

The Long March to Peace: The Evolution from “Old Diplomacy” to “New Diplomacy”

Written by Andrew Kourti

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ANDREW KOURTI, OCT 9 2020

The traditional scholarly opinion on the modern history of international relations suggests that the Great War constituted a radical turning point, signalling the emergence of “new” diplomacy, distinct in both spirit and style. It was thought the old system was primarily to blame for the outbreak of the war, as George Young, who in 1914 was the first secretary in the British legation at Lisbon, claimed “the public is revolting against orthodox diplomacy” due to “its failure to secure peace on earth to men of good will” (Young 1921: 15). Thus, popular opinion asserted, if future wars were to be avoided there required a fundamental change to how nations interacted with one another, with old practices abandoned. Hamilton and Langhorne note, the “new” diplomacy has two central tenets: first, it is more open to public scrutiny and control; second, the establishment of an international organisation which would facilitate the peaceful resolution of international disputes and act as a deterrent to the waging of aggressive war (Hamilton & Langhorne 2011: 142). It is further postulated within the traditionalist framework that the transition between the “old” and “new” diplomacy marked the rise of the so-called “American method” as emphasised by Harold Nicolson, who served as Second Secretary at the Foreign Office during the war (Nicolson 1953: 72). It is assumed that Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, was the key architect of the new diplomacy, with the foundations of change laid out in his seminal “Fourteen Points” address to Congress on January 8, 1918 (Thompson 2018: 19). Lord Percy, a British diplomat, judged that the rise of “new” diplomacy was a revolution led by Wilson, arguing that one of the most significant changes, the creation of the League of Nations, happened because “Wilson wanted it – and for no other reason!” (Percy 1920).

However, this study proposes that the distinction between “old” and “new” diplomacy should not be viewed as a radical change in course, but rather rooted in long-term liberal thought. As Sylvest explains, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries prominent liberal intellectuals “grappled with the central conundrums of international politics, including the nature and causes of war... and the preconditions necessary for securing peace” (Sylvest 2009: 3). The First World War was the catalyst which augmented both government and public support for liberal diplomatic methods which had been slowly evolving. It is important to note, the factors which shall be assessed in this essay are undoubtedly interconnected, but for the sake of analysis, they shall be separated to help facilitate a clearer comparison between “old” and “new diplomacy”. Furthermore, this essay shall predominately focus on British examples but will occasionally draw from other nations.

A key tenet of the “old” diplomatic process was the belief that sound negotiation must be continuous and confidential. The notion of secrecy was considered of utmost importance, as emphasised by Jules Cambon, a French diplomat and former Ambassador to Berlin, who proclaimed “the day secrecy is abolished... negotiation of any kind will become impossible” (Nicolson 1953: 76). It was assumed that if an ambassador’s conversation were private, they could remain rational, as there was no danger of public expectation being aroused, ensuring Ambassadors remained focused on the content of the negotiations rather than appeasing public opinion. Secondly, with no public pressure, an ambassador negotiating a treaty was not pushed for time, allowing for documents to be considered and drafted with exact care. For instance, the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, occupied the sole attention of Arthur Nicolson, the British Ambassador to Saint Petersburg and father to Harold Nicolson, for a period of one year and three months (Nicolson 1953: 76-77).

