

## **Thinking About Regional Diplomatic Culture**

**Geoffrey Wiseman, Australian National University**

**Email:** [geoffrey.wiseman@anu.edu.au](mailto:geoffrey.wiseman@anu.edu.au)

[**Note:** Comments most welcome]

### **Evolution of (my) thinking about diplomatic culture**

Building on earlier English School-related perspectives (e.g., Bull, 1977, 2002; Der Derian 1987, 1996; Sharp, 2004) and my own experiences as a diplomatic practitioner, I wrote an article in 2005 supporting the idea of the existence of a deeply rooted, state-based diplomatic culture with its own distinctive institutions, values, and norms – all constituted and reproduced by routine practices – and which had been neglected in the study of international relations, especially in the United States. This neglect had consequences, notably in connection with explaining and understanding the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Using Iraq as a case study, I argued that the United States transgressed five norms of diplomatic culture that are widely accepted, if often internalized: the use of force as a last resort, transparency, continuous dialogue, multilateralism, and civility. I defined *diplomatic culture* as “the accumulated communicative and representational norms, rules, and institutions devised to improve relations and avoid war between interacting and mutually recognizing political entities.” I concluded that even a paramount America could not avoid diplomatic culture’s pervasive influence. My normative purpose with that article was to demonstrate diplomatic culture’s capacity to moderate state, even great power, behavior. My scholarly purpose was

to show that a “universal” diplomatic culture exists, that we can point to evidence of its existence, and that it can be researched empirically.

Two years later, Paul Sharp and I co-edited a collection of essays examining the proposition, articulated by Hedley Bull in 1977 that the diplomatic corps – the diplomats of different sovereign states resident in the capital of another sovereign state – is the most tangible expression of that universal culture (Sharp and Wiseman, 2007; see also our 2016 definition). Living in the United States and during a stint in the Executive Office of the United Nations Secretary-General, I became increasingly fascinated by what appeared to me to be the many ways in which countries related differently to the universal diplomatic culture, with the US approach to diplomacy seeming to be of particular interest and consequence. And so, in 2011, I wrote an article in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* arguing that since its rise as a world power, the United States has participated in *international society’s* diplomatic culture in a *distinctive* way – and that this distinctiveness stems from seven interconnected characteristics of American diplomacy<sup>1</sup>. My main normative point was that the United States conducts a distinctive form of ‘anti-diplomacy’, accepting in practice many diplomatic norms and practices while remaining reluctant to acknowledge the fact. Trump reinforces, rather than undermines, that view (Wiseman 2017). In sum, there is considerable evidence to support the idea that there is both a universal (or perhaps more precisely an international society-based) diplomatic culture and at the same time national diplomatic *cultures* or what Jeffrey Robertson (2015) convincingly demonstrates with the South Korean case, national diplomatic *style*.

---

<sup>1</sup> (1) America’s long-held distrust and negative view of diplomats and diplomacy, which has contributed to the historical neglect and sidelining of the US Department of State in the United States’ policy-making process; (2) a high degree of domestic influence over foreign policy and diplomacy; (3) a tendency to privilege hard power over soft power in foreign policy; (4) a preference for bilateral over multilateral diplomacy; (5) an ideological tradition of diplomatically isolating states that are considered adversarial and of refusing to engage them until they meet preconditions; (6) a tradition of appointing a relatively high proportion of political rather than career ambassadors; and (7) a demonstrably strong cultural disposition towards a direct, low-context negotiating style.

What has stirred the diplomatic-studies pot, in the very best sense, in the last decade or so is new inter-disciplinary research that challenges the traditional (English-School) concept of a universal diplomatic culture.

Several scholars, notably Costas Constantinou (loosely speaking a post-modern humanist), Jason Dittmer (a political geographer), Fiona McConnell (a human geographer), and Noe Cornago (an International Relations scholar) have suggested that the notion of a singular world diplomatic culture should be supplemented by pluralizing conceptions of multiple diplomatic cultures (Constantinou 2013; Cornago, 2013; Dittmer and McConnell, 2016; and Constantinou, Cornago and McConnell, 2016). These scholars acknowledge the continuing importance of diplomatic culture as a *state-based* practice, but they emphasize and prefer to see diplomacy as *social* practice. Thus, if diplomacy is indeed a humanistic, social practice then there is a “diversity of diplomatic cultures beyond the formal state system” Dittmer and McConnell, 2016, abstract).

