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Siniver, Asaf; Hart, Dan

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The Meaning of Diplomacy

Asaf Siniver[1]
Department of Political Science and International Studies,
University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom
a.siniver@bhamn.ac.uk

Dan Hart[2]
Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham,
Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom
d.hart@bham.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article draws on interviews with 198 state ambassadors and applies an interpretivist lens to provide a more nuanced conceptualization of diplomacy. In doing so, we seek to project a closer fit between scholarly definitions of the term and how diplomacy is understood by practitioners. We contribute to the literature by proposing a more refined understanding of the term, presented here as five distinct (though not mutually exclusive) 'meanings' of diplomacy: (1) The actors taking part in modern diplomacy; (2) the objectives of diplomacy; (3) the mechanisms of diplomacy; (4) diplomacy as a skill; and (5) diplomacy as a profession. We find that drawing on the full range of the diplomatic experience is particularly important given the growing challenges to negotiation as the primary agency of diplomacy.

1 Asaf Siniver is Associate Professor (Reader) in International Security at the University of Birmingham. He is the editor of the *Journal of Global Security Studies* and a Leverhulme Research Fellow. He has published extensively in the areas of international mediation, conflict resolution, foreign policy analysis, and contemporary US foreign policy.

2 Dan Hart is a researcher, social entrepreneur and businessman. His fields of interest include international relations, leadership and careers. He holds a Visiting Lecturer position at the University of Birmingham and Southampton University.

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diplomacy – ambassadors – diplomats – negotiation

The study of diplomacy has long been noted for its overly historical focus and lack of theoretical and methodological development. Particular criticism has been directed at the lack of cross-fertilization between international relations (IR) theory and the diplomatic canon, leading the latter to be described as the "poor child of International Relations theory" (Sofer 1988: 196) and viewed as epiphenomenal, redundant, and anecdotal (Der Derian 1987, Murray 2008, Gilboa 2008, Sharp 2009, Constantinou 2013, Pouliot & Cornut 2015). This theoretical inertia of the diplomatic field is often explained by the fact that the vast majority of diplomatic literature has been written by practitioners of diplomacy or diplomatic historians, whose interest lies in "a particular past," rather than in theory-building (Cohen 1998). According to Jönsson and Hall (2005: 9), the blame for this under-theorization should be shared between diplomatic historians and IR theorists:

> Political scientists often accuse their historian colleagues of simply 'scratching around' and lacking any rigorous methodology at all, failing to be concerned with contemporary problems, and being 'mere chroniclers' of an 'embalmed past.' Historians, not to be outdone, frequently criticize the theorists for erecting artificial models *ex nihilo*, creating smoke screens of jargon, and becoming infatuated with computer paraphernalia instead of human beings. Similarly, Wiseman notes that American IR theory lags far behind American diplomatic practice since it 'has long overlooked diplomacy, generally showing little interest in what diplomacy is, in what diplomats do, and, indeed, in what diplomats should do' (Wiseman 2011: 710–711).

None of the mainstream approaches to IR – realism, liberalism, and Marxism – consider diplomacy a central entity of international relations. The IR field has tended to focus on the macro level of conflict and cooperation at the systemic level, rather than the micro level of the social practice of diplomats. This traditional statist approach is considered the leading paradigm in diplomacy studies, having shaped its scholarship for decades (Craig & George 1995; Melissen 1999; Murray 2012a). It endorses the view that the state is the "only diplomatic actor of significance" (Sharp 2003: 857), and accordingly, it emphasizes the

centrality of the state in governing its goals and functions, and in determining the channels through which it operates. State-centric definitions perceive diplomacy as the operational side of foreign affairs, which has the mandate to implement governments' foreign policies. Morgenthau, for example, whilst addressing diplomacy systematically, does not include diplomacy in his six principles of realism, but rather views it as a means (alternative to war) for dealing with the consequences of state actors' pursuit of power. Similarly, liberals view diplomacy as a tool to affect the nature of the interaction between states and the international system, rather than a core matter of international relations which determines the character and interests of the constituent actors in the system. Finally, Marxist variants do not assign much significance to diplomacy in a political space defined by the accumulation and reproduction of capital (Jönsson & Hall 2005).

Contrary to these systemic views of international relations in which diplomacy does not play a constitutive part, the English School has presented a more embedded view of diplomacy in the social and political space, whereby beyond the rationalist and power-related conceptualization of diplomacy, there exists an international society which is autonomous of state actors and their material interaction. This diplomatic institution is comprised of an established collection of norms and practices (including roles, agreed goals, rules, and conventions) that govern the relationships between the individuals and organizations involved in it. Hadley Bull, for example, included diplomacy as one of five institutions at the heart of international society, alongside war, the great powers, the balance of power, and international law, while Martin Wight described diplomacy as the "master institution" of international relations (Bull 1977; Wight 2002). Similarly, Der Derian (1987: 114) noted that diplomacy is "embedded in the social at large, and so something is lost if it is abstracted from that placement," while Neuman (2003: 366) acknowledged that "the work on diplomacy carried out by the English School remains the best dock from which to depart."

