Modern Diplomacy and the Changing Nature of International Politics in the 21st Century[1]

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Abstract

Modern diplomacy in the 21st century has become increasingly complex, requiring a broader scope or the performance of more tasks that extend beyond the traditional high politics of old. This means that current diplomats must deal with more diverse global concerns due to the nature of the post-Cold War era marked by diplomatic inflation, the decline of US hegemony, the rise of China, nuclear proliferation, climate change, globalisation, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), and the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this diversification of the diplomatic agendas and the inclusion of a growing number of stakeholders, the diplomatic field is experiencing an amplified array of challenges. Therefore, this article examines these major changes and their impact on modern diplomacy by utilising the theoretical framework of the English School where the emphasis is on a 'society of states' and a world united by common humanity. The research also employs a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the mentioned post-Cold War issues and how diplomacy can contribute to mitigating them. The paper then concludes by recommending the need for a more specialised diplomatic corps who are well-versed in technological advancements and digital platforms. By becoming more specialised, diplomacy can become more effective and thus, remain a vital tool in navigating the intricacies of contemporary international politics while mitigating the major challenges the globe faces.

Keywords: COVID-19; Globalisation; Modern Diplomacy; Post-Cold War International Politics; The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

Introduction

International politics have become more complex since the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, and consequently, it confuses traditional diplomats (Haynes et al., 2011, pp. 5–6, 8; Spies, 2019, pp. 42–43; Stern, 2015). The intricacies that modern diplomats have to deal with have arisen because of the post-Cold War global era and its move from being foremost about high politics (such as security, military and geopolitical), to incorporating a wider and growing scope of issues outside a state's national borders. These additions are more complex to deal with and have an increased number of stakeholders such as state decline or rises, power politics, nuclear proliferation, global warming, desertification and diseases (Haynes et al., 2011, p. 8; Sharp, 1999, p. 33; Spies, 2019, pp. 42–43).

To further scrutinise the phenomena driving global change and influencing modern diplomacy, the paper utilises specific and relevant international political issues such as diplomatic inflation, the hegemonic decline of the US, the rise of China, nuclear disarmament, climate change, globalisation, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the research examines what exactly the post-Cold War arena is and how current international politics can be described.

[1] Sections in this article were taken from a PhD thesis at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg.

Post-Cold War International Politics

A particularly relevant change to international politics after the Cold War ended was Russia's diminutive place in the new security arrangements (Kirby, 2022; Sakwa, 2017, pp. 14–16). The US became the dominant global superpower with Eastern Europe's economic systems and trade relations rapidly declining and marked by upheavals (Norwich University, 2024). Furthermore, the Russian government became plagued with increased crime rates and corruption while global competition and rivalry created a real possibility of war. The truth of this statement can be seen in Putin's 2007 address in Munich, where he resolutely rejected the post-Cold War system and accused the US of creating a unipolar world 'in which there is one master, one sovereign…at the end of the day this is pernicious.' (Fried & Volker, 2022). This speech was decidedly a precursor of a modern Russia striving to reassert itself and an apt example of this is Russia's dissatisfaction with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) expansion and the resulting invasion of Ukraine (Fried & Volker, 2022; Kirby, 2022).

As evident in the war in Ukraine, the post-Cold War era is turbulent and complex. This view is supported by Emel Parlar Dal (2018, pp. 35–37), who emphasises that the end of the Cold War gave rise to geopolitical confusion. This confusion arose because of an apparent cumulative fluidity of alignments and a partial reconfiguration of the world order in international politics. In short, after the Soviet Union collapsed, uncertain regional and global power and authority structures were starting to be shaped and are still ongoing. But how does this impact modern-day diplomacy?

Yolanda Kemp Spies (2019, p. 42) emphasises that diplomacy's predominant focus during the Cold War era was 'high' politics. This means diplomats mostly concentrated on military, security and geopolitical matters exemplified by Cold War politics. However, when the Cold War ended, the diplomatic field diversified immensely. The practice of diplomacy now includes an ever-increasing number of highly complex challenges and new influential actors, which are not confined to national borders (see diplomatic inflation). The changing international politics, diplomatic inflation, intricate security matters and the inclusion of 'low' politics in diplomacy (such as climate change and the recent pandemic) are discussed in the following sections (Spies, 2019, p. 42; Tella, 2018, p. 202).

Diplomatic inflation

The 21st century has highlighted the fact that the activities of non-state actors can no longer be ignored because of the power configuration in the international arena (Tella, 2018, p. 202). States no longer possess a monopoly on power and are being challenged from three different directions: from above by regional and global organisations, from below by militias, and from the side by various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and corporations. Another new competition for state power also involves including civil society actors, according to Alejo (2019, pp. 106–107). These players seek to influence global agendas within their state or multilateral institutions. This means that multilateralism is being replaced by 'multistakeholderism'. Gleckman (as cited in Alejo, 2019, p. 115) described multistakeholderism:

> 'In the past 20 years in the intergovernmental arena, multistakeholder consultations have gained wide support as an umbrella framework for bringing together diverse constituencies to develop common approaches to contemporary global challenges and to present challenging development projects.'

