

The Transformation of Foreign Policy

DRAWING AND MANAGING BOUNDARIES
FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT

Edited by
Gunther Hellmann,
Andreas Fahrmeir,
and Miloš Vec

OXFORD

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Preface

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1

Introduction

*Andreas Fahrmeir, Gunther Hellmann,
and Miloš Vec*

The way “foreign policy” is commonly imagined and analyzed is tightly linked to the modern state system. To take just one example, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* relates foreign policy to other social practices such as diplomacy (said to be “the tool of foreign policy”), and war, alliances, and international trade, considered to be “manifestations” of foreign policy.¹ The reference to “states” evokes a form of governance that emerged in seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Europe, and which proved very successful subsequently, even though there are indications that states’ relevance may be declining in the twenty-first century.

This definition thus links “foreign policy” to a specific historical period and/or to specific forms of governance. By contrast, few observers would argue that diplomacy, war, alliances, or trade are practices solely associated with the modern state system. Historians as well as legal and international relations scholars would quickly agree that the concepts of diplomacy, war, alliance, and trade relate to social practices between political communities which date back much further than the start of the modern state system and which will likely survive its potential downfall—as they require no more than the existence of recognized boundaries between political communities, irrespective of whether these political communities are “states,” “tribes,” or other entities. Oddly enough, therefore, “foreign policy” seems to be of a much more recent origin than its “tools” or “manifestations.”

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online <<http://www.britannica.com/topic/foreign-policy>> accessed September 2015.

1.1. JUST A RECENT PHENOMENON?

Making a strong case for seeing “foreign policy” as a comparatively recent phenomenon is not difficult. Exhibit A could be evidence from historical semantics. In the English language the expression “foreign policy” seems to appear for the first time in the early eighteenth century. “Diplomacy” in its modern sense was an even later arrival; prior to the late eighteenth century, the word referred to expertise on “diplomas,” i.e. charters.² Halvard Leira (2012) argues that the emergence of the term “foreign policy” is an expression of an emerging “rationality of government” at that time, which enabled the state “to demarcate itself from civil society and to construct itself as something above and beyond society.” Regardless of whether or not one agrees with this particular explanation of the invention of the term “foreign policy” or its antecedents like “foreign affairs” (already in existence in the seventeenth century), limiting its use to the modern period can also be justified by pointing to the transition from a “society of princes” (Bély 1999) to a “society of states” between the early modern and the modern period, to the birth (as some believe) of “modern” international law, to the reduced impact of domestic confessional disputes on international relations in the age of absolutism, or to the novel analyses of “foreign policy” as a distinctive practice, which emerged at the time.

While no obvious obstacles to the study of “foreign policy” exist from the modern period to the twentieth century—a period dominated by the rule of “states”—questions can be raised with regard to the present. These doubts have their basis not in semantics (the study of international relations and foreign policy is much too vibrant a field for that), but in practices. The development of European foreign policy (i.e. the *dual* practice of boundary drawing among EU member states individually, and between them as a collective and their external environment) is one example that illustrates a transformation of foreign policy and intercommunal orders that calls into question states’ centrality to foreign policy. “European foreign policy,” however defined, “cannot easily be contained within a state-centric analysis with relatively clear boundaries between internal and external policy environments” (White 2004: 11). This holds true in spite of the EU’s recent crises and irrespective of whether they will, in the medium term, strengthen the supranational elements in European integration or lead to the collapse of the European integration project.

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, q.v. “diplomacy” <<http://www.oed.com.proxy.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/view/Entry/53200?redirectedFrom=diplomacy#eid>> accessed June 2013; see also Der Derian 1987: 105–9; Constantinou 1996: 76–94.

1.2. A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF FOREIGN POLICY: BOUNDARY DRAWING

It follows from this that linking “foreign policy” to the interaction of states, and thus to particular historical experiences, has two disadvantages. Doing so raises significant obstacles to the study of foreign policy in the “pre-modern” period, when—as most historians would now agree—“states” in the modern sense did not exist; and it creates problems for the analysis of “foreign” policy in the “post-modern” period when it may be difficult to identify a single boundary that demarcates one state clearly from another. This leads us to propose a different approach which the contributions to this volume will explore. In our view, “foreign policy” as an analytical concept can easily be distinguished from “foreign policy” as an expression that emerged at a certain historical moment in order to cope with a novel reality, namely the emergence of a particular form of political interaction among states.

