

Diplomacy after the Procedure

Why Foreign Policy Will Require Figures
of a Special Kind

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*Diplomacy is the art of negotiating to prevent or resolve conflicts,
find compromises and mutually acceptable solutions,
and expand and deepen international cooperation.*

Great Russian Encyclopedia

*Diplomacy is the established method of influencing the decisions
and behavior of foreign governments and peoples through
dialogue, negotiation, and other measures short of war or
violence.*

Britannica

What is the role of diplomacy in the crucial moments of international politics? As a rule, diplomacy gives way to the individual ability of leaders to objectively assess the balance of power and make decisions on the basis of such assessments. Filled with nostalgia, we look at the 19th century or the second half of the Cold War era as the triumph of diplomatic art. But this was nothing more than the result of the greatest stability ever in relations between the key powers, which rested on the order recognized by all. But the foundation of this order began to crumble due to the evolution of its constituent living organisms—states, and then even the most advanced diplomatic skills faced insurmountable difficulties.

Recognition of this fact does not mean that diplomacy—the art of smoothing out contradictions that inevitably arise when societal organizations contact each other—loses its significance. But, like any bureaucratic activity, it needs clear and generally recognized rules and procedures. It retreats into the shadows, yielding the leading role to politics, when the rules cease to work and procedures are swept away by the necessity dictated by national interest.

Each new round of history changes the circumstances under which classic diplomacy becomes unnecessary, and national leaders, on the contrary, have to live up to the highest expectations. Those who made decisions on the international order in Vienna, Versailles or Yalta acted in a situation where the balance of power between the main actors varied and they themselves had different positions in respect to the rest of humanity. It is the ability of leaders to assess the extent of permissible injustice with regard to everyone's claims that creates an order which is accepted by all states of significance. Further work is handed over to diplomats. Once key issues are resolved, the heads of state go back to internal problems of paramount importance to them.

However, one most important condition remained unchanged at all times. Leaders had the opportunity to test the balance of power empirically. A new order emerged when the revolutionary situation in international relations was resolved, and the winners started to shape up the coming peace. There is no such opportunity now. The enormous stockpiles of nuclear weapons built up by the United States, Russia,

and, most likely, China limit their actions since military resolution of contradictions cannot serve as a basis for a new order. Full development of a revolutionary relationship between states that are crucial for global stability is unthinkable. And we do not know how long diplomats will have to wait before they can come onto the stage of international politics.

The creation of a system ensuring formal equality of states was an attempt to free diplomacy from the scheme described above. This evolution began in the 17th century and reached its climax in the second half of the 20th century. Chaotic relations between states were gradually supplemented by procedural elements forming the basis of the Westphalian system that exists somewhat independently of the changing international orders. After World War II, it was enshrined in international law codified in the UN Charter. As a result, diplomacy has acquired a new function to manage constant interaction between states.

The international governance system is going through a period of trial. The reason is the significant increase in the number of formally sovereign states, the spread of coercive diplomacy and, finally, the absence of any need for the great powers to take responsibility for dozens of small and medium-sized countries. This reduces the possibilities of diplomacy as an administrative mechanism for managing global affairs. Diplomacy stops enforcing procedures in interstate relations, which just recently seemed to be its most important function. At the top level, it is blocked by the inability of leaders to find common solutions, and at the practical level, it is obstructed by abortive attempts to control the world through generally accepted procedures. Ideally, the latter should compensate for the inability of great powers to create a sustainable international order.

Under such circumstances, diplomacy loses a significant, if not the major, part of its general purpose, and observers focus on external effects to make foreign policy activities as impressive and emotional as possible. Moreover, ordinary people, spoiled by the ostentatiously democratic character of foreign policy, expect to see nothing more than superficial and comic manifestations of fundamental problems. In fact, ICT achievements provide unprecedented technical possibilities for that.

All this does not bode well for international politics and diplomacy. Thinking that nuclear deterrence may disappear in the foreseeable future would be just as naive as believing in the ability of several great powers to subjugate the rest of the world. But this will not stop the march of history, and the next generations of diplomats will have to solve tasks that will by far exceed all the previous ones in complexity and diversity.

