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Introduction

Diplomacy has been characterized as “the master-institution”¹ or, more prosaically, as “the engine room” of international relations.² Yet diplomacy has received surprisingly little attention among political scientists specializing in international relations. Indeed, diplomacy has been “particularly resistant to theory.”³

Diplomacy “exists” within international theory, but is rarely analysed or extensively explored. In addition, the conceptual wealth of the literature on diplomacy is quite limited and, to a great degree, divorced from the development of political theory.⁴

Theoreticians have viewed the literature on diplomacy as “redundant and anecdotal.”⁵ Abba Eban speaks of “an intrinsic antagonism” separating theoreticians from practitioners, and argues that there are few fields “in which the tension between theory and practice is more acute than in diplomacy.”⁶ There is a simple reason for this:

No area of world politics has reflected a greater gap between experience and theory than diplomatic statecraft. The reason is that those who explicitly study such statecraft have not been theoretically oriented, while those who emphasize theory have not focused upon diplomacy.⁷

Moreover, in the Cold War era, during which theorizing in international relations (IR) flourished, the threat of force, rather than diplomacy, was seen as the essential foundation of a viable foreign policy.⁸ “Cheap talk” was contrasted with decisive action using military hardware.⁹

It has been argued that IR theory and diplomacy alike suffer from this lack of linkage between theory and practice. Diplomacy has been called

“the missing link” in the study of international relations.¹⁰ Eban argues that “one of the handicaps of diplomacy is that ... it is not yet plugged in to any recognized science.”¹¹ John Burton expands on that idea:

Diplomacy is a profession, and like the medical and other professions, it has a status that reflects the ignorance of those outside it of the knowledge and skills required to practice it. ... Other professions have an input from science: professional diplomacy has traditionally been learned by practicing the art, by apprenticeship. There has been no new input from any science.¹²

Another feature of the literature on diplomacy contributes to diminishing its usefulness for theory-building: it is seldom based on value-free and detached observations but is frequently emotion-laden and opinionated. Diplomacy is either perceived as something good to be defended or something evil to be pilloried. There is a gulf between Ernest Satow's classic characterization of diplomacy as “the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states,”¹³ and eighteenth-century French writer Le Trosne's description of diplomacy as “an obscure art which hides itself in the folds of deceit, which fears to let itself be seen and believes that it can exist only in the darkness of mystery.”¹⁴ The secret diplomacy that was generally perceived to be a factor in the outbreak of The First World War was condemned in even harsher terms: “what we now know as diplomacy is nothing more than a convicted fraud, a swindler of mankind, and a traitorous assassin of the morality and progress of the human race.”¹⁵

A more recent value-laden discussion concerns the alleged decline of diplomacy, the notion that diplomacy is not only politically harmful but also “technologically redundant.”¹⁶ The decline or crisis of diplomacy has become “a well rehearsed proposition.”¹⁷ Diplomacy is sometimes suggested as a candidate for the endangered species list,¹⁸ and Zbigniew Brzezinski's quip in 1970 to the effect that if foreign ministries and embassies “did not already exist, they surely would not have to be invented,” is frequently quoted.¹⁹ Other observers, on the other hand, argue that “contemporary diplomacy shows every sign of adapting vigorously to new conditions and participants.”²⁰

The purpose of this book is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Theorizing diplomacy, we want to raise the fundamental question: What are some essential dimensions, or timeless features, of diplomacy? In other words, we put more emphasis on continuity than

change; or, more accurately, we want to uncover those timeless parameters, within which change occurs in a long-term historical perspective. In the process, we want to make IR theory relevant to diplomacy, and diplomacy relevant to IR theory. While exploring a number of essential dimensions, we have no pretensions to develop a full-fledged theory of diplomacy; our endeavor is perhaps best characterized as pre-theoretical groundwork.

To avoid misunderstandings, two points of departure in our theorizing effort need to be emphasized from the very outset. First, contrary to many observers and commentators, we do not see diplomacy as an institution of the modern state system, originating in fifteenth-century Italy. In our view, diplomacy is a perennial international institution that “expresses a human condition that precedes and transcends the experience of living in the sovereign, territorial states of the past few hundred years.”²¹ In other words, we regard diplomacy as a timeless, existential phenomenon and want to explore whether its varying forms throughout history may be subsumed under some generic, essential categories.

Second, when we claim that diplomacy has been resistant to theory, we need to make one important reservation. Negotiation is generally regarded as the key instrument of, and sometimes even equated with, diplomacy. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for instance, defines diplomacy as “the conduct of international relations by negotiation.” And the study of international negotiation has since the 1960s developed into a vital and productive subfield of IR research with advanced efforts at generalizations and theory-building.²² Our theorizing effort, with its principal focus on diplomacy as an institution rather than diplomatic method, will not contribute to this rich body of literature. Yet we will draw on insights from negotiation theory in our discussion of communication as an essential dimension of diplomacy in Chapter 4.

