

Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics

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Edited by Ole Jacob Sending,
Vincent Pouliot and Iver B. Neumann

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Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics

This book examines world politics through the lens of diplomatic practice. It argues that many global phenomena of our time, from the making of international law to the constitution of international public power, through humanitarianism and the maintenance of global hierarchies, are made possible and shaped by evolving forms of diplomacy. The study of diplomacy is largely dominated by firsthand accounts and historical treaties, with little effort at theoretical discussion. This book shows how diplomatic studies can benefit from more explicit theorizing, and argues that the study of world politics should pay more attention to what goes on in the diplomatic "engine room" of international politics.

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OJS, VP, IBN

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Introduction

OLE JACOB SENDING, VINCENT POULIOT,
AND IVER B. NEUMANN

This book examines world politics through the lens of diplomatic practice. We argue that many global phenomena of our time, from international law to world order, through humanitarianism, global hierarchies, and public power, are made possible by evolving forms of diplomacy. In that sense, this book is not about diplomacy per se, but rather about the constitution of world politics in and through diplomatic practice. To shed new light on the making and remaking of international relations, we bring social theory to bear on diplomacy. Our starting point is simple: as we enter the twenty-first century, everybody seems to agree that diplomacy is changing, yet few people can specify exactly how – and with what effects on world politics. Our goal is to produce new knowledge about the evolving character of diplomacy and the ways in which it (re)constitutes significant facets of world politics.

In this Introduction, we accomplish two main goals. First, we provide theoretical tools to better grasp the role and character of diplomacy and how it may be changing in the contemporary era. We develop a relational framework focused on two dimensions: the evolving configurations of state and non-state actors and the competing authority claims that underpin diplomatic practices on the world stage. Second, we begin to theorize the ways in which diplomacy makes and remakes world politics. The remainder of the book offers rich case studies to empirically substantiate our broad argument about the constitution of world politics in practice. In this Introduction, our more limited objective is to explain the significance of our argument for key debates in international relations (IR).

All in all, by bringing theory to bear on diplomacy and, reciprocally, by bringing diplomacy back into the study of world politics, this book clears new grounds in IR. While diplomatic studies would greatly benefit from a more concerted effort at theorizing, the rest of the discipline should also pay careful attention to the larger effects of

what is actually going on in the engine room of global politics. This Introduction supplies the building blocks for both of these contributions. But first, we make the case for a renewed effort at theorizing diplomacy.

Theorizing diplomacy and change

In the first edition of the *Handbook of International Relations*, Jönsson makes the rather harsh but substantively accurate judgment that so far, the study of diplomacy has been “long on typologies” but “short on theory.”¹ With some exceptions,² most of the existing literature in diplomatic studies has a very hands-on flavor, detailing the purposes, tactics, and procedures of diplomacy. This work is important, in that it specifies how certain kinds of topics are handled through diplomacy, establishes what kind of traditions for handling them exist, and draws some generalizations from comparative case studies. Studies of this type are also valuable for their focus on what actors who are up against a certain historical circumstance actually do.

The dominance of empirics in diplomatic studies probably stems from a combination of two factors. First, the study of diplomacy was traditionally the province of practitioners more than academics. Diplomats such as Sir Ernest Satow and Harold Nicolson as well as

¹ Christer Jönsson, “Diplomacy, Bargaining and Negotiation,” in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons, eds., *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2002), 215.

² James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); Costas Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Iver B. Neumann, “Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy,” *Millennium* 32(3), 2002, 627–652; Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy* (London: Palgrave, 2005); Rebecca Adler-Nissen “Late Sovereign Diplomacy,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 4, 2009, 121–141; Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Iver B. Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats: Ethnography of a European Foreign Ministry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Corneliu Bjola and Markus Kornprobst, *Understanding International Diplomacy: Theory, Practice and Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2013); and Vincent Pouliot and Jérémie Cornut, “Practice Theory and the Study of Diplomacy: A Research Agenda,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 50(2), 2015.

budding statesmen such as Henry Kissinger have written key texts.³ This helps explain why diplomacy has often been seen as the “art” of resolving negotiations peacefully or, more generally, of identifying the national interest beyond the constraints and lack of vision expressed by elected politicians. Based on their first-hand engagement with diplomacy, these authors were primarily concerned with defining the purposes and ideal functions of diplomacy, from negotiation through information gathering to communication.

