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CHAPTER ONE

The Lost Art of Diplomacy

Ambassadors have no battleships at their disposal, or heavy infantry, or fortresses; their weapons are words and opportunities.

—DEMOSTHENES

I didn't want to be no Chamberlain umbrella man.

—PRESIDENT LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON

IN THE SUMMER of 432 BC, the leaders of Sparta gathered to consider whether to go to war with their mighty neighbor, Athens. For months, tensions had been building between the two Greek city-states. Months earlier, Sparta's ally Corinth had come to blows with the Athenian navy. Another Spartan ally, Megara, had recently been subjected to an Athenian trade embargo. And a Corinthian colony, Potidaea, now lay under siege by Athenian forces. With each passing month, the Athenians seemed to be tightening the noose around the Peloponnese while Sparta sat idly by, doing nothing. Now Sparta's allies were demanding help: Mobilize and meet the enemy head-on, a group of Corinthian envoys pleaded. Fail to act, they warned, and Sparta might lose not only her allies, but her liberty and honor as well.

Most Spartans wanted to fight. A proud and martial people, they boasted the finest army of the Hellenic world, renowned for its heroic stand against the Persians at Thermopylae fifty years earlier. A group of war hawks, many of them hot-blooded young nobles, longed to test their mettle against the haughty Athenians. They found an able spokesman in the ephor Sthenelaidas, who implored his countrymen to dispense with formalities and take up arms. "Vote . . . for war, as the honor of Sparta demands," he told the assembly, and "with the gods let us advance against the aggressors."¹

One voice spoke against the clamor for battle. The aging king Archidamus II admonished the assembly to take stock of their situation. The coming war, he said, would be long and terrible. The Athenians had more ships and men than Sparta, and a lot more money. War against such an opponent would be easy to start, but hard to finish. It would grind on for years and require every ounce of national blood and treasure. It would claim the lives of Sparta's sons and daughters, bring ruin to her homeland, and probably result in the devastation of much of the Greek world.

Before rushing to war, Archidamus counseled his countrymen to improve their strategic position. Send emissaries to the Athenians, he advised, to remonstrate for peace in a tone "not too suggestive of war, nor again too suggestive of submission." Use the time gained to rally Sparta's far-flung allies, replenish the treasury, refill the granaries, and restock the armories. If necessary, Archidamus argued, Sparta should even be willing to join forces with the hated Persians to tip the scales in her favor. By making these preparations, he reasoned, Sparta might yet dispose the Athenians to peace, and if that failed, she would be better prepared for war when it eventually came.

At first, Archidamus's address didn't seem to make much of an impression. Egged on by Sthenelaidas, the assembly voted for war. But in the weeks that followed, as the Spartans realized the extent of their unreadiness for battle, the old man's wisdom sunk in.² Remembering the king's advice, Sparta sent diplomats far and wide to slow the rush to war and pull the triremes and hoplites of other city-states to her side. When war finally came the following year, Sparta was in a better position to fight than she had been the previous summer. The ensuing conflict was long, and the margins of success were razor-thin. When the final victory came for Sparta more than two decades later, it wasn't because she had a better army than Athens but because she had assembled a bigger and better array of allies—including, crucially, her arch-enemy Persia. Sparta triumphed because her leaders proved adept at exercising the very qualities that Sthenelaidas had scorned as unpatriotic: patience, prudence, flexibility, indirection, and self-control. In short: diplomacy.



Over the ensuing two and a half millennia, the "Archidamus moment" has played out on innumerable occasions in the cockpits of history's great powers. With clockwork regularity, a city-state, kingdom, empire, nation-state, or superpower has found itself confronted with the impending danger of

a big war for which it is underprepared. Just as often, soldiers—men like Sthenelaidas—have promised to save the state and salvage its honor by defeating the enemy in battle. But when the military has proven inadequate to the task, or when the financial resources required for mounting a sustained buildup of armies, fleets, and forts exceeded the state's available means, great powers have invariably turned to diplomacy to build winning coalitions, divide their opponents, and reshuffle the deck in their favor.

This book argues that skill in diplomacy of this kind—strategic, far-sighted, and sedulously tactful—is of foundational importance to the survival and prosperity of a successful great power. Its central claim is that diplomacy finds its highest and most enduring expression not as an agent of abstract peace or international order, or as a bag-carrier to an all-powerful military, but as an instrument of grand strategy in its own right, which states use to manage the gaps between finite means and the seemingly infinite ends of a hostile outside environment. Diplomacy is the political medium by which states tap into resources beyond their own to isolate, deflect, or humble menacing opponents. It is the instrument par excellence for manipulating the critical factor of time in competition and achieving what Clausewitz called the “highest and simplest” object of strategy: concentration.³ The essence of diplomacy in strategy is to rearrange power in space and time so that the state avoids tests of strength beyond its immediate ability to bear. This role is indispensable, timeless, and cannot be performed by any other instrument of state.

By situating diplomacy within the realm of strategy, I challenge two conceptions of diplomacy that have become firmly lodged in the modern mind. One is the notion, borne of America's wars in the 20th Century, that human societies can only find true safety—and honor—in a preponderance of military power, and that diplomacy is a quixotic or pusillanimous enterprise that jeopardizes both. The other is the idea, equally prevalent in recent years, that humanity is progressing inexorably toward a liberal utopia, and that diplomacy's job is to pave the way for that outcome by abolishing war and the nation-state itself from the human experience.

