Diplomacy

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War compels and focuses public attention, leaves a clear mark on human life, and is responsible for shaping our world. On the other hand, despite its importance, diplomacy rarely gains much attention. When military theorist Carl von Clausewitz remarked in the early 1800s that war was the continuation of policy by other means, he sought to normalise the idea of war in modern politics. But, his words also indicated that actions short of war are available to help states achieve their objectives. These are typically the actions of diplomats. And, their work is often far less expensive, far more effective and much more predictable a strategy than war. In fact, unlike in centuries gone by when war was common, diplomacy is what we understand today as the normal state of affairs governing international relations. And, in the modern era, diplomacy is conducted not only between nation-states, but also by a range of non-state actors such as the European Union and the United Nations.

What is diplomacy?

Diplomacy has probably existed for as long as civilisation has. The easiest way to understand it is to start by seeing it as a system of structured communication between two or more parties. Records of regular contact via envoys travelling between neighbouring civilisations date back at least 2500 years. They lacked many of the characteristics and commonalities of modern diplomacy such as embassies, international law and professional diplomatic services. Yet, it should be underlined that political communities, however they may have been organised, have usually found ways to communicate during peacetime, and have established a wide range of practices for doing so. The benefits are clear when you consider that diplomacy can promote exchanges that enhance trade, culture, wealth and knowledge.

For those looking for a quick definition, diplomacy can be defined as a process between actors (diplomats, usually representing a state) who exist within a system (international relations) and engage in private and public dialogue (diplomacy) to pursue their objectives in a peaceful manner.

Diplomacy is not foreign policy and must be distinguished from it. It may be helpful to perceive diplomacy as part of foreign policy. When a nation-state makes foreign policy it does so for its own national interests. And, these interests are shaped by a wide range of factors. In basic terms, a state's foreign policy has two key ingredients; its actions and its strategies for achieving its goals. The interaction one state has with another is considered the act of its foreign policy. This act typically takes place via interactions between government personnel through diplomacy. To interact without diplomacy would typically limit a state's foreign policy actions to conflict (usually war, but also via economic sanctions) or espionage. In that sense, diplomacy is an essential tool required to operate successfully in today's international system.

In the modern context then, a system dominated by states, we can reasonably regard diplomacy as something being conducted for the most part between states. In fact, the applicable international law that governs diplomacy – the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) – only references states as diplomatic actors. Yet, the modern international system also involves powerful actors that are not states. These tend to be international non-

governmental organisations (INGOs) and international governmental organisations (IGOs). These actors regularly partake in areas of diplomacy and often materially shape outcomes. For example, the United Nations and the European Union (two IGOs) materially shaped diplomacy in the case studies highlighted later in this chapter. And, a range of INGOs – such as Greenpeace – have meaningfully advanced progress toward treaties and agreements in important areas tied to the health and progress of humankind such as international environmental negotiations.

While readers of this book will be familiar with the concept of war to some extent due to its ubiquity in modern life, diplomacy may present itself as something alien or distant. On the one hand this is a consequence of what diplomacy is and how it is carried out. Diplomacy is most often an act carried out by representatives of a state, or a non-state actor, usually behind closed doors. In these instances, diplomacy is a silent process working along in its routine (and often highly complex) form, carried out by rank-and-file diplomats and representatives. This is perhaps not the best place to shine a light on diplomacy for beginners. On the other hand, sometimes the public are presented with briefings, statements, or – more rarely – full disclosures of a diplomatic matter. These usually drift into the public consciousness when they involve critical international issues and draw in high-ranking officials. Because they do get headlines and work their way into the history books, examples drawn from this type of diplomacy are used in this chapter to offer a more palatable access point.