We postulate that it is possible to examine foreign policy in the long term without making anachronistic and unrealistic assumptions about the longevity of modern states. Instead we make two assumptions. First, we assume that a sphere of “foreign policy” can always be distinguished from “domestic” political interaction by social practices that, however malleable over time, include rules for “diplomatic” (in contrast to internal) negotiations and decision-making processes. Analogous distinctions can be drawn between “wars” on the one hand and “rebellions” or “riots” on the other, as well as between “international” and “domestic” law.

From this perspective, the field of foreign policy is never “just there” or self-evident because it involves the interaction of easily visible “states.” Rather, “foreign policy” is always a result of processes of boundary drawing. Boundaries exist in any society. They can set territorial states, city states, urban confederations, social groups, interpersonal networks, or powerful individuals and their clients apart from each other. They can be centered on territory, legal incorporation, alliances, rank, or status as well as on interests. At given times, some of these boundaries come to be seen as dividing a “domestic” space from a “foreign” one, thus setting “domestic” policy apart from “foreign” policy. Which boundaries are assigned this role is contingent on historical circumstances, but once these boundaries become clear, practices of “foreign policy” emerge and can become an object of analysis.

Second, we argue that the foreign–domestic divide is typically located not at one, but at multiple boundaries. This is obvious, for example, in the contemporary European setting: a “foreign”–“domestic” divide is visible at the level of the individual member states as well as between the European Union and its “exterior,” and even between individual territories in federal systems within

member states possessing a high degree of autonomy and thus being able to conduct a type of “foreign policy” directly with “Brussels” and possibly with their counterparts in other EU member states over the head of national governments. Similar cases of multiple boundaries can be found in ancient Greece (with one boundary separating “Greece” from “the Barbarians” and others separating the territory of individual *poleis*), or the early modern European territorial system (particularly within the Holy Roman Empire). Even in the age of the nation state’s apogee, there were multiple boundaries between the “domestic” and the “foreign.”

A different perspective on the problem is how empires with a claim to universality, like the Roman Empire, conceptualized an outer boundary: did they fail to recognize any legitimate outside, so that international law became unthinkable from their point of view? This would have left only “domestic” law and interactions—at least in theory (though treaty practice could obviously differ). We would argue that functionally similar gradations of “insides” existed and that these provided for corresponding legal forms, again permitting the conduct of “foreign policy” on different levels.

1.3. THREE ADVANTAGES OF OUR CONCEPTUALIZATION

We argue that this conceptualization of “foreign policy” as a practice which results from drawing multiple boundaries that constitute “foreign-policy” actors has three advantages. It offers a way of studying the evolution of foreign policy for longer periods than 300 years without having to engage with anachronistic conceptualizations; it helps to situate current debates on foreign policies “above,” “below,” or “beyond” the state in broader historical contexts; and it can conceive of “modern” or nineteenth-century “foreign policy” as one representation of longer historical continuities. Like other frameworks for “foreign policy,” the modern state system, though it may have produced a more substantial semantic legacy than other historical transformations, can thus be seen as the result of one of many transformations of foreign policy.

Given the emphasis on historical contingency and the co-constitution of foreign policy and intercommunal order in the context of the transformation of foreign policy, the focus will be on historical moments in which the transformative dynamics are more easily discernible. In abstract terms, these historical moments are situations when the “domestic” and the “foreign” are (re)defined or (re)negotiated via exclusionary and inclusionary practices. The notion of a *moment of foreign policy transformation* is meant to cover a specified period of time or series of events which can be meaningfully

delimited in spatio-temporal terms (e.g. Sewell 2005). In some instances this may involve rather short phases of transition (measured in months or years), in others the time span may extend over decades. One of the guiding observations for concretizing a historical moment is the extent to which certain practices of boundary drawing lead to the creation of new rules and institutions or the reinforcement or transformation of established ones. In this sense institution-building or transformation might be taken as a sedimentation of such practices.

