

## CHAPTER 13

### DIPLOMACY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF NATIONAL POWER

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*A diplomat is an honest man sent abroad to lie for his country.*

Apocryphal

*The patriotic art of lying for one's country.*

Ambrose Bierce<sup>1</sup>

*The media and intellectual elites, the State Department (as an institution), and the Foreign Service (as a culture) clearly favor the process, politeness, and accommodation position..*

Newt Gingrich<sup>2</sup>

Ordinary Americans have often been uncomfortable about the art and practice of diplomacy. Frequently, they associate diplomacy and American diplomats either with elitist, pseudo-aristocratic bowing and scraping before supercilious foreigners whose aim is to impinge on our sovereignty and partake of our largesse; or as naïve country bumpkins whose gullibility allows them to forsake key American goals and objectives; or as ruthless, cynical practitioners of Bismarckian realpolitik whose aims and practices fall far short of our Founders' noble aspirations, or as liberal, one-worldists whose collective ideology is far from the American mainstream and who seek to undermine the political aims of elected Administrations. These stereotypes go back to our country's origins and have been reinforced by such traumatic events as Wilson's perceived failure at Versailles, the Yalta Conference near the end of World War II, Henry Kissinger's role as architect of the opening to China, and the failure to obtain a UN Security Council resolution endorsing the use of force in Iraq.

Is any of this true? True or not, does it matter? What is diplomacy supposed to do? Does the U.S. wield diplomacy effectively? Can democracy and diplomacy function harmoniously? How does diplomacy fit in with the protection and furtherance of national security?

First, diplomacy is one instrument among many that a government utilizes in its pursuit of the national interest. Among others are: military power, actual or potential; economic power; intelligence-gathering and operations; cultural and information or "soft power"; relative degrees of national unity; and probably others. Diplomacy never functions in isolation from the other instruments of power but may at times be emphasized as the situation warrants. In its simplest, most original form diplomacy is the official means by which one state formally relates to other states. Although ambassadors have existed since antiquity representing one sovereign to another, the earliest diplomats often functioned more as de facto hostages to ensure peace or compliance with some agreement than in the modern understanding of an ambassador's role. Since nation-states were more or less legitimized by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, a whole series of codes and protocols have been established to create a framework for the practice of diplomacy. These include such

seeming anomalies (and irritants to common citizens) as diplomatic immunity; creation of embassies; establishing and breaking diplomatic relations; sending and receiving diplomatic notes, demarches, non-papers and other forms of communication; holding international conferences and many other means of interstate communication and relations.

Diplomats are agents of the State. In theory, they act on instruction. Until the advent of modern communications, their instructions necessarily had to be general and they required a nearly innate understanding of the national interest of the country they represented. Both because of the non-democratic nature of nearly all States before the American and French Revolutions, and due to the need for confidentiality to protect state secrets and national security, diplomatic exchanges and even treaties or agreements were often undertaken in secret or with quiet discretion. When Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points called for "open covenants openly arrived at" (a reference to Allied agreements for post-World War I division of spoils from the Central Powers that appeared to make a mockery of claims the War was meant to make the "world safe for democracy"), he was publicly challenging the entire edifice of traditional diplomacy that had, however, begun to be modified with the rise of the mass media and popular participation in the nineteenth century. Increasingly, mounting scrutiny from democratic media and academics and ever-increasing intrusive clandestine intelligence-gathering make formal secret agreements less and less palatable.

One prism through which to view diplomacy is to think of it as an element on the spectrum of national security devices. In the "normal" course of events, most nations, while competing for influence, markets, relative perceived power and other markers of strength, most of the time relate to one another the way competitors do in seeking market-share—not as gangs fighting over turf. In other words, the assumption is that peaceful approaches, use of agreements and treaties, and normal intercourse will prevail. In this scenario, diplomacy provides the lubricant for acceptable relations, seeks to remove irritants, and strives for mutual understanding. However, even in the relations between traditionally peaceful entities, in the semi-Hobbesian universe of contemporary international relations, diplomacy holds in its quiver, the potential threat of force. In the cases where rivalry becomes equated with threats to vital national interests (a determination that is difficult to objectively define but that governments make drawing on their specific cultural, historical, and political traditions and bringing to bear whatever institutions or individuals wield predominant influence on this subject), diplomacy becomes an adjunct to overt or masked displays or use of armed force. In this situation, diplomacy becomes the main instrument to build coalitions, influence publics and elites in other countries of the justice of the cause, and works closely with the military establishment to make available critical spaces in non-national territory for the possible deployment of armed force (i.e., aircraft overflight rights, port visits, shipment of men and materiel). Finally, if armed conflict does erupt, diplomacy continues during that period (albeit with a lower emphasis) focusing on post-war planning, cost and burden-sharing, and international organization endorsement (or at least non-condemnation) of the military actions.

