RIS

The changing practices of frontline diplomacy: New directions for inquiry

Andrew F. Cooper[1]* and Jérémie Cornut[2]

[1]University of Waterloo, Canada and [2]Simon Fraser University, Canada
*Corresponding author. Email: acooper@uwaterloo.ca

Abstract

This article develops the concept of 'frontline diplomacy' – what practitioners referring to work in embassies, consulates, and permanent representation as 'the field' –, defined here as all diplomats' activities taking place away from headquarters. IR scholarship tends to focus on Ministries of Foreign Affairs located in capitals. On the contrary, building on the practice turn in IR, we first show that international politics emerge from frontline practices. Adding to criticism against the practice turn, we then explain that it has missed important transformations occurring in frontline diplomacy because it tends to privilege stability over change. We finally discuss two innovations in frontline practices: the action of Sherpas in G20 summits following the 2008 crisis and the use of Twitter by US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul (2012–14). For each we answer three questions: How do these activities transform traditional modes of operation? How are non-state actors involved in them? What do they tell about transformation of global politics? Because diplomatic practices at the frontlines epitomise international politics, these new directions for inquiry contribute substantively to IR scholarship. At the theoretical level, they enrich the continuing encounter between IR and diplomatic studies through practice theory and help to understand change in practice.

Keywords: Diplomacy; International Practice Theory; Frontline Diplomats; Polylateralism; Embassies

Introduction

Diplomatic practices at the frontlines – what practitioners call 'the field' or 'frontline diplomacy', that is, the tradecraft of diplomats either posted abroad in embassies, consulates, and permanent representations or operating through other types of activity beyond headquarters – epitomise diplomacy. Whether one defines diplomacy as 'the mediation of estrangement',[1] a 'claim to represent a given polity to the outside world',[2] a 'mediating practice',[3] or the management of 'relations of separateness',[4] diplomacy is first and foremost concerned with the management of frontlines between different political entities. Examining these frontlines and those in charge of managing them thus has much to offer for International Relations (IR) scholars. It is through frontline diplomats that states cooperate with foreign governments, non-governmental organisations, multilateral organisations, civil society, and individuals.

---

[1]James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).
[2]Ole Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy: The Making of World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 6.
[3]Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Relationalism: Why diplomats find International Relations theory strange', in Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy*, p. 298.
[4]Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 10.

Studying the frontlines should thus be an obvious starting point for those interested in international politics. Yet much more of the focus has been on the management of international relations from headquarters in national capitals rather than at the frontline.[5] Frontline diplomats are often considered to be working far from the spheres of power, having only a marginal role in decision-making processes. Other scholars interested in diplomacy privilege the headquarters over frontlines for methodological reasons.[6] On the contrary, building on the most recent literature in International Practice Theory (IPT) we start from the conviction that the activities of 'professional strangers'[7] and 'mediators'[8] posted abroad are constitutive of international politics. This idea was originally formulated by Paul Sharp and Geoffrey Wiseman in an edited volume analysing how the international society is constituted by and finds expression in the diplomatic corps.[9] The burgeoning literature on diplomacy in practice further shows what is gained from understanding how and with what consequences.

We both build on and criticise the practice turn in IR. IPT scholars have made important analyses of diplomacy at the frontline, but their focus needs to be enlarged to grasp new diplomatic practices. Most of their work focuses on intergovernmental relations and traditional activities such as high-level negotiations, representations, and information gathering. And yet, we have witnessed a continuing transformation of frontline diplomatic practices that are progressively adapting to twenty-first-century realities. In frontline diplomats' role as advocates, special envoys, connectors, and relief agents there is today an intensity and innovation of style and substantive breadth that departs from other familiar images of diplomacy. Polylateralism – the inclusion of non-state actors in diplomatic interactions – creates new dynamics and changes their ways of doing things.[10]

Some fundamental questions about what it means to practice diplomacy at the frontline today have yet to be answered. We need to understand better the tensions between traditional diplomacy centered on intergovernmental relations and innovative processes in which there is an emphasis on public outreach, delivery to clients, and a range of partnerships with non-state actors. The first part of our article discusses the value of practice theory as an analytical lens to understand diplomacy at the frontline; the second part focuses on the limits of the contribution of IPT scholars' to the understanding of diplomacy at the frontlines; and the final part analyses two case studies, the role of Sherpas in G20 summits and the use of Twitter by US Ambassador Michael McFaul. These case studies are centered on the questions scholars need to answer to make sense of the transformations of diplomatic practices at the frontline. As the conclusion argues, our framework of analysis could be applied to other innovative frontline practices.

Frontline diplomacy and the making of international politics

Inspired by the promise of a practice turn in social theory and influenced by the sociology of international relations and constructivism's emphasis on the constitutive effect of language, a solid core of IR researchers have recently begun to focus on hitherto underexplored diplomatic

---

[5]Seçkin Bari Gülmez, 'Do diplomats matter in foreign policy? Sir Percy Loraine and the Turkish-British rapprochement in the 1930s', *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2017).

[6]Iver B. Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats: Life Inside a European Foreign Ministry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012); Christian Lequesne, *Ethnographie du Quai d'Orsay: les pratiques des diplomates français* (Paris: CNRS Edition, 2017).

[7]Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*, p. 10.

[8]Iver B. Neumann, 'To be a diplomat', *International Studies Perspectives*, 6:1 (2005), p. 85.

[9]Paul Sharp and Geoff Wiseman (eds), *The Diplomatic Corps as an Institution of International Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[10]Geoffrey Wiseman, '"Polylateralism" and new modes of global dialogue', in Christer Jönsson and Richard Langhorne (eds), *Diplomacy: Problems and Issues in Contemporary Diplomacy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004), pp. 409–30; Geoffrey Wiseman, 'Polylateralism: Diplomacy's third dimension', *Public Diplomacy Magazine*, 4 (2010), pp. 24–39.

practices, delineating what might be called the new anthropology of diplomacy.[11] Reciprocally, there is a growing interest in practice-based theorising among scholars of diplomacy.[12] Against what Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot and Iver Neumann call 'explanation by naming',[13] practice theory holds that social processes constitute the social world. It builds on the intuition that diplomatic practices, diplomatic culture, and international politics are closely interrelated.[14]

Many of the foremost contributors to IPT literature point to the need for an expanded mode of analysis because everyday actions that diplomatic practitioners undertake are not only informed by the structures in which they operate, but that the actions themselves constitute the realm of social activity that is defined as diplomacy. Diplomacy is the making of international politics and it is often ostensibly mundane phenomena that are in fact what makes the world go round.[15] This recalculation of IR analysis allows for relatively under explored pathways to be examined and studied. As this section argues, it places frontline diplomacy in the foreground.

Practice theory and its critics

As a first approach, we can define practices as 'socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world'.[16] Sharpening their definition, Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot make a distinction between behaviour, action, and practice. Sitting at a desk is a behaviour; sitting at a desk and delivering a visa is an action; delivering visas in consulates is a (diplomatic) practice. There is a progressive gradation between the three concepts; behaviours are constitutive of actions, which are constitutive of practices.

The study of practices delineates what is now commonly called IPT. Practice theory seems at first sight to be a contradiction in terms; another critical view stresses that in any case, all theory relates to practice at some level. To answer these objections and clarify what IPT is, various lists of core commitments or main theoretical assumptions are proposed by IPT scholars.[17] When applied to diplomacy, this approach invites us to begin our exploration of world politics and diplomacy from the daily activities of diplomats, their practices, their mental habits, their social entanglements, their repertoire of actions, and their networks. This concern is boosted by the

---

[11]Iver B. Neumann, 'Returning practice to the linguistic turn: the case of diplomacy', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31:3 (2002), pp. 627–51; Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats*; Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Vincent Pouliot and Jérémie Cornut, 'Practice theory and the study of diplomacy: a research agenda', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:3 (2015), pp. 297–315; Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy*.

[12]Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*; Stuart Murray, Paul Sharp, Geoffrey Wiseman, David Criekemans, and Jan Melissen, 'The present and future of diplomacy and diplomatic studies', *International Studies Review*, 13:4 (2011), pp. 709–28.

[13]Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy*.

