The future of diplomacy

Changing practices, evolving relationships

As we enter the 21st century, everybody seems to agree that diplomacy is changing and yet few people can specify exactly how or where it is heading. Since its very inception, International Journal has been a key forum for such discussions. A 1998 exchange between Paul Sharp and Andrew Cooper, for example, gave new scholarly prominence to the ways in which, and degrees to which, state-to-state diplomacy was being challenged by new actors. This has remained a core question in debates about the changing faces of diplomacy ever since. In this issue of IJ, we seek to contribute to the

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search for emerging patterns in diplomatic practices. Instead of focusing solely on new actors, however, we cast a wider net and locate both traditional and nontraditional diplomatic agents as part of an evolving configuration of social relations. Overall, the picture we draw shows an intriguing combination of the “gentlemanly diplomacy” inherited from a state-centric world with various heterodox forms of political intercourse made possible by globalization. In the changing diplomatic landscape, we argue, old and new practices coexist in a mutually constitutive relationship.

As innovative relationships develop among an increasingly heterogeneous cast of diplomatic actors, the nature and function of diplomacy also evolves. Of course, today’s diplomacy, just like yesterday’s, remains primarily concerned with the ways in which states deal with the external world. But emerging practices also indicate efforts on the part of states to enrol various nonstate actors, just as nontraditional agents seek to act globally through the state’s diplomatic outreach. Observe, for instance, how foreign ministries have bankrolled historically nondiplomatic practices such as development and disaster relief, and how nontraditional agents use public resources toward their ends. As soon as one scratches a little, in fact, examples of new forms of diplomatic relations abound. Globalization and increased interdependencies have caused line ministries to interact directly with their counterparts in other countries, thereby challenging the position of foreign affairs ministries. In multilateral settings, the practice of diplomacy is being reshaped by recent changes in the global distribution of power, often in unexpected ways. Nongovernmental organizations have become more visible in world politics through delegation and indirect rule, thereby opening new state-society interfaces at the global level. All the while, military professionals have developed new practices for mediating and interacting with a broader set of actors. With the current trend toward the legalization of world politics, lawyers have become central diplomatic actors in their own right, providing authoritative interpretations of other actors’ room for maneuver. Religious actors are often powerful by virtue of the capacity to mobilize transnational constituencies. Economists, for their part, shape diplomatic practice through claims of expertise that go far beyond the technical details of economic governance.

In this introduction, we specify two main areas in which diplomacy is changing as a result of these evolving social patterns. First, we look at the relationship between representation and governance: if anything, diplomatic work is traditionally about representing a polity vis-à-vis a recognized other.
To the extent that such representation now increasingly includes partaking in governing, however, a whole array of questions about the relationship between diplomats and other actors emerges. Most prominently, are the governing and representing functions compatible in practice, or do they contain inherent tensions? Second, we focus on the territorial-nonterritorial character of the relation between the actors who perform diplomatic work and the constituencies on whose behalf they act and from which they claim authority. Building on these distinctions, contributors to this issue use their empirical findings to reflect not only on the evolution of diplomacy, but also on broader debates on the changes in world politics. That is, to the degree that diplomacy is constitutive of world politics, an empirical focus on its manifold practices and the social relationships that they weave offers an excellent vantage point on important debates about the changing distribution of power, the role of ideas in shaping states' interests, the relationship between state and nonstate actors, and the effects of globalization on state sovereignty.

The following pages seek to accomplish two main tasks. First, we briefly survey the literature on diplomacy and identify two strands, each with its own merits and limits. The traditional literature on diplomacy is characterized by a combination of history, practitioners' reflections, and a proliferation of typologies, with a relative dearth of theoretically informed analysis. While we embrace the move to capture diplomacy as a practice that develops over time, we also conceive of it as a category of analysis. More recently, multiplying works about the so-called "new diplomacy" inquire into the rise of nonstate actors on the diplomatic stage. We, too, observe the emergence of various nontraditional agents alongside traditional diplomacy. However, instead of providing an "explanation by naming," which seeks to demonstrate the power of new agents, we suggest analytical categories that help recover the relational nature of contemporary changes in the diplomatic practice.

Second, we discuss two such conceptual lenses. To begin with, we argue that diplomats, especially those of the nontraditional type, increasingly make authority claims that are nonterritorial in nature. Economic or legal expertise, for instance, has a universalistic tone that is quite different from the communitarian state-to-state diplomacy of the good old days. Although constituencies often (though not always—witness moral actors) remain "national," this territoriality is slowly eroding as authority becomes tied to

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“global” symbolic systems, which has significant effects on what diplomats do, how they do it, and why. Our next move is to suggest that diplomatic practice and its evolution over time can be explored by looking at the relationship between representation, historically the core function of diplomacy, and governance, which has become progressively more important. Military diplomacy, to take one obvious example, is less about dialogue than it is about getting things done. To the extent that governing takes precedence as the matrix for global politics and foreign policy, the task of representation is increasingly conditioned by the task of governing. We conclude by showing how the study of diplomacy helps illuminate core debates in the international relations discipline. Diplomacy, understood as the representation and governing among recognized polities, is the infrastructure of world politics. As such, it offers a good empirical intake to reflect on and contribute to broader theoretical debates in the study of world politics, such as changes in the distribution of power in the international system; the role of ideas and representations in explaining changes in states’ interests and policy outcomes; the nature of global governance and relationship between state and nonstate actors; and the effects of globalization on state sovereignty.