In pursuing such a route, this volume offers a perspective which aims at doing justice both to the specificity of transformations in different historical periods and the necessity to inquire into such processes in a theoretically reflective manner. This is precisely what we see as lacunae in the scholarship of disciplines like political science, history, and law. Due to complementary blind spots—with historians usually emphasizing uniqueness at the expense of generalization whereas political scientists often stress generalization at the expense of historical contingency—an appreciation of an evolutionary understanding of foreign policy which acknowledges both contingency and systematicity is often lacking. A combination of both involves in particular the *comparison* of moments of foreign policy transformation across historical epochs, spatial extensions, and issue areas. Yet, in the social sciences comparison is often associated with the construction of (a “universe” of) “cases” where as many “independent variables” as possible can be held constant (e.g. Bennett and Elman 2008). This is based on the assumption that generalizations about the connections between cause(s) and effect are the essential element of theory building. However, in our view this misconstrues how we should think about social action in general and foreign policy in particular. It postulates the identity of particular cases (via *ceteris paribus* conditioning) where the contingency of historical events and the genuine creativity of social action allow for the postulation of similarity at best. We take the position that one can gain general knowledge about different expressions of foreign policy based on an appreciation of both similarities and differences. To argue that something is unique does not only presuppose that things may also be identical or similar. It also presupposes mental operations which amount to what we usually call comparison—the operation of “assimilating” observed phenomena to a particular concept based on some postulated similarity (Dewey 1991 [1938]: 185, 246–251).

Foreign policy, we argue, is a political practice of boundary drawing among political communities, which is as old as war or diplomacy. Accordingly, the cognitive operation of assimilating observations of practices of foreign policy, war-making, or diplomacy to these concepts should not be limited to the modern interstate system (starting roughly in the sixteenth/seventeenth century). The basic features of foreign policy as a distinct exclusionary/inclusionary practice of boundary drawing date back at least to the transition from the “pre-international systems” of hunter-gatherer bands, sedentary tribes, and chiefdoms to the interlinked “international systems in the ancient and classical

world,” which were made up mostly of city states and empires, including, in the latter case, imperial forms of political organization shaped by “nomadic tribes” (Buzan and Little 2000: 111–240). While it is not of central importance to our argument, the transitional phase between these two periods may be said to have occupied “nearly five millennia between the rise of civilization in Sumeria, and the creation of a world economic system by European national states during the sixteenth century AD” (Buzan and Little 2000: 164).

What is more important is the key difference between these two evolutionary stages of political organization. In “pre-international” kinship-based societies the differentiation between inside and outside, the domestic and the foreign, was less pressing because interacting units were much smaller, more interdependent, and less hierarchically organized. This already changed with the early city states of Sumeria with populations between 10,000 and 20,000 people covering areas of effective political control between 10 to 30 kilometers (Buzan and Little 2000: 174). Thus, foreign policy as a distinct exclusionary/inclusionary practice of boundary drawing between political communities can be said to date back roughly to this period. However, foreign policy cannot be conceptualized as a practice of creating a single boundary between native and foreign spheres. Particularly if one is not convinced by narratives that situate the creation of a modern state system around the time of the treaty of Westphalia, which supposedly replaced an imperial with a state-centered conception of foreign policy, the existence of multiple outsides must enter the picture.

1.4. OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME

We begin by situating our approach more firmly in the historiographies and debates of political science, law, and history (Chapter 2). All of the disciplines mentioned have developed particular traditions and frames in coming to terms with the normativity and the legitimation narratives for the construction of the “foreign.” However, the underlying conceptualizations and the drawing of boundaries in theory and practice have received only limited treatment. Whereas conceptual histories of “politics” exist (e.g. Sellin 1978), foreign policy has not been dealt with systematically in terms of conceptual history.³ Two further systematic chapters follow. The first, by Gunther Hellmann, problematizes common ways of defining foreign policy and substantiates an alternative way of conceptualizing it by examining the uses of the word in the context of broader vocabularies as well as the practices of foreign policy (Chapter 3). Miloš Vec highlights the role of legal distinctions created—

³ In political science the works by Richard Ashley 1987 and Halvard Leira 2012 come closest.

mostly—in the nineteenth century for the construction of the dichotomy between the “national” and the “international” (Chapter 4).

The subsequent chapters discuss moments of transformation of foreign policy in historical sequence, beginning with classical antiquity. We do not attempt to provide a comprehensive treatment of all major transformations. In fact, as our proposed framework is in some ways unconventional, even the contributors of this book would not easily be able to agree on such a list. Moreover, the table of contents reveals that entire historical periods like the Middle Ages, and case studies from outside the European context, are missing entirely. Our case studies have been chosen because they seem to us particularly salient examples of moments of foreign policy transformation. They focus on the creation and signification of boundaries between the foreign and the domestic and the designation of specific actors as foreign-political rather than domestic-political.