These and other English School contributors to the study of diplomacy have been described as "conceptual jailbreakers" and "epistemic torchbearers" (Jönsson & Hall 2005: 19; Wiseman 2011: 711). However, as Murray notes (2013: 23), by and large, diplomatic scholarship remains resistant to theoretical development, so the field is "puzzling, multifaceted and its core subject is contested." In this article, we aim to address Murray's concern that the recent cross-fertilization between diplomatic studies, the English School, and variants of constructivism, while welcomed, has created "a sense of conceptual disorder and confusion. For example, trying to define 'what is modern diplomacy?'

is quite difficult" (Murray 2011: 722).[3] We suggest that this difficulty points to the wider pathology of an under-theorized field: whilst communication and clarity of expression are considered core aspects of the *practice* of diplomacy, attempts to *theorize* diplomacy have resulted in a confluence of definitions and typologies which draw divergent epistemologies and methodologies (Plischke 1979; Reus-Smith 2002; Hoffman 2003; Pouliot & Cornut 2015).

Given this state of confusion, we adopt an interpretivist approach to propose a new heuristic of diplomacy, or, more accurately, "meanings of diplomacy." As we shall discuss in detail later on, this heuristic is methodologically novel in that it draws on interviews with 198 ambassadors from four countries. By asking the practitioners of diplomacy to define their field, we address Melissen's call that "A field that aims to act as a two-way conduit between scholars and practitioners benefits from reflection on the practitioners' added value for its academic work" (2011: 724). In doing so we also respond to Wiseman's plea that the challenge in the field is how to "draw attention to the fact that diplomatic norms and the daily practices from which they are constituted … became so deeply internalized over the years, that many scholars no longer appreciated their regulative, evaluative, constitutive, and practical effects" (2011: 712). If we are to adopt a more embedded view of diplomacy in the political and social space, then the first step must surely be to ask the practitioners of diplomacy how they understand and evaluate the practice of diplomacy. Therefore, we suggest that our heuristic of meanings of diplomacy provides a first building block on the path to future theory development and more effective cross-fertilization between IR theories and diplomatic studies.

This article proceeds as follows: we begin with a review of the literature to demonstrate the state of confusion and existing gaps in how the term 'diplomacy' is defined and operationalized. We then present our research design and justify our choice of an interpretivist approach in this study before analyzing our findings, especially in relation to the role of negotiation in diplomacy. We conclude by pointing to the potential limitations in our study and its implications for future research.

3 To illustrate his point, Murray brings the following example: "Consider the three following popular definitions … For Berridge (2010), diplomacy and diplomatic studies are axiomatic with the state and its diplomat. According to Ramsay (2006), however, this gatekeeper monopoly that Berridge describes is incorrect, for today 'every man is a diplomat, painful though it may be for professional diplomats to acknowledge.'" For Sharp, diplomacy cannot be defined on a 'state' or 'man' level, but is best understood sociologically as a 'group' interaction (2003: 722, fn. 16).

Defining Diplomacy

Diplomacy is both "a category of practice and a category of analysis" (Pouliot & Cornut 2015: 299), meaning that contemporary definitions of diplomacy are broad and differentiated along epistemological and methodological boundaries. According to Der Derian, the pursuit of a single, all-encompassing definition of diplomacy is futile given the nature of international relations:

> If I were to pretend that a single definition could capture the essence of diplomacy, then there would be no purpose for an enquiry. In fact, it would negate an enquiry, for its very rationale is to question the existence of a defining essence. Moreover, the high level of ambiguity inherent in international relations can render the attempt for exactitude in definition a specious activity (1987: 108, *fn* 10).

Accordingly, the British historian and diplomat Sir Harold Nicolson notes that the "word 'diplomacy' is carelessly taken to denote several quite different things" leading to "confusion of thought" and substantial misunderstandings (1988: 3), while De Magalhaes argues that the definitions are "imprecise, incomplete and clearly erroneous," resulting in "deplorable conceptual confusion" (1988: 49). Similarly, Marshall (1999: 8) points out that the word is often misinterpreted since it simultaneously represents "content, conduct, character, method, manner and art," and Sharp (2003: 857) concludes that it is "a notoriously tricky term … that cannot be settled decisively." This conceptual confusion has been addressed through various typologies in the literature. De Magalhaes (1998) sees diplomacy as commonly defined through four prisms: foreign policy, an instrument of foreign policy, international negotiations, and the activity of diplomats. Sharp (2003) defines diplomacy as a synonym for statecraft, foreign policy, and international relations, as well as the making of foreign policy by practitioners. Pigman (2013) offers a basic distinction between a positivist state-focused approach and a post-positivist approach which focuses more on the core functions of diplomacy, while Murray (2008) presents a more nuanced typology of three schools of diplomatic thought: traditional state-based approaches; nascent approaches which focus on the role of new, non-state actors; and innovative approaches which highlight the coexistence and even cooperation between traditional and 'new' forms of diplomacy.

Berridge's (2002: 1) definition of diplomacy embodies Pigman's positivist approach and Murray's traditional school of thought, whereby the main purpose of diplomacy "is to enable states to secure the objectives of their foreign policies." This approach has often been criticized for being too static and too statist,

particularly following the emergence of new non-state actors in the post-Cold War era, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and multinational corporations (MNCs). In addition, while "traditional" questions of war and peace continue to dominate much of the diplomatic arena, the international community also faces challenges from "newer" challenges such as terrorism, migration, global warming, and pandemics, which not only defy national boundaries but also require diplomatic cooperation between state and non-state actors (Craig 1983; Puchala 1995; Hocking 2004). In the face of this reality, traditional approaches to diplomacy seem somewhat redundant: the rigid conceptual focus on formal structures of diplomacy has not only hampered efforts to theorize the field, but it can also be blamed for a certain failure to "deliver" policy results in a complex world by the imposition of such an autonomous and exclusive attitude to world affairs and other practitioners of diplomacy (Der Derian 1987; Constantinou 1993; Langhorne 1998; Riordan 2003; Elman & Elman 2003). Traditional diplomacy is thus not only ineffective and obsolete but, as Modalski suggests, it should be most condemned for "the harm it inflicts on world society" (1979: 190).

