Diplomacy and international theory

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Abstract. Diplomacy has long been neglected as a preoccupation of international theory. To repair this deficiency, this essay focuses upon bargaining over interstate disputes and makes two distinctions. One is between diplomacy as independent and as dependent variable. Analysis of diplomacy as independent variable studies diplomatic practice as causal influence, as when overcoming pressures that increase the danger of war or deadlock. This perspective is important for developing a diplomatic ‘point of view’. Dependent diplomacy analysis is preoccupied with constraints upon diplomatic statecraft and with adaptation to them. A second distinction is between negotiated bargaining, to reconcile divergent state interests, and non-negotiated bargaining that converges upon common interests between states. The essay dwells upon the link between independent diplomacy and negotiated bargaining, on one hand, and dependent diplomacy and convergent bargaining, on the other.

No area of world politics has reflected a greater gap between experience and theory than diplomatic statecraft. This has placed students of diplomatic statecraft increasingly out of phase with other international relations analysts who have aimed at controlled comparisons, broader explanation, and cumulative insights. There are a variety of reasons for this condition.

First, students of diplomacy have not been theoretically oriented. They have stressed its extreme variability, and consequently the difficulty of reaching empirical generalisations. ‘Of all the branches of human endeavour’, Harold Nicolson wrote in support of this view, ‘diplomacy is the most protean’.1 Second, those most committed to comprehensive international theory have excluded diplomacy from their generalisations on the grounds that it is too uncertain and unpredictable. For example, John Mearsheimer, a prominent neorealist theorist, criticises multipolar systems because in them ‘coalition strength would depend heavily on vagaries of diplomacy’.2 A third reason for the failure to study diplomacy theoretically is that

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those committed to doing so have not provided a satisfactory foundation. For example, Hans Morgenthau, who regarded diplomatic statecraft as central to international peace, emphasised the contrast between, on the one hand, the potential of classical diplomacy to mitigate power politics, and on the other, the eclipse of diplomacy during the Soviet-American Cold War. While each of these arguments could be theoretically analysed, the two do not seem to fit into the same theoretical framework.

This article does not propound or affirm any theory about diplomatic behaviour; instead, more modestly, it develops a pre-theory foundation that permits subjecting diplomatic practice to theoretical inquiry – specifically, to inductive, empirically-grounded studies yielding contingent but not universal generalisations. Research must be tailored to this foundation by having a relatively narrow focus and by taking account of the variability of diplomatic experience, no matter how ‘protean’. These are prerequisites for drawing out broader implications from particular case studies. As Alexander George has noted, apparently unique developments can and should be described more generally ‘as a particular value of a general variable that is part of a theoretical framework of independent, intervening, and dependent variables’. Analysis in this article is limited to the diplomacy of interstate dispute management and resolution, in which high-stakes bargaining, one of the most important aspects of diplomacy, takes place.

The foundation presented here contains a conceptual framework consisting of two key distinctions. The first is between diplomacy as independent and as dependent variable. Diplomacy as dependent variable takes into account rising constraints upon diplomatic statecraft, such as public opinion, ideology, and the intrusion of


3 For Morgenthau’s discussion of the need to revive diplomacy in order to strengthen international peace, see Politics Among Nations, 4th edn. (New York: Knopf, 1967), pp. 532–50; for his argument that diplomacy in the Soviet-American Cold War ‘has little with which to operate and tends to become obsolete’, see ibid., p. 531.


5 The present writer has previously studied this distinction in ‘Diplomacy as Independent and Dependent Variable’, International Negotiation, 6 (2001), pp. 79–104.
specialised actors. Analysis of diplomacy as dependent variable also focuses on the degree to which diplomatic practice adapts to these constraints. Nicolson's idea of 'protean' diplomacy presumably incorporates the potential of diplomats and their governments to adapt to political, military, and economic changes affecting the fate of diplomatic initiatives. On the other hand, Morgenthau, critiquing the effects of ideological inflexibility and militarisation on Cold War diplomacy in the latter half of the twentieth century, was more pessimistic about diplomacy's adaptive potential. By contrast, diplomacy constitutes an independent variable when diplomats push for dispute management in opposition to pressures that increase the chances of war. When Morgenthau praised the qualities of nineteenth century European diplomats for their ability to prevent war between major powers, and argued for taking the crusading spirit out of diplomacy and for accommodating on secondary questions, he had in mind diplomacy as independent variable.

A second distinction is between negotiated and non-negotiated types of bargaining. Diplomacy is negotiated when the interests of states cannot be fully reconciled, and explicit bargaining is required to reveal the area of agreement. For example, Hedley Bull notes that the problem for diplomacy is that 'states have different interests, and ... common interests have first to be identified by a process of bargaining before any question of maximization of them can arise'. Adam Watson has more generally defined diplomacy as 'negotiation between political entities which acknowledge each other's independence'. On the other hand, even when the will or opportunity to negotiate is absent, and when it is not explicit, bargaining can converge upon and underscore common interests between states, avoid misunderstandings, highlight the potential for communication between adversaries, and define practical steps to strengthen the harmony of interests. Non-negotiated bargaining is critical for international norms of behaviour. Convergence is stimulated either by shifts in national interest or by new opportunities to recognise those shifts. An example of the former is the reintegration of France into the international system, and agreement on holding periodic consultative meetings between highly-placed great-power officials, in the era after the defeat of Napoleon. The latter is illustrated by the reconciliation between the United States and China in the early 1970s on the basis of their common opposition to the Soviet Union.