Neither idea is particularly new. They reflect, respectively, the age-old reflex of the soldier, as articulated by Sthenelaidas, and the vision of the lawyer or priest, which is probably just as old. What changed in the modern era is the extent to which both impulses seemed poised to finally realize their full potential. Their ascendancy was occasioned by the existence of a uniquely powerful and dynamic state, in the form of the post-Cold War United States, that seemed to have the potential to remake the world, including its adversaries, in its own image. For the first time in the human

story, the competitive principle that had given rise to classical diplomacy, and propelled its development in both form and function, seemed to have been suspended.

But just like past utopias, ours didn't last. Geopolitics, to the extent it ever really went away, returned with all its primal intensity. States remain the building block of international politics, and the very biggest states—the great powers—have the potential to dominate their regions and destroy one another. Survival, not harmony, is as much the central concern of states today as it was in Thucydides's time. Even the United States, the most powerful state in world history to date, must contend with gaps between the means at its disposal and the seemingly infinite ends presented by the threats in its outside environment. The quest to manage those gaps—grand strategy—remains a defining discipline of the successful state. And those states that can mobilize diplomacy as a tool of grand strategy to build and maintain alliances, concentrate military resources, and splinter enemy coalitions are likely to find a decisive advantage over those that cannot.

In this setting, the ancient art of diplomacy deserves a fresh look. What follows is a reflection on diplomacy not as we have come to view it in modern times but as it was understood and practiced by Archidamus, and centuries of Western statesmen (and a few women) who came after him. The book's primary interest is the history itself: the leaders, the choices they faced, and the times in which they lived. The main characters are not just individuals but the great powers they led and diplomacy itself, its logic, uses, and institutions. By taking this deep dive into the past, I hope to rediscover some timeless attributes of diplomacy as an enduring, and remarkably efficacious, human enterprise. That, in turn, will hopefully shed some insights that will prove useful to Western leaders as they face their own "Archidamus moment" in the days ahead.

What Is Diplomacy?

Diplomacy, the British diplomat Sir Ernest Satow wrote in 1917, is "the application of tact and intelligence" to relations between states.⁴ But diplomacy far predates the modern state and occurs even when tact and intelligence are in short supply. Stripped to its essence, it is simply communication between sovereign entities for the purpose of reconciling conflicting interests. Diplomacy in this, its most basic form can be found in Homer and the Hebrew Bible. It already existed in a highly sophisticated form by the time of Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty, some three millennia

before the birth of Christ.⁵ And we may reasonably assume that the earliest tribes of humans practiced it amid their interminable feuding over horses, hunting grounds, and fertile river valleys.

Like any art, diplomacy is better defined by its outcomes than its processes—and its most important outcome is the constraint of power.⁶ Human societies need diplomacy most when they face an enemy that will not submit to their own laws and that cannot be cowed or defeated using the force at their disposal.⁷ In a world with infinite resources, or ruled by one all-powerful state, there would be no need for diplomacy, since human interaction would be either intrinsically harmonious or would have the dynamic of master and vassal. Those empires in history that came closest to thoroughly subjugating their surroundings, like the Aztecs, Mongols, or Rome at its peak, left little in the way of a tradition of what could properly be called diplomacy.⁸ For them, external relations was an exercise in law and administration rather than negotiation—of judiciously extending their own customs to those neighbors who had the good sense to submit without subjugation by military force.

Diplomacy is endemic, in other words, to competitive settings. It emerges in organized form among the jockeying kingdoms of the ancient Near East and moves to the cramped and striving world of ancient Greece, and thence to inland Europe, whose craggy, crenulated landscape impeded unification under a single ruler. Its modern forms found ignition amid the decay of Rome and the universal Church, first in the wars of the crowded Italian peninsula, then in the struggles of Europe's great dynastic houses north of the Alps, and finally in the global contests of Europe's colonial empires.

Diplomacy's functions developed to give states advantages in competition. Since antiquity, rulers have sent emissaries abroad to gather information, convey messages, and broker deals.⁹ Far back also goes the custom of giving envoys safe passage and immunity from the laws of the land to which they are sent. The earliest diplomats were kissing cousins to the spy—like the heralds that Odysseus sent to scout the land of the Lotus-eaters or the Gideonites in the book of Joshua who “did work wilily . . . as if they had been ambassadors” to enmesh the Israelites in a treaty of alliance on false pretenses.¹⁰

Diplomacy's most important function, and that which ultimately sets it apart from the work of the spy or courier, is negotiation. Negotiation—the promotion of the national interest through compromise—is essential for survival in a competitive landscape where states cannot achieve safety by subduing their neighbors. It is to diplomacy what skill at arms is to war: the central and indispensable competence. Early diplomatic manuals devoted as

much attention to the art of negotiating as military manuals do to the art of winning battles. So vital is it to diplomacy's *raison d'être* that for a long time in the Western world, diplomats were simply called *négotiateurs*.¹¹

Negotiation is not deception. A con artist may fool someone once or even twice, but then the game is up. Because states deal with one another repeatedly over long time horizons, the diplomat must operate in some degree of good faith. "Success achieved by force or fraud," the 18th-Century French diplomat François de Callières wrote, "rests on an insecure foundation; conversely, success based on reciprocal advantage gives promise of even further successes to come."¹² Those states in history that have possessed the will and means to impose their will by force have tended to treat diplomacy as *a ruse de guerre*.

