

JIM'S READING CORNER

This is a practitioner's handbook for students; as Verbeke modestly remarks in his foreword, "*this book informs students about the practice of modern diplomacy while simultaneously inviting them to critically reflect on it.*" It is however much more than that: a fascinating reflection on diplomacy by a practitioner who is at the same time a scholar. Verbeke looks at four major themes: the organisation of diplomacy/a diplomat's conceptual toolbox/diplomacy's first call: international peace and security/the normative framework of diplomacy. It should be mandatory reading for any aspiring diplomat, but it will also be read with profit by seasoned diplomats who want to take a fresh look at their trade, and indeed by anybody who is interested in international relations. The book contains many lessons for people working in the EU institutions, even those who do not directly work in the diplomatic area.

The introduction sets the tone: diplomacy is what diplomats do, rather than what they say. Words are part of the diplomat's toolbox to advance the interests of their political masters; therefore, they should be taken *cum grano salis*. Grand concepts do not necessarily mean much and are often misleading; artificial labels ('neo-this and post-that') obscure more than they shed light. When people claim to run 'an ethical foreign policy,' look at what they do, not what they say.

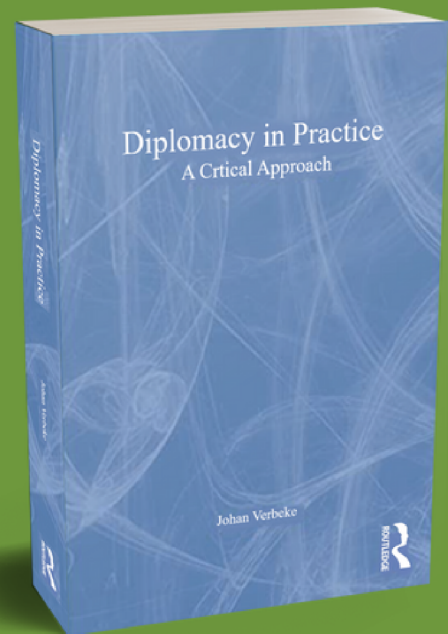
Diplomacy is primarily a practice, and an instrument of foreign policy. It is more about 'how' to do things than about the 'what'. 'Climate diplomacy' or 'human rights diplomacy' do not make much sense. There is just one diplomacy, which is a way of going about solving problems, but it is applied in many areas.

At the end of the introduction, Verbeke recalls the adjectives he uses to characterize the book's outlook: practical, instrumental, empirical, skeptical, realist. And he sets out in simple terms nine lessons he has learnt in the course of his long career. 'Diplomacy in practice' contains a wealth of information and anecdotes.[1] I will not even try to summarise it but rather pick out a few elements that struck me and that have a direct bearing on the EU.

[1] I should maybe add, for amateurs of game theory and cognitive psychology, that part II contains two chapters (4 and 5) devoted to the links between the scientific findings in those areas and diplomacy. I had read some of the books he refers to and found this part interesting as well, but some people may want to skip some of it.

DIPLOMACY IN PRACTICE: A CRITICAL APPROACH

BY JOHAN VERBEKE





The limits of transparency

I was delighted to read what Verbeke has to say about the notion of transparency, which is one of the great catchwords in our Brussels bubble. He quotes President Wilson whose words were rarely matched by his acts and who claimed that “[...] diplomacy should proceed always frankly and in the public view.” Dag Hammarskjöld, the Swedish Secretary-General of the UN in the '60s, was more honest and to the point when he said: “The best results of negotiation cannot be achieved in international life, any more than in our private world, in the full glare of publicity.” He was a Swede, which makes his words even more relevant, because Sweden has been at the vanguard of the call for transparency in the EU. It was under the first Swedish Presidency that a new regulation on transparency was negotiated in the 90s. I was at the time head of cabinet of the President of the Commission and wondered how Swedes could carry out their business in full view of the wider public. The simple answer was that they didn't. Our top legal advisor went to Stockholm to understand better how they applied transparency at home. He discovered that they did have an elaborate system whereby any correspondence with the authorities went into a public registry. This made sense and was indeed something other countries could take inspiration from. But they made sure that sensitive preparatory texts did not become public. Interestingly, in Brussels, they lobbied for a much more extensive system of transparency, which applied in principle to any kind of document; and this is what came to be decided in the EU regulation. The authorities can, on the ground of a number of exceptions to full publicity, decide not to release some documents, but in that case they must provide detailed justification. A few years later, when I was director in the GSC responsible for transatlantic relations, we had regular meetings of a Senior Level Group with the US. Transparency organizations, which are often financed by subsidies from the Commission, then asked first for the agendas of those meetings (we gave them), then for the detailed reports (we refused this, for obvious reasons). But the European Court of Justice forced us to go through all the reports and decide paragraph by paragraph what could be released and what not. This meant that one of my very small team of collaborators had to spend an inordinate amount of time to respect the Court injunction. Washington was not amused and told us that making the substance of the discussions public would lead to them withdrawing from the SLG. It was one of those Kafkaesque situations where good intentions lead to bad outcomes. I should also add that nowadays any Council discussion on legislative is streamed live. The result of this rule is that hardly any serious negotiation takes places in the Council meetings anymore. The

real exchanges take place outside of the room or in informal lunches or breakfasts. Too much transparency kills transparency!

