange of information and views in real time. The resulting demand to form opinions and make decisions in real time as well has shown the physical limits of humans employing all the means digitisation makes available.

Digitisation has changed the basic conditions of communication. At the same time, it has provided a vast digital space for a narrative competition that uses the most effective communication techniques to influence public spheres at home and abroad. Personalities – "influencers" – certainly play a role: Trump's or Carl Bildt's tweets are only two noteworthy example here.

The speed of the Internet can be beneficial: At the time of the 2015 refugee crisis, confronted with a wave of fake news, the Federal Foreign Office drafted and implemented a communication strategy that could immediately counter fake news. Just as well, as in the Lisa case, the perks of the Internet can be used in a different manner. It shows the propensity of fluid publics to emotionalise (and personalise) content, and how this can be directly translated into diplomatic action. Here one can no longer speak of a competition, but rather of a fight of narratives.

All of this depends on the work of algorithms. The message is no longer the medium, but the content counts – and thus bots and fake news and the campaigns carried out with them gain additional importance. The algorithmic sorting of media content has the consequence that for the optimization of content above all emotional information is selected, because it triggers particularly many reactions with users. This creates a filtering bubble of emotionalised and often false information that can greatly influence the perceptual world of users. Anger, pain, joy spread quickly and change attitudes towards the democratically elected and seemingly too little empathic representatives. The result: governments, foreign policy and diplomats are seen as no longer trustworthy. The loss of trust, but also the feeling of not being represented, leads to the loss of legitimacy.

In order to regain confidence and legitimacy for government action – and also foreign policy – one could consider: (a) subjecting social media companies to democratic regulation and creating the necessary degree of transparency. (b) As algorithms are programmed to compete for attention, it might be possible to normalise and standardise algorithms - if possible in an international context – to the extent that the actor has the required attention span before acting. Again, it should be ensured that such activities are transparent and that they happen in ex-change with the public.

Facing threats of rising nativism, nationalism as well as post-truth and post-fact trends, diplomacy might need to go back to its foundational concepts of power relations. On the other hand, it will have to engage the public – consisting of a new generation of digital natives – and operate at the nexus of politics and society while being embedded in a transnational world with international interactions. Thus networking, the interaction between diplomacy and the public, is central to diplomacy as a whole. Today, there is less control of the information environment. "Informing the public" has become a "dialogue with the public". The lack of trust in the Internet can eventually be an ally to traditional diplomacy. Accordingly, more socialisation should be considered.

Recommendations for the Project
Diplomacy in the 21st Century and its Legitimacy Crisis

The analyses of diplomacy in the 21st century and its challenges should also take into account the implications of renationalisation, populism and isolationism. Diplomacy is facing a domestic challenge because it finds itself in a legitimacy crisis, which stems from societal elements. This becomes especially evident when looking at states that are at the core of the international system such as the UK, the US and parts of the EU, where the legitimacy crisis manifests itself through issues such as trade deals, the Euro cri-sis or migration issues. Furthermore, modern day diplomacy's legitimacy is questioned with regards to its internal functioning, which is being criticized for its lack of transparency.

Less and less, diplomacy happens in its traditional „bubble", where dialog and exchange are limited. The core of diplomacy, government and power, is changing. Facing the prevailing trends of transnationality on the one hand and "renationalisation" on the other, new norms and rules are needed. Contrary to the common perception, millennials are for the most part not transnational at all, but in their majority local and national. Taking this into account, it would be helpful if the project transitioned into an advisory stage that offers possible solutions for these issues.

Further Suggestions

Opening up or Remaining Closed?
In search for a "new diplomacy", in the future the project should focus on the question: What does diplomacy mean? Is it an assessment of crises or a recipe for dealing with them? During a crisis, governments lose control. Dealing with the crisis, should classic diplomacy open up to increase legitimacy, at the cost of losing control, or should it remain closed and maintain control, but endure a loss of legitimacy?

The Need for a Coherent German Foreign Policy
With respect to the decline of multilateralism, the question whether multilateralism has ever been strong at all is a valid one. It might have always been a complement to the bilateral. A more pressing issue is that every German ministry has its own organisation and coherent concepts are lacking. Other questions worth considering: What is Germany's role in international organisations? What are large corporations interested in, and is there still a German EU policy?

Establishing Norms through the EU
As a regional power with a large market, the EU can be a way for national diplomacy to establish norms in the face of authoritarian governments. Rather than interacting with the EU via the foreign ministry, Germany should develop a comprehensive European policy obligatory for all its agencies.
Engaging the Public in a Post-Truth World
Concrete models should be explored.