We traditionally see diplomats as mediators. They build bridges between nations and they repair them when they break. During a crisis, diplomats ‘keep it cool’ and try to prevent the crisis from worsening into armed conflict. Diplomats are the men and women who keep the international system running despite its fundamentally conflictual nature. At least, this is how diplomats have portrayed their profession for hundreds of years. This role as mediator is apparent in third-party mediation such as US President Jimmy Carter’s involvement in the Israel–Palestine negotiations in 2002-2003 or in the EU’s proposal to delegate high-level mediators for talks between President Viktor Yanukovich and the opposition in Ukraine before Crimea was annexed by Russia in March 2014. Explicit mediation is also evident in preventive diplomacy, such as the UN’s peacekeeping missions in Macedonia. In both third-party diplomatic mediation and preventive diplomacy, crisis or conflict resolution is the explicit goal.

However, the focus of this contribution is how diplomacy in general is seen as mediating among states, peoples and ideas — and why this is an incomplete view. From James Der Derian’s understanding of diplomacy as ‘the mediation of estrangement’,1 over English School-inspired pluralists such as Paul Sharp,2 to Costas Constantinou’s post-structuralist call for humanism,3 diplomacy is seen as the practice of dealing with difference. While there are different interpretations of what that entails, Iver B. Neumann’s description of diplomacy as a third culture — that is, a culture for mediation between political entities with diverse cultures — has been widely accepted.4

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Yet as most diplomatic scholars also recognize, diplomacy has never been just about representation and the mediation of difference. It has always been deeply embedded in other international practices. Diplomacy sometimes produces crises, fuels wars and deepens conflicts. For instance, the EU’s ongoing attempts to stabilize its Eastern neighbours may sometimes result in more instability, rather than less. When the EU sought to reach an association agreement with Ukraine in 2014, it was not just an attempt to form closer ties and promote European standards, values and interests, for according to critics it also alienated Russia-oriented Ukrainians and provoked Russia.

Moreover, diplomats often transgress from their own ideals about representing and mediating between sovereign states. Today, diplomats are working on a myriad of projects of transnational and global governance. While many observers have warned against this development from system maintenance to governance, they tend to hold on to the assumption that diplomacy itself is a politically ‘empty practice’, or, to use the words of US Ambassador Henry White (1850-1921), diplomats are simply ‘greasing the wheels’. This short contribution is therefore concerned with the way in which scholarly understandings of diplomacy as the mediation of estrangement raise — but also evade — questions of power and responsibility.

Mediation: Diplomats as Custodians of International Society

Diplomatic studies are still dominated by Hedley Bull’s idea of great powers being ‘custodians of international society’. A custodian has the responsibility to look after something, a museum, a culture, or a tradition. Clearly, a custodian does not change the exhibitions or the museum as a whole; he or she mainly keeps things in order. While the focus on care-taking corresponds to the self-understanding of many diplomats, it also prevents us from addressing diplomacy’s implications in time of crisis.