“There is nothing as practical as a good theory” is an often-used quote, attributed to the German psychologist Kurt Lewin. In fact, all human perception is theory-driven, insofar as we all process information through preexisting “knowledge structures” or preconceptions. The main difference between scientific and intuitive theories is that the former are explicit and open to scrutiny, whereas the latter are implicit and lie below the level of awareness. The title of our book is an intended paraphrase of the well-known modern classic *Essence of Decision*, in which Graham Allison demonstrated that our conceptual models or lenses serve like floodlights that illuminate one part of the stage but, by the same token, leave other parts in the shade or in the dark. Moreover,

Allison argued, using a different metaphor, “conceptual models not only fix the mesh of the nets that the analyst drags through the material in order to explain a particular action; they also direct him to cast his nets in select ponds, at certain depths, in order to catch the fish he is after.”²³

We share Allison’s view of theories as instruments for processing the raw material of knowledge – selecting, categorizing, ordering, simplifying and integrating – that sensitize us to certain aspects of a problem and some sets of data, while blinding or desensitizing us to others. The principal difference between Allison’s study of the Cuban missile crisis and our effort at theorizing diplomacy is that he contrasted three more or less established models of political decision-making, whereas we lack a commonly accepted set of conceptual lenses to apply to diplomacy.

It should be noted that the title of our book, like Allison’s, lacks the definite article. We do not claim to uncover “the” essence of diplomacy. Nor do we belong to any kind of essentialist school of thought, maintaining that “some objects – no matter how described – have essences; that is, they have, essentially or necessarily, certain properties, without which they could not exist or be the things they are.”²⁴ Rather, we want to propose a number of essential or constitutive dimensions of diplomacy, within which historically contingent change may occur. Just as Allison explored three alternative conceptual models (rational actor, organizational process and governmental politics), so we end up with three essential dimensions of diplomacy: communication, representation and reproduction of international society. However, the similarity in the number of conceptual building blocks is the result of coincidence rather than design. And, unlike Allison’s, our three conceptual tools are constitutive rather than explanatory.

Our book is organized as follows. As a backdrop to our own contribution to theory-building, we will, in Chapter 1, give a brief characterization of the extant literature on diplomacy and address the question of why diplomacy has been marginalized in IR theory. On the basis of this background sketch, we formulate our own theoretical, conceptual and methodological points of departure in Chapter 2. More specifically, we develop our view of diplomacy as an international institution, propose that diplomacy can be analyzed as the mediation of universalism and particularism, and introduce the three essential dimensions of diplomacy that will be elaborated in subsequent individual chapters. In Chapter 3, we discuss processes of institutionalization and ritualization, as applied to diplomacy. Distinguishing three different levels of institutionalization, we examine institutionalization-cum-ritualization processes at the

symbolic and cognitive level; reciprocity, precedence and diplomatic immunity at the level of rules; and diplomatic ranks at the level of organization.

Chapter 4 is devoted to communication, the first of the three essential, timeless dimensions of diplomacy. After discussing the significance of language to diplomacy, we outline the basic aspects of diplomatic communication: the gathering and transmission of information as well as negotiations, processes of back-and-forth communication. We identify two important options in the diplomatic repertoire – verbal vs. non-verbal communication, and private vs. public communication – and focus on technological developments as vehicles of change in diplomatic communication.

Chapter 5 deals with diplomatic representation, drawing on analyses of representation in various other contexts. The chapter is organized around the basic distinction between representation as behavior (“acting for others”) and as status (“standing for others”). As far as behavior is concerned, the question is whether diplomats as representatives have an “imperative mandate” or a “free mandate,” whether they are bound by instructions or are free to act as they see fit in pursuit of their principals’ interests. Standing for others implies either the embodiment of the diplomats’ principals or symbolic representation.

In Chapter 6 we analyze the role of diplomacy in reproducing a certain type of international society, exercised primarily through the instrument of diplomatic recognition. Contrasting the exclusive recognition practices of the Ancient Near East with the inclusive recognition practices of Ancient Greece, we look at the mixed pattern of the Middle Ages and the modern exclusive recognition pattern, issuing in a homogeneous society of sovereign states.

Finally, in Chapter 7, we raise the question of what happens to diplomacy in times of flux, when new types of polities challenge existing ones, around which diplomatic norms, rules and practices have been built, and when a different combination of universalism and particularism becomes a possibility. We examine three eras of more or less successful transformations in the nature of polities: the panhellenist project of Philip II of Macedonia and Alexander the Great as an alternative to the Greek city-states, the medieval struggle between religious and secular loci of authority, and the recent emergence of the European Union as an international actor.

Our book is addressed to students of international relations and specialists on diplomacy alike. We realize that some of the sections discussing IR theory may alienate diplomacy experts, at the same time

as readers from the IR community may find the multitude of examples redundant, once our main points have been made. In either case, we recommend selective reading. We hope that our main arguments will come across without unrestrained attention to our careful anchoring in IR theory, in the first case, and our effort to adduce examples from many different historical eras, in the latter case.

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