THE STUDY OF DIPLOMACY

Historically, the study of diplomacy has been more the province of practitioners than academics. Key texts have been written by diplomats like Sir Ernest Satow and Harold Nicolson and by statesmen like Henry Kissinger. This helps explain why diplomacy has often been defined by its purpose and ideal functions, or by the particular skills that the diplomat should have, either to excel in the “art” of resolving negotiations peacefully or more generally to define the national interest beyond the constraints and lack of vision expressed by elected politicians, as in the example of Talleyrand’s tenure at Quai d’Orsay, or in Kissinger’s idea that diplomats should balance the dual goals of advancing the state’s interests and maintaining the state system.


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A definition that is similarly tilted towards functionalism may be found within the English school of international relations.²

Beyond the list of specific functions said to define diplomacy—negotiation, communication, information-gathering, etc.—and the skill-set that goes with them, the study of diplomacy has, as Christer Jönsson put it, been “short on theory” but “long on typologies.”³ There seems to be no agreed-upon baseline definition from which to theorize about change, and the tendency is—with a few exceptions—for studies to identify and account for changes in diplomatic practice by adding a prefix: there is para-diplomacy, small states diplomacy, NGO diplomacy, business diplomacy, public diplomacy, “catalytic” diplomacy, “triangular” diplomacy, etc.⁶

In this literature, diplomacy is often defined prescriptively. More elaborate definitions highlight a set of core functions, typically focusing on physical and symbolic representation.⁷ Thus, an often-used definition holds that diplomacy is essentially a dialogue about representation and negotiation between political units that recognize each other.⁸ To us, as much as we need to define diplomacy in order to start analyzing it empirically, any exercise in definition becomes sterile if we do not factor in that the understanding of diplomacy, like state sovereignty, must be studied by recognizing the inherent relationship between diplomacy as a category of practice and diplomacy as a

⁸ Watson, *Diplomacy,* 33.
category of analysis.\textsuperscript{9} Given the aforementioned influence of practitioners in the study of diplomacy, there seems to be a conflation of the two: the “folk-models” and self-understandings of diplomats have been codified and described at length in historical treatises and books, over time also becoming part of the scholarly attempt to unpack and account for the nature and functioning of diplomacy. Thus, while Kissinger’s account of diplomacy is important, it is more so because of its influence on the ideal-typical self-understanding of diplomats, and more generally on “diplomatic culture,” than as a source from which to try to unpack and account for what that diplomatic culture is.\textsuperscript{10} Discussing the analytical purchase of the concept of identity, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue, with George Orwell, that we must let the meaning choose the word and not the other way around. For them, identity has lost its analytical purchase because it means too little and too much, and often nothing at all in analytical terms:

> Everyday “identity talk” and “identity politics” are real and important phenomena. But the contemporary salience of “identity” as a category of practice does not require its use as a category of analysis. Consider an analogy. “Nation” is a widely used category of social and political practice. Appeals and claims made in the name of putative “nations”—for example, claims about self-determination—have been central to politics for a hundred-and-fifty years. But one does not have to use “nation” as an analytical category to understand and analyze such appeals and claims. One does not have to take a category inherent in the practice of nationalism...and make this category central to the \textit{theory of nationalism}.\textsuperscript{11}

We contend that the same can be said of diplomacy, and that to study diplomacy, we need analytical categories that offer distance and clarity, which the concept of diplomacy itself cannot offer. As a social phenomenon, diplomacy calls for analytical tools that capture how diplomats and others


understand and do diplomatic work—as a category of practice, that is—and at the same time can situate and account for these folk-models with reference to the broader sociocultural and political-institutional frameworks within which they operate.

Note that there is nothing inherently problematic in using a practice category as an analytical category. Rather, it is what Wacquant calls the “uncontrolled conflation of social and sociological...[or] folk and analytical understandings” that cause problems. For example, if a central self-understanding of diplomats is their ability to “keep a bracket” during negotiations, or to showcase to their political superiors back home that their analysis of the situation in a country rivals that of others, then this must surely be included in the analysis. But analytical tools are needed to capture why this is so, how it affects what diplomats do, and how it differs from the work of nondiplomatic actors, whose register for evaluating skills and capacity may be different.

On top of traditional studies of diplomacy, a strand of studies of changes in, and even decline of, diplomacy started in the 1980s and 1990s, continuing to this day. Most prominently, a number of books announcing the age of a “new diplomacy” document the arrival en force of an array of new actors on the diplomatic stage. Various nonstate actors, from NGOs to celebrities, are analyzed as new actors and forces in world politics. An interesting aspect of this literature is that it seems not to have been integrated with the parallel literature in international relations theory more generally, which showcased the role and power of a range of nonstate actors, such as epistemic communities, transnational advocacy networks, and civil society organizations.