This prescriptive bent relates to the second reason why diplomatic studies have often stayed clear of theorization. In his famous IR textbook, Hans Morgenthau suggested a hermeneutic study of statesmen:

We look over his shoulder when he writes his dispatches; we listen in on his conversations with other statesmen; we read and anticipate his very thoughts. Thinking in terms of interest defined as power, we think as he does, and as disinterested observers we understand his thoughts and actions perhaps better than he, the actor on the political scene, does himself.⁴

Nowhere in the IR literature have people stuck closer to Morgenthau’s methodology than in diplomatic studies.⁵ The result is that we now have a sizeable literature focusing on how states pursue diplomacy rather than on theories of diplomacy. These literatures concentrate on problem solving rather than on the social and political processes that make issues emerge as diplomatic tasks in the first place. Existing studies also tend to treat the attributes of the state and of diplomats as constant.

At the conceptual level, the implication of the specific way in which diplomatic studies have evolved is that seminal definitions usually focus

³ Sir Ernest Satow, *Satow’s Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, 6th edn (London: Longman, [1917] 2009); Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, [1939] 1963); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). For a critique, see Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats*.

⁴ Hans J. Morgenthau (with Kenneth W. Thompson), *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th edn (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, [1948] 1985), 5.

⁵ Note, however, that Morgenthau identifies the practice of diplomacy as the central empirical site for the study of world politics. This equally important part of his approach has unfortunately not been followed very well, in part because the theory he proposed saw diplomacy as a medium for the application of power. This selective reading has made the study of diplomacy strangely marginal to broader debates about world politics.

on a set of core functions of diplomacy, typically physical and symbolic representation. For example, a classic view owed to the English School of IR holds that diplomacy is “the process of dialogue and negotiation by which states in a system conduct their relations and pursue their purposes by means short of war.”⁶ As useful as it may be to distinguish diplomacy from other social forms, such a definition ends up fixing so many features of diplomacy that it makes the study of change impracticable.⁷ To circumvent this obstacle, a lot of the works that delve into recent developments in diplomatic practice tend simply to add a prefix: there is new diplomacy (in many flavors) – paradiplomacy, small states diplomacy, non-governmental organization (NGO) diplomacy, business diplomacy, public diplomacy, twiplomacy, multilateral diplomacy, polydiplomacy, catalytic diplomacy, celebrity diplomacy, real-time diplomacy, triangular diplomacy, and the list goes on.

Our strategy differs in two respects. First, we move from diplomacy as a category of practice to diplomacy as a category of analysis.⁸ Too often, there seems to be a conflation of the two: the “folk-models” and self-understandings of diplomats have been codified and described at length in historical treatises and books, over time also becoming part of the scholarly attempt to unpack and account for the nature and functioning of diplomacy. For example, while Kissinger’s account of diplomacy⁹ is important, it is more so because of its influence on the ideal, typical self-understanding of diplomats and more generally of “diplomatic culture”¹⁰ than as a source from which to try to unpack and account for diplomatic culture. We strongly believe in the value of inductively restoring categories of practice in social analysis; as such,

⁶ Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (London: Routledge), 11.

⁷ One notable exception is Jan Melissen, ed., *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Morten Skumsrud Andersen and Iver B. Neumann, “Practices as Models: A Methodology with an Illustration Concerning Wampum Diplomacy,” *Millennium*, 40(3), 2012, 457–481.

⁹ Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problem of Peace, 1815–1822* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

¹⁰ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in International Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); James Der Derian, “Hedley Bull and the Idea of Diplomatic Culture,” in Rick Fawn and Jeremy Larkins, eds., *International Society after the Cold War: Anarchy and Order Reconsidered* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1996), 84–100.

many of the classics in diplomatic studies are of great value, but then not as theoretical propositions (analytical categories) but for what they tell us about how diplomats themselves categorize the world. We therefore take great pains to treat diplomats' (practice) categories as a prelude to theoretically and historically informed accounts of where these categories come from, how they were made possible, and what effects they produce. The categories used by people to be studied should not be the end point of social inquiry.¹¹

Second and related, we problematize the contours of what diplomacy is and is not by conceiving of it as a profession. What makes a diplomat is a claim to jurisdictional control over certain tasks that are sanctioned by the state and recognized in international law.¹² In this regard, diplomats form what Ashley once termed a mutually recognized "community" that "administers the recognized public sphere of international life."¹³ Very importantly, we do not treat the tasks over which diplomats claim jurisdictional control as givens, nor do we limit the tasks that we may define as diplomatic to official diplomats. Rather, the extent to which diplomats actually "administer" or control the "recognized public sphere" between states is something to be assessed empirically, not taken as a definitional starting point. To be able to assess diplomacy empirically as a set of durable practices, we need to cast our net wider to capture the relationships between diplomats and a broader array of actors who are engaged in practices that have conventionally been defined as core diplomatic tasks to analyze how new tasks emerge and become more or less recognized as constituting

¹¹ Note that there is nothing inherently problematic in using a practice category as an analytical category. For example, if a central self-understanding of diplomats is their ability to "keep a bracket" during negotiations, then this must surely be included in the analysis. But analytical tools are needed to capture the institutional conditions for why this is so, how it affects what diplomats do, and how this feature of diplomacy affects the making of world politics. In the next three sections, we begin to carve such tools.

