

H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

Review Essay 70

David Lindsey, *Delegated Diplomacy: How Ambassadors Establish Trust in International Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9780231209328 (hardcover, \$140.00); 9780231209335 (paperback, \$35.00).

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“By God, this is the end of diplomacy!” Lord Palmerston exclaimed upon receiving his first diplomatic telegram in the 1860s.¹ He feared that the introduction of instantaneous international communication between heads of state would render ambassadors obsolete. Though this prediction never entirely came to pass, the fear of Palmerston’s prognostication remains alive among oft-marginalized diplomats.

If David Lindsey’s impressive new book is correct, however, diplomats have nothing to fear; diplomatic representation continues to be an indispensable tool for states. Despite the ability of heads of state to easily communicate directly with one another, Lindsey demonstrates that delegating authority to diplomats who have won the trust of their foreign host can pay great dividends.

As a former diplomat, I was irked that international relations literature overlooks the importance of foreign affairs professionals in shaping world affairs. Lindsey’s book helps fill this gap, significantly advancing my understanding of the practice of diplomacy. The mixed methods that are employed to test the theory are creative and lay a strong foundation for future study. I recommend *Delegated Diplomacy* for scholars and practitioners alike.

Lindsey’s theory is that effective diplomats are those who are more sympathetic to their foreign host than their own government’s stance ought to dictate. Diplomats can leverage that sympathy to play something akin to a mediation role between the two states. Those who have earned the trust of their host can elicit superior information, and their advice will be more effective at shaping host government perspectives. “A diplomat loyally serves the national interest by being less than entirely loyal to it,” quips Lindsey (267).

¹ Ronan Farrow, *War on Peace: The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Influence* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018).

Structural theories of international relations (for example, realism and liberalism²) and preeminent theories of diplomacy,³ both of which typically assume that a state's policies and its reputation are led by unitary actors,⁴ contain implicit skepticism about Lindsey's theory, suggesting that there no use in looking beyond the state and its leader.⁵ Lindsey provides a convincing rebuttal, arguing that "It is pointless, from a communications perspective, to send out an ambassador who is entirely tethered to the positions of the sending country. A diplomat who mechanically carries out instructions is of little value to the receiving country" (263).

Indeed, the many anecdotes in this book of diplomats *not* behaving mechanically bring Lindsey's theory to life. The unitary actor model, which is so prominent in international relations literature, withers under the endless procession of contrary examples: Nicholas Trist, President James Polk's envoy in Mexico, defied instructions to return to the United States and successfully negotiated an end to the Mexican-American war and a vast swath of new territory for his country; Saudi prince and long-time ambassador to the United States Bandar Al Saud deliberately mistranslated a letter to President Jimmy Carter about the Middle East peace process. British Ambassador David Ormsby-Gore grew so close to President John F. Kennedy that he regularly withheld vital information from his own government to support the Americans during the Cuban Missile Crisis; "I trust David as I would a member of my own cabinet," Kennedy wrote at the time (102).

Lindsey's work demands that we take the role of diplomats seriously. The case study in chapter seven shows why. Centering on the unsuccessful tenure of US Ambassador to Germany James Gerard during World War I, it explores a powerful counterfactual: "Could a better ambassador have prevented the deterioration of German-American relations?" (254) Lindsey uses extensive primary and secondary sourcing to convince the reader that *preventable* miscommunication between the two countries led them to miss a mutually desired opportunity for peace. As encrypted messages ping-ponged back and forth between Washington and Berlin, the ambassador to Germany mirrored Washington's talking points, rendering himself irrelevant as the miscommunications deepened. If the ambassador had been seen as having Germany's best interests at heart, Lindsey speculates, he would have been able to have soothed German suspicions about American intentions and potentially altered the course of the war.

Chapter six features a positive case. The American Ambassador in Britain, Walter Hines Page, working at the same time as Gerard during World War I, used his reputation as an Anglophile to soothe the most aggressive impulses in London and steer the United States and Britain away from war. As the theory predicts, officials in London trusted the pro-British ambassador far more than the American president and "were willing to confide sensitive information to him in the expectation that he would use it with discretion" (181). The qualitative portions of the book convinces the reader that a sympathetic ambassador can make the difference between war and peace.

The book's quantitative portions are also valuable contributions, especially given the limited availability of data on the secretive practices of interstate diplomacy. Lindsey demonstrates that leaders are dramatically

² Prominent examples include: Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); and Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

³ See, for example, Anne E Sartori, *Deterrence by Diplomacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), which assumes that reputation is a national rather than individual characteristic; and, Robert Jervis, "Do Leaders Matter and How Would We Know?" *Security Studies* 22: 2 (2013): 153-179.

⁴ The "two-level games" of diplomacy and domestic political pressures are a prominent alternative to the unitary actor framework, though this research agenda is distinct from exploring the role of advisors to the head of state. See, for example, as described, for example, by Robert Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42: 3 (1988): 427-460.

