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Diplomacy and War

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Summary and Keywords

Scholars acknowledge that there is a close connection between diplomacy and war, but they disagree with regard to the character of this connection—what it is and what it ought to be. In general, diplomacy and war are assumed to be antagonistic and polar opposites. In contrast, the present diplomatic system is founded on the view that state interests may be pursued, international order maintained, and changes effected in it by both diplomacy and war as two faces of a single statecraft. To understand the relationships between diplomacy and war, we must look at the development of the contemporary state system and the evolution of warfare and diplomacy within it. In this context, one important claim is that the foundations of international organizations in general, and the League of Nations in particular, rest on a critique of modern (or “old”) diplomacy. For much of the Cold War, the intellectual currents favored the idea of avoiding nuclear war to gain advantage. In the post-Cold War era, the relationship between diplomacy and war remained essentially the same, with concepts such as “humanitarian intervention” and “military diplomacy” capturing the idea of a new international order. The shocks to the international system caused by events between the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 have intensified the paradoxes of the relationship between diplomacy and war.

Keywords: diplomacy, war, international order, statecraft, international organizations, League of Nations, Cold War, nuclear war, humanitarian intervention, military diplomacy

Introduction

The relationship between diplomacy and war is intimate. There is little disagreement about this. It is with regard to the character of this intimacy – what it is and what it ought to be – that great differences of opinion exist. It is often supposed that diplomacy and war are antagonistic and polar opposites. In late medieval Europe, for example, those who worked as diplomats were often presented as servants of Peace as much as Princes (Mattingly 1955). Earlier, those working as diplomats were regarded as sacred because

they sought to avoid war. Even today diplomats are widely regarded as engaged in settling disputes peacefully and, as the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations expresses it, working for “the promotion of friendly relations among nations.” However, this view of the relationship depends on seeing war as a problem deriving from pathological behavior or wicked actions of human beings. The diplomatic system in which we live today bears the imprint of a very different and political conception of war as both an instrument of policy (Clausewitz 1968) and an institution of the international society of states (Bull 1977). In this view, state interests may be pursued, international order maintained, and changes effected in it by both diplomacy and war as two faces of a single statecraft.

Modern Diplomacy and War

To understand the relationships between diplomacy and war, therefore, “one needs to look at the development of the contemporary state system and the evolution of warfare and diplomacy within it” (Fierke 2005:21). Both became professionalized and organized around the Hobbesian assumption that the members of a political anarchy could legislate away neither their general condition nor their particular differences. This being so, they would always be forced to talk and/or to fight. Writings from within the modern diplomatic tradition, therefore, have always insisted on the close relationship which exists between diplomacy and war. Some, however, have insisted that a preference within diplomatic culture exists for the “resolution of conflict by negotiation and dialogue” (Berridge 2004:187). If war breaks out, in this view, there is a sense in which diplomacy has failed (although this failure is not necessarily to be ascribed to the diplomats; it may be the fault of their masters acting irresponsibly or without restraint). In contrast, others interested in modern diplomacy have observed that there is nothing intrinsically irenic about it (James 2005). Diplomacy may be used to create alliances and build coalitions for wars to maintain the balance of power, for example, or, more controversially, to create a situation in which a war on favorable terms becomes more likely. It can be used in an attempt to avoid wars. And, perhaps most dramatically, it can be used “even in the midst of hostilities” when governments “must be able to send ministers to make overtures of peace or to prepare measures tending to moderate the horrors of war” (Berridge 2004:179).

Students and admirers of modern diplomacy have been reluctant to blame it for the disasters of world wars in the first half of the twentieth century (Nicolson 1966:103). This is in contradistinction to the view that secret diplomacy conducted out of embassies and rigid alliances was culpable. What they have concluded, however, is that those disasters – World War I in particular – were of such a magnitude that they resulted in great, and possibly fatal, damage to the institution of modern diplomacy together with the circumstances and beliefs which sustained it (Butterfield 1953). For them, this is a matter of considerable regret. International relations may be invariably bound up with and driven by considerations of power, they argue, but good diplomacy (by which they mean the modern European variety) can let the tests of resolve and strength play out without

recourse to force of arms. There are even occasions on which skillful diplomacy can allow us to finesse force or, in Butterfield's words, "steal a march on power" by giving rhetorical strengths and moral suasion their chance to enter the fray (Butterfield 1953: 76). For students and practitioners of modern diplomacy, however, force and the potential for waging war successfully provide pull in negotiations (Butterfield 1953). Even former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, while adhering to the liberal internationalist belief that force is acceptable only as the ultimate sanction to be used as a last resort in dealing with a lawbreaking actor, said: "if diplomacy is to succeed, it must be backed both by force and fairness" (Luck 2006:33).