Pigman's post-positivist approach and Murray's nascent and innovative schools of thought are more closely aligned with the English School's international society; as Dunne (2001: 225) points out, "In our globalized world, a whole range of non-state actors in part constitute and are constituted by the rules and institutions of international society." Here diplomacy is viewed as a mechanism designed to establish and maintain networks and relationships among traditional and new actors in the pursuit of shared interdependent goals (Diamond & MacDonald 1996). According to Der Derian (2009: 10), this approach offers "a general working definition of diplomacy as mediation between estranged individuals, groups or entities." However, as Murray suggests, one should be cautious of the nascent school's wholesale rejection of "old" diplomacy; after all, he asks, "if these entities are obsolete, in crisis, or irrelevant, then why do they continue to exist? To deny traditionalism or state-centrism is to deny an actuality of the modern diplomatic environment: the omnipotence of traditional diplomacy" (2012a: 122). Accordingly, Murray's innovative school of diplomatic thought sees the divisions between state-centric and nascent approaches to diplomacy as not only artificial but as pushing a sterile and unproductive debate over diplomacy, which hampers progress towards theoretical innovation. Melissen's emphasis on "the mechanism of representation, communication and negotiation through which states and other international actors conduct their business" (1999: xxii) is typical of this approach, as is Smith's suggestion that "today, diplomacy refers not only to the advancement of national interests and the practice of persuasion but also to the management

of global issues" (2000: 1). Plischke presents perhaps the most comprehensive definition of this approach to diplomacy. It is:

> …the political process by which political entities, generally states, conduct official relations with one another within an international environment. With the proliferation of the institutionalisation of international affairs by other than classical diplomatic processes, and with the engagement in interrelations by political institutions other than states – such as international and supranational organizations, emergent political entities – diplomacy can no longer be said to be confined solely to the conduct of the international affairs or foreign relations of established national states (1979: 33).

These and other typologies of diplomacy are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather point to the fluidity of the practice of diplomacy and the theoretical inertia which has defined this literature for many decades. As noted by Meerts, there are fundamental cleavages between "practitioners, researchers, and trainers in the field, creating disconnectedness that cannot be easily solved" (2015: 43). While typologies such as Pigman's and Murray's make an important scholarly contribution, we suggest that there is still room for improvement. These typologies are at the same time too general and too specific: they are nomothetically-orientated towards "universal laws" that take a top-bottom approach, treating *all* definitions of diplomacy as sole derivatives of the presence or absence of the state. At the same time, they are too narrowly focused on the state (whether present, partially-present, or absent) as the focal point of the *academic* literature on the field, whilst paying scant attention to how the *practitioners* of diplomacy define and understand their profession and the environment within which they operate. Unlike the Waltzian state-centric approach which deduces the changing nature of diplomacy from the centrality of the state in international relations, we adopt an interpretivist approach which views actors of diplomacy as constitutive entities whose identities and beliefs are shaped by the ideas and norms of their social environment (Wendt 1987; Hopf 1998; Zehfuss 2002). To paraphrase Wendt, we suggest that diplomacy is what diplomats make of it.

Negotiation as a Process and Role for Diplomats

Adopting Wendt's approach to the structure-agency problem in international relations is particularly apt when studying diplomacy as a process of negotiation and diplomats as negotiators. As Glenn and Susskind (2010) note, negotiation as a process of diplomacy is not merely an act of communication,

but a more substantive method of interaction, which informs and changes not only how diplomats view their interlocutors but also how they view their own role and position within the international system. In a similar fashion, Kelman (1996) and Fisher and Brown (1998) refer to negotiation as interactive problem solving and a reciprocal process of persuasion, respectively. Meerts, however, uses the terms international negotiation and international diplomacy interchangeably, for the reason that "the term 'international negotiation' is the most common terminology to be used by those who deal with diplomatic negotiation processes" (2015: 11). But this only serves to further compound the challenge of understanding negotiation as a function, or process of diplomacy, rather than its synonym.

As the accepted mechanism of interstate negotiation, diplomacy as a process is essential to the normal conduct of the nation-state system, yet the rapid growth in the number of "diplomatically active" non-state actors, technical innovations (especially social media), and public awareness of and sensitivity to "glocal" issues (such as climate change, pandemics, and migration) has significantly altered the environment in which diplomats operate, and accordingly their need to adapt to it. Compare for example Boyer's assessment in 1997 that despite "the advent of the internet, global travel, and the increasing contact with individuals and other international actors … it is more difficult to identify a marked change in the array of political forces that condition the setting in which international negotiation takes place" (92–93), with Stanzel's warning in 2018 that "today [modern diplomacy] is subject to unprecedented influences and restrictions …However, diplomats' responses to modern challenges often fall under the radar of governments and the public, precisely because they do not conform to what is traditionally considered to be typically diplomatic" (5). A middle-ground view is offered by Sharp (1999), whereby the process and aims of negotiation remain embedded within the global structure of the state system, thus containing the forces of globalization to affect only the magnitude of diplomatic interactions, but not their essence.