As these distinctions are elaborated upon in this essay, a preliminary conclusion is that independent diplomacy is especially highlighted in explicit, negotiated bargaining, whereas dependent diplomacy is more common when bargaining is convergent. However, the theorist must be alert to other logical possibilities: negotiation frequently takes place under sharp constraint, and independent diplomacy can be highly significant, as Hitler and Napoleon showed, when a state employs international norms to weaken them.

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7 Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, pp. 446–7, 534–44.
10 Watson, Diplomacy, p. 33.
The essay also uses independent and dependent diplomacy to define a diplomatic 'point of view', using it to evaluate the world politics literature and to raise questions that additional theoretically-oriented work can focus upon. Such a viewpoint needs to be further developed and legitimised.

**Diplomacy as dependent variable**

Diplomacy as dependent variable refers to the consequences of specified constraints for the ability of states to cope diplomatically with disputes with other states. Constraints have effects either as *possibilities*, with some courses of action made more difficult or impossible by the constraints and others easier to accomplish or newly possible; or as *probabilities* that, because of changes in the environment, specified courses of diplomatic action will be taken and others excluded.11

To illustrate the use of diplomacy as dependent variable, we study here the assertion that the norms of classical European diplomacy, dating from the eighteenth century, have had a declining impact upon state behaviour for some time because of intervening modern developments. The classical norms included (1) preserving five great powers in Europe; (2) limiting wars by restricting commanders in the field; and (3) limiting the ambitions of states by strengthening the balance of power.12 Gordon Craig and Alexander George argue in their study *Force and Statecraft* that, beginning about 1890, a ‘diplomatic revolution’ was caused by changes in technology, in the public’s effect upon diplomacy and diplomats, in the intrusion of complex and technical economic issues into world politics, and in the rise of ideologically-motivated leaders. They maintain that these developments, taken together, weakened diplomats’ and governments’ commitments to the older diplomatic norms, lessened diplomatic flexibility, and contributed to intensified war and conflict.13

In showing how the dependent variable – the diplomatic ability to defuse confrontations – has been affected by the diplomatic revolution, Craig and George note that crisis management has been complicated by modern difficulties of controlling allied military forces, of slowing down the tempo of military action, of coordinating

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13 The full statement of the theory is as follows: ‘The diplomatic revolution eroded both the conditions and norms that supported the classical European system. Developments in technology and science revolutionized transportation, communications, and the art of warfare; the emergence of mass political parties and of special interest groups rendered domestic peace more precarious and made it more difficult for governments to pursue coherent and consistent policies as in the past; and the rise of new ideologies and extreme forms of nationalism tended to increase international friction and dispute. As the international community became more conflict-prone, the homogeneity of the diplomatic community deteriorated. As the new technologies of war became more difficult to control, diplomats and statesmen lost faith in the norms, procedures and modalities that had maintained the flexibility and viability of the balance-of-power system in the past. Increasingly also foreign affairs fell into the hands of popularly-elected heads of state who were more sensitive to the currents of domestic politics and public opinion.’ Ibid., p. 286.
military and diplomatic moves, and of countering incentives for pre-emptive military action and military solutions. The well-known case of the outbreak of the First World War illustrates all four of these problems. It might be hypothesised that, as a consequence of these same problems, the diplomatic revolution rendered diplomats and governments less able to defuse crisis by peaceful means. If so, a larger proportion of confrontations between great powers in the twentieth century would have ended in war than during the classical period. Craig and George supply an historical overview that seems to disconfirm this hypothesis. They note how 'the principal powers were engaged in almost continuous warfare against each other' during the classical period of the eighteenth century. A And in the Cold War period two hundred years later, by the time the diplomatic revolution had presumably taken root, successful crisis management became a hallmark of Soviet-American relations. Soviet-American peace persisted during more than forty years of dangerous Cold War conditions, during which – according to Craig and George – the international system was normatively focused upon mutual superpower concern about crisis management to prevent a Third World War.

To hypothesise a link between the diplomatic revolution and peace or war is to understand the variance in the dependent variable in terms of crisis outcomes. Such a link, if established, would display the impact of the diplomatic revolution on crisis management in its strongest form. But if the diplomatic revolution is not clearly related to crisis outcomes, it might nevertheless affect diplomacy by introducing such pressures as war deadlines, loss of flexibility, and multiple channels of communication. It might be hypothesised that these pressures made crisis more dangerous but did not predetermine crisis outcomes.

To state the relationship between the diplomatic revolution and the process of interaction between governments in this weaker form is to place the focus upon the response of diplomats and governments to the newer pressures. One possible response was diplomatic passivity; that is to say, diplomats and governments were bewildered by the pressures and unable or unwilling to adapt to them. The rapidity with which the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in July 1914 was followed by the outbreak of major war might suggest such bewilderment. When Morgenthau described diplomacy during Soviet-American Cold War as 'obsolete', he seemed to accept that same position. However, even if war took place as the consequence of new crisis pressures, this is insufficient to support the conclusion that diplomatic norms and efforts were insignificant. According to Richard N. Lebow, the most remarkable feature of German decision-making in 1914 was the great difficulty German leaders experienced in going to war; that difficulty can be reconciled with older system norms. Furthermore, passivity can only explain successful crisis management with reference to fortuitous circumstances. With reference to the record of successful Soviet-American crisis management, neither fortuitousness nor the fear of nuclear war are adequate explanations.