HIGH DIPLOMACY LIMITATIONS

Diplomacy in the classical sense has always been the privilege of powerful states, comparable in strength. It was the art of managing contradictions that were inevitably generated by the pursuit of basic interests and values. At the top level, decisions are made by state leaders. At the executive level, there are diplomats whose task is to implement the decisions made by those who are responsible for the survival of their peoples.

But such solutions are not always possible. In his classic work *The Congress of Vienna: A Reappraisal*, a patriarch of international relations, Henry Kissinger, points that “the effectiveness of diplomacy depends on elements transcending it.” It does not work when an important power pursues a revolutionary policy, considering the existing international order unfair for its basic interests and values. At this point, the internal motives of the state make it impossible for it to reconcile itself with the existing order, even if a rational assessment of the balance of power suggests tragic consequences.

For three hundred years, such situations have repeatedly and invariably led to large-scale armed conflicts in Europe and the world. The sincerity of a revolutionary power’s motives creates an insurmountable obstacle to a peaceful solution. Diplomacy becomes pointless and silent, and guns begin to speak. What is truly dramatic is that order as such almost never was the cause of revolutionary behavior. France’s actions against the rest of Europe at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries were solely internal in nature. Germany’s dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, which led to the world war of 1914-1918, was largely caused by the growth of

its own power as a result of dynamic internal development. Over the past two hundred years, only the actions of Germany and Japan before World War II were precipitated by the fact that the international order established after the Great War was inherently unfair to them.

A distinctive feature of the modern revolutionary situation is that all significant global players except the United States are dissatisfied with their position. Russia considers the international order established after the Cold War blatantly despotic, and its actions appear to be most revolutionary. China is following the same path, getting less and less reserved in expressing its discontent. China's actions are induced by its internal development, not by external pressure, as in the case of Russia, and therefore represent a fundamental challenge to other states. Less powerful countries, primarily India, are also unhappy about the privileges gained by the Americans and their allies, but do not have the potential to realize their aspirations. Even the leading countries of continental Europe, such as Germany and France, become increasingly dissatisfied with their own situation, but, like India, have limited resources to change it.

In a situation where a total war cannot be a means of changing the existing order, major powers seek to ensure that the pent-up dissatisfaction does not lead to tragic consequences. In modern international politics, both revolutionary forces and the status quo countries for the first time in history are not ready for offensive action, thus illustrating George Orwell's idea of "a peace that is no peace" from his 1945 essay *You and the Atomic Bomb*. Mutual assured destruction keeps the great nuclear-weapon powers, and all others for that matter, in a situation where classic diplomacy cannot work, and distortions in the balance of power cannot be eliminated even theoretically. Leaders are strategically helpless and have to reduce their actions (both tactical and strategic) to maneuvers and decisions that matter only at the time of their adoption.

What we see in relations between Russia and the West is not the construction of a new order. It is a correction of contradictions, painful for all, but unavoidably short-term. In a strategic deadlock, only tactical maneuvering makes sense since it is necessary to consolidate resources

for a possible collision. But it will not happen, because the lethality of nuclear weapons makes such a conflict politically senseless and irrational. Diplomats in the service of their political leaders secure maneuvering paths and oscillate along the line, but do not maintain order, as has been the case over the past several centuries.

Since there is no legitimate universal order and cannot be any, diplomats have stopped speaking the same language. This tool is losing importance in communication between the key powers. It remains only in narrower regional communities such as liberal democracies united within NATO and EU institutions, a special system of relations between Russia and China, the post-Soviet space, and other associations we know little about. When representatives of different communities meet each other, their communication boils down to mutual accusations of lack of goodwill and desire to come to an agreement as borne out quite vividly by the example of Russia and the West. The reason for disagreements is not that someone is being hypocritical. The situation is much more tragic: everyone believes in his own rightness and, in the absence of a universally recognized legitimate order, does not even allow the possibility that his opponent may also be right. The opponent's loss of touch with reality, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has put it, is caused by the total lack, even theoretical, of the ability to speak the same language.

