

The ICD Annual Academic Conference on Cultural Diplomacy 2011: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations; New Actors; New Initiatives; New Targets (Berlin, December 15th- 18th, 2011)

## Understanding the Essence of Modern Diplomacy

Didzis Klavins<sup>1</sup>  
(University of Latvia)

Since the end of the Cold War, a growing number of researchers have paid attention to diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> However, in comparison with related fields, the concept of diplomacy has not been studied profoundly. As Paul Sharp points out, “the study of diplomacy remains marginal to and almost disconnected from the rest of the field”.<sup>3</sup> Barry H. Steiner makes an even harsher statement, arguing that, “no area of world politics has reflected a greater gap between experience and theory than diplomatic statecraft”.<sup>4</sup> Although scholars continue to break a lance on diplomacy and the diplomat’s role in the future, few authors can afford to dispute the fact that diplomacy nowadays has become amorphous. Above all, there are more questions than answers. That is why the aim of this paper is to understand the essence of modern diplomacy and the features of its modifications in the 21st century.

---

<sup>1</sup> Didzis Klavins is a Ph.D. student in Political Science at the University of Latvia. He holds the Europaeum’s M.A. in European History and Civilisation (with distinction) jointly offered by Leiden University, Université Paris I – Panthéon-Sorbonne and the University of Oxford. The title of his thesis: “From Empire to Europe: Sir Harold Nicolson and Anti-Appeasement, 1930–1940”. Didzis also holds a M.A. (with distinction) and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Latvia. He has also studied at Uppsala University, University of Oslo and University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. For several years Didzis has worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. Currently, he is a board member of Baltic to Black Sea Alliance (BBSA) and research fellow at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LIIA).

<sup>2</sup> Since the end of the 20th century the interest for researching the role of diplomacy has grown. During the last ten years several interesting works have been published. For example, Jönsson, C., Langhorne, R. (eds), *Diplomacy*. Volume III. Problems and Issues in Contemporary Diplomacy. London: Sage Publications, 2004.; Ross, C. *Independent Diplomat: Dispatches from an Unaccountable Elite*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2007.; Barston, R.P. *Modern Diplomacy*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2006.; Riordan, S. *The New Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.; Hocking, B., Spence, D. (eds.), *Foreign Ministries in the European Union: integrating diplomats*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002; Bátorá, J. *Does the European Union Transform the Institution of Diplomacy?* Discussion Papers in Diplomacy. Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’. 2003. Pp. 1-25.; Freeman, C.W. *Arts of Power: Statecraft and Diplomacy*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007.; Jönsson, C., Hall, M. *Essence of Diplomacy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2005.; Berridge, G.R. *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.; Sharp, P. *Diplomatic theory of international relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Sharp, P. „For Diplomacy: Representation and the Study of International Relations”, *International Studies Review*, 1/1 (1999), Pp. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Steiner, B.H. „Diplomacy and International Theory”, *Review of International Studies*, 30/4 (2004), P. 493.

The collapse of the USSR was the end of the bipolar division of the world that characterized the Cold War years. Changes of international agendas were determined by growing hopes for benefits of diplomacy.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for example, the end of the Gulf War in 1991 not only illustrated successful cooperation mechanisms among the US-led coalition forces of regaining Kuwait from Iraq, but it also symbolized the hope of using this model in the future. But during ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia most hopes died. The international community was not able to effectively prevent the humanitarian crisis and restore peace. Preventive diplomacy failed due to the international organizations dependence “on external constraints, including interests of their leading members”. Moreover, as Raimo Väyrynen admits, “their division of labour was too primitive to permit an early and effective action”.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of the Cold War, international agendas changed considerably - changing with them the character of diplomacy. As Brian White says, diplomacy has

