France, the author readily admits, is one country that owes its survival as much to its skills in diplomacy as to its force of arms. Traditional bilateral diplomacy now coexists with multilateral conferences, summits and multipartite institutions, addressing a widening range of subjects. The stakes grow ever higher: the maintenance of peace and the avoidance of conflict continue to depend on the practice of international negotiation – but so now does the struggle to regulate the future uses of the planet’s resources and to find a response to the increasingly potent and widespread threats of nuclear destruction and terrorism that is based on order, equity and cooperation. As the author concludes, international negotiation is a vehicle for the expression of values – not a provider of solutions – and a continuous process.

Clearly, it is more vital than ever that those charged with international negotiation understand its principles and workings. Surprisingly, perhaps because the subject is a vast one that straddles the boundaries of international law and political science, very little has been published to further its study as a discipline. It tends to get taken for granted – a dangerous error. Alain Plantey’s book is a rare and magisterial work: it offers a coherent, far-reaching analysis of the techniques and practice of international negotiation, giving a historical perspective, explaining how it has adapted the present international context, and arguing with passion for its continued adaptation for the future.

Alain Plantey is an author of unique distinction both as a scholar and a diplomat. A former President of the Institut de France and a Member of the French Academy of Moral and Political Science, he was an adviser to General de Gaulle, represented France at the UN General Assembly, and served as President of the Court of Arbitration of the International Chamber of Commerce.

The book has four main themes: diplomatic negotiation; institutional negotiation; prospective negotiation, or “negotiating for the future”, and negotiation as a political art. In French textbook-style, it is divided into numbered paragraphs: key conclusions are captured in italics. Historical illustrations abound, especially enlightening on the main themes of European and transatlantic diplomatic strategy. That said, the book is by no means an easy read: even for someone with a working knowledge of French, the language is declamatory and densely nuanced. But, the conclusions are clear-headed, and the effort rich rewarded.

Originally, the author reminds us, the methods used in diplomacy were fashioned out of those of trade. Even now, the links between commerce and power remain strong. Negotiation is an exchange, and the subject of that exchange will have a different value to each protagonist. Whether or not a particular negotiation can be considered a success depends, the author emphasises, on whether its objectives were purely diplomatic or part of a longer-term strategy.

The book explores the relationship between negotiation and law, with the concept of good faith as its essential underpinning. In relations between sovereign states, political considerations prevail over legal ones; however, precisely because negotiation can produce results which are binding on sovereign states, it must itself be subject to legal rules governing its exercise and validity. Notions of sovereignty, capacity, non-interference and responsibility are explored, and also the use of reciprocity and recognition as preconditions.

As to international organisations, each one is different: its scope, objects, procedures, funding and administrative machinery must themselves all be negotiated. The author warns against the tendency for the UN, so long paralysed by the opposition of the superpowers, to be drawn increasingly into activities which are essentially political. He goes on to ask whether the increasing rigidity of organisational procedures will cause states to revert to ‘classical’ bilateral negotiations. The decision-making processes of various organisations are compared. As actors in international negotiation, the ‘personality’ and effectiveness of each organisation is relative: states do not, in the author’s view, really recognise any international organisation as a true political or diplomatic partner. Theirs is a more secondary role, as instruments of diplomatic manoeuvre.

International negotiation has proved extraordinarily adaptable. No longer is it primarily concerned with defending the status quo: it has already evolved to encompass economic, financial and cultural subjects. Corruption, drugs, money-laundering and terrorism are all new fields in which international cooperation has been achieved through negotiation. But the acceleration of technical and scientific progress, mobility and industrial expansion make negotiation more necessary than ever, and the very volume of negotiation now taking place is a stabilising factor. Traditional models of diplomacy are inadequate, however, in the face of fundamentalism, imperial expansion, anarchy, and worsening threats to world peace. The author describes how risks have been dispersed and conflict avoided by collective processes: he concludes that negotiation in future will centre on the prevention and limitation, rather than exploitation of risk. Fear is a favourable breeding-ground for negotiation; the sheer scope of the risks has modified attitudes to war and diplomacy and changed the landscape of both.