

# H-Net Reviews

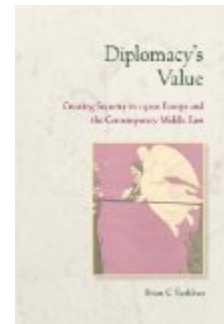
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Brian C. Rathbun.** *Diplomacy's Value: Creating Security in 1920s Europe and the Contemporary Middle East.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. Illustrations. 280 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5318-2; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7990-8.

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Published on H-Diplo (March, 2015)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach



## Magnificent! But Is It Diplomacy?

*Diplomacy's Value: Creating Security in 1920s Europe and the Contemporary Middle East* by Brian C. Rathbun is a valuable, but flawed, book. It is valuable in that it provides a compelling argument and evidence for why outcomes in negotiations cannot be reduced to structural factors. The “diplomatic styles” that statesmen adopt also shape outcomes, in particular they affect the prospects for success. The book is flawed, however, by the way in which it relegates much of what diplomacy is about and what diplomats do to the margins of its account. This is a plausible position, perhaps, but one that is neither original nor consistent with Rathbun’s stated purposes—to provide an account of how diplomacy works and why it matters.

Most of us have a hunch that diplomacy is or ought to be important, but it is difficult to demonstrate this in any systematic or rigorous way. As Rathbun notes, the academic study of International Relations (IR) has provided little help in this regard. It has a bias toward structural explanations that undervalue and, in the case of the neorealists, completely ignore the role of agency because it is assumed to be either unimportant or impossible to theorize. To address this difficulty, Rathbun examines relations between Britain, France, and Germany in the decade following World War One. This is well-traveled ground for international historians who have charted the initial failure of Britain and France to come up with a common German policy, and the emergence of the “spirit of Locarno,” which allowed for treaties in 1925

by which Britain guaranteed the security of the other two. Rathbun’s account focuses on negotiations where an analysis of structural elements alone—the distribution of power both between and within states and the general state of relations between them, for example—provides an unreliable guide to outcomes. Sometimes negotiations fail when the structural elements would suggest that a successful outcome was likely. Sometimes they succeed when the structural elements suggest that failure was to be expected. These surprises, Rathbun argues, can be explained by reference to the negotiating styles of the participants, the general assumptions from which these styles are derived, and the interplay between different styles.

At the onset of his argument, Rathbun puts forward the distinction made by Harold Nicolson between foreign policy and diplomacy. Foreign policy is about the ends of sovereign states. Diplomacy is about the peaceful means—principally negotiation—by which these ends are secured. This is a useful distinction, but one that is not without problems. Are appeasement and détente examples of foreign policy or diplomacy? Is Nicolson’s conception of negotiation restricted to explicit bargaining, or does it incorporate a broader range of diplomatic functions, for example, the representation of interests and identities, the collection and dissemination of information, and the creation and maintenance of relationships? Clearly, Nicolson’s distinction is not always watertight and his conception of diplomacy blurs at the

edges.

Rathbun identifies three basic approaches to negotiation: coercive bargaining, pragmatic statecraft, and reasoned dialogue. Presented as recommendations about how to negotiate, they are rooted in rational choice, realist, and liberal understandings of the world respectively. They are also characterized in terms of two sorts of bargaining that an actor may attempt: value claiming focused on what an actor wants and value creating focused on what all the actors participating want together with larger conceptions of what might be good for all of them and others. Research in social psychology demonstrates that these approaches to bargaining can be linked to certain personality types and the heuristics or cognitive shortcuts they take to make sense of the world. People's cognitive shortcuts, in turn, are influenced by the extent to which they are driven by proself and prosocial motivations. They are also influenced by the extent to which people possess a low or a high epistemic motivation seen in terms of their willingness or otherwise to remain open-minded and accept new information. Someone identified as proself and low in epistemic motivation is likely to have a value claiming understanding of how to succeed in the world, which results in their employing coercive bargaining. Someone who can be identified as prosocial and high in epistemic motivation is likely to have a value creating view, which results in their employing reasoned dialogue as an approach to bargaining. This complex of personality type, general outlook, and resultant approach to bargaining as it is present in a statesman is said to be his or her diplomatic style.

Rathbun then hypothesizes on the likelihood for success when these bargaining or diplomatic styles are employed. Two coercive bargainers will engage in value claiming, for example, as will a coercive bargainer negotiating with someone taking a pragmatic statecraft approach. Two people both utilizing pragmatic statecraft make value creating a possibility, and two people engaged in reasoned dialogue make value creating likely. It is of central importance to note that these rock, paper, scissors combinations operate with a degree of independence from structural features. As a result, value claiming coercive bargainers may miss opportunities for discovering agreements that an analysis of the structural elements alone would have suggested were within reach. Those engaged in reasoned dialogue may discover or create agreements that the structural elements suggest would be difficult to achieve. It is also important to know that for Rathbun, like Thomas Hobbes, clubs are trumps. Coercive bargaining by one side sooner or later leads to

coercive bargaining by the other even if the latter started with a different style. "Bad" style drives out "good."