To enable the reader to get a sense of what diplomacy is and why it is important, this chapter will use two interrelated case studies. The first case study involves the quest to manage the spread of nuclear weapons. The second half of the twentieth century came to be dominated by conflict between two nuclear-armed superpowers, the United States of America (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) – often called the Soviet Union. In this tense climate, diplomacy ensured that few other nation-states developed nuclear weapons. Hence, the diplomatic success in curbing the proliferation of nuclear weapons is a major one, and one that involved non-state as well as nation-state actors. US-Iran relations form the second case study. This case spans several important decades from the end of the Second World War, to the present day. As times changed, the structure of international relations also changed, often causing material shifts in the patterns of diplomacy between both nations. By visiting that relationship, it is possible to not just show the importance of high-level diplomacy between two pivotal states but also to consider the importance of an international governmental organisation – the European Union. The case studies were chosen as they offer a glimpse of diplomacy between states that were sworn enemies and had had little in common due to incompatible economic, political, or even religious, systems. Yet, through diplomacy, they were able to avoid war and find ways to achieve progress in the most critical of areas.

Regulating nuclear weapons

After the first use of an atomic bomb by the US on Japan in August 1945, the world was transformed. Reports and pictures of the total devastation caused by the two bombs that the US dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima confirmed that the nature of warfare had changed forever. As one reporter described the scene:

There is no way of comparing the Atom Bomb damage with anything we've ever seen before. Whereas bombs leave gutted buildings and framework standing, the Atom bomb leaves nothing. (Hoffman 1945)

Although the US was the first state to successfully detonate a nuclear bomb, other nations were also researching the technology. The second state to successfully detonate a bomb was the Soviet Union (1949). The United Kingdom (1952), France (1960) and China (1964) followed. As the number of nations possessing nuclear weapons increased from one to five, there were genuine fears that these dangerous weapons would proliferate uncontrollably to many other nations.

Proliferation was not only a numbers issue. As the weapons developed in sophistication from those dropped in Japan they became many orders of magnitude more destructive, representing a grave threat to humankind as a whole. By the early 1960s, nuclear weapons had been built that could cause devastation for hundreds of kilometres beyond the impact zone. The United States and the Soviet Union, who were locked into a system of rivalry known as the Cold War, seemed to be in a race to outdo each other in terms of the quantity and quality of bombs each possessed. The Cold War was known as such because the presence of nuclear weapons on both sides made a traditional war

between the two almost unfathomable. If somehow they were to end up engaged in a direct conflict they each had the power to destroy the other entirely and in doing so jeopardise human civilisation as a whole.

It may seem strange but, despite their offensive power, nuclear weapons are primarily held as defensive tools – unlikely to be ever used. This is due to a concept known as deterrence. By holding a weapon that can wipe out an opponent, such an opponent is unlikely to attack you. Especially if your weapons can survive that attack and allow you to retaliate. In an environment as insecure as the Cold War, gaining a nuclear arsenal was a way to achieve deterrence and a measure of security that was not otherwise attainable. This was obviously an attractive option for states. For this reason, any hope of creating an international regime of moderation over nuclear weapons seemed doomed during the Cold War.

To the brink and back

The United Nations (UN), which was created in 1945 in part to give international diplomacy a focal point and create a more secure world, attempted in vain to outlaw nuclear weapons in the late 1940s. Following that failure, a series of less absolute goals were advanced, most notably to regulate the testing of nuclear weapons. Weapons that were being developed required test detonations, and each test released large amounts of radiation into the atmosphere, endangering ecosystems and human health.

By the late 1950s, high-level diplomacy under a United Nations framework had managed to establish a moratorium (or suspension) on nuclear testing by the United States and the Soviet Union. However, by 1961 a climate of mistrust and heightened tensions between the two nations caused testing to resume. One year later, in 1962, the world came to the brink of nuclear war in what is now known as the Cuban Missile Crisis when the Soviet Union sought to place nuclear warheads in Cuba, a small island nation in the Caribbean less than 150 kilometres off the southern coast of the United States. Cuban leader Fidel Castro had requested the weapons to deter the United States from meddling in Cuban politics following a failed US-sponsored invasion by anti-Castro forces in 1961. As Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev (1962) put it, 'the two most powerful nations had been squared off against each other, each with its finger on the button.' After pushing each other to the brink, US president John F. Kennedy and Khrushchev found that via diplomacy, they could agree to a compromise that satisfied the basic security needs of the other. Over a series of negotiations Soviet missiles were removed from Cuba in return for the United States removing missiles they had deployed in Turkey and Italy. As the two sides could not fully trust each other due to their rivalry, the diplomacy was based (and succeeded) on the principle of verification by the United Nations, which independently checked for compliance.