The “new diplomacy” literature essentially describes the effects that globalization is having on the diplomatic crowd. We, too, observe that the social and political fabric of diplomats is evolving as we enter the 21st century. After all, if globalization means the gradual deterritorialization of some social relations and politics, then the nature and role of the diplomat—whose traditional function precisely is to represent at a distance, that is, to span geographic space—must be changing as well.5 Thanks to technological innovation and a hospitable normative environment, the breadth and depth of interactions at the global level is reaching levels unprecedented in human history. In fact, Badie may well prove right that “the present international system is on the verge of acquiring the same level of social density that characterized the nation state at the end of the nineteenth century.”6 The global stage, in other words, is becoming home to social and political relations that could soon be almost as intense and numerous as those that characterized national politics in earlier stages of the modern western state. Inevitably, we conjecture, heightened social density (to use Durkheim’s notion) brings important changes for diplomatic practice, which, after all, has long been a—if not the—central form of social and political intercourse at the international level.

That being said, we also depart from the new diplomacy literature because, like that on global governance more generally, it tends to adopt an actor-centric focus and engage in “explanation by naming”: a set of actors is defined—a transnational advocacy group, say—and these actors are then analyzed with a view to demonstrating their ability to shape policy outcomes and state interests. But by hanging the causal story to be told on one set of actors—defined by the analyst—we know little about the relative significance of other groups, the relationship among different types of actors, and the relations of power at work between these. In other words, it is one thing to demonstrate the power of a certain type of actor, but quite another to account for the process by which they become and are powerful relative to other actors.

In a volume on environmental policymaking, for example, Michelle Betsill and Elizabeth Corell try to measure how and under what conditions NGOs influence negotiations over international environmental policy.

They find evidence of such influence and thus refer to “NGO diplomacy,” equating this to a challenge to traditional interstate diplomacy. We contend that in defining the relationship between diplomats and nondiplomats in this way, the most significant aspects of diplomacy and its changing character and function are difficult to identify. Put differently, finding that some nondiplomatic actors are powerful in some sense still does not tell us anything about the relative significance of traditional diplomats, or about the institutional environment in which diplomats and nondiplomats both operate. There is a corollary to this in the study of state sovereignty and globalization, where empirical demonstration of the power of global financial markets, or of any particular type of nonstate actor, is used as an argument for how the sovereign state is being circumvented, undermined, or rendered less powerful under conditions of globalization. More recent contributions to this debate challenge this view, arguing instead that we are seeing a reassemblage of state practices, or the reconfiguring of the governmental strategies employed by states and nonstate actors alike. What these studies have in common, we suggest, is their taking stock of contemporary shifts in diplomatic practices thanks to a focus on the relations among actors and practices.

ANALYTICAL TOOLS: TERRITORIAL VS. NONTERRITORIAL AND REPRESENTING VS. GOVERNING

The role of nonstate actors is neither new, nor necessarily something that undermines, in and of itself, the position of traditional diplomacy. As much as there is a diffusion of authority and new role for nondiplomats in work hitherto conducted by diplomats, we do not believe that we are moving towards what Kennan called a world of “diplomacy without diplomats.” For as long as there has been contact between different polities, there has


been diplomacy at work, and when the character of the relations between these polities changed, so, too, did diplomatic practice. Even in a globalizing era, hardly any group other than traditional diplomats perform all of those tasks that are typically associated with diplomacy, namely negotiation, representation, information-gathering, and communication.20 Thus, an NGO involved in environmental negotiations or a transnational corporation setting up global transparency standards can be said to perform some elements of diplomatic practice, but not all of them.

Moreover, diplomacy is an institutionalized feature of the state system and, like sovereignty, it therefore remains significant even when it is being supplanted and changed by new practices and new actors. Established diplomatic practices—summits, preparatory committees charged with drafting, and so on—provide the infrastructure for other actors to partake in representation and governing where different polities are involved. By virtue of representing the primary actors in the system—states—state diplomats are in a powerful position that enables them to draw on and use different types of actors to advance particular interests in different contexts. Thus, states now typically include key nonstate actors in negotiations where these can offer information and advice and when they are seen to represent powerful domestic constituencies. By virtue of how the institution of sovereignty sets up states as primary interlocutors—codified in international law and practice—the interesting question seems to us to be not whether diplomacy as an institution is being challenged or how diplomatic actors are pressured from the outside. Rather, it is how the institution of diplomacy, as well as the work done by diplomats and nondiplomats, is changing over time as new actors are included in global governance and new forms of governing are being developed and put to use. In order to tackle this issue, we propose two analytical distinctions: the first, territorial versus nonterritorial representation, focuses on varying forms of authority claims and their effects on constituencies; the second, representing versus governing, emphasizes the evolving balance between two core diplomatic functions.

**Territorial versus nonterritorial authority claims**

If we want to account for changes in diplomatic practice by virtue of the proliferation of actors involved in diplomatic work, the question of how and why different actors “do” diplomacy must be central. For example,

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an actor representing a religious community is expected to represent that constituency in a different way than an actor representing a territorial unit, and both will differ from an actor who claims to represent institutionalized expertise. Aside from the constituency per se, it is primarily the source of authority that is shifting or, more precisely, “deterritorializing.” We wish to stress that an adequate understanding of diplomacy necessitates a closer look at variation and similarities in the character of the relation between diplomats and the territorially defined unit they represent, on the one hand, and other types of representatives whose constituencies differ in that they are not territorially defined.