With the advent of nuclear weapons, the set of issues of real importance for the survival of great powers proved to be extremely limited. This created the illusion that almost all other scenarios can be handled at ease. The maintenance of the "nuclear world order" has created a special field of diplomacy (strategic stability) that can oust all others. When it comes to this narrow set of questions, Russian and American diplomats understand each other very well. However, the practice of international communication clearly indicates that this is not enough to maintain a stable peace.

In a "nuclear order," even such issues, fundamental by historical standards, as the expansion of military blocs or the deployment of conventional armed forces may seem insignificant. What was seen as the problems of war and peace until the middle of the 20th century

ceased to be considered significant in the second half of the century. The main task of diplomacy in the nuclear age was to correct the tactical distortions in the balance of power between the key military powers at the top level which at the same time is isolated from real life. The main challenge facing nuclear superpowers is their own internal resilience and potential for development, which is not the best way to improve the ability to hear and be heard. But, as we see now, traditional issues of international politics—geopolitical considerations or the prestige of states—are still in the forefront. Although nuclear issues are potentially most important for the survival of major countries and humankind as a whole, they cannot provide a sustainable basis for a just international order.

This was fully borne out by the end of the Cold War. Maintaining the balance of power and diplomatic dialogue at the strategic level did not prevent an unfair attitude towards the interests of some countries from going far beyond reasonable measure, becoming unbearable. Strategic stability is important, and it is great that diplomats from Russia, the U.S., and China can discuss it on the basis of common categories. But this also turns dialogue into scholasticism, which has hopelessly lost any touch with the daily interests and aspirations of states. It is the same as replacing the discussion of pressing issues, such as health, with a general philosophical debate about life and death.

INTERNATIONAL GOVERNANCE DIPLOMACY

However, the current crisis involves not only the high diplomacy of great powers, but also its continuation and alternative, that is, governance diplomacy created by the Westphalian system genius as if to keep states from savagery, if it is impossible to create a legitimate common order. This raises questions about the prospects and meaning of the enormous array of international diplomacy built up over almost four hundred years of orderly relations. It has absorbed an incredible number of practices and rituals that have little to do with the resolution of current foreign policy tasks facing states, but exist to symbolize the continuity of the organism we call the international system, thanks to the neorealist theory. This phenomenon draws its right to exist

not from the abstract assumption that the world is an interconnected system, but from the rules and procedures, the agreement with which is not publicly disputed by anyone and compliance with which is entrusted to diplomats and institutions.

Each European, and therefore international, order was created by the strongest players in the shadow of not only war, but also a unique system of signs that allows states to recognize each other. This system is commonly called Westphalian, which reflects, however, a conditional reference to a series of agreements between European states, crowned by the peace treaties of 1648. It is generally believed that the brilliance of the Westphalian system is in its procedural nature. In other words, starting from that historic event, states agreed not only on who will control a particular territory, but also on the general principles of interaction.

The subsequent international orders either redistributed territories (the Peace of Utrecht and the Peace Treaty of Versailles) or established additional rules of the game (Vienna and Yalta) on the basis of mutual recognition of legitimacy. The only exception is the international order after the Cold War, the main document of which (the Charter of Paris adopted in 1990) camouflaged the redistribution of territories under the control of great powers with rather laborious rhetoric about the new principles of international interaction. That is why it offers opportunities for justifying virtually opposite approaches to European security—procedural matters were only needed for fancy formalization of the West's territorial acquisitions, and, therefore, procedures could be handled frivolously.

From a historical point of view, it is wrong to deny that the substantive practical role of the Westphalian treaties was no less significant than the procedural one. They determined the balance of power and, therefore, the ownership of land and people—the basic resources the rulers need to keep and increase their power. However, even if procedural matters were not prevalent, their very existence became such a new factor in European practice that they can be considered the most significant legacy of the Westphalian world.

It is no coincidence that the Peace of Westphalia is the only collection of documents of its kind, which were not drafted by

emperors and envoys, but by hundreds of lawyers and bureaucrats representing the negotiating states in Münster and Osnabrück. The balance of military capabilities in peacetime remained outside their attention since no one at that time could even think of the need to negotiate limits on the creation of weapons of mutual destruction. The “arms race” was conducted uncontrollably because other means were needed to protect weak states in their relations with strong ones. Rules provided such means, even though they were broken by all major powers to their advantage.