I have little doubt that this pluralization-of-diplomatic-culture trend has produced significant new insights about diplomacy itself and has enriched the field with theoretically important works, and simultaneously reinforcing other research that does not focus directly on diplomatic culture but shedding light on it via elaborations of the practice turn (e.g., Neumann, numerous publications; Sending, Pouliot and Neumann, 2015). All this amounted to a burst of new diplomacy theorizing, which largely undermined earlier laments that diplomacy was theoretically dreary (e.g., Christer Jonsson and Martin Hall, 2005). For attempts to catalogue this burst of theory, see Murray, 2013; Kerr and Wiseman “Conclusion”, 2018).

Central to the plural diplomatic-culture(s) thesis was Dittmer and McConnell's *Diplomatic Cultures and International Politics* (2016). Here is a sampling of the contributors' arguments:

- Constantinou continues his path-breaking and field-defining work pushing way beyond Bull, Martin Wight, Adam Watson, R. J. Vincent and their English-School fellow travelers – such as Sharp and Wiseman – seeing diplomatic culture afresh as “something that collectively emerges out of social encounters (p. 26).”
- Merje Kuus acknowledges the state-based diplomatic culture that underpins the European Union (EU), while adding a note of skepticism of what she calls “the more celebratory claims about a new diplomacy that somehow bypasses the state” (p. 43). Kuus reminds us that (a) diplomatic knowledge is “tightly linked to the nation state as the most powerful geographical model of political life today” (p. 42), (b) that geography counts when it comes to staffing the European External Action Service (EEAS) in part on EU geographical-balance grounds, and (c) that geographic propinquity (Pouliot, 2015), in the Brussels European Quarter, matters. My extrapolations from these insights include (i) that diplomatic culture and its related practices facilitate the process of “Becoming European” and (ii) that tactically, in Europe, diplomatic culture and practices help distance Europe from its colonial history, whereas “Becoming ASEAN-ized” means not letting Europe off the hook for its colonial past.
- To continue on this last point, using the 1955 Bandung Conference held in Indonesia as her case, Naoko Shimazu shows how the conference symbolically book-ended

regional post-colonial diplomacy. Bandung was in some sense trans-regional before the regions being represented had in fact come into being politically and diplomatically. Finally, as Shimazu concludes, Bandung was “diplomacy as theatre” (p. 73) in which there was “no dress code” with leaders showcasing national and not regional dress (p. 71).

- In his chapter, Iver Neumann highlights the micro spatial dimension of diplomacy, developing a range of diplomatic metaphors such as “venue” and, particularly, “site”.
- Geographers Herman van der Wusten and Virginie Mamadouh explore macro-level diplomatic culture and practice using concepts of networks and nodes in a hyper-connected Europe, focusing on the diplomatic corps of national capitals and of Brussels. Their work resonates with this panel’s concerns when they comment: “the global diplomatic bilateral network is *a series of more or less distinctive regional clusters*.... The European cluster is extra dense and is more than others connected to all other clusters” (p.95, my emphasis; see also Batora, 2018).
- In reminding us that over the centuries many diplomats have also made important literary contributions, John Watkins argues that diplomats can have a double persona of sorts – what he calls “doubleness” (p.117). They represent the national while also balancing a higher sense of purpose to a wider community or to international law. On this argument, echoing socialization theory (English School, A. I. Johnson’s *Social States*), diplomats should logically be open to representing national and regional diplomatic practices (and I would argue of universal ones as well).

- Jessica Shadian’s chapter explores the tensions that arise between Westphalian diplomatic culture and what she describes as distinctive Inuit practices and cultures (esp. pp. 158-60), practices and cultures that I would guess contributed to the constitution of the Arctic or Circumpolar *region*.