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Faith in secret diplomacy was shattered with the advent of the Great War, with leading liberals attributing the series of secret negotiations, treaties, and pacts as being a root cause of the conflict. On 17 September 1914, the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), a group of British left-wing liberals and socialists which included individuals such as Ramsay MacDonald, Norman Angell, and Charles Trevelyan, signed a letter to the press arguing “the lack of parliamentary scrutiny and sanction for British foreign policy” was to blame (Sharp 2016: 119). As late as 1914, Sir Edward Grey had not revealed to the Cabinet the exact nature of the military arrangements reached between French and British General Staffs (Nicolson 1953: 78). The secret Anglo-French Naval Convention of 1912, to at least some degree, had committed the British public to support France against a German attack without their knowledge or consent. Subsequently, the demand for open diplomacy garnered increasing popularity throughout the war, E.D. Morel, the secretary of the UDC, called for the public to “have a greater say... and that parliament should be kept fully informed of any agreements that might thereby be concluded”. This was later supported by Wilson, whom on 27 May 1916 in an address to the League to Enforce Peace appealed for a “universal association of the nations” which would submit “to the opinion of the world” (Hamilton & Langhorne 2011: 143). The war had certainly enhanced the significance of public opinion in international politics. Notably, the British Foreign Office broke with tradition to establish a news department to disseminate news regarding foreign affairs on a formal and systematic basis (Hamilton & Langhorne 2011: 147). The demand to end secret diplomacy culminated in the first of Wilson’s “Fourteen Point” address, his programme for the new international order demanded, “Open covenants of peace”, “no private international understandings”, and for diplomacy to always proceed “in the public view” (Link 1984: 536). This view was shared by Soviet politician Maxim Litvinov, whom in a telegram to Wilson on Christmas Eve 1918 proclaimed, the Russian people similarly shared Wilson’s great principle of open diplomacy. The Bolsheviks wasted no time in proving their commitment to said ideals, with Leon Trotsky, the first People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, publishing old tsarist files, which included secret wartime agreements of the Allies, such as the carving up of the Middle East (MacMillan 2003: 83-84).

However, it must be noted that change was not necessarily as radical as it may first appear. Firstly, there were limitations to the extent the Great Powers committed to this new form of open diplomacy. The Bolsheviks, as Hamilton and Langhorne note, “continued to conduct their foreign relations on two planes – a diplomatic and a revolutionary one”. The founding of the Comintern, the Russian sponsored communist international, in March 1919 co-ordinated and promoted revolutionary activity throughout the world. Subsequently, Soviet embassies became hotbeds of conspiracy and intrigue (Hamilton & Langhorne 2011: 157). Further, Wilson quickly retreated from his initial stance, in a meeting with the Senate in 1918 declaring, “I meant not that there should be no private discussion of delicate matters but that no secret agreement should be entered into” (Eban 1983: 346). The disappointment was evident during the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, with hundreds of journalists complaining about the secrecy of proceedings (MacMillan 2003: 65). Nevertheless, the subsequent creation of the League of Nations from the Paris conference stood in contrast to the secret diplomacy of the “old” system, with the League’s Covenant requiring the registration and publication of treaties and other engagements amongst member states (Hamilton & Langhorne 2011: 163).

Significantly, it must be stressed that open diplomacy has long-term roots in liberal thought. Historians such as Géraud have claimed that open diplomacy was an American creation born from public suspicion of the secret machinations of the Great Powers (Géraud 1945: 261). Yet, this does not appear to be true with the exaltation of popular wisdom a common theme of Enlightenment thinking. Philosopher De Condorcet in the eighteenth asserted all agreements and contracts should be submitted to public debate (Eban 1983: 348). Further, a Foreign Office which was now accountable to public opinion has analogies with the public minister of the eighteenth century who had to make himself palatable to a court (Butterfield 1966: 186). Moreover, as emphasised by Anderson, “parliamentary and public scrutiny had by the later nineteenth century a considerable history in Britain”, although it was by no means consistent. The 1850s and 1860s marked a growth in parliamentary interest and influence in foreign affairs. Parliamentary papers relating to foreign policy were more affordable and frequent. Further, calls for a more open diplomacy garnered support after the 1911 Moroccan Crisis had shown how easy Europe may be engulfed by war, resulting in parliament discussing the creation of a foreign relations committee for the first time (Anderson 1993: 142-144). Thus, the shift from secret to open diplomacy must be viewed as a continuation of pre-war liberalism, with the war being a catalyst for peoples and governments to embrace said ideals.