Diplomacy's means have evolved to support its functions. These have long been: the ambassador, the embassy, the treaty, and bureaucracy. The resident ambassador appears first among the pocket states of Renaissance Italy as a way of keeping tabs on rivals and seizing opportunities, as one 15th-Century Venetian diplomat put it, to "win or preserve the friendship of princes."¹³ The embassy evolved to give the ambassador a permanent perch from which to operate nonstop in peace and in war; "to sleep," as Richelieu said, "like the lion, without closing one's eyes . . . to negotiate ceaselessly, either openly or secretly, and in all places."¹⁴

What the soldier defends with arms, the diplomat defends with treaties. These exist to lock in advantages gained in negotiations or war. The effects can prove durable; the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity that were codified at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 remain the cornerstone of international relations to this day. But as a rule treaties are seasonal constructs, the validity of which rests, *rebus sic stantibus*, on the conditions that existed when they were signed.¹⁵ Bureaucracy emerges in diplomatic history as a way of equipping the state with the archives and scribes needed to retain knowledge of foreign places and past agreements, and thereby ensure "constant vigilance" in competition with other states.¹⁶

None of diplomacy's means create power on their own. "Covenants without swords," as Hobbes says, are "but mere words." Their force, as is frequently pointed out, derives from the power of the state that wields them. This takes the form not only of military force but of wealth, which can be proffered or withheld to entice or coerce, and of what today is called "soft power" but is more correctly understood as influence and reputation, which can attract or repel.¹⁷ It is a truism, but nevertheless true, that diplomacy succeeds in proportion to its effective integration with military and economic power.

Yet while diplomats' efficacy is derivative, it should not be concluded from that that they simply transmit power realities the way that metal conducts electricity. Skilled diplomacy can amplify the power of a weak state, while inept diplomacy (what the Greeks called *parapresbeía*) can diminish a state's influence and cause even the mightiest of great powers to under-realize their potential.¹⁸

The abilities of the individual conducting diplomacy therefore matter greatly—arguably even more than is true of a general. Unlike military commanders, diplomats have no armies at their fingertips; as Demosthenes wrote, “their weapons are words and opportunities.” When Callières admonished his prince to select ambassadors with “a spirit fertile in expedients” and “quick penetration to be able to discover the secrets of men's hearts,” it was because great matters of state depended on the intellect and character of the person who would bear its image abroad.¹⁹

Like the soldier, the diplomat's reason for existence is to ensure the survival and welfare of the state. An embassy or treaty is as much a means to this end as is a battleship or cruise missile. For the activities of diplomats to have purpose, they must reflect the policy of the state; to talk about them in isolation is like talking about the movements of the hand without the brain. Diplomacy, in other words, encompasses not just the method by which policy is enacted but also the policy itself.²⁰

Strategy's “Younger Brother”

When people hear the word “strategy” they think of generals pouring over maps in wartime. Diplomacy, so the thinking goes, is the stuff that happens when the fighting stops. As the Habsburg émigré Robert Strausz-Hupé wrote during the Cold War, Americans tend to “look upon diplomacy as the antithesis of conflict” in the conviction that “guns will remain silent as long as statesmen confer.”²¹

In fact, diplomacy has from the beginning been an integral part of conflict, and therefore of strategy. At its highest level, strategy is “the calculated matching of means to large ends.”²² Danger arises for a state when the gap between the means at its disposal, in the form of military and economic power, and the ends to which it could apply those things, in the form of threats in the outside environment, widen to a point that endangers the state. When this happens, a state faces a difficult choice: accept a higher level of risk than is tolerable, or mount an all-out effort to close the gap using its own resources, which can be hard to sustain for very long.

Diplomacy's role in strategy is to help bridge these gaps. It doesn't do so on its own, since it is not a source of power; rather, it is a political tool that states use to enhance the means at their disposal externally or reduce the number of threats arrayed against them, or both.

Perhaps the most timeless articulation of diplomacy's role in strategy can be found in Archidamus's address to the Spartan assembly, as related by Thucydides:

I do bid you not to take up arms at once, but to send and remonstrate with [the Athenians] in a tone not too suggestive of war, nor again too suggestive of submission, and to employ the interval in perfecting our own preparations. The means will be, first, the acquisition of allies, Hellenic or barbarian it matters not, so long as they are an accession to our strength naval or financial—I say Hellenic or barbarian, because the odium of such an accession to all who like us are the objects of the designs of the Athenians is taken away by the law of self-preservation—and secondly, the development of our home resources. If they listen to our embassy, so much the better; but if not, after the lapse of two or three years our position will have become materially strengthened. . . . Perhaps by that time the sight of our preparations, backed by language equally significant, will have disposed them to submission, while their land is still untouched, and while their counsels may be directed to the retention of advantages as yet undestroyed.²³

At the heart of Archidamus's logic is the idea that states can gain an advantage over adversaries by using diplomacy to impose certain kinds of constraints.

