Introduction

When things go wrong in international affairs, we frequently find people talking about a failure of diplomacy. When something difficult needs to be accomplished, or when a settlement or general improvement in international relations is in prospect, more and better diplomacy is often called for. Newspaper and television editorials, in particular, assure us that the elements of this or that particular international problem are quite clear, as is the range of possible solutions. Governments have committed. Peoples are supportive. It is now, they assert, up to the diplomats. Not only are diplomacy and diplomats important, however, after the best part of a century of apparent decline, the demand for both of them is currently on the rise. It is so in the senses outlined above. It is often asserted, for example, that foreign policy failures, especially those of the United States (US) in the Middle East and in the "War on Terror," were in some sense caused, or at least made worse, by a lack of effective diplomacy. We even find those closely associated with these failures almost penitently declaring their determination to try more diplomacy in the future. However, this rise is also evidenced in a number of other ways. Both new countries and aspirant ones work hard to obtain diplomatic recognition and build new diplomatic services. New international actors seek changes in the practices of international relations that will permit them to acquire similar sorts of recognition and representation. Even individual people can join in some diplomatic conversations on the Internet and create a virtual diplomatic presence as impressive as those created by the foreign ministries and embassies of states.

While diplomacy and diplomats are regarded as important, however, and the demand for both is currently on the rise, quite what diplomacy is remains a mystery. To be sure, we have a sense that it is a way in which countries talk to and negotiate with one other. We also have images of embassies and ambassadors, consulates and consuls, and the presence of diplomats on a variety of public and private occasions, seated at tables with colleagues, walking with (or slightly behind) their political

masters, caught by journalists in airport arrivals and departures, or giving careful interviews on television. However, the distinguishing characteristics of diplomatic practice (if there are any) remain unspecified except for a general sense that they lie outside what is regarded as the normal range of human interactions. In the absence of this specification, therefore, diplomacy acquires the character of a magical balm-like "political will" which, when called for and applied to a problem in sufficient quantities, will in some mysterious way get things moving and make things right.[1]

Magic and mystery or, more properly, a belief in the former and an acceptance of the latter, certainly play a part in diplomacy's effectiveness, and the term has a talismanic quality. We consecrate attempts to negotiate an important agreement, achieve an interest or obtain recognition, for example, as diplomacy in the hope that this will help to secure what we want and avert what we fear. We may also identify developments that we do not want or do not like as the fruits of diplomacy as a black art, since a talisman can be used for good and bad purposes. In both its good and its bad applications, however, we use the term diplomacy in the hope that it may help convince others and possibly ourselves that a mysterious power is at work. The question arises, therefore, is there any more to diplomacy and diplomats than this? To say they have a talismanic quality is surely to imply that there is, for there must be some reason why people think them powerful. Even magicians have their own rules and magic its accounts of how and why it works. Yet here mystery is compounded by a puzzle, for neither the diplomats nor those who study them provide much insight into how and why diplomacy works.

In this regard, the former may be forgiven. One does not ask conjurors how they perform their tricks. Those who study them do not get off so easily. They certainly provide corroborative expert testimony for the talismanic qualities of diplomacy and diplomats. Beyond this, however, students of diplomacy tend to differ only over whether its sustaining myths should be protected or exposed. The minority position, taken by diplomatic historians, for example, is less interested in explaining diplomacy's mysteries as in charting the exploits of those who are said to

[1] An example of the use of "political will" in this sense may be found in Raymond Tanter, *Rogue Regimes: Terrorism and Proliferation* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), p. 202.

understand them without explanation. Unlike Dean Acheson, many students of diplomacy, particularly the historically inclined, accept the idea that the special skills of the diplomat involve a "mysterious wisdom, too arcane for the layman" which is derived from the sovereign character of those they represent.[2] In contrast, the majority position taken by those who have escaped the archives and embraced the international world beyond the Vienna *règlement* approaches the mysteries of diplomacy in a different way. The thrust of their work is to say that the more closely one looks at diplomacy – at its history, its sociology and its psychology – the more one comes to realize that, like fog, it cannot properly be said to exist in the way it appears from a distance. It consists merely of people doing the normal things like bargaining, representing, lobbying and, of course, communicating we find in all walks of life.

