

## THE BIRTH AND EVOLUTION OF A DIPLOMATIC CULTURE

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The terms “diplomat” and “diplomatic” are used in this essay in a traditional sense, meaning agents acting on behalf of recognised international actors for the conduct of mutual relations of a non-violent character.

### The Beginnings

In early history, human groups living in the same region tended to come into contact in their quest for food. Such contacts were mostly of a hostile nature and resulted in one group’s moving farther away. As humans became more and more numerous, their fight for territory became fiercer and more frequent. It would appear that the first “diplomatic” contacts among hostile groups aimed at agreeing on a truce and possibly the recuperation of dead warriors. These first “diplomats” already had certain characteristics that can be found in later diplomatic cultures: they came without weapons and tried to use persuasion to obtain their goals. They were also considered inviolable by the opposite side, at least in principle.

When some human groups settled they started to interact both with other nearby settled groups and others that still led a nomadic existence. These contacts, when they were not violent, led to exchanges of goods, animals and even prisoners from previous clashes. To make this possible, peace agreements had to be concluded. Emissaries active in this context needed to be of a certain social standing and to possess the requisite knowledge of the issues in question. Sometimes they were required to stay as hostages to guarantee the implementation of agreements. Often they were individuals related to the ruler of their community. As hostages, they became familiar with the culture of their keepers. One can assume that even after having been released, they were likely to play an important role in relations between their community and the one in which they had been held.

Ancient empires and their surrounding communities tended to have rather frequent diplomatic exchanges. Depending on the size of the outside community, such exchanges took place on a level of more or less equality. The Amarna tablets found in Egypt provide an insight into the manner in which that country conducted its relations with neighbours and more distant entities of the Near East in the second millennium BC. We have records of the manner in

which diplomatic relations were conducted within and by ancient Greece and of similar relations in the Hellenic world in the last centuries BC. During the same period, Kautilya, an Indian author, wrote *Arthashastra*, a compendium of statecraft during the Maurya dynasty, which also illustrates the manner in which diplomatic relations were conducted at the time. Records exist from the same period documenting diplomatic relations among the “Warring Empires” of China. These sources show how the necessities inherent in the conduct of diplomacy tended to lead to patterns of behaviour and thinking that can be said to form the essence of a diplomatic culture.

The Roman empire had relations both with its neighbours and more remote entities. The latter contacts were occasional and mostly related to trade. The former were governed by the Roman *ius gentium*, a kind of unilaterally edicted international law. When the Roman empire broke up, somewhat chaotic situations prevailed for several centuries in Western Europe, but the main actors continued to have peaceful relations between violent confrontations. The Byzantine empire gradually set up the first diplomatic service of a modern kind, followed by the Republic of Venice and the Holy See. In the world of Islam, the caliphate gradually broke up and the resulting entities engaged in active diplomacy among themselves as well as with the Byzantine empire and other Christian rulers.

From the information available, one can deduce that a common diplomatic culture was already in the making. The diplomats had to defend the interests of their ruler while cultivating amicable relations with the ruler and the elite of their country of accreditation. Like today, these objectives tended to clash, especially as defence of interests could be very active resulting in espionage and interference in local politics, sometimes cumulating with the fomenting of revolts and assassinations. On the other hand, too friendly relations with the receiving prince and elite could be seen as treason by the sending prince and his entourage. To navigate successfully in such troubled waters required a considerable amount of intelligence, flair, tact and a personality of a self-effacing but nevertheless unshakable kind. Diplomats were not yet professionals but often tended to have a career of sorts.

## **Classical Diplomatic Culture**

Classical diplomatic culture was, to a considerable degree, the result of the emergence of permanent diplomatic missions in Europe during the Renaissance. The presence of several such missions in the same place required the

observance of some basic rules of protocol. Diplomats, moreover, were not only engaged in contacts with the receiving entity. Relations between various missions followed similar patterns as relations between their respective sending entities, and early versions of diplomatic corps emerged. The characteristics of classical diplomacy prevailed for several centuries without undergoing major change. From personal appointees of the ruler or his chief administrator of external policies, diplomats eventually evolved into public officials and their profession tended to become a career. But their personal and social background and the qualities required of them remained basically the same up to the early twentieth century.