Westphalian principles were literally forged in the fire of religious wars, when the need to separate values and interests was recognized as the only relatively stable basis for the ability of states to negotiate, and the main attributes of a sovereign power had to be codified at least in general terms because single Christendom had ceased to exist. This made it possible to distinguish relations between states as formally equal units into a separate type of interaction and entrust them to specially appointed representatives.

Thus, the Westphalian order was not a set of rules, but the institutional outcome of interaction within the world of European states by the middle of the last millennium, just as a welfare state was the result of their internal development by the beginning of the 20th century. Its spread to the whole world was probably Europe’s most outstanding achievement. This certainly did not abolish the deeply European nature of this institutional form, even after China had joined it in the 1840s, making this order global. The Westphalian order governed and continues to govern relations between states, and it is no coincidence that it originated simultaneously with modern international law. The possibility to manage the entire range of interactions between sovereign countries has become an outstanding achievement and has gradually filled diplomacy with a new meaning.

Thanks to the Westphalian system, the rules of the game are more important than specific scenarios of relations between specific countries. The central role that the Westphalian order assigns to procedural matters led to the emergence of surrogate diplomacy: an enormous apparatus, the main task of which is international governance

rather than the resolution of objectively arising contradictions between the interests of great powers.

The emergence of a generally accepted system for recognizing a state as sovereign could not become an obstacle for the strongest countries with the most powerful militaries to control international politics for centuries. In the 18th-19th centuries, European empires, including Russia, which had incomparably greater power capabilities than all others, were parties to the legitimate order. It was an era of unity for international governance and diplomacy of the great powers, and high-ranking envoys could negotiate among themselves, representing the policy chartered by their rulers and (after 1870) the president of the French Republic. The rules that we call Westphalian were not codified in international law until the middle of the 20th century, but this was not necessary. Although European empires did not wage big wars between 1815 and 1914, they effectively resorted to the limited use of force where diplomacy was powerless or unnecessary.

The balance of power was a way to maintain universal peace, but as empires built up enormous military capabilities, each new aggravation of relations became more dangerous. The only attempt to work out an agreement on the “hardware” was made by tsarist Russia. Faced with the burden of its own military spending and increasingly lagging behind economically, it proposed to hold a conference in 1898 in order to curb the arms race. With the exception of the subsequent Hague Conventions, this historical period marked the dominance of classic diplomacy—sovereigns and their envoys. The basis for its managerial function already existed, but was not used as European colonial empires remained too confident of themselves. Their superior military capabilities served as a means of coercion, and selfish interests served as the right to use them.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: RISE AND FALL

The European peace ended with two world wars because a system based on the balance of power gives no guarantees against conflicts that cannot be resolved through negotiations. The era of classic diplomacy had come to an end, and countries that did not want to

conduct business in the old way—the United States, Soviet Russia, and then China and India—entered the world stage. Their military capabilities were insufficient at first to simply repeat the European experience. Woodrow Wilson and the Bolsheviks simultaneously renounced “secret diplomacy.” This did not mean that the new powers rejected the primacy of selfish interests in foreign policy. They simply relied on other means of coercion and urged the development of appropriate diplomacy. This spurred demand for the managerial function of diplomacy, which hitherto had lain dormant in the nature of the Westphalian system. Unlike the outgoing European empires, the new powers had limited capabilities to control other nations directly. They found it more appropriate to manipulate less powerful countries through international institutions and rules.

In the second half of the 20th century, there was an avalanche-like increase in the number of sovereign states that flooded international politics with formally independent jurisdictions. Such a multitude could no longer be controlled directly and manually; the strongest powers needed a tool to use instead of force. All this was happening in a unique situation of the second half of the 20th century, the main distinction of which was the desire of the most powerful states to make international politics more or less orderly. Indeed, the horrors of World War II made them think about more humane forms of mutual coercion, and the procedures, dating back to the Westphalian principles, turned out to be most suitable for this purpose.