Neither buttressing diplomacy's mysteries nor seeking to normalize the activities of diplomats is a good idea in my view. The former involves viewing diplomacy as exclusively a state practice and diplomats through the prism of how three centuries of modern European interstate relations were presented, and it is now both impossible and wrong. It is impossible because it inexorably forces students of diplomacy in the minority position to defend claims at odds with a flood of material and social facts growing stronger every day. It is wrong because they can only manage this by ignoring more and more of the international relations we must and ought to talk about. The majority position in contrast, that of normalizing diplomacy, is quite possible but still wrong. It is possible because it does involve encountering and engaging these developments. It lets us see, for example, how more and more people are involved in the sorts of activities which used to be the exclusive preserve of state diplomats, and it lets us see the great changes which have taken place in what even state diplomats actually do. It is wrong, however, in that it suggests that diplomats are now simply operatives, like other operatives, in the great transnational social networks of power and influence which function both between and within countries. Insofar as this position is adhered to, it may

[2] Acheson's reaction described in Robert D. Schulzinger, *The Making of the Diplomatic Mind: The Training, Outlook, and Style of United States Foreign Service Officers: 1908–1931* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), p. 142.

contribute to the processes by which we see and produce more people whom we call diplomats in the world. Insofar as it denies that there is anything particular and distinctive to diplomatic practice, however, these diplomats will be far less effective than they might otherwise be at delivering the sort of magic for which expert opinion calls and which common wisdom hopes when things get difficult.

Of course, the mystery of diplomacy and source of its effectiveness do not reside in any magical powers that people may believe it to have. Rather, they are to be found in the distinctive ordering of familiar understandings, values and priorities that is particular to diplomacy as a social practice. What follows, therefore, is my attempt to make explicit what common wisdom hopes for, namely that there is something called diplomacy that can produce desirable effects when other ways of conducting human relations are regarded as inappropriate or have failed. Indeed, I shall argue that it is possible to identify a specifically diplomatic tradition of international thought from which the generation of diplomatic theory which can say interesting and useful things about international relations and human relations in general is possible.

Theory and international relations

To say that I am attempting diplomatic theory of international relations requires that I say something about social theory in general and international theory in particular. What do we understand ourselves to be doing when we engage in theorizing of this sort? There are no universal criteria as to what constitutes good social theory. Thus, there is no single answer to this question with which everyone will agree. In principle, as students of international relations, we seek to understand and, perhaps, explain the occurrence of significant phenomena in our field with the intention of having what we have found out and what we think about it used, more or less directly, to make the world a better place for some or all its people. Knowledge about international relations is accumulated by discoveries, while understanding is deepened by the interpretation and discussion of their possible significances. In practice, however, the processes by which theories are generated and considered are not straightforward. No general agreement exists among those who study international relations about what we are studying or how it should be studied, and when attempts are made to secure general agreement in this

regard, they often produce a counter-reaction or are simply ignored. Indeed it sometimes seems as though, beyond sub-groups of the like-minded, we barely listen to each other. As for the wider world, it takes notice of a few of us only when we have something useful or relevant to say to projects, or on grounds, which should often make us feel distinctly uneasy.

The implications of these observations for the question, "what are we doing when we do International Relations (IR)?" may be captured by imagining a social gathering of members of the attentive public in an early fifth-century Roman provincial town.[3] They are considering a response to the barbarians soon to be at the gates. The discussion is led off by the more policy-relevant types polarized between those who call for more legions and those who maintain that legions are never the answer. It soon becomes derailed, however, by someone pointing out that, as a result of imbalances between imperial revenues and expenditures which are probably structural, more legions are simply not an option. To which someone else adds that even if they were, it would be no good because few people are willing to serve as soldiers anymore, and those who do won't fight. With the benefit of distance we can see how vital their deliberations must have seemed to the participants, and how the proto-political economist and proto-sociologist might have had a deeper, but not necessarily more useful, understanding of what was going on. We can also see how little these deliberations mattered in terms of the outcome to the crisis that prompted them (although, since this is a book about diplomacy, the story ends with a successful parlay which allows the barbarians to enter the town without burning it or killing everybody). Finally, we can see whose problems attract my attention, not, for example, the deliberations held in what I imagine to be the gloomy, brutal encampments soon to be established outside the town.

All this is going on when we "do IR." We are always involved in the world of international relations (ir/IR), whether by choice or implication. We may be influential in it, but rarely for the right reasons or in the way that we would wish, and never decisively because ir/IR is an

[3] I shall follow the convention of putting the academic discipline of field of study in upper case and the practice studied in lower case. Thus, International Relations is the study of international relations. The same convention will be followed for abbreviations, thus IR. Abbreviations will not be used in denoting the practice in question.

open-ended process. As to the debates one can have about which theoretical and methodological approaches to take, therefore, I have little to say beyond declaring that I am an adherent of Smithsonian pluralism rather than de Mesquita monism.[4] There may be a best way to get at different kinds of truths about international relations, although I am not even sure about that, since people may differ on even how the same sort of thing is best apprehended. I am sure, however, that there is no single best way of getting at all of the things in which we are interested.

