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Jul 05, 2017 by [Katharina E. Höne](#)

Would the Real Diplomacy Please Stand Up? ^[1]

In a recent CPD Blog post, Shaun Riordan appeals to us to "stop inventing 'new diplomacies'" and argues that "we must end the obsession with creating new 'types' of diplomacy." Indeed, those practices we describe as diplomacy are expanding. We are seeing discussions on digital diplomacy, climate diplomacy, health diplomacy, business diplomacy, education diplomacy, and sports diplomacy to name a few. Should we, as scholars and practitioners of diplomacy, be concerned? The worry seems all too real. If everything is diplomacy, then nothing is. An ever-expanding concept eventually becomes meaningless. Does this charge apply to these new diplomacies? As so often, the answer is that it depends. Rather than a categorical rejection, the proper response is to sharpen our intellectual tools and get to work. I will do so by asking four questions.

New diplomacy?

In its latest incarnation, new diplomacy describes the fact that new topics and new individuals and organizations have entered a realm hitherto reserved for professional diplomats and traditional topics related to security concerns and national interest narrowly defined.

Proponents argue that new diplomacy is a way of reflecting these changes. Critiques point out that it is simply the latest fashion trend, or perhaps more accurately the latest fashion fad, in global affairs and does not actually describe changed realities. However, in order to tell the imposter from the innovator, we need to look closely at diplomacy as a practice, its relation to the state, and the purposes of these new diplomacies.

A profession or a practice?

One of the easiest ways to map a social field of activity is to distinguish between the professional and the layperson. If we view diplomacy as a profession, then only those with the proper credentials and membership in the relevant professional organizations are diplomats. In other words, diplomats are selected officials, representing a state, who enjoy special privileges and immunities qua the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

A danger greater than overuse of the term diplomacy is the potential of diplomacy to become anachronistic and to no longer reflect the changes in the management of global affairs.

Yet, if we look at international relations only through the lens of professions, there is a lot we are missing. Hence, I argue that it is extremely useful to change our gaze from profession to practice. The question then is not "who is a diplomat?" but "what is it that diplomats do?" From there, a list of functions of diplomacy emerges. Scholars point to information gathering, communication, representation, negotiation, and the reproduction of international society. If we follow the logic of practice, then those engaged in these activities, are, by definition, diplomats. In other words, these functions of diplomacy provide a useful checklist, which can serve as the basis for judging a "new diplomacy" and its practitioners.

If we understand diplomacy as a profession, it is relatively easy to delineate between the practitioner and the outsider. If we see diplomacy as a practice, we are provided with a checklist of activities, which helps delineate one practice from another. Undoubtedly, there will be grey areas.

With, beside, and beyond the state?

One thing is clear: if we approach diplomacy as a profession, it remains linked to the state. We need to wonder if that is still appropriate. One of the driving forces behind new diplomacy is the emergence of new individuals and organizations, not linked to the state, managing our

global affairs. Many of the new areas of diplomacy – like Internet governance, climate change, education, health, humanitarian affairs – are marked by the presence of new diplomats (non-governmental organizations and civil society) who influence debates by introducing new and crucial topics, who participate in global deliberation, and who are key for the implementation of global goals.

Of course, this should not lead us to believe that these new diplomats operate on equal footing with the traditional ones. The playing field is not level and careful analysis is needed to see to what extent the new diplomats participate in negotiation and influence outcomes. It is clear that we do not escape the state entirely. As long as this is the organizational model of our world, this is not a problem. However, if this is in the process of changing, our idea of diplomacy also needs to adapt. If it didn't, diplomacy would simply become irrelevant and die out.

And the purpose?

Defining a social field of activity and its subcategories is always done with a certain purpose in mind. Decisions about what is and what is not diplomacy are not self-evidently given; they are made on the basis of certain criteria, which are defined by a deliberation process.

What we should be discussing are the criteria for such decisions and the purpose of applying these criteria. In relation to new diplomacy three particularly important ones come to mind: empirical evidence, attention to specific practices and tools, and expressions of aspirations for a better world. First, if we see that new topics emerge and non-professional diplomats become relevant for the management of international affairs, then our use of the term "diplomacy" needs to reflect that. Second, terms like climate change diplomacy and digital diplomacy remind us that we are dealing with a specialized field of activity. In the case of the former, scientific evidence and the role of the expert play a much bigger role. In the case of the latter, there are new tools that need our attention. Terminology should reflect that and, hence, allow us to address these differences. Third, we can, much like president Woodrow Wilson's "open covenants...openly arrived at", also consider new diplomacies as expressions of how the world could be, of ideals and hopes for a better future.

There are, of course, also less altruistic reasons for jumping on the bandwagon of new diplomacies. But we will not be able to tell the difference without careful analysis. To imply that all new diplomacies are inaugurated for less than altruistic reasons is to gloss over the three criteria outlined above.

Would the real diplomacy please stand up!

In other words, to distinguish the real diplomacy from the imposter in new clothing needs careful analysis. Not all new diplomacies are naked. A danger greater than overuse of the term diplomacy is the potential of diplomacy to become anachronistic and to no longer reflect the changes in the management of global affairs. If diplomacy is not to become a dinosaur, new diplomacies and their careful debate should be welcomed as part of a much-needed dynamism in the field.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *A longer version of this piece appeared on the [Diplo Blog](#).*
