

09.02.2026

## **The Demise of Diplomacy**

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During a high-level briefing some years back, I recall being lectured about how we in the senior management of the Foreign Ministry should all “think more like businessmen and less like diplomats”. The irony in that statement notwithstanding, I have come to realize that this was not just run-of-the-mill hubris, it was the prevailing thinking among the political powers that be, parroted as an act of allegiance.

Of course, diplomats all around the world are accustomed to routinely being labeled as soft, aloof and out of touch elites who bounce from fancy cocktails to black tie dinners without a care for the pressing issues burdening the people they purport to represent. Diplomats are also well aware of the widely held falsehood that anyone at any time can become a diplomat and successfully practice diplomacy as if no training, knowledge, expertise or experience was required. All this comes with the territory, even if it is not necessarily appreciated. But, despite being aware of the criticism, we practitioners could not foresee that while we were conducting the thankless work of diplomacy, the art itself was being subjected to a slow death.

The rise of populism globally and its inherent anti-elitism is one reason why diplomats and diplomacy have lost ground in statecraft. The boomer generation that today governs the masses and the younger versions thereof have made easy pickings out of diplomats. Diplomacy requires patience and dedication, takes time to deliver solid results and many of its real-world successes go unnoticed. Confrontation and crisis are always much more newsworthy. In resolving conflicts, a sustained and behind-the-scenes effort must be undertaken to develop trust, carefully understand motivations of the other and the root causes of the issue, so as to ascertain clues that may help develop the basis of a lasting compromise. This is never easy; the intricacies of diplomacy rarely are. As such, they are not appealing to bombastic politicians who prefer media-friendly stunts in short successive bursts. The fact that diplomacy is the most cost-effective tool in the long run to deliver peace and stability is easily lost on populists who have neither the time nor the interest in any undertaking that stretches beyond the next election cycle. It is much easier to caricaturize diplomats and shun diplomacy as a tool reserved only for cowards in the act of capitulation.

Another phenomenon that has eaten away at the crucial role of diplomacy is the rapid rise in new means of direct communication and the appeal of social media.

Politicians and others in positions of power have happily seized on the ability to talk directly to their counterparts and also to the public at large; proverbially eliminating the middleman. But effective messaging requires finesse and simple misunderstandings can lead to disastrous outcomes. The old inside joke is that diplomacy is the art of telling people to go to hell in a way that they look forward to the trip. Even when the punchline is less than savory, there is always a way to express it astutely. Conversely, blunt communication is a sure way of undermining confidence and sowing the seeds of enmity. Diplomacy is critical to peaceful statecraft as it is vital in shaping the concept, content and context of the communication, without necessarily changing the core message. Whereas diplomats have for long played a central role in calibrating, refining and conveying high-profile messages, they are now relegated mostly to devising explanations for statements they had no part in preparing and sometimes do not even understand themselves.

There may be many reasons as to why decision making in many countries has become more and more centralized, indeed personalized, especially on foreign policy. Those reasons notwithstanding, this type of closed-door, top-driven policymaking without any inter-agency preparation has played into the hands of those very close to leadership with the material means, parochial constituencies and narrow agendas that allow them to exert influence. The old adage that access is power holds true everywhere, and diplomacy has suffered because of it. In this seeming global interregnum, strategic thinking and long-term policy making is paradoxically not as attractive as it used to be and diplomats, with their compromise-based approaches, perceived elitism and tendency to privately talk truth to power, are more and more sidelined in high level deliberations. Indeed, the dark art of Kremlinology as applied to the global conduct of diplomacy today will show that in most instances of head-of-state/head-of-government interaction, diplomats are rarely if ever in the room, not even as lowly “note-takers”.

The changing global conflict landscape is also posing increasingly new challenges to the conduct of diplomacy. As the old order fades and the future hangs in the balance, there is a prevailing sense in global affairs that the race is on to make big moves and best position for what comes next. In this setting, states and non-state rogue actors alike are resorting more and more to disruption and violence either to address festering grievances, further national interests or capitalize on power vacuums, seizing opportunities to shape new realities. The tendency to use hard power instead of soft triggers a vicious cycle and when men in uniform are in the room, diplomats’ voices are always suppressed. If violent conflict is ongoing, those who promise victory on the battlefield will be more likely to be heard than those who advocate for a peaceful settlement that may require inconvenient concessions. It comes across as a contradiction but as conflicts proliferate, turn more destructive and drag on, the space for diplomacy lessens not because the acute need for it is not there, but because the ability of those in uniform to influence top-level decision-

making increases with ever more presence, audience and options. The rapid spread of new high-tech military capabilities, which can proudly be brandished on the battlefield and deliver seemingly quick wins, only adds to this conundrum.