First, diplomacy acts to curb one's own emotions. Don't give in to the passion of the moment and rush into war, Archidamus tells the impetuous young men around him. Take stock, marshal allies, send envoys, appeal to reason. Think before you take the plunge. This is not a counsel of cowardice but of prudence.

Second, leaders use diplomacy to gain control of the clock. Don't engage when the enemy wants it; engage when you are ready. Use the time gained by talking to the enemy to recruit allies and make preparations for battle. War may be averted entirely and, if it cannot be, the state will still be in a substantially better place all-round for waging it than otherwise would have been the case.

Third, and most important, Archidamus says, use diplomacy to constrain the enemy. Gathering states to one's side or even rendering them neutral denies their support to an adversary. This is what Clausewitz

meant when he wrote about finding “another way” to increase “the likelihood of success without defeating the enemy’s forces”; “to disrupt the opposing alliance, or to paralyze it” and thereby find “a much shorter route to the goal than the destruction of the opposing armies.”²⁴

By building coalitions, states isolate an opponent and thereby reduce his options for profitable aggression while reducing the range of dangers against which their own resources have to be deployed at a given moment.²⁵ Doing this repeatedly over long stretches of time allows states to cultivate a balance of power that aggregates other defensive-minded states and stacks the odds against would-be aggressors.

Finally, diplomacy attempts to put limits on war itself. War is expensive—“a matter not so much of arms as of money,” as Archimadus says. Even preparing for war places enormous financial strains on the state and its people. By sharing the load with allies, diplomacy alleviates these burdens. Once unleashed, war is a primal force of incalculable ferocity that can quickly get out of control; as Clausewitz wrote, leaders must find ways to keep its exertions commensurate to the object at hand.²⁶ By giving the policymaker options beyond bloodletting, diplomacy helps maintain political control over the warrior, including by bringing war to an end, if it threatens the destruction of the state.

What all of these functions share is a focus on improving the state’s odds of survival at an attainable cost in money and risk. It’s not an exercise in sweet reasonableness but the use of forethought and reason to close off an opponent’s opportunities for achieving his political ends by military means. Diplomacy may therefore be said to be an inherently conservative and defensive enterprise, both in the sense that it proceeds from a realization of the limits of one’s own power and in the sense that it seeks to prevent dangerous accumulations of power by others.

Diplomacy, in other words, arrives at peace not by transcending geopolitics but by excelling in it—through the doorway of high strategy. Strategy, in Strausz-Hupé’s memorable formulation, “is diplomacy’s elder brother.”²⁷

“Shit in Silk Stockings”

Diplomacy’s role in strategy hasn’t won it many admirers across the ages. In the human imagination, the diplomat has always seemed to be a peddler of occult arts. “*On n’aime pas ces porteurs de secrets que sont les ambassadeurs*,” Jules Cambon said: “We don’t like these bearers of secrets known as ambassadors.”²⁸ The Greek poems describe Hermes, god of

envoys, as a deity “of many shifts, blandly cunning, a robber, a cattle driver, a bringer of dreams” known for “deeds such as knavish folk pursue in the dark night-time.” Sir Henry Wotton memorably described diplomats as “honest men sent abroad to lie for their country.” Even Niccolò Machiavelli, who certainly had no qualms about dissimulating for power’s sake, deprecated diplomacy as a form of “honorable laziness.” And Napoleon put the matter bluntly when he called his chief diplomat, Talleyrand, “shit in silk stockings.”

Soldiers in particular have always viewed the diplomat’s counsel with suspicion, as summed up in Sthenelaidas’s rebuttal to Archidamus: “Let us not be told that it is fitting for us to deliberate under injustice; long deliberation is rather fitting for those who have injustice in contemplation.”²⁹

The soldier’s critique of diplomacy rests on the assumed superiority of *l’arme blanche*. Military force is the most direct and efficient medium by which states pursue their desired ends. Force is agency. Its application, whether in the form of phalanxes or cruise missiles, conveys the precision of a mathematical science. By comparison, diplomacy seems a dilatory and altogether chancier proposition on which to hazard the security of the state.

But Sthenelaidas’s declamation wasn’t only about efficiency; it was also about honor. War is a primordial act that stirs the passions and excites the imagination. Violence is simply more exhilarating than talking. “There is nothing in [the diplomat’s] achievements,” the 19th-Century British statesman Lord Salisbury wrote,

which appeals to the imagination. . . . His victories are made up of a series of microscopic advantages: of a judicious suggestion here, of an opportune civility there; of a wise concession at one moment and a far-sighted persistence at another; of sleepless tact, immovable calmness, and patience that no folly, no provocation, no blunders can shake. But there is nothing exciting in the exercise of excellences such as these. . . . The result is that while the services of a commander are celebrated with almost undiminished enthusiasm from age to age, the services of the diplomatist fade rapidly away from a nation’s memory.³⁰

Where war leaves behind a roster of great deeds whose luster only grows with the retelling, diplomacy’s greatest accomplishments often consist of events that never occur—in crises defused and collisions averted. Where even hopeless wars seem to convey the prospect, however illusory, of glory for those who wage them, diplomacy, with its undercurrents of duplicity and temporization, carries something of the night about it. And where war

seems to hold out the promise of satisfyingly definitive solutions, diplomacy involves compromise, which embraces imperfection and entails an acceptance of the limits of power and transience of all human effort.³¹

The jurist's critique of diplomacy is subtler, but probably just as old. Clear back to antiquity, human societies have looked for ways to tame war's chaos without the mess and uncertainty of negotiations, by appealing to the laws of man or the gods. There is an unbroken line that runs from the amphictyonic councils of ancient Greece to the *ius gentium* of Rome and the *res publica Christiana* of St. Augustine to the moral philosophizing of Grotius and Kant to the League of Nations and the United Nations charter and declaration of universal human rights.