[14]On diplomatic culture, see Paul Sharp, 'The idea of diplomatic culture and its sources', in Hannah Slavik (ed.), *Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy* (Malta: DiploFoundation, 2004), pp. 361–79; Geoffrey Wiseman, 'Pax Americana: Bumping into diplomatic culture', *International Studies Perspectives*, 6:4 (2005), pp. 409–30; Costas Constantinou, 'Everyday diplomacy: Mission, spectacle and the remaking of diplomatic culture', in Jason Dittmer and Fiona McConnell (eds), *Diplomatic Cultures and International Politics: Translations, Spaces and Alternatives* (Abington: Routledge, 2006), pp. 23–40.

[15]Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy*.

[16]Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International practices', International Theory, 3:1 18 (2011a), p. 4.

[17]Neumann, 'Returning practice to the linguistic turn', pp. 637–8; Adler and Pouliot, 'International Practices', (2011a), pp. 6–7; Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, *International Practice Theory: New Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 19.

animation of one of the major rationales for the use of practice theory is 'getting closer to the everyday activities of those speaking, writing and doing'.[18] In terms of method and data collection, this is both a challenging and rewarding task.[19]

Explanation through practices is not causal in a strict sense. Yet, practice theory of diplomacy can advance IR in at least three respects: it provides empirical depth to analyses that are often disconnected from on-the-ground practical realities; it gives a central place to agency and individual performances in a discipline that tends to over-emphasise structure; and it privileges complexity-sensitive and problem-driven investigations rather than parsimonious and theoretically driven ones, creating a space where interparadigm cross-fertilisation become possible.[20]

The appraisal of practice theory in this article is different from other types of criticism. On the one hand, a school of scholars take issue with general assumptions of practice theory. Erik Ringmar, for example, challenges the very foundation of practice theory, arguing that due to a series of logical fallacies, misinterpretations, and outright impossibilities, this conceptual approach does not hold up under scrutiny. By citing a number of authors drawing upon practice theory, Ringmar demonstrates that there is no unified definition of practices, and that many scholars are using the term in many different ways.[21]

On the other hand, other scholars such as Christian Lequesne contend that there has been an overemphasis on the theory of diplomacy, and, as a result, the actual practices that constitute the field have gone relatively under examined. His own case study investigates an array of everyday practices at the European External Action Service (EEAS) in an attempt to understand how they conduct their diplomatic duties. Lequesne concludes with a plea for diplomatic studies to embrace the turn towards understanding the practices or habitus of diplomats. He suggests that there needs to be a greater deal of first-hand, field-based research to complement the theoretical aspects of diplomatic study.[22]

We contend here that practice theorists have built an impressive amount of works on the practice of diplomacy, but that they need to expand their analyses to emerging aspects of this trade and go beyond the traditional aspects of diplomacy on which they typically focus. We do not want to limit practice theory but to increase its scope of analysis to explore the questions related to what the changing frontline diplomatic practices tell us about the current changes in international politics, and conversely how do analyses of frontline diplomacy today advance our understanding of international practices.

Putting frontline diplomacy in the foreground

Several important works in IPT paved the way towards a greater encounter between diplomacy and IR advocated by many.[23] While highlighting the overall disjunction between IR and diplomacy, with diplomatic practices being viewed as under examined and underappreciated in the existing literature, these works help bring diplomatic practices at the frontline into the foreground. The form of diplomacy they are interested in are the bundle of practices that are placed on the tangible level, informed by structures and ideational forces, between political actors claiming and negotiating rights over a distinct polity. Even if, as we will show below, these works

---

[18]Christian Bueger, 'Pathways to practice: Praxiography and international politics', *European Political Science Review*, 6:3 (2014), p. 383.

[19]Vincent Pouliot, 'Practice tracing', in Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey Checkel (eds), *Process Tracing: From Analytic Metaphor to Best Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 237–59.

[20]Adler and Pouliot, 'International Practices', (2011a); Pouliot and Cornut, 'Practice theory and the study of diplomacy'.

[21]Erik Ringmar, 'The search for dialogue as a hindrance to understanding: Practices as inter-paradigmatic research program', *International Theory*, 6:1 (2014), pp. 1–27.

[22]Christian Lequesne, 'EU foreign policy through the lens of practice theory: a different approach to the European External Action Service', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:3 (2015), pp. 63–76.

[23]Geoffrey Wiseman, 'Bringing diplomacy back in: Time for theory to catch up with practice', *International Studies Review*, 13:4 (2011), p. 712.

leave important questions unanswered, they do much to overcome the neglect of frontline diplomatic practices by IR scholarship.

The bulk of IR analysis focuses on headquarters away from frontlines. Headquarters and decision-makers at home are considered central players in international activities. As principals, they impose limits on what frontline diplomats – their agents – can do. Often, diplomats at the frontline are not heard by headquarters or are tempted to send messages to the capitals about what the government wants to hear rather than what they think. On the contrary, the idea that the pivotal sites of diplomacy are the organisational frontlines around which bilateral and multilateral diplomacy takes place is central in the turn to practices.

Several reasons spurred some IPT scholars to put frontline diplomacy in the foreground. Because it rejects a bird-eye view on international politics and starts from on the ground realities, IPT challenges what sort of international activities are brought to the foreground or left in the background. Selective IPT scholars consider that frontline diplomats have significant space to negotiate and mediate on an improvised basis. They act on a day-to-day basis in bilateral, multilateral, and polylateral relations. They also contribute to finding a way out of international crises – in conflicts that directly involve their country, or as a third party (most notably, through shuttle diplomacy). The main emphasis is on the creation of standards and interactions between states and organisations within institutions, sites, and activities that are far from headquarters themselves.

There is crucial value in looking at these frontline practices. Negotiating treaties, engaging with civil society, sitting on the United Nations Security Council, conducting bilateral relations, sending reports, resolving crises, distributing aid, and issuing visas are activities of improvising diplomats working at the frontlines and endowed with agency and margins of autonomy. In each of these contexts, 'faced with changing circumstances and denied complete information, [they] virtuosically adapt their ways of doing to cope with the practical problems they face'.[24] These ways of improvising things for frontline practitioners on the ground are constitutive of international relations.

The concentration on the use of new and innovative conceptual tools on frontline practices comes out in a number of articles in a special issue, edited by Vincent Pouliot and Jérémie Cornut (co-author of this article), – *Practice Theory And The Study Of Diplomacy*.[25] For instance, in Merje Kuus's examination of the role of symbolic power and socialisation as it regards EU diplomats, she elaborates that the geographic spaces with respect to new and old EU diplomats come from play an important role in determining their appearance, their attitude, and their outlook.[26] Along these lines, it stands to reason that EU institutions, serving as a space to fuse these disparate ideas, will create their own distinct forms of behaviour, and that this process will play a key part in establishing the practices that diplomatic practitioners will follow.

Even more explicitly, Cornut's examination of the role of Western embassies and their staffs during the political turmoil in Egypt in the first two months of 2011 shows that knowledge generated by people working on the frontlines is different from knowledge generated by people working in a position detached from the reality on the ground.[27] Cornut's conclusion, derived largely from interviews with embassy and support staff, suggests that the diplomats and staff on the frontlines are knowledge producers, and that the knowledge they generate relies extensively on the connections they have established while working abroad. Decision-makers in

---

[24]Jérémie Cornut, 'Diplomacy, agency and the logic of improvisation and virtuosity in practice', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:3 (2018), p. 726.

[25]Pouliot and Cornut, 'Practice theory and the study of diplomacy'.

[26]Merje Kuus, 'Symbolic power in diplomatic practice: Matters of style in Brussels', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:2 (2015), p. 380.

[27]Jérémie Cornut, 'To be a diplomat abroad: Diplomatic practice at embassies', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:3 (2015), pp. 385–401; Vincent Pouliot and Jérémie Cornut, 'Bilateral and multilateral diplomatic practices', in Pauline Kerr and Geoffrey Wiseman (eds), *Diplomacy in a Globalizing World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 185–98.

headquarters extensively relied on their diplomats in Cairo during the crisis. Communications between headquarters and embassies were almost permanent while embassies became central in the decision-making process. The sustained focus is on the official staff and spaces at the frontline rather than headquarters.