---

<sup>5</sup> For a better understanding of diplomacy’s transformation in the 21st century it is necessary to give a short description of this term. Linguistically the word “diplomacy” comes from Greek word “diplōma” („diplo” literary means „placed in two” and the suffix „ma” means „object”). In Ancient Rome diplomacy meant a certificate carved on copper plates. These certificates were used as official travelling documents. And in the 18th century the French word “diplomate” was used for somebody who is authorized to lead conversations on behalf of the state. Before 1796 diplomacy was commonly known as ‘negotiation’ or, as Cardinal Richelieu used to describe, *négociation continuelle*. The English word “diplomacy” was introduced in 1796 by Edmund Burke; it was based on the French word “diplomate”. From a state-centric view of international relations, diplomacy is connected with developing and implementing foreign policy as well as giving advice. Such a definition of diplomacy corresponds with Geoffrey R. Berridge’s position that diplomacy is an important way to develop foreign policy. But one of the most popular definitions of diplomacy belongs to English diplomat Sir Harold George Nicolson, who ostensibly always followed the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of diplomacy - ‘the management of international relations by negotiation; the method by which these relations are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys; the business or art of the diplomatist’. However, in modern times this definition does not include all processes of diplomacy. That is why we need wider definition. Thus I offer the following definition – diplomacy as the process of communication between countries and other international actors. Also it is necessary to structure the term of diplomacy in accordance with features of the 21st century. The concept of diplomacy in the public sphere is quite often used as a synonym to foreign policy which, in fact, is not correct. If modern foreign policy is characterized by the objective actions of a country in the international system for the welfare of society and usage of external conditions of security and influence on international system itself, then diplomacy is one of the tools of foreign policy. One of the most adequate ways of understanding the meaning of diplomacy nowadays is its division into two perceptions. The first is the narrow meaning of diplomacy, the second – the wide one. Talking about the narrow meaning of diplomacy, it is important to mention that it is based on traditional interpretations of diplomacy as the tool of foreign policy. In this case we talk about foreign affairs as government institutions. But if we take into consideration that 21st century diplomats work in other government organizations as well as that there are different actors in the international system we have to use a wider definition of diplomacy that offers a more exposed interpretation. In this case, diplomacy is usually closer to international communication and dialogs.

<sup>6</sup> Väyrynen, R. „Preventive Action: Failure in Yugoslavia”, *International Peacekeeping*, 3/4 (1996), P. 21.

become more global, complicated and fragmentary.<sup>7</sup> Thus, changes in diplomacy are especially visible by the involvement of many new actors in the area of international cooperation. A fast developing international system opened doors to many new actors, including international organizations, transnational corporations, and important interest groups. Diplomacy that, from the middle of the 15th century, was known as an important tool of foreign policy became wider in the post-Cold War era. In fact, the transformation of diplomacy has not been completed yet. Nowadays, for instance, governmental diplomacy must deal with various non-state actors that shape its agenda. As Giandomenico Picco points out, “diplomacy, one of the last monopolies of a government, is now accessible to and performed by NGOs as well as individuals who have one main characteristic: credibility”.<sup>8</sup> At the same time it would be a big mistake to consider that the role of governmental diplomacy has declined. “Although the entry of these new players has ended the effective monopoly diplomats once enjoyed over international relations, governmental diplomacy continues to have an important role”.<sup>9</sup>

The role of the State has changed in response to the rapidly changing international environment and the involvement of new actors. The result, of course, is that diplomacy has changed with it. Multilateral processes connected to security, economic, social, technological and other changes influence the essence of modern diplomacy. One of the authors who has been able to elegantly express the subject of change is Richard Langhorne. According to him, “the current sense of flux in diplomacy which is evident both on the ground and in studies of the subject is primarily due to the conjunction of major growth in the diplomacy of states at a time when the role of states is changing and this change is leaving space for the emergence of new and untrained users of diplomacy, users who sometimes do not acknowledge that either need or in practice actually employ diplomacy at all”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is true that modern diplomacy has become a transnational process of social relationship realized by an enlarged diplomatic community.