Diplomacy fundamentally consists of a constant assessment of other countries' power potential, perceived vital interests, relationship with other states, in an attempt to maximize one's own country's freedom of action with the ultimate purpose of assuring the achievement of the nation's vital interests, the core of which is survival. Diplomacy traditionally and currently utilizes a variety of practices or maneuvers to obtain the protection or furtherance of the national goals or interests. Essentially all these practices are elements of diplomatic strategy that seek advantage for the state short of war (although war always remains the ultimate recourse). From the realist perspective, all strategies, while perhaps amoral in themselves, have as the ultimate goal the moral aim of the survival of the state and its core values. Thus, leaders must take account of the particular circumstance of the place in the international order of their state to determine what

would be an effective strategy and tactics or maneuvers to enable its success. Thus, from the British and French perspective in 1938, the decision to appease Germany over the Sudetenland may have been a misperception of the relative power of each state but was not, a priori, an invalid tactic. The constant politically-charged accusation of “Munich” or “Yalta” in quite different circumstances is meaningless. Sometimes appeasement is good or unavoidable. In the case of Nazi Germany, in hindsight, it was a bad tactic because Hitler could not be appeased, and the Allies simply postponed the inevitable clash to a moment when they yielded military advantage to Hitler. Détente (especially the series of arms control human rights agreements) as practiced by Nixon and Kissinger was an effort to reach accommodation with the Soviet Union at a time when it appeared a balance of power in nuclear weapons had been struck and neither side could expect to gain a decisive advantage. The effort by President George H. W. Bush to create a coalition in the First Gulf War was not so much to increase U.S. military advantage over Iraq as it was to demonstrate—especially in the Arab and Islamic worlds—the broad support to repel Iraqi aggression in Kuwait. In the recent Gulf War, the relative absence of a significant coalition was largely a function of the administration’s desire to not be constrained in tactics, operations (targeting), and strategy in the way it believed NATO operations in Kosovo had been hampered.

## **Diplomatic Instruments**

The main instrument of diplomacy is negotiation, whether in a formal or informal setting. In a sense all diplomacy is a constant adjustment of relations among states pursued simultaneously through multiple, overlapping dialogues: bilateral, multilateral (e.g., United Nations); special conferences and other venues. The goal is usually, but not always, to reach an agreement that could range from those containing significant enforcement mechanisms for implementation (e.g., the Non-Proliferation Treaty) to hortatory proclamations such as the Kellogg-Briand pact that purported to outlaw war. One of the special advantages diplomats as a profession may have is that they should possess significant knowledge of the personalities and national cultural styles of their interlocutors. Since much diplomatic maneuvering by states consist of bluffs and feints as well as subtle signals either of accommodation or willingness to risk war, a capable diplomacy can discern and characterize the meaning of a given action. Misinterpretation, ignorance, lack of knowledge, or arrogance can lead to unforeseeable consequences (e.g., ignoring India’s warning during the Korean War that China would intervene if U.S. forces approached the Yalu River).

Diplomatic relations among countries have long followed a common set of practices. The necessity to maintain contact as a means to facilitate dialogue between states leads to diplomatic recognition that can be of the state but not the government (e.g., North Korea by the United States); or of the government as well. Normally, such recognition is not a moral stamp of approval but a reflection that a regime controls the preponderance of national territory, and that it is in the interest of the other country to have formal channels of communication. Breaking relations can be a prelude to war; more often it is a mark of extreme disapproval. But if the regime survives, non-recognition can be a cause of great inconvenience since maintaining a dialogue usually involves talking either through third parties or in multilateral institutions. There are also anomalous situations such as is currently the case with Cuba where the United States maintains a large Interests Section under the technical protection of the Swiss embassy in order to pursue business with the Castro regime without compromising its disapproval. Sometimes a decision is made to withdraw the ambassador, temporarily or for longer periods, to deliver a significant rebuke for some policy or action of the host government. The downside to such an action is that dialogue between the states may become more rigid and are certainly conducted at a lower level of authority. In normal practice, the ambassador heads an embassy that is usually divided into numerous sections each specializing in a particular subject area. The number of persons granted diplomatic status, which under the Vienna

Convention imparts immunity to certain host government laws, is negotiated between the two states.

