Chantal-Nina Kouoh, Diplomates indépendants. Emergence d’un statut. La dynamique des diplomaties non gouvernementales à l’orée du XXle siècle

(Independent diplomats. Emergence of a statute. The dynamics of non-governmental diplomacies on the threshold of the 21st century)


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To date, the 1961 Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations remains the main legal framework of diplomatic practice. According to the Convention, diplomacy is to be understood within the context of inter-states relations and to be exclusively conducted by accredited officials. 50 years later, state and bilateral diplomacy still make up the main channel of international relations. But restrictive definitions of diplomacy do not hold anymore. Since the end of the Cold War, the expansion of multilateralism, the rise of non-state international actors and the development of communication networks have all contributed to the erosion of the traditional conception of diplomacy and the development of innovative foreign policy strategies and negotiation tactics. However, the multiple and major evolutions of diplomatic practice and international negotiations have remained largely overlooked by the francophone academic literature on international relations and political science. Some exceptions do exist. In 2009, Bertrand Badie highlighted the multiple contributions of non-state actors to foreign-policy making and international negotiations.1 Some recent studies provide important insights on the transformations of diplomatic personnel and their careers.2 Guillaume Devin3 and Yves Buchet de Neuilly4 detailed the effects of the expansion of multilateralism upon international negotiations. Yet, overall, very few academic researchers seek to grasp the transformation of diplomatic practices as such.

Diplomates indépendants – Emergence d’un statut is precisely meant to address such a gap and analyse the progressive disconnection between diplomacy

and sovereignty, through the rise of non-governmental, ‘independent’ diplomats. The first part of the book goes back to the progressive institutionalisation of state diplomacy and provides an overview of the various fields through which foreign policy has been formulated and channelled since the 17th century. Chantal-Nina Kouoh argues that diplomacy has progressively shifted from traditional institutions to a new range of non-state diplomatic actors and thematic fields. A long part of Diplomates indépendants – Emergence d’un statut is therefore dedicated to providing an inventory of some non-state international actors (non-state public entities, transnational companies, international organisations and transnational movements) and the wide range of thematic areas on which they operate (military, culture, sport, human and women’s rights, and the like). According to Chantal-Nina Kouoh, the emergence of non-governmental diplomats would be “the ‘natural’ outcome of the major transformations that are currently affecting international relations”. “Independent diplomacy” – defined as conducted by “freelance non-governmental professionals”, but in accordance with international rules”(p. 220) – would then constitute an “alternative” to both official foreign policies and advocacy campaigns conducted by international NGOs and transnational social movements. The rise of independent and “selfless” diplomats is then conceived as a significant impetus to the democratisation of diplomacy as well as a relevant and much needed answer to the “worldwide demand of facilitation” (p. 268) and conflict resolution. The last chapters are more explicitly normative and include repeated calls for strengthening ‘independent diplomacy’ as a means of overcoming the limitations and biases of state diplomacy.

Such a strong normative perspective and lack of critical distance are part of the main shortcomings of the book. At the conceptual level, the thesis suffers from the lack of precise and consistent distinctions between foreign policy and diplomacy. While Chantal-Nina Kouoh explicitly aims at focusing on the latter, the first chapters of the book highlight the diversified tools and arenas (culture, sport, language, business and private sectors, and the like) chosen by diplomatic actors to advance the national interest and achieve their goals. The core of the thesis – the emergence of ‘independent diplomats’- is described in the second part, at quite a late stage in the book. The author provides a conceptual distinction between ‘micro’ and ‘nano’ diplomacy, based on the scale and level of interactions. Micro-diplomacy is defined in quite an essentialist manner, as “middle-range and altruistic diplomacy, focused on issues linked to human well-being, dedicated to finding lasting solutions and based on the fundamental needs of communities and groups that it supports”. “Nano-diplomacy” is located ‘at the bottom of the diplomacy pyramid’ - under “micro-diplomacy” – and conducted by field actors in support of ‘micro-diplomacy’” (p. 220). Independent diplomacy finally appears as a combination between nano and micro diplomacy, articulated with both state diplomacy and international interventions conducted by NGOs, transnational social movements and multinational corporations (p. 221). In line with earlier proposals by Luc Reychler,5 Diplomates indépendants – Emergence d’un statut welcomes the development of professionalised “field diplomats”, no longer distinguished by whom they represent or by their administrative status but by the skills (“open-minded, modest, creative, qualified, tactful, thoughtful, committed,