14 Craig and George, Force and Statecraft, 16.
15 See fn. 3.
Craig and George for their part reject such an assumption of diplomatic passivity in this context. They instead conclude – much less pessimistically than the full outline of the theory suggests – that ‘The diplomatic revolution has both complicated and aided the ability of statesmen to confine military moves in a crisis to those that constitute clear demonstrations of their resolve and are appropriate to their limited objectives’ (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{17} Statesmen are aided, they observe, by the availability of more sophisticated intelligence resources providing clearer means for top decision-makers to evaluate the opposing side’s military moves. Instead of being an unalloyed negative constraint, technology serves as an opportunity for leaders to compensate for the military and political conditions impairing their freedom of action. Such a conclusion, which helps explain repeated Soviet-American success in crisis management, raises an analytical dilemma for those studying diplomacy as dependent variable. On one hand, emphasis upon the strength of constraints and upon the resulting weakness in the dependent variable should not lead to the assumption that the latter is informed by passivity alone. On the other hand, the more that diplomacy is conceived of as adapting to or compensating for constraints in the international environment, the less problematic for international stability those constraints appear to be.

Craig and George appear to be of two minds on this subject. In their overview of international history, their focus – consistent with the diplomatic revolution – is with diplomacy increasingly at bay, impeded in accomplishing what it had notably achieved in the nineteenth century, namely, peaceful accommodation of major disputes. The puzzle here is that diplomacy does remain effective during crises despite the rising constraints. The ability of diplomats and governments to adapt and to take advantage of new-found opportunities seems to be part of the answer to this puzzle. However, establishing the impact of the diplomatic revolution will be more difficult when account is taken of opportunities as well as limitations affecting diplomatic behaviour, because the channels of influence to be accounted for are more numerous.

By contrast, in that portion of \textit{Force and Statecraft} in which the overall concern is to apply knowledge to statecraft, so as to increase the chances of successful crisis management (among other goals), Craig and George focus upon opportunities available to states, and especially upon information about how policies have and have not worked in the past. This approach highlights how shifts in international developments may be less important for crisis management than are the willingness and ability of policymakers to learn from their past mistakes. Here the puzzle is how policymakers learn to overcome international constraints, and why they do or do not do better on the learning curve. The puzzle is resolved by the discovery, through narrower, case-focused analysis, of policy-relevant commonalities and differences appearing in a variety of cases. Craig and George in fact argue in this connection for more limited, case-grounded theory, rather than for more complex and broader propositions such as that of the diplomatic revolution.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Craig and George, \textit{Force and Statecraft}, p. 224. Emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., pp. 153-63. Such an approach is also advocated by George in ‘Case Studies and Theory Development’.
Diplomacy as independent variable

Martin Wight understands diplomacy as an independent variable when, contrasting the inevitability of war in general and the preventability of particular wars, he argues that the difference between them is explainable by diplomatic statecraft. ‘It is the task of diplomacy’, he writes, ‘to circumvent the occasions of war, and to extend the series of circumvented occasions; to drive the automobile of state along a one-way track, against head-on traffic, past infinitely recurring precipices’.19 In the nineteenth century, as in the mid-twentieth, the importance of independent diplomatic action was directly associated with the magnitude of the threat of great-power war. And while diplomacy was certainly employed as it was earlier for propaganda, deception and gamesmanship, its greater importance was to counter the prevailing tide of conflict at the time of the greatest need. The crisis management dimension of diplomacy in particular can be fully examined, it appears, only by understanding diplomacy as an independent variable – that is to say, the use of statesmanship to counter the drift to war, rivalry, and mistrust – by reaching cooperative arrangements in spite of those tendencies.

If diplomacy ‘circumvents occasions’, then intrinsic gain in agreement is less critical than avoiding a breakdown of discussions. The larger the risks and dangers of such a breakdown, and the more unacceptable therefore a diplomatic failure, the more understandable is the focus upon diplomacy as independent variable. Despite treating diplomacy as a dependent variable in relation to the diplomatic revolution, Craig and George appear to treat it as an independent variable in relation to the requirements of successful crisis management, in which the consequences of diplomatic failure could mean highly destructive warfare. ‘If catastrophe is to be avoided’, they write in relation to superpower confrontation, ‘decision makers in a crisis must be capable of functioning at a very high level’.20 They justify this conclusion primarily by the scale of the effort required to restrain armed forces placed on war-readiness levels. Of seven crisis management requirements Craig and George set forth, four relate entirely to military restraint – irrespective of diplomatic options. Without such restraint, the most active diplomatic posture designed to preserve peace will be inadequate. However, the distinction between passive and active diplomacy has a bearing on Craig and George’s conclusion even if military restraint is practised. They recognise the importance of diplomatic efforts: one of their rules provides for reconciling diplomatic and military moves; a second entails ‘diplomatic-military options that signal a desire to negotiate rather than to seek a military solution’; and a third entails choosing ‘diplomatic-military options that leave the opponent a way out of the crisis’.21 On the latter two points they cite grounds for optimism: (1) because of the widespread fear of annihilating warfare, ‘The current generation of policy makers in the industrialized world is likely to explore every possible avenue of negotiation rather than resort to force’; and (2)

20 Craig and George, Force and Statecraft, p. 227.
21 Ibid., p. 216. The quotations in the next sentence are also ibid., pp. 225–6.
because of advances in communication and transportation, governments are better enabled to ‘separat[e] the opponent’s fundamental interests from his rhetoric’.