Multilateral Diplomacy, International Organizations, and War

It is often, if not altogether accurately, claimed that the foundations of international organizations in general, and the League of Nations in particular, rest on a critique of modern (or "old") diplomacy. In allowing war to occur in 1914, it had either "failed" to recognize how prohibitively costly modern warfare had become, or it did not care because its practitioners would not suffer the consequences. Thus, the central idea in the aftermath of World War I was that if diplomacy were only conducted in a more transparent fashion with "open covenants, openly arrived at," then it might be possible to usher in at long last a Kantian, cosmopolitan period of "Perpetual Peace." If World War I was the result to some extent of shortcomings in diplomacy, then the League of Nations would provide a diplomatic framework that could be utilized to prevent wars, or to resolve them decisively against the initiators of armed aggression.

As a diplomatic institution, the League was quite successful, resolving about 50 percent of the 60 or so disputes referred to it. These were mainly between minor powers, however, which for different reasons were prepared to settle rather than face the costs of war against their antagonist or possibly everyone else. Great powers, in contrast, found the costs of enforcing collective security more daunting, and the revisionists among their number found the costs of threatening war for what they wanted less so. Thus, by the time of the Munich crisis in 1938, the British and the French (albeit with less enthusiasm) had opted for the old diplomatic technique of appeasement and no longer looked to the League to resolve such crises (Guzzini 1998). For multiple reasons, the League had been unable either to replace war with diplomacy or to restrict it to the role of providing collective enforcement for an agreed-upon international order. By 1939, it appeared clear that war and diplomacy remained in an intimate and complementary relationship as instruments of statecraft and institutions of an international society operating in balance of power terms (Watson 1983:117). By 1945, it appeared equally clear that diplomacy had been subordinated to total warfare on behalf of unlimited objectives and universal projects. Once the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers had been achieved, it was unclear what would follow.

The UN’s Congress-like structure reflected this combination of continuity and change together with lessons learned from the failure of the League. The realities of power in general, and the strength of the great powers in particular, were to be harnessed in the Security Council to the task of maintaining international order and, more particularly, crushing the previous aggressors if they attempted to mount another challenge; old measure to deal with old threats in an ostensibly new way. The principal conflicts with which the UN had to deal, however, the Cold War and the proxy wars which emerged where the imperatives of the “Great Contest” (Deutscher 1960) and decolonization intertwined, presented a far more complex picture of the relationships between diplomacy and war. The competition between the USSR and the USA, for example, together with the scale of the destruction by nuclear weapons which it threatened, seemed to subordinate warfare to a strategic and abstracted form of diplomatic bargaining which, in some views, would continue even once a nuclear exchange had begun (Schelling 1960; Kahn 1962). For much of the Cold War, and prompted by the successful handling of the Cuban missile crisis, the intellectual currents ran strongly towards the idea of avoiding such wars and away from fighting them to gain advantage (Freedman 2003), although a counter-current concerned with war-fighting and victory persisted and strengthened towards the end (Grey 1999). However, events and, more importantly, non-events dictated that the relationship between diplomacy and nuclear war remained an abstract or potential one after a dramatic and terrible beginning of the nuclear age at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The so-called proxy wars of national liberation and indirect superpower competition, in contrast, seemed to subordinate diplomacy to war. The efforts of strategists and statesmen to put war back in the diplomatic bag as an instrument of state policy by replacing the focus on total (and, hence, impossible) wars with limited (and, hence, possible) wars were unsuccessful (Kissinger 1957). In Korea, Vietnam, and the wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors, for example, diplomacy became an instrument of military and political warfare unbounded by clear starting or finishing declarations, and limited only by the desire of the powerful not to do everything, or even let their subordinates do everything, in their power (Quandt 2005). The end of the Cold War did little to clarify the relationship between diplomacy and war or, more accurately, it provided clear evidence for multiple interpretations.

Diplomacy and War after the Cold War

In the short to medium term, at least, perhaps the least compelling of these interpretations was the one denying that events in the USSR had heralded a revolution in international affairs. A great power had collapsed or, perhaps, merely undertaken a strategic retreat. Sooner or later Russia would recover or other great powers would emerge to challenge the USA (Mearsheimer 2001). The “unipolar moment” would pass, and both diplomacy and war would resume their previous roles, modified only, perhaps, by developments in technologies with military applications (Krauthammer 1991). This has not yet occurred in any sustained way. Whether this is so because the USA is so strong