However, the unattainable military superiority of Russia and the United States over the rest of the world created a special field of diplomacy, in which only a very limited number of states could engage. All other issues were so insignificant that they could be left outside what Moscow and Washington were ready to deal with most seriously. Dependence on allies has disappeared: no help from friends can play a decisive role when it comes to a hypothetical clash of huge nuclear arsenals. As a result, two kinds of diplomacy have emerged: high-level diplomacy and all the rest, the real significance of which is doomed to decline.

Beyond strategic stability dialogue there is a vast field of global governance in a world filled with almost two hundred formally equal

countries and an incredible number of important issues. In terms of the survival of the key states, all this was not really important, because it was not related to the likelihood of a global fatal conflict. (This did not exclude various and intense conflicts outside the Big Two, but they occurred in the “second league.”) After the end of the Cold War, the diplomacy of the “winners” carried the imprint of contempt for other states and their interests. Just like the Soviet Union before, the United States believed that in all matters that did not concern relations between the superpowers, diplomats’ task was not to convince, but to force the opponent to change his point of view, and to secure a solution that matched the American point of view. This approach was adopted in relations between the nuclear superpowers on all issues other than strategic stability. As a result, international governance, which was expected to provide a sustainable alternative to the missing international order, turned into coercive diplomacy.

In this sense, China is an interesting phenomenon. Historically, China does not see other countries as equals, and this has always complicated its efforts to build a diplomatic tradition. However, over decades of weakness this nuclear (super)power has developed habits that are usually typical of medium, if not small, states. But as its power grew, Beijing went back to tributary diplomacy, which presently manifests itself in visits to China by delegations of countries that seek its favorable attitude. Only recently has China engaged in international governance diplomacy in earnest by exerting active influence on numerous institutions. Reliance on more traditional forms of protecting national interests by non-military means helps China avoid confusion caused by the erosion of this system. China actively seeks to dominate many international institutions, but their future is uncertain.

The change in the balance of power at the end of the Cold War came into conflict with international governance based on the principle of universal formal equality. Even if the hegemonic power was ready to hand over a significant part of world affairs to institutions, the manifestation of its own interests inevitably created a situation where the interests of other countries were reflected in the most important

decisions and events merely symbolically. The function of multilateral diplomacy was relegated to finding the least humiliating formula for all to satisfy American demands.

As Russia and China became embroiled in conflict with the United States over the injustice of the international order, its institutions had basically ground to a halt. The procedure cannot work if the strongest states are not interested in it. So when the United States lost the ability to “govern the governance,” it replaced international law with a “rules-based international order,” that is, started resolving issues through transactions with a limited number of partners. Washington cannot dominate simply because everyone agrees with its exclusive rights—there are not enough resources for that. Coercive diplomacy remains the only way for Washington to govern, although it is now limited geographically and functionally. However we can already see its signs in the behavior of the main competitors of the West.

The most dramatic consequence of the past thirty years is the degradation of the Westphalian system’s main function—governance by formally equal states within the framework of a common coordinate system. The procedure becomes unnecessary, and its performance easily turns into a public and theatrical action. This challenge is much more serious than the invented stories about the alleged demise of sovereignty (their only goal was to adapt international politics to the needs of the strongest power and its closest allies).

In its modern form, the procedure is a set of principles and norms of interstate interaction, the highest expression of which is the UN Charter that is based on the experience of international politics in the first half of the 20th century. Even when the agenda of the nuclear superpowers prevailed, the principles and rules could remain in place because the opposing states needed formal restrictions on their behavior in other areas. After the Cold War, the rules could also remain in force, they just needed to be used for the benefit of states dominating in terms of military power. Until 1991, the Soviet Union and the United States carried out governance within their respective camps, and then the United States tried to do this alone, but globally.

Nowadays the possibility and, most importantly, the need for global governance are qualitatively decreasing. This is why rules and norms, the enforcement of which is what governance actually is, become redundant. The abovementioned “rules-based international order” has become central to the West’s rhetoric. Essentially, its purpose is to dismantle permanent and formally recorded general norms so that all nations would follow the preferences (often situational) of a group of culturally homogeneous countries. One of the first and most noticeable consequences of the decline of the Westphalian order as a procedural basis is “second-tier” diplomacy—a direct product of the Westphalian tradition.

