

Diplomacy and Global Governance

The Diplomatic Service in an Age of Worldwide Interdependence

Present day diplomacy came into existence with the emergence of the “Westphalian” regime which established the principle of each “sovereign” ruling over a distinct geographic area; doing so with absolute power; and so as to exclude all others. As “territory” then was the sole source of wealth, states could expand wealth and power just by gaining territory from others. States were thus each other’s competitors at best and potential enemies at worst. This “path dependency” dating from the “Westphalian Order” has infected diplomacy with the notion of a world order determined by fully sovereign states, each attempting to maximize its autonomy and independence. That is at odds with the present world system where wealth does not arise from excluding others; but through connecting to others. Diplomacy has often failed to fully adjust to this new global order. If and where it has, it retains a central function as catalyst of worldwide cooperation – not just between states, but also between the many “new actors, such as NGOs and corporations, that now shape the global political system”.

Much in the established rituals of diplomacy still reflects this heritage dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth century; as become evident in some inanities of official protocol; or by the quite common, highly competitive strife to fill positions in international gatherings that carry empty prestige but no political power. This heritage from the long-gone Westphalian era even is still at the core of the “Vienna Diplomatic Convention” of 1961 - a text which provides diplomacy with the still valid base in international law. The convention upholds the “principle of non - interference in internal affairs”.

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Author:
Thomas Nowotny

Editorial Board:
Marta Götz
Radosław Grodzki
Krzysztof Malinowski

In its strict interpretation, that would limit contacts of foreign diplomats to contacts with the ministry of foreign affairs of their host country. It would define those limited contacts the sole legitimate vehicle for meaningful political interaction between states.

This notion is at odds with today's world. International trade and investment have expanded faster than the already rapid expansion of overall wealth. Much of the world's economy, information, industry, and culture have thus become global. Therefore, these areas are no longer under the control of single states acting alone. Also the number and weight of tasks has grown, that can be tackled by common effort only: the stability of the world's monetary regime; global warming; pandemics; energy policy; terrorism; preservation of bio-diversity; etc. etc.

Even the mightiest states thus find themselves enmeshed in a web of interdependence. Strategies to counter that trend have failed miserably. In the 1980ies, Latin-American countries had to abandon their fight against "dependenzia". North Korea has not yet done so, but at the price of starving to death up to two million of its inhabitants.

When ignoring these massive shifts in the global regime and when still sticking to the notion of a "Westphalian World", traditional diplomacy will become not just useless but counterproductive. However, if the goal is the security and welfare of a state, diplomacy has to shift gears. States now have to guard their interests not by maximizing independence, or by playing the "zero sum -", or "negative sum game" of competing with other states. They have to guard their interests and those of their citizens by participating in global governance.

As we have seen, the "Vienna Diplomatic Convention" would establish diplomats as the privileged, or even exclusive "gatekeepers" at the border that separates a state's realm of the "internal" from the realm of the "foreign". That is not the position diplomats find themselves in today. Neither are they "gatekeepers" with the task of controlling whatever transaction occurs across a border; nor do they retain a monopoly in shaping such relations where they can and should be shaped by politics. They have gotten competitors. By now, diplomats have little say even in some policy areas which are central in the establishment and maintenance of global order; as for example in questions concerning the global monetary regime; and more general, on most trade and investment issues; not to talk about the realm of the security services – a world of its own, closed to all outsiders.

Like issues are being dealt with by other public officials, such as those from prime minister's office; from the ministry of finance, the ministry of trade, or from the central banks. Increasingly though, such other actors are not public official at all. Some potent ones come from private enterprise; others represent various "Non-Governmental Organizations".



This is not to imply that diplomats have become mostly redundant, with their tasks voided of political significance and limited to some petty administrative and consular work. As the number of tasks has grown that have to be dealt with by global governance, so has not just the number but also the diversity of states. They range from very big to very small ones; and from well-established ones to those at the brink of “state failure”. Extracting order from such diversity is a big challenge. Equally challenging is the task of heaving on board all of the new “global actors” such as private enterprises or non-governmental organizations. In the end, all solutions negotiated will have to be legitimized by the entity with the most comprehensive political legitimacy – and this entity is still the state.

Diplomats retain a function in global governance for two reasons. They provide useful multi-purpose tools to the states as these retain important functions in global governance. Second, and due to their being imbedded in a vast worldwide net of other diplomats, and due to their specific culture and training, they are better apt than most to navigate in this world of wide diversity and indeterminacy. For this is something they carry over from their earliest beginnings. Their task had always been to deal with issues, persons and events beyond the immediate control of a state’s internal administrative/political machine. That had always called for the capacity of creating trust; for the ability to listen; and for the skill of envisaging and shaping compromise.

In a more timely version of their craft, diplomats thus do retain a rather relevant function in safeguarding and shaping that worldwide interdependence. But to do so effectively, and in order to meet today’s challenges, they will have to adjust their ways and institutions.

This calls (inter alia) for:

- Enlarging the scope of multilateral diplomacy at the expense of the bilateral one,
- Shift of emphasis – and resources – from the representations abroad to the central office,
- Specialization of diplomatic officers according to geographic areas and / or policy fields,
- Opening up of the diplomatic service to experts,
- “Outsourcing” of some activities,
- Easing the dead weight of useless overhead and outdated protocol,
- Facility in the cooperation with those within their state who also have become



“international actors”,

- Full use of the tools made available by the “information age”; and expansion of the knowledge base through cooperation with specialized research institutions and think tanks.

The theses and opinions included in this text express the opinions of the authors only.

Thomas Nowotny is an Austrian diplomat and academic. As diplomat he had served in postings abroad and has been head of policy planning in the time between 1983 and 2003. From 1970 to 1975 he had been private secretary of Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky. From 1993 on he had worked first as Counsellor at the Paris OECD; then as Senior Political Advisor at the London based European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; and later still as researcher and advisor to an Austrian promotion and development bank. He now teaches international relations at the Vienna University and is author of numerous articles and of several books, including the most recent one on *Diplomacy and Global Governance – The Diplomatic Service in an Age of Worldwide Interdependence* (Transaction Press).