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Under the “old” diplomacy, the Great Powers had committed themselves to a system of alliances. The system had derived from the underlying principle of balance of power, meaning that no single Power or group of Powers be permitted to become a law unto itself. Increasingly peace in Europe depended on armed might than co-operation amongst the Powers, resulting in diplomats to engage in alliance building to deter potential enemies and ensure military superiority in the event of war (Hamilton & Langhorne 2011: 99). As Viscount Cecil, a British Lawyer and advocate of the League of Nations emphasised “the Balance of Power was purely negative... it accepted the proposition that every nation was the potential enemy... and it merely sought to limit the consequences of that disastrous assumption” (Butler 1928: vii). Further, Northedge adds that with international affairs dictated exclusively by a few states “the system placed a premium upon ambition, intrigue, acquisitiveness... with the object of advancing one state to the detriment of another” (Northedge 1986: 23). Ultimately, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century conflicts between the Powers could not be resolved by any rearrangement of alliances; and it was the entanglement of alliances which escalated the Sarajevo Crisis from a local conflict into a European war.

In the aftermath of the outbreak of the war the system of balance of power was immediately discredited. Cambridge classicist G.L. Dickson was highly critical portraying pre-war diplomacy as a Hobbesian type “international anarchy” (Egerton 1983: 502). This was a view shared by Wilson, during his “Four Principles” speech of February 1918 he told the American Congress that the balance of power was forever discredited as a means of maintaining peace. Consequently, Wilson proposed a League of Nations which would provide a system of collective security based in the reign of law and arbitration (MacMillan 2003: 21). Crucial to the concept of collective security was the notion that bilateral treaties had resulted in international anarchy and were to be replaced in favour of a universal/semi-universal association of states, hence according to Soffer “among the most salient aspects of the “new” diplomacy is the appearance of multilateral diplomacy” (Soffer 1988: 502). Member states were obliged to settle disputes peacefully and to not go to war with each other until all procedures for arbitration and conciliation as laid down in the Covenant had been exhausted. Under the new system, the League would act as the guarantor of the peace treaties. Additionally, a provision within the Covenant enabled members to bring disputes to the League which they were not directly involved in but were concerned may threaten international peace. Further, *Article 19* provided the League with the power to revise treaties or to take preventative measures to resolve differences amongst states. Lastly, if the League was unable to prevent conflict from breaking out it would attempt to secure peace by ensuring members submitted disputes to the League’s machinery for conciliation and arbitration. The arbitration process would be undertaken by a permanent Court of International Justice. At worse the League would attempt to localise the conflict (Henig 2010: 36, 46-47). The rejection of power politics and the use of force to settle disputes is epitomised no better than in the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, which joined sixty-three nations together, in a dual pledge to renounce war as an instrument of national policy and to only seek peaceful resolutions in settling disputes (Debenedetti 1972: 22).

The entry of the United States into the small group of senior members in the diplomatic community according to Eban was “the most decisive innovation in the twentieth century” (Eban 1983: 342). It is suggested that the increasing prominence of America on the world stage reflected the increasing internationalism which existed post-World War One, and the commitment to a collective system of nations. While this is undoubtedly true, it is not without its limitations, most notably the American Congress failed to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and subsequently refused America’s membership to the League (Henig 2010: 59). Further, Dykmann stresses, that “Smaller states could get the impression that the Greater Powers ruled the League”. This is evidenced by the number of different nationalities working as employees at the League secretariat; in 1920 there were thirty-eight members of the League, yet only fifteen different nationalities (Dykmann 2015: 76-78). Nonetheless, this was a period of transition, the influence of Smaller Powers had begun to increase and culminated with four seats to be allocated to said nations on the League Council (Henig 2010: 35).

