# Chapter 9
## The importance of an international diplomatic culture

From a practitioner's point of view diplomatic culture can be evaluated as the accumulated communicative and representational practices, rules, and institutions devised to improve relations and avoid war between interacting political entities.[1] They are to be separated from the legal obligations of international law (customary or treaty such as the UN Charter) and reach beyond those.

Although processes of cultural exchange and interaction have shaped the emergence of modernity in distinctive ways, they are still largely perceived as an expansion of western modernity. The spectrum of non-western responses to social- economic, political and cultural models and world order largely influenced by Western Europe and the United States ranges from unreserved adoption and cautious adaptation to the formulation of alternative vision of governance at the local, national, regional and global levels. Specific notions of identity and of social-cultural cohesion seem to call for different institutions and modes of governance, reflecting not just cultural preferences but also economic interests and specific geopolitical constellations. While some of these models assert validity for a particular community or society only, others claim universal validity competing with western models. Irrespective of the claims and perceptions of their advocates, these models do not develop in isolation, but result from complex patterns of interaction with other cultural traditions, visions and practices.

It is the relevance of culture and the cultural embeddedness of governance which determines identity, authenticity and social cohesion in globalized relations. Language is pivotal to this cultural identity.[2]

The tendency of globalization has brought about a certain degree of cultural convergence to the point of homogenization but also shown some areas of ethnic or religious polarizations. In lack of common identity-in-the-making we are therefore far from a nascent truly global culture referring to collective model of evaluative and cognitive standards and values.

The determining procedural factor in diplomatic negotiations are very often the cultural differences ("cultural gap") and resulting discordances between the negotiating parties. These "cultural gaps" are often at first detectable at a linguistic level. Culture is the underlying dimension of any international interaction. Therefore, the understanding of culture as a complex of attributes subsuming every area of social life provides a key to the successful outcome of negotiations.[3]

Diplomats (as other well travelled elites) have to be knowledgeable and sensible to other cultures and their context in the foreign domestic scene (customs, manners, form of social organisation). Different cultures produce varying international negotiating styles (verbal and explicit): the Anglo-Saxon rationality of give-and-take fosters the problem-solving model. Other, especially non-western, approaches view a more long-term relationship and are concerned with consideration of symbolism and status. This is a more communicatory, face-saving style.[4] Both styles may, at times but not necessarily, merge in the tendency of cultural conversion.

The similar or common training (in national or international diplomatic schools) and the uniform code of conduct may create a sense of belonging to an international professional community. Indeed, there are many behavioural similarities in this profession (especially among neighbouring countries or regional or political groupings such as the EU) which create an "esprit de corps" (corporate spirit of professional ethics, a common stock of ideas and values, code of conduct[5]). Nevertheless, cross-cultural differences can also play a role in diplomatic understandings and proceedings. In bilateral as well as multilateral diplomatic dealings cultural differences (customs, manners, forms of social organisation but especially intellectual mind-sets) can lead to a cultural gap impinging on the diplomatic process. From a practitioner's point of view, the way out of a possible dead-lock due to cultural differences and misunderstandings is the search by all partners in the diplomatic intercourse for a common ground of values or experiences (third platform, agreed framework) from which to carry out the interaction constructively.

What is common to the development of diplomacy derives not only from similar patterns for the administration of foreign affairs but also from their participation in a common field of diplomatic action. What differentiate them are those domestic characteristics that have produced the modern, independent, sovereign state. Institutional differences reflect the size, power, governmental structure and political leadership in each state. Though shared international experiences create common forms, diplomacy developing within a separate politicial system will keep its own distinctive and variable cultural characteristics.[6]

In the final analysis, it is the diversity of national interests which poses a natural political delimitation to any communality within the diplomatic profession. The personal friendship among colleagues will normally be superseded by the hardcore interests one has to promote and defend as a successful and credible diplomat.

There is no doubt a gradual assimilation of national and regional styles of diplomacies which is also promoted by the common work in International Organizations and through multilateral diplomacy. But from a practitioner's point of view it would be illusory to talk presently about a distinct/single diplomatic culture or corporate identity,[7] also because contemporary diplomacy is going through a process of adaptation, changing conditions and the introduction of outside participants. The fact that diplomatic practices and values are often transgressed in pursuit of national interest[8] remains a strong argument for the disputed existence and against the general acceptance of a diplomatic culture.

## References

[1] A broader definiton is given by **Geoffrey Wiseman,** Pax Americana: Bumping into diplomatic culture, in: International Studies Perspectives, vol. 6 (2005), p. 409

[2] **Leigh Oakes**, Language and National Identity, (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company 2001)
**Thomas M. Franck,** The empowered self. Law and society in the age of individualism, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), p. 95

[3] **Raymond Cohen**, Negotiating Across Cultures. International Communication in an Interdependent World (Washington: United Institute of Peace Press 2002), 3rd revised edition

[4] **Raymond Cohen**, Negotiating Across Cultures, p. 216

[5] **Hedley Bull,** The Anarchical Society: A study of order in world politics, (New York: Columbia University Press 3rd ed. 2002) p. 304, 160

[6] **Zara Steiner (ed.),** The Times survey of foreign ministries of the world (London: Times Books 1982) p. 11

[7] **Christer Jönsson**, Essence of Diplomacy, p. 39 seems to detect a diplomatic subculture due to:
– shared symbols and references
– mutual expectations, agreed-upon rules, regulations and procedures
– formal organizations.
From a practical point of view, cultural and political differences and interests among diplomats will prevail over shared beliefs, values and discursive practices.

[8] **Geoffrey Wiseman,** p. 416