These contemporary global challenges Gleckman (as cited in Alejo, 2019, p. 115) mentions are at the centre of this article and are discussed sequentially as stated. This is done to better understand how

the international arena has changed after the end of the Cold War and how it is influencing modern diplomacy today. The first of these major topics is the decline of the US.

US Hegemonic Decline

US hegemonic decline has been debated for decades (Keaney, 2017, pp. 253–254; Wallerstein, 2002, pp. 60–61). Some authors, like Immanuel Wallerstein (2002, p. 60), claim that the US's decline started as early as the 1970s. For him, this decline came about because the same economic, political, and military factors that first contributed to the US becoming a global hegemony are now producing its decline.

Wallerstein (1983, pp. 102–104) describes hegemonic decline as the loss of economic power (first, there is a deterioration of the agro-industrial production edge, then commerce and finally finance), followed by an erosion of political alliances and the rise of two contending powers in a succession battle to replace the current hegemon (see Figure 1).
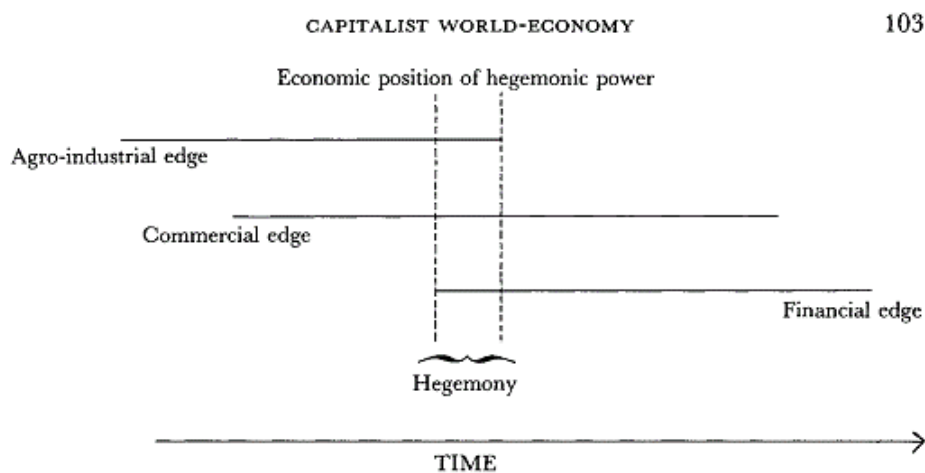

Figure 1:   Wallerstein's Simultaneous Advantage in Three Economic Domains for Hegemony.

Source: Wallerstein, 1983, p. 103).

Wallerstein (2002, pp. 60–68) further explains the US's decline in specific terms based on its ideological changes and the political unilateralism/isolationism it exhibited in recent history. This political shift was accompanied by global resistance to US foreign policy as is evident in incidences within the G7. For example, during the political battle before the war on Iraq, considerable divisions emerged between the US and its allies where Great Britain remained a steadfast ally, Italy and Japan only nominally supported the war, and Canada, Germany and France resisted a 'war-based' resolution to the demilitarisation and regime change in Iraq (Volgy et al., 2003, 2004, pp. 191–192, 2005).

Another major influence on the US's hegemonic status was the 2008 global economic crisis. Due to this devastating event, the US has been unable to return the global economy to a healthy state (Dilek, 2010, pp. 159–160, 169–170; Marc Emile Oosthuizen, 2019, pp. 107–108; 157–158). This means the US cannot supply enough global public goods as it did in the past. After all, the economic crisis has weakened the US's credibility, strength, the value of its currency along with its hegemonic status as discussed by Paul Viotti in *The Dollar and National Security* in 2014 (cited in Keaney, 2017, pp. 258–259). Viotti asserts that the US dollar underpins the projection, exercise, and thus the credibility of its hard power but as it has weakened, so too has the country's hard power and soft power potential. The 2008 economic crisis thus seems unmatched in the history of the US and has

concluded in an even greater international economic disorder than first anticipated (Dilek, 2010, pp. 159, 169–170).

Economically, US hegemony is in decline due to its enormous military and defence expenditure and its accompanying military overreach (Wallerstein, 1983, pp. 102–104, 2002, pp. 60–68). This is evident in the country's share of world military expenditure in 2012, which was around 39%, meaning that the government had to appropriate 37% of all US tax to this sector in that year (Oