1 Introduction

Even though I have never seen the King,
I know whether he is a sage or a fool
When I read his letter or I meet his envoy.

from ‘The Hare Bluffs the Elephant’, part of the Pancatantra, an Indian book of folk wisdom

The ancient Indians talked of kings holding a ‘triple power’ of physical strength in money and arms, the knowledge that comes from good counsel and intelligence, and endeavour, by which they meant bravery and effort. But they were also well aware of the significance of diplomacy for dealing with enemies. In the Pancatantra, the king of the hares drives away a herd of elephants, not by threatening force, but by sending an experienced negotiator, Vijaya, to persuade them to leave. The tale, though short, contains a number of insights into the best way of conducting diplomacy. These include the importance of speaking with care, being succinct and adhering to instructions, if diplomatic missions are to be successful: ‘For an envoy can build an alliance, so also can he split allies apart.’ The tale also underlines the wisdom of rulers respecting the inviolability of envoys if diplomacy is to function: ‘Envoys only repeat what they have been told. Kings must not kill them.’ The modern world may be much more complex, with the rights of embassies now enshrined in the 1961 Vienna Convention, but the same basic truths remain. Just as economic wealth, military strength, competent intelligence services, efficient government and social cohesion may impact on the success of a country’s foreign policy, so does the way it conducts its diplomacy. Envoys may still build alliances and split enemies apart. Both roles were well illustrated during the presidency of Richard Nixon in the early 1970s, when diplomacy brought about the ‘Opening to China’. This drew China towards the United States while hardening the rift between Beijing and Moscow. For America it also offset the image of helplessness

1 Adapted from the translation by Patrick Olivelle (Oxford University Press, 1997), 115.
2 Ibid., 114–17.
and military failure created by the Vietnam War, suggesting that the country could once again master the international environment.

This book is about what can be learnt from studying the diplomatic practice of one country in a given time period and is designed to throw light on two main questions. First, how was diplomacy organised in order to put into effect the country's foreign policy? To this end it looks at the reform of the British Diplomatic Service and Foreign Office as well as the use of such institutions as ambassadors, envoys, summits and state visits. Second, a subject that must be at the centre of any historical study, how did diplomatic practice change over time to make it more effective? It will become clear that, even in a comparatively short period, practice did indeed change in important ways, especially with an expansion of the roles played by professional diplomats, a growing frequency of multilateral summits and innovations in the way states communicated. Thus, in contrast to most works of international history, which dwell on particular political strategies, geographical issues or conflicts, the questions here revolve around how diplomacy was actually conducted, focusing on the United Kingdom under the administrations of Alec Douglas-Home, Harold Wilson and Edward Heath in the years 1963–76. It is a book about the means of diplomacy rather than the ends. It is not, therefore, a traditional study of foreign policy in the sense of studying crises, conflicts and particular international relationships. It is not an analysis of a particular set of decisions on a given area of policy. Neither is it a study of


Defining diplomacy

In an everyday sense, diplomacy may simply be defined as ‘tact, skill or cunning in dealing with people’. Such attributes are certainly of value to professional diplomats, but the definition is too vague to provide a guide for academic study. In the United States ‘diplomacy’ is also frequently used as a synonym for ‘world affairs’ or ‘foreign policy’. This is the sense in which it is used in Henry Kissinger’s study, *Diplomacy*, which is really a history of international relations since the Congress of Vienna. But the value of this usage is diluted by the very fact that it confuses diplomacy with something much broader. Another former US secretary of state, George Shultz, gets nearer to the mark when he writes that ‘diplomacy is the method – some might say the art – by which relations between nations are managed. It is the manner, as distinct from the content, of foreign policy.’ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it more fully as ‘the management of international relations by negotiation; the method by which these relations are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys; the business of art of the diplomatist; skill . . . in the conduct of international intercourse and negotiations’. Surprisingly, it was only first.


7 *Collins Concise Dictionary* (Collins, 1990), 353.


used in this sense by Burke as late as 1796. It is this sense which will be used to guide the analysis here.

Harold Nicolson, in his seminal work Diplomacy of 1939, also recommended the Oxford English Dictionary definition, though he used the term ‘diplomatic practice’ to differentiate his focus on the methods and structure of diplomacy, from foreign policy in general. Geoffrey Berridge, one of the leading contemporary experts, makes the definition in a rather different way: ‘diplomacy consists of communication between officials designed to promote foreign policy either by formal agreement or tacit adjustment’.

This has the advantage of differentiating it from the use of force, propaganda and law in the international sphere. It also leads on, as does the Oxford English Dictionary definition, to the study of the methods of communication in the international sphere. These include the use of foreign ministries and diplomatic services, the employment of ambassadors and envoys, and the official contacts between governments either bilaterally or multilaterally, including via international organisations. The levels involved can range from the lowest official in a diplomatic post up to the head of state. Before Burke, diplomacy was usually referred to as ‘negotiation’ and, while today this gives too narrow an idea of what diplomacy involves, there is no doubt that the promotion of international negotiations is part of the diplomat’s role. International negotiation is itself part of a process, a relationship between different entities. In the modern world the entities are generally states, but the term also includes international organisations and protagonists in civil wars. Negotiation is most likely to be successful when relationships have been carefully nurtured, which takes us back to the role of ambassadors and envoys, summits and state visits in promoting contacts and understanding.