In her analysis of economics as a global profession, for instance, Marion Fourcade shows how economists, while still located within a national professional setting, are able to rely on a technical knowledge and language whose universalistic tone makes it possible to claim global jurisdiction. Expertise, which is in fast-increasing demand in contemporary diplomacy, is shifting the principle of representation away from territoriality toward virtual forms of authority grounded in symbolic systems. Note, however, that the distinction between territorial and nonterritorial representation is ideal: economists who perform regulatory work with counterparts from other countries are engaged in both territorial and nonterritorial representation, as Leonard Seabooke’s contribution makes clear. Conversely, state diplomats deploy moral arguments and expert-based legal interpretations produced by nonstate actors as they debate whether or not state behaviour conforms to international law, as Ian Hurd demonstrates.

The deterritorialization of diplomatic representation is attributable not only to expertise, but also to older symbolic forms embedded in value-systems. We have already mentioned the doubly territorial and virtual nature of religious constituencies. Here, too, value-systems intersect with territoriality. Cecelia Lynch shows how different loyalties and constituencies intersect to constitute the sui generis character of how Christian humanitarian organizations are involved in both representation and governance. Still, the deterritorialized character of representation is seen in the diplomacy—or “good offices”—functions of the UN secretary-general. This representation is distinct in type and scope because it is performed on behalf of an international organization, with all the symbolic pomp of the “international community,” and not of a state or NGO. This difference stems from the

character of the relation between the representative and the constituency: the nature of the constituency that is represented by the secretary-general is in part embedded in the UN charter, for which the secretary-general acts as the highest international civil servant, but it is also embedded in part in the member-states themselves, whose approval is ultimately necessary for forceful action. Moreover, there is the shored up “moral authority” that a secretary-general may be able to build up over time.

Similarly, many NGOs advocating on behalf of “humankind” (e.g., in favour of a right to migrate) also claim an authority that is not territorially bounded. An actor representing Amnesty International is communicating with others, gathering information, and engaging in negotiations in a way that differs from that of representatives of states or other actors. As Stephen Hopgood has demonstrated, Amnesty’s effort to build and institutionalize its authority as representatives of certain values (human rights) affect both what it does and how: Amnesty is torn between two different and competing claims to authority—one moral, the other political—and this tension runs through the organization, shaping its identity and mode of operations.22 There is reason to believe that this dynamic also goes for other actors, but representatives of states are here distinct by virtue of the institution of sovereignty. But this difference holds primarily for the task of representation, and less so for the task of governing, to which we now turn.

**Governing versus representing**

While state actors remain in a powerful position with regard to governing, arguably a growing number of actors—those claiming to represent expertise, values, “civil society,” or affected populations—are also becoming more important. This evolution is largely due to the fact that governing is concerned with acting on an external social reality, the contents of which must be assessed and known in order to be governed effectively. This is not to suggest that governing is rational while representing is political. On the contrary, we submit that both are political, but that the form that the political process assumes in governing is distinct from its form in representation.

Given that there is more transborder regulation and governing afoot than ever before, we contend that governing has become more important to the life of diplomacy. By implication, the resources that different actors bring to bear hang to a considerable degree on whom, and what, they claim

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to represent as they partake in the process of governing. Note that we are not assuming that the character of what is to be represented—whether it be a nation, a faith, or a set of interests or values—is in any sense objective or reified. They are all constructed, but with varying degrees of acceptance and institutionalization.

Typically, representation is organized around the idea of advancing the interest of a given constituency, where those interest are presumed to be defined through communication with the constituency, and where judgements about how to advance those interests are central. Governing, in contrast, is organized around changing other actors' behaviour to achieve certain objectives, the achievement of which calls for the enrolment and participation of a greater number of actors and the use of different types of judgement and expertise. As an example, consider the military. There has always been a strong connection between a polity's diplomatic and military capabilities. For example, in the middle ages, diplomats were frequently tucked away behind the military when it went into battle, only to re-emerge to begin negotiations when the new status quo had been decided on the battlefield. Alternatively, military threats have, implicitly and explicitly, hovered in the background of diplomatic negotiations. If we consider the situation on the ground in places like Afghanistan today, however, the soldier and the diplomat are working in tandem, both partaking in governing and deploying distinct claims to authority by virtue of what they represent. Indeed, Tarak Barkawi's contribution to this special issue shows how military-to-military relations between states—legitimated in the language of diplomatic representation—have very much been about governing and the constitution of hegemonic relations. Strong states gain "direct access" to act on and govern in other, weaker, states through such systems of representation. The general point here is that such transnational links between professionals—whether representing the state or not—are assuming an institutionalized form. When states meet in the World Health Organization or the International Monetary Fund, delegations are typically dominated by representatives from line ministries (such as health and finance) whose claim to authority is linked to the territorial unit being represented and to the specific expertise over the issue-area in question. We interpret this trend as having to do with the fact that governing is becoming a central frame of reference for representation.

and thus for traditional diplomatic work. A case in point is, we argue, the degree to which the performance of the task of representation in the making of new international law, or in setting up new financial regulations, necessitates in-depth technical expertise.

