

## Interview - Costas Constantinou

Written by E-International Relations

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Costas M. Constantinou is Professor of International Relations at the University of Cyprus, with cross-cutting interests in diplomacy, conflict, international political theory, and legal and normative aspects of international relations. His research uses conceptual and autoethnographic approaches to understand methods of engaging alterity and modes of living, relating and cohabiting. Besides Cyprus, he has conducted fieldwork in India, Nepal, Lebanon, Israel, Turkey and Kenya. His publications include *States of Political Discourse: Words, Regimes, Seditions* and *On the Way to Diplomacy*.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

In the field of diplomacy, the current exploration of issues and questions beyond state-centric and foreign policy concerns is a very exciting development. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the field was mostly limited to the study of foreign policy formulation and implementation, negotiation strategy and tactics, and practitioners' guides to diplomatic procedures, rules and rituals. Nowadays, we find an abundance of cross- and multi-disciplinary studies of diplomacy that have completely changed the field. What I have in mind here is the work of political geographers, social anthropologists, critical diplomatic historians, political ecologists, science, culture and education scholars, but also of colleagues rooted in the IR discipline but open to social concerns and the insights imported from other disciplines. A lot of this work is high-level and innovative and has changed the academic landscape of diplomacy offering exploratory vistas for theorization and praxis. Purist and conservative voices still misread these developments as fashion or confusion, protesting that diplomacy has become everything and anything, that we no longer know what diplomacy is or supposed to achieve, and the like. As far I am concerned, what we have gained are new research agendas and fruitful debates on, among other topics, diplomatic assemblage, practice theory, everyday diplomacy, informal diplomacy, public diplomacy, diplomatic ethics, science diplomacy, digital diplomacy, visual diplomacy, and diplomacy and the arts. It is a fantastic period to conduct research in diplomatic studies.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

My thinking has been broadly shaped by experiences in my country. Cyprus remains a source of inspiration and my approach has been, for the most part, autoethnographic. Unfortunately, or fortunately as the joke goes, Cyprus is a good case study for IR research. Growing up in the 1970s, I became acquainted early on with both inter- and intra-ethnic violence, hate rhetoric, war, displacement and division. Our neighborhood bordered the buffer zone and nationalism was all around us, from school to church to the athletic club we used to hang around as kids. Although it was a tragic period to live in, it did give us an eerie ease and strange familiarity with conflict, soldiers, guns and bullets, and UN peacekeepers in our midst. It also gave us certainty about what happened and which side was responsible for the tragedy. Or so I thought.

My ethnocentric upbringing was completely shattered when I went to university in the UK, learning 'the other side' of the story, meeting Turks and Turkish Cypriots, finding out about the latter's precarious condition from 1963 to 1974, that no one cared to tell me before and the Greek books I had read never mentioned. There was no internet in the 1980s, so it was all a big surprise. This was my first ontological crisis – the feeling that the 'self' and 'other' are *other* than what one really thought as well as being totally betrayed by national education and self-serving knowledge and

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truth. It was a hurtful experience, but its memory nourished a critical disposition and, ultimately, proved humbling and therapeutic with regard to knowledge struggles and epic failures to understand the world we live in. We can only keep trying, opening up space to learn and know anew.

Thinking back, I can now see that this experience made me deeply suspicious of the pretensions and uses of knowledge, popular as well as academic. Not only that 'others' can deceive 'us' by presenting something as a fact or a given, doing so deliberately or because they themselves only partially know, but also, more disturbingly, that once this knowledge is familiarized and becomes 'ours', our own thinking deceives us, through the established ideas and projections it employs to explain any given situation. Although in the beginning Cyprus was deliberately not in my research interests, it provided valuable empirics and indirectly led me to problems and puzzles that raised very 'Cypriot' questions on 'non-Cypriot' sites: official and alternative forms of diplomacy, contested sovereignty, marginal or exceptional states, colonial continuity, security and legitimization discourses, and conflict transformation.