Like the soldier, the jurist sees diplomacy as inefficient. Negotiations are opaque and arbitrary; at best, they advance the selfish interests of a handful states and only push conflict off for a bit. But where the soldier offers to deal with danger in kind, the jurist aspires to rise above it by abolishing war itself. Subjected to a higher law, the thinking goes, societies will disarm, get rich, and find harmony. Viewed against these vast potentialities, diplomacy seems not just inadequate but tainted with the same immorality as war, for it impedes the use of reason to remove the *sources* of human strife. As the 19th-Century German liberal philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote, the diplomat's machinations rest on "dishonorable stratagems" [that are] incompatible with a just world order."³²

These age-old critiques of diplomacy pale in comparison to the savaging it received in the 20th Century. Western publics blamed diplomats for the loss of life in the two world wars. After the first, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson called for Old World diplomacy to be thrown out entirely and replaced by world government. After the second, American leaders came to associate classical diplomacy with British prime minister Neville Chamberlain's catastrophic attempt to appease Adolf Hitler at Munich.

In the decades since, diplomacy has labored under the long shadows of Wilson and Chamberlain. The resulting mentalities reflect, respectively, the ancient critiques of the lawyer and the soldier. Every U.S. president since Harry Truman has either invoked Munich to justify military intervention or been accused of appeasement by their critics.³³ Even Ronald Reagan, hardly a merchant of "peace at any price," found his photograph juxtaposed with that of Chamberlain in a full-page ad in the *Washington Times* after embarking on nuclear talks with Mikhail Gorbachev. By contrast, Wilson, despite the disastrous failure of his plans, came to symbolize the promise of an egalitarian future that might, with persistence and the right administrative formula, become a reality.

The nail in diplomacy's coffin came after the Cold War. While not scorned in the way they had been after the two world wars, diplomats seemed to lack an obvious role after the collapse of the Soviet Union. There was no grand settlement among the major powers of the sort that had occurred after previous hot wars—no equivalent to the momentous gatherings at Vienna, Versailles or Potsdam. Western diplomats quickly turned their attention to building a capacious new order characterized by multilateral rule-making at the center and nation-building in the periphery.

The main reason diplomacy atrophied after the Cold War was the totality of U.S. supremacy, which far surpassed that of victors in earlier world conflicts. For the first time in history, a global superpower possessed economic and military strength outstripping all of its potential enemies combined. With liberal ideals in the ascendancy, the United States could embrace a foreign-policy program geared not to *shaping* the behavior of rivals but to *transforming* them entirely, into polities resembling itself. The competitive principle that had given rise to classical diplomacy in previous eras was, it seemed, now gone for good. In these remarkable conditions, the substitutes to diplomacy long advocated by the soldier and lawyer appeared to have finally and definitively triumphed, to a degree that removed its purpose altogether.

A (Re)Forgotten Art

Given diplomacy's apparent demise, it is unsurprising to find that it has withered in recent years both as a profession and as a topic of scholarly study. But while the extent of decay is unprecedented, the phenomenon is not. Many times across the ages, human societies enjoyed moments in the sun, when the tools of war or law seemed to be in the ascendancy. Thinking and writing about diplomacy in a serious way, as a tool of strategic statecraft, has frequently been spurred by doubts about the durability of these moments and worries about the inevitable return of the competitive principle.

In modern times, there have been two such “rediscoveries” of diplomacy. The first occurred in Britain after World War I. The prevailing wisdom at that time held that old-school diplomats were incompatible with mass democracy, which demanded a “new diplomacy” whereby elected leaders would conduct negotiations at large summits organized under the auspices of a peace organization, the League of Nations. A few Brits were unconvinced by this fad. In 1917, an Asia hand named Sir Ernest Satow

wrote his famous manual on diplomacy as a way of preserving knowledge of diplomacy's historic functions. A few years later, another British diplomat named A. F. Whyte published an English translation of the writings of the 18th-Century French diplomat François de Callières, with an introduction extoling diplomacy as a vital but neglected public service. And on the eve of World War II, Harold Nicolson, a disillusioned Wilsonian, wrote what would become the first in a series of books advocating for a return to the high standards that had characterized Western diplomacy at its zenith.³⁴

The second big rediscovery of diplomacy came in the United States during the early Cold War. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, conventional wisdom held that diplomacy was not just outdated but completely dead.³⁵ Old-fashioned diplomacy seemed counterproductive in the unfolding ideological struggle and pointless in an era of atomic weapons.³⁶ A handful of Americans, many of them émigrés from Europe, challenged this view. Writers like Hans Morgenthau, Walter Lippmann, and Robert Strausz-Hupé argued that diplomacy was an indispensable component of national power and that a vigorous U.S. diplomacy would be needed to contend with the Soviets.³⁷