FOUR DEBATES AND HOW DIPLOMACY MATTERS TO ALL OF THEM

By way of conclusion, we argue that studying diplomacy is central as an empirical intake to a range of central debates about world politics. One debate concerns the changes in the distribution of power in the international system. Another addresses the role of ideas in policy change. A third has to do with the role of nonstate actors in shaping policy outcomes. The last concentrates on the effects of globalization on state sovereignty.

The first debate has centred on the nature of power, the role and character of balancing, and competing claims about the source of strength of great powers, notably the US and China. Whether diplomatic practice has or has not changed is a central empirical test for the claims made. Do diplomatic practice and the relations between distinct diplomatic actors change in response to shifts in the distribution of power? At one extreme is the view that diplomacy is so stable and institutionalized—an unmoved mediator—that it does not change in the face of changes in its immediate environment (or adjacent and interlinked practices). Another is that diplomacy reflects the underlying distribution of power, priming us to see changes in diplomatic practice when there is a change in the distribution of power. Pouliot’s contribution charts a middle way between these two views, arguing that due to its thick social fabric—expressed in diplomats’ “sense of one’s place”—changes in the distribution of power more or less translate into a socially contingent pecking order between diplomats.

A central claim by constructivist scholars is that how states behave and define their goals is defined by the intersubjectively shared ideational framework within which they operate. Norms, in short, are said be constitutive of identities and to regulate behaviour, and so changes in the normative and cognitive framework will result in actors having new identities, new objectives, and new strategies. If diplomacy is, as Reus-Smit has argued, defined by foundational purposive norms, then changes in those purposive norms will, over time, result in new organizing principles.

between states and, thus, also in diplomatic practice. Few others have taken up this challenge, however, as the major focus of constructivist work has been on how and why ideationally induced change takes place. And here the institution of diplomacy has been relegated to the background, the focus being instead on how one set of actors—often transnational norm advocates in alliances with state actors—advocate norms that others are socialized into accepting. But the character of diplomacy, and the identity of diplomats, is much more than a vehicle through which ideationally driven political change takes place.

Indeed, a range of questions here emerges about the functioning and possibly changing character of diplomacy: does the “legalization” of world politics mean that legal actors (law firms, law professors, ministries of justice) become more influential in shaping diplomatic practice? Hurd’s contribution suggests that it has not, and argues that while nonstate actors can offer important legal arguments, it is state representatives who publicly defend state behaviour and its conformity with international law. Similarly, Seabrooke finds that the revolving doors between public and private actors do not challenge the position of state diplomats. Much more important is the question of the status and authority of those actors who can demonstrate acumen in both the private and public sphere.

As regards the literature on global governance and its attendant focus on the role and power of nonstate actors, it is quite remarkable that diplomacy—as an institution mediating and communicating among distinct polities—has not been a central empirical focus of analysis. The claim that nonstate actors are powerful is a mainstay in this literature, and it is typically based on accounts that focus on a particular type of actor, such as advocacy groups, civil society organizations, or expert groups. In singling out one set of actors, and hanging the causal story on their doings, analysts of nonstate actors have marginalized the practice of diplomacy and the actions of diplomats in these processes. This also holds, we believe, for accounts that are chiefly concerned with measuring the relative significance of state

and nonstate actors, as they see the relationship between state and nonstate actors as a zero-sum game. We opt for a different strategy, asking instead how changes in the cast of actors involved affect diplomatic practice, and how, in turn, diplomatic practice itself conditions and structures nonstate actors’ strategies. Both Lynch’s and Sending’s contributions suggest that diplomatic practices are central structuring sites for the actions of others, such as humanitarian and development actors engaged in global governance. At the same time, as diplomats are increasingly engaged in representation in the context of global governance efforts, distinct relations of dependence and information-sharing are being developed between diplomats and other actors.

Finally, studies of diplomacy have a direct bearing on the debate about globalization and changes in state sovereignty. Since diplomacy is about mediation between the inside and the outside of distinct polities, and the character and relationship between these polities change so that the boundaries between them become blurred, it would be surprising if diplomatic practice were to remain unchanged. Sending’s contribution attributes the relative stability of the institution of diplomacy to the fact that it is a “thin” culture—a version of Granovetter’s argument about the “strength of weak ties.” Still, examples of changes in diplomatic practices are legion, a case in point being Neumann’s analysis of how small and medium powers increasingly invest in systems-maintenance—previously assumed to be the province of great powers. Neumann speculates that this change may be a response to the rise of new great powers, and more generally to the rise of governance as the frame of reference for representation and the advancement of national interests.

When all is said and done, we can be certain of one trait that the future of diplomacy will inevitably share with its past: it will remain a key practical grounding of ever-changing configurations of social relations beyond the state. In assessing the evolution of practices over time, therefore, scholars should remind themselves that diplomacy is a social form deeply embedded in historically and culturally contingent contexts that produce meanings and politics.