I had an inclination for and cultivated an interest in political theory and philosophy during my postgraduate studies, and the experience I described above made it evident that ontological and epistemological issues were highly political and a priority. Doing theory was a necessary though not sufficient condition for change. Reading Foucault on power/knowledge, Heidegger and Derrida on the metaphysics of presence, and within IR the early poststructuralists, Ashley, Der Derian, Dillon, Shapiro, Sylvester, Walker and Weber, among others, clarified and exemplified the value of theorizing in order to open alternative paths to thinking and acting. Doing my PhD in the early 1990s, I overdosed on social and political philosophy, history of ideas and postcolonial theory. These sources still guide and influence my thinking. I benefit but also suffer from them, as my writing occasionally becomes more theoretical than I intend it to be. I blame Cyprus, first and foremost, for becoming a theorist.

### **How do dominant IR theories view diplomacy and diplomatic practice? Which IR theories are most accurate in capturing the role, scope and effect of diplomacy over international relations?**

Dominant IR theories view diplomacy and its practice restrictively and in a rather problematic way. Consider (neo)Realism and (neo)Liberalism, which essentially approach diplomacy as an interstate or intergovernmental affair. But also, they approach it as primarily a strategic exercise, a means of achieving an end or getting one's way with others. The end or goal can vary. It can be 'good' or 'bad', 'virtuous' or 'malicious', depending on one's perspective. When Hans Morgenthau in the last chapter of *Politics Among Nations* concludes with a number of rules for peace-preserving diplomacy, it sounds promising for world peace, yet on closer inspection (even if for the sake of argument, we grant that his 'rules' would lead to the 'goal' of peace), the ethical implications of peace are not open to questioning in his scheme. Is the peace-to-be-preserved simply power-balancing, or hegemonic or colonial peace? Is it peace with justice or deferring justice, coercive or non-coercive peace, top-down or bottom-up peace? So far as these rules follow the Realist approach, one can easily deduce that Morgenthau's peace is more about order than justice.

Equally, for the Realist or the Liberal approach, the practice of negotiation in pursuit of those unproblematic interests of 'our' side ('our' state, 'our' regional organization, 'our' values and way of living) may be entirely justifiable from the perspective of achieving ultimate ends, yet not from the angle of ethical responsibility towards those not invited to the negotiating table or not serviced or represented by 'us'. I am not saying that the pursuit of one-sided interests is wrong per se, but rather that it provides a normative commitment and a particular way of seeing the world that a student of diplomacy needs always to be aware of. And, of course, to realize that given this normative commitment, one may not resolve but actually exacerbate global problems.

Without naming specific 'IR' theories — for the cross-disciplinary approaches that I value most often engage in debates that do not seek to contribute to 'big' theories or colonize the field — I find much more interesting theoretical approaches that explore the transformative potential of diplomacy. That is to say, approaches that are concerned with transforming conflict or hostile relationships, rectifying materially or mentally damaging situations, advocating for and engaging across divides to resolve common problems, supporting subaltern communities and ecological balance, promoting respect for human rights and rights of nature, and negotiating modes of living and coexistence under conditions of planetary complexity. I am not saying that these are the 'most accurate' approaches in capturing

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what diplomacy *is* all about. Rather, I am suggesting that these approaches are more ethically perceptive and sensitive and, in my register, exemplify what virtuous or critical humanist diplomacy *can* and *should* be about. They encourage research into aspects that have been neglected in conventional approaches and dominant theories that prioritize self-interest, power maximization, and institutional or regime promotion.

**Is there a gap between diplomacy as a practice and diplomacy as a field of scholarship? If so, how can this gap be bridged?**