An American embassy is normally organized in the following manner: at the apex is the Ambassador, appointed by the President as his personal representative and confirmed by the U.S. Senate. He may be a career Foreign Service Officer from the Department of State or he may be chosen from other agencies or the private sector. His/her alter ego is the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) who serves under the Ambassador to assure the timely, efficient, and correct carrying out of instructions and to assure good management practices in the embassy (i.e., avoidance of waste, fraud, and mismanagement). There are usually several functional State Department Sections (i.e., Political, Economic, Consular, and Administrative) that handle the reporting, management, and protection of U.S. citizens and issuance of visas to foreign nationals. Many Embassies also maintain a Defense Attaché Office with representatives from one or more of the armed services; a Defense Cooperation Office that manages foreign military sales and transfers; often a Foreign Commercial Service that promotes U.S. exports; a Foreign Agricultural Service that does the same for agricultural commodities; a Legal Attaché (normally FBI) that liaises with host country police authorities; Drug Enforcement Agency that does the same on narcotics issues; and a representative from Customs, possibly the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Depending on the country, many other Federal agencies may be represented. Similarly, the receiving country may have similar sections in its embassy in Washington.

How, in the real, contemporary world, does modern American diplomacy work? With or without the publication of the National Security Strategy, which is an explicit annual overview of an Administration's top priorities often together with a general roadmap on how to achieve the objectives, the Department of State, usually in conjunction and coordination with the other foreign affairs agencies under the auspices of the National Security Council, will send telegraphic (or sometimes e-mail or telephone) instructions to an embassy in a given country or international organization. It might be a request for information on a matter that has risen to the attention of at least the Country Director in a regional or functional bureau of the Department of State (perhaps due to media attention, pressure from a lobbyist, or a request from a member of Congress). Or the department could instruct the Ambassador to raise with the host country a matter of concern such as the arrest of an American citizen, a report of human rights abuse by a military unit, allegations of unfair commercial practice harmful to an American firm, sale of military weapons, a request for port visit of a U.S. warship, surveillance of a suspected terrorist or many other possible items. In what becomes a continuous conversation, the appropriate section in the embassy (Political, Economic, Consular, Defense Attaché, Commercial Service, or others) would be tasked to take the necessary action. Sometimes the embassy itself reports on a matter and offers a recommendation. In rare cases where immediate action is vital, the embassy might report what it did and implicitly request endorsement of the action. Often, in parallel fashion, especially on important issues, the Department would convoke the Ambassador or an appropriate official from the relevant embassy in Washington or its Mission to the United Nations to make similar points. Because embassies and foreign ministries are organized on highly hierarchical principles, it is often possible to adjust the tone and content of the message to a particular rank, thus making clear the relative importance of the message. Depending on response, the message's content, deliverer, and recipient can be ratcheted up or down accordingly.

## **Diplomatic Roles**

What are the principal roles of a diplomat? First, he is an agent of his government ordered to carry out instructions from authorized superiors. In the American case, there is often a vigorous internal debate throughout the foreign affairs agencies of the government on a given policy, as well as on the tactics of its

proposed execution, a dialogue in which both Department of State and embassies continuously engage. However, once a decision is made, the action is carried out. Whatever an individual diplomat's private feelings on a given issue may be, he is duty-bound to carry out the instructions. If his conscience does not so allow, he may request a transfer to another assignment or region or offer to resign. In effect, the diplomat in this role functions as a lawyer with the U.S. Government as his client. Just as a lawyer's ethical responsibility is to make the most vigorous possible advocacy for his client regardless of his personal opinions of the client's innocence, so is a diplomat in public or in conversation with foreign interlocutors expected to make the best possible presentation on behalf of his government.

The diplomat is also an information-gatherer and analyst. Although not expected to compete in real-time with the media organizations such as CNN or the *New York Times* on basic facts, due to his presumed experience and familiarity with a country, its culture, institutions, and key personalities, the diplomat should be able to bring added value by analyzing and putting in context what to harried Washington senior leaders can seem like isolated, meaningless events. So, for the diplomat to be well-informed, he ideally should speak, read, and understand the local language, extract from the mass media key nuggets of important information, develop a string of well-informed contacts covering a wide spectrum, and attend major events such as political party congresses. As a message-drafter, the diplomatic drafter needs to be succinct, clear, pungent enough to both hold busy readers' attention and to answer the "so-what" question. The analysis needs to be substantiated by fact and interpretation, each clearly labeled as such. While never writing with the intent to provoke, when necessary, the drafter may have to call attention respectfully but clearly to actual or potential situations that may be unpleasant or resented by policymakers. At the same time, national leaders must be careful not to shoot the messenger even if they disagree with the analysis or recommendations. Sometimes, this requires courage from the drafter and restraint from the recipient. It is always the policymakers' prerogative to choose other courses. But retaliation against unwanted advice or analysis can lead to self-censorship and ultimate harm to the national interest through failure to realistically assess events.

