

Research article

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY IN DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT

In a growing number of countries diplomatic systems are being overhauled so that the commercial activities of diplomatic services have been centralized, the commercial activities of diplomats have been extended, and business interests have been formally integrated within diplomatic systems. These changes result directly from the tendency of governments to reorganize and in many cases merge, their trade and foreign ministries, as well as the strategy of building formal business government links within diplomatic institutions. While none of these features is unfamiliar to previous diplomatic systems, what is exceptional is the relative neglect of the commercial aspects of diplomacy within diplomatic studies. This lack of attention to the commercial and business elements of diplomacy in traditional theories of diplomacy means that we find ourselves trying to analyse contemporary changes to diplomatic organization and practice without a suitable conceptual and analytical framework. Highlighting the significance of a political economy approach to diplomacy, and also engaging with orthodox approaches to diplomacy, this article begins to develop some analytical and conceptual tools to better identify, explain and understand changes in diplomatic systems as well as the increased influence of private interests in diplomatic practice now under way. **Copyright © WJPDIR, all rights reserved.**

Introduction

This article is informed by a concern with changes in diplomatic practices and organization in a growing number of states; more specifically, the emerging importance attached to commercial elements of diplomacy has become a foreign policy priority of various governments. To implement this new policy emphasis, governments have restructured their diplomatic institutions in a number of ways. Some states, for example Canada, Australia and Belgium, have reformed their organizational structures in quite dramatic fashion by merging their trade and foreign ministries into one department. Others, such as the United Kingdom (UK) and the Czech Republic, have created new joint bodies of these two ministries to coordinate commercial diplomacy. At the centre of these new diplomatic structures we find formal business – government partnerships. Such partnerships are also present in state that have not introduced organizational reform, such as the United States (US), South Africa, Germany, Norway, Brazil, Sweden and Tunisia, and is evidence of the widespread prioritization of commercial diplomacy in the international objectives of an increasing number of states. The development of formal business-government linkages within government as well as increased government spending in support of business interest are now a common feature of commercial diplomacy. In sum, governments are reorganizing their diplomatic systems so that commercial activities are far more centralized and the commercial activities of diplomats are extended. More crucially, new diplomatic practices based upon the ascendancy of business interests within diplomatic systems have begun to emerge.

With such changes already established in many countries, and under consideration in many others, we may well be witnessing substantively significant changes to the practice of diplomacy in the twenty-first century; changes that are fashioned by commercial interests. What are the key features of this diplomacy? First, it combines the economic and the political at both domestic and international levels. Second, government business partnerships have become the key organizing principle as well as an attribute of the state in the world economy. Third, the public interest is conceptualized as a collective expression of private interests. As this article shows, some of these features are common to most diplomatic systems of the Western and non-Western world. What is uncommon, however, is the recognition of these features in the canon of diplomatic studies, rendering them present-but-invisible in most accounts of the theory of diplomacy and practice. Thus, while orthodox diplomatic studies might usefully explain traditional interstate high politics in bilateral and multilateral settings, it fails to identify, explain and understand many changes to diplomatic systems and in particular the increased influence of private interests in diplomacy which is of growing relevance today.

The current diplomatic system – a system in which commercial activities predominate in terms of the relative percentage of resources spent on them – challenges a number of inferences that are core to the dominant view of diplomacy found in the canon of diplomatic studies. These include structural inferences such as the separation of politics and economics in diplomatic processes and the conceptualization of diplomacy as an autonomous political process as well as an attribute of the general political interest in the international political domain. Also included is the stronger inference that traditional diplomacy is the privileged domain of professional diplomats, conducted almost exclusively by Foreign Service personnel and officials from Foreign Ministries. We thus find ourselves conceptualising and analyzing a diplomatic system that is at variance with the chief intellectual

tenets of diplomatic studies. The challenge now is to develop a way of conceptualizing and analyzing diplomacy that can identify, explain and understand these sorts of changes to diplomatic practice.

Conceptualizing Changes in Diplomatic Practice

This article takes up this challenge. It first asserts that diplomatic practice is and always has been much more than the traditional interstate high politics that it has largely been portrayed as, and in so doing rejects the implicit novelty of commercial diplomacy contained within traditional accounts. This is not to conclude that nothing has changed. Instead, the argument is that commercial diplomacy has always been an integral part of diplomatic practices, but that its form is currently undergoing restructuring, that is, the relationship between government and business is changing with important consequences for diplomatic practice.