The most illustrious voice to emerge from this ferment was Henry Kissinger. From the 1950s onward, Kissinger became a prolific advocate for refurbishing diplomacy as an instrument of high policy in the Cold War struggle. A philosopher at heart, Kissinger was beguiled by Kant's notion that humanity is slowly moving toward a global federation that will banish war from the human experience.³⁸ He developed a lifelong preoccupation with the question of international order, which, invoking Kant, he saw as "the most difficult and the last to be solved by the human race."³⁹ The job of the diplomat, Kissinger believed, was to solve that problem by devising a series of "intermediary stages," grounded in the balance of power, that would slowly allow humanity to realize Kant's dream.⁴⁰

Both rediscoveries of diplomacy occurred not because of nostalgia but because international exigencies made them necessary. The first was primarily about restoring the professional competence that was lost when politicians took charge of diplomacy; the second was about restoring political control over war that was threatened by the advent of nuclear weapons. Both were rooted in a desire to recover lost constraining functions that are classical diplomacy's stock-in-trade. And both were driven by individuals who looked to history for inspiration and succeeded in producing a rearticulation of diplomacy's core functions suited to the new circumstances of the time.

So far, the post-Cold War world has not produced a similar reappraisal. Peace in our time has seemed more durable and certain than in those earlier eras; confidence in the soldier and jurist runs much deeper. As a result, diplomacy's depreciation since 1991 has been more comprehensive, and the resulting loss more pervasive, than that which occurred after 1919 and 1945.

The effects of this loss can be seen in modern writing on diplomacy. Since the Cold War, the field of diplomatic history has shrunk to a fraction of its former size.⁴¹ A few scholars have kept the torch burning by pointing out diplomacy's indispensable role in international politics.⁴² And a handful of practitioners have begun to argue for a renewal of diplomacy to cope with rising world tensions.⁴³

For the most part, however, diplomacy has become a province of law. Since the early 1990s, the professional focus has been on multilateral rule-making ("governance diplomacy") or conflict management ("stabilization diplomacy"). Modern treatises on diplomacy branch in innumerable directions that reflect the interests and desired remit of the international jurist: "refugee diplomacy," humanitarian diplomacy, "digital diplomacy," "climate diplomacy," "health diplomacy," "sports diplomacy," and so on.⁴⁴ The emphasis is on navigating international bodies and administering peace as a process *above* the level of the state, not understanding diplomacy's strategic uses *by* the state.

The absence of strategy in works on diplomacy is mirrored by a general neglect of diplomacy in the modern writing about strategy. There are a few important exceptions, mainly in the field of grand strategy, which have done much to illuminate the diplomatic policies of various empires and rulers across the ages.⁴⁵ But by and large, post-Cold War strategic studies have shown a heavy bias for the military end of the spectrum. Recent major books on strategy contain entries on counterinsurgency, terrorism, attrition, and deterrence, but very few that deal more than tangentially with diplomacy.⁴⁶

Perhaps the biggest difference about today is that the nature of power itself seems to have changed. When Nicolson or Morgenthau wrote about diplomacy, they could assume as a given that power was understood to be finite, and that the state's ability to impose its will was highly constrained from within and without. It was a short distance from that recognition to the conclusion that the state might need to devise political expedients to bridge gaps in the means at its disposal, at least temporarily, through diplomacy.

By contrast, after the Cold War, the old limits seemed to have vanished. History supposedly ended, at least in ideological terms, and ideals reigned supreme.⁴⁷ Power came to be seen as something that could be conjured

at will. It took many nebulous and flashy forms: “soft,” “smart,” “generative,” and the like.⁴⁸ Untethered from underlying material realities, power became a kind of ideational substance that could be produced without being consumed or depleted. The state itself seemed about to be transcended as geography ceased to matter and sovereignty became a virtual construct.⁴⁹ Diplomacy had been “dead” before, but never has the rigor mortis been so advanced.

Argument and Approach

But obituaries of classical diplomacy, this book argues, were premature. Its starting point is that Kant was wrong: Humanity is not progressing toward an apotheosis. War is a permanent condition of human existence. We still inhabit a world of competing states, and their highest goal is survival. Their range of choice remains limited by all kinds of things—geography, finite wealth and weapons, clever enemies. The job of diplomacy is to help the state navigate those realities, while amplifying constraints on opponents. The doorway through which it makes that contribution is strategy: the art of survival.

The aim of the book is to make a fresh articulation of classical diplomacy, both as an art and as a source of stability, for a new and unstable era. In that sense, it can be viewed as a humble attempt to extend the tradition of Callières, Satow, Nicolson, and their successors into the 21st Century. Like them, I look to history to help us understand diplomacy’s core role and functions. My approach is to examine how national leaders in past eras used diplomacy to cope with the dangers of great-power competition.

Attempting such an inventory across all of time would fill an entire library and is well beyond the abilities of an author who has a wife, two kids, and a dog that demand his attention. So to reduce the matter to a manageable form, I am narrowing the focus in a handful of ways that allow me to get to the nub of the issue.