In Washington, the middle-level diplomat is not as concerned with interpreting events in a foreign country as he is with assisting in defining his agency's position on a given issue (usually a whole host of them) while interacting with other elements of the foreign affairs agencies in order to glean their positions to better support their own agency's position.

A diplomat is also a negotiator. Depending on the issue, a diplomat may have more or less freedom to adjust from basic instructions, tactics, and goals. In order for a negotiation to succeed, which may not always be desirable or the preferred outcome, the astute diplomat will have a good general understanding of his counterpart's baseline requirement, some sense of the national cultural manner of negotiating, and a willingness to bargain—but not to bargain away essential or vital objectives. This propensity for negotiation, also an inherent part of a lawyer's toolkit, is what sometimes infuriates ideological or idealistic individuals since they believe it immoral to negotiate with either blatantly evil states or leaders or they believe it puts the United States in a position of appearing to make compromises on what can be construed as vital interests. Unless there is no longer a need to negotiate at all because of acknowledged overwhelming power of one country, or because diplomacy has yielded to open war, such compromises are an inherent property of having to deal with a Hobbesian world of sovereign states. Even criminal prosecutors make plea-bargains with criminals to achieve a balance of justice, resource use, and likelihood of conviction on the most serious charges.

In a slightly different key, a diplomat facilitates and maintains dialogue with his counterparts, hopefully with a view to arriving at complementary assessments of threats, benefits, and actions to take to maximize their respective national interests. If the dialogue goes far enough, it can lead to commitments usually

expressed in the form of treaties or agreements. They can range from reciprocal reduction of tariffs to willingness to go to war on behalf of another country.

Diplomats also act as spokesman and sounding board for the country. A good diplomat will be effective in public and private gatherings at furthering his country's interests and refuting criticism of it by couching his advocacy in a manner best suited to the culture where he is stationed. Because of the ubiquity of media outlets, a good diplomat learns how to access the host country media, key decisionmakers, and most relevant institutions (parliament, military, chambers of commerce, labor union federations, etc.), and gets his point across over the blare of "white noise" emanating in the modern media.

At the more senior level, diplomats serve as counselors to national leaders, few of whom are regional or global experts. While diplomats rarely have the final say in the most solemn decision a nation can make—the decision to go to war—they can serve to make clear the potential costs as well as benefits of such acts and the likely prospects of coalitions in favor (or opposed) to their country. While certainly not pacifists, diplomats are temperamentally and professionally inclined to seek non-violent solutions partly because that is what they do, and partly because they frequently can foresee second and third order consequences that can lead to a worse situation than the status quo ante bellum. It is at this juncture that politicians and the media sometimes confuse reporting and analysis that may be at odd with national leadership goals with disloyalty. It is not a desire for the status quo, let alone a preference for dealing with dictators, that may drive diplomats as some have charged. Rather it is a realization that in the absence of comprehensive universally-acknowledged supremacy, negotiation with other regimes, no matter how unpalatable, may be necessary. The obvious classic quote is that of Winston Churchill who, despite being before and after World War II an adamant anti-Communist, said on Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, "If Hitler invaded hell, I would make at least a favorable reference to the devil in the House of Commons."<sup>3</sup>

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, diplomacy is a mechanism—one among many—used in furtherance of the national interest and in protection of the national security. While styles of diplomacy may differ by national cultures, personal idiosyncrasies, and historical memories, they all have a common purpose. As long as there are states and they hold differing assessments of their national interests, there will be diplomacy. While technology is making certain traditional means of conducting diplomacy obsolete, the core functions of diplomacy will remain. In the past airplane and telegraph made clipper ships and quill pen instructions redundant. New information technology is already making reporting far more focused on analysis than simple newsgathering that is done better by CNN, and e-mail and cell-phone are replacing cabled instructions. Such advances occasionally produce serious suggestions to eliminate some or many embassies, but only because of a perceived more efficient manner of performing their functions. Diplomacy is still a vital element of national power.

## Notes - Chapter 13

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1 Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*, available at [www.alcyone.com/max/lit/devils/d.html](http://www.alcyone.com/max/lit/devils/d.html), accessed 7 August 2003.

2 Newt Gingrich, "Rogue State Department," *Foreign Policy* (July-August 2003) available at [www.foreignpolicy.com/story/story.php?storyID=13742&PHPSESSID=7580b0d87d9d1e0995f9bc68f8beab56d](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/story.php?storyID=13742&PHPSESSID=7580b0d87d9d1e0995f9bc68f8beab56d) accessed 7 August 2003.

3 Winston Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, p. 370.