¹² Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), chap. 1.

¹³ Richard K. Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism," *International Organization*, 38(2), 1984, 225–286, p. 275. Diplomats form a community of practice; see Emanuel Adler, *Communitarian International Relations: The Epistemic Foundations of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2005, chap. 1). For an analysis of diplomats as an epistemic community, see Mai'a Davis Cross, *The European Diplomatic Corps: Diplomats and International Cooperation from Westphalia to Maastricht* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

“diplomacy.” We believe that this move is of crucial importance, for it allows us to theorize diplomacy as an emergent phenomenon whose form changes over time. This way, not only do we embed diplomacy in broader institutional changes, we also gain perspective on how much diplomacy matters in defining the infrastructure through which world politics is produced and reproduced.

As a category of analysis premised on a particular kind of jurisdictional claim, diplomacy may be defined, in the broadest possible terms, as a claim to represent a given polity to the outside world. Pitched at this level of abstraction, the concept reduces to three key dimensions: first, diplomacy is a process (of claiming authority and jurisdiction); second, it is relational (it operates at the interface between one’s polity and that of others); and third, it is political (involving both representation and governing). To study diplomacy, then, we need analytical categories that offer distance and clarity, as well as sufficient analytical flexibility to allow for the analysis of change. Indeed, if we are to understand the social processes through which diplomacy is central to the making and remaking of world politics, we need analytical tools that can unpack diplomacy as a set of durable social practices. Using a relational perspective, we propose two such theoretical lenses: configurations and authority claims. These two analytical tools allow us to specify what, if anything at all, is actually changing in contemporary diplomatic practices. To situate our focus on configurations and on authority claims, we first discuss in some detail what we mean by a relational perspective.

Relational analytical tools

It is generally admitted that an actor’s identity is defined by its relationship with other actors. As such, there is an implicitly relational view in so-called actor-centric accounts: to analyze diplomacy by adding a prefix of “business diplomacy,” say, is to define it in terms of its relationship to, and differentiation from, diplomacy. Moreover, inasmuch as diplomacy is often equated with “diplomatic relations,” one may easily conclude that the practice of diplomacy invites a focus first and foremost on relations, as that is the stuff from which and on which diplomats work. This is true: there is something distinct about diplomatic practice that invites a focus on relations (see also Conclusion, this volume). Yet, our point is a more fundamental one: the social world as

a whole is made up of relations. By this we mean that agents, objects, and structures emerge from transactions and connections, that is, relations. Our task as analysts is to grasp the processes through which such relations are appropriated and used to stabilize and reify some other relations as making up an entity or thing.¹⁴ This means that diplomacy is not merely a practice that deals in relations between pre-constituted political entities. Rather, these relations are seen as constitutive of, and ontologically prior to, these entities. With Abbott, we may say that a relational perspective looks for “things of boundaries” rather than the boundaries of things.¹⁵

Our focus is therefore on the processes through which diplomacy is made and remade through practices whose characteristics must be treated as contingent and open to change. This follows from our choice to see diplomacy as defined through the practices that are socially recognized as such. Diplomats and others engage one another in both competitive and cooperative ways to produce what counts as competent diplomatic practice. Conversely, in our efforts to analyze the effects of diplomacy on world politics, we focus on how diplomacy is involved in generating agents (e.g., states), objects (e.g., treaties, embassies), and structures (sovereignty). Take the state for instance: diplomatic work is organized around, and helps reproduce, the state as the naturalized political arena for the generation of meaning and belonging. It follows that if the constituent contents of diplomatic practice change, then the meaning of statehood changes with it.

Our frequent invocation of the concept of (diplomatic) practice now becomes more readily understandable: from a relational perspective, it does not make sense to say that an institution – such as international law or multilateralism or sovereignty – structures or secures a certain order. It is the continual use or performance of the material and symbolic resources that are recognized as being vested in these institutions that helps produce and reproduce certain orders. Indeed, one central virtue of focusing on diplomacy as an infrastructure for the making of world politics is that it opens up oft-neglected causal pathways through which particular orders are continually reproduced. As Barkawi

¹⁴ See Patrick Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, “Relations before States: Substance, Process, and the Study of World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 5(3), 1999, 291–332.

¹⁵ Andrew Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” *Social Research*, 62(4), 1995, 857–882.