However, these last points appear to underestimate the difficulties of initiating an active diplomacy under time-urgent, highly pressured conditions. In particular, the problem of finding a peaceful solution to crisis is likely to be complicated by the circumstances in which the crisis has arisen: most modern-day crises occur because of some diplomatic failure brought about by faulty reading of the opponent’s intentions. As Robert Jervis has noted, upon the onset of crisis the credibility of the opponent and of one’s own country will be in question. Yet questioning the value of trusting the adversary will likely prevent a government from ‘exploring every possible avenue of negotiation’. Instead, it can be expected to contribute to selective diplomatic outlooks, and to retard the willingness to take advantage of communication links compromised by prior misunderstanding. Moreover, trust between adversaries may be paradoxically harder to re-establish during crisis when diplomats move ‘against the flow’, so to speak. In short, apart from military restraint, defusing crisis may require an improbable, even unnatural, transcending of the prevailing political environment.

While independent diplomacy is frequently reflected in frantic and uphill efforts to prevent war, it is also evident in efforts to shape the terms of defection and war. Diplomatic behaviour can affect military realities by (1) increasing or decreasing the frustration level for which defection is a response; (2) adding to the dependence upon diplomatic as opposed to military channels; and (3) itself becoming an indispensable means of facilitating defection. With respect to the first of these, numerous cases exist in which the will to defect is conditioned on some preliminary diplomatic programme. In 1941, for example, the Japanese naval staff postponed its attack against Pearl Harbor to permit Japanese diplomats in Washington additional opportunity to work out a territorial arrangement with the United States over the Far East that would make the attack unnecessary. Only when additional discussions failed to break the deadlock did the naval staff proceed with its war plans. The Soviet Union went still further as it prepared for war in Afghanistan in 1979: in October 1979, it ‘telegraphed its intentions to intervene’ to the United States so as to gauge American reactions. American failure to protest may well have been taken by the Soviets as evidence that the United States had no objection to the intervention. In these cases, the decision to defect is linked either to confirmation of an unfavourable diplomatic reality, or to obtaining some favourable one in which certain goals will not be damaged by the defection.

Second, diplomacy can affect military conditions, not by utilitarian diplomatic demands, but by a process that can flourish as a substitute for defection – what

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For a study concluding that too much trust was a cause of the Cuban missile crisis, see Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter, ‘Controlling the Risks in Cuba’, *Adelphi Paper no. 17* (London: Institute of Strategic Studies, April 1965).


George Kennan has termed ‘that cushion of safety that normally existed in the ability of governments to talk with one another over the diplomatic channel’.25 This point weakens the relevance for world politics of the much-studied prisoners’ dilemma game, which has been adduced in recent decades to explain how, without communication, defection occurs as mutual suspicions override incentives to cooperate, even in an alliance relationship that otherwise encourages cooperation. From the diplomatic point of view, on the other hand, the decision of states to defect, or to act to exclude each other from the game, is likely to depend on a calculation of whether mutually beneficial outcomes can be obtained, a calculation that logically requires taking account of existing diplomatic channels.26 There is no a priori reason to assume that states should invariably behave as if communication between them were relatively unimportant or inconsequential, and be compelled, for lack of it, to allow for a condition to develop in which they are required to decide once and for all whether to defect.27 In addition, the perceived value of the pre-defection relationship needs to be taken into account by those who emphasise the importance of defection; if it is not, the importance of defection is deflated. The question, ‘Defection from What?’ though coloured by military developments, directs attention as well to the perceived importance of the diplomatic cushion.

Finally, diplomacy can itself be a tool of defection. For example, the illusion of a cooperative Nazi-Soviet framework was critical to Hitler’s strategy of defeating the Russians by surprise attack in 1941. Hitler was required to offer Stalin still more favourable terms than those contained in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 – indeed, virtually any terms that Stalin asked for, in order to establish the cover of the German-Soviet alliance.28 In such cases, the underestimate of defection rather than the objective danger of defection is the key condition. ‘[D]ecision makers underestimate the ability of others to defect’, Jervis has written, ‘and therefore frequently believe, incorrectly, that they can get away with some exploitation … [They have thought] they could safely act against the other side’s interests because they exaggerated the constraints inhibiting the rival’s retaliation’.29

26 To be sure, the formal diplomatic potential can be totally neglected. George Kennan refrained from any contact at all with Stalin for nearly a year when serving as ambassador in the Soviet Union in 1953 and 1954. And, prior to the Seven Years War in 1756, British and French leaders, assuming that their opposite counterparts did not want war over their relative empires in North America, did not question each other’s pacific intent. So confident were they of peace, that when reports of fighting in Maine and the Ohio Valley reached London and Paris, the governments rejected negotiations, preferring to probe their opponents’ intentions with force. The two countries decided to embark upon limited war while maintaining ‘cordiality . . . at all cost’, since they wished to impress rather than destroy each other. Because of their political and diplomatic optimism, they played down the urgency of the crisis, and the outstanding issues were never really discussed. Patrice Louis-René Higonnet, ‘The Origins of the Seven Years’ War’, Journal of Modern History, 40 (March 1968), p. 78.
27 The case in which ‘the urge to preempt . . . could become a dominant motive if the character of military forces endowed haste and initiative with a decisive advantage’ is incisively discussed in Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 227ff.
Bargaining over divergent and incompatible interests