Given this article's focus on how diplomats define diplomacy and their role as diplomatic actors, it is important to conceptualize the agency of diplomatic activity. While the majority of the literature tends to focus on diplomacy as primarily inter-state negotiation, the role of diplomats as agents of negotiation has been generally neglected. As will be discussed in our findings, the diplomats' identity of themselves as an aggregated sum of their profession, role, status, and set of skills is invariably affected by the projected identity of the state that they represent, although the two are rarely reciprocated. Indeed, as Faizullaev notes (2014: 288) "to serve well, [a diplomat must] fully or partially integrate his or her self with the state's self" – but this is not to say that

diplomatic agents always agree with their state's policy decisions. At the same time, it is important to note that just as states institutionalize their representatives, so do diplomats individualize the state that they represent through their unique set of skills, experience and cognitive makeup (Adler-Nissen 2014). This brings us back to the English School's emphasis on the diplomatic agency as playing an important part in diplomatic negotiations, and in international society more broadly.

Research Design and Methods

According to Bevir and Rhodes (2012: 201), "Actions and practices are intrinsically meaningful: they embody the beliefs of the actors and cannot properly be discussed without reference to their beliefs." Exploring diplomacy through an interpretivist lens allows us to view actors of diplomacy in a different way than traditional relationalist approaches of IR, whereby (state) actors' relations are structured by the balance of material power. Key to our research design is the assumption that actors of diplomacy are diplomats rather than states, and that their identities and beliefs are independent of static power relations; they are socially constructed through their own interaction and their interpretation of their environment (Farrell 2002). In doing so, we not only aim to offer a more nuanced conceptualization of diplomacy, but we also showcase "the diversity and contingency of meaningful activity" (Bevir & Rhodes 2012: 201; see also Gabriel 2000).

In this study, we gathered qualitative data to examine how diplomacy is understood by diplomats. We draw on interviews with 198 ambassadors from four Western countries: 50 ambassadors from the United States (25.3% of the sample population), 42 from the United Kingdom (21.2%), 57 from Israel (28.8%) and 49 from Denmark (24.7%). We followed the "most similar cases research design" (Levy 2008). Although our population of participants is drawn solely from state representatives, we maintain that the most pertinent distinction to be made here is not between state and non-state representatives, but between diplomats and non-diplomats. According to Abba Eban, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations and the United States in the 1950s, diplomats operate in a different environment from national leaders; it thus matters less where the diplomats come from given their socially constructed *esprit de corps*:

> To represent a cause to the outside world does not necessarily require the same qualities as the task of mobilizing and organizing national resources.... There is a diplomatic temperament which is international.

> Diplomacy is a craft and a technique. It can no more be practiced by men who have not studied its principles than a bridge can be constructed by a man untutored in the science of engineering (cited in Siniver 2015: 54–55).

The sample included 115 (58%) retirees and 83 (42%) active ambassadors. The age range of respondents was 36–92 years. The average age of retirees was 71 (std=9) and for the active diplomats 51 (std=6.5). Among retirees, nearly a quarter (std=9) retired fairly recently (in the previous three years). As for the gender of interviewees, 162 (82%) were males and 36 (18%) were females. The gender ratio in this study is representative of the wider population of cases: according to Towns' and Niklasson's sampling of 7,000 ambassadorial appointments, the share of women of different regional ambassador appointments ranged from 6 percent and 10 percent in the Middle East and Asia (respectively), to 25 percent and 35 percent in North America and Nordic countries, respectively (Towns & Niklasson 2017). All respondents who participated in this research were senior diplomats who had served at least once as state ambassadors. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample of interviewees from the population of individuals in diplomatic practice. The sample was identified through methods of networking and snowballing. All interviews were conducted during 2012 – 2015. They were semi-structured, lasted between 1:10 and 5:20 hours and included questions looking into the ambassadors' career experiences and professional development. The interview protocol included six topics:

1. The participants' background and interest in diplomacy.
2. Their employment history.
3. The roles of diplomats.
4. The skills of diplomats and their professional development.
5. Their expatriation experiences.
6. The advantages and downsides of their career.

The participants were first asked how they defined diplomacy and were explicitly requested to do so based on their own experiences. The size of the sample was determined by the need to reach data saturation around the main research topics. Charmaz and Belgrave (2012) define saturation as a state when new data no longer adds new information that can enhance the understanding of the core categories. The sample size was also affected by the attempt to capture data across gender and several age brackets, and to prevent network-lock that can occur when using referral-sampling. Their responses were transcribed and analyzed using Constructivist Grounded Theory, moving from initial (open)

coding to focused coding. The open coding involved highlighting initial topical themes, whereas focused coding involved axial coding (associating categories to their subcategories), comparative coding (comparing transcripts to produce analytic distinctions), selective coding (organizing data around salient codes and identifying core categories), and theoretical coding (charting the relationships between core categories and other categories).

Findings

To what extent do these ambassadors' views reflect on the rapid changes in the nature, purpose, and conduct of modern diplomacy? While a majority of ambassadors viewed diplomacy as primarily a state-run activity for the purpose of enhancing national foreign policy priorities, a large proportion also acknowledged the new challenges faced by diplomats in the area of international negotiation. Drawing on research by Stein (2011), Adesina (2016), and Stanzel (2019) we suggest that the increase in the plurality of "diplomatically active" actors and technical innovations (especially social media), and growing public awareness of and sensitivity to foreign policy issues, has had noticeable impact on the conduct of international negotiations. The exponential growth in the (mis)use of social media, in particular, is often cited as an acute challenge to traditional diplomacy. Our findings below correlate with these trends.

Accordingly, based on our research design and viewing the practice of diplomacy through an interpretivist lens, we propose that the term can be better understood in relation to five parameters: (1) the identity of the actors, (2) their goals, (3) their mechanisms of interaction, (4) the profession, and (5) the skill sets of diplomacy.

Each of the five categories is understood by interviewees to represent the following constructs of diplomacy:

1. The actors taking part in diplomacy (n=154, 78%):
   - 1.1 State-centric approach (n=122, 62%)
   - 1.2 Innovative approach (n=32, 16%)
2. The goals of diplomacy (n=168, 85%):
   - 2.1 Promoting the foreign policy goals of the sending states (n=89, 45%)
   - 2.2 Pursuing mutual goals (n=28, 14%)
   - 2.3 Pursuing global interdependent goals (n=16, 8%)
   - 2.4 Developing the relations between states (n=26, 13%)

2.5 Facilitating peaceful relationships amongst actors, resolving conflicts and preventing wars (n=59, 30%)

3. The mechanisms through which diplomacy operates (n=145, 73%):
   - 3.1 Managing the relationships between actors and between people (n=59, 30%)
   - 3.2 One-way or two-way representation of states to foreign audiences (n=57, 29%)
   - 3.3 Communication between countries and people (n=125, 63%)
4. Diplomacy as a profession (n=18, 9%).
5. Diplomacy as a skill (n=30, 15%).

In their definitions of diplomacy, each of the interviewees presented a different combination of these elements and emphasized distinct sub-categories, thereby creating the range of definitions captured in our analysis, and presented below. Across most of these categories, some differences were found between ambassadors from different countries, between men and women, or between active and retired ambassadors. In the following analysis, these themes will be examined and unpacked.

1) The Actors Taking Part in Diplomacy

Most ambassadors (n=154, 78%) included in their definition of diplomacy a description of the main actors in diplomacy today, while a minority (n=44, 22%) of interviewees' definitions did not refer explicitly to the actors involved. Similar to the scholarly definition reviewed earlier, the majority of interviewees (n=122, 62%) featured a statist outlook in their interpretations of the term and thus perceived sovereign states, governmental bodies and their official representatives as the main actors in modern diplomacy. A minority of participants (n=32, 16%) displayed an innovative outlook, where in addition to governmental bodies and official representatives, they mentioned the involvement of NGOs, IGOs, and MNCs in diplomacy. None of the interviewees presented a nascent outlook. No differences were found between diplomats from different states, or between retirees and active ambassadors. The large proportion of state-centered definitions and the absence of nascent descriptions among participants are perhaps unsurprising, given that all interviewees are employees of their countries' ministries of foreign affairs, and thus, from their professional standpoint, they are most likely to perceive the state as the main actor in diplomacy. Whilst not disputing the centrality of states in modern diplomacy and the formal structures through which it operates, a small number of interviewees (n=10, 5%, both retired and active) noted that diplomacy has significantly changed in the past decades as new actors have entered

the international arena, while others (n=32, 16%) have made more specific references to the rising influence of NGOs, IGOs, and other non-state actors in modern diplomacy. While these definitions underline the centrality of states in modern diplomacy and the formal structures through which it operates, several interviewees (n=10, 5%, both retired and active) noted that diplomacy has significantly changed in the past decades as new actors have entered the international arena. These findings confirm Stanzel's earlier warning that the main challenge for state diplomats is adapting to a new diplomatic environment characterized by the advent of new actors and issues and rapid growth in communication technologies.

2) *The Goals of Diplomacy*

Most respondents' accounts (n=168, 85%) included the goals of diplomacy in their definitions of the term, while a minority (n=30, 15%) did not explicitly articulate the objectives of diplomacy. Five clusters of goals have emerged from the analysis:

a. Promoting the foreign policy goals of the actors involved (n=89, 45%)
b. Pursuing shared goals (n=28, 14%)
c. Pursuing global interdependent goals (n=16, 8%)
d. Developing the relations between states (n=26, 13%)
e. Facilitating peaceful relationships amongst actors, resolving conflicts and preventing wars (n=59, 30%)

Most of the interviewees who mentioned the goals of diplomacy (n=94, 56%), cited one goal in their definition while 44% cited two or more. As seen above, the goals most often mentioned were the promotion of foreign policy goals and the facilitation of peaceful relations. A comparison of the respondents' descriptions of diplomacy to scholars' definitions cited earlier suggests that while the majority of interviewees referred to the objectives of diplomacy, the goals of diplomacy were rarely mentioned by academics and often remain implicit.