My own point of departure is to paraphrase one of Hedley Bull's attempts to identify international theory. Diplomatic theory may be understood simply as the leading ideas of diplomats and those who study them that have contributed to our thinking about diplomacy and international relations.[5] Thus, and although they would have made better titles, I am not offering *a* diplomatic theory of international relations, still less *the* diplomatic theory of international relations by which all significant international phenomena can be explained in a few sparse and tightly related causal propositions. To be sure, my diplomatic theory attempts to generate some related propositions from these leading thoughts about diplomacy and diplomats, but it does not seek to capture and explain the whole world of international phenomena in terms of these propositions. It merely asks us to explore how these propositions might affect our view of that world and how to live in it. For all of its apparent simplicity, however, my adaptation of Bull's leading-thoughts-and-thinkers approach to diplomatic theory requires further clarification. It does so because it invites us to consider at least three types of thinking about diplomacy, in only two of which I am interested.

[4] Former ISA Presidents Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Steve Smith used the opportunity provided by the bully pulpit of their presidential addresses to lay out their sense of how the field ought to progress, the former claiming that scientific methods generated better knowledge in terms of both yielding truths and practical utility, the latter claiming that different approaches yielded different forms of knowledge and that claims for the inherent superiority of one form of knowledge over all others should be treated with great caution. See "Presidential Address by President-Elect Bruce Bueno De Mesquita," *ISA Convention*, Chicago, February 22, 2001 and "Presidential Address by President-Elect Steve Smith," *ISA Convention*, Portland, Oregon, February 27, 2003.

[5] Hedley Bull, "Theory and Practice of International Relations, 1648–1789, Introduction," in Brunello Vigezzi, *The British Committee on the Theory of International Politics (1954–1985)* (Milan: Unicopli, 2005), p. 310.

First, there is what a number of people, already on the brink of closing this book in disappointment, take to be diplomatic theory – namely the relatively narrow and applied body of knowledge pertaining to the right conduct of professional diplomats in their relations with one another and other servants of the states to which they are accredited.[6] Of diplomatic theory in the narrow sense, I have nothing else to say other than it is derived from reconciling general diplomatic assumptions with the historically specific circumstances of the modern state system. It sets out one way of doing diplomacy and, under certain conditions, a very good way at that. Secondly, there is what international theorists in Bull's sense have had to say about international relations and the place of diplomacy and diplomats within them, that is to say diplomatic theory as a subset of international theory. I am very interested in this, of course, but principally as a target of criticism. International theory provides or, at least, implies theories of diplomacy, whereas what I develop is diplomatic theory of international relations and, as it turns out, diplomatic theory of international theory too. Thirdly, my paraphrasing of Bull implies diplomatic theory in the sense of what diplomats themselves have had to say about international relations. They have had a great deal to say. However, because of their circumstances and priorities, this often appears in forms – autobiographies, diaries and histories, for example – which do not lend themselves well to the conversations and debates of theoretical discourse. It is my contention, nevertheless, that a coherent and distinctive set of propositions about international relations – diplomatic theory in this third sense – can be derived if not from the utterances of diplomats always, then from the place which is distinctively theirs in international relations.

Outline of the argument

I begin by critiquing what the academic study of International Relations (IR) has had to say about diplomacy and diplomats. To do so, I borrow heavily on the English School and, in particular, on the idea of traditions

[6] See, e.g., John Wood and Jean Serres, *Diplomatic Ceremonial and Protocol: Principles, Procedures and Practices* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), Elmer Plischke (ed.), *Modern Diplomacy: The Art and the Artisans* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy, 1979), and, of course, Earnest Satow, *Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1979). From this point, I shall not use "diplomatic theory" in this narrow sense.

of international thought associated with Martin Wight.[7] This approach assumes that when we examine inquiry and debate over time, those engaged in it can be grouped on the basis of shared sets of assumptions about important questions, ways of answering them, and significant findings. It is not unproblematic for, while these traditions seem to take on a life of their own as patterned and distinctive ways of thinking with their own histories, this is not the case. They are always identified as such by someone and, as such, they are always shaped by the identifier's own priorities and way of seeing. Even Wight's own organization of the traditions, for example, operates like one of those tilting maze games where all movement seems complex but the slope carries you steadily in one particular direction. Thus, traditions of thought are always contestable, often contested and significant only to the extent that they secure a consensus from others about their usefulness and reasonableness. While each particular tradition may be challenged, however, people do seem drawn to the general activity of identifying traditions because doing so and maintaining that such traditions exist seems more useful than maintaining that they do not.