⁵ Other scholars have started answering this question, including: Matt Malis, "Conflict, Cooperation, and Delegated Diplomacy," *International Organization* 75: 4 (2021): 1018-1057; and, Geoffrey Gertz, "Commercial Diplomacy and Political Risk," *International Studies Quarterly* 62: 1 (2018): 94-107.

more likely to send diplomats to countries for which they have sympathies (176), though it is important to note that his statistical analysis cannot test whether those sympathetic appointments are more effective than the alternative. Lindsey's strategy here is both novel and creative: he mines declassified US Presidential Daily Briefings for profiles of foreign diplomats to build a rich dataset. This dataset provides illuminating detail about the character of many high-level diplomats of the day, including their perceived honesty, integrity, and political leanings. Lindsey admits many limitations of this data. For example, the sympathies of diplomats are coded along a pro-Western or pro-Communist axis, which is undoubtedly a telling indicator during the Cold War, but likely conceals significant variation within each camp. Nevertheless, the resulting analysis establishes a clear pattern of support for Lindsey's theory that leaders will appoint diplomats who are more sympathetic to host nations.

The book relies on formal modeling in chapters two and three to give more weight to this argument. Lindsey presents an "elicitation game" (111), similar to a cooperation game, in which a sympathetic agent of a state can extract more information from a host state and thereby make cooperation between the two countries more likely. The core model demonstrates that the optimal strategy for a leader is always to appoint a positively biased diplomat who can build more credibility with the host nation than the leader alone. The modeling is useful and straightforward.

The model, and the book as a whole, assume that diplomats are primarily useful for communication purposes. Diplomatic reporting or policymaking functions might invite a fully-aligned agent rather than a biased one, but Lindsey suggests reporting tasks are satisfactorily handled by the intelligence community, while policymaking is typically handled in the capital rather than an embassy. I think Lindsey's argument goes too far in dismissing other diplomatic activities as meaningless, such as supporting the selection of superior policy decisions,⁶ improving information collection through diplomatic reporting,⁷ or shaping foreign domestic public opinion.⁸ Lindsey defends the assumption by noting the absence of policy recommendations from ambassadors in the declassified Presidential Daily Brief (PDB) archives (50), though a similar analysis from a more policy-focused archive such as the *Foreign Relations Series of the United States* archive might have demonstrated more ambassadorial activity in the policy process itself compared with the PDB, which is for intelligence purposes. The assumption does not square with the fact that, in the United States, at least, ambassadors regularly participate in National Security Council meetings via modern video conference technology, and thousands of other diplomats continue to engage in diplomatic reporting.

This weakness does nothing to weaken the validity of Lindsey's theory on diplomatic communication, and productive future work can investigate the different potential roles of diplomats. For instance, conventional wisdom suggests that the experience gained during challenging assignments in the field better prepares a bureaucrat for positions of higher policymaking authority later in one's career. A deeper investigation of the potential opportunities and risks of biased diplomats across a wider range of foreign policy functions might have been illuminating.

Lindsey's book also left me wondering about the incentives of the diplomats and risks to the leaders of appointing misaligned representatives. Principal-agent models, on which Lindsey aligns his work (9), expect both principal and agent to react strategically to their environment.⁹ Here, leaders select their ambassadors strategically, but ambassadors hold static preferences that derive merely from personal affinity (94). I am

⁶ Kevin M. Esterling, *The Political Economy of Expertise: Information and Efficiency in American National Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

⁷ Ian R. Turner, "Political Agency, Oversight, and Bias: The Instrumental Value of Politicized Policymaking," *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 35: 3 (2019): 544–578.

⁸ Eytan Gilboa, "Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616: 1 (2008): 55–77.

⁹ Gary J. Miller, "The Political Evolution of Principal-Agent Models," *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005): 203–225.

curious about the logic of why diplomats would advance a personal agenda and risk their reputations at home by expressing misaligned sympathies with their political leadership. Is it possible that the bureaucrats might strategically calibrate expressed sympathies in order to advance their careers?¹⁰ Might we find varying commitment to the president's agenda between political and career diplomats?¹¹ The rich literature on formal models of bureaucracy¹² offers many enticing hypotheses that Lindsey might explore in future work to better understand the motivation of diplomats. Such extensions will have scholarly value and direct policy relevance.

In sum, this book is a delightful read and an essential contribution to burgeoning literature on the bureaucratic foundations of international relations. It should also be useful for peace and conflict scholars who are interested in the institutional processes that can mitigate or accelerate war. Finally, Lindsey's book is highly relevant outside the academy, where a long-simmering debate continues about the appropriate role of diplomacy within US foreign policy institutions.¹³ I highly recommend this book to future diplomats and political leaders since it will inform their debates about the conduct of diplomacy. If Lindsey's thesis is correct, diplomats will remain relevant into the foreseeable future—and worthy of future scholarly research.

Dan Spokojny is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, focusing on the role of expertise in foreign policy. He is the founder and CEO of fp21, a non-profit think tank dedicated to improving the processes and institutions of US foreign policy by designing a new culture of evidence-based policymaking. Dan served in government for over a decade as a US Foreign Service Officer and a legislative staffer in Congress. He lives in Washington, D.C.

¹⁰ Sean Gailmard and John W. Patty, *Learning while Governing: Expertise and Accountability in the Executive Branch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹¹ Matt Malis. "Conflict, Cooperation, and Delegated Diplomacy," *International Organization* 75: 4 (2021): 1018–57.

¹² Gailmard and Patty, "Formal Models of Bureaucracy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 15 (2012): 353-377.

¹³ William J. Burns, "The Lost Art of American Diplomacy: Can the State Department Be Saved," *Foreign Affairs* 98 (2019): 98-107.