First, I’m looking only at the history of diplomacy in the West. This is reasonable, since diplomacy as we know it in its modern form originated in Europe and continues to bear a Western imprint at the global level. The great Eastern empires have fascinating diplomatic traditions, and maybe I will write about those someday. But for the most part those empires did not recognize the concepts of sovereignty for political units of all sizes, or the separation between diplomacy and espionage, that we have come to associate with the Western tradition.

Second, I am interested only in the diplomatic strategies of the great powers. All states practice diplomacy. But only the most powerful ones undertake actions that have the potential to rearrange regions, set the template for global order, and, if things go badly, kill every person on the planet.

Third, I am interested only in what were once called conservative great powers—that is, states that are not attempting to violently overturn the status quo. Genghis Khan, Suleiman the Magnificent, and Adolf Hitler all employed professional diplomats. But the ends to which they used them would more properly be called subterfuge or deception, in that their chief aim was to facilitate conquest. This is not diplomacy but rather the waging of warfare by non-violent means. By definition, classical diplomacy concerns itself with stymying accumulations of power that would allow one great power to dominate the others.⁵⁰

Fourth, I am looking at the actions of individual leaders. History is made up of imperfect people, laboring under the strain of events, who had to live with the consequences of their decisions. Diplomacy in particular is the realm of the mind; as one early 20th-Century historian wrote:

More than any form of history, perhaps, that of diplomacy brings into prominence in its plenitude the psychological element, the constructive value of human plan and purpose. It reveals the mind of an individual, or the sagacity of a group of statesmen, grasping the conditions of a situation in which vast combinations of force may be thwarted by other combinations, and the interests of a nation, or of civilization itself, secured by a sound public policy.⁵¹

To understand history at this level, we have to see the world as decision-makers at the time saw it. We have to know the leaders themselves: what they feared, who they loved, what they had for breakfast. Doing that requires us to look past the patina of bronze busts to underlying follies and peccadillos. There is a tendency in diplomatic history to lionize a rotating cast of virtuosos who seem to walk in the clouds and commune directly with the gods. This book casts a broader net. Richelieu, Metternich, and Bismarck all make appearances in the following chapters. They are considered the “greats” for a reason. But diplomacy has never only been the exclusive province of geniuses. It is also the story of eunuchs, courtesans, alcoholics, and moms who were just trying to help their kids stay out of trouble. Seeing this full panoply of actors makes diplomacy at once more accessible and, when it succeeds, more remarkable.

Finally, I am interested in moments that truly mattered: when the stakes were high and strategy had life-or-death consequences. All too

often, historians study how diplomats built order *after* wars ended. Those are important episodes, and a few of them appear in the book. But they aren't really the best situations to see diplomacy's role in strategy for the obvious reason that by the time great powers reach the peace table, the military has already had its say on the battlefield. The opposite problem applies when studying diplomacy *during* wartime. Once the fighting starts, the options shrink, reaction cycles takes over, and strategy becomes a quest for physically overpowering an opponent by main force.

Instead, this book's main interest lies in the period leading up to a potential war, when savvy strategists can see a major conflict looming on the horizon, but before the straitjacket of "crisis management" has taken over. It is during these instants—let's call them the "Archidamus moment"—when the dangers of scarcity are most keenly felt, and when diplomacy offers the greatest promise for shifting the odds in one's favor.

Historically, the times that have brought these realities most starkly into focus are wars against more than one great power simultaneously.⁵² Two-front war is a uniquely dangerous threat in the life of even very powerful states, because it is then that the gaps between means and ends are widest. Sitting "between the devil and the deep blue sea" forces states to clarify what they care about and fear the most—and what they are willing to give up. The moments when such wars are foreseeable but leaders have not yet been overtaken by events provide the purest laboratory we are likely to find for assessing diplomacy's place in strategy.

With these factors in mind, I chose to look at episodes of great danger drawn from the lives of seven great powers that span roughly a millennium and a half, from the arrival of Attila the Hun on the Danube in the mid-5th Century AD to the end of Richard Nixon's first term in November 1972. Across these episodes, I trace four threads that jointly comprise the book's argument.

First, I contend that the need for diplomacy in strategy arises in inverse proportion to the amount or efficacy of military strength that a great power has on hand to address the threats it faces. The realization of this deficit is far from automatic; to the contrary, great powers almost always reach instinctively for the military option when they are threatened. It is only when that option proves inadequate to the task, or the costs involved with ramping up militarily would saddle the state with an intolerable financial burden, that leaders turn, often reluctantly, to diplomacy as an expedient for securing the state. Diplomacy's role in strategy is to construct political expedients that help states bridge these dangerous gaps between the means at their disposal and the threats arrayed against them.

Second, in managing these gaps, I argue that diplomacy gives the state an advantage in influencing the factor of time in strategic competition.⁵³ By limiting the uses to which force is likely to be applied at any given moment, diplomacy helps the state conserve, redirect, and concentrate its power. The essence of diplomacy in strategy is to rearrange power in space and time in order to achieve its utmost political aims while avoiding tests of strength beyond the state's ability to bear. This role is indispensable, timeless, and cannot be performed by any other instrument of state.

Third, I argue that diplomacy's use in strategy comes with costs and trade-offs, management of which are themselves part of the measure of its success. Sometimes these costs are tangible and strategic; sometimes they are moral and reputational. Dealing with them requires leaders to make gut-wrenching choices involving long-cherished goals or aspirations. No analysis of diplomacy's role in strategy can be complete without examining these trade-offs and asking, "Was it worth it?"