Moreover, a universal association of states was rooted in long-term liberal ideals. As early as the eighteenth century, political theorists such as John Locke and Thomas Paine were writing that democratisation would result in a “family of nations... which would guarantee peace” (Soffer 1988: 197). Additionally, James Bryce, a British liberal politician, had championed internationalism, arguing “national allegiance could block progress” and give rise to “prejudice, hatred and wars”. He went on to argue for the creation of a “peaceful and orderly co-existence of nations” and became a central figure for the establishment of the League (Sylvest 2009: 155-161). Furthermore, the concept of collective security and multilateralism was not necessarily new, rather it was the product of tendencies visible long

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before the war. For the period between 1815-1914, stability was maintained through the informal but effective system of the Concert of Europe, established during the 1815 Congress of Vienna. The self-appointed concert would meet and decide whether to accept consultation with lesser states and how to avoid hostilities among its members. If rivalry became too intense, the Major Powers would consult and compensate one another to avoid conflict (Eban 1983: 340). Additionally, a network of internationalism and international law had been growing outside of the State system. Kang Youwei, a Chinese political reformer, noted the Universal Postal Union, as “evidence of a trajectory from which states may one day organize themselves into a world parliament” (Rosenberg 2012: 824). Further, sport highlighted the growing spirit of internationalism, in 1896 Athens hosted the first modern Olympic Games, and in 1904 The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) was founded in Paris (Rosenberg 2012: 831). The war was not the catalyst of an international spirit and the concept of a family of nations working together to ensure peace, but it was the impetus to which governments institutionalised their commitment to internationalism.

Due to the very nature of the balance of power thinking the Great Powers in the lead up to the war had found themselves in constant arm and naval races in the attempt to secure superiority within the continent. The spiralling arms races were blamed for the outbreak of war, Sir Grey, British Foreign Secretary, underscored this sentiment declaring, “great armaments lead inevitably to war” (Grey 1935: 91). The brutality of war helped to popularise the burgeoning anti-war sentiment which was developing within the West. David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, outlined his “three-point programme” to the Trade Union Congress on 5 January 1918, calling for “the creation of some international organisation to limit the burden of armaments and diminish the probability of war” (Sharp 2016: 121). Wilson expressed similar views in multiple speeches, notably the “Four Principles” (11 February 1918), the “Four Ends” (4 July 1918), and the “Five Particulars” (27 September 1918), during which he demanded war become more difficult, increased control on armaments, and a programme of general disarmament (Sharp 2016: 120).

Subsequently, “new” diplomacy was committed to a process of disarmament. Within the League, the Permanent Commission would “advise the League on the execution of stipulations” of the article on disarmament, and in general naval and military matters. League-sponsored schemes were directly aimed at arms limitations, it was hoped that this would encourage other nations to similarly disarm, along with legitimising the stringent disarmament of Germany under the terms of the peace settlement. In an alternative to military might, it was hoped sanctions would provide an effective strategy to curtailing aggressive behaviour (Henig 2010: 37, 49). Furthermore, during the League’s first Assembly meeting in 1920, it created the Disarmament Committee to directly tackle the issue. While it was President Harding who made the most significant contribution to disarmament by calling the Washington Naval Conference held between 1921-1922. During which the major maritime powers fixed the ratio of capital ships between them (Sharp 2016: 129). Yet, calls for disarmament and the use of arbitration has origins prior to the war, with the most notable example being the 1899 Hague Conference. Tsar Nicholas II had issued a Rescript calling for a meeting amongst the Great Powers in an attempt to substitute war for international law and arbitration and curtail the growth of armaments. Despite being met with cynicism, with Kaiser Wilhelm II claiming this was merely an attempt to reduce the “heavy drain on [Russian] resources”, and Britain rejecting arms limitations as something to which it could not subscribe (Hucker 2015: 408-413). The conference can still be viewed as laying the fundamental groundwork for change to occur in the future. As Frits Kalshoven notes, the Conference implanted the idea “that arsenals cannot be permitted unlimited growth”, an idea that despite not immediately achieved in the short-term would blossom in the aftermath of the Great War (Hucker 2015: 414). Moreover, the establishment of The Permanent Court of International Arbitration laid the crucial foundations for its successor, The International Court of Justice (Caron 2000: 4).