Diplomacy is facing new challenges, including an expanded foreign policy agenda, changing social demands, and the rapid growth of domestic agencies

---

<sup>7</sup> White, B. „Diplomacy” in Baylis, J., Smith, S. (ed), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. P. 393.

<sup>8</sup> Picco, A. „A New International System?”, *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, 4/2 (2005), P. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Riordan, S. *The New Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003. P. 130.

<sup>10</sup> Langhorne, R. „On Diplomacy”, *Political Studies Review*, 6/1 (2008), P. 55.

operating abroad. One feature of the 21st century that is changing the character of diplomacy is the use of advanced information technologies in modern communication. Nowadays, operativeness of information's circulation and its accessibility changes the dynamics of diplomatic work requiring faster reactions and other principles of information selection. Moreover, the 21st century agenda requires experts in various fields: energy issues, environment, finance, economics, human rights, health issues, information and communication technology, organized crime, security issues and terrorism. Diplomacy's transformation in the 21st century has been characterized by fast growing cooperation and coordination between institutions in solving different questions. In the context of the EU, for instance, it is the question of the development of the European External Action Service (EEAS) which would be capable to ensure effective and efficient delivery of policies.

Many of the above mentioned features of diplomacy correspond with the typologies of Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham. Describing the changes of diplomacy in the 21st century, these authors pay attention to transformation in the mechanism of diplomacy and diplomats. The authors, for instance, point out the following changes: expanded diplomatic dialogue; changes in emphasizes – more attention for multilateral diplomacy; a large number of involved experts and specialists; the growing importance of mass media, international community and non-governmental actors.<sup>11</sup> In fact, diplomacy, similar to security, does not exist in a vacuum. It is influenced by a continual process of change. As the world changes so too does diplomacy. Therefore, as Brian Hocking writes, “diplomacy is responding, as it has in the past, to change in the character of both state and society”.<sup>12</sup>

Nowadays, diplomatic services, in the way of state administration offices and branches, are subject to change. Considering the rapid development of events in the circumstances of globalization, as well as the fact that international relations include many new important actors, traditional diplomacy can not handle a vast array of new issues. For example, the environment, population, terrorism, transnational crime, drugs, and sustainable development would overrun the old order. Thus, effective foreign affairs institutions are essential, not only for improvement of economical and

---

<sup>11</sup> Evans, G., Newnham, J. *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*. London: Penguin Books, 1998. P. 130.

<sup>12</sup> Hocking, B. „The End(s) of Diplomacy”, *International Journal*, 53/1 (1997/1998), P. 170.

social welfare, but also for providing security.<sup>13</sup> Foreign affairs institutions that were serving as the core of diplomacy during many centuries have to make a decision. If they will stay with previous methods and structure of work their actions probably will become not only sluggish but also unclear.

Despite the growing importance of non-state actors, countries still can change and make international agendas as global actors – thus directly or obliquely influencing the stability of security. That is why it would be wrong to say that the role of the country has lessened due to growing importance of non-state actors or that the role of governmental diplomacy has declined.

It is important to mention governmental diplomacy's capacity to react adequately to non-traditional threats, risks and vulnerabilities. For example, foreign affairs institutions, considering actual regional and international questions, must urgently develop a proactive role, re-modelling traditional methods and adjusting them to new conditions. Foreign ministries and diplomats need to reinvent themselves – and to strengthen security in all levels of analysis. These global issues have not traditionally been in their purview. They should be.