The case for treating diplomacy as an independent variable is most compelling when divergent interests of states in conflict must be taken into account to manage a crisis. Wight’s view that diplomacy must ‘circumvent the occasions of war’ suggests that any bargain that is struck will be viewed differently by the participants because their interests and expectations are likely to be different and perhaps irreconcilable. Bargaining may be impeded by a lack of clarity about the adversary’s interests, since, as Charles Lockhart has remarked, prior to crises states ‘do not adequately recognize one another’s interests, or . . . misperceive that others are able and willing to support these interests’. In such cases, crisis management requires clarifying the adversaries’ interests for each other. At the Congress of Berlin, a high-water diplomatic achievement, diplomacy is said to have been facilitated by the fact that peace was more threatened by the absence of clearly defined objectives than by major incompatibility of state interests. Mediation by Henry Kissinger and later by Jimmy Carter to manage Israeli-Egyptian conflict over the Sinai also illustrates the importance of clarifying the opponents’ interests for each other.

Goals can be clarified under time constraints, if the diplomacy is not too ambitious. In the Cuban missile crisis, for example, a ‘least effort’ agreement in principle was reached relatively quickly, in which the Soviet Union agreed to remove its missiles from Cuba, in exchange for an American agreement not to invade Cuba and private assurances that American intermediate-range missiles in Turkey would be removed. ‘Least effort’ agreement seems particularly desirable when the risks of miscalculation and of inadvertent war are high – that is, when military preparations of war must be made, but where the preparing country is not in a position to gauge how its military moves are perceived by its adversary.

Divergent interests thus need not, in themselves, impede the chances of bargaining-agreement. Divergent interests stimulate bargaining, because as the parties have contrasting assessments of the value of agreement they are prepared to exchange benefits more valued by the other party for benefits more valued by themselves. ‘It may even be easier’, Roger Fisher has written, ‘to reach a peaceful settlement if the parties do not see things the same way, but rather see things differently’.

Opposed to those highlighting the potential of diplomatic activism to manage crises are others who view diplomatic activism as a major cause of confrontations that constrain diplomats. This second viewpoint emphasises the dangerousness of

31 According to W.N. Medlicott, ‘[I]t is probably true to say that the absence of clearly defined objectives provided a more serious threat to the peace of Europe [at the time of the Congress of Berlin] than any real incompatibility between the ultimate aims of Austria, England, and Russia’. The Congress of Berlin and After, 2nd edn. (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1963), p. 4.
33 This is known as Homan’s theorem; see Zartman and Berman, The Practical Negotiator, p. 13.
34 Fisher et al., Coping with International Conflict, p. 47. Zartman and Berman (The Practical Negotiator, pp. 175–6) point out that it is in the details of negotiation that this statement is illustrated.
interstate confrontations promoted by the hard bargaining of governments in dispute. The danger is of a loss of control that can lead to war despite the determination of the parties to avoid it, and the hard bargaining reflects inflexible objectives. Thomas Schelling conceives of states as continually engaged in demonstrations of resolve, tests of nerve, and explorations for understandings and misunderstandings... through a diplomatic process of commitment that is itself unpredictable. The resulting international relations often have the character of a competition in risk-taking, characterized not so much by tests of force as by tests of nerve. Particularly in the relations between major adversaries...issues are decided not by who can bring the most force to bear in a locality, or on a particular issue, but by who is eventually willing to bring more force to bear or able to make it appear that more is forthcoming.35

Perhaps the most famous example of a demonstration of resolve that diplomats could not successfully manage was the crisis that preceded the First World War. Positional concerns were then compounded by prior commitments and the strength of national will, ruling out flexibility. ‘The game of power politics, if really played hard’, Kenneth Waltz argued more generally in reference to multipolarity, ‘presses the players into two rival camps, though so complicated is the business of making and maintaining alliances that the game may be played hard enough to produce that result only under the pressure of war’.36 Produced by war pressures, hard bargaining under multipolarity was extremely difficult to sustain without producing widespread hostilities, because, Waltz maintains, hard-bargaining allies were determined not to defect from their alliances.

More recently hard bargaining was a characteristic of the diplomacy of the Soviet communist regime in the period immediately after the Second World War, when Soviet representatives were said to be ‘under compulsion to try for a certain number of times to secure each Soviet point, no matter how minor’, and consequently even minor disputes became ‘test[s] of staying power’.37 While posing an extremely difficult challenge to Western patience, such tactics were paradoxically contagious: as hard bargaining for individualistic gain is sensible for any one state, it also becomes sensible to any and all the others, irrespective of the ‘regulated environment’ that was in conflict with such bargaining. Yet, the more states that are attracted to individualism, the less attractive as a political instrument free-loading becomes. Indeed, by complicating dispute management and convergence of interests, such individualism can make all states worse off by heightening the search for relative advantage.