In order to make such an argument the article will proceed as follows. First, it rehearses the traditional and popular account of diplomacy; that is, diplomatic relations are the very stuff of 'high' politics. Such an account is flawed because it is a partial, indeed singular, rendering of a more complex and multifaceted history of diplomatic practices. An explanation for this myopia is found in the way the academic relationship between diplomacy and International Relations (IR) is constructed. Thus the second part of the article concerns itself with how hegemonic interpretations of international relations serve to impose a contrived understanding of diplomacy. The article argues that the dominant interpretation revolves around a series of dichotomies that mask alternative 'origins' of diplomacy and diplomatic systems. Third, clearing the ground for a political economy approach, the article recounts some alternative origins of diplomatic practices, and thus their historical form. In order to explain the continued relative neglect of these alternative accounts the article engages with the theme of IR as an ongoing discourse. Once this is done, we will be in a better position to analyse the contemporary changes in diplomatic institutions first highlighted. The conclusion presents these as changes contained within an unbroken diplomatic tradition of ongoing public and private engagement, something that has been obscured by the predominant rationalist approach found in the diplomatic studies canon. In approaching diplomacy in the first instance as containing political and economic elements, analysis is then able to focus upon changing public-private relationships within state structures. We could then begin to address critical issues which as yet have largely been ignored, remain paradoxical or unanswerable, in the current diplomatic studies schema and justify the need for a political economy approach to diplomacy.

Political Approach to Diplomacy

The changing institutional structures of national diplomatic systems;

Normative issues regarding the relationship between private business interests and the public interest;

The reconfiguring of diplomatic actor identities as private actors becomes officially involved in diplomatic processes;

Discourses of a profession in peril.

The neglect of the economic dimension of diplomacy in orthodox studies has proved particularly costly in the study, for example, of the impact of non-state actors in multilateral and bilateral diplomacy. The scope for international business groups such as the International Chamber of Commerce, the World Economic Forum, and the Transatlantic Business Dialogue, to influence multilateral diplomacy at the international level has grown with the creation and development of for example, the GATT/WTO, the United Nations and economic summits. And at the domestic level, there is a much broader scope of methods of bilateral diplomacy than is suggested by orthodox studies as a result of public private networks found in the diplomatic services of many countries. Equally, orthodox studies tend to lose sight of the important expert and technical advice provided by epistemic communities who enjoy formal authority in multilateral and bilateral diplomacy especially since economic negotiations have become more technical and complex on issues such as intellectual property and services.

The Misrepresentation of Commercial Diplomacy

In the partial and exclusive rendering of diplomacy that is most commonly given, the wider activities diplomats – and especially their commercial work – are seen as departures from the more serious concerns of diplomats. The notion that the effectiveness and stature of ‘traditional diplomacy’ is being reduced as new issues that encroach on to the diplomatic agenda is an all too familiar concern of the scholarly response to these changes. It was for example, a key topic for discussion around a short report titled ‘Diplomacy; Profession in Peril?’ at a recent Wilton Park conference held in London. (Jennings and Hopkinson, 1999).

Several personal accounts of diplomacy given by active or retired diplomats record what is mostly the high political content of diplomacy, presenting an incomplete record of their work. Nicholas Henderson’s diaries of his service as British Ambassador in Warsaw, Paris, Bonn and Washington from 1969 to 1982 provide perhaps the best example of this. While Henderson claims to show that diplomacy is the management of a ‘whole range of practical everyday matters between states’, he provides few details of the daily work of the Embassies and their huge staffs. And while there is plenty of incidental mention of commercial work – visits to local industries, trade fairs and the like – there is no attempt to present this as a significant and integral part of diplomatic practice despite the importance to British trade interests of Paris, Bonn and Washington. How sharply this contrasts with, for example, the description of the work of the British Embassy in Iran covering some of the same period. Ambassador Anthony Parsons argues that his Embassy was dominated by commercial work (Henderson, 1999).