A similar tendency to tilt analysis to the frontlines as opposed to headquarters is offered in the contribution that Sending and Neumann make to the well-known collection edited by Adler and Pouliot.[28] This piece looks at how states and international organisations interact with each other, arguing that certain practices play a dominant or anchoring role for other subordinate practices. The authors illustrate their argument through a case study on the World Bank, where technical expertise plays the role of the anchoring practice.

When national and multilateral diplomacy are examined in combination, the shift towards frontline sites is even more common. For instance, the close examination of the decision-making processes that occurred in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the EU to help explain why the 2011 intervention in Libya unfolded as it did by Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Pouliot showcases the importance of frontlines.[29] In line with practice theory's emphasis on competent practices, they argue that the United Kingdom, France, and the United States (the P3) were able to exert their influence and establish a perception of competence surrounding the situation on the ground in Libya. No other state or group was able to successfully contest the P3's claim of competence. Once the P3 established themselves as the most competent members in the UNSC on the matter, they were able to shape the intervention in accordance with their desires.

The authors then go on to retrace the genealogy of the contestation, the influence wielding, and the deployment of political capital in New York and Brussels, showing through interviews and corroborated evidence that the P3 were able to deflect criticism of their plan, and bring other members on board to support the intervention as they construed it. Significantly, there was contestation between the embassies and permanent representations, with the former clearly subordinate in pivotal decision-making: 'Aided by Gaddafi's inflammatory rhetoric, the P3 … imposed its own evidence and frames even in the face of contrary reports from other members' embassies in Tripoli, according to one E10 delegate.'[30] Despite objections from many permanent and non-permanent UNSC members, the P3 pushed through their agenda, thanks at least in part to the ability of their frontline diplomats to cement themselves as the most competent actors on the topic.

Pouliot extends this line of analysis in a detailed study of the proliferation of permanent representation in political hubs such as the UN and NATO.[31] He contends that multilateral diplomacy, in the form of these high-level hubs, has become increasingly prevalent, and perhaps the dominant mode of diplomacy. As such, he seeks to explore the dynamics at work in the presence of permanent representation to these bodies. He concludes that the result is the formation of cliques, with a high density of network interaction, social seclusion, and clustering of groups within the cliques. In terms of IR theory, this multilateral togetherness produces practices that challenge realist theorising about how the world works. The formation and preservation of cliques forces diplomats into a situation in which they strive to maintain the cohesion of the group. The enduring proximity between actors appears to make them more willing to invoke lateral thinking and other creative methods to appease their peers when necessary.

---

[28]Ole Jacob Sending and Iver Neumann, 'Banking on power: How some practices in an international organization anchor others', in Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (eds), *International Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011b), pp. 231–54.

[29]Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, 'Power in practice: Negotiating the international intervention in Libya', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:4 (2014), pp. 889–911.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Vincent Pouliot, 'The practice of permanent representation at international organizations', in Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy*, pp. 80–108.

The changing practices of frontline diplomacy

The original focus of practice turners has led them to emphasise diplomacy at the frontline. Yet, as this section shows, IPT has generally a limited conception of frontline diplomacy in practice. As they emphasise intergovernmental relations and state-to-state relations, only the most traditional dimensions of this trade are considered. This is linked with IPT's tendency to highlight continuity over change.

Non-state actors and the complexity of frontline diplomacy in the twenty-first century

IPT works remain limited in scope and emphasise the most traditional aspects of frontline diplomacy, and yet the sites of frontline diplomacy are increasingly diverse. For instance, if stretching the limits of analysis toward the frontlines in a more sustained fashion, Cornut's work opens up as many questions as it answers. The attention on embassies leaves open all sorts of questions about how, with who else, and where frontline diplomacy is practiced. Certainly in Cornut's work there is a break between those who stay in the embassy and those who reach out to interact with people on the even more frontlines.[32]

In multilateral settings this focus on traditional frontlines in terms of the application of practice theory is also ambiguous. Think of Adler and Pouliot. Their study showcases the wealth of insight of practice theory but in tandem the need to take these insights into different areas of operational concerns.[33] The de facto examples of IR sites are frontline forms of international relations. In terms of illustrations, heavy reference is made to G8 summits, or earlier episodes of summit diplomacy such as the Helsinki Conference in the early 1970s. Yet, there is sometimes an absence of focus on other frontline diplomacy or even action. Similarly, although Geoffrey Wiseman does mention a distinction between Security Council resolutions and UN frontline peacekeeping operations, this theme is not explored in detail.[34] If illuminating on the autonomy allocated to an international organisation such as the World Bank, the study by Sending and Neumann lacks any mention of the activities of the World Bank on the ground, which includes the operations of 100 offices in member states.[35]

The relationship question with non-state actors is an important one. And yet, the centre of attention in practice theory often privileges state officials or traditional diplomats. As the editors of *Diplomacy: The Making Of World Politics* make explicit in their Introduction: 'What makes a diplomat is a claim to jurisdictional control over certain tasks that are sanctioned by the state and recognized in international law'.[36] Such an approach, if opening some neglected areas of research, closes off other avenues. For sure, some space is offered to other state officials, but boundaries are placed on those clusters deemed to have a representative component in institutionalised form. Military personnel are in, but not development personnel: 'If we consider the situation on the ground in places like Afghanistan today, however, the soldier and the diplomat are working in tandem, both partaking in governing and deploying distinct claims to authority by virtue of what they represent.'[37] That being said, as we will clarify later, a number of the chapters of the volume adopt a more nuanced view on this.

In limiting the scope to 'officials', practice theory sets boundaries that may miss the complexity of diplomacy in the twenty-first century. As Ian Hurd states, even if diplomacy is primarily an action involving states, that does not mean that non-state actors are not involved, merely that their presence is intended to influence the way states act.[38] Thus although diplomacy

[32]Cornut, 'To be a diplomat abroad'.
[33]Adler and Pouliot, 'International Practices' (2011a).
[34]Geoffrey Wiseman, 'Diplomatic practices at the United Nations', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:3 (2015), pp. 316–33.
[35]Sending and Neumann, 'Banking on power'.
[36]Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy*, p. 7.
[37]Ibid., p. 18.
[38]Ian Hurd, 'International law and the politics of diplomacy', in Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy*, pp. 31–54.

remains state-centric, it has a marked proliferation of actors. In this realm of meaning making, actors engage in a cascade of contestation and competition in order to shape discourse and policy in their favour. Much of the intensity and innovation so evident in this activity, whether by NGOs or other agents such as philanthropic foundations, celebrities, or former leaders is animated by their frontline operations.[39]

Signs of a stretching out of practice theory to study innovations at the frontlines come out in a few interesting contributions to the literature. Janice Stein, for one, engages with humanitarian assistance as a community of practice. Stein traces the changes in humanitarian practices over the past two decades in response to perceived failures. In doing so she makes an effort to address frontline measures, particularly refugee camps in Rwanda, and relief efforts in Somalia and Haiti. In particular, Stein explores the way humanitarian agencies are taking explicit efforts to change the on the ground structures that allow for humanitarian crises, making them explicitly political in their actions. Above all, Stein raises the questions of who stands at the frontline:

> Who is the practitioner in this story? It is the engineer connecting water pipes after an emergency. It is the staff at the 'head office', increasingly professionalized and bureaucratized, that is appealing to governments and donors to sustain the engineer 'in the field'. And it is leaders of humanitarian organizations who come together in forums to consider their practices, the consequences of these practices, and the critiques levelled at a community that allegedly did not reflect enough on what it did.[40]

Rebecca Adler-Nissen similarly opens the door to a look beyond formal diplomatic practitioners, those who are not members of the foreign service but still perform diplomatic functions in the EU.[41]

Change in IPT

This criticism against IPT should not come as a surprise as practice theory is often charged with focusing on stability and unwillingly reifying social realities.[42] IPT scholars claim they grasp both change and continuity within their framework of analysis. For them, the approach innovatively bridges the divide between agential change and structural continuity. Practice theorists of diplomacy look at how diplomats improvise contingent practices adapted to the problems they face as much as how existing ways of doing things shape their practice.[43] As Adler and Pouliot put it, practices 'are not merely descriptive "arrows" that connect structure to agency and back, but rather the dynamic material and ideational processes that enable structures to be stable or to evolve, and agents to reproduce or transform structures'.[44] Yet, as Ted Hopf recently contends, a 'credible and … comprehensive account of change in practices' is still needed.[45]

---

[39]Andrew F. Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishing, 2007); Andrew F. Cooper, *Diplomatic Afterlives* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

[40]Janice Gross Stein, 'Background knowledge in the foreground: Conversations about competent practices in "sacred space"', in Adler and Pouliot, *International Practices* (2011b), p. 91.

