

Review Feature – New Perspectives on Diplomacy

Written by Kristin Anabel Eggeling

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KRISTIN ANABEL EGGELING, JUL 9 2022

New Perspectives on Diplomacy: A New Theory and Practice of Diplomacy

Edited by Jack Spence, Claire Yorke and Alastair Masser

I.B. Tauris, 2021

New Perspectives on Diplomacy: Contemporary Diplomacy in Action

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'New Perspectives on Diplomacy: A New Theory and Practice of Diplomacy' (hereafter: *Theory and Practice*) and 'New Perspectives on Diplomacy: Contemporary Diplomacy in Action' (hereafter: *Action*) are two sister volumes on the nature, change and future of international diplomacy published by I.B. Tauris in 2021. Edited by J.E. Spence, Claire Yorke & Alastair Masser, the volumes come out of ongoing research and conversations among staff and alumni of King's College London's Department of War Studies. The overall aim of the books is three-fold. First, to "bridge the divide" between "the abstractions of academia...[and] the everyday challenges and realities of life in a government department" (*Theory and Practice*, p.9). Second, to untangle the place of diplomacy in relation to the world's multiple contemporary crises – e.g., pandemics, economic downturns, war, and the fraying of alliances and agreements (*Theory and Practice*, p.xvii). And third, to do this in the form of a "thought-provoking text for both students and practitioners" (*Action*, p.xi).

A New Theory and Practice of Diplomacy

True to its name, the *Theory and Practice* volume starts with an introduction on 'The changing theory and practice of diplomacy'. It essentially argues that scholars need to "widen the aperture of focus" (p.12) with which they look at the ever-changing field of professional diplomacy. It is followed by nine substantial chapters, an autobiographic report by former British Ambassador Nigel Thorpe on 'Life as a diplomat', and a conclusion. At the outset, Spence, Yorke and Masser outline a number of questions for their contributors to consider that could each be the subject of separate books, including: "What do recent shifts in world order mean for how diplomacy is practiced? How does technology and communication change the nature of interactions? How should academics study diplomacy?" and, interestingly and too often still marginalised in academic texts, "Looking to inspire new generations to study a topic [diplomacy] that is so important to all of us, what do universities need to teach" (p.2). I return to the latter two questions below.

Some of the nine substantial chapters introduce a particular concept as a lens to (re)consider diplomacy, such as ethics (ch. 1), identity (ch. 4) or empathy (ch. 6). Others focus on the relationship between diplomacy and other (sub)fields of international relations, including intelligence (ch. 3), conflict resolution (ch. 9) or small-state politics (ch. 8). While all are read-worthy, Mervyn Frost's chapter on diplomatic practice and the ethical world order (ch. 1), Pablo de Orellana's chapter on the power of describing identity in diplomatic texts (ch. 4), and Barbara Zanchetta's chapter on diplomatic summitry (ch. 5) stand out.

First, Frost's chapter, perhaps also because it appears as the volume's first, is interesting for the theoretical tone it tries to set for the rest of the book. This tone is dominated by the so-called 'practice turn' in International Relations and diplomatic studies. Reading the volume with this in mind, two things stand out. The first is that the editors write in

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the conclusion that this theoretical focus has been “unintentional” (p.228) and more driven by the apparent natural alignment of practice theory and diplomacy (on this see also Pouliot and Cornut 2015) than by their editorial advice. Second, and even more surprising, is that Frost’s version of this turn, which emphasizes practices as structures of meaning (p.19-20 and, extensively, Lechner and Frost 2018) is *not* the one adopted by most of the chapters that follow (e.g., Belanger, p.39; Yorke, p.133; Kurtz, p.142). Rather than following Frost’s definition, the other authors side with the more canonical version in IR of “practice as competence performance” developed by Adler and Pouliot (2011) and others. Sadly, this (mis?)match is not discussed by the editors (or any of the authors), which would have lifted the volume to another level of theoretical nuance.

De Orellana’s chapter, moreover, stands out as a detailed and grounded study of how identity and diplomacy relate. He develops a model for studying this relationship that could be easily used or replicated by, indeed, both students and practitioners of diplomacy. The latter may – if in other words – ask themselves: what is the ‘discursive architecture’ of the policies we design, or what are ‘the nuances we collapse’ (p.93) in our everyday ways of talking? This way, they could come to important insights about how their language structures their doing.

Thirdly, Zanchetta’s chapter on diplomatic summitry tells us many insightful things that lie at the core of diplomatic practice. This includes the origin of calling a summit a summit (find out on p.103-104), and a neat discussion of when and how summits can trigger meaningful foreign policy change (e.g., the US-China relations following the 1972 Beijing summit) or not (e.g., US-Soviet relations following the 1972 Moscow summit).

Contemporary Diplomacy in Action

The second volume, *Contemporary Diplomacy in Action*, builds on the former, is less theoretically driven, and considers a range of large-scale themes in relation to diplomatic practice, including globalisation (ch. 1), grand strategy (ch. 3), social media (ch. 4), the environment (ch. 5), how diplomacy is perceived by domestic populations (ch. 6), social movements and trust (ch. 8), and emotions (ch. 9). Like *Theory and Practice*, *Action* is rounded-off by a chapter written by a practitioner, former US Ambassador Bonnie Jenkins, who discusses issues of limited diversity in the American diplomatic corps. In particular, Jenkins stresses how the underrepresentation of women, LGBTQ, and racial minorities distorts the ‘face of the nation’ in favour of those who have historically been privileged in the United States (p.209-217). Hers is a powerful intervention and should be read alongside Ambassador Thorpe’s reflections in *Theory and Practice*, who seems to have experienced some of the dynamics that Jenkins writes up against, e.g., a diplomatic “recruitment process that took an applicant to a country house for a weekend and studied his (he would have been male) behaviour” (p.216).

