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On Diplomacy Beyond On Diplomacy:

Time for a 'Second' Edition

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When I was invited to take part in the 2017 ISA celebration for the 30 years of *On Diplomacy* I realized I had in fact lost the book. Twice. I first misplaced a second-hand copy of James Der Derian's classic somewhere in-between moving from Norway to the hallways of the aptly-named Hedley Bull Centre at the Australian National University (ANU), where I studied for my postgraduate degree in diplomacy. As I started my PhD in diplomacy at the ANU, *On Diplomacy* was one of a few texts I could not afford not to re-buy: considered a classic of diplomatic studies and already rare in libraries around campus, for many, the volume had already become 'a must'. Many years and a few overseas moves later, I lost the copy I bought at the ANU as well. I brought it to a class in my "Negotiation" course at University College London's Faculty of Engineering Sciences only for some eager scientist to appropriate the slightly faded pages in view of the upcoming essay deadline – a good sign of the appeal of more lyrical diplomatic thinking amidst technocratic experts, I thought there and then.

Accustomed to searching for and purchasing different sorts of texts, I was struck by the lack copies of *On Diplomacy* in academic bookstores around London, a void that was only accentuated by Amazon's cheeky suggestion that I purchase a second-hand hardback copy for just £235 – quite the bargain for a vintage title really. Losing the second copy could not have been more timely. Having only managed to borrow another second-hand copy from King's College's library shortly

before ISA 2017, I pondered quite publicly whether I should have stolen an original copy for myself as Paul Sharp placed his on the table at the convention roundtable. Der Derian's classic is a book well worth the risk, I reckoned.

No doubt, I cannot boast an affair with *On Diplomacy* as extensive as those of some of the other scholars in this forum. In 1987, as *On Diplomacy* was 'hitting the shelves', I was less preoccupied by the interventions of Fred Halliday (1987) on *The Making of the Second Cold War*, as noted by Sharp, than by scrolling through the pages of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1986). Unlike the more senior figures in this forum, I made my acquaintance with Der Derian's foundational text much later, in the early-2000s at the ANU, when the text was assigned, appropriately enough, in a session on Hedley Bull and the English School. Yet Der Derian's work had a different style (and logic) from the other classics of that IR period: it spoke of complex historical processes, but kept its gaze on the *cultural* complexity of the diplomatic milieu. In so doing it fed into my growing fascination with diplomacy proper - and studies of such - as more general IR literature seemed to overlook these intricate structures and their pre-Westphalian roots.

As I grappled with the complexities of the great debates and the intricacies of current shifts in IR theory, it confirmed to me that my purpose in academia was to engage with that particular, peculiar world of diplomacy, which, although it might receive less attention, and less frequent or feted publications, displays a resilience and an enthusiasm that few other strands of social science can. The ISA celebration was, therefore, not just a good chance to look for another copy of the book: it spoke of why we should look back again at our diplomatic studies tradition, but it also spoke of the need to hold that in tension with the 'new diplomacy' of our present time, which is characterized by radical global transformations and formidable theoretical challenges. Most of all, it reminded me that the part of the book that really sparked my interest in the type of diplomacy I work on (e.g. Acuto 2011), came at the end. I would therefore like to offer some reflections here on the importance, but also the incompleteness, of *On Diplomacy* for a generation of diplomatic scholars that, like me, has predominantly developed in the contexts of debates on the 'new' domains of diplomacy.

On Diplomacy beyond diplomacy

On Diplomacy is a persuasive narration of the historical formation of a diplomatic culture. As Neumann (in this forum) already pointed out, the book reminds us of the strength of the 'essayist tradition' in IR – a tradition that goes beyond the dominance of structured qualitative assessments of world politics and exceeds the shadow cast by often even less readable quantitative tomes. *On Diplomacy* did not compromise with the behaviouralist tendencies of popular in (world) politics at the time. Nor did it make do with a present-tense discussion of many IR texts in what – we would later learn – was the last decade of the Cold War. Rather, perhaps thanks to Bull's mentoring, it stayed the course as a historical reconstruction offering historical arguments. As such, it stands as an example to the present generation of diplomatic scholars of the value of challenging the dominance of the 'now' in academia, a challenge to the urgency of policy and the pressure for rapid publication. Der Derian is not always easy to read, or indeed grasp, but he most certainly presents us with a text that has remained pertinent, convincing and dense in persuasive assertions (a mark of many Enlightenment essayists like Samuel Johnson and Joseph Addison) that still echo across diplomatic research papers, syllabi and discussions – as our ISA roundtable proved.

Yet as Jef Huysmans (1997: 337) noted on the book's tenth anniversary, Der Derian's work is "often a bit of a rough ride" and should perhaps be best understood not as a "single entity" but as a series of "poststructuralist interventions" in IR between more 'heavy' scholarly interventions on one hand and more 'pop' activism between media, opinions and cross-disciplinary experimentation on the other. Representative of the former type of Der Derian, *On Diplomacy* is thick in theory whilst, in a sense, not being a theoretical book: Nietzsche, Hegel, and Marx all loom large in the discussion of the book's most famed idea: that diplomacy is the mediation of 'estrangements'. This has certainly inspired Foucauldian approaches to diplomatic analysis in the past three decades, but it should also remind us of the importance of not losing sight of the symbolic and inter-cultural powers of the diplomatic profession. I would argue, however, that *On Diplomacy* must be read in dialogue with the other kinds of Der Derian that are out there – including the one

that turned up at the ISA celebration, and that gestures well beyond the limits of IR as a discipline, probing and poking at innovative methods and unlikely disciplinary engagements. After all, this is why *On Diplomacy* was on my syllabus, and perhaps why it disappeared from my desk whilst I was teaching in the Faculty of Engineering Sciences.

Indeed, I originally put *On Diplomacy* to work for an inquiry *beyond* diplomacy, which took the descriptions (and pre-scriptions) of the last chapter seriously and was inspired by that spirit of curious engagement with technology that is key in the study of diplomatic affairs. I always read *On Diplomacy*'s more forward-looking discussions of changes in the scientific-technological bases, and the types of 'diplomats' engaged, in light of the Der Derian that came after 1987, who is exemplified by the book *Antidiplomacy* (1992) and the article 'Virtuous War' (2000). In light of these, *On Diplomacy*'s last few pages were not enough, alone, to satisfy my early appetite for understanding the contemporary and historical technological challenges of - and to - diplomatic cultures. Yet they undoubtedly contained embryos which would echo in these later important works: the Der Derian of *On Diplomacy* was already telling us to go beyond diplomacy, into its radical transformations.

Years later, taking IR methodology further beyond the comfort zone that *On Diplomacy* had already pushed the limits of, Der Derian would continue to test its historical discussions, classic conditions and preconceptions of causality. For instance, in an article (2011: 373) on the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of President Ronald Reagan, he attempted a mix of visual culture and IR sensibilities to see whether the "ubiquity, interconnectivity and reflexivity of global media" was in fact symptomatic of a new quality and speed of today's diplomatic milieu. The 2011 model Der Derian, as the 1987 one, calls for better diplomatic sensibilities (to the entanglements of diplomats) as much as for novel means for diplomatic studies.

The 'techno diplomacy' of *On Diplomacy* should also be understood in its transition from the novelty in diplomatic method and practice discussed by Der Derian in 1987, to the foundations of his present disruptive intervention in rethinking the methods and ontology of IR from the 'quantum' up (e.g. Der Derian & Foldy, 2015). Welcoming the readers of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* "to the weird new worlds" (Der Derian, 2011: 373) of this type of diplomatic landscape, this

is a different Der Derian to the Bull-inspired 1987 model, and yet he also stands in dialogue with that last chapter of *On Diplomacy* that warned us that already the times were indeed 'a-changing'. As Noe Cornago summarized at the ISA roundtable, one of the marks of Der Derian's take on diplomacy is in his capacity to go looking for new signs and new symptoms of major transitions – something that eventually emerges in the 'techno' diplomacy of the book but also something that has been reiterated across his scholarship over the years. Key here, in my view, are the changes in the 'mediation' that is at the heart of *On Diplomacy*.

What has happened in the years since 1987, then, is an exponential expansion of the mediations and the estrangements that were so well captured in the original text. The rise of non-traditional diplomatic actors, which was documented in its early days in *On Diplomacy's* technology chapter, has been accompanied by a growing awareness in IR (beyond the *realpolitik* of the first debate) of the material underpinnings of the diplomatic game. 'Things' and material objects, as well as non-state diplomats, are now more widely recognized as populating a scene that might in fact have far more 'techno diplomacy' than ever before (Mayer and Acuto 2016). IR as a discipline is thus after all forced to reconsider its practices of mediations amid a rampant variety of cultural, political, economic and technological estrangements.