In the future, we expect the discussion of whether diplomats need to be on top of the substance, not simply relying on the experts, and applying their creative genius and negotiating skills to responding to security issues, to continue. The environment is changing in other ways, however, beyond the impact of technology and the new agenda. Of course, the most important question is how to keep pace with this reality. One method for all countries does not exist. However, the main idea is to promote a faster transition to the new, or modern, form of diplomacy. First of all, foreign affairs institutions must try to adjust to new trans-institutional cooperation and nets of coordination (on the national/super-national level). This especially concerns the adoption of advanced information technologies. Secondly, foreign affairs institutions should delegate a part of their functions to other stakeholders which are able to contribute constructively to the formulation and implementation of security policy (e.g. branch ministries). Anyway, this does not mean that the importance of foreign affairs institutions will lessen. Thirdly, we should provide (a part of countries provide already) new specialists in foreign affairs institutions, changing the balance between specialists and generalists. For example, diplomats are more often taking part in anti-

---

<sup>13</sup> Riordan, S. „Reforming Foreign Services for the Twenty-First Century”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 2/2 (2007), P. 161.

terrorist policies. Diplomats-generalists of foreign affairs offices are usually unprepared for such assignments. Maybe this is the reason for points of view such as ‘foreign ministries and diplomatic services are not as useful as once they were.’<sup>14</sup>

Although the diplomatic mission, which is a participation in the country's foreign policy formulation and implementation, remains unchanged, diplomatic functions have become more diverse. In addition to the usual features (for example, compiling and evaluating available information, communication, negotiations and dispute resolutions, participation in multilateral institutions, economic development), a diplomat must also be a kind of entrepreneur, manager and coordinator. In short, there is clear orientation and adaptation to diplomacy which could be described as “the model of coordinated synergy”. One could highlight the following components of this model:

- The delegation of functions of share representation to other actors;
- Movement to redefinition of the balance between generalists and specialists;
- Active cooperation between businesspeople and diplomats;
- The growing role of specialists in fields such as business, power industry and IT;
- The global information environment is defining the work of the foreign office;
- The ways of communication have been diversified;
- Development of innovative information technologies;
- Fast exchange of information minimizes the importance of previously planned policy;
- The focus on immediate solutions, growing importance of multilateral cooperation formats.

This term should be understood from the point of view of a narrower definition of diplomacy to a wider one. Talking about requirement and changes in the actions of foreign affairs machineries, it is important to mention Shaun Riordan’s statement: ‘The economic and social, as well as physical, security and welfare of a country and its citizens depends on its ability to navigate the interconnected and interdependent geostrategic challenges of the new millennium. This requires, as a

---

<sup>14</sup> Langhorne, R. „Full Circle: New Principals and Old Consequences in the Modern Diplomatic System”, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 11/1 (2000), Pp. 33-46.

minimum, a modern and effective foreign service within equally effective foreign policy machinery”.

Summarizing, we can say that the transformation of diplomacy happens at high-speed. If we take three basic features of diplomacy as the starting point (representation, negotiations and exchange of information) we see major changes. Twenty years ago, the essence of diplomacy was described with the following components: state-centric environment; dominant formats of mutual cooperation between countries; ministry of foreign affairs as the exclusive institution for foreign policy implementation; exclusiveness of diplomatic institution in representing important governmental issues; controlling of local-international events; communication by traditional ways of information exchange and presence of generalists during dialogs. However, we now see the following changes: ministry of foreign affairs has delegated some functions to other actors; the role of non-governmental actors has increased; multilateral cooperation formats become more important; the structure and functions of diplomatic institutions are redefined; the balance between generalists and specialists is redefined; the influence of information on agendas of foreign affairs is growing; global information environment is defining the work of foreign office; the ways of communication are diversified; innovative information technologies are introduced; fast exchange of information minimizes the importance of previously planned policy, fast decisions are emphasized; experts' role in negotiations becomes more important. Considering the aforementioned discussion, I want to even argue that the role of diplomacy will be even more important in the future than it has been during the last twenty years. As Paul Sharp has recently written on the role of diplomacy and diplomats, ‘the demand for both is currently on the rise’.<sup>15</sup>



*This work has been supported by the European Social Fund within the project «Support for Doctoral Studies at University of Latvia».*

---

<sup>15</sup> Sharp, P. *Diplomatic theory of international relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, Pp. 1-2.