Poverty of soft power: evidence from Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East

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Abstract

This article advances a conceptual and empirical critique of the notion of soft power. I contest that most soft power analyses suffer from four major problems: the problem of selective origins, the problem of tautology, the problem of intersubjectivity and the problem of selection bias. Problem of selective origins means that the historical processes through which such power is generated and reproduced are often unspecified. The problem of tautology refers to the cyclical relationship between attractiveness and legitimacy; a country’s ability to attract others is taken as a consequence of the legitimacy of its actions. Yet the reverse proposition is also supposed to be true: A country’s actions are seen as legitimate primarily because that country seeks to persuade others rather than coerce them. Thus, soft power is reduced a circular relationship between legitimacy and attractiveness. The problem of intersubjectivity entails that the possession of soft power is entirely contingent on the perception of others. The last problem with soft power involves selection bias: most soft power analyses disproportionately rely on positive cases. In the empirical part of the article, I will apply the four-point critique of soft power re-analyze the Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East since 2002. I will show that the origins of Turkey’s soft power remains unsubstantiated (problem of origins), nor is it established how exactly the assumed attractiveness of Turkey produced political legitimacy (problem of tautology). Most soft power analyses of Turkish foreign policy are one-sided, focusing on the Turkish discourse at the expense of the perceptions of others (problem of intersubjectivity). Lastly, most who celebrated soft power in the Turkish case disregard the critical instances where soft power tools either failed or had to be supplied by instruments of hard power (problem of selection).

Keywords: Soft power; foreign policy analysis, Turkey, Middle East;

1. Introduction

This article advances a conceptual and analytical critique of soft power. It contests that the concept of soft power contains six limitations that reduce its capacity to explain foreign policy outcomes. Soft power analyses lack explanatory capacity to the extent they: 1) fail to discuss the processes through which soft power is produced and reproduced; 2) do not specify the target audience of soft power at the subnational level; 3) reduce the relationship between legitimacy and attractiveness into a tautology; 4) fail to specify how potential power is transformed into actual power; 5) pay insufficient attention to the soft power competition among multiple actors; 6) do not specify the conditions under which countries go back and forth between soft and hard power. I illustrate these six conceptual problems by using qualitative evidence from Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East since 2002.

Soft power, understood as the ability to shape the preferences of others, has become a common currency in international relations. Joseph Nye popularized the concept in 1990s as a critique of the prevailing theories of the decline of the American power (Nye, 1990 and 1991) and continually revised the concept to this day (Nye, 2004 and 2011). Nye’s main objection was mainstream (realist) theories’ narrow focus on hard forms of power caused them to
miss the non-material and less-visible aspects of power. Hard power is command power; it is “the ability to shape what others do” and thus “can rest on coercion or inducement.” Soft power, on the other hand, is co-optive power; “the ability to shape what others want.” The key difference between two types of power is that soft power does not involve an explicit cost-benefit calculation (Oguzlu, 2007). Country B complies with the policies of Country A not because A threatens B and/or provides it with side payments but rather because Country B considers the Country A’s identity and objectives legitimate. Legitimacy is thus critical for soft power. There are three sources of legitimacy: the values, institutions and the foreign policy (objectives and goals) of the power holder.

While soft power was originally conceived as a rebuttal to the literature on US’ global decline, the concept has found a wider audience including the foreign policy discourses of mid-range regional powers like Turkey. Most observers of Turkish foreign policy agree that Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East rose significantly over the last decade (Altunisik 2005 and 2008; Oguzoglu 2007). Surveys indicate that Turkey is indeed quite popular in the region (Altunisik and Ellabad, 2010; Akgun and Gundogar, 2012). Turkish cultural exports such as soap operas and sports are very high in demand in places like Egypt, Iran and Syria. Turkey’s rising image in the Middle East is also indirectly observed by the surging numbers of Arab tourists visiting Turkey over the past decade (Altinay 2008).

While soft power is a widely popular notion in academic as well as policy circles, soft power analyses have a number of common conceptual issues, which severely reduce their capacity to explain foreign policy outcomes.

2. Six Issues with the Concept of Soft Power

2.1. Origins

Most soft power-centered analyses frequently start from a preexisting pile of elements, which are assumed to increase a country’s attractiveness, and then proceed onto the next step, which is to document the myriad of ways in which these elements supposedly shape foreign policy outcomes. The processes through which soft power is produced and reproduced are relegated to the margins of the analysis. The lack of attention to the historical origins and sites of reproduction of soft power is problematic as it exacerbates the intangibility of soft power. Soft power is already difficult to measure and operationalize. If we cannot explain how soft power is generated, then our ability to understand its nature and impact is also curtailed.

The problem of origins is pervasive in most soft power arguments, including Nye’s original conceptualization. In his effort to explain how the attractiveness of the US culture and political ideals/system could be utilized to achieve foreign policy goals, Nye omitted to ask through which historical processes these particular set of values and ideals emerged as qualities deemed attractive by the rest of the world (Bilgin and Elis, 2008, 11-12).

