

Empathy Is the Best Strategy for Diplomacy

On Some Special Features
of Contemporary International Relations

Ivan A. Safranchuk

Ivan A. Safranchuk, PhD in Political Science
MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia
Institute for International Studies
Leading Research Fellow;
National Research University—Higher School of Economic, Moscow, Russia
Department of International Relations
Associate Professor;
Member of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Russia.

SPIN RSCI: 9754-1094
ORCID: 0000-0003-2214-6628
ResearcherID: 0-3257-2017
Scopus AuthorID: 57193867458

E-mail: i.safranchuk@inno.mgimo.ru
Address: Office 4101, 76 Vernadsky Prospect, Moscow, Russia

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-2-54-64

Historically, the fundamental function of diplomacy is to represent one sovereign before another and ensure communication necessary for that. Diplomacy as a practice has rich traditions. Its two most important features—the privilege of being received by the sovereign and personal security—have naturally transformed into the high status of an ambassador. During the Renaissance, diplomatic missions became permanent in Europe. With time this practice spread to the whole world and the legal basis of diplomatic activity expanded (Zonova, 1999, pp. 1-3; Hamilton and

Langhorne, 2011, pp. 37-60). However, diplomacy is not only a practice, but also a function. The key question here is not how international communication occurs, but why, that is, what its purpose is.

General explanatory models, applied to different areas of human activity, answer the “why” question differently. From the idealistic and humanistic standpoint, communication between sovereigns and peoples is a natural wish of civilized actors. Therefore, as civilization developed, international communication expanded. From the economy-centered point of view, the development of trade is a beneficial phenomenon that requires the broadening of external relations and international communication. From the standpoint of rational interest understood the Machiavellian way, external communication gives a sovereign greater opportunities and additional tools. Taken individually and described in historical retrospect, these factors and their combinations bring one to the conclusion that since the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance the need for international communication and related diplomatic practice expanded almost continuously. There were attempts at self-isolation or forced isolation, but all of them ended in a “reunification” with the outside world. Moreover, in the second half of the 20th century, forced disconnection from the international environment began to be perceived as a punishment and turned into a tool—a full-fledged policy of sanctions.

Recognition of the fact that international communication has been constantly expanding for centuries does not fully explain why it is so necessary. So, it would be appropriate to highlight some features of international communication in different historical periods.

DIPLOMACY AND BALANCE OF POWER

In modern times, diplomacy was tightly linked with the questions of war and the balance of power (Zonova, 1999, p. 8; Mallett, 1981). Explaining the title of his fundamental work *Diplomatic History of Europe*, Antonin Debidour admitted the possibility of a broad interpretation of diplomacy understood as all relations that governments can maintain among themselves and all issues on which they wish to reach an agreement through negotiations. However,

he devoted his work to what he considered to be the centerpiece of diplomacy, namely, what promotes or breaks peace and to the relationships that emerge around the balance of power (Debidour, 1891, pp. 1-2).

The absence of a hegemon required constant maneuvering by all countries. Threatening to use force, formalizing the results of its use, creating alliances for building up one's own strength, and disrupting the enemy's attempts to act likewise—all these efforts required communication with other actors. There emerged a dynamic environment where the issues of war and peace were two sides of the same coin. The 19th century can be considered the heyday of such a system of international communication, based on diplomatic missions of various levels and large congresses convened at the turning points in history (Nesmashny, Zhornist, Safranchuk, 2022, pp. 9-10). However, in modern times, along with the practical function of diplomacy, tied to issues of war and the balance of power, there was also a philosophical dream of peace, which resonated with the aspirations of the enlightened part of society (Angell, 1910).

The beginning of World War I made intellectuals think that the balance of power concept and corresponding diplomatic maneuvering had failed. The war was now seen as a very wasteful and extremely inhuman phenomenon. The establishment of an order based on agreements looked as a sound alternative, and diplomacy began to be increasingly associated with such activity. Its perception as an alternative to war grew stronger. Practical steps along these lines had little or no effect in the 1920s and the 1930s, but World War II strengthened the peace-centered diplomatic tradition, or so it seemed at that time. The victorious powers declared their intention to create a world order that would be universal and fair, and also to bear responsibility for it. This is precisely how the unanimity regarding the spirit and letter of the UN Charter can be interpreted.