A further facet of the “old” diplomacy was the assumption “that the Great Powers were greater than the Smaller Powers”. The basis for such thinking was that the Great Powers possessed a wider range of interests and responsibilities, and, above all, more money and guns. Additionally, it was assumed the Great Powers were responsible for the preservation of peace, subsequently, the principle of intervention was widely accepted (Nicolson 1953: 73-74). Moreover, the Smaller Powers were viewed as pawns, with the Great Powers compensating one another at the expense of the territories and peoples of non-sovereign states, for as Eban emphasises “the aim of diplomacy in the nineteenth century was European stability, not universal equality” (Eban 1983: 340). However, the system failed with growing imperialistic rivalries perpetuating the tensions amongst the Great Powers as they aimed to increase their influence on the world sphere. Further, it was posited that colonial empires had created an anti-

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human and brutal culture amongst the Powers, as reflected by the fighting of the Great War (Wesseling 2005: 106-106). Increasingly throughout the war, Wilson demanded a new diplomacy which was more wholesome than its predecessor. On 27 May 1916, Wilson told the Republican League to Enforce Peace that the Smaller Powers “have the right to enjoy the same respect for their sovereignty” (Sharp 2016: 120). In his address to Congress on 22 January 1917, the “Peace without Victory” speech his commitment was reinforced. Thomas Knock hailed it as “the Wilsonian manifesto of the Great War”, the first statesman to demand “a New Diplomacy based upon the principle of equality of nations, [and] self-determination” (Knock 1995: 105-106, 115).

The League attempted to realise this goal with members pledging to respect each other’s independence and territorial boundaries. Further, *Article 22* of the League Covenant laid out a detailed Mandates scheme for nations “not yet able to stand by themselves”, consisting of two phases. First, the League would oversee the formal removal of the sovereignty of the state previously controlling the territory, it would then eventually transfer mandatory powers to individual states. A permanent Commission would examine annually the reports of the Mandataries to assess whether they had reached a stage in their development to allow for independent existence. But it must be stressed that the system was limited, with no time-frame placed on the transfer process (Fuller 1947: 93). Further, to suggest self-determination was a wholly American concept would be a disservice to national movements which had emerged prior to the war. The Indian National Congress (1885) and the African National Congress (1912) were breeding grounds for anti-colonial sentiment and the demand for independence. Moreover, anti-imperialism had already been legitimised within Western discourse, for example, Keir Hardie, the British Labour Party leader, had adopted a sympathetic position towards contemporary Indian nationalists (Ballantyne & Burton 2012: 409, 411). Additionally, the Liberal Party in Britain was divided, with a group of anti-imperialists attacking the “jingoistic imperialist spirit of the 1890s”. The division came to a head during the Boer War campaign with individuals such as John Barns, a Liberal Member of Parliament, denouncing the war as unjust (Auld 1975: 411, 418). Hence, the aftermath of the war provided an opportunity for critics of colonialism to rally together and test “new” theories of global order, with Wilson being one of many critics.

The evolution of diplomacy from “old” to “new” had profound implications on the nature and role of Ambassadors. Under the “old” system, Ambassadors were afforded a large amount of independence to conduct foreign relations on their own accord. They were the main source of information regarding the political conditions and opinions in the country which they resided, as well as the sole intermediately who could explain the purposes and motives of one government to another. Consequently, as Nicolson reveals “ambassadors abroad were expected to use their own initiative and judgment”, allowing for the pursuit of a personal policy, a notion underscored by Lord Malmesbury, a British Statesman, who wrote, “I never received an instruction worth reading” (Nicolson 1953: 81-83). Further, the conduct of foreign relations lay in the hands of a select “socially and educationally relatively homogenous élite”, who were not necessarily specialists in any particular field (Otte 2004: 40).

