

# Hedley Bull: Constitutive or Reflective of International Society?

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### Is Hedley Bull's Institution of Diplomacy Constitutive or Reflective of International Society?

In his 2003 essay on the English School and Diplomacy, Iver Neumann states that 'Bull does not treat diplomacy and the other four institutions as constitutive of international society, but as reflective of it'.<sup>[1]</sup> Neumann's claim is that Bull does not conceive of the institutions and international society as being essential to order, but as being 'no more than the form a particular order happens to take'.<sup>[2]</sup> This is contra to Hedley Bull's own assertion that the five institutions: diplomacy; war; international law; the great powers and balance of power, are integral to international society. They are the means by which order is pursued in international society through the communication, enforcement, adaptation and protection of mutually understood rules. Bull writes:

These institutions serve to symbolize the existence of an international society that is more than the sum of its members, to give substance and permanence to their collaboration in carrying out the political functions of international society, and to moderate their tendency to lose sight of common interests.<sup>[3]</sup>

In this essay I will explore Neumann's criticism with regard specifically to the institution of diplomacy. I will contend that in fact Bull's conception of diplomacy is constitutive of international society, by reflecting upon each of its functions in turn as these are defined by Bull in *The Anarchical Society*.

#### Communication

Without communication there can be no relationship at all between states. Bull states that international society emerges:

...when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.<sup>[4]</sup>

Communication is integral to international society because the conscious effort of states to form relationships is what sets this mode of order apart from the state of anarchy, or a system of states. In addition, without communication there could be no trade or alliance between states, only conflict or indifference.

It might be contended that significant changes in the mode of diplomacy in recent history indicates that the institution may, at least in part, be reflective of a separately functioning international society. One particularly significant impact upon the institution of diplomacy has been the advancement of technology, particularly in the field of telecommunications. In response, diplomacy has evolved and adopted these innovations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of communication between states. For example, the telephone is now in use as a mode of diplomatic communication, and telephone 'hot lines', permanent direct links between two heads of state, were established as recently as the 1960s between Washington and London, Paris and Moscow, and London and Moscow, to name but a few examples.<sup>[5]</sup> So, the conduct of diplomatic communication has changed over time from

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being the elite pursuit of professional ambassadors or 'diplomatists'[6] to the inclusion of direct correspondence between senior politicians and state engagement with non-state actors. It could therefore reasonably be contended that the communicative function of diplomacy is reflective of international society, adapting according to its capacities and needs.

However, it is important to note that in the main, conventional bilateral diplomacy has remained virtually unchanged and has been adopted almost universally since its inception in the 15th Century. Bull also notes that 'there is more to communication than the exchange of messages; messages have to be understood and interpreted'[7]; the diplomatist is an expert in this, and is therefore pivotal to the success of exchanges between the political leadership of states.

Diplomacy has also adapted to incorporate the emergence of multinational institutions such as the United Nations, and the multilateral exchanges mediated by these. This development, however, does not necessarily indicate a decline in the importance of the traditional diplomatist Bull describes; the actors who facilitate diplomacy within states on behalf of these institutions require the same attributes and particular skills in communication as ever, despite the many environmental changes noted above.

What these observations indicate is that the communicative function of diplomacy is not so easily impacted upon by those significant developments both within states and in relations between them, but rather maintains its integrity and its inherent utility in the constitution of international society. Despite advances in technology, newly arising international issues and the emergence of multinational organisations pursuing multilateral diplomacy, the good diplomatist and particular conventions of communication remain important elements in diplomatic relations between states.