Questions can be raised from a diplomatic point of view about this problematic condition. First, Schelling’s reference to states ‘continually engaged in demonstrations of resolve’ (my emphasis) deflates the distinction between pre-crisis and intra-crisis diplomacy that permits gauging the full impact of the onset of the sense of mutual danger, which is in turn conditioned by the confrontation’s unpredictability. If diplomacy functions as ineffectively during crisis as beforehand, the chances of

ultimate defection are quite high, and yet Schelling does not appear to allow for the diplomatic adaptation to the crisis that would help to forestall that result. Moreover, the link between diplomacy and the onset of crisis, as Schelling understands it, can be questioned. Schelling argues that the dangerousness of crises has an impact upon pre-crisis behaviour of states. ‘What deters such crises’, he wrote in reference to the Cuban missile crisis, for example, ‘and makes them infrequent is that they are genuinely dangerous’.38 But it is not clear why crises should be discouraged in this way prior to the time that crises appear dangerous, if, as Schelling contends, states continually engage in tests of resolve.

Second, while Schelling focuses on problematic diplomacy contributing to confrontation, he is silent on diplomacy that discourages such confrontation. Governments appear to make binding commitments more frequently when they assume that these will not be tested. If Waltz is correct, governments under conditions of multipolarity mostly hesitate to make commitments because of their fear of a diplomatic breakdown, and of the loss in their position that they anticipated from such a breakdown. ‘Politics among the European great powers tended toward the model of a zero-sum game’, Waltz argues. ‘Each power viewed another’s loss as its own gain. Faced with the temptation to cooperate for mutual benefit, each state became wary and was inclined in tests of resolve.39

Waltz thus agrees with Schelling that concerns about relative advantage impede interstate cooperation, but he suggests that the diffidence and suspicions of states limit their confrontations of each other. A second limitation on diplomatic tests of resolve is the use of ambiguity. Without diplomatic ambiguity, Jervis has argued, countries would tend to force their adversaries to retreat as much as possible and would find it more difficult to probe each other’s views.40 A third limitation is that the hardest bargaining is usually associated with minimal rather than maximal positions. For example, as Henry Kissinger noted, countries desiring a negotiated agreement will ordinarily begin with maximal objectives that are subject to modification, while only countries determined to defect will start a negotiation with their minimal position.41

Convergent interests

Convergent interests are commonly understood as increasing the potential of interstate cooperation. In their most developed form, in international regimes, such interests ‘establish stable mutual expectations about others’ patterns of behaviour and . . . develop working relationships that will allow the parties to adapt their practices to new situations’.42 Cooperative arrangements that result from convergent interests temper concerns about relative advantage that otherwise make cooperation between states difficult or impossible.

38 Schelling, Arms and Influence, p. 96.
39 Waltz, Theory of International Politics, p. 70.
Advocates of convergent bargaining employ contrasting assumptions about diplomatic behaviour. On one hand, they hypothesise that convergence defuses crises by limiting tests of resolve. ‘One of the values of laws, conventions, or traditions that restrain participation in games of nerve’, Schelling has written, ‘is that they provide a graceful way out. If one’s motive for declining is manifestly not lack of nerve, there are no enduring costs in refusing to compete’. Even as the absence of communication appears to increase the danger of war, tacit rules, situationally determined and not requiring any explicit communication, can be a way to resolve a crisis. ‘[W]hen some agreement is needed’, Schelling has written, ‘and when formal diplomacy has been virtually severed, when neither side trusts the other nor expects agreements to be enforceable, when there is neither time nor place for negotiating new understandings, any agreement that is available may have a take-it-or-leave-it quality. It can be accepted tacitly by both sides or by unilateral announcements that one will abide by it if the other does too’.

On the other hand, Schelling takes account of the possibility that a multitude of communications channels may be available during crisis. This he finds problematic because the channels provide opportunities to communicate new objectives, making crisis results more indeterminate. ‘One difficulty with overt negotiations’, Schelling wrote, Is that there are too many possibilities to consider, too many places to compromise, too many interests to reconcile, too many ways that the exact choice of language can discriminate between parties involved, too much freedom of choice. In marriage and real estate it helps to have a ‘standard-form contract’, because it restricts each side’s flexibility in negotiation. Tacit bargaining is often similarly restrictive; anything that can’t go without saying can’t go into the understanding. Only bold outlines can be perceived. Both sides have to identify, separately but simultaneously, a plausible and expectable dividing line or mode of behavior, with few alternatives to choose among and knowing that success on the first try may be essential to any understanding at all…. In warfare the dialogue between adversaries is often confined to the restrictive language of action and a dictionary of common perceptions and precedents.

When diplomacy is inadequate, and yet the overriding concern of states is with the search for common interests, the difference between Schelling’s two scenarios – the absence of communication and large-scale communication – is insignificant. Assuming that states can define common interests, negotiated diplomacy will either be inconsequential (when diplomatic linkages are severed) or needs to be made so (when linkages are distractions). Schelling argues more generally that whether their communication is minimal or plentiful, antagonists need to coordinate their expectations because they have a ‘common inability to keep their eyes off certain outcomes’. However, from a diplomatic point of view, the problem of acting on common interests raises a different set of questions. First, defining and acting upon convergent solutions may be problematic because (1) conflicting goals and attitudes

43 Schelling, Arms and Influence, p. 120.
44 Ibid., p. 139. Emphasis in original.
46 Schelling, Arms and Influence, pp. 140-41.
47 Schelling, The Strategy of Conflict, p. 73.
may prevent reaching convergent solutions; (2) convergence is not well-defined; and (3) the parties are determined to move beyond convergence.