The study of diplomatic practice

The study of diplomatic practice has been growing in Europe and North America in recent decades, with a few journals now dedicated to it.

10 Burke adapted the word from the French diplomatie, but even this was only used from 1791 according to Paul Robert, Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française (Paris: Société du Nouveau Littére, 1968).

Much of the focus has been on contemporary developments, such as the increasing role of non-governmental organisations in international discourse and the growth of ‘public diplomacy’, whereby international actors seek to influence the press and popular opinion. There are several works on the changing role of foreign ministries, diplomatic services and ambassadors since the Cold War. Yet diplomacy still forms only a small part of the study of international relations, where the focus tends to be either on the nature of international relationships and general explanations of its interactions, or on the processes of foreign policymaking. Nonetheless, it is sometimes seen as highly significant. Hans Morgenthau, for example, as a key writer of the ‘Realist’ school, emphasised the importance of states and power in the international system; but the closing chapter of his seminal work, *Politics among Nations*, was dedicated to diplomacy. Here there was a message of hope, in that ‘the ultimate ideal of international life – that is, to transcend itself in a supranational society – must await its realisation from the techniques of persuasion, negotiation and pressure, which are the traditional instruments of diplomacy’. Where Morgenthau believed that an international ‘society’ had yet to be created, others have argued that transnational elements like trade, domestic factors and moral concerns have already created such a society. Here the significance of diplomacy is obvious. Members of the ‘English School’ effectively adopt a ‘constructivist’ approach to this question, accepting that states are the primary actors in the international field, but arguing that these ‘construct’ their interests from interacting socially with one another: ‘A state does not know how to act because it is a state; it acquires its identity through interaction with other states.’ Viewed in this light, diplomacy, like the balance of power and international law, is a primary institution of


14 This is not a theoretical work, so theory is touched on here only briefly. For a fuller discussion of the place of diplomacy in theoretical approaches, see Mai’a K. Davis Cross, *The European Diplomatic Corps* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 13–22.


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international society, a significant factor in the way states interact but also a way in which they are ‘socialised’. Embassies are set up in other countries because this reflects the fact that a state is part of international society and is recognised by others as such; their very existence helps to reproduce the international system or society.17

Turning to historians, the literature dedicated to diplomatic method is again quite limited in volume. In addition to a few general histories of diplomatic practice that go back to the ancient world,18 there are some studies of particular eras,19 various works on international organisations or multilateral negotiations,20 and a small number of thematic books that combine political, scientific and historical methods to look at certain elements of diplomatic practice.21 More numerous are biographies of diplomats22 and accounts of international negotiations and summit


meetings. However, these works tend to provide a detailed, historical account of their subjects and the attention paid to diplomatic practice is actually minimal; they also tend to highlight a few high-profile personalities or conferences, rather than giving an appreciation of the richness of the field. This paucity of work is not surprising, since most international historians concentrate their attention on the foreign policy of particular governments or on particular wars and crises, alliance relationships or regional problems.

That is not to say that the study of international history is in any way narrow. It has expanded over recent generations, away from old-style ‘diplomatic history’, which tended to limit itself to dry exchanges between diplomats, or ‘what one clerk said to another clerk’, as one critic put it. It now embraces such broad background factors to decision-making as economics, changing technology, belief systems and mindsets, the psychology of key figures, bureaucratic structures and cultural influences. Many of these factors have their source in the domestic experience of states rather than in the international arena, although international historians have also explored the links between foreign policy and such areas as defence, propaganda and intelligence. Indeed ‘the history of international relations’, as the subject area is increasingly known, has tended to become an amalgam of historical approaches and themes. Yet, in both traditional diplomatic history and its more ‘international’ form, an interest in diplomatic practice has been rare.25 There are a number of books about diplomatic practice in the medieval period,26 but in the modern era it is almost as if diplomatic practice is

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25 A good overview of the field is Patrick Finney, ed., *Palgrave Advances in International History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), although this only touches on diplomatic method in the essay by Thomas Otte, ‘Diplomacy and Decision-making’, 46–7. Also helpful is David Reynolds, ‘International History, the Cultural Turn and the Diplomatic Twitch’, *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 3 (2006), 75–91.