It should be noted however that there is also revealed a mutual relationship between diplomacy and international society; as diplomacy shapes it, so international society influences how diplomacy functions. This allows diplomatic communication to adapt to prevailing conditions of international society, yet foundational principles and requirements governing the institution do remain consistent. For example, Bull notes that diplomacy cannot succeed 'where foreign policy is conceived as the enforcement of a claim to universal authority, the promotion of the true faith against heretics, or as the pursuit of self-regarding interests that take no account of the interests of others'[8], that is, where it is perceived that no common interest can possibly be established between states. This principle was evidenced recently in the diplomatic efforts surrounding the conflict in Syria. The United Nations have engaged in communications with the Syrian opposition, a disparate group of influential non-state actors and therefore not the conventional subjects of diplomatic conversations. Prevailing international societal conditions, norms and values have impacted upon the normal conduct of diplomacy, necessitating engagement with 'rebels' due to international pressure and the United Nations' commitments and goals. Conversely, the Syrian opposition has refused to enter into talks with the Russian state, on the grounds that there can be no mutual interests between them, given their prior expression of support for President Assad[9]. Diplomatic principles hold and shape the trajectory of conflict resolution in Syria, impact upon current and future relations between Syria and Russia, and so on; diplomacy constitutes international society.

### **Negotiation**

The function of negotiation is important to the constitution of international society as we know it since, without it, 'international relations would be possible but they would consist only of fleeting, hostile encounters between one political community and another'.[10] Historically, political negotiation has determined the makeup of international society through the establishment of, for example, the content of international law regulating the air, seas and land, the boundaries of states, the outcomes of war and so on. A significant example of the impact of negotiation on the constitution of international relations is the Treaty of Westphalia, which in 1648 determined the foundational principles of the European state system, which endure to this day:

....the statesmen who gathered at Westphalia to conclude the war agreed that henceforth religious and other domestic issues were not legitimate concerns for international relations. Thus the conception of national sovereignty and the principle of non-interference by one state in the internal affairs of another society were established.[11]

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Gilpin continues that, along with the notion of sovereignty and the regulation of warfare, 'the creation of the institutions of modern diplomacy... were among the principal means developed to preserve the system'.<sup>[12]</sup> This example of negotiation therefore indicates how diplomacy is integral to international society both in terms of the conception of societal rules, norms and values, and in terms of its maintenance, and the preservation of order.

Again, one might challenge the constitutive nature of diplomacy by highlighting how the mode of diplomacy has changed in accordance with changes in the international society. From its origin as the secretive preserve of the elite, diplomacy has become increasingly transparent through its susceptibility to lobbying by highly visible non-state pressure groups, and through widely accessible sources of once closely guarded information, such as Wikileaks. Like communication, these changes have been brought about primarily through the advancement of technology, and particularly social media. Yet diplomacy was in existence well before society was so engaged in it, and the negotiations which result in most political decisions still take place between diplomatic personnel, away from the public eye. Indeed, Bull notes that 'negotiation is greatly facilitated if it can be undertaken in private, without the intrusion of competing preoccupations and loyalties, and if the negotiators are all members of the same profession, between whom there is confidence and mutual respect.'<sup>[13]</sup> The advent of more open diplomacy does not detract from the importance of artful negotiation, nor has it significantly changed the means by which diplomatic decisions are actually formulated. Diplomacy's function of negotiation is not a response to changing demands of international society; it is the means by which constitutive decisions are made which impact upon and preserve interstate order.

## Information

Again, there simply could be no international society if each state were unable to obtain information about any other. If a society is formed when one state consciously decides to pursue a relationship with another based on mutual interest, states must have some idea about the interests, values and ambitions of others in order for this element of international society to be plausible. Bull acknowledges that the resident ambassador is by no means the only method by which states gather information about each other, nor is he necessarily the most essential. Political analysts, journalists and intelligence agencies are all in a position to interpret and predict the development of interstate relations based on their understanding of the state in question, and of international society as a whole.

