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(editor)

Diplomacy of Regions

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Preface

Diplomacy of Regions offers a timely and thoughtful contribution to the study of diplomacy beyond the nation-state. With both clarity and sensitivity to context, the book explores a topic that has often been overlooked in traditional diplomatic theory. By placing regions at the centre of its analysis, it addresses an important question: how can we understand diplomacy in today's world, where political power and international engagement are no longer the exclusive domain of sovereign states? It invites us to view diplomacy as a more flexible and layered practice, shaped by cooperation, negotiation, identity and symbolism.

What makes this book stand out is not only its content but also the way it was created. It grew out of a shared academic journey between students and their professor. This is not simply the product of teaching but of co-creation, in which knowledge was developed through critical thinking, mutual trust and intellectual curiosity. The book is not only about regional diplomacy; it is also a record of how meaningful academic work can develop in a supportive and dynamic learning environment.

By focusing on regions such as Bavaria, Wallonia and Scotland, the authors show how identity, autonomy and political differences influence how regions engage with the wider world. These examples do more than illustrate theory: they offer insight into how diplomacy is evolving and how regional actors navigate questions of legitimacy, effectiveness and representation. The chapters invite us to rethink diplomacy in the twenty-first century and to consider whose voices are heard in international affairs.

This is a well organised and conceptually strong book. More than that, however, it is a reminder of what academic work can become when research, teaching and collaboration are closely connected. It shows that the classroom can be a space not only for learning but also for creating

knowledge with real relevance and depth. I am pleased to recommend this volume – as a useful resource for scholars, students and practitioners, and as an example of academic work rooted in shared purpose.

Ljubljana, June 2025
Jana Arbeiter

DIPLOMACY OF REGIONS: A THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

Blaž Juren and Boštjan Udovič

Introduction

For a long time, diplomacy was perceived as the preserve of sovereign states – an institutionalised practice deeply rooted in the Westphalian system,[1] a framework of norms and rules that established state sovereignty as the foundation of formal international relations. This meant that the state retained the exclusive right to represent sovereignty, national territory and populations at the international level. In recent decades, however, we have witnessed an expansion in the range of actors engaged in diplomacy. Local entities, international organisations (both governmental and non-governmental), multinational corporations and other institutions are becoming increasingly significant participants in diplomatic practice. Among these actors are also regions, which have begun to pursue international relations through various external-relations channels. This change in actorship implies that, when discussing actors and agents in diplomacy, we should adopt a de-Westphalian *forma mentis* – a mindset in which national diplomacy is understood as only one of several players involved in international engagement. In the light of decentralisation, globalisation and diverse modes of governance, diplomacy is evolving and offers us new opportunities to understand this transformation. Regional governments function not only as domestic political units but also as increasingly autonomous actors in international affairs.

Traditional diplomacy is typically defined as a political activity of states, in which they seek to "secure the objectives of their foreign policies without resort to force, propaganda, or law [...] and it consists of communication between officials designed to promote foreign policy either by formal agreement or tacit adjustment" (Berridge, 2010: 1), primarily between nation-states. This form of diplomacy emerged in early

[1] The Westphalian system refers to the state-centric international order that emerged after the Peace of Westphalia (1648). It is often regarded as the foundational moment of modern state sovereignty, the legal equality of states and the principle of territoriality.

modern Europe, when states began establishing permanent missions with embassies and ambassadors. These practices were later standardised among the Holy Alliance great powers in the Vienna Regulation of 1815,[2] and codified at the universal level in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961, which marked the attainment of institutional maturity. During the twentieth century – especially after the Second World War, within the bipolar system – this model prevailed. States were the principal bearers of legitimate international authority, while other actors, such as regions, cities and NGOs, were largely invisible and actively excluded from formal diplomacy. This reinforced a binary conception of diplomacy: a state-based (official, traditional) model versus a non-state (unofficial, new) model, a distinction that inadequately captures the evolving landscape of diplomatic practice (Devin and Toernquist-Chesnier, 2010). By the late twentieth century – particularly after the Cold War – this understanding of actorship in diplomacy began to erode. The rise of globalisation, regional integration projects and the growing complexity of international issues such as migration and climate change demanded new forms of cooperation that transcend the boundaries of sovereign states. While states remain central, other actors have also acquired the capacity to send and receive envoys, conduct negotiations and conclude agreements (Melissen, 1999: 2).[3] At the same time, processes such as federalism and decentralisation have enabled regions to act on the international stage and engage in what is often termed the diplomacy of regions. Unlike states, they conduct diplomacy without sovereignty. This growing international agency of regions (and other sub-state actors) is commonly