Action, too, hosts a number of strong chapters. These include Thomas Colley’s original study of how diplomatic work is perceived by ‘ordinary people’ – in his case, British citizens thinking about the overextension of the British diplomatic ego in the case of the EU-Brexit negotiations (ch. 6) – and Francesca Granelli’s interesting chapter on social movements, diplomacy and relationships of trust (ch. 8).

By far the most outstanding chapter in this volume – and perhaps both sister books altogether – is Harris Kuemmerle’s chapter on ‘Defining environmental interests’ (ch. 5). A truly remarkable text, Kuemmerle uses the first two pages of his chapter to tell us that “one would have to spend a very long time trying to come up with even a single contemporary global concern that does not have at least one central environmental, climatic, geographic, resource, pollution, or energy aspect” (p.99). I agree – one would have to spend a very long time indeed. Kuemmerle then builds an elegant argument around environmental diplomacy as being driven by ‘environmental identity’ and ‘political will’, which is written in such an accessible, yet determined, style that one cannot but nod along with his text. His arguments about how environmental interests are formed and, indeed, what diplomats and policy makers come to think of as the environment itself are translatable into other areas of diplomatic practice. Similar chapters could be written, for example, about ‘Defining security interests’ in the current debate about the enlargement of NATO, or about ‘Defining digital interests’ in ongoing struggles between supranational regulators and global tech companies in the EU.

How should academics study diplomacy and what should we teach about it?

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Much more could be said about the individual chapters as well as volumes both individually and together, but I want to return to two of the editors' opening questions: *how should academics study diplomacy* and *what should we teach about it?*

Firstly, the volumes need to be commended for their indiscriminatory use of multiple methods to study diplomacy. Their analyses range from discourse analysis to social media mapping, ethical meta-discussions, document analyses and the study of particular diplomatic interactions, such as summits, meetings in intelligence headquarters, gatherings around "mountains of Ferrero Rochers" (Theory and Practice, p.213), and even a trip to the "Drunken Clam", the local town's pub in the American cartoon series Family Guy (p.132). This methodological eclecticism shows, indeed, that diplomacy happens in many places and underlines the usefulness of the diplomatic studies scholar "widening the aperture" (Theory and Practice, p.12) in where they look.

None of the chapters explicitly looks, however, at how the hierarchies, orders, powers, and dynamics discussed in relation to the substantial doing of diplomacy have shaped or are shaping the academic study of diplomacy itself. With Jenkins, we too must ask: are we – diplomatic studies scholars – diverse enough? Who sits in our governing bodies, convenes our big conferences (e.g., is it King's College? or any other prestigious, powerful institution in the developed, rich and anglophone 'west'?), or publishes books about diplomacy (English-language publishers based in London, New York, and Dublin)? This does not have to be a meta-discussion: We can ask how we, as diplomatic studies scholars, (re)make the 'practical' world of diplomacy through the issues and questions we focus on. If, as Frost states, there is a certain symmetry between diplomatic practice and the academic practice of writing about diplomacy (intentionally or otherwise), what are our ethical responsibilities? As Yorke asks, what are the empathies that we need to extend? And like Kuemmerle, what are the issues we need to define to pursue our interests? And for de Orellana, what are the collapsed nuances that we need to be aware of? If we want to push our understandings of the *Theory, Practice* and *Action* of contemporary diplomacy, to make it more inclusive, more diverse, and more representative of the world we live in, we may thus not only need a 'widened aperture' but also a mirror.

Second, *how should we teach diplomacy?* While not a direct concern in any of the chapters or editorial comments, *Theory and Practice* and *Action* offer a wealth of teaching resources, in particular through the many ways in which different chapters of the books could be assigned and taught together. In addition to discussing the two practitioner statements side-by-side, de Orellana's chapter on writing identity could be paired with Kuemmerle's chapter on the definition of issues and their relation to diplomatic interests for a class on diplomacy and identity. Similarly, de Orellana's framework could be taught alongside Colley's study of domestic interpretations of diplomacy for a class on how identities transpire political boundaries and open – and close – spaces for future action.

Finally, I want to draw attention to two parts of the books that many readers will skip over: the list of contributors at the beginning and the selected bibliographies in the end. The first tells us about (some of) the voices who write about diplomacy today. In the short bios, there is a lot of information about what diplomatic studies scholars do, where they come from, and how their thinking has been shaped. These short texts can be read as diplomatic artefacts, too, as individual careers made possible by a world of cross-border movement, community building and collaboration. These characteristics are central to diplomacy, but they are also cornerstones of the academic world. Second, and finally, the selected bibliographies. Anyone starting out in the study of diplomacy (a student, perhaps) or wanting to get an overview of the academic literature (a practitioner of diplomacy, perhaps) can turn to these pages. Should one, after completing the 20+ chapters in these volumes still long for more insights on diplomacy, it is a good idea to follow the path laid out there.

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Kristin Anabel Eggeling is a postdoc at the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Her research interests are in diplomacy, international practices, digitalisation, and ethnographic methods in IR. Kristin has written about cultural diplomacy and practices of nation branding, as well as about how diplomatic practice is performed in 'synthetic situations', the study of diplomacy through practice theory, how digital diplomatic artefacts can be interpretively studied, and, most recently, the doing of remote ethnographic work on diplomacy during the pandemic. Kristin can be contacted at: kristin.eggeling@ifs.ku.dk and on Twitter @KEggeling.