A diplomat was supposed to come from a superior social background. He had to have an excellent education in the fields of arts and history, possibly also law. He had to possess an engaging personality and excellent manners, speak, if possible, two or more “civilised” languages, of which first Latin and later French was compulsory, have considerable financial means of his own, as for a long time he not only received no salary but had to finance personally his premises and staff, and preferably be married to a lady of similar qualifications, capable of being an excellent hostess. It is not surprising, therefore, that outstanding personalities like Metternich or Bismarck spent time as diplomats or that thinkers and inventors like Benjamin Franklin would not refuse a diplomatic appointment.

As a result, diplomats fit easily into the ruling circles of the receiving country, in which quite often they spent a considerable number of years. Thus, they became experts in analysing local events and policies and were able to provide valuable insights to their home country. On the other hand, their personal background and their long absence from home made them rather ignorant of the realities of their own country. This was a handicap when they had to negotiate on the latter’s behalf. They had to rely on precise instructions and, in their absence, would be hesitant to undertake any major engagements or offer concessions. This may have prompted the tendency to use *ad hoc* diplomatic teams for important or complex negotiations rather than the resident missions.

Some diplomatic negotiations, especially those aimed at ending conflicts involving a number of countries, were lengthy. A good example is the series of negotiations which led to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This helped in strengthening the diplomatic culture, as the same diplomats would meet again, in varying contexts and circumstances, over a number of years. The Congress of Vienna in 1814/5 inaugurated a multilateral approach to the major problems of Europe and the world and further reinforced the feeling among diplomats of belonging to the same profession and culture. As a result, when countries with

different cultures, like the Ottoman empire, Japan and China, were admitted to international diplomatic interaction, they did not try to impose their own cultural approaches but were willing or forced to adjust to Western diplomatic culture.

Diplomats have often been blamed for failing to prevent the outbreak of the First World War. This failure was, however, the result of their culture and of the expectations placed on them by their governments, which were mostly restricted to the conduct of ordinary and peaceful bilateral relations. They were not prepared for, nor instructed, to intervene actively in conflict prevention.

### **The First “Cultural Revolution”**

The 1919 peace agreements were not the work of diplomats; those diplomats present had to stay on the sidelines while the politicians decided among themselves the fate of Europe and much of the world. Diplomats had a certain role in the implementation of the peace treaties, as evidenced by the more or less permanent Conference of Ambassadors. However, a considerable number of diplomats now had to cope with the new environment of multilateral diplomacy. In addition, they soon had to deal with diplomats of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, many of whom were party faithfuls with no international experience and little respect for diplomatic niceties. The world economic crisis of the 1930s, moreover, gave rise to a new kind of economic diplomacy that could not be entrusted to traditional diplomats but had to be handled by officials of directly concerned ministries. Finally, the culture of traditional diplomats did not help them to cope with the brutality of Hitler’s representatives.

During the Second World War and its aftermath, traditional diplomats were still active and played a considerable role in the preparations for the new world of multilateral organisations. However, they had to rely increasingly on experts from other ministries to advise them, and the latter were quickly tempted to take over the conduct of negotiations themselves.

A new development was the need felt in many countries to give diplomats better training for their job. So, to a degree, diplomatic culture was both safeguarded and adapted to the new situation. Unfortunately, this training effort was not extended to officers outside the foreign ministry who were increasingly involved in diplomatic activities. As for international civil servants with whom diplomats had to deal more and more, they received no diplomatic training at all. Only the presence among them of a considerable number of diplomats

made available by member countries brought a degree of diplomatic culture into those circles.

### **The Proliferation of International Actors and their Representatives**

Since 1960, the number of sovereign states has grown from some 60 to over 200. Most of these new states are former colonial territories. Their original cultures are diverse, but all have been subjected to efforts by the colonisers to adopt at least a certain amount of their culture. This was particularly noticeable in the field of diplomacy, where the first batches of diplomats of newly independent countries were trained in the coloniser's foreign service. The diplomatic culture instilled into them was largely of the traditional sort and frequently not adjusted to new international realities. The result was often that such new diplomats either felt ill at ease and tried to copy an alien approach or, on the contrary, revolted against traditional diplomatic attitudes and attempted to follow "authentic" values.