Once the immediate crisis over Cuba was resolved, high-level diplomacy continued. Neither nation desired such a dramatic break down in communications to occur again, so a direct hot line was established linking the Kremlin in Moscow and the Pentagon in Washington. Building further on the momentum, in July 1963 the Partial Test Ban Treaty was agreed, confining nuclear testing to underground sites only. It was not a perfect solution, but it was progress. And, in this case it was driven by the leaders of two superpowers who wanted to de-escalate a tense state of affairs.

Although early moves to regulate nuclear weapons were a mixed affair, the faith that Kennedy and Khrushchev put in building diplomacy was pivotal in the course of the Cold War and facilitated further progress in finding areas of agreement. In the years that followed the Cuban Missile Crisis, Cold War diplomacy entered a high watermark phase in what became known as a period of 'détente' between the superpowers as they sought to engage diplomatically with each other on a variety of issues, including a major arms limitation treaty. In that climate, progress was also made on nuclear proliferation.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty

Building on earlier progress, the 1970s opened with the entering into force of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (1970) – often known as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The Treaty sought to channel nuclear technology into civilian uses and to recognise the destabilising effect of further nuclear weapons proliferation on the

international community. It was a triumph of diplomacy. The genius of the treaty was that it was aware of the realities of the international politics of the time. It was not a disarmament treaty as great powers would simply not give up their nuclear weapons, fearful their security would be diminished. So, instead of pursuing an impossible goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, the Non-Proliferation Treaty sought to freeze the number of nations that had nuclear weapons at the five nations which already possessed them: the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France and China. Simultaneously, those five nations were encouraged to share non-military nuclear technology with other nations – such as civilian nuclear energy – so that those nations would not feel tempted to pursue nuclear weapons. In short, those who had nuclear weapons could keep them. Those who didn't have them would be allowed to benefit from the non-military research and innovation of the existing nuclear powers.

Due to the well-considered design of the treaty and its enforcement, it has been deemed highly successful. Following the end of the Cold War, the Non-Proliferation Treaty was permanently extended in 1995. Granted, it has not kept the number of nuclear nations to five, but there are still fewer than ten – which is far from the twenty or more projected by diplomats on both sides of the Atlantic before the treaty entered into force in 1970. States with nascent nuclear weapons programmes, such as Brazil and South Africa, gave them up due to international pressure to join the treaty. Today, only a small number of states are outside its bounds. India, Pakistan and Israel never joined as they (controversially in each case) had nuclear ambitions that they were not prepared to give up due to national security priorities. Underlining the weight of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, in 2003, when North Korea decided to rekindle earlier plans to develop nuclear weapons, they withdrew from the treaty rather than violate it. To date, North Korea remains the only nation to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The non-proliferation regime is not perfect of course – a situation best underlined by North Korea's quest to proliferate despite international will. It is also a system with an inherent bias, since a number of nations are allowed to have nuclear weapons simply because they were first to develop them – and this continues to be the case regardless of their behaviour. Yet, while humankind has developed the ultimate weapon in the nuclear bomb, diplomacy has managed to prevail in moderating its spread. When a nation is rumoured to be developing a nuclear bomb, as in the case of Iran, the reaction of the international community is always one of common alarm. In IR we call ideas that have become commonplace 'norms'. Due to skilful diplomacy in decades gone by, non-proliferation is one of the central norms underpinning our international system.