There is indeed a gap between the practice and the theory of diplomacy. How big is the gap and whether and how far it can be bridged very much depends on one's understanding of 'practice' and 'theory'. It is something that has concerned me from the very beginning of my academic research. Although I don't consider that my work has been successful in bridging the gap, I think it seriously raised the question and pointed towards a direction. My entire PhD thesis and first book, *On the Way to Diplomacy* (1996) is a long meditation on the notion of *theoria* – which in ancient Greek did not just mean philosophical contemplation but *sacred embassy* sent to the oracle posing questions and seeking prophesies and *ecumenical embassy* sent abroad on a freelance mission to learn from foreign cultures. This alternative practice of diplomacy, beyond *presbeia*, i.e. the embassy sent from one polis to another, shows that in ancient Greece (as well as in other cultures as I suggested elsewhere) the contemplative or reflexive dimension was an essential requirement for adequately practicing diplomacy. That is, the notion of *theory*, before employed by Plato and Aristotle, was already a diplomatic practice. And, reversely, diplomacy from its ancient beginnings was never just about implementing policy but also about questioning and revising it, not merely advocating positions but also about 'theorizing' the world, translating cultures, mediating differences, and promoting understanding across societies and civilizational divides.

A significant recent development with regard to bridging diplomatic theory and practice is the 'practice theory' approach in International Relations. The insights of scholars working in this area are extremely valuable (i.e. the work of, among others, Adler-Nissen, Pouliot, Sending, Neumann, Cornut). I fully commend their attempts to retrieve 'theory' and 'understanding' from the field, from the ecology of practices that produce and distribute symbolic power and in general from the habitual way of doing things among professionals who *consciously* practice diplomacy. This approach focuses on diplomatic practices as units of analysis, looks at what we can learn from the social skills, competences and innovations of diplomats at the level of action, and to that extent adopts a more pragmatic understanding of knowledge and theory.

I do, however, depart from the narrow purview of diplomacy in 'practice theory', i.e. concerning who actually practices diplomacy and where this practice takes place. Scholars of this approach concentrate mostly on state and intergovernmental practice, and although they are open to the historically and culturally contingent practices of diplomacy beyond the state, they restrict the definition of diplomacy to those practitioners that 'claim to represent a given polity to the outside world'. But what about those who do not claim to represent a given polity, yet represent a subaltern group, or advocate for a good cause, or work to raise awareness about a problem and engage others in order to resolve it? Or, consider many a low-level mediator that are not officially accredited yet work on the ground to resolve local conflicts? What would it mean, contrary to the 'practice theory' approach, to view diplomacy as emerging whenever someone successfully claims to represent and negotiate for a territory or a group of people or a cause, or successfully claims to mediate between others engaging in such representations and negotiations. In the quotidian, diplomacy ceases to be a professional skill or special technique and thus captures a wider spectrum of social activities. These everyday practices of diplomacy should also concern us and feed into our practice theorization.

**Part of your research on diplomacy deals with the spectacle of diplomacy. What is the importance of this spectacle? How important are images of diplomacy and diplomatic practice in the current time and era?**

The visual is becoming increasingly important in diplomacy. It is no longer perceived as merely an embellishment or part of the protocol or dignified milieu of diplomatic practice, a supplement to logocentric diplomacy. The advent of public diplomacy has contributed considerably in elevating the role of the visual as well as the recent technological advances that make it super easy to produce, manipulate and disseminate images. So, getting acquainted with the

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pictorial turn and how non-verbal communication is used not only for 'professional' diplomatic signaling but for the production and dissemination of public visual narratives is a sine qua non of practicing diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has both instrumental and analytical purchase.

However, the visual and even more the cinematic also offer new opportunities for theorizing diplomacy. Early on in my work and later, I focused on diplomatic imagery, such as Hans Holbein's painting 'The Ambassadors' (1533), primarily to underscore the framing of the 'reality' of modern diplomacy and to suggest how those who are enframed within this particular 'picture of diplomacy' need to become conscious of the framing process and reframe their place and situation in it. More critical and challenging than theorizing with still pictures is the task of thinking with moving images. This is the main reason I recently started experimenting with directing essay films. From this perspective, I have followed on Deleuze's insights on cinema as not being just about acting and performance but about thinking, elevating the power of montage and counter-montage to creatively challenge the opiating and framing effect of moving images, which if left unchallenged construct a dominant viewpoint. By re-assembling images, counter-montage can thus emancipate 'the viewpoint'. This is exactly how early critical cinematographers, like Dziga Vertov, understood the promise of cinema or 'the moving eye' – to see 'that which the eye [normally] doesn't see... making the invisible visible, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt'. The visual and the cinematic thus offer us not just new sites for analyzing diplomacy and global politics but new opportunities for thinking and writing differently about them.