After the Westphalian principles and derived rules of formal international law had become universal, diplomats were tasked with monitoring the implementation of the rules, and seeking solutions on the basis of the existing order if the interests of states collided. However, the very existence of this complex system depends on the extent to which states need to manage world affairs. Currently such management is retreating into the shadows as unnecessary. Instead, the need to constantly tune and reconfigure various bilateral relations becomes more urgent not systematically, but on a case-by-case basis when there is a conflict of interest. The importance of the foreign ministries not only in formulating, but also in implementing foreign policy is declining across the world. Ministers, at best, become the most trusted and high-ranking envoys of their political leaders, and at worst, they turn into locum tenants who give small or big trouble to those who really determine foreign policy.

The disappearance of confidentiality is unavoidably associated with the overall decline of diplomacy and limits the return to the classical forms of the European balance of power or the late stage of the Cold War. Since foreign affairs become much less significant for countries than their internal ones (the pandemic has played a role in this, too), they are less and less viewed as an important area of activity with its own rules. This process is spurred by information society achievements and the ability to continuously conduct political activities through social networks and other means of quick communication with public

opinion. This clearly becomes natural for most elected politicians in the West. At the same time, openness, sometimes demonstrative, becomes a global feature.

Another important factor limiting the possibilities of diplomacy in a situation where the emergence of a new international order is impossible is the seeming absence of the risk of a military clash between great powers that may be provoked by procedural flaws. The nuclear-weapon states have created a system among themselves to prevent local conflicts from spiraling into a war that will be hard to survive. Nuclear deterrence substantially solved the problem that was one of the reasons for the rapid escalation that resulted in a large-scale conflict in 1914—diplomacy was lagging behind the political process, which became fatal in the summer of that year. The “guns of August” could have fired several times before that, but diplomats had managed to ward off the war. In July and August 1914, the circumstances did not allow them to prevent a disaster, although, of course, it had objective causes.

Nowadays nuclear issues are practically not connected in any way with other areas of cooperation between Russia, the United States, and increasingly China. This makes it possible to maintain a relatively stable situation even during the most acute political discussions. The military has built a system to prevent uncontrolled escalation and continues to improve it. This is one of the remaining channels of communication between Russia and the West. As a result, diplomacy is no longer needed to prevent war between the great powers as they have learned to do this without it. But calm is probably deceptive, while the tools for resolving interstate political conflicts have been lost in the corridors of international institutions. The latter, in turn, have become irrelevant in the collective management of world affairs. Those who have the power to impose common solutions do not need such governance, the weak cannot govern in principle, no matter how big a team they build, and individual medium states balance, trying to conduct targeted diplomatic dialogue with major powers and talking to the small ones only from a position of strength. So the task of diplomacy is to address specific, albeit constantly arising, bilateral issues in concrete cases, but not through a certain system of interaction.

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The need for diplomats will not disappear. Firstly, this field of activity will remain at the top level because modern rulers need envoys. This is probably one of the most convincing reasons to hope for the return of some elements of classic diplomacy. The erosion of international institutions and multilateral formats will rekindle demand for individuals who can represent their countries' interests in specific matters or in a particular geographical area not only at the top level between nuclear superpowers, but also between them and weaker states. For example, ties between Russia and its neighbors can be improved if the efforts of existing institutions are complemented by the activities of envoys with special and generally recognized powers.

Specific issues important for the great powers, such as the state of affairs in the peripheral zones (the Middle East and its countries, Afghanistan, the Korean Peninsula, etc.), also need to be overseen by qualified envoys. As the number of "problem" countries or areas increases, demand for emergency and targeted diplomacy will increase too. Moreover, in the coming years, the heads of state will most likely be busy ensuring internal stability in their countries, and foreign policy interference will become "surgical" to make progress on a specific issue through interaction with similar professionals from other interested powers.

Finally, states will have to perform an incredible number of procedures inherited from a much more orderly era, and this may take an indefinite time. They may be confidential due to the sensitivity of the issues to be addressed. But for the most part these are not the kind of tasks where the absence of occasional comments in social media is so crucial. Traditional 20th century diplomacy will have a lot of room for work in the years to come, but it will no longer be the main means of protecting foreign policy interests. Rather it will become a public setting, the backdrop for the main processes to be based on entirely different principles.