By the end of 1975 I had, with the approval of the Foreign Office, reorganized the Embassy staff to meet our priorities. First came export promotion in all its aspects dealing with the flood of business visitors and commercial enquiries, helping to organize trade promotions and trade delegations seeking new commercial opportunities and feeding them back into the export promotion machine back home.

Similarly, retired Indian Ambassador Kishan Rana states that during his career ‘I found that over fifty percent of my time was devoted to economic work’ (Rana, 2000).

It is certainly difficult to make much sense of these differing accounts of what comprises everyday diplomacy in the modern era. Like Henderson, most diplomats focus almost exclusively on the political content of diplomacy when describing the work of the diplomat. Also held over from the early twentieth century is the habit of discussing commercial work in pejorative terms. Henderson, for example, refers to commercial activities as 'humdrum'. Again, contrast this with Rana's statement that commercial activities are 'one of the most exciting arenas of modern diplomacy' (Rana, 2000:126). Of course, what we are identifying might be contrasting individual circumstance and interests. Yet the evidence of both Rana and Parsons suggests that Henderson, and others, might well be doing diplomats a disservice by presenting only a partial account of the everyday work of the Embassy and binding diplomatic identity to a narrow political schema (Henderson, 1981).

That commercial diplomacy may be uninteresting is not the key issue for us. What is at issue is the inaccuracy that attends the representation of commercial work in the diplomatic studies literature. It simply does not make analytical sense to discuss diplomatic practice without recognizing that commercial diplomacy makes up a significant part of diplomatic work. Nor does it make analytical sense to relegate commercial work as a diversion from or a degeneration of traditional diplomatic activities and concerns (Dickie: 1992:30).

Modern diplomacy cannot be understood as separate functions but instead needs to be analysed as multifaceted work in which specialist tasks such as commercial work and information work are interrelated; so much so that it is often impossible to distinguish between the many activities of a diplomat. UK government records support this view, Members of the UK Diplomatic Service complained, for example, that the Duncan Report on Overseas Representation had mistakenly divided commercial work into political and economic components rather than seeing commercial diplomacy as a composite activity involving both. This, some diplomats claim, led the Duncan Committee to exaggerate the benefits of encouraging private sector involvement in trade promotion (by recommending an increased role for UK Chambers of Commerce). They concluded that the Duncan Committee undervalued the role of professional diplomats in trade promotion. Even diplomats, therefore, are critical of the tendency of outside observers to limit diplomatic identity and processes to the political aspects of their work (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1970).

In a practical sense, in most posts, diplomatic missions are simply not involved in the affairs of high politics. At places other than, say, neighbouring capitals, and to some extent the capitals of the major or regional powers, the political relationship is a given and does not call for more than exchanges of views on significant global/regional issues and bilateral developments. Perhaps the most useful account of the multifaceted nature of diplomacy is provided by Lord Trevelyan who describes the diplomat as 'an economist, a commercial traveler, an advertising agent' who'.... Continues to have a basic political job. The composite nature of diplomacy and the integration of political and economic interests in diplomatic practice is nowhere more striking than in the Levant area from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. In 1582, direct agents of the Levant Company became British diplomats and, until 1805 (when the British government took over), the company paid the entire costs of providing a diplomatic service in the area. According to historical accounts, these diplomats combined the roles of

royal representatives and commercial agents with aplomb. Indeed, they were generally considered more effective in representing both national and trading influences than the regular officials of the General Consular Service. Similarly, the English East India Company and the Dutch East India Company forced the flag to follow trade throughout the East from 1600 to the early nineteenth century. In the UK 'the search for new markets and new distributive systems had been a national priority and meant that the company's ship commanders, such as William Hawkings, were 'entrusted with all diplomatic negotiations'. These composite characteristics are also evident elsewhere and especially in formative US diplomacy (Pletcher, 2001). In the eighteenth century, debates on isolationism between Hamilton, Jefferson and Madison focused on questions of appropriate balance between minimal political connection and maximum commercial relations. Much later, the historian Williams described the newly independent US as a 'mercantilist state' and highlighted the policy of 'open-door imperialism' to describe shifts in emphasis in US diplomacy from territorial expansion to the promotion of free trade to secure open markets (Williams, 1992:45).