There are also new actors, supported by new money and new ambitions, in the globally broadening conflict space. Over time, especially after the turn of the century, engaging some of these new actors, especially in light of their dubious characters, shady backgrounds and hidden agendas, has become the purview of intelligence agencies. Diplomats are bound by national and international law and need political blessing before embarking on diplomatic activity aimed at solving disputes. With the classic turf struggles that exist in most every country's bureaucracy, processes that began with off-the-radar deniable engagement have more and more continued in the same vein, keeping diplomats and diplomacy out of the loop on purpose. With some of these new actors now emerging into the limelight and gaining legitimacy, the bonds that endure have given intelligence agencies the means and freedom to expand on their activities, branching out of the shadows and deep into diplomatic turf. The allure of intelligence-based work for politicians may be self-evident, but these two tradecrafts are drastically different – if not diametrically opposed – in practice, and confusing one with the other is a recipe for failure.

The decline, however, is not limited to just areas where clandestine or military activity exists. The same trend applies to other branches of government also. New concepts that have emerged such as defense diplomacy, energy diplomacy, culture diplomacy, environment diplomacy, gastrodiploamacy, and sport diplomacy are not just made-up catchy titles. They are ways of scoping out and defining new lines of official activity at the international level without the inclusion or even contribution of diplomats. More often than not, work conducted in these differing areas are undertaken by officials with no diplomatic background and little experience in international relations, sadly to the detriment of serious statecraft.

Are diplomats completely blameless in this regression? One could reasonably ask. Has diplomacy receded into the background basically because it could not deliver and became irrelevant? Could it not be that diplomats who live a majority of their lives abroad have over time become disconnected from the realities of their own countries? From personal experience, I would be the first to accept the truth in some of the stereotyping that occurs with regard to almost every chancellery around the world. But a few bad apples should not give the many an unfair rap by way of induction. Also, the truth is that diplomats, who excel at convincing foreign counterparts, have in general been unwilling or unable to explain exactly what it is they bring to the table even within their own constituencies.

There is of course a good reason why this is one of the oldest professions in the world. The art of diplomacy has for centuries withstood the test of time because it meets the need of the people, even though, like various branches of scientific research, it is mostly conducted away from prying eyes, only to deliver concrete outcomes beneficial to all.

However, the traditional challenges of understanding and explaining the vital role of diplomats in statecraft still remain; like the simple fact that there are too few diplomats around; that they never get traction within their own governments and bureaucracies because they keep moving and only have networks among foreign counterparts; that their work mostly has to be conducted in secret; that their value only manifests in the long term; and, that the language they speak seems arcane to many, to name a few.

Peering into the next quarter of a century, a clear risk in global affairs is for the diplomatic muscle within governments to atrophy. Diplomacy, much like in a master-apprentice dynamic, is learned and conducted on the job. It is a practice that cannot be taught but acquired through years of practice. It is an art where one must master the fundamentals over time and with repetition to grow and mature sufficiently to be creative. Social intelligence, in-depth understanding of the other, contextual judgement and interactive decision making, especially when no existing data sets exist to fall back on, are vital qualities in diplomacy that are acquired with experience. There are countless books on diplomacy and the life of diplomats but there is no single manual on how to practice diplomacy. This is because in diplomacy, temperament in real life is as important as acquired technique; reflexes developed over time are as important as experience; and, adapting to new circumstances is as important as knowing the status quo. The conduct of diplomacy is not static and changes according to the times. Even though its fundamental goals and functions remain the same, its practice is always in a state of flux, adapting itself to prevailing trends. In short, in diplomacy, knowledge and expertise will get one so far. A consummate diplomat develops a sense for the art, instilled over time and with amassed knowledge, experience and feel. This sense is much like a muscle that needs constant exercise; the weaker it becomes, the higher the risk of injury.

In statecraft, especially in democratic settings, it goes without saying that diplomacy is not and cannot be practiced solely by diplomats. However, it should equally be conceded that diplomacy cannot successfully be conducted without the support and involvement of diplomats either. It is worth recalling that there were two clear instances in contemporary history when diplomacy took a backseat in international relations — the periods preceding the two World Wars.

As humanity confronts ever more risks and threats in a time of severe global uncertainty, diplomacy, as a tool of effective communication – if not the glue that holds

the global system together – is crucial to provide the basis for cooperation and collaboration on the international level both to mitigate risks and more importantly to devise frameworks based on shared narratives and common interests to allow nations to work together, rather than against each other.

In contemplating the future, the repositioning and revitalization of diplomacy as a vital tool of statecraft and renewed respect for and trust in diplomats, who have made its practice their life's work, has become a vital and urgent priority.