[41]Rebecca Adler-Nissen, *Opting out of the European Union: Diplomacy, Sovereignty and European Integration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[42]See, for example, Sebastian Schindler and Tobias Wille, 'Change in and through practice: Pierre Bourdieu, Vincent Pouliot, and the end of the Cold War', *International Theory*, 7:2 (2015), pp. 330–59; Marcus Holmes and David Traven, 'Acting rationally without really thinking: the logic of rational intuitionism for International Relations theory', *International Studies Review*, 17:3 (2015), pp. 414–40.

[43]Bueger and Gadinger, *International Practice Theory*; Jérémie Cornut, 'The practice turn in International Relations theory', in Robert A. Denemark and Renée Marlin-Bennett (eds), *The International Studies Encyclopedia* (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford Reference Online, 2016).

[44]Adler and Pouliot, 'International Practices' (2011a), p. 5.

[45]Ted Hopf, 'Change in international practices', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:3 (2018), p. 705.

At least three reasons explain why IPT scholars emphasise continuity over change. Firstly, in a practice theory perspective, mental dispositions do not change easily. Any new pieces of information or new experiences are integrated within the existing mental dispositions that individuals have acquired since the beginning of their existence. Rapid changes in mental dispositions are therefore uncommon – most of the time background assumptions do not change, or change only marginally. And because mental dispositions are stable, practices also tend to be repetitive.

Secondly, practices correspond to repeated ways of doing things, not emerging trends and innovative approaches. A practice cannot be an isolated event or a unique performance, and needs instead to be repeated in time and places. What may seem an isolated or idiosyncratic event or a unique performance is analysed as the instantiation of one or several practices, which emphasise generality rather than uniqueness. Practices are patterned in the sense that they imply regularity and repetition, directing IPT scholars' attention away from innovation and change.

Thirdly, practices are produced by the repetitive interaction between members of a group. They are 'a social artefact',[46] 'always linked to a collective',[47] and 'the products of social structures'.[48] They 'are acquired through socialization, exposure, imitation, and symbolic power relationships' – in a nutshell, 'what may seem to be a set of individual dispositions is in fact profoundly social'.[49] Because change often starts from individuals rather than groups and may become mainstream only after a long process of socialisation and interiorisation, IPT is again better equipped to grasp continuity over change.

It is thus not surprising to see that IPT scholars look at the most traditional aspects of frontline diplomacy, emphasising intergovernmental relations and classical diplomatic practices such as state-to-state negotiations, information-gathering in embassies, and official representations. As practice needs to be stable, repeated, inculcated, anchored, sedimented, and shared, IPT scholars' first instinct is to look at longstanding practices. As they start from ingrained realities, they tend to overlook innovative approaches and changing ways of doing things.

There is no better illustration of this trend than the way IPT scholars look at change itself. They generally analyse it as the progressive replacement of one practice with another. In their framework, due to the weight of past practices, change is incremental and occurs at the margins of existing practices. For them, 'the past is actualized into the present. … The habitus instills path dependency in social action for revisions take place on the basis of prior dispositions.'[50] New practices emerge out of old practices. For instance, Pouliot and Jean-Philippe Thérien focus on a 'ratchet effect' in the global governance of international security since 1814. They show how 'past and current practices tend to form new baselines for future negotiations'.[51] Similarly, Pouliot and Andrew F. Cooper (co-author of this article) consider that the G20 – in emphasising the role of leaders – emerges out of a combination of both transformation and reproduction of Western-dominated global order norms and practices.[52] In this framework,

---

[46]Cornelia Navari, 'The concept of practice in the English School', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:4 (2011), p. 614.

[47]Bueger and Gadinger, *International Practice Theory*, p. 19.

[48]Ted Hopf, 'The logic of habit in International Relations', European Journal of International Relations, 16:4 (2010), pp. 539–61.

[49]Vincent Pouliot, 'The logic of practicality: a theory of practice of security communities', *International Organization*, 62:2 (2008), pp. 273–4.

[50]Pouliot, 'The logic of practicality', p. 273.

[51]Vincent Pouliot and Jean-Philippe Thérien, 'The politics of inclusion: Changing patterns in the governance of international security', *Review of International Studies*, 41:2 (2015), p. 4.

[52]Andrew F. Cooper and Vincent Pouliot, 'How much is global governance changing? The G20 as international practice', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:3 (2015), pp. 334–50.

change occurs from existing practices creating path-dependency effects that influence the emergence of new practices.

We suggest the need for IPT scholars to shift focus. The processual approach of IPT's scholars and their interest in how change in practice stems from past ways of doing things tend to prevent them from looking at the transformative – and sometimes revolutionary – implications of agents' practical adaptation to new realities. We do not contend that IPT is unable to understand change, but that it tends to focus on long-established and canonical ways of doing things. With many IPT scholars, and against several of their critics, we do think that practice theory is suitable to understand change. But IPT's ontology leads IPT scholars to simply overlook innovation, and emphasise continuity over transformation. This serious limitation can be overcome if IPT scholars' attention is drawn to emerging practices.

Frontline diplomacy in transformation: two case studies

International practitioners are constantly innovating; new diplomatic practices are always created. More than one reason helps to spur these transformations in recent years. The involvement of other ministries in international politics, the empowerment of non-Western countries promoting a distinct approach to diplomacy, the intrusion of non-state actors on the global scene, increasingly deterritorialised threats, the role of social media and the Internet, changes in international law, the rise of informal interactions and networks, pushes towards outsourcing to private companies, the redefinition of national interests to include global concerns, greater accountability and transparency, the need for specialisation and expertise, and the concentration and diversification of embassies all play a part in changing the nature and practice of diplomacy.[53] We contend that emphasising these changes and acknowledging their impact on diplomatic practices at the frontline is an important step towards a better understanding of world politics.

Building on two case studies, we illustrate in this section how we can look at the changing practices of frontline diplomacy and what is gained from it. For each case, to theoretically and empirically unpack our key arguments, we first describe the case study and then answer three questions, identified as relevant in the course of the discussion above: 1. How do these activities transform traditional modes of operation at the frontlines? 2. How do they relate to a key dimension of new frontline practices, that is, publicity and connection with non-state actors? 3. What do they tell us about transformation of global politics? We successively look at the role of G20 Sherpas in global governance and the use of Twitter by US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul.

Because of their differences, these case studies allow us to grasp the scope, nature, and consequences on international politics of changes occurring at the frontlines of diplomacy. On the one hand, the innovative practices associated with the 'digitalisation' of public diplomacy[54] in embassies remain located in traditional diplomatic institutions. These institutions are characterised by permanence, as well as a specific organisational culture and hierarchical structure that are transformed to adapt to twenty-first-century technology of communication. In contradistinction, G20 summitry relocates frontline diplomacy.[55] Unlike the common forms of mission-oriented diplomacy[56] related to public diplomacy activities, there is no association with traditional physical sites of frontline

---

[53]Andrew F. Cooper, 'The changing nature of diplomacy', in Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 35–53.

[54]Ilan Manor, 'The Digitalization of Diplomacy: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Terminology', Working Paper No. 2, Oxford Digital Diplomacy Research Group (January 2018).

[55]Daniel D. Bradlow, 'Lessons from the frontlines: What I learned from my participation in the G20', *Global Summitry*, 1:2 (2016), pp. 135–50

[56]Andrew F. Cooper, 'Civil society relationships with the G20: an extension of the G8 template or distinctive pattern of engagement?', *Global Society*, 27:2 (2013), pp. 179–200.

diplomacy. While there is some space for innovative techniques, it is the 'human condition', not techniques via digital diplomacy[57] that remains salient.

The relocation of multilateral diplomacy: G20 Sherpas after the 2008 crisis

As a model for problem solving apart from universal organisations set up in the immediate post-1945 era, the G20 is an experimental work in progress with a high degree of ad hocism. Originally created in 1999 to organise discussions between finance ministers and central bank governors promoting financial stability, since 2008 it enables gatherings of heads of government or heads of state to focus on a more transversal and political agenda. At one level, each of the individual G20 summits has its own particular policy narrative held together by a set of informal rules. Throughout this process therefore there is a search for balance between the priorities of the country (and leader) presiding over a specific G20 with the more generalised rules of the game. At another level, some measure of sustained coordination has emerged with the establishment of the so-called troika system. Indeed it is this process that provides the vital glue to the G20 process 'transferring knowledge' between the different summits.[58]

At the core of the G20, two very different figures of frontline diplomats emerge. In the vanguard of the G20 process, Sherpas are designated as the personal representative of the leader. As such they maintain a close relationship working on the text (the talks before the talks) and sitting close by the leader at the summit itself. They do the heavy policy lifting and have a prominent role in organising collaboration before and during G20 summits. They share this frontline role with officials from the ministries of finance and central banks – also designated as finance Sherpas – who have the technical expertise to negotiate global finance and economic governance. In organisational terms the finance officials had the advantage of an established culture of meetings from the older G20 Finance since 1999. By way of contrast none of the Sherpas – or for that matter their leaders – had sat around a table of this type before 2008.

A key element of the bureaucratic division of labour between Sherpas and finance experts was the creation of a number of technical-oriented Working Groups (WG) in the wake of the 2008 crisis. At the first November 2008 summit the G20 created four working groups to put into place principles on financial regulatory reform. Since the creation of these WGs, there are tensions between the discrete technical oriented component of the G20 and the Sherpa track with a diffuse agenda. Finance officials want to maintain the 'purity' of the G20 as a functional forum dealing with a very specific agenda. The Sherpas – often at the encouragement of leaders who feel more comfortable with a less technical agenda – want to open the agenda up in a means more akin to the G7/8. As a former G20 Sherpa is recorded as saying: 'In many delegations there is a dis-function between Sherpas and finance Sherpas …. The agenda has grown too wide.'[59]

The dominance of the finance experts with the need to deliver a big stimulus package and a reformed regulatory process came to the fore in dramatic fashion at the April 2009 London summit. While the Sherpas retained an importance in coordinating the activities of the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development as well as leaders and officials, many lacked the technical expertise to be the prime actors in the G20 process. The finance track was thus very much in charge. This pattern continued at the Pittsburgh September 2009 summit, where the US Sherpa Michael Froman prepared a number of papers but left it to 'the finance officials to draft most of the text on all technical matters [including] financial regulations, International Financial Institutions reform, and

---

[57]Alan S. Alexandroff and Donald Brean, 'Global summitry: Its meaning and scope Part One', *Global Summitry*, 1:1 (2015), p. 2.

[58]Diane Stone, *Knowledge Actors and Transnational Governance: The Public Private Policy Nexus in the Global Agora* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[59]Cited in Jim O'Neill and Alessio Terzi, 'The world is ready for a global economic governance reform, are world leaders?', *Bruegel*, Blogpost (29 October 2014).

macroeconomic policy [with the Sherpas focusing] on the economy, the overview text for the draft communiqué, and non-finance items including trade'.[60] Faced with this relative loss of authority the tendency of the Sherpas was to extend the focus of discussion to wide-ranging institutional questions (including the membership of the G20, and the role to be played by other ministries including foreign affairs) and to some compelling issues beyond finance/economics (the Haiti earthquake in 2010 for instance).

This is not to exaggerate the erosion in standing of Sherpas as mobilisers in the G20. Daniel Price, the US Sherpa in the Bush administration, was instrumental in putting the logistics of the 2008 Washington G20 summit together. Yet clearly at this stage the Sherpas, on the core issues around the question of 'how to fix the banks' and the state of the financial sector more generally, followed the lead of the finance track. In Washington the work of drafting of the communiqué was given to the finance deputies, although the document was reviewed by the Sherpas. Subsequently the Sherpas followed closely the work of the WGs, and brought into the meeting the finance deputies to facilitate coordination.

How do these activities transform traditional modes of operation?

The character of the G20 reproduces a good deal of what can be termed high-level diplomacy, with an onus on individuals to demonstrate ample technical skills and competence in negotiation. The mode of operation via the G20 process has a top-down orientation, with a high degree of personal involvement by political leaders and their personal representatives. G20 diplomacy is not removed from the central sphere of authority, in that it is indelibly connected with decision-making at the apex of power both nationally and transnationally. G20 summitry at the core remains a highly state-centric process.

Yet, there is some elements of a dualistic shift, with signs of an important if still limited double movement in influence on policymaking beyond the national state to both transnational and non-state forces.[61] As a crisis committee the G20 concentrated on highly technical issues outside the level of competence of both some leaders and foreign ministry officials. The key ingredient is the leverage of expertise and specialised knowledge. As insiders within the G20, the finance officials held some considerable advantages over the Sherpas. And although in the category of outsiders it is the resisters that grab much of the attention, as it will be discussed below, it is the accommodative side of civil society that is most salient for teasing out the changing sources of influence on the G20 process.

G20 summitry is also divergent in a variety of ways from other global governance bodies. Unlike other types of frontline diplomacy G20 summitry is not influenced by ebbs and flows in budget commitment. Contrary to the activities of this type performed in fixed sites associated with diplomatic practice, G20 is multilocational. Most notably it moves the sites of the practices of diplomacy and global governance away from the traditional hubs of multilateral diplomacy (Geneva, New York) into unanticipated sites. Unlike the UN secretariat or officials from the International Financial Institutions, frontline diplomats at the core of the G20 summit process do not operate as a global civil service. Certainly they do not share an institutional headquarters or common office space. Nor is there a set organisational chart. As the discussion here shows, with improvisation comes risk in terms of building trust and a culture of cooperation.

How do these activities relate to publicity and connection with non-state actors?

The style of G20 summitry diplomacy changes from one G20 to another (from a relatively barebones forum at the height of the crisis in November 2008 to fairly lavish events in Pittsburgh, Cannes, Los Cabos, Saint Petersburg, Canberra, Antalya, Hangzhou, Hamburg, and Buenos Aires

---

[60]John Kirton, *G20 Governance for a Globalized World* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), p. 302.

[61]Diane Stone, 'Global public policy, transnational policy communities and their networks', *Policy Studies Journal*, 36:1 (2008), pp. 19–38.

in successive years) but the connection between the activity and the main game of public policy was never doubted, with a narrative of 'saving the world' cascading from the 2008 financial crisis. While the trappings of traditional diplomacy (complex negotiations and ever-expanding communiqués) are built in to the process the focus is on delivery or at the perception of delivery.

Analogous to other types of frontline diplomacy much of G20 summit diplomacy is conducted with minimal transparency, with an onus on closed networks of often 'faceless' bureaucrats. By its very focus there is a technical bias towards the activity of the work taken on by financial officials and Sherpas. Yet, although most of the work of these officials is done in closed settings, the G20 summits themselves allow some penetration by societal groups.[62] To be sure, the process of engagement with non-state actors has increased appreciably after 2008. Overtime, the G20 as a protected preserve for selected state officials has been challenged.

From the outside looking in the G20 was always susceptible to physical challenges by protestors. A wide number of non-state actors explicitly rejected G20 technical oriented culture (black bloc, ATTAC). One of the rationales for moving the site of this type of frontline diplomacy has been to insulate the forum from this type of backlash. From the inside out the very different type of challenge has been on the nature of expertise. The assumption made concerning the evolution of global collective policy making is that, albeit governments and their public servants remain core actors, space will open up for new entrants.[63] In terms of the G20 this available space is strictly limited to those among non-state actors that embrace the technical orientation at the core of the mode of operation.