In sum, a closer reading of diplomatic memoirs as well as official documentation, and a deeper dip into diplomatic history, reveals a diplomacy that is multi-dimensional. These sources indicate that diplomatic activity is primarily concerned with the building of economic and commercial relations and that it is sometimes concerned with political relations. Thus, far from being a departure from traditional diplomacy, the economic and commercial aspects are fundamental to it.

The Modern Idea of Diplomacy

Making distinctions between politics and economic, between private and public, and between international and domestic, diplomacy is generally conceived of in two ways. Broadly defined, diplomacy is a process of communication, negotiation and information-sharing between sovereign states. More narrowly defined, diplomacy is also a foreign policy instrument that belongs (almost exclusively) to states in an international system of anarchy. As a process of communication, negotiation and information-sharing, diplomacy largely revolves around the activities of professional (public) political actors and representatives of the state working in foreign ministries, permanent residencies or in international organizations.

However diplomacy is defined, the consensus view is that it has a constitutive function; it is a means of ordering the relations between states. In its most elevated status, diplomacy is 'essential to the difference between peace and war' and the 'bulwark against international chaos' as well as an ordering principle that can create balances of power.

Thus conceptualized, the study of diplomacy, as both process and policy instrument, is primarily focused on states and is concerned with the conduct and content of interstate relations and foreign policy. It would be wrong to say, however, that this is the exclusive focus of diplomatic studies. Recently, there has been discussion and recognition of the widening content of diplomacy and also of the emergence of non-state actors as diplomatic agents as well as diplomatic actors found in other government departments. But the literature on these new areas of

diplomacy – environmental diplomacy, public diplomacy and commercial diplomacy – has not found its way into the mainstream of diplomatic studies which still largely concerns itself with what Marshall calls the political foreground (Hopkinson, 1990).

This is not to argue, however, that diplomatic studies lacks a dynamic approach to diplomacy. Existing accounts of diplomacy have readily and accurately identified diplomacy as a changing process in which diplomatic practice and methods are subject to adjustment in response to both systemic and domestic factors. These include the overall increase in diplomatic activities and the new practices and processes – such as summit diplomacy and multilateral diplomacy – which have emerged in response to factors like the increase in the number of states in the international system and the development of international and regional organizations. Further examples of dynamism are the numerous efforts to increase the professionalism and efficiency of diplomatic processes, which have led to the increased application of new technologies in diplomacy such as the recent innovative use of web pages in consulates and overseas embassies. We could also point to factors such as the greater level of public scrutiny of diplomacy and the increased involvement of government actors from outside Foreign Ministries and Foreign/Diplomatic Services. As a result of these technological and organizational dynamics, modern diplomatic practice routinely involves rapid communications, less secrecy and increased informal public involvement, increase involvement of officials from other government departments as well as private actors. But while there has been widespread recognition and detailed discussion of procedural and substantive changes to diplomacy, this has not developed into a series of new discourses within contemporary diplomatic studies. The conceptual framework of diplomacy, the definition of diplomacy and the systemic environment of diplomacy has been constant in diplomatic studies from Wicquefort (1606 – 1682) to date. In essence the very idea of diplomacy that it is a dialogue between states in an anarchic systemic structure of independent political units has not changed all that much during some three hundred and fifty years of scholarship. The concern of this article is with the analytical obstacles this perpetuity poses for understanding and explaining significant but neglected areas of study that emerge when the political meets the economic, such as the interaction and contest between public and private interest within national and diplomatic systems (Anderson, 1993).

How might this idea of diplomacy be explained? Where does this idea itself originate? The predominant idea of diplomacy emerges in the various historical accounts of the development of diplomacy that assign prime significance to the diplomatic system of the Italian city-state system in the evolution of what is called ‘modern diplomacy’ that now operates around the world. With very few exceptions, most descriptions see the simultaneous emergence of the Italian city-state system and the first organized diplomatic system in the mid-fifteenth century. This historical reading establishes the idea that diplomacy is constituted by, and also constitutes, state sovereignty. State sovereignty, in turn, constitutes the anarchic systemic structures characterized by the separation of the domestic from the international, the economic from the political, and the private from the public.

The Italian city-state system of ‘feverish competition between the small Italian states’ emerges as the system that leaves a permanent imprint on the evolution of modern diplomatic practice. In his classic work, Harold

Nicolson describes how the fall of the Roman Empire created a vacuum of political authority in which ‘physically weak’ states looked to ‘diplomatic combinations’ for their defence. Here is the classical realist explanation for the emergence of organized diplomacy and a balance of power. For example he argues that in the Italian system ‘Policy ceased to be stated in the sharp alternatives of obedience or revolt, but became a question of adjusting rival ambitions’ and ‘it was then that professional diplomacy became one of the branches of statesmanship’ and then spread across Europe. Other take Nicolson’s description as a given, and proceed to argue that the Italian system became the first organized diplomatic network in the history of the international system ‘formed on the basis of a system of interstate relations recognizable as the direct ancestor of the one which exists today (Anderson, 1993).

We can also note the rationalist ontological source of diplomatic studies in its explanation for the transhistorical nature of this system since the mid-fifteenth century. The system of diplomacy that emerged in this era is seen not only as the first diplomatic system in history, but it is one that would have a permanent imprint on diplomatic practice in the twenty-first century. This historical moment in the mid-fifteenth century, a moment that brings forth the unison of state sovereignty and an organized network of diplomacy, itself gives rise to an important conceptual schema – the prominent line that Europe is central to all international relations. From this point the power politics of Europe becomes the core empirical and conceptual focus of diplomatic studies (and IR) until at least the beginning of the twentieth century, if not beyond. This euro-centrism is evident in the mentors of the theory of diplomacy. Callieres, Kissinger, Nicolson, Richelieu, and Wicquefort.

In this respect the historiography of the theory of diplomacy is not so much a case of the past informing the present, but is rather a means of allowing the present discourse to caricature the past. But this is not our chief concern. Our chief concern is more practical. The significance of the reading of the evolution of diplomacy presented in mainstream diplomatic studies is that it enables a specific political idea of diplomacy to take hold, one that focuses almost exclusively on political dialogues between states.

In the following two sections we will draw upon our ontological themes to locate alternative historical accounts of diplomatic practices and then begin to develop a political economy of diplomacy. First then, what of the claims that the international system is one shaped as much by socioeconomic as political-military relations?

The Political Economy of Diplomacy

The prominent line of argument in the canon of diplomatic studies that sees a constitutive relationship between diplomacy and state sovereignty, as well as a constitutive relationship between diplomatic systems and an anarchic system of sovereign states, emerges from a particular reading of history that is informed more by rationalist inferences than by empiricism. In contrast to the arguments presented in this article, this orthodoxy fails to recognize, let alone explain, the commercial activity of diplomats as a core element of diplomatic practice. This is because the traditional approach to diplomacy privileges political transactions and neglects economic transactions. As a result a key analytical difficulty has always been present in diplomatic studies. Namely, the conceptual framework of much of the diplomatic studies literature means that it is ill-suited to the study of commercial

diplomacy in general. Therefore, by corollary, it is also ill-equipped for a more particular study of the changes to diplomatic practice currently underway in several countries.

To shift to an approach that seeks to understand and explain these significant changes we need to think about diplomacy in a postRationalist framework. Broadly speaking this requires an ontology based on open-ended historical narratives of diplomacy that does not tie diplomacy to the state and ‘the anarchy problematique’, but rather sees diplomacy as a means of connecting cultures, economies and states in order to build and manage social relations at domestic and systemic levels. Thus a political economy of diplomacy would identify changes to diplomatic practice as products of the interaction of economic and political, as well as cultural, discourse at domestic and systemic levels in particular historical periods (Jessop, 1990).

Specifically if we are to understand and explain the functions and content of diplomatic practice we need to do what political economy does. We need to analyse social formation in diplomatic systems; that is, we need to disaggregate diplomatic systems so that we see diplomacy not as an instrument of an autonomous public actor (the state) but as an aggregate of public and private interests within the state similar to Jessop’s Strategic relational conception of the state as a social relation. In this way current diplomatic practice then becomes a product of current aggregates of interests. The precise mix of which varies in time producing changes to diplomatic practice. In this way we might explain current reforms to diplomatic practice in terms of moves by private interest to use public political authority (the state) to control the market.