However, in practice, the world turned towards the Cold War, the beginning of which is generally associated with Winston Churchill's Fulton Speech. Either of the newly established warring camps was an alliance cemented by political, economic, and idiational factors.

Creating and maintaining such alliances and establishing a solid regulatory framework for them, that is, forming their own hegemonic orders, was an important task for the diplomatic services of the United States and the Soviet Union. At the same time, relations between the two camps and their leaders followed the tradition of the balance of power and international maneuvering, but it had two significant limitations.

Firstly, the awareness of the destructive potential of nuclear weapons limited power politics. Needless to say, the balance of power theory was also applied to nuclear weapons and formed the basis for the Soviet Union's and the United States' gradual transition to diplomatic contacts on arms control issues. However, it was not the kind of international maneuvering that is designed to gain an advantage, traditional for the balance of power approach, but contractual recognition of the "nuclear stalemate," that is, the impossibility of a rational nuclear war. In the 1970s and 1980s, the United States made several attempts to get out of the nuclear stalemate with the help of military-technical innovations, but each time the Soviet Union forced it back to square one at a new, higher level of quantitative and qualitative balance of nuclear weapons.

Secondly, the two warring camps in the Cold War were keen to assert the universality of their economic and value-philosophical models. Each of them believed that it was on the side of Truth and History. Therefore, avoiding defeat was rather a tactical objective, but winning was the main goal, and this meant not just the disappearance of the geopolitical rival, but its total ideological debunking. Attempts at détente and peaceful coexistence changed the forms and temporal horizons of rivalry, but not its essence. The determination to achieve universality and eventually total victory, and not just relative gains, temporary recognition of one's opponent as an actor—all this is incompatible with the balance of power doctrine. The latter implies not a final battle between "good" and "evil" (although moral and ethical factors are necessary to mobilize the masses), but endless rivalry for relative advantages in pursuit of rational interests.

The impossibility of a direct victory in the Cold War and the existential rejection of the opposing side prompted the natural choice in favor of destruction from within: trying to find the opponent's weaknesses and putting pressure on its sore spots in various ways, including by supporting the "fifth column" in order to undermine its system. Accordingly, diplomatic communication was needed not only for conducting traditional negotiations with the adversary's leaders, but also for gaining access to its society for propagandistic (in fact, even subversive) purposes.

At the same time, as the rivalry dragged on and had to be conducted in such a way as to prevent uncontrolled escalation, the sides agreed to develop international law and the system of UN institutions and form not only hegemonic orders for the like-minded, but also a kind of global order.

DIPLOMACY DETACHED FROM NATIONAL INTEREST

The end of the Cold War produced such a high degree of material and ideological dominance of the United States that for some time it seemed that the whole world had really become *Pax Americana*. This factor distorted the idea of rational international communication and its goals and objectives. In the U.S., many began to think that traditional foreign policy was no longer relevant and a system of relations with the United States was all that everybody needed. By the early 2000s this delusion had vanished (Kissinger, 2002). However, the strongest trend towards globalization had a far greater and lasting impact on the ideas of international communication at the end of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st centuries.

The phenomenon that by the end of the last century—after several decades of discussions about the growing interdependence of the world and its new (or not quite new) quality—began to be called globalization, can be considered in a wider context as a convergence of two interrelated processes that continued over the previous two or three centuries. Namely, an increase in the physical interconnectedness of the world, that is, material globalization, and its growing ideational integrity, that is, ideological homogeneity

and universalization. These processes were not linear: there often happened events that divided peoples, disrupted their physical ties, and antagonized them ideologically. But in the long term, all most significant political, economic and social upheavals, be it the consequences of colonialism or of big wars, contributed to the emergence of a common global economic and political system and increased the interconnectedness of the world (Chanda, 2008). By the beginning of the 21st century, this long historical trend had gained an incredible momentum.

There emerged, among other things, a rich and complex international environment, and communication with it became the most important task for each individual state, even for such a strong country as the United States. Liberal intellectuals believed that over time the influence of the global environment would outweigh American power, and in the future the United States would have to join it on an equal footing with everybody else, delegating power to international institutions (Nye, 2003).