2 "The Vienna Regulation remains the basis of the organisation of modern diplomacy to this day. Its classification of diplomatic offices and its principal rule on precedence were generally applied in Europe throughout the nineteenth century and were adopted by non-European states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When diplomatic customs and practices were codified in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 18 April 1961, these rules were incorporated into it." (Lesaffer, 2025)

3 Melissen (1999) argues that diplomacy has evolved in both form and function, moving towards more pluralistic models.

discussed under the concept of paradiplomacy, often linked to the notion of neo-medievalism: a theory that envisions a world in which sovereignty is fragmented, authority is dispersed across multiple levels, and the monopoly of the state over diplomacy is undermined (Christie, 2022: 770). Duran (2019) develops this perspective further, describing the shift from a Westphalian (traditional) order to a neo-medieval order, in which regions share diplomatic space with sovereign states and challenge the classical diplomatic tradition. Regions employ flexibility and coalition-building to amplify their voice in the international community and to participate in diplomacy. The rise of the diplomacy of regions demonstrates that diplomacy is becoming pluralised and shaped by a wide array of actors, each with its own priorities, identities and strategies. This may lead towards a redefinition of diplomacy, which "can be broadly understood to emerge whenever someone successfully claims to represent and negotiate for a territory or a group of people or a cause, or successfully claims to mediate between others engaging in such representations and negotiations" (Constantinou, 2016: 2).

All these changes are visible in the day-to-day practice of diplomacy, reflected in the relations between state and non-state actors. Streams and currents of diplomatic activity now originate from actors who, two decades ago, would have been considered "peripheral". Some of these actors are now, at times, more influential than states. This development raises a fundamental challenge: how can we explain the diplomacy of sub- or non-state actors if diplomatic theory remains tied to a classical understanding, in which sovereignty resided exclusively in the state and diplomacy was its sole prerogative? Theory therefore lags behind contemporary reality. Yet some researchers have recognised that the theory of diplomatic representation itself needs to be "updated" to reflect current trends. Within this framework, scholars analyse what is actually taking place in modern diplomatic relations and develop new concepts – such as paradiplomacy, sub-state diplomacy and multilevel diplomacy – to capture the trend of de-Westphalianisation. Other scholars focus less on actorship and more on motivation, distinguishing between external and internal drivers of new diplomatic actors (or

para-state or sub-state actors). These include identity, culture, economic interest, institutional frameworks and responses to transnational challenges. A third approach highlights the level of symbolism. Here, researchers examine the relationship between central governments and sub-state governments, which may at times act as competitors and at others as close collaborators. Such approaches to sub-state diplomacy can thus be seen as either supplementary or complementary, depending on how each entity positions itself and why it chooses to operate *extra ambitus*, i.e. beyond the confines of the state. Our contribution seeks to highlight the challenges posed by these different approaches and to add a piece to the mosaic by formulating our own definition of regional diplomacy – one that aims to bring together various perspectives and traditions in the debate on sub-state and para-state diplomacy.

Regional diplomacy: a theoretical conceptualisation

The emergence of sub-state actors on the international stage has significantly reshaped the traditional paradigms of diplomacy, once monopolised by sovereign states. Today, new actors operate across borders in pursuit of specific interests. This development has also transformed the terminological landscape, producing considerable diversity in how such practices are described. Concepts such as *paradiplomacy* and *sub-state diplomacy* are often associated with the diplomacy of regions, which has itself emerged alongside these definitions. The concept of *paradiplomacy* functions as an umbrella term for all international activities of subnational governments below the level of the sovereign state. Cornago (2009: 13) defines it as "sub-state governments' involvement in international relations, through the establishment of formal and informal contacts, either permanent or *ad hoc*, with foreign public or private entities, with the aim to promote socio-economic, cultural or political issues, as well as any other foreign dimension of their own constitutional competences." Similarly, the originator of the term,