Most analyses of Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East commit this fallacy, i.e. they take Turkey’s soft power as granted and move on to an analysis of its consequences. A number of factors contributing to the attractiveness of Turkey are brought up, but there is no systematic study of these factors. One argument involves Turkey’s shared historical experiences and cultural (including religious) affinity with the nations in the Middle East (and the Balkans), which in turn involves implicit references to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. It should be remembered however that the same historical connection to the Ottoman’s cultural and political legacy used to be a source of tension between Turkey and its Arab neighbors for the entire 20th century. How exactly did the shared memories of the past become a source of cultural and political affinity, a source of soft power for Turkey? Which historical processes have transformed the memory of the Ottomans from a liability to an asset for foreign policy? Unless we understand this, we cannot properly evaluate the conceptual validity and causal capacity of soft power.

2.2. Target Audience

Soft power has no external reality. Unlike hard power, which can be to a certain extent resource-based (i.e. how many tanks, or how much resources a country has); soft power solely depends on the perceptions of others. Country B has no soft power over Country A other than what Country A recognizes and acts upon as Country B’s power. This raises a further question: whose perceptions do we mean about when we say Country A? Countries are not
monolithic actors. Within Country A, there exist multiple groups (social, economic, ethnic, religious etc.) who may be differentially perceptive to the soft power of Country B. Some groups within Country A may find a certain trait of Country B attractive, while others do not. (Wang and Lu, 2006). Equally importantly, not all actors have the ability to influence policy. While the ordinary citizens might be highly susceptible to the cultural power of another country, the decision-making elites might be impervious to such influences. Thus, soft power analysis should, at minimum, distinguish between low soft power targeted at the broader public and high soft power targeted at the elites (Kurlantzick, 2006).

Take for instance one of the most frequently cited indications of Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East: the popularity of Turkish TV shows among the Arabic speaking population. There is a growing body of research on the popularity of Turkey’s cultural exports. One particular case study looks at the impact of the Turkish soap opera Gumus. This show, which apparently exemplifies “a Muslim-Modern life style”, has gathered quite a following in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Palestine and other Arab countries. Having shown how popular the show is, the author quickly concludes that Turkey should take advantage of the popularity of the series as a soft power asset (Deniz, 2010, 51-52).

The problem here is not the empirical validity of the proposition that Turkish cultural products are increasingly popular in the Middle Eastern geography. The problem is analytical. What is the target audience of soft power in any given country? Is it the entire population? A certain demographic group? The policymakers? Given that the efficacy of soft power is entirely contingent on the perception of others, analyses should be much more explicit about what exactly the target of the soft power is and how exactly that target group can be expected to influence policy. There is a rather large causal chasm between the overall popularity of TV shows among the general public and the processes of policy making at the national level.

2.3. Tautology

The problem of tautology refers to the cyclical relationship between attractiveness and legitimacy; a country’s ability to attract others is taken as a consequence of the legitimacy of its actions. Yet the reverse proposition is also supposed to be true: A country’s actions are seen as legitimate primarily because that country is attractive in the eyes of the others. Thus, soft power is reduced a circular relationship between legitimacy and attractiveness. Seen in this light, soft power is not a causal factor but rather an axiomatic statement regarding the equivalency of legitimacy and attractiveness (Beng, 2008).

The tautological relationship between legitimacy and soft power figure prominently in the debates on Turkish foreign policy. One frequently raised source of Turkey’s soft power is its efforts of conflict mediation. Turkey indeed assumed the role of impartial mediator in several regional issues; examples include the attempt to initiate dialogue with Hamas in 2005, the peace talks between Syria and Israel in 2008, the Russia-Georgia conflict in 2008 and the ongoing efforts of Ankara to mediate between Iran and the international community regarding the nuclear issue.

These mediation efforts of Turkey are presented both as a cause and effect of Turkey’s growing soft power, which is conceptually problematic. Turkey, by acting as an impartial arbiter of conflicts, seeks to enhance the legitimacy of its foreign policy, which in turn adds to its soft power potential. At the same time, Turkey is able to act as an impartial mediator; the argument goes, precisely because it has soft power, i.e. because the objectives and methods of its foreign policy are deemed legitimate by others. The legitimacy of Turkey’s foreign policy and Turkey’s overall attractiveness emerge as not only mutually reinforcing but also ultimately circular factors. The idea that a fair-minded foreign policy can both be the source and the implication, both the cause and the impact, of soft power makes a tautological, rather than causal, argument.

2.4. Mobilizing and Deploying Soft Power

The fourth major problem with soft power analysis is that it often fails to distinguish between potential and actual soft power, and neglects the intricacies of transforming the former to the latter. The fact that a country is prosperous
in terms of its soft power assets does not necessarily mean that it has power at its disposal. The government needs to actively tap into the soft power reserves to turn it into actual, actionable power.

It is difficult for governments to mobilize and deploy soft power on demand. First, production sites are non-governmental; power is generated primarily through the decentralized mechanisms of civil society (Fan, 2008). A government cannot easily ramp up the production of soft power in accordance with the strategic needs of the state. Soft power resources are also rather unspecific; it is not necessarily evident that a particular soft power asset will be relevant to a particular situation. Indeed, soft power works indirectly by shaping the environment of policy rather than the immediate cost-benefit calculations of decision-makers. Thus soft power takes longer to take produce results.