The US and Iran

Following the end of the Second World War, Iran found itself placed in a geostrategic hotspot. It shared a long border to its north with the Soviet Union and as a result acted as a geographical buffer to any Soviet moves into the Middle East. Iran's wider location, known as the Persian Gulf, was a region that contained the world's largest-known pool of oil – the steady supply of which was vital for the fuelling of Western-orientated economies. So, a coincidence of time, place, politics and economics judged Iran – in most ways a weak and underdeveloped state – important. When Iran's king, known as the Shah, found himself side-lined by a powerful left-leaning government, the United States, in league with the British, conspired to restore him to power via a covert coup in 1953. During the Cold War the United States feared that leftward political developments in nations would result in a domestic communist revolution and/or an alliance with the communist Soviet Union. In certain cases, therefore, the United States took interventionist action to contain communism from spreading. The coup was a watermark in US-Iranian history. It set up a pattern of close relations that would last 25 years, as the Shah became a loyal ally of the United States in a volatile region. This volatility was not just due to Cold War geostrategic rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union. The wider region was embroiled in a series of crises caused by decolonisation and the resulting phenomenon of Arab nationalism, regional opposition to the creation of Israel, and a major ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan. Then, as now, this was a highly unstable area of the world to live in.

Iran has always been a nation that, despite different manifestations of its internal shape and character, has aspired to greater stature internationally, or at the very least regional predominance. For example, the Shah, whose autocratic rule was brought to an end by the 1979 revolution that erased his regime and created the Islamic Republic of Iran, harboured grand designs for Iran as the premier nation of the Middle East. This vision was shared by the United States, which armed Iran with advanced weaponry, of the non-nuclear kind, during the Shah's rule. The United

States hoped its support of the Shah would allow him to widen and deepen Iranian power in order to help stabilise the region. Iran today is not much different to the Shah's Iran in the sense that it exists within the same borders and is a nation of the same peoples. However, a significant caveat is that the regional and global role Iran was to play under the Shah was largely in line with American desires, while the role envisioned by the Islamic Republic of Iran is deeply antagonistic to just about every facet of American politics. Hence, US-Iran relations are packed with insight and intrigue due to the history and divergent paths both nations have experienced.

The Iran hostage crisis

To connect our US-Iran case study to the issue of diplomacy, we do not need to look far beyond the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran to an episode known as *the Iran hostage crisis*. In November 1979 a gang of Iranian students invaded the US Embassy in Tehran, Iran's capital city, and captured the personnel they found there. This occurred after the Shah, who was in exile, had taken residence in New York for cancer treatment. The protesters demanded his return to stand trial for various crimes committed by his regime, such as torturing political dissidents. So the prisoners, most of them US diplomatic personnel, were taken hostage as a bargaining chip, their freedom offered in exchange for the return of the Shah. The United States and Iran found themselves in uncharted waters when Iran's new government, led by the once-exiled anti-Shah cleric Ruhollah Khomeini, officially sanctioned the hostage-taking.

Due to established diplomatic customs, an embassy – although hosted on foreign soil – is forbidden from being entered by the host state unless permission is given. So, when the Iranian protesters invaded the US Embassy in Tehran they violated a key feature of diplomacy developed over centuries to allow diplomats the freedom to do their work. This is why, to use a more contemporary example, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was able to avoid arrest by British police by taking up residence in an innocuous-looking terraced house in London – the house is the Embassy of Ecuador and police were refused entry. Strange as it may sound, police officers were then stationed outside the door waiting to arrest Assange should he decide to leave – an operation that has cost the British taxpayer millions of pounds. It is evident from the Assange example how highly such diplomatic customs are regarded by nations and how little this changes over time – even when those nations are in conflict.