Second, when common interests and norms exist, diplomatic contacts are likely to help define and act upon them. When analysing the Cold War between the Western Powers and the Soviet Union as an international system, Craig and George assert that the two sides had only one objective in common – preventing another world war – and this common objective overrode their many conflicts and rivalries. They explain that Cold War crisis management succeeded because of the widespread fear that any superpower war would escalate, and because of military deterrence. Yet diplomatic practice, particularly the regular exchange of views between American and Soviet diplomatic representatives, was also significant in helping to manage crises.

Diplomatic frameworks commonly constructed to uphold international norms illustrate how states adapt to affirm and strengthen the norms. They also paradoxically illustrate how states capitalise opportunistically upon those norms for relative gain. Such frameworks stimulate opportunism as governments are more confident that they will not need to pay a high price for their commitments. Writing about superpower relations in the Middle East, for example, Harold Saunders wrote that

With the safety net of . . . a diplomatic framework to fall back on, [the United States and Soviet Union had] been willing to use the Arab-Israeli conflict as a vehicle in their competition, but each side has recognized some limits of tolerance in the other’s willingness to accept setbacks. . . . Interestingly, they were most cautious in 1967 and 1983 when their bilateral relationship was least well developed. They were most daring in terms of their own competitive military involvement in 1970, when they had begun to develop enough of a relationship to be more confident of their ability to avoid confrontation but were still testing each other in the process of building that relationship.

Rather than ruling out confrontation, the safety-net appears to be the prime stimulator, in turn, of trust between adversaries that can itself lead to confrontation; the framework emboldens the parties to strengthen their positions and commitments in a manner that cannot be sustained by the framework, so that the latter is tested.

Schelling and Saunders can evidently agree that the same situational problems that create a normative preference for convergent solutions also draw attention to what

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48 Craig and George, *Force and Statecraft*, p. 105.
49 In another study, George wrote that ‘To urge that the superpowers undertake timely, serious diplomatic discussions to clarify their interests in a particular area and to identify actions by the other side that they would regard as threatening those interests is to do no more than to enjoin US and Soviet leaders to make greater use of traditional diplomatic practices’. He went on to note ‘sporadic efforts’ to do so, including some successful ones in the 1980s, and noted that ‘The question is how to institutionalize such traditional diplomatic practices and make them more effective’. ‘US-Soviet Efforts to Cooperate in Crisis Management and Crisis Avoidance’, in George et al. (eds.), *US-Soviet Security Cooperation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 595. Yet regular useful exchanges between American and Soviet diplomats are known to have occurred through much of the Cold War period, and appear to have been more important than George acknowledges. See, for example, *As I Saw It*, by Dean Rusk, ed. Daniel S. Papp (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 357–61.
51 On the value of trust in negotiations, see *The Practical Negotiator*, pp. 27ff.
distracts states away from the convergence. But Schelling's concern that diplomatic activism weakens the potential of convergent solutions to international crisis is transformed by Saunders to a very different problem: that common norms and interests embolden governments to take greater risks in exploiting their differences, and indirectly stimulate the tests of resolve that Schelling relies upon common norms to temper.

Bargaining may to be more opportunistic with ample convergence because the dangers of breakdown are smaller; the less diplomacy needs to be geared to preventing a breakdown, the more it can be conditioned by narrow demands for national advantage. But when convergence is insignificant, or absent altogether, the risks of breakdowns are larger and bargaining must be narrower if crisis instabilities are to be overcome. In such a case, the context rather than the myopic self-interests of the contending states forms the major danger to stability.

Concluding observations

This article has tried to develop a diplomatic point of view and to refine concepts to enable the diplomacy of conflict management to be the object of theoretical study. This concluding section summarises the main arguments and elaborates further on them. It also shows that developing a point of view and refining concepts are related preoccupations.

A diplomatic point of view is developed here in two ways. One is to point out how arguments that do not explicitly focus upon diplomatic practice have unstudied diplomatic implications. Neglect of these implications detracts from isolating the independent significance of diplomacy on other developments, which we may term 'diplomatic potential'. Understanding diplomatic practice as a causal influence – that is, how it impacts upon other specified variables – requires theorists to anticipate diverse ways in which that potential can be actualised.

Failure to appreciate a variety of ways in which this actualisation occurs is linked to the neglect of crisis management diplomacy as an independent variable. In this article, for example, we have noted the argument made by Craig and George that cooperation in Soviet-American crisis management is to be explained by the mutual fear that any outbreak of superpower war could escalate, and by deterrence. While these affected diplomacy directed to superpower disputes, they do not focus upon the independent contribution that diplomacy made to the management of superpower confrontation.

This article has argued that diplomacy as independent variable is most consequential when, as in the Cold War period, diplomats 'circumvent occasions' when faced with a common, highly threatening danger. At this preliminary point, it may be suggested that among the first steps for appreciating the independent significance of diplomatic practice must be to probe the operational significance of what Wight has termed 'circumvent[ing] occasions'. The circumventing necessitates negotiated bargaining, and the negotiations have larger importance because rules and norms are relatively weak.

For example, circumvention necessitates anticipating resistances to diplomatic initiatives, overcoming them, using the element of danger and the threat of failure to
establish a basis of accommodation, being able to make expeditious decisions and to force expeditious decisions by others, and limiting the focus of negotiations. Circumvention also entails the risks of failure; diplomatic potential should not be overrated, because in many dangerous instances a diplomat may herself rate the probability of failure in negotiated bargaining as higher than the chances of success. The necessity of diplomatic action evidently drives this effort, and not the chances of success, yet the chances of success may be increased or diminished by the choices diplomats make.

A much larger body of writings, some also discussed in this article, suggests that variables such as military plans and dispositions, ideology, public opinion, and the diplomacy of making commitments, impact upon crisis management by limiting diplomatic choices. From a diplomatic viewpoint, the weakness of these writings is that diplomacy as dependent variable cannot adequately be illuminated solely by highlighting the constraints upon diplomacy brought about by other variables; it must also allow diplomats’ adaptation to these constraints. Specifically, it should allow for opportunistic action based upon skill and ingenuity in particular circumstances, compensating for developments that limit diplomatic choices. Writings that fail to do so are too confining from a diplomatic point of view. Failure to allow diplomatic adaptation to constraints, for example, weakens Schelling’s discussion of diplomatic tests of resolve; Morgenthau’s characterisation of diplomacy during the superpower Cold War as ‘obsolete’; and Craig and George’s argument about the ‘diplomatic revolution’.

Adaptation is more likely to occur when diplomats accept limitations posed by added constraints as a given. But the analyst should also anticipate, alternatively, that diplomats may be unaware of the constraints, and thus may act – perhaps in counterproductive fashion – as though they do not exist; or that diplomats may be aware of the constraints and accept them passively without taking compensatory action. To determine the weight of the constraints as they impact upon diplomatic practice, the theorist, who must introduce a null hypothesis as a hypothetical possibility, should never accept a priori the constraints as a binding obligatory element upon diplomatic action. Instead, their importance will have to be determined on a case-by-case basis, taking into account whether diplomats understand them as limits upon their behaviour, and in what ways. If the constraints affect diplomatic behaviour, presumably they would also affect the results of negotiated bargaining that takes place.

While many types of constraints present themselves for study, and some, such as domestic political structure, have arguably become more important in recent years, those most emphasised in this article have been norms, rules, and convergent interests. Schelling’s argument that these developments can and should guide diplomats working to promote accommodation should receive empirical study. Perhaps, as Schelling recommends, negotiated bargaining takes its cues from norms, rules, and convergent interests, even when it is potentially able to ignore or downplay them. Then the norms, rules and interests diminish the independent importance of negotiated bargaining, and confine it to more predictable paths. On the other hand, diplomats may not take their negotiating cues from norms, rules, and convergent interests. This would be more probable when normative and convergence elements are weaker. It is argued here that the significance of diplomacy as dependent variable is greatest in this context not in relation to negotiated bargaining or to some
superceded model of diplomatic behaviour, but instead when norms and rules are clear-cut and respected. The logic is that when international norms are strong, there is relatively little need for diplomacy to circumvent occasions.

Although we have played up the differences and analytical tensions between negotiated bargaining, on one hand, and norms and rules, on the other, in practice neither is likely to fully overshadow the other. As Harold Saunders and Robert Jervis have noted, hard bargaining for negotiated advantage is often encouraged when norms and rules provide a well-established diplomatic framework, as in the nineteenth century great-power concert. And relatively unstable periods, such as the classical period prior to the Napoleonic Wars and the superpower Cold War rivalry, were not without norms. A more difficult issue is that independent and dependent aspects of diplomatic behaviour are illuminated by investigating similar elements, including constraints, the search for leverage and influence, norms, and the diplomatic ‘cushion of safety’ highlighted by Kennan. We have noted that diplomacy as independent variable can illuminate the decision of governments about whether to defect from commitments with allies and adversaries. Furthermore, diplomacy is independent if it constitutes the basis of deception. Diplomacy is highlighted as dependent variable when governments capitalise upon international regimes to bargain hard for relative advantage, and when they employ their constraints and those of other states as sources of political leverage for the same purpose. These tendencies are particularly significant, it appears, in light of the contemporary proliferation of international regimes.

As between negotiated and convergent bargaining between states, it is doubtful whether one can be adequately understood without making assumptions about the other. The dynamics of negotiation can be studied on the assumption that certain international norms are given. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye have argued, for example, that sensitivity interdependence, by which they mean the ability of some states to capitalise on the dependence constraints of others, ‘can provide the basis for significant political influence only when the rules and norms in effect can be taken for granted’. The full effects of this interdependence cannot be understood, they note, without examining what they term ‘the “translation” in the political bargaining process’. We propose here that this bargaining process, which Keohane and Nye did not study, will be affected by the balance between negotiated and convergent bargaining, the relative importance of one type of bargaining being inversely related to the other.


Even if it is conceded that the modern diplomatic revolution weakened norms favourable to classical diplomacy, it remains to be explained how the ‘almost continuous warfare’ noted by Craig and George in the classical period (Force and Statecraft, p. 16) permitted classical diplomatic norms to arise.


54 Ibid.