Where light appears between structural expectations and actual outcomes, it provides an intimation of diplomacy existing as an independent causal force, but how is this existence to be demonstrated? Rathbun's case studies employ a close analysis of contacts and negotiations between French, British, and German leaders, which is impressively based on a mix of secondary and primary sources. The latter include foreign policy papers from all three countries. These sources are used in two ways: to provide the narrative and to provide evidence for establishing to which personality type each negotiator belongs. Sometimes there are clear examples of thinking in diaries, letters, and cables that provide clues in this regard. In addition, however, Rathbun also uses party and broader political affiliations of the negotiators to identify the sources of their negotiating styles. Research in social psychology, he notes, suggests that there is a strong relationship between membership of political parties conventionally defined in terms of left and right wing and personality profiles in terms of value seeking and value claiming approaches, proself and prosocial motivations, and high and low epistemic motivations. The cases broadly confirm the hypotheses regarding which combinations of diplomatic styles are most likely to realize success, and in the final two chapters the insights generated are applied to making sense of why the Oslo peace process between Israelis and Palestinians got underway and then faltered. Where, Rathbun asks, is the Middle East Gustav Stresemann who will combine the caution of pragmatic statecraft with the imagination of reasoned dialogue to work for joint and universal gain?

What then are the flaws of the book? These may be divided into general, particular, and diplomatic. The general faults are those that can be identified with the approach taken and not this particular application of it. Social psychology involves some heroic lumping and splitting. Can we really separate personality types and diplomatic styles along the dimensions suggested, for example, and identify key negotiators as belonging to these types? Can we use their party affiliations combined with party ideologies to establish their individual social and epistemic motivations? Generalizers will say let's try and see what we come up with. Particularizers will immediately start generating exceptions that they regard as undermining the validity of the exercise. Ramsay MacDonald and Ernest Bevin, for example, were both members of the Labour Party but very different sorts of foreign secretaries. Neville Chamberlain and Win-

ston Churchill were both Conservative prime ministers but exhibited differences in their approaches to statecraft which border on archetypal.

Particular flaws are almost as difficult to discuss. I am in no position to engage either the claims about what successive studies in social psychology have demonstrated to the satisfaction of social psychologists or the application of these claims to the styles of French, British, and German diplomats in the 1920s. Nor am I in a position to engage the particular interpretations of the negotiations as these are presented in the narrative. On the whole, however, the narrative in the cases is impressive and flows well. It flows so well, indeed, that at times the insertion of reminders about the theoretical points being made interrupts cases that are making themselves. One question does keep arising in the case narratives. How does what is being presented differ from the propositions that policy (both in content and presentation) may change with each change of the party in government, and that agreement in international negotiations is more likely when parties (especially liberal parties) who are closer to each other come to power? There is much more to what Rathbun is arguing than this, but these propositions suggest lines of attack against an account that, for all its emphasis on agency, is full of structures—personality structures, ideology structures, political party structures, and government structures. Even the interactions are presented as one set of structures running up against another set, and, if this is the case, we need know little about diplomatic style since this is in great part an aspect of party identity.

Regarding diplomatic flaws, I am on somewhat firmer ground. The book was prompted in Rathbun's own telling by his and his wife's realization, upon her being hired by the US State Department, that both of them had "no earthly idea" what she would be doing (p. ix). Literature reviews by others studying diplomacy, Rathbun suggests, confirm that no one else had any idea what diplomacy is or how it works either. This is not the case. The sources he cites certainly make observations to the effect that diplomacy is not well understood and has been understudied and undervalued in IR. At least three of these authors have, however, followed up their comments to this effect with book-length treatments of what diplomacy might be and what it might be doing (James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* [1987], Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy* [2005], and Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* [2009]). While Rathbun generously acknowledges and cites these books, he does not

engage what amounts to over twenty years of accumulated work that attempts to answer the general questions in which he is interested. Indeed, he conveys the impression that those attempts have not been made.

Why he has done this becomes clear as the argument of the book develops. On page 48, he notes that the "cases generally neglect the positions and actions of professional diplomats." This is justified, he argues, by "the high profile of the issues under discussion which meant that decisions were made at the highest level of government." The Nicolsonian distinction between foreign policy as decisions and diplomacy as negotiation collapses. We are back in the Olympian world of statecraft and statesmen, where leaders make their moves (and draft their own notes), and diplomats resume their accustomed role in mainstream IR as mere messengers and sources for the record. Thus on page 111, we learn that the German ambassador reported to his foreign minister, Stresemann, that his impressions of Edouard Herriot were "favorable beyond expectation." In saying this, of course, the ambassador is not necessarily merely reporting to his minister. He may also be trying to shape his minister's expectations in the hope of influencing policy. Only rarely is the agency of diplomats considered. On page 67, for example, the efforts of the French ambassador Charles de Saint-Aulaire to influence the prime minister Raymond Poincaré are noted. These are efforts "indicating a more pragmatic, realistic style of diplomacy perhaps more typical of a professional diplomat" and they fail. Here then are two tantalizing glimpses (there are a few others) of opportunities to understand diplomacy not taken because of the decision to focus on statesmen. Of all the other diplomats involved in exploring the opportunities for the negotiations examined here, framing them, clarifying them, keeping them going, and, possibly, messing them up, we learn very little. The focus on interactions between statesmen reflects the assumptions of mainstream IR, and North American mainstream IR in particular, regarding what is to be studied—actors who bargain, and how they are to be studied—as participants in episodes of interaction that produce discrete outcomes. The result is a very fine book about personality and statecraft, which reminds us of the value of archives and other written records. However, it is a book that is not quite as novel as it purports to be, which does not engage the body of theoretical work that now exists in the study of diplomacy, and which, in the end, tells us very little about diplomacy and its part in constituting international relations. This seems a high price, perhaps an existentially high price, to pay for securing mainstream recognition.

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**Citation:** Paul Sharp. Review of Rathbun, Brian C., *Diplomacy's Value: Creating Security in 1920s Europe and the Contemporary Middle East*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. March, 2015.

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