International organisations also became ever more numerous and, in many instances, specialised. Their officers were experts and mostly devoid of diplomatic experience. With regard to new states, many of which are small or poor, or both, such organisations, especially the IMF and the World Bank, but also the European Union, could adopt a powerful and even overbearing position, so that the conduct of their representatives was hardly affected by traditional diplomatic culture. The same can be said of representatives of superpowers during the cold war, who used every means at their disposal to keep third world countries on their side. During the first years of independence, many former colonies had to cope with considerable very un-diplomatic interference from the representatives of their former colonial power.

In recent years, non-governmental organisations, lobbies, pressure groups and transnational enterprises have become active and sometimes powerful international actors. They were kept outside the fora of diplomatic interaction for a long time, and thus many of them have hardly been motivated to absorb a diplomatic culture. However, representatives of such entities have long been active in confidential encounters with diplomats, sometimes with notable success. Whether this will help the spreading of diplomatic approaches in places where they are still shunned remains to be seen.

## **Diplomatic Culture and Institutional Cultures**

Diplomatic culture is the product of interaction between representatives of states and international institutions of various kinds. Yet, these representatives are themselves embedded in the culture of the institution that employs them. This culture may put constraints and restrictions on their freedom of action and also promote attitudes that are not entirely compatible with an overall diplomatic culture. The behaviour of diplomats of the two superpowers during the cold war was greatly marked by this type of internal cultural influence. However, even comparing the institutional cultures of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the French Quai d'Orsay shows considerable differences. This is important as these two countries were the masters of huge colonial empires and bequeathed their culture on the new states emerging from decolonisation, including in the field of diplomacy.

At the level of international governmental and non-governmental organisations, the impact of the institutional culture on their representatives is even greater as the latter often have no real diplomatic background. Moreover, such representatives are only concerned with issues related to the area of competence of their institution; they often lack an overall view as regards the situation of a state to which they are sent as representatives. This is enhanced by the fact that they will normally deal only with the administrations in charge of the issues for which their sending institution is competent.

## **Is There Still a Diplomatic Culture?**

Under the guise of public diplomacy, it is now fashionable to address directly and openly the people and their leadership as well as the media in the country where a diplomat is posted. This is done by politicians and other public figures from the sending country and also expected from professional diplomats. They are supposed to be visible, give media interviews, attend all sorts of public events, especially those organised by the media, and shed the "outdated image" of the diplomat. Dress regulations are abolished or disregarded, overly good manners are suspect, and the use of blunt ordinary language is often encouraged. Another aspect of public diplomacy is the open interference of diplomats in national affairs and politics of receiving countries, not just by making representations to governments and their ministries, but by publishing articles in the press and speaking to the audio-visual media. This began in Africa but has now spread worldwide. Sometimes pushy attitudes are also used by the dip-

lomat to become popular in his own country, possibly with a view to further political activities.

Alongside such developments and occasional excesses, however, a great amount of diplomatic activities still follow the approaches of an enlightened diplomatic culture, which has managed to retain the best of traditional values while shedding ballast and adjusting to new developments. This culture still stresses restraint, politeness, tolerance, patience, empathy and mutual confidence, all qualities which cannot shine in the glare of public diplomacy as practiced today. As in the past, many achievements obtained by practicing this kind of diplomacy must remain unknown to the public. Nonetheless, occasionally certain results become publicly acknowledged, for example, the role played by Norwegian diplomacy with regard to conflicts in Palestine and Sri Lanka.

At the multilateral level, diplomats used to be vocal representatives of the two sides in the cold war as well as of the non-aligned movement. Much time was wasted in acrimonious exchanges; often diplomats of one side were encouraged to shun contacts with their colleagues from the other. Since the end of the east-west confrontation a climate more akin to the values of traditional diplomacy has evolved in multilateral gatherings. Informal and confidential contacts often replace the confrontational statements in public debates, thus contributing to the reaching of more balanced outcomes. The greater involvement of international secretariats in the preparation and management of multilateral negotiations has also led to more intensive interaction with diplomats of the countries concerned. This has promoted a greater awareness of the advantages of diplomatic culture in those circles.

It would thus appear that whereas diplomatic culture has changed and keeps changing, it is by no means dead, and it should not be allowed to die!