Finally and relatedly, I argue that effective diplomacy relates power back to a national mission that is greater than the state itself and transcends profane power politics. Great states, like individuals, "cannot live by bread alone"; they seek survival for reasons that are not purely material but cultural, spiritual, and particular to their histories. Alone among the instruments of state power, diplomacy provides a medium for connecting the exercise of power to a higher sense of purpose in the world. It seeks to transmit not just the "how" but the "why" of power.

Plan of the Book

The chapters are arranged chronologically.

Chapter 2 begins with the frantic efforts of the young Byzantine emperor Theodosius the Younger and his wily court chamberlain Chrysaphius to deal with the unstoppable hordes of Attila without taking their eye off of powerful Sassanid neighbors to the east.

Chapter 3 moves to Renaissance Italy, where we find the aging Venetian doge Francesco Foscari attempting to settle accounts with mainland rival Milan so that he can turn his attention to the threat from the Ottoman warlord Mehmed II, who has just sacked the great Christian citadel of Constantinople.

Chapter 4 has two parts. The first chronicles the Valois queen-regent Marie of Savoy's efforts to entice the Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent into an alliance against the emperor Charles V. The second examines Cardinal Richelieu's quest to court the heretic Protestant princes of

Germany and free the kingdom of Louis XIII from the encircling grasp of the Habsburg Empire.

Chapter 5 moves to Habsburg Austria, where the empress Maria Theresa and her eccentric minister Count Kaunitz maneuver to form an alliance with archrival France to save their empire from the cunning soldier-king Frederick the Great. The second half of the chapter looks at how the statesman Klemens von Metternich built an elaborate system of diplomacy that extended Austria's lifespan as a great power and created one of the longest periods of great-power peace in history.

Chapter 6 shifts the focus north to Germany, where we find the bilious chancellor Otto von Bismarck spinning elaborate webs to keep his empire out of a two-front war with France and Russia.

Chapter 7 looks at how British leaders on the eve of two world wars attempted to use diplomacy to secure the British Empire from multidirectional attacks, with very different results.

Chapter 8 brings us to the Cold War, where we find Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger sending secret messages to Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in a bold gambit to discomfit Leonid Brezhnev and extricate America from the war in Vietnam.

Each chapter follows a similar mold. I start by examining the geography of the great power in question and explaining the dilemmas that confronted it at a moment of particular danger. Next, I describe the constraints facing the group of leaders in question and catalogue the military and financial resources at their disposal. I outline their strategic options and describe the often very intense debates that raged at the time. I devote particular attention to understanding the mindset of the leaders themselves—how they thought about their options, and why they chose a particular path. I then show the results of their decisions and ask what could have been done differently. At the end of each chapter, I offer some thoughts on what the great power in question contributed to the development of diplomacy as a profession and as an instrument of grand strategy.

A central claim of the book is that the pressure of competition spurs developments in diplomacy's forms and uses. To drive this home, I track a handful of themes from one chapter to the next. One is *fluctuations in military technology*, whose periodic spikes in lethality, from the compound reflex bow to the atom bomb, have served to both help and hinder the task of diplomats. Another is the *changing use of money in diplomacy*, from the era of gold ducats to the end of Bretton Woods, as a way of gaining advantage in great-power competition. A third is *bureaucracy*, which emerges in the storyline with the Byzantines creating a "bureau of

barbarians” to get a handle on the wild assortment of tribes around their borders, and ends with Henry Kissinger’s efforts to sideline the bureaucrats at the U.S. State Department.

The diversity of experiences across the chapters is itself part of the point of the book. Whatever a 15th-Century Venetian doge and a 20th-Century U.S. president may not have had in common, they shared an imperative to protect their homelands against omnidirectional enemies that possessed powerful weapons and were motivated by antagonistic worldviews. It is in tracing this recurrent theme of the need to match finite means to seemingly infinite ends across a shifting mosaic of situations that we are able to see what has changed over time in diplomacy’s institutions and conventions, and what has remained the same in its underlying logic in strategy.

In writing this book, I didn’t go in search of any “lessons” for the present.⁵⁴ There can be no doubt that great-power competition is upon us in the early 21st Century, and that the conditions percolating in the world today resemble the dangerously competitive dynamics that were the norm in earlier ages. At the end of the book, I identify some recurring traits of great powers that employed strategic diplomacy successfully that are likely to remain valid in the future. But there are no clear and easy instructions that Theodosius the Younger or Metternich can give us for how to deal with Xi Jinping or Vladimir Putin.

History’s primary usefulness lies not in pat lessons but in what it tells us, mirrorlike, about the human condition. In a modern era that has lost the shared reference points that bound together past generations, history has become one of the few things at our disposal for creating a shared sense of identity and purpose.⁵⁵ At a time when reality itself seems startlingly malleable, history is a reminder of certain constraints that do not change: geography, human nature, and the logic of strategy being chief among those. History is a good solvent to hubris, and to the conceit that we moderns know everything and can solve everything. If this book does nothing but remind us of our mortal frames—and perhaps challenge Lord Salisbury’s claim that there is nothing in the achievements of the diplomat capable of sparking the human imagination—then it will have achieved its aim.

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