a. Promoting the Foreign Policy Goals of the Actors Involved

The most frequently cited goal (n=89, 45%) of diplomacy in interviewees' definitions was the promotion of the state's foreign policy interests. The analysis of interviewees' accounts revealed that the ambassadors often used the terms "country's interests," "national interests," "foreign interests," "national objectives," "foreign policy goals" or "national policy objectives" interchangeably. Unsurprisingly, further analysis has shown that nearly all participants who

articulated this goal displayed a state-centric approach. Most participants thus defined the promotion of national foreign policy interests as the main objective of diplomacy, while explicitly indicating that diplomacy is a means through which these goals can be achieved. In reference to their own function in diplomacy, participants have used a range of terms to describe their roles in relation to their countries' foreign interests. These varied between "presenting" or "representing," "protecting," "securing" or "defending" these interests, aiming to "achieve," "pursue" or "attain" their countries' objectives, or to "further," "promote" or "advance" their countries' foreign policy goals. In contrast to the scholarly observations presented earlier which indicate that diplomacy is often seen as synonymous with foreign policy, the interviewees' accounts reveal no such overlap of terms. Only one interviewee associated diplomacy with foreign policy, though he specifically emphasized that diplomacy is "the implementation of foreign policy."

b. Pursuing Shared Goals

Several ambassadors (n=28, 14%) offered an outlook of diplomacy that placed the promotion of mutual (bi-lateral or multilateral) interests as a key objective of diplomacy. Some of these interviewees displayed a state-centric approach, while others articulated an innovative outlook. All of them emphasized the view that diplomacy offers structures, systems or means through which states and organizations can collaborate or cooperate in order to attain "shared," "mutual," "common" or "joint" interests or goals, and ensure "a win-win outcome, rather than one side getting his own way at the expense of the other."

c. Pursuing Global Interdependent Goals

Several participants (n=16, 8%), mostly females (10 out of 16), articulated a view of diplomacy that emphasized the promotion of global interdependent goals. In line with their views that the objective of diplomacy is to promote global interdependent interests or objectives, all of them displayed an innovative approach in their view of the actors involved in diplomacy. In addition, two ambassadors offered a view of diplomacy that is more in tune with the "global governance" perspective, which suggests that the goal of diplomacy is to facilitate or promote institutional integration at the highest level to address issues of global scale. Both interviewees emphasized the intermediary role that diplomats assume as they interact and attempt to connect between civic society and its official policies and their nations, and therefore perceived diplomacy as a system that facilitates this connection. As one diplomat noted:

> Today diplomacy has an international element that goes beyond the national interest … there are international laws, regulations and policies,

> international organizations, so diplomats today see themselves as members of the diplomatic international society, and they are therefore committed to something that is much larger than their countries' foreign policy goals. They are committed to a set of laws and regulations, norms, objectives, even international values. This is because diplomacy is the seal on all the international treaties and contracts. And in practice, diplomats are the only ones who really know and are aware of the nuances of international laws and the details of bi-lateral or multilateral treaties that they have signed, and what is required from their countries ….

Such sentiment echoes Hocking et al.'s argument that though diplomats are still defined in terms of their official roles as those who have the mandate to represent national governments, at the same time they are members of a community of practice and speak for the institution of the international system. Diplomats are thus perceived as gatekeepers, boundary-spanners, brokers, or mediators, who facilitate the linkage between domestic and international environments.

d. Developing the Relationships between States

Several interviewees (n=26, 13%) indicated that a primary goal of diplomacy is to advance the relationships between states. Unsurprisingly, all of these accounts displayed a state-centric approach. The interviewees articulated several types of inter-state relational goals: to "establish" or "build new ties" between states, to "manage," "conduct," or "facilitate" the relationships between countries, to "enable continued relations," "sustain," or "maintain" existing associations, to "further develop" or "advance" international relations, to "manage" the cooperation between parties, to "expand" or "increase" areas of collaboration, or "forge stronger alliances". As can be seen from these accounts, the objectives that respondents mentioned vary between initiating or establishing new associations, enabling normalization and ensuring the continuity of existing relations, to developing or strengthening international ties. These goals varied in their contents from the scholarly definitions cited earlier since most scholars regarded the management of international relations as a mechanism through which diplomacy functions, rather than a goal.

e. Facilitating Peaceful Relationships amongst Actors, Resolving Conflicts, and Preventing Wars

Another key theme that emerged from the ambassadors' definitions of diplomacy (n=59, 30%) was their view that a pivotal goal of diplomacy is to facilitate peaceful relationships between nations. Among this group, some ambassadors referred to the goal that diplomacy fulfills in times of crisis, as one of the

interviewees noted: "Diplomacy is … partly about peacekeeping, but it is also about peacemaking." Several ambassadors (n=28, 14%) noted that when international conflicts loom on the horizon, a primary function of diplomacy is anticipatory and pre-emptive, while its aim is to prevent the escalation of conflicts and avoid the use of force. Here too, the ambassadors have used several terms to describe the objectives of diplomacy, such as: "minimize the friction between states," "overcome disagreements," "reconcile differences," "avoid conflicts," "prevent military action," or "prevent having to resort to force". Several interviewees noted that the success of diplomatic missions is often judged by their outcomes – whether a conflict was resolved by peaceful means or by force, as one interviewee noted: "If force becomes the arbiter - then diplomacy did not work." Few interviewees (n=8, 4%) commented that once conflict has erupted, the function of diplomacy is to intervene and mediate between warring sides, in order to resolve conflicts and restore peace. Such views intertwine the goals of diplomacy with the means through which it is conducted, suggesting that the use of non-violent, peaceful means to manage international relationships is in effect a central goal of diplomacy. This is in line with Murray's notion of modern diplomacy as "the business of peace," whereby diplomatic practitioners are guided by a shared set of values, norms, practices, and standards that are geared to reduce conflict and promote stability and peace.