Overall, the key contention is that—as there are always multiple (potential) boundaries between spheres designated as “foreign” or “domestic”—a fuller description of the precise meaning of the respective boundaries is needed in order to grasp the changing significance of the distinction between the foreign and the domestic. The process of creating boundaries involves emphasizing one or several dividing lines at the expense of others (which, then, are rendered less visible).

The second focus is on the designation of particular actors as “foreign-political.” Foreign policy is obviously set apart as a distinct sphere of activity when ministries or bureaucracies specifically dedicated to it complement the age-old institution of ambassadors. However, it is as interesting to observe the different modes of behavior that mark foreign policy as a distinct sphere, and which provide evidence for its transformation. If boundary drawing is conceived as the intercommunal equivalent of domestic legislation, the political agents authorized by the state or other sites of intercommunal political authority to engage in these activities would certainly include, but not be limited to, diplomatic agents. Given the many privileges which accrue to *recognized* foreign policy actors, the struggle for foreign policy actorhood is correspondingly intense, and provides another potential insight into processes of setting domestic and foreign spheres apart from each other.

Our historical case studies begin with Chapter 5 by Hans Beck, who examines how Greek *poleis* conducted “foreign policy” among themselves while recognizing a larger divide that separated them from “barbaric” peoples or empires. He presents a study of the early existence of multiple outsides in a complicated system of comparatively small foreign policy actors engaging in sophisticated (and—comparatively—well-documented) intercommunal relations. Chapter 6 by Hartmut Leppin deals with almost the opposite perspective: foreign policy conducted from the point of view of the Roman Empire, a structure so large (and so confident of its power) that there is some debate on

whether it could even conceive of foreign policy toward a “barbarian” world considered fundamentally alien and unequal. Christianization supplemented an existing tradition of political dominance and unequal relations to outsiders with a feeling of religious superiority.

The rise of the nation state since the seventeenth century is an instance of the strengthening of some boundaries (those between states) at the expense of others (between provinces, cities, and the countryside, or between estates). While this attempt was largely successful, the next section of this volume focuses on its limits: alternative boundaries never disappeared from the practice of foreign policy completely. While Andreas Fahrmeir (Chapter 7) highlights the persistence of internal boundaries and their effect on the perception of the homogeneity of “nation states” from abroad as well as the administrative implications of the divide between “metropolitan” and “colonial” territories in global empires, Luigi Nuzzo argues in Chapter 8 that the doctrine of a divide between “civilized” and “uncivilized” territories that led to the elaboration of distinct legal systems for colonies prevented the elaboration of a single “domestic” space with regard to nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperial powers. When constructing a global international legal order, some political actors were excluded by the *ius publicum europaeum* from the Rule of Law, positioned in an indistinct zone and at the same time included in the absolute state of the European authorities, positioning natives and their territories far from modernity but inside pre-modernity. Verena Steller’s close reading of diplomatic negotiations after the First World War (Chapter 9) focuses on new foreign policy actors which emerged, paradoxically, as the result of an attempt to re-establish traditional formats of diplomatic interaction. She documents how the integration of economic experts as well as captains of industry as a group that could, to some extent, transcend boundaries and break open conventions of diplomatic intercourse led to a novel form of the conduct of international relations.

The emphasis of the final group of chapters lies on the present, with topics that correspond to the historical studies. Janne E. Nijman (Chapter 10) discusses how some cities are emerging as foreign-policy actors in complicated multi-boundary systems like the European Union and beyond, providing some surprising parallels with the study of a multi-layered, city-based political system by Beck. Christer Jönsson’s contribution (Chapter 11) examines the boundary-spanning function of diplomacy but cautions against tying it too closely (solely) to foreign policy, opening up the possibility of another layer of different boundaries that can coincide, but also modify, other distinctions between domestic and foreign spaces. In Chapter 12, Paul Sharp zooms in on what might be called the counterpart of the construction of foreign-political boundaries, namely the existence of “foreign policy” and “diplomacy” in spaces otherwise considered domestic. Finally, Chapter 13 concludes with a summary of the main lines of the argument.

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