Those groups with an accommodative style were able to make some inroads into the summit process. In part this shift to allow societal engagement reflected the symbolic need for the G20 to address legitimacy issues. As the G20 members stated in 2012, the aspiration for outreach is founded upon an intent to strengthen the G20's capacity 'to build and sustain the political consensus'.[64] But it also reflected some degree of instrumental purpose in that some elements of civil society possessed considerable technical skills.

While entrée to insider status is far from fully institutionalised, civil society representatives gained some measure of access to G20 process at the Seoul, Cannes, and Los Cabos summits. A breakthrough meeting between civil society and the G20 Sherpas featuring diverse representatives from civil society took place at the 2010 Seoul summit. One month before, approximately 150 representatives from civil society met via a Civil G20 in Incheon, Korea. Civil society organisations positioned themselves not only as the champions of an expanded development agenda (with an emphasis on financing for development and a rights based approach for development), but also on filling the perceived gaps of legitimacy in the G20. Furthermore, the meeting constituted a procedural breakthrough due to the presence and active participation of so many Sherpas and sous-sherpas, including those from India, Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa but not China or Brazil. Oxfam International was represented at the Civil G20 by a large team, with an emphasis on pushing forward with the Seoul development consensus, along with representatives from groups such as Make Poverty History, Caritas, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Interaction, Save the Children, and Social Watch.

In a separate category, moreover, there is the ultra-insider role of Bill Gates, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Gates had the organisational resources that allowed a comprehensive engagement with the G20 summit process, extending from the crisis committee ambit (with a focus on detailed proposals for a financial transaction tax) to a steering committee commitment

---

[62]Cooper, 'Civil society relationships with the G20'.

[63]Richard Higgott, Geoffrey Underhill, and Andreas Bieler, *Non-State Actors and Authority in the Global System* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[64]Cited in Stephen Slaughter, 'Building G20 outreach: the role of transnational policy networks in sustaining effective and legitimate summitry', *Global Summity*, 1:2 (2015), p. 2.

on development and health issues.[65] However, if the influence of the Gates Foundation continues to be felt through support for big civil society organisations and agenda items on the delivery side of the spectrum, the direct impact peaked with the 2011 Cannes summit with the Gates Foundation reaching the point of having a de facto Sherpa in the G20 process (Geoff Lamb, a former senior official with the World Bank), and Bill Gates being commissioned by French president Nicolas Sarkozy to write a report on innovative financing for development. In many ways, therefore, Gates's close involvement at Cannes was an exceptional one-off performance.

What do these activities tell us about transformation of global politics?

Contrary to the older G7, G20 frontline diplomacy encompassed unlike as well as like-minded components.[66] As such, the risks of building trust among disparate sets of state officials is accentuated. The image of G20 on the frontlines coincides with the expansion of state actorhood beyond the traditional establishment to a wider set of countries among the BRICS and set of middle powers.[67] From this perspective the G20 is not just in the vanguard of diplomacy but in the aspirations of global governance. As opposed to improvised concert power of previous eras taking place in Vienna or Paris, or for that matter in an ad hoc manner in Potsdam or Yalta, at the heart of the G20 model was a global reach. A degree of equality was granted not only to countries outside of the traditional elite but state officials.

As the G20 showcases economic policy cannot be viewed as only the insulated domain of national entities. All of the countries in the G20 had an incentive for collective problem solving when the global financial crisis hit.[68] Together they had a stake in the stability of the global system. None spent a great amount of time negotiating their position in the elevated G20. When the call went out – even if it was a call by the US and core European countries – it was not rejected. Sovereignty has thus been bent by the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis. The question is how much the G20 has been felt in in terms of its impact on the rules and procedures of the global order. The need for a ratcheting up of collective policymaking was clear.

Still, if bent, the hold of sovereignty was not broken. For all the group action mobilised by the global financial crisis this form of behaviour took the G20 into contentious territory. Clear red lines took shape for many of the G20 members about what they would not agree on in terms of collective policymaking. China from the first summit resisted any mention of 'imbalances' in the communiqué. China was also adamant that the issue of climate change not be discussed with any negotiations left to the UN. And at least initially China would not allow currency exchange rates, although over time this positioned loosened. At Pittsburgh the US went about the Sherpa process with a long document on the eve of the summit, although what was put forward was not highly problematic except for an initiative on climate finance. Again China led the resistance. Germany pushed for a chart of principles about economic behaviour that did not receive wider endorsement. A wide number of countries also unilaterally defected from G20 commitments. Australia broke away from the push for monetary stimulus by repeatedly raising interest rates. France and Britain moved with respect on the curtailment of bankers' bonuses.[69]

[65]Lesley Wroughton, 'Bill Gates urges G20 to live up to aid promises', *Reuters* (3 November 2012).

[66]Andrew F. Cooper and Ramesh Thakur, *The Group of Twenty (G20)* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Kirton, *G20 Governance for a Globalized World*.

[67]Andrew F. Cooper, 'The G20 and contested global governance: BRICS, middle powers and small states', *Caribbean Journal of International Relations & Diplomacy*, 2:3 (2014), pp. 87–109.

[68]Andrew F. Cooper, 'The G20 as an improvised crisis committee and/or contested "steering committee" for the world', *International Affairs*, 86:3 (2010), pp. 741–57.

[69]Alan Alexandroff, 'G20 Global Governance is Hard Work, World – Get Used to It!', Rising BRICSAM (7 November 2011), available at: {http://blog.risingbricsam.com/?p=950} accessed 8 November 2018; Jonathan Luckhurst, *G20 since the Global Crisis* (New York: Palgrave, 2016)

All of these constraints do not suggest, however, that the G20 was not capable of mobilising collective action on core issues of economic/financial governance, if often this role was one of indirect leadership with delegation to other technical bodies. A good illustration of this dynamic came out via the agreements on forms of macroprudential financial regulation such as the Basel III Accords, which moved beyond self-regulation.[70] Incidentally, this example also illustrates the magnitude of the degree of complexity and problem-driven orientation of so much of contemporary global governance. One implication of this trend has been to give unequal recognition to certain clusters both at the state and non-state level. Finance experts have a strong bias towards non-state actors that share their technical focus. Thus the move to allow greater access to those actors such as Oxfam and the Gates Foundation that have this capacity.

Twitter in embassy: the case of US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul (2012–14)

Practical interactions taking place on Twitter are transforming what is known to be acceptable communication strategies by diplomats. Twitter revolutionised the spread of information by decentralising it, because anyone with a Twitter account can create, receive, and spread information instantaneously. This has made Twitter an excellent platform to watch news unfold around the world, often in real time, and to comment on events. Decision-makers, citizens, and diplomats are using the platform to follow local and international news stories. For politicians and diplomats, the goal became to recruit as many followers as possible.

The example of the use of Twitter by embassy personnel under US Ambassador Michael McFaul's serves here as an illustration of the impact of Twitter on public diplomacy conducted at the frontline. Before being sent to Russia from January 2012 to February 2014, Michael McFaul, a Stanford University professor had little experience with social media. McFaul was adamant about focusing his efforts on the rise of social media diplomacy, arguing that it offers 'a fast way to get out information, correct the record and engage Russians'.[71] In a context of increased tensions between Russia and the West, Ambassador McFaul was a supporter of the Obama administration's 'reset' policy with Russia. Faced with a decrease of US popularity among Russians in the midst of tensions with Russia, and with the Kremlin's tightening control of the media, the US Embassy in Moscow was looking for other ways to reach the people. A pioneer in social media diplomacy at the frontline, Ambassador McFaul soon adopted a multilingual and multiplatform social media strategy.[72] For instance, he used YouTube to introduce himself directly to the Russian people.[73]

With a new attitude towards social media, McFaul, in less than two years attracted more than 70,000 followers on Twitter and 13,000 followers on Facebook. Over the years, McFaul has used his social media accounts to respond to several events in Russian news and notably the sentencing of the Pussy Riot punk rock performers, Edward Snowden's grant of asylum in Russia, the White House cancellation of a planned Moscow summit, prominent human rights cases, Russian measure banning adoptions by American citizens, and the US-Russian disagreements over how to respond to the chemical weapons attacks that took place in Syria.[74]

---

[70]Andrew Baker, 'The new political economy of the macroprudential ideational shift', *New Political Economy*, 18:1 (2013), pp. 112–39.