3) The Mechanisms of Diplomacy

A majority of the interviewees (n=145, 73%) referred to the means through which diplomacy is conducted. These can be broadly categorized into three clusters:

a. Managing Relationships between States or Organizations and the People Who Represent Them

The analysis reveals that nearly a third of the interviewees (n=59, 30%) referred to the management of the associations between states as the main mechanism of diplomacy. Nearly all of them highlighted the establishment and management of interpersonal networks, ties, relationships, and interactions with key people as the main means through which diplomacy operates. We suggest that whether the facilitation of inter-state relations is seen as a goal of diplomacy or a means to achieve other goals, in both cases the interviewees' accounts denote that this function is carried out through human relations: through "networking," "forming ties," "facilitating contacts," "establishing relations," or "interacting" with associates. The people with whom these ties are forged often remain implied in respondents' definitions, though few noted

that these are "people who hold key positions," "have the power to influence national policies," or the "decision-makers" in other states. Indeed, having access to local officials and key people, establishing, maintaining, deepening and developing local ties and relationships, and building trust, seem to be a central aspect of ambassador's role, which both active and retired respondents perceived as the most effective means for accessing and influencing host governments. As noted earlier, diplomacy is often perceived as synonymous with international relations. Some of the respondents' descriptions suggest that the management of international relations is seen by practitioners as both an objective and a mechanism of diplomacy. The overlap of terms denotes the centrality of this function in diplomacy and may offer an explanation as to why the two terms seem indistinguishable. In addition, several ambassadors (n=17, 9%) noted that gathering and transmitting information is a key mechanism that underlies their relational function. These respondents noted that despite the vast amounts of information available in the public domain today, collecting information and being continually updated in all current affairs of the receiving country remains a central aspect of their job. This can cover a variety of domains – from commercial or financial to cultural and artistic interests, with political and trade interests often featuring as key aspects. This function is performed in order to produce an accurate assessment of the local situation, which provides the foundation for policy formulation and decision-making processes at home.

b. *One-way or Two-way Representation of the States Involved to Foreign Audiences*

Sharp (2009) suggests that diplomats are often compared to other professionals who act on behalf of others (such as lawyers) who are therefore charged with advocating and advancing the interests and viewpoints of those whom they represent (though they may not necessarily wholly endorse these interests). Nearly a third of participants (n=57, 29%) described representation as one of the main mechanisms through which diplomacy is conducted. Among these, two interrelated themes emerged: some interviewees (n=31, 16%) referred to diplomacy as one-way representation, while others (n=26, 13%) viewed it as a two-way representation. Across both of these groups, some ambassadors (n=33, 17%) perceived their role as representing their government to other governments or other types of overseas audiences, while others (n=24, 12%) perceived their representational function as "presenting" or "showcasing" their country as a society and a culture to others. Our analysis suggests that from the interviewees' perspective, representation has several dimensions:

- Whom they represent: These vary between a limited scope of representing one's government or the head of state or wider scope of representation which encompasses the country as a society and culture.
- What content is represented: Information, views, positions, interests, policies, values, economic representation, financial, cultural, religious, scientific, etc.
- How it is done: Representation can take very different forms, from ceremonial representation to public diplomacy. It can involve clarifying intentions, lobbying, protesting, negotiating, and seeking agreement, persuasion or coercion. It can be done officially or through unofficial routes, secretly or openly.
- The target audience: This can vary between other governments, international or multilateral organizations or the public in foreign countries.

c. Communication between States, Organizations, and People

Our findings here correlate to the general consensus in the literature on diplomatic negotiations that communication is the most fundamental form of diplomatic agency (Jönsson & Hall 2003). The centrality of interpersonal communication as a vital mechanism and critical skill that diplomats must possess is evident. As pointed out by Tran (1987: 8), "communication is to diplomacy as blood is to the human body. Whenever communication ceases, the body of international politics, the process of diplomacy, is dead, and the result is violent conflict or atrophy". Moreover, others also noted that in diplomacy "saying is doing" and "doing is saying," and that "speech is an incisive form of action" which may justify the "semantic obsession" of diplomats (Eban 1983: 393; Jönsson & Hall 2005: 86).

Communication was described by 63% of participants (n=125) as the main mechanism through which diplomacy operates. Among these, almost all interviewees interlinked their discussion of the inter-state or inter-organizational communication with the interpersonal aspect, thereby indicating that these are in effect the same mechanisms, and that inter-state communication cannot be conducted without the human interface.