In Iran's case, its disregard for established diplomatic principles was both shocking and extreme. Not only did it violate established diplomatic principles, but hostage-taking by a state is defined as a war crime under the Geneva Conventions. Predictably, the United States rejected Iran's demands and the hostage crisis became a tense diplomatic stand-off lasting 444 days. It turned Iran into an international pariah: there was worldwide outrage at its disregard not only for the rules of the international system but also for human decency as it paraded the hostages – bound and gagged – in front of news cameras. It also marked a new anti-Western political path for Iran, one in stark opposition to its pro-US stance during the time of the Shah. Despite the eventual freeing of the hostages in January 1981, the once-friendly nations had become foes. Following the crisis, all direct diplomatic links between the United States and Iran were severed until an issue of nuclear proliferation brought them to the same table over thirty years later.

Nuclear Iran

The idea of Iran possessing nuclear weapons is understandably controversial. Iran's known disregard for international laws and customs, as evidenced by the hostage crisis and reinforced by the regular accusation that it supports terrorist and radical groups, creates an atmosphere of mistrust in the international community. News of Iran's nuclear ambitions has been a point of major international diplomatic focus since 2002, when news leaked out that Iran had begun the development of a modern nuclear programme that showed signs of weaponisation (see Sinha and Beachy 2015 and Patrikarakos 2012). This was in spite of the fact that Iran is a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and therefore bound to neither receive nor develop nuclear arms. Iran protested that its programme was for civilian and peaceful purposes only. However, due to Iran's international profile, few believed this. Given that the United States had just declared its 'Global War on Terrorism' following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it was a tense period.

In 2002 the United States had no appetite for diplomacy with Iran over the nuclear issue. The US had already invaded Afghanistan in late 2001 and was preparing to invade Iraq in early 2003 as part of its campaign to rid the Middle East of regimes which might provide safe harbour to transnational terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda – the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. The United States also had a larger goal: to secure regime change in Iran, which it considered the world's leading state-sponsor of terrorism. Seen through that logic, a war on terror was meaningless if it did not target the world's chief terrorist. This would be done by demonstrating the might of the United States through its invasion of Iran's neighbours – note that Afghanistan borders Iran to the east and Iraq borders Iran to the west. This would then create internal pressure on Iran's leadership to reform of its own accord; it might even incite another revolution. If that failed, the United States was prepared to engage with Iran in some fashion in order to destroy its nuclear research facilities and possibly engineer regime change via military means, as it did in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is best encapsulated by president George W. Bush's oft-repeated phrase that 'all options are on the table' regarding dealing with Iran – outlined in more complete terms by the following passage from an official government document:

The Iranian regime sponsors terrorism; threatens Israel; seeks to thwart Middle East peace; disrupts democracy in Iraq; and denies the aspirations of its people for freedom. The nuclear issue and our other concerns can ultimately be resolved only if the Iranian regime makes the strategic decision to change these policies, open up its political system, and afford freedom to its people. This is the ultimate goal of U.S. policy. In the interim, we will continue to take all necessary measures to protect our national and economic security against the adverse effects of their bad conduct. (The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2006, 20)

In that climate, diplomacy seemed a non-starter. However, an unlikely candidate entered the fray – the European Union (EU). In 2003, three EU nations, the UK, Germany and France, initiated high-level diplomacy with Iran in an attempt to prevent a war and introduce mediation to the situation. The talks were rejected by the United States, which refused to take part, given its above-mentioned objectives. For the European nations, diplomacy was worth pursuing. Despite the UK, France and Germany being traditional allies of the United States, there was no appetite in Europe for more war in the Middle East. The war in Iraq was controversial, as many – including the United Nations, which refused to mandate the war – did not accept its rationale. The 2003 invasion of Iraq also divided Europe politically and caused mass popular protests. In this context, engaging Iran was a bold move of diplomacy – effectively stepping in the way of the world's sole superpower when it was at its most belligerent. The talks were initially inconclusive, but they at least succeeded in engaging Iran in diplomacy, stalling its nuclear programme and offering a path to resolution other than confrontation.