[71]Cited in Robert Koenig, 'Using "social diplomacy" to reach Russians', *The Foreign Service Journal* (January/February 2014), p. 22.

[72]Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018); Mark Landler, 'In the scripted world of diplomacy, a burst of tweets', *The New York Times* (4 February 2014); Will Wright, 'America's digital diplomacy in Russia after Michael McFaul', *Global Voices* (2 January 2015); Chrystia Freeland, 'Social media statecraft: a multiplatform strategy', *The Globe and Mail* (5 April 2012).

[73]Nicholas J. Cull, 'The long road to public diplomacy 2.0: the Internet in US public diplomacy', *International Studies Review*, 15:1 (2013), p. 135.

[74]McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*; Koenig, 'Using "social diplomacy" to reach Russians'.

Twitter progressively became a central platform for public bilateral exchange. For instance, in May 2012, McFaul highlighted in a speech to students at the Moscow's Higher School of Economics the role of the Russian government in pressing the Kyrgyz government to force US forces out of an air base. In response, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, launched a Twitter offensive, accusing McFaul of 'meddling' in Russian affairs in nine successive tweets. The ambassador tried to ease the tensions, explaining on Twitter that his talk was actually focused on improvements in US-Russia relations. As a result of these tensions, the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt sent a tweet commenting that the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had launched a 'Twitter war' against McFaul, writing: 'that's the new world: followers instead of nukes. Better.'[75]

Another particularly salient example is McFaul's criticism of the conviction of Alexei Navalny, a Russian lawyer and political activist. Navalny was arrested numerous times by the Russian authorities, most notably in 2012, when he was accused of embezzlement and fraud at the same time that he was running for Moscow's Mayoral race against incumbent mayor Sergey Sobyanin, a Putin appointee.[76] Ultimately, Navalny was sentenced to five years in prison, though he was released a day later, until his appeal could be heard.

Amid these allegations of fraud and embezzlement, McFaul twitted about the trial: 'We are deeply disappointed in the conviction of [Alexei Navalny] and the apparent political motivations in this trial.' McFaul's tweet had a direct effect, promoting the idea of a politically motivated trial. Many saw Navalny's trail as a parody of the law, 'highly questionable', his guilt raising serious doubts.[77] Most importantly, perhaps, was the tweet by McFaul. Although not the only critic of Navalny's criminal trial, McFaul's statement served as a clear statement of the US position on the matter, giving it, arguably, an extra element of legitimacy. Minutes after the tweet was live, it had started generating buzz on the Russian social media landscape, reaching nearly 1,000 retweets, as well as dozens of likes and comments. As a Russian journalist explained: 'Everyone was checking McFaul's Twitter account and quoting what he said.'[78]

How do these activities transform traditional modes of operation?
In the past, ambassadors were plenipotentiary because they were given full powers to engage the country and their own governments. The letters of credentials ambassadors present to their host country upon arrival still describe them as plenipotentiary. Today this provision is purely symbolic, as they no longer actually use their power to bind their government without first consulting their headquarters.[79] If anything, the opposite logic seems true: modern communication technologies and the ease of transcontinental travel allow decision-makers at home to directly interact with their foreign counterparts, effectively sidestepping their ambassadors. In these cases, the latter do not even broker cooperation or serve as initial intermediaries.

The case of McFaul's use of Twitter shows that new communication technologies empower frontline diplomats in novel ways. In a manner that contradicts other trends, as Ilan Manor explains, the dynamic at work 'has once again altered the role ambassadors play in diplomacy. This is due to the fact that power is now migrating back from the MFA to the embassy.' He continues: 'Embassies have reasserted their importance in the fields of public diplomacy and image management', because 'digital tools have substantially increased an embassy's ability to

---

[75]Miriam Elder, 'Michael McFaul, US ambassador to Moscow, victim of Kremlin "Twitter war"', *The Guardian* (29 May 2012); McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, p. 306.

[76]McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, p. 302; David M. Herszenhorn, 'Putin critic gets 5-year jail term, setting off protests', *The New York Times* (18 July 2013); Will Englund, 'In Russia, activist Alexei Navalny freed one day after conviction', *The Washington Post* (19 July 2013).

[77]Ben Brumfield, 'Outspoken Putin critic Alexei Navalny hit with prison sentence', *CNN* (19 July 2013).

[78]Cited in Koenig, 'Using "social diplomacy" to reach Russians', p. 21.

[79]Louie Fréchette, 'Foreword – diplomacy: Old trade, new challenges', in Cooper, Heine, and Thakur (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, pp. xxx–xxxv.

communicate with the population of a foreign country, to create relationships with key audiences and elites and to manage their country's image'.[80]

Faced with questions of relevance of their traditional trade, political sections in embassies have switched to new roles over the last decades. They are more directly involved than before in the promotion of their country's values and interests through engaging with the civil society and non-state actors of their host countries. Missions directly engage with foreign audiences through public speech making, media interviews, interactions with civil society, and cultural exchanges. Ambassadors and embassy personnel supplement their interactions with the public through various social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, which can attract thousands of followers. This new form of social media diplomacy is increasingly important in countries like Russia, where government censorship over political ideas and events is tightly controlled. News events, policies, and even ideologies become harder to control.[81]

The speed to which social media travels cannot be ignored; especially in the face of the slower press releases and news conferences that take longer to be addressed by traditional media, or are not even acknowledged.[82] As a consequence, the use of Twitter has come to be seen as a standard practice in embassies. Diplomats now commonly receive training and instructions on how to manage official and personal social media accounts in foreign postings. Diplomats and their MFAs have started adapting institutions and practices in order to integrate these technologies and not fall behind in the diplomatic game. With digital diplomacy comes both policy innovation and institutional adaptation.[83]

How do these activities relate to publicity and connection with non-state actors?

The relevance of public engagement with non-state actors by frontline diplomats in embassy is further increased by social media and new technologies of communication. As explained above, McFaul's activities illustrate the importance of reaching out directly to foreign publics. Russians receive the majority of their news reports from television, with coverage that was highly controlled by the Kremlin, and frequently included biases against the United States. Aside from television, radio audience was often limited, leaving social media as the best platform to communicate with Russians.[84] Social media were commonly used by opponents to the government to convey messages that differed from Kremlin's stances. In this context, Ambassador McFaul encouraged social media interactions between his office and the public. He explains:

> We knew that we were going to lose the battle for the hearts and minds of many Russians, at least in the short term. The Russian government devoted huge resources to shaping citizen attitudes, vastly eclipsing our paltry budgets for public diplomacy. They owned or controlled all major television stations, which reached tens of millions every night, while we just had my Twitter and Facebook accounts.[85]

New technologies are instrumental for achieving political goals at the frontlines. Thanks to them, frontline diplomats are able to engage more broadly and more efficiently with foreign civil society and create an attractive image of their country.[86] They value these practices for the tools

[80]Ilan Manor, 'Ambassadors as digital gatekeepers', *Exploring Digital Diplomacy* (8 March 2017), available at: {https://digdipblog.com/2017/03/08/ambassadors-as-digital-gatekeepers/} accessed 20 December 2017.

[81]McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*.

[82]Koenig, 'Using "social diplomacy" to reach Russians'.

[83]Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes (eds), *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); Taylor Owen, *Disruptive Power: The Crisis of the State in the Digital Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Philip Seib, *The Future of Diplomacy* (Malden: Polity Press, 2016).

[84]Freeland, 'Social media statecraft'.

[85]McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, p. 283.

[86]Alisher Faizullaev and Jérémie Cornut, 'Narrative practice in international politics and diplomacy: the case of the crisis in Crimea', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 578–604.

and the aid they provide to mass communications, such as the speed that news can be shared on social media platforms and the audience they can reach. The US embassy in Moscow tried to move quickly and responded as soon as possible to breaking news and/or events, with some of McFaul's tweets reaching an estimated half-million people in the 24-hour news cycle.[87]

With the popularity of this new social media diplomacy, emerges the idea of the 'humanisation' of the frontline diplomat. McFaul's success is linked with the way he 'mixes life and work, … blending the personal and the professional' on Twitter.[88] This is part of a strategy to attract followers – as McFaul explains, 'any time there is something personal or something with a photo or video it gets much more pickup or retweets than a statement on Syria'.[89] Adding to this, it seems McFaul is further humanised by his use of the Russian language. Recognising the importance to communicate in one's own language, McFaul makes a point of sending out most of his tweets, Facebook posts, and blogs, in Russian – with the embassy site following the example.[90] The humanising element is at play here when McFaul sometimes makes grammatical errors, and followers actually argue that these mistakes add authenticity to him and his posts.[91]

What do these activities tell us about transformation of global politics?