The need for realism

Verbeke talks about the need for realism and seeing the world as it is. I will just dwell on one aspect here. The reality is that rivalry among States is endemic and natural. So is self-interest. This again is important in the EU context. You hear sometimes people complaining that a Prime Minister or a Minister 'just defended national interests' in a negotiation. Well, of course they do, that is what they are elected for. There is no pure European interest divorced from the national interests. Member States defend their self-interest; what else should they do? The real question is how they do it. In the EU system, they do it by working together with the other Member States to find solutions, by using the Institutions to define the common good, by working in an environment of rules and under the watchful eye of the European Court of Justice. Any discussion on any piece of legislation starts with various national positions. What matters is that at the end there is an agreed text. It is all about finding common ground, reaching compromise, and moving ahead together.

Verbeke is clear that realism is not opposed to idealism. The two categories are complementary. Realism is to look at the world as it is, a descriptive category. Idealism is a normative category, i.e. what we should aspire for. They operate at different levels, you need both. (Max Weber's distinction between the ethics of the responsibility and the ethics of conscience is a different way of saying the same thing.)

“That is why the realist is sensitive to ethical values, and the idealist knows about national interest. On closer analysis, therefore, the opposition between realism and idealism disappears. Except in one respect; that idealism dominates the rhetoric of diplomacy even when its actual practice is guided by realism. And so it happens that our governments take their decisions in terms of self-interested egoism but explain them in terms of self-sacrificial altruism.” (page 4)

The shattered hope of an 'ethical foreign policy': theory and reality.

Chapter 10 of part IV looks at the principles of human rights and the rule of law. It is extremely thought-provoking overall, but I will again just highlight one particular aspect. The EU is very much based on those two concepts, and that is part of its appeal. It is therefore tempting to pretend that the EU foreign policy is primarily 'based on values'. It is



is also tempting to embrace calls for an 'ethical foreign policy' that periodically appear, as was the case with Jimmy Carter's administration or when Robin Cook was the British Foreign Secretary in the late 1990s. But, says Verbeke, "an 'ethical foreign policy' is an oxymoron, a self-contradictory concept [...] Ethics postulates absolute values, [...] you do not compromise on them. Diplomacy, on the contrary, is about interests that clash and that need to be reconciled by way of compromises [...] it is the art of the feasible." (Page 229). Europeans were upbeat in the 1990s and believed that the 'end of history' announced by Fukuyama in his famous book, was a given and that European post-modernism would be the defining feature of the future. This was not to be, of course, as the war in Yugoslavia soon showed. The world is a tough place and many key actors do not at all share the EU's vision. Over the past few years, the EU has progressively adapted to that reality; today, most Europeans accept that our foreign policy must defend our interests and our values and that this requires power and resilience.

The virtue of 'muddling through.'

The EU is often accused of 'muddling through', which is a pejorative term. But isn't it the only way to negotiate compromise? People often ask for a 'vision' and a planned progress towards fulfilling it. But life rarely works in this way. It is most often a process of trial and error where the actual decision-

making is messy. In the words of Verbeke: "Decision-making is a process of experiment and discovery, of successes and failures which allow us to reassess our ends and means in a process of constant adaptation. We improvise, we combine means with ends, and rather than proceeding to a comprehensive evaluation of all available options we just look at a relevant subset of them." (Page 69). I recently read Caroline de Gruyter's book about the similarities between the Habsburg empire and the EU; she makes the same point and extols the virtues of 'muddling through.' Democracy is messy, and the EU as a democratic union of democratic States is particularly messy. As Churchill quipped, "democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

This is a subjective, superficial, and patchy review, which does not do justice to the wealth of thought and information contained in this work. The EU is presently working on creating its own diplomatic academy. I think that Johan Verbeke's manual should be mandatory reading for all those who will be part of the academy. In fact, I hope that it will also be read more generally by people who are interested in how States and organizations run their business and interact with the outside world. Finally, it is also invaluable for academics and think tankers who write about diplomacy and the EU.