This being so, I employ Wight's schema from his essay in *Diplomatic Investigations*. In this, he suggests that Western thought about international relations can be broadly organized into three great traditions.[8] The first, which he identifies as a Machiavellian or realist tradition, presents the world in terms of interests and power. Its focus is on explaining why the world is the way it is, why this must be so, and how to survive and prosper in it. The second, which Wight calls the Grotian or rationalist tradition, presents the world in terms of interests and rights. Its focus is on exploring attempts to reform and improve international relations by the application of reason to the problems in which their conduct results. And the third, which he calls the Kantian or revolutionary tradition,

[7] For useful histories of the English School see Timothy Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A history of the English School* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1998) and Vigezzi, *The British Committee on the Theory of International Politics (1954–1985)*. For an extensive bibliography of English School research and much more see *The English School* website at www.leeds.ac.uk/polis/englishschool/.

[8] Martin Wight, "Western Values in International Relations," in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 89–131 and Martin Wight (Brian Porter and Gabriele Wright, eds.), *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (Leicester: Leicester University Press/Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1991).

presents the world in terms of power and right. It proceeds from the assumptions that the existing arrangement of relations is itself the source of most problems, and its focus is upon how people, as moral beings or agents of a historical process, might overthrow or transform these relations.[9] In successive chapters of the first section I examine how diplomacy and diplomats appear in the theory and practice of each of these traditions. I argue that they play important parts in all three, but ones for which each tradition cannot fully account in its own terms. Instead, a common theme emerges. Not only do the operations of diplomacy and diplomats remain mysterious in all three traditions, they are also presented as disappointing, albeit in very different ways.

In the second section, I examine how diplomats look back at this world of competing traditions of international thought making their own sense of how it works, what may reasonably expected of it and, thus, what may be expected of them. Again, I use the traditions of thought idea as presented by the English School. This time, however, I rely on what may be termed Richard Little's corollary to Wight's exposition.[10] It is tempting to regard the traditions presented above as competing or contending approaches to International Relations which are, in principle at least, mutually exclusive. Something like the trinity appears in many college texts, for example, as a menu from which, at some point in the future if we are to be serious about IR, difficult choices will have to be made.[11] In Wight's approach, however, the three traditions are not presented as contending approaches to capturing some essential truth about international relations and the people who undertake them, nor even as watertight intellectual traditions in themselves. As Little makes clear, the traditions co-exist in more-or-less permanent tension with one another as the markers of a space within which international conversations and actions are undertaken and undergo further interpretation by theorists, practitioners and ordinary people alike.[12]

[9] I will refer to these as the realist, rationalist and radical traditions from this point.
[10] Richard Little, "The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, 6, 3 (2000), pp. 395–422.
[11] See, e.g., Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi, *International Relations Theory: Realism, Pluralism, Globalism* (2nd edn.) (New York: Macmillan, 1993) and James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., *Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey* (2nd edn.) (Cambridge, MA: Harper Row, 1981).
[12] Little, "The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations," pp. 395–422.

Little's corollary, I argue, makes it possible to identify a distinctive diplomatic tradition of thought from which diplomatic theory of international relations can be developed. It does so by implying a place to stand from which to make diplomatic sense of a world populated by people who think about international relations and conduct them in terms of any or all of the three traditions outlined above. At the heart of the diplomatic tradition lies the assumption that people live not as such, but as peoples in various sorts of groups. This *plural fact* both engenders and is engendered by a value placed on living separately. The diplomatic tradition thus presents peoples as living in *conditions of separateness* from one another, and even where they are not physically separated, a sense of separateness remains a dimension of their relationships. These conditions give rise to a distinctive form of human relations – *relations of separateness*, and diplomacy develops to manage these relations. Those whom we regard as diplomats occupy positions between human communities that make possible a specifically *diplomatic understanding* of the world. It is an understanding that privileges the plural character of human existence, the plural character of the ideas and arguments by which people make sense of their lives both to themselves and to others, and it treats as axiomatic the proposition that relations between groups are different from those within them.

This *diplomatic understanding* of human relations, in its turn, makes possible *thinking diplomatically* about their content, and especially about the sorts of arguments that people get into about the world, how it should be, and their places in it. Between groups of people, arguments cannot be definitively settled and the balance of virtue cannot be definitively determined in the senses in which both of these are usually understood, nor do they need to be. *Thinking diplomatically*, therefore, privileges the maintenance of relations – peaceful relations at that – over whatever those relations are purportedly about. The existence of this commitment to *raison de système* – keeping the whole show going – in addition to or above *raison d'état*, *raison de souverain* or even *raison de peuple* is extraordinarily difficult to establish. We get intimations of it, however, in the paradox by which actual diplomats are often criticized both for going against the grain of what everybody really wants and taking the line of least resistance instead of doing the right thing. What they are actually doing, I will argue, is attempting to manage three sorts of diplomatic relations: *encounter relations* between peoples meeting for the first time; *discovery relations* between peoples