‘the missing dimension’ of what – ironically – used to be called diplo-
matic history.27

However, changes in diplomatic practice have clearly affected the way
international relations are conducted, as a brief mention of some key
twentieth-century developments will show. In 1900 there were already
several international organisations, but they tended to focus on technical
issues such as postal services, the telegraph or air navigation. There were
multilateral conferences, like those in The Hague concerned with dis-
armament, but leading ministers seldom attended them. The last great,
multilateral, ministerial conference of the European powers had been
back in 1878 in Berlin. Even bilateral conferences, where a minister
from one country visited another for official discussions, were rare. ‘The
almost invariable practice’, wrote Maurice Hankey, long-serving secre-
tary to the British Cabinet, ‘was to deal through intermediaries – skilled,
tactful and experienced intermediaries, but not those persons on whom
the ultimate responsibility rested.’28 The main ‘intermediaries’ were the
permanent ambassadors posted by the great powers to each other’s
capitals. The drawbacks of this system were exposed in the July 1914
crisis, when diplomats were overwhelmed by the pace of events, and
during the First World War it proved necessary to hold regular meetings
with allied countries at various levels in order to concert policy. The
British and French premiers first met in July 1915, and Lloyd George,
who became prime minister in December 1916, was a keen advocate of
‘conference diplomacy’. The end of the war, of course, saw the creation
of a permanent, global organisation, the League of Nations, whose
assemblies were frequently attended by foreign ministers. The League
was central to ideas that the balance of power politics of pre-1914 could
be replaced by a ‘new diplomacy’ based on collective security.

More frequent summits and more numerous international organisa-
tions: these developments in diplomatic practice soon became central to
the way international discourse was conducted. It would be difficult to
imagine a discussion of Chamberlain’s appeasement policy without the
series of summits he attended with Hitler in 1938, culminating at
Munich, or a discussion of British imperial decline without reference to
the Commonwealth. After the war, Britain was one of five members of

27 The term used to be reserved for the history of intelligence: Christopher Andrew and
David Dilks, eds., The Missing Dimension: Governments and intelligence communities in the
twentieth century (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).
28 Lord Hankey, Diplomacy by Conference (London: Ernest Benn, 1946), 12.
the United Nations Security Council, a member of NATO and, eventually, a member of the European Community, all of which had a profound effect on its foreign policy. The growth of summity and multilateral negotiations in turn affected the role of ambassadors, who also found their position threatened by the increasing use of non-professional ‘special envoys’, and the creation of embassies in ‘disguised’ form.

Structure

The current book focuses on such changes as those discussed above in diplomatic practice. It takes a different approach from most existing studies of this subject, one that is narrow in a chronological sense and in its focus on just one country, but broad in the aspects of diplomatic practice that it embraces. Rather than looking at one-off, prominent examples of diplomats, summits or state visits, it adopts a ‘bottom-up’ approach that tries to give a fuller appreciation of their number, frequency and types. The period surveyed is not long, but neither is it too short to get an idea of changes in diplomatic practice. The book does not claim to be an exhaustive study of British diplomatic practice in the period; it has little to say, for example, on the work of junior diplomats, issues of protocol, the role of the Diplomatic Corps in London or how public diplomacy was conducted. Many areas which it does cover might easily have been expanded into books in their own right. But it does provide an analysis of the most important developments, including the reform of the Diplomatic Service, the use of a growing number of non-professional ‘special envoys’, the significance of summity and the impact of multilateral negotiations. It also considers two little-discussed subjects, diplomatic relations and state visits, to show why they deserve attention and how they evolved during the period.

Following the first, introductory, chapter, chapter 2 provides essential background material, including an overview of the international issues facing Britain, an outline of the bureaucratic machine in the overseas arena, an introduction to the key characters involved and a general look at the work of career diplomats. Chapter 3 looks at the debate during the period 1963–76 about the purpose of Britain’s overseas services and considers the merger of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Colonial Offices into a single Foreign and Commonwealth Office. After this the focus becomes more specific: chapter 4 investigates the role of resident ambassadors in light of challenges to their traditional functions thanks to improvements in global communication, news reporting and the work of international organisations. It looks at various ambassadors in a range of
posts in the period 1963–76 to gain an understanding of how their role changed, what functions they continued to fulfil and how valuable they continued to be. The next three chapters consider various challenges to the position of the resident ambassador. Chapter 5 investigates the role of ‘special’ envoys, using a broad definition, and includes a discussion of the foreign secretary’s contribution to diplomacy. Chapter 6 begins a discussion of summits, conferences held at the level of heads of government, emphasising just how popular, even mundane, bilateral meetings between leaders had become. Chapter 7, while making general points about multilateral negotiations, focuses on meetings at leaders’ level and draws out an important shift in British experience from an emphasis on Commonwealth summits to those involving the European Community. However, the next chapter serves as a reminder that the head of state continued to have a diplomatic role: in fact, important reforms to state visits were introduced under Wilson and Heath, who recognised the need to ‘compete’ with other countries by using the monarchy to impress high-profile visitors to Britain. Finally, chapter 9 deals with one of the most interesting developments in diplomatic practice in the 1960s, the tendency of states to break off relations for purely symbolic reasons. Britain was central to this phenomenon, because several African states broke off relations with London over the issue of Rhodesia in 1965; but the British government was also among the first to maintain contacts via a kind of ‘disguised embassy’ known as the ‘interests section’, a development that showed the continuing flexibility of diplomatic practice and its innovation in the face of any challenge. The conclusion to the book emphasises this flexibility as well as the continuing significance of diplomatic practice to the study of international history.