**Swedish ambassador Ingemar Lindahl has called Cyprus the “diplomat’s graveyard”. Is this a fair characterization of the situation in Cyprus since the island’s independence in 1960?**

Yes and no. It very much depends on one's understanding of diplomacy and what one considers to be its ends. Is diplomacy simply what is practiced by professional diplomats and accredited government officials? Is the only end of diplomacy in Cyprus to reach a comprehensive settlement of the so-called Cyprus Problem? Could diplomacy also be about containing and/or transforming conflict, or managing crises, or reaching temporary agreements in the midst of disagreement? One's assessment of diplomatic 'failure' or 'success' can shift depending on what kinds of answers one gives to these questions. On one side of the spectrum, decades of UN sponsored negotiations, with special representatives and supporting teams appointed by seven consecutive UN Secretary Generals to mediate the process, with additional special representatives from the UK, USA, EU, Russia, Greece, Turkey and other European countries, and even with a comprehensive plan that was put to a referendum in 2014, it is perfectly legitimate to describe the current situation in Cyprus as a diplomatic failure, or as graphically put, the graveyard of enthusiastic and aspiring diplomats slain in this tortuous negotiation process. From this perspective, official diplomacy has not achieved its stated objective, i.e. to settle the conflict and unite the island through a comprehensive peace agreement.

On the other side, when I sit at the café of the Home for Cooperation (H4C) in the UN Buffer Zone in divided Nicosia – where ambassador Lindahl actually launched the book you refer to – I can see a series of 'minor' diplomatic successes taking place before my eyes on a daily basis. The activities of the civil society at H4C, organizing seminars, exhibitions, peace education and walking tours across the divide, maybe viewed as less important, track two or non-diplomatic from the more elitist perspective of professional diplomacy (not by Lindahl, incidentally, who has been very supportive of the H4C!). For me, by contrast, I see here everyday diplomacy at its best, reaching out, collaborating and deliberating conditions of living together, making the most of a difficult situation and uniting people in the midst of division. And the H4C, I must stress, is only one of many sites in the island, though perhaps the most prominent and visible one. There is a plurality and diversity of actors and sites, where individuals and groups negotiate the negative impact of division and create possibilities for change that works for them, in some cases temporary arrangements, in others more permanent ones. The tireless work of these everyday ambassadors suggests, consequently, that we should not only focus on the graveyard of official diplomacy but also on the birth clinics and nurseries of the non-official, low-level, and bottom-up diplomacies of local mediators and peacebuilders.

Of course, one should not romanticize the ability of local agency to overcome the tragic effects of violent conflict, the hostile rhetoric, the permanent tension, and the reality of displacement and division in Cyprus. But one should not underestimate either the achievements and 'minor gains' of local agency and everyday diplomacy in transforming conflict from a physically violent to a post-violent one. For me, this speaks directly to the kind of diplomacy I value

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and which, as I have argued, has a multidirectional character that needs to be acknowledged. We are increasingly used to seeing diplomacy as multilateral and multilevel, but the multidirectional quality of it is less appreciated. That is to say, how when a particular objective or agreement cannot be reached, continuous and persistent diplomacy can change direction, device a *modus vivendi*, agreeing on how to disagree, cooperating on 'side effects' or 'technical' issues in the midst of disagreement, shifting diplomatic effort on what is feasible rather than the desirable or optimal. And, what is a *modus vivendi* other than, literally, a mode of living — the opposite to a diplomat's graveyard.