In sum, the diplomatic-culture(s) approach helpfully brings in and examines diplomatic culture *geographically*, yet – with the implicit exception of the EU – less so *regionally*. And it is this aspect that I’m hoping this panel will open up new avenues of research.<sup>2</sup>

### **Is there some kind of scholarly consensus about diplomatic culture?**

I see a rough scholarly consensus emerging about diplomatic culture around the following elements:

- there is a universal state-based diplomatic culture encapsulated, legally, in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (1963) and, empirically, in the world’s capitals and cities that host diplomatic and consular corps.
- The state-based diplomatic culture is too narrow to capture all activity that might reasonably be classified as diplomacy and needs, in both theory and practice, to be articulated in ways that go beyond narrowly defined *state practice* and needs (somehow) to include broadly defined plural, *social practice*.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Reinforcing the arguments of the 2016 Dittmer and McConnell volume, Constantinou, Cornago, and McConnell argued in the same year that non-state diplomatic actors are developing new professional diplomatic skills consistent with a multi-milieu, cross-professional world, a development that they frame as “*transprofessionalization*” (2016: 3). Again, this wave of scholarship point scholars (including myself) in interesting new directions.

<sup>3</sup> While this *state-social practice dichotomy* is useful and important, Paul Sharp (2009) puts something of a conceptual break on this claim, staking a middle position between the *universalists* and the *humanists* in his claim that while all human individuals are capable of thinking and acting diplomatically, they are not “diplomats” or diplomatic actors in any consequential sense unless they represent a separate group that seeks to preserve and manage its difference with other groups (Wiseman, 2015: 299).

- *National cultures and styles* can be identified and are meaningful in practice, even if they are far from being fully developed in research output (Wiseman, 2011; Robertson, 2015).

### **What research gaps still remain?**

Given the geography underpinnings of the plural diplomatic cultures approach, *pace* the European Union space, it is surprising to me (as a non-geographer) that relatively little weight is given to the “geography” of other regions outside Europe. I am acutely aware of region-building writings, arguing that regions are constituted not only materially (geographically), but ideationally (ideas) as well (e.g., see Medcalf, 2015 in relation to the Asia-Pacific vs the Indo-Pacific). With this in mind, therefore, this panel seeks to address the question whether between the *universal* and *national* conceptions of diplomatic culture, there might be yet another dimension to the pluralizing diplomatic cultures literature that could be explored and developed further: *regional diplomatic culture*. There is of course a substantial literature on regional organizations, but very little on the idea of regional diplomacies (*pace* Batora, 2018).

So, my starting point is the hypothesis that sitting between a universal (international-society) diplomatic culture and national diplomatic cultures, there are variations in substance and style in the main regions of the world. Can we meaningfully identify sub-regional variants, or “regional diplomatic complexes” (to build on Barry Buzan’s conception of a “regional security complex”)? If so, is it possible to develop – and test for – a concept of regional diplomatic culture? And, finally, to build on Constantinou’s insights, can we interpret

*regional* diplomatic culture as “something that collectively emerges out of *regional* social encounters.”

So, I arrive inductively at a working definition of *regional diplomatic culture*: “the accumulated communicative and representational norms, rules, institutions *and practices* devised to improve relations and avoid war between interacting and mutually recognizing political entities *and actors within a self-identified region of three or more sovereign states.*” (italics show change from my 2005 definition of diplomatic culture).

### **Conclusion:**

There is of course a considerable literature on *strategic culture* (e.g., Johnson, 1995), in contrast to, until recently, *diplomatic culture*. In terms of this strategic vs. diplomatic culture dichotomy (Haacke, 2003), I suspect that in the **Pacific Islands region**, diplomatic culture is dominant over strategic culture. To the extent that there is a **Northeast East Asian** regional diplomatic culture, it is an essentially realist one, in which strategic culture is overwhelmingly dominant over diplomatic culture. Is there a **Southeast East Asian** (ASEAN) regional diplomatic culture? Yes, and it has become progressively dominant over strategic culture since Konfrontasi (in the mid-1960s) and Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in 1978. In **South Asia**, strategic culture remains dominant over diplomatic culture.

(1) Is there an identifiable universal, or global, state-based diplomatic culture? Yes, no doubt.

(2) Are there identifiable regional or sub-regional diplomatic cultures in the Asia-Pacific region? We don’t know, but I think that there are, albeit in greatly varying degrees.