The examples above ultimately provide an improved understanding and definition of the role of public and digital diplomacy in the modern world. Diplomacy has always been regarded as a channel of contact between foreign powers with the purpose of exchanging information, clarifying positions, and seeking collaborations.[92] Traditional diplomacy can be understood as a state-centric diplomacy with the aim of resolving conflict peacefully in the name of national interest.[93] It is a dialogue of negotiations between official, political entities.[94] However, with the rise of new technologies, of the Internet, and especially of new social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs, diplomacy has seen itself evolving and adapting to a degree of connectivity not seen before; moving from a traditional form, to a public one.

Old norms of traditional diplomacy, conceptualised as face-to-face interactions between official state actors, are supplemented by the new, modern norms of collective participation and social media presence both by state and non-state actors. With the rise of social media, the interactions between state actors become public, broadcasted, and more transparent, with public forums changing the flow of power to a horizontal dimension. While the old norms of traditional diplomacy were rigid, structured, and rooted in centralised notions of power, the new norms of public diplomacy allow for fluid conversations between state actors and non-state actors, as well as diffused relations of power. While power still primarily resides with the elites, the citizens can now be exposed to the decision-making process of elites that allow them to have a role in international diplomacy through commenting news, liking Facebook pages, and retweeting political messages.

Against the old Wilsonian idea of publicity in diplomacy leading to peaceful relations, Twitter diplomacy at the frontlines also shows that transparency in diplomatic processes does not necessarily lead to consensus building and peace. New technology of communication may

---

[87]Koenig, 'Using "social diplomacy" to reach Russians'.

[88]Freeland, 'Social media statecraft'; McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*.

[89]Cited in Freeland, 'Social media statecraft'.

[90]Sabrina Sotiriu, 'Digital diplomacy: Between promises and reality', in Bjola and Holmes (eds), *Digital Diplomacy*, p. 43.

[91]McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, p. 299.

[92]Eytan Gilboa, 'Diplomacy in the media age: Three models of uses and effects', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 12:2 (2001), pp. 1–28.

[93]Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy*, p. 3; Costas M. Constantinou and Paul Sharp, 'Theoretical perspectives in diplomacy', in Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy* (London: SAGE, 2016), pp. 13–27.

[94]Adam Watson, *The Dialogue between States* (London: Routledge, 2005).

nurture opposition and conflict rather than foster dialogue, exchange, and, in the end, peace. The use of social media diplomacy by Ambassador McFaul did not automatically heighten the popularity of the US, with relations between Russia and the United States actually turning colder as a result.[95]

Conclusion

The analysis outlined here invites a look at world politics through what happens at the frontlines of diplomacy. Diplomats traditionally represent, negotiate, and communicate at the frontlines of the sovereign polities in whose name they act. Globalisation and the disruptive effect of new technology have changed these frontline practices. New actors emerge and create new opportunities for international exchange. All of these factors heighten the need for diplomacy while at the same time transform the tasks and functions of diplomats. There is increasing space for an expanded and more diverse diplomatic community. Adding to Wiseman's hypotheses about the transformative impact of polylateralism on diplomacy, these changes make frontline diplomats more likely to engage polylaterally with non-state actors than diplomats at home.[96]

Our emphasis on transformations of frontline diplomatic practices contributes to both diplomatic studies and the practice turn in IR. The dialectic between change and continuity in diplomatic practices is an important one in both fields. The question has fuelled a protracted debate among students of diplomacy in particular.[97] They have produced plenty of interesting works on shifts in diplomatic practices without using practice theory lenses. On the contrary, Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann consider that practice theory lenses are particularly suitable to understand how traditional state-centric diplomatic relations combine with non-traditional political interactions and shape the making of world politics today.[98] In this line, we suggest the need to focus on what diplomatic agents, relations, and practices at the frontline today tell us about changes in diplomatic culture on the one hand, and about transformations of world politics, on the other.

From a practitioners' perspective, frontline diplomats need more than ever before to be flexible and versatile, learn to collaborate with non-state actors, and to manage new media and informal networks. For Philip Seib, the frontline diplomat of the future will be an 'expeditionary diplomat' who breaks free from the isolation of working behind embassy walls, is autonomous while maintaining a close relationship with headquarters, speaks the language of the country, and monitors social media.[99] In a similar vein, Anne-Marie Slaughter explained in an interview to the *Washington Post* in 2009 that frontline diplomats 'are going to need to have skills that are closer to community organizing than traditional reporting and analysis, as new connecting technologies will be vital tools'.[100] Similar ideas were formulated in Condoleezza Rice's call for a 'transformational diplomacy'[101] as well as in Daryl Copeland's *Guerrilla Diplomacy*.[102]

---

[95]McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, p. 314.

[96]Wiseman, 'Polylateralism'.

[97]Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy* (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Juergen Kleiner, 'The inertia of diplomacy', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 19:2 (2008), pp. 321–49; Brian Hocking, 'Catalytic diplomacy: Beyond "newness" and "decline"', in Jan Melissen (ed.), *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 19–42; Sasson Sofer, 'Old and new diplomacy: a debate revisited', *Review of International Studies*, 14:3 (1988), pp. 195–211; Brian Hocking, Jan Melissen, Shaun Riordan, and Paul Sharp, *Futures for Diplomacy: Integrative Diplomacy in the 21st Century* (Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2012).

[98]Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy*; Cooper and Pouliot, 'How much is global governance changing?'.

[99]Philip Seib, *Real-Time Diplomacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[100]Cited in Cooper, Heine, and Thakur (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, p. 22.

[101]Anthony Holmes, 'Where are the civilians? How to rebuild the U.S. foreign service', *Foreign Affairs*, 88:1 (2009), pp. 148–60.

[102]Daryl Copeland, *Guerrilla Diplomacy* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2009).

In our analysis, privileged roles are given not only to individuals with close contact to leaders at the apex of power but to many relatively obscure frontline officials, outside of the direct purview of foreign ministries and with more discrete technical or social media skills. Because of the constitutive effects of diplomats' practices, changes at this micro-level are closely related to changes at the international level. Applying practice theory lenses to new practices of frontline diplomacy provides theoretical depth for diplomatic studies that could contribute quite a bit to IR. The purpose of our article has been to invite scholars to go further in that direction, and focus on how new diplomatic practices at the frontline contribute to shape international politics today. What is clear is that the novel ways frontlines are managed by diplomats – and what, in turn, these new frontline practices tell us about the changing nature of international politics – should be seen as profoundly relevant to IR scholars.

Andrew F. Cooper is Professor at the Balsillie School of International Affairs and the Department of Political Science, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. His most recent books are *BRICS VSI* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *Diplomatic Afterlives* (Polity, 2014); *Internet Gambling Offshore: Caribbean Struggles over Casino Capitalism* (Palgrave, 2011); and *Celebrity Diplomacy* (Paradigm, 2007). He is also the co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy* (2013), and *Rising States, Rising Institutions: Challenges for Global Governance* (Brookings, 2010). His scholarly publications have appeared in a number of prestigious journals such as *International Organization*; *International Affairs*; *World Development*; and *International Studies Review*.

Jérémie Cornut is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. His teaching and research focus on diplomacy in practice, International Relations theory, and Canadian foreign policy. His articles have notably been published in the *European Journal of International Relations*; *Cooperation and Conflict*; *Journal of International Relations and Development*; *International Studies Perspectives*; *International Journal*; *Études internationals*; and *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*. He is currently working on the transformative impact of technology on diplomacy. This research project started while he was fellow at the Balsillie School of International Affairs. jcornut@sfu.ca