In the ideal model of a globalized world there supposedly would be no room for traditional international communication. In such an extreme form as a “flat world” (Friedman, 2007) the system would cease to be an external environment for individual actors but would turn into a global network where everyone is connected to everyone by many horizontal links, with the hierarchical structures losing all relevance. There would be nothing external anymore—no actors and no environment, all becoming parts of one whole. Naturally, far from everyone believed that such an ideal form would ever be possible, but recognition of the global system’s expansion and its significant influence on each individual state prevailed. So, the exceptional importance of relations with the external environment was deemed immanent.

The work of diplomats as communication professionals was reconfigured. Priority was attached to participation in building a regulatory and institutional framework for the international environment (Neumann, 2008; Jönsson, 2008), and to the establishment of relations with it in such a way as to obtain the

maximum practical benefits. This could be understood as a relationship between universality and particularity (Jönsson and Hall, 2005, pp. 33-34).

At the same time, diplomats ever more often found themselves in the same company with representatives of the transnational businesses and the non-governmental sector, whose interests, even if they retained priority connections with some jurisdictions, were not determined by the national considerations of individual states. This produced the widespread thesis that the world was witnessing an erosion of the borderline between “external” and “internal” affairs (Putnam, 1988). This was true in the sense that, as mentioned above, the dependence on the external environment grew and international communication professionals were breaking away from the national interests of their states to drift closer to the “global world” than to their own peoples and domestic politics.

Such a bias in favor of the external environment and the global agenda triggered a backlash. In the 1990s and early 2000s, it manifested itself in the developing countries, where it was mainly used by the left and ultimately had little effect. However, in the developed countries ordinary citizens grew increasingly critical of their globalized elites, who were no longer quite national. At first, this protest was exploited by right-wing populists, but gradually it penetrated the political mainstream. Security and economic development agendas began to be nationalized (Popov and Sundaram, 2017; Safranchuk and Lukyanov, 2021b, pp. 15-18). Elected politicians increasingly adjusted their countries’ foreign relations to “domestic” interests, both national and electoral. Apparently, international communication professionals were required not only to prioritize the national interests formulated by the elite, but also to pursue them in a way that would be consonant with public sentiment at home, so that the country’s foreign policy would be an asset in elections and not a liability of elected politicians. International communication was reconfigured. The connection between the “external” and the “internal” remained, but its qualitative parameters had changed. Whereas at the previous stage, when the emphasis

was on globalization, the task was to maximize participation in the “external” domain, to influence it, and to derive the greatest possible benefits from it, now it was more important to make foreign policy a natural extension of domestic affairs.

What we are witnessing today is rather a reaction to the excesses of the previous decades. In the future, international communication will be determined not only by this, but also by some unique traits of the modern structural realities in which the states will have to act.

WITH NO ORDER FOR A LONG TIME

In material terms, the world remains global, even despite its certain fragmentation in the last decade. But the desire for idiational homogeneity and a common value space has been completely lost. The process of universalization has come to a stop. A materially global but idiotically non-universal—and moving towards further heterogeneity—world is the modern reality that contains an immanent contradiction. For the existing level of material globality, the world is too diverse, while for the growing level of non-universality, it is excessively interconnected materially on a global scale. Too different actors are too closely connected to each other (Safranchuk, 2020; Safranchuk and Lukyanov, 2021a, pp. 62-64).

For the time being, the temptation to “correct” this reality in either direction remains strong. Liberal intellectuals are dreaming of restarting idiational re-universalization, while realists are pushing for material deglobalization. However, the former is hardly possible in any way other than by means of brutal coercion, while the United States as the only strong agent harboring such aspirations no longer has the capability to do so. As for material deglobalization, especially a deep one, it is rejected by the major part the international community (although in different ways in different countries), because most countries’ socioeconomic development models provide for material globalization. Therefore, a combination of material globality and idiational non-universality, and an imbalance between the two may become a long-term structural reality determining the nature of international communication.

The attitude to the external environment will also change. For a long time, its importance grew. Some tried to use it, to derive benefits, or even to radically remake it. But in any case, the focus on the maximum involvement in it prevailed. ***Now the desire to increase resilience in relation to the external environment may gain the upper hand.*** In other words, the emphasis will shift from maximizing the impact on this environment to minimizing the environment's feedback. At the same time, the international environment itself is likely to become more uncertain, turning into an inevitable risk, not an opportunity.