However, Bull does assert that conventional bilateral diplomacy is uniquely placed to gather intelligence that 'derives from day-to-day personal dealings with the leading political strata in the country to which a diplomatist is accredited'<sup>[14]</sup>, and consists of details of political leaders' personal views and ideas, providing an idea about what future actions and policies they might undertake.<sup>[15]</sup> By way of example, Berridge writes:

...during the American-mediated negotiations between Israel and Egypt in the 1977-79 period, in which accurately sensing the mood of the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, was of vital importance to the Carter administration, great reliance was placed on the reports of the US ambassador in Cairo.<sup>[16]</sup>

Such Diplomatic information is constitutive of international society in that it contributes significantly not only to immediate responses at the negotiation table or to other states' activities, but in the long-term informs how states formulate their foreign policy, and shapes the course of their relationships with one another.

## Minimisation of Friction

Another of Neumann's criticisms of Bull's concept of diplomacy is that he 'does not unpack the idea that diplomacy is about minimizing friction, but rests content with asserting it'<sup>[17]</sup> Neumann claims that this indicates that Bull does not place great significance on this function of diplomacy, rather treating it as 'derivative of other functions'.<sup>[18]</sup>

Whilst it is perhaps true that Bull does not explain this function of diplomacy with as great clarity as he does the others, it does not follow that this is evidence for the institution being reflective of the other institutions, nor of international society itself. Bull claims that, 'given the juxtaposition of different political communities, each with its own values, preoccupations, prejudices and sensibilities, friction in international relations is always present'<sup>[19]</sup>, and that the minimisation of this friction is 'one of the main functions of diplomacy'.<sup>[20]</sup> He goes on to emphasise the

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particular skills and qualities of the professional diplomat which allow him to fulfil this function, and to mediate effectively between states with divergent interests. What Bull is describing is the very essence of diplomacy; the art of recognising and pursuing common interests to establish mutually agreeable terms conducive to the constitution of order in international society.

However, Bull does focus primarily on the personal attributes of the diplomatist and these may be said to be contextually dependent with regards culture, religion, language, history; even the technological advances alluded to previously necessitate different skills in modern diplomacy, for example a good telephone manner is required and the speed of exchanges has greatly increased since the introduction of telecommunications to the professional diplomat's apparatus. As a result, it may be argued that the function of minimising friction, so dependent as it is upon these contextually-bound aptitudes, is reflective of the present requirements of international society. If the capacity for minimising friction is reflective of international society and this is the main function of diplomacy, does it follow that the institution is reflective also?

Bull's explanation suggests that this is not the case since, when reviewing the literature on the personal attributes of the good diplomat, it is 'striking... how little over the centuries the recommendations have changed'.<sup>[21]</sup> Although some skills and virtues do depend on context, the basic qualities of the 'ideal ambassador'<sup>[22]</sup> have endured. The integration of the adjective 'diplomatic' meaning 'having or showing an ability to deal with people in a sensitive and tactful way'<sup>[23]</sup>, into everyday language, is testimony to this. This suggests that whilst some qualities are context-specific, others are universal and inherent to diplomacy itself, distinct from the environment in which they are being employed.

Finally, in addition to the actors involved in diplomacy, this function is constitutively important with regards the other four institutions of international society also. The institutions enforce the rules which govern order in international relations, and minimisation of friction entails discerning those common interests which define and legitimate these rules. As such, the diplomatic function of minimising friction is also integral to the composition and maintenance of the other institutions, and therefore the means by which order in international society is both constituted and upheld.

## Symbolic

It is difficult to postulate that the symbolic function of diplomacy can be constitutive since, by definition, when one entity symbolises another it is reflective of it. Perhaps then the symbolic function of diplomacy serves primarily to highlight the institution's importance to international society. Bull writes:

Diplomatists... are visible expressions of the existence of rules to which states and other entities in the international system pay some allegiance. In the developed form of the diplomatic corps that exists in every capital city they are tangible evidence of international society as a factor at work in international relations.<sup>[24]</sup>

The symbolic function of diplomacy is facilitated by the presence in almost all states of the embassies and diplomatic staff of others. It is a constant physical reminder of international society, and all its associated rules, norms and expectations. Neumann notes that this physicality sets diplomacy apart from the other institutions since it is more visible and constant, and acknowledges the importance of 'the idea of a diplomatic culture'.<sup>[25]</sup> This is the notion of the diplomatic structure as a kind of microcosm of international society, whereby the relationships conducted between professional diplomatists within one state are reflective of those between the states they represent.