In the years that followed invasion, military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan became deeply troubled as both nations (for different reasons) descended into instability. This required a longer-term, and more substantial, military presence by the United States than had been planned. As a result, the US became bogged down and was not in a position to realistically pursue a military strategy against Iran. Thus, it joined the EU-Iran talks, albeit reluctantly, in 2006. China and Russia also joined, making it a truly international diplomatic affair. It took almost a decade, but the parties finally reached agreement in July 2015. That agreement is a marvel of diplomacy. What were once mutually opposing positions characterised by decades of mistrust between the United States and Iran were painstakingly worked on by diplomats at all levels over many rounds of diplomacy until compromises acceptable to both sides were found.

Personal relationships between the diplomats were also built during the years of the negotiations, and these helped transcend state rivalries. Wendy Sherman, the US lead negotiator, recalled how she and her Iranian counterpart, Abbas Araghchi, both became grandparents during their negotiations and shared videos of their grandchildren with each other. Personal relationships like this do not dissolve or change pre-set national interests on either side, but they were instrumental in both sides developing the resolve to work tirelessly and not give up until they were able to agree on key parameters. Similar personal relations were developed between officials at the highest level when they spent 17 days locked in intense discussions in Vienna during the concluding phase of the negotiations. Sherman later described the scene on the final day, with all the diplomatic personnel gathered together, as US Secretary of State John Kerry addressed the parties:

Secretary Kerry was the last person to speak. He recounted that when he was 21 he went off to war in Vietnam. He made a commitment that he would do whatever he could in his life to make sure that there was never war, ever again. The room was absolutely still. There was quiet. And then everyone, including the Iranians, applauded. Because, I think for all of us we understood that what we had done was to try to ensure peace, not war. (Sherman 2016)

Much like the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the key to the success of the diplomatic strategy underlining the agreement was to focus on verification rather than the seemingly impossible goal of establishing trust. The diplomats laboured in the one area where a resolution was possible and found a way to make it acceptable for both sides. For Iran this overtly involved the phased removal of punitive economic sanctions that had been sponsored by the United States and also the tacit removal of any direct military threat. For the Americans, the deal placed Iran under a strict regime of verification to ensure that it cannot easily develop nuclear weapons, and if they appeared to be doing so there would be time for the international community to react before those weapons became useable. This is known as a 'breakout' period (see Broad and Peçanha 2015). Such a thing is only possible via an unprecedented system of strict international inspection of Iran's facilities, which Iran agreed to.

The resolution of the US-Iran nuclear standoff would not have been possible without the bold move of three European Union nations to start a diplomatic process during the tense year of 2003. Not only was a serious confrontation between Iran and the United States avoided, but the important non-proliferation principle that has become central to international relations was upheld by securing Iran's commitment to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The Iran nuclear deal, although a clear example of a diplomatic success in the face of tall odds, is contentious and fragile. It will need to weather multiple political shifts in the United States and Iran that might unseat it in years to come – and it does not remove the enmity between the states, which continue to mistrust each other. However, it may be seen in retrospect as the opening act on a path of rapprochement between the two nations that may gradually replace the toxic pattern of relations begun in 1979 with the hostage crisis. Even if the United States and Iran resume a path of confrontation, it does not take away from the triumph of diplomacy in this case, with nuclear weapons in the Middle East prevented from proliferating during a critical period and an alternative offered to what might have been a major war.

Conclusion

Diplomacy in the modern era, an era sometimes called the 'long peace' (Gaddis 1989) due to the absence of major war since 1945, has deepened and widened in complexity. Nowadays, it would be ill advised to base a description of diplomacy on actions short of, or in response to, war between states. Diplomacy today is integral to ensuring that our period of long peace gets longer and that the world we live in is as conducive as possible to the progress of the individual, as well as the state. As today's world is more linked and interdependent than ever before, effective and skilful diplomacy is vital to ensure that humankind can navigate an ever-growing list of shared challenges such as climate change, pandemics, transnational terrorism and nuclear proliferation that may be our undoing if left unresolved. So, while you may not know the names of many of those engaged in diplomatic endeavours, nor see much of their hard work credited in the media, their work is more important than ever to all of us.

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