5 Luc Reychler, ‘Beyond traditional diplomacy,’ Diplomatic Studies Programme discussion paper, No. 17 (1966), University of Leicester, Centre for the Study of Diplomacy.
… and altruistic” (p. 222)) that they have acquired and possess in mediating and facilitating conflict resolution.

A whole chapter is dedicated to describing the main achievements of thirteen ‘independent diplomats’ (Bertha Sophie von Suttner, Frédéric Passy, Henri Dunant, Eugenio and Lina Balzan, Mother Teresa, Josephine Baker, Mohammad Yunus, Wangari Muta Maathai, Binet Diop, Carne Ross, The Elders, Malala Yousafzaï, Scilla Elworthy). It highlights their contributions to human rights, gender equality, development, conflict resolution, but provides very little information about their actual autonomy from state structures, their social and professional trajectories, or potential similarities in the practical ways they have exerted their influence. Such a focus would have led to developing a more nuanced analysis of the various and sometimes contradictory interactions between ‘individual diplomats’, governments, international organisations, scientists, NGOs, and international think tanks. The book contains several thematic focuses, including on peacemaking and private mediation. It includes several references to non-governmental associations of international leaders and experts acting in the field of conflict resolution - including Independent Diplomat and The Elders. Since the end of the Cold War, third party interventions by ex-government officials, Nobel Prize winners, individual experts, academics, or religious leaders have indeed greatly thriven. From peace processes to cease-fires and hostage negotiations, private individual actors have come to play a more prominent role in peace talks and political discussions. However, rather than confronting state actors or traditional diplomats, they often complement their initiatives through more informal channels. Looking at the international movement for democracy and human rights, Nicolas Guilhot shows how the pivotal positions of power that various individuals occupy at the junction of academia, national and international institutions, and activist movements, are critical elements for understanding the burgeoning of external interventions in support to democracy promotion.\(^6\)

In line with Brian Hocking’s definition of catalytic diplomacy in which multi-stakeholder coalitions among state and non-state actors, often assembled by professional diplomats, seek to manage policy issues,\(^7\) Chantal-Nina Kouoh aims at moving beyond the rather old and sterile debates about the revival or the ‘decline’ of diplomacy, which are essentially based on the international relations paradigm debates on the demise of the State as the pivotal actor of international relations. She admits that independent diplomacy “is not meant to replace state diplomats” (p. 272) and may intersect with traditional actors (p. 219). Yet, the specific arenas and various forms of these interactions are not detailed and the extent to which ‘independent diplomats’ would be autonomous from state foreign policy remains largely unquestioned. State and ‘alternative’ diplomats seem to remain in an antagonistic relationship, a zero-sum game for legitimacy in the conduct of foreign policy.

Unfortunately, Diplomates indépendants – Emergence d’un statut includes very little information about the position of the author herself. Chantal-Nina Kouoh indicates having worked “closely with ‘Very Important Persons’, from all continents, within a prestigious international organization” (p. 195). However, no specific information is provided about the profiles of such individuals or the

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organisation in question. She refers to “fifteen years spent observing the impact of public interventions by celebrities from the South” (p. 196). But nothing is said about the actual conditions in which such observation was conducted. And this is precisely where the main weakness of this book lies. While Diplomates indépendants – Emergence d’un statut may represent a useful introduction to the diversification of the forms, the actors and the styles of diplomacy, observations seem to fill in the edges around the (partial) review of existing literature. It does not articulate clearly its empirical or theoretical contribution. Readers interested in finding a renewed conceptual and analytical framework for understanding the individualisation and diversification of diplomatic practices will not be satisfied.