King Diplomacy for Perpetual Crisis

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Traditionally, we have been able to count on national leaders to resolve international crises — or at least to hope that they will. International (and national) crises are generally the almost exclusive purview of national leaders. Citizens expect them to staunchly grasp the helm and steer the national ship away from the threatening shoals. Towering leaders such as Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, David Ben-Gurion, Charles de Gaulle, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt became part of the pantheon by showing their mettle in the international crises and challenges that threatened their nations during their time in power. Others, including Neville Chamberlain, Golda Meir, Lyndon Johnson, Nikita Khrushchev and Jimmy Carter, lost authority and their mandate after what was publicly understood (rightly or wrongly) as their failed leadership during times of crisis and war. Leadership is assessed mainly in the face of domestic and, even more so, international crisis, which is when it essentially either thrives or wanes.

On the other hand, diplomats are the agents of routine, ceremonial custom and inter-state maintenance. The public image of everlasting cocktail parties is a gross distortion of the diplomat’s life. Diplomats are the back-stage managers of inter-state relations: those who toil behind the scenes to ensure that the seas of international relations remain calm. It is the diplomatic vocation to sustain and nourish routine, and it is in times of routine that diplomats’ capabilities are most required.

We thus have an idealized and commonsensical conception of a division of labour and responsibilities between national leaders and diplomats: leaders take care of statecraft and crises; diplomats handle the routine. That is how we habitually and commonsensically understand the allocation among state machineries. However, as argued below, for various reasons this division of labour and responsibilities is currently withering away in a process that is resulting in a collapse of routine into perpetual crisis and a shaken public mind.

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The black and white distinction between national leaders and diplomats is, of course, an ideal-type ordering of reality and heuristic simplification. Naturally, diplomats have inevitably played an important role in times of war and crisis. Think of Yitzhak Rabin, who, as Israeli Ambassador to the United States during the 1973 War, succeeded in securing the American airlift (Operation Nickel Grass) that helped Israel at a critical time (and boosted his own political standing en route to becoming prime minister); or Ken Taylor, the Canadian ambassador to Iran during the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, who heroically took part in the CIA covert operation Canadian Caper to rescue six American diplomats; and finally, consider Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who, as Sweden’s special envoy in Budapest during the Second World War, saved the lives of tens of thousands of Jews, only to disappear later into the Soviet dungeons and probably to perish there. We also, naturally, see leaders enjoying a few tranquil and routine days in office and they are, of course, responsible also for the non-crisis aspects of running their countries. Moreover, for a routine to settle down, leaders have to have and promote a vision and agenda. Yet, notwithstanding these caveats, there are good grounds for the division into two ideal-types of national leader and diplomat, and it is helpful to do so. It is commonsensical to equate diplomats with routine and leaders with statecraft and crisis, and it is quite reasonable and appropriate to so understand the division of labour and responsibilities of these two kinds of state agent.

This contribution poses the question of what the consequence might be of this (idealized) division of labour withering away. Since the division of labour is indeed withering away, this question is not just hypothetical. This contribution thus argues that the division of labour is being superseded by new forms of diplomacy. I purposefully do not use the label ‘new diplomacy’, as new diplomacy generally refers to diplomatic initiatives and acts by different organs of civic society and private individuals that are usually understood as an assault on the established old diplomacy by forces outside the state system. Rather, the focus here is on the assault on the old diplomacy from a different quarter: state leadership. In other words, this contribution focuses on the spreading phenomenon of heads of the executive branch assuming responsibility for the routine, every day, personal (and public) diplomacy of their country. Perhaps

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