Thus a political economy of diplomacy goes beyond the particular and narrow sense of the political, to a position where we recognize that *economics matters* in diplomacy. Not that we would wish to privilege economics in any essentialist manner, rather we see the necessity of integrating the political and the economic approach in order to help identify the linkages between public and private actors and interests – that is, the relationships between public and private within diplomatic systems. Then changes to diplomatic practice can be understood in terms of changes to public-private relationships within states that vary through times (Brien, 2000:15).

Adopting such an approach not only brings advantages to diplomatic studies, it also adds to our understanding of the international political economy in that it forces a recognition that agents – that is diplomats – are significant actors and part of a dense, yet unexplored, network of market actors in the world economy. After all, current commercial diplomacy the promotion of inward and outward investment as well as exports involves the search for competitive advantage in the world economy by diplomat-business alliances. An International Political Economy (IPE) agenda that includes analysis of current diplomatic practice with its emphasis on commercial diplomacy may well expose the connections between human agency and systemic transformation and stability and thus add to debates about the relationship between structure and agency in IPE. By identifying diplomat-business alliances as significant actors in the world economy we are to use Robert O’Brien’s phrase, ‘rediscovering human agency’ and moving beyond the state-centred focus of some leading scholars in IPE. In recognizing relationship between business and diplomats, an IPE agenda that includes the study of current diplomatic practice would also contribute to current IPE debates such as that over the ‘privatization’ or ‘marketisation’ of the state and the issue of

state capacity within the world economy. Thus we would claim that a political economy approach to diplomacy has a double advantage – it adds to the theoretical and empirical utility of diplomatic studies as well as IPE.

Conclusion

Because of the predominantly rationalist approach to diplomacy – an approach that is based largely on a statist reading of international relations – much of the diplomatic studies literature is unable to perceive, let alone analyse, the commercial elements of diplomacy. Thus to date, commercial diplomacy has suffered a present-but-invisible status within diplomatic studies. This blindness produces a partial disclosure of what constitutes diplomatic practice. By using diplomatic memoirs, government records as well as alternative studies of the origins and development of diplomacy, we can overcome this blindness and provide ample evidence of the significance and continue presence of the commercial elements in diplomacy. Indeed, contemporary changes to the institutions and practice of diplomacy have created a diplomatic practice in which the balance between the commercial elements and political elements of commercial work has swung very much in favour of the former.

At present there is a clear disjuncture between the theory of diplomacy and diplomatic practice. Most diplomatic theorists would have us believe that diplomacy is the stuff of high politics, yet we know that this position obscures the practice of a diplomacy that is far more complex and multifaceted. Not only do we know this intuitively, diplomats and official government records tell us that this is so. More significantly, we also know that commercial elements of diplomacy have always been embedded in diplomatic practice; diplomats have always undertaken commercial activities. As long as theories of diplomacy continue to divorce market relations from political relations when understanding international relations, there is always the danger of masking the commercial elements of diplomacy.

In this article we have shown the necessity of adopting a political economy approach that integrates market relations with political relations and thus conceptualizes diplomacy as a continuous political-economic dialogue. We have also cleared the ground for such an approach. We have begun to develop the necessary analytical tools to better understand and explain the multi-dimensional nature of diplomacy, including its commercial element. We do not claim to have produced a new way of theorizing diplomacy. Rather we have provided a different conceptualization of diplomacy, one that integrates diplomatic studies with IPE, so that we can develop an agenda in diplomatic studies that can better identify the commercial diplomacy in general and explain the changes now underway in diplomatic institutions and practice in particular. As we have shown, these changes are best understood in terms of an unbroken diplomatic tradition of the marriage between public and private actors and interest that is evident in the origins and evolution of diplomacy and diplomatic systems. Far from being a weakening of diplomacy, the contemporary changes are easily accommodated inside the diplomatic tradition. Focusing upon the key characteristics of the contemporary changes – the development of new institutions and the formal inclusion of business representatives and thus business interests – is important. Not because it helps us reach artificial conclusions about the demise of resilience of traditional diplomacy, but rather because it provides a means to

identify and understand the change in public-private relationships within state structures – an issue that is already of current academic concern within IPE but much overdue in diplomatic studies.

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