In order to effectively tap into soft power reserves, the government needs certain organizational capabilities and resources, including extensive channels of distribution and communication. Such organizational capabilities are in turn often contingent on hard power, hard resources.

Turkey made an effort to develop some institutions and practices directly geared towards mustering Turkey’s soft power potential (Altinay, 2008). Chief among the institutional instruments of Turkey’s soft power are TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), which delivers developmental assistance to more than 100 countries. Similarly, the Institute of Public Diplomacy has assumed a critical role in promoting Turkey’s image abroad. Such organizational instruments, however, not only ultimately hinge on the existence of hard power (economic resources etc.) but also they are also bound to prove ineffective ultimately as the production of soft power is increasingly outside the control of the government, as demonstrated most recently by the role that social media played during the Gezi protests in Turkey in May-June 2013.

2.5. Soft Power Competition

In its simplest form, soft power relationship involves two actors: the sender and the receiver; Country A that wields soft power and Country B (or a group of countries) that are assumed to within the sphere of attraction of the former. This is too simplistic a model, however, as in reality, Country A actively competes with a number of countries that are seeking to establish their own spheres of attraction in a certain region, or even globally. China for instance is actively trying to raise its soft power profile globally through a number of cultural initiatives, infrastructural and economic assistance programs and soft-spoken diplomacy. There is an intense global soft power competition between China and the US.

Similarly, Turkey too is competing with other regional players in the Middle East who are using soft power resources to establish a sphere of attraction. Debates regarding Turkey’s growing popularity in the Middle East however rarely engage in comparative analyses, which would involve measuring and evaluating Turkey’s soft power vis-à-vis its regional rivals like Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Turkey’s popularity in Palestine might have risen for the last few years, but so has Egypt’s for instance. After regime change in Egypt and the election of President Morsi in 2012, Muslim Brotherhood reasserted itself as the key arbiter in Palestinian issue, directly challenging Turkey’s claims to be the primary mediator of regional conflicts. Egyptian President Morsi even managed to upstage Erdogan and mediated talks in Cairo between the leaders of Fatah and Hamas in 2012.

Speaking of soft power competition, one should not neglect the possibility of blowback. Soft power, like hard power, can lead to resentment, if applied incorrectly or disproportionately. Voices complaining that Turkey is perhaps too keen on asserting itself into the domestic affairs of its neighbors are being heard more and more frequently and loudly in the Arab media. Combined with the re-emergence of rival soft powers like Egypt in the region, the potential of blowback suggests that future soft power analyses should be more cognizant of the competitive aspects of the issue.

2.6. Oscillating between Hard and Soft Power

The last major issue with soft power is that it fails to specify the conditions under which countries can be expected to go back and forth between soft and hard power. Let me explain this issue by two examples.
As noted earlier, Turkey’s increasingly friendly relations with Syria for the period of 1999 to 2008 were frequently presented as evidence of the efficacy of Turkey’s growing soft power. Ankara had indeed had some success with Damascus: it convinced Assad to recognize the results of elections in Lebanon for instance. It also facilitated talks between Syria and Israel. In return, Syria did not object to the election of a Turkish head to the OIC. Things took a much different course however with the breakout of civil war in Syria. The escalation of tensions with Syria resulted in a hard turn from soft to hard power over the last two years, as Turkey switched to a clearly militarized posture, as evidenced by the military support provided to anti-Assad forces as well as the installment of NATO Patriot missiles on the Syrian border. Now relations with Syria are at least as securitized as they were in the 1990s.

Turkey’s relations with Iran similarly have also displayed a shift from soft to hard power (Demiryol, 2013). Since 2002, Ankara had increasingly friendly relations with Tehran. Turkey served as a mediator between Iran and the international community, regarding Iran’s nuclear program and the economic sanctions. Turkey’s relations with Iran deteriorated rather quickly after 2010. Iran refused Turkey’s further attempts to mediate talks with the US and the international community. Iran also ceased to cooperate with Turkey on security issues. Turkey quickly switched from soft to hard power instruments in its relations with Iran when it agreed to host on its soil NATO’s early warning radars, which are a part of the new missile defense shield covering all NATO members within the range of Iran’s ballistic arsenal.

As the Syrian and Iranian cases demonstrate, Turkey was rather swift in switching from soft to hard power tools. How can we explain this? What does the case with which countries can switch between hard and soft power tools tell us about the validity of these concepts? One answer is to conceive of power as a continuum that extends from the hardest of hard power instruments and the softest of soft power tools, with most real world applications falling somewhere in-between. The determining factor of how hard or soft a power tool is needed is how securitized the issue at hand is. If issues are securitized, the tendency to use hard power is increased (Oguzlu, 2007).

I find this approach rather problematic because the criterion for choosing the firmness of the power tool, i.e. how securitized the issues are, is completely exogenous. If countries use hard and soft power instruments selectively depending on the situation, can we really talk about countries as soft power actors, as if this is a part of their foreign policy identity? Is identity nothing more than a function of the securitization level of the issues at any given time? Do we define the type of power (or measure its firmness) by the type of objectives that is being deployed towards (securitized or not) or by a factor that is intrinsic to the power itself?

I think addressing these questions is critical for raising the conceptual validity of the notion of soft power.

References

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