**One of the key positions defining the Greek Cypriot stance over the Cyprus Problem is the abolition of the external guarantees over the state's constitution in the event of a solution. You have argued for the revision of the Treaty of Guarantee, currently in place under the 1960 Constitution, and not its abolishment, why is that? What could be achieved by the retainment of guarantees in Cyprus?**

You get me back to official diplomacy and what is considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of the Cyprus Problem. To start with, I have argued that the existing Treaty of Guarantee is unacceptable because it contains colonial provisions and gives the Guarantor Powers (Greece, Turkey and the UK) a pretext to interfere in Cyprus. Especially problematic is the 'constructively ambiguous' Article 4, which appears to leave open the legitimacy of military intervention (the guarantors 'reserve the right to take action') and which, if so interpreted, violates a peremptory norm of international law (Article 2.4 of the UN Charter), a case for invalidating the whole Treaty of Guarantee. But, let us remember that these strong guarantees for the independence and constitutional order of the Republic of Cyprus were agreed upon by all parties back in 1960, including the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, because the parties did not trust each other, i.e. did not trust that the Greeks would still not try to forcibly unite the island with Greece or the Turks to forcibly divide it. Seeing how history unfolded, it seems that they were right not to trust each other and themselves! Both Cypriot communities as well as Greece and Turkey clearly violated the Treaty of Guarantee.

However, my view is that we should not throw away the baby with the bathwater. What we need are guarantees that legally and meaningfully bind all parties concerned to any future settlement — the Cypriots, the so-called motherlands, and the former colonial power that still has sovereign bases on the island. Because of the violent history and security concerns of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, because of 'spoilers' in both communities as well as external interests from the 'motherlands', we need a strong framework that guarantees the implementation of the settlement and new state of affairs. Specifically, guarantees that legally bind all parties to effective conflict resolution mechanisms (something that is absent from the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee), keep the UN involved on the ground with upgraded responsibilities for implementation (rather than foreign armies with unilateral right to take action as provided by the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee), and compel parties to submit any disagreement over implementation or violation to the International Court of Justice (again something that is absent from the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee). These are the kind of guarantees that I would like to see in place, unlike the 1960 guarantees that gave guarantors only privileges and blank cheques without binding responsibilities or commitments that their activities can be legally checked by international courts.

The current crisis over the delimitation of sea zones and the right of exploiting hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean is a case in point. We need binding legal commitments that any current or future disagreement between Cyprus, Greece and Turkey over delimitation and sharing, will be resolved through arbitration or adjudication as provided by international law, if it cannot be solved by the interested parties through negotiation. If we have no such legal commitments, Cypriots across the divide will remain hostages to fortune and populist politicians, at home and abroad, exactly as in the past, when we can be smart now by committing in advance to strong procedures for resolving future disputes and tensions. These are the revised guarantees that I argued for, including colonial privileges that should be cancelled, and I believe strongly that it will minimize the chances of future collapse that everyone wants to avoid. If a different phraseology, other than guarantees, is more agreeable to the stakeholders (e.g. Treaty of Security and Implementation), whilst the text legally covers what I have suggested above, it is equally fine by me.

**You have extensively worked on issues of hybrid identity on the island, particularly the case of the *linobambakoi*. In what ways are these hybrid identities important in the case of the Cyprus conflict?**

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### Do you see any parallels with other international conflicts?

The valorization of hybrid identities is extremely important in spaces where identity politics is predominant. Even more so, where rival ethnic identities have fueled nationalism, violence and division, as in Cyprus. It helps to revision and rethink the Cyprus conflict beyond its strict bi-communal frame, to appreciate that there are other communities living on the island, communities with different problems and aspirations, communities that transgress the ethno-cultural identification that rival regimes of power consider as a given. We are used to using terms like Greek-Cypriot or Turkish-Cypriot, both locally, in political and legal discourse, as well as internationally when the Cyprus conflict is discussed. So, if and when, one mentions GreekTurk-Cypriots or MuslimChristian-Cypriots as a historical and present reality, there is often amazement and disorientation. This confusion, however, can be helpful in provoking thinking about the naturalness, perennality and purity of the ethnic identities on the island, in the name of which conflict is pursued.

There are of course parallels from around the globe. Hybridity is universal, although not always accepted. Furthermore, we need to factor in that to hybridize can also be a power move than singles out an identity as derivative, not primary. What is important to realize is that these kind of 'exotic' communities may be seen as threatening or progressive depending on whether one adopts an ethnocentric or a cosmopolitan perspective. So, within conflict zones, their ethnic allegiance is often doubted and they can be stamped as untrustworthy or treacherous. However, within societies where multiculturalism is valorized their historical presence can be rehabilitated. A good example of the latter are the *peranakans* in Singapore who have historically experienced discrimination but whose bi-racial / bi-ethnic nature very much speaks nowadays to the multi-ethnic coexistence narrative of Singapore, as developed after independence.