Der Derian's interpretation of Bull's concept suggests that the diplomatic culture may in fact be more than simply reflective of international society:

.... diplomatic culture is about understanding and bringing alien peoples into the dominant international discourse of the day... a diplomatic culture facilitates movement – of ideas, people, and sometimes even armies – across alien boundaries.<sup>[26]</sup>

Here, diplomatic culture is construed as constitutive in that it provides the means by which all other diplomatic

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functions are deployed; it brings together representatives of states and equips them with common conventions and language conducive to effective communication, negotiation, information gathering and minimisation of friction.

One might argue that the constitutive symbolic significance of diplomacy is diminished by multinational institutions such as the European Union or United Nations, who perhaps may be perceived to have a more significant impact upon international relations than individual embassies or ambassadors. Bull acknowledges this consideration, but contends that the diplomatic culture within states still plays a significant role in symbolising international society. Examples to support this claim occurred recently in late 2012, when protesters rallied outside United States embassies in Kuala Lumpur, Cairo, Benghazi and Islamabad to express their anger regarding an amateur American made anti-Islam film released on the internet, or when anti-austerity demonstrations took place outside embassies throughout Europe. These incidents indicate that resident embassies are not simply administrative buildings, but have symbolic significance as representatives of their sending state and of the relationship between the home and sending state.

So, since the presence of diplomatic missions in any state's capital serves as a constant reminder of international society, diplomacy may be said to be constitutive in that the diplomatic mechanism is the means by which relationships are conducted between states, and its physical presence contributes to the maintenance of order by reinforcing the existence of accepted norms and values integral to international society.

## Conclusion

I have indicated above how diplomacy is necessary for international society to function, and may therefore be said to be constitutive, rather than reflective of it. International society is the conscious formation of relationships between states which recognise common interests and pursue order, and this would not be possible without the functions of diplomacy to facilitate international relations.

However I have also noted how the relationship between diplomacy and international society is in many ways one of mutual impact. Bull notes that diplomacy presupposes international society, since it 'is made possible by the acceptance by the states concerned of complex rules and conventions'.<sup>[27]</sup> That said, international society and its constituent rules, norms and conventions did not simply emerge out of a system of states into their present form; they have been shaped by the institutions Bull outlines, with diplomacy being the primary facilitator of communication and understanding between states. So, although some concession may be made to Neumann's statement, it is clear that diplomacy plays a significant role in the constitution of international society.

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[1] Neumann (2003) p. 350

[2] Ibid.

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[3] Bull (2002) p. 71

[4] Ibid. p. 13

[5] Berridge (2005)

[6] Bull (2002)

[7] Ibid. p. 172

[8] Ibid. p. 164

[9] 'Syrian Opposition Leader Snubs Invite to Moscow', *The Independent*, 28 December 2012

[10] Bull (2002) p. 164

[11] Gilpin (2003) p. 114

[12] Ibid.

[13] Bull (2002) p. 174

[14] Bull (2002) p. 175

[15] Ibid.

[16] Berridge (2005) p. 125

[17] Neumann (2003) p. 348

[18] Ibid.

[19] Bull (2002) p. 165

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid. p. 176

[22] Ibid. p. 175

[23] Oxford Dictionaries (2010), <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/diplomatic?q=diplomatic>, [accessed 7 January 2013]

[24] Bull (2002) p. 166

[25] Neumann (2003) p. 348

[26] Der Derian (1996) p. 84

[27] Bull (2002) p. 161

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