that rivaling it appears impossible, or because great power politics have become a thing of the past, remains unclear. The latter sentiment has been far more influential and was well captured by the “new political thinking” of the Gorbachev era to the effect that a common humanity facing common problems could not afford the costly and dangerous rivalries of the past. Despite the political fate of its author and subsequent events in his country, the mood of his arguments carried forward into the UN’s own “Agenda for Peace” in the early 1990s. In this, diplomacy would become a management exercise and war transmute into peacekeeping, both on behalf of a developing and increasingly representative world order. In a more politicized version of this account, the New World Order, as presented by President Bush senior, appeared in hegemonic, rather than human, terms. Whether it was in favor of or opposed to an order underwritten by American power, however, the relationship between diplomacy and war remained remarkably similar. Concepts like “humanitarian intervention” and “military diplomacy” captured the idea of a new international order, with new standards of behavior for its members, being enforced in the Balkans, the Persian Gulf, the Korean peninsula and sub-Saharan Africa, in the face of opposition from those variously presented as “dead-enders,” counter-hegemonic resisters, the representatives of an emergent global civil society, and civilizations.

Diplomacy and War in a World of Many Actors

The shocks to the international system provided by events between Al-Qaeda’s attacks on the USA in 2001 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 have not resolved the tensions between the interpretations above. Rather, as the list of those contesting dominant conceptions of the contemporary international order indicates, they have sharpened the paradoxes and increased our uncertainty. Claims to a congruency between humanitarian and cosmopolitan conceptions of a new world order, on the one hand, and a hegemonic world order project, on the other, have become harder to sustain for the time being thanks to a spell of American unilateralism which has run into difficulties. Yet there is little evidence that other great powers are taking anything more than tactical advantage of these difficulties. There has been no resumption, for example, of the sort of hard balancing of the past in which war and the threat of war were supposed to be tamed and harnessed in the service of diplomacy’s preoccupations with order and peace. Rather, the Clausewitzian continuum between war and politics, in which they both constitute the “other means” to each other, and by which the ends of statecraft are pursued, is ascendant. War, politics, and diplomacy increasingly fold seamlessly into one another, yet on behalf of whom and to what ends? The comprehensive efforts which have been made to squeeze out the idea that war is a normal undertaking in an international society of states and to reduce the number of circumstances in which recourse to it may be regarded as legitimate have been matched by the rise of the idea that force may be used by others and that everyone may use it to advance ideas, values, and beliefs about how humankind should be organized.

At the heart of the modernist conception of the relationship between diplomacy and war was the idea that the former might moderate the dynamics and consequences of raw power politics between states, but that it could not remove them entirely. To paraphrase Martin Wight, if one recognized that war in general was an ever-present possibility, then one would improve one's chances of avoiding particular wars through effective diplomacy (Porter and Wight 1991). In much contemporary thinking about diplomacy and war, in contrast, a general peace is assumed to be an ever-present possibility, and one's chances of achieving particular peaces through effective diplomacy are enhanced by recognizing that this is so. However, the prospects for conducting successful wars – in the form of peacekeeping and peace-building operations or violent acts of resistance or emancipation – are similarly enhanced by claiming that they are waged to defend, restore, or achieve peace. Insofar as such wars appear to have been less destructive and costly to date than those of the twentieth century, this state of affairs may be regarded as an improvement. However, it often places diplomacy in the position of calling for war – albeit small wars – to sustain or achieve a general peace. Should the required wars become bigger, because those against whom they are directed have become stronger, then present trends in the relationship between diplomacy and war may begin to look less benign.

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Links to Digital Materials

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Finnish Conflict Management Initiative. At **www.cmi.fi**, accessed Apr. 19, 2009. The site focuses on the role of the Finnish Conflict Management Initiative, which was founded in 2000 by former Finnish President Marti Ahtisaari. It publishes excellent reports including *The Private Diplomatic Survey of 2008*, which provides invaluable information and a map about the activities of 14 key private diplomatic actors engaged in conflict resolution.

OSCE Conflict Prevention Center. At **www.osce.org/cpc/**, accessed Apr. 10, 2009. This site deals with the efforts of a major European regional organization to prevent and resolve conflict. The Conflict Prevention Center of the OSCE provides support for the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, and for the missions of the organization in the field. It works to implement confidence-building measures as well as post-conflict reconstruction.

Conflict News Browser. At **www.crinfo.org/gcsearch/news/news_preconfigured.jp**, accessed Apr. 24, 2009. Click on diplomacy in the index. The site provides comprehensive information on the relationship between diplomacy and war, culled from 15 English language newspapers around the world, focusing on past and contemporary news stories

about diplomatic efforts to end conflict. The reportage goes right up to the current efforts of the Obama administration to engage the Iranians in a diplomatic dialogue.

Diplomacy Introduction. At **www.crinfo.org/action/recommended.jsp?1st_id=277**, accessed Apr. 24, 2009. The site contains summaries of relevant books and also web pages that deal with such issues as preventive diplomacy, the use of force in diplomacy (coercive diplomacy), multitrack and two-track diplomacy, and the lessons learned from international diplomacy in attempting to prevent genocide in Burundi.

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