**Given that several bicomunal initiatives currently exist on the island seeking to create a rapprochement between the two communities, do you see any prospects for the development of a truly 'Cypriot' identity as a consequence of these developments? How important would the construction of such an identity be for the solution of the Cyprus Problem?**

I am all for rapprochement but I don't see 'the development of a truly "Cypriot" identity' as a certain and undisputed benefit. We need to remain vigilant about the kind of negations and rejections that such development might entail. We can already see the problem in the discourse of some extreme enthusiasts of (neo)Cypriot identity: a discourse that unites across the ethnic divide but it is often exclusionary and scathing against mainland Turks and Greeks, settlers, migrants, and so on. On the one hand, it is understandable why people with the best intentions want to construct such an identity to oppose and counterbalance Greek and Turkish nationalism in Cyprus, nationalisms that undermined the unity and independence of the Republic of Cyprus as well as bicomunal collaboration at different levels. On the other hand, whilst counter-balancing ethnic nationalism, the negative potential of civic nationalism should not be underestimated, bearing in mind the rise of racism against non-Cypriots, refugees from the region, and the treatment of domestic workers. Especially the latter has been shown in the most tragic way with the serial killings of foreign women, that have not been investigated by the Cypriot police when they were reported missing. They were not seen as a 'priority'.

Sure, I appreciate that cultivating a sense of unity and commonality is important for resolving the Cyprus Problem. I don't want to belittle or undermine it. But I would rather that this comes from an appreciation that our lives are entangled with each other irrespective of who 'we' are or may become, that we share common fears, aspirations and interests across different divides, and therefore that we should acknowledge our interdependence and enhance modes of coexistence. In other words, given the plethora of identities that we have and the specific aspects of identity one may choose to highlight in different contexts and circumstances (Cypriot, Turk, Greek, Christian, Sufi, Alevite, European, city-dweller, peasant, Middle Eastern, Levantine, human, earthling, and so on), I would rather we learn first to navigate the vast ocean of identity/difference and the impact that our little 'precious' identities have on us. Given the plurality of identities that people valorize in modern societies, the task should not be to construct another 'true one'. Instead, we should be more accommodating to the 'many ones' in our midst, to try to lighten the burden of identity claims and demands, whilst recognizing that a specific identity may still be important for humans, playing a role in the enactment of worlds and imaginative orders within which they find meaning in their lives.

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### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?**

Welcome all advice, but remain autonomous. Autonomy is very important for thinking. The experience and guidance of 'seniors' are always valuable. But it's important not to just follow the concerns or mimic the style of 'senior' or 'star' scholars in IR, no matter how admirable their work is. I say this as someone who over the years learnt a lot from my seniors, peers and colleagues, scholars who helped me understand what I was doing or point me towards directions that I haven't thought of. I also learnt from my students upon whom I rested and tested my ideas. Don't miss such opportunity to learn from others.

However, academic life is also solitary. And rightly so, if you ask me. Where I learnt the most and advanced in my thinking was when I posed my own questions, clarified in my mind how my quests differed from those of others, gathered the courage to follow paths with few or no travelling companions, something that allowed me to stray, forage and experiment. Of course, it didn't always work, there is a risk involved and a price to be paid, but the journey broadened my vision and, at least for me, perhaps also because of valuing autoethnography, it was definitely worth taking. I don't agree with Paul Feyerabend's total anarchistic theory of knowledge that 'anything goes', but I would strongly advise that one may look anywhere for answers and follow leads that inspire and trigger one's imagination. Remaining passive or faithful followers of a dominant ideology, or of the main theoretical-empirical concerns of the IR discipline, is detrimental to creativity and originality. And, more crucially, it limits the horizon of possibility within which we think, act, and live fully and meaningfully.