In such conditions, two main functions of diplomacy, which have been steadily manifesting themselves in different historical periods, are in demand. The first one is international maneuvering aimed at gaining relative advantages over rivals. The second one is the preparation of agreements setting the rules for such maneuvering in order to reduce the risk of unintended escalation. However, the effectiveness of these efforts in the new conditions may be low. Due to material interconnectedness, it will be difficult for the rival parties to achieve and formalize the balance of power, while the growing idiational disunity does not let trust become strong enough for setting the "rules of the game."

All these factors promise an extremely volatile and unpredictable international environment in which the desire to protect oneself is combined with the inability to do so by fencing oneself off. Attempts to fence somebody off by coercion will be interpreted as an act of aggression and evoke a harsh response.

In the past, the main response to uncertainty and risks was an order guaranteed either by the hegemon or "common" international institutions. Both options have been used up. A likely alternative may be not an order of some type but strategic empathy, that is, the ability to understand and recognize the needs of another party without giving up one's own views or trying to change the opponent.

References

Angell, N., 1910. *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relations of Military Power in Nations to Their Economic and Social Advantage*. New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Chanda, N., 2008. *Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers, and Warriors Shaped Globalization*. New Delhi: Penguin Viking.

Debidour, A., 1891. *Histoire diplomatique de l'Europe depuis l'ouverture du Congrès de Vienne jusqu'à la clôture du Congrès de Berlin*. Paris: F. Alcan.

Friedman, T.L., 2007. *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Jönsson, C., 2008. Global Governance: Challenges to Diplomatic Communication, Representation, and Recognition. In: A.F. Cooper, B. Hocking and W. Maley (eds.) *Global Governance and Diplomacy: Worlds Apart?* Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 29-38.

Jönsson, C. and Hall, M., 2005. *Essence of Diplomacy*. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hamilton, K. and Langhorne, R., 2011. *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration*. 2nd Ed. London and New York: Routledge.

Kissinger, H., 2002. *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century*. Moscow: Ladomir.

Mallett, M.E., 1981. Diplomacy and War in Late Fifteenth Century Italy. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 67, pp. 267-288.

Nesmashnyi, A.D., Zhornist, V.M., and Safranchuk, I.A., 2022. International Hierarchy and Functional Differentiation of States: Results of an Expert Survey. *MGIMO Review of International Relations*. doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2022-olf2

Neumann, I.B., 2008. Globalisation and Diplomacy. In: A.F. Cooper, B. Hocking and W. Maley (eds.) *Global Governance and Diplomacy: Worlds Apart?* Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 29-38.

Nye, J., 2003. *The Paradox of American Power. Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Popov, V. and Sundaram, J., 2017. Convergence? More Developing Countries Are Catching Up. In: V. Popov and P. Dutkiewicz (eds.) *Mapping a New World Order: The Rest beyond the West*. London: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 7-23.

Putnam, R.D., 1988. Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games. *International Organization*, 42(3), pp. 427-460.

Safranchuk, I., 2020. Globalisation and the Decline of Universalism: New Realities for Hegemony. In: P. Dutkiewicz, T. Casier, and J.A. Scholte (eds.) *Hegemony and World Order*. New York: Routledge, pp. 65-77.

Safranchuk, I.A. and Lukyanov, F.A., 2021a. The Modern World Order: Structural Realities and Great Power Rivalries. *Polis. Political Studies*, 3, pp. 57-76.

Safranchuk, I.A., and Lukyanov, F.A., 2021b. The Contemporary World Order: The Adaptation of Actors to Structural Realities. *Polis. Political Studies*, 4, pp. 14-25.

Zonova, T.V., 1999. Komparativny analiz stanovleniya rossiyskoi i evropeiskoi diplomaticheskoi sluzhby. [Comparative Analysis of the Emergence of Russian and European Diplomatic Service]. *Rossiiskaya diplomatiya: istoriya i sovremennost'. Materialy nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii*. [Russian Diplomacy: History and Modernity. Academic Conference Proceedings], 29 October. MGIMO University.