Within this group, a plurality of ambassadors (n=81, 41%) cited two mechanisms. The most widely cited mechanism was communication, and this was often accompanied by representation or conducting relationships between actors. Few interviewees (n=4, 2%) noted the changes that occurred in the last two decades in diplomacy, thus echoing a common critique of modern (often state-centered) diplomacy that with the development of new communication technologies and social media and the prevalence of "direct-dial diplomacy" and summits between heads of states, ministers, and others, diplomacy has become "technologically redundant". Today's emphasis on speed often prompts

decision-makers to respond directly and quickly to events, thereby sidestepping the traditional diplomatic avenues which are often much slower in pace. This proposition which is often described as "the decline" or "the crisis" of diplomacy, has led some commentators to describe diplomats as an endangered species. However, an alternative view contends that diplomats have adjusted to "media diplomacy" and learned how to use the new media to their advantage. In addition to stressing the centrality of human communication in diplomacy, the respondents described several communicative means that are regularly utilized in diplomatic relations, some of which have come to signify diplomacy as a profession. These include:

1. Negotiation (n=38, 19%):
2. Persuasion and influencing (n=22, 11%)
3. Mediation (n=11, 6%):
4. Public diplomacy (n=10, 5%):
5. Marketing (n=8, 4%).

The ambassadorial views of negotiation as the most basic means of diplomacy is widely supported by the literature. It is in this role as negotiators where diplomats take perhaps the most substantive form of diplomatic agency. Whether they are bilateral or multilateral, or whether they take place in diplomatic summits or behind the scenes, diplomacy is "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" (Nicolson 1988: 7). At the same time, the finding that only 19 percent of ambassadors have mentioned negotiation (and even fewer mentioned mediation), points to the fact that while the number of negotiation efforts in intrastate and interstate conflicts has increased since the Cold War, the rapid advances in air travel and communication technologies have made the role of ambassadors as negotiators less necessary. In addition, the growth in global threats that are not bound to a single territory or issue (for example, terrorism, pandemics, energy, environment, migration, and food security) often requires technical expertise and the personal involvement of heads of state. This multilateral context, both in terms of issues and the need for cooperation at the highest level, has gradually made the role of ambassadors in negotiation redundant (Bercovitch & Fretter 2004: 15–16; Bercovitch & Jackson 2012: 19–21; Zartman 2016).

4) Diplomacy as the Profession of Diplomats

Around 9% of participants (n=18) perceived diplomacy as a profession. Among these, the majority (12 out of 18) were Israeli diplomats, which may reflect a prevailing practice in modern diplomacy towards the de-professionalization

of diplomacy and the ascendance of political appointments at the expense of professional diplomats – see, for example, President Richard Nixon's edict that "Anybody who wants to be an ambassador must at least give $250,000. I'm not going to do it for political friends and all that crap" (Kutler 1997: 4). The appointments of people who have not been assessed, recruited or trained by the ministry of foreign affairs have understandably eroded the occupational status of professional diplomats, as the increasing presence of non-career diplomats raises questions regarding the skills required to conduct the work of diplomacy aptly.

5) Diplomacy as a Skill

Several participants (n=30, 15%) referred to diplomacy as a skill, either interpersonal or communicative. Few interviewees suggested that diplomacy is a cross-cultural skill – the capacity to understand other cultures and work effectively across cultural and linguistic differences. As suggested by the abovementioned quote by Eban, diplomacy as a profession is often associated with the application of intelligence and tact, a highly effective and proficient communication skills and the ability to communicate diplomatically. This entails using a carefully calibrated language that enables agents to engage in cross-cultural communication while minimizing unnecessary misunderstanding – the result of a shared code which has developed over the years and manifested in diplomatic protocols and conventions.

Conclusions

This article set out to provide a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of diplomacy through an interpretivist lens. We found that the constructed meanings that diplomats ascribe to their profession are much more diverse and nuanced than the existing literature on diplomacy has so far indicated, and is considerably more multi-layered and complex than Murray's three-tier taxonomy. Based on interviews with 198 diplomats, we have found that scholarly definitions of diplomacy fall short of capturing the wide range of experiences of the modern diplomat. Moreover, our analysis suggests that the meaning that practitioners assign to the term "diplomacy" is central to their understanding of the professional sphere within which they operate. It marks their view of the actors with which they engage, the goals they aim to accomplish, the structures through which they choose to work, the tools that they are likely to use, the competencies that they perceive as essential for their work, and their own professional standing. We conclude that the ways in which diplomats define

diplomacy are a central aspect of their day to day work, and are of particular significance due to the international and cross-cultural dimension of diplomacy, since these reflect the culture of diplomacy as the institution of international society.

Though our population of participants was composed solely of state representatives, and the finding concerning the identity of the actors may point to a certain degree of endogeneity, it is nevertheless important to note that a significant proportion of our interviewees noted that diplomacy today involves working alongside global organizations and attempting to achieve global interdependent objectives. Moreover, one of the distinctive characteristics of diplomacy as the institution of the international society is the regulations that it introduces into international affairs – the set of laws, policies or guidelines as well as norms and etiquette that both states and diplomats are expected to comply with. It also sets a strong ideological tone, which is manifested in an abiding commitment to peacemaking and peacekeeping. As noted earlier, the ambassadors' affiliation – whether state or non-state representatives – holds little relevance to the findings given that ambassadors are distinguished from national leaders by an esprit de corps which is unique to the very essence of the diplomatic practice. In the case of state representatives however, because diplomats are both employees of their states' civil service as well as members of the international society, they assume an intermediary position between the two. This can at times become a point of contention, especially when national and global objectives are at odds. This tension raises obvious questions about how to reconcile national and global priorities, and subsequently, the tools available to diplomats to reconcile such dilemmas. Such questions are beyond the scope of this article, however. Further research on the meaning of diplomacy can benefit from investigating the nexus between the national domain which the diplomat represents and the international arena within which the diplomat operates.

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