In the aftermath of the war distrust in Ambassadors had reached fervour pitch, with their lack of accountability and scheming viewed as a crucial factor in the growing tension and slide to war. In response, heads of states took an increasingly active role in foreign relations, as emphasised during the post-war peace settlement. Lloyd George, for example, was determined to personally dictate British policy, ignoring the Foreign Office wherever he could and instead relying on his own staff such as his private secretary Phillip Kerr (MacMillan 2003: 49). Further, the Paris summit conference had brought Lloyd George, Woodrow Wilson, French President Clemenceau and the Italian Prime Minister Orlando together, in addition to some thirty other countries represented by prime ministers, foreign ministries and emirs (Eban 1983: 359). Increasingly, conferences took precedence over the personal diplomacy of Ambassadors. The League as it finally emerged was to function as a standing international conference, a body which was to meet regularly operating through a periodic Assembly of all member states. (Henig 2010: 43). However, the concept of summitry and conferences was not a radical conception, the Congress of Vienna was a ten-month long meeting of ambassadors between 1814-1815 chaired by Austrian statesman Klemens von Metternich; and the Congress of Berlin dominated by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and British Prime Minister Disraeli (Eban 1983: 359). Occasional summit and conference meetings were not unknown what is particular to the “new” diplomacy was the frequency of their occurrence. As Soffer sums up, they were not a “unique twentieth century phenomenon”, rather they must be viewed as “the climax of traditional diplomatic activity” (Soffer 1988: 204).

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Regarding the Ambassadors themselves, pressures of the war had resulted in their specialisation, with the number of specialists on the staffs of diplomatic missions increased. Military and naval attachés gained prominence in order to assist the process of demilitarisation, while commercial attachés were required to manage the vast amount of debt and interest taken on by governments (Hamilton & Langhorne 2011: 173). For example, Viscount D’Abernon, an economic specialist, was made the first British Ambassador to the Republican Government of Germany (Dale 1942: 85). Additionally, there was an increased demand for the democratisation of foreign services, yet this was not necessarily new to “new” diplomacy, as the French had already taken steps to widen the social base before the war. Further, it appears the democratisation of foreign services was not adopted by all states, in Britain the reforming impulse began to die away, notes Steiner, as during the 1920s and 1930s domestic problems of economic and social nature resulting from the Great Depression claimed public attention (Steiner 1982: 357-358). It was only until 1943 reforms overseen by Anthony Eden, the then Foreign Secretary, that the Consular Service was amalgamated with the Foreign Office and Diplomatic Services, and the introduction of a broader system of entry and increased grants and allowances, allowing for the process of democratisation to occur (Eden 1965: 257).

Ultimately, diplomacy was subject to evolutionary change within the twentieth century, adapting to the consequences and new challenges which were present in the aftermath of the Great War. The shift from “old” to “new” diplomacy was not a radical change in course or an “Americanisation” of the diplomatic method, but a continuation of long-term liberal thought. Undoubtedly, the United States had increased her prominence on the world stage and was influential, most notably President Wilson, in the shaping of the post-war international stage and the conduct of “new” diplomacy. However, this is not without its caveats, America had failed to join the League of Nations, and the key tenets of “new” diplomacy were not wholly American concepts, rather they were standard features of liberal internationalist thought. Additionally, the Great War must not be considered the root cause for the changes in the diplomatic method, it was a catalyst to which governments increasingly committed to international liberalism. Further, when assessing each aspect of the “new” diplomacy, whilst change certainly occurred, the change from “old” to “new” no longer appears as radical as traditionalists have suggested. Open diplomacy had not allowed for public discourse during the negotiation process as first hoped. The Major Powers continued to dictate policy, controlling the League’s council and its appointments. The principle of self-determination, while a significant step in universal equality, was somewhat undermined by the non-existent deadline to the Mandates system. Arguably the greatest change was the nature and role of Ambassadors, with heads of states taking an increasingly prominent role resulting in the increased frequency of conference and summit diplomacy. Further, the demands of the war had resulted in increased specialisation, yet the process of democratisation was not universally adopted by all states. To leave on this note, it is significant to differentiate between the aspirations of “new” diplomacy and the reality of the changes to which in enacted.

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Written at: University of Nottingham

Written for: John Young

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