On Diplomacy contained important seeds of subsequent work by Der Derian (2000, 2011) but also work that others in diplomatic studies (e.g. Bjola and Homes, 2015) find critical to much of the way in which we speak of diplomacy today. We can appreciate how the symbolic relations discussed in *On Diplomacy* allow us to better understand the dynamics of 'post-International society' estrangement in the present. Yet here too we encounter some initial appreciation of the paradoxical clash of diplomatic culture with new (para-)diplomatic cultures, and the continuous alienation of diplomats themselves from their own system. An often under-appreciated element of *On Diplomacy* is, therefore, its still pertinent flagging of what we could term the 'unevenness' of alienation that underpins estrangements and the differential impact that changing socio-technical conditions have on diplomats and their culture(s). As Der Derian notes in the book, and as the ISA roundtable confirmed, these estrangements happen by multiple means, not just verbal or

quintessentially international ones. Yet this begs us to read more of Der Derian's diplomacy after *On Diplomacy*.

On Diplomacy after On Diplomacy

If we read *On Diplomacy* in light of Der Derian's more recent quantum turn and its representation in his 'Project Q'¹, we need to ask ourselves not just about the mediatory role that diplomatic agents might have, but also about the alienation of diplomats themselves, who often struggle to know what the system does to them - in a reversal of the logic of *On Diplomacy*. Hence, *On Diplomacy's* tongue-in-cheek preamble on the imminent 'demise' of diplomacy, setting the readers up for what is in fact a solid argument for the value and the culture of diplomatic engagements, remains today more than ever a pertinent 'essay question': does diplomacy, Western or otherwise, have a viable future? Will it withstand its necessary stretch to a wider and more complex realm, and make the necessary 'quantum' changes?

By his own admission, there is an unlikely line of work that goes from the still very classical IR style and themes of *On Diplomacy*, to the multimedia and posthuman experimentations of Project Q, via a middle ground of 2011's "quantum diplomacy". Yet this is a trajectory that certainly foreshadows much of the contemporary turn to neo-materialism and STS-infused IR (e.g. Salter, 2015). This approach to 'IR' (if we can still call it IR) also calls for novel theoretical and empirical tests and for a sense of the present as an exciting experimental and necessary moment. As he noted in a recent interview, Der Derian's international society-inflected tendency towards historical IR in *On Diplomacy* might also have to give way to more attention to current affairs: "Political science", as he puts it, "is too busy looking in the rear view mirror, to prove how we got here with models and numbers, to deal with *now*", and to appreciate that, Der Derian suggests, from a Project Q perspective, that "you have to look over the horizon, look beyond the disciplinary boundaries" (in Caso, 2016). He makes an apt call for a transformed and more

¹ Led by Der Derian at the University of Sydney and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Project Q has sought to engage IR scholars, physicists and philosophers in a discussion of peace and security dynamics in a "Quantum Age". See more at: <https://projectqsydney.com> (last accessed 20 May 2017).

experimental diplomatic tradition, which would be historically aware, but not stuck in the past or lost in the now, with no rejection (as the ISA roundtable proved) of the value of re-reading history as a foundation of our shared IR discipline. Balancing the needs of past, present and future in such enquiries emerges as a key concern.

As he puts it then, again speaking of Project Q more than *On Diplomacy*, but embodying the 1980s spirit of his earlier work, "the best progress – epistemic, ethical, political – comes through a respectful dissent, not consensus." Respectfully, Der Derian had already offered quite some disagreement with the predominant state-centric tradition of diplomacy of the 1970s and 1980s by speaking, and writing, of symbolic power and alienated relations of estrangement. Today, still respectfully, but perhaps in a less tongue-in-cheek manner, Der Derian still takes a hit at the world of IR. After all, it might be time for Der Derian to return to this more traditional path and, conscious of the advances of Project Q, consider a sequel to the 1987 classic. It is perhaps a good moment for him to begin working on *On Technology: A Genealogy of Diplomatic Estrangement*, picking up from where he left 30 years ago, and telling what is, after all, the future of diplomats and diplomatic culture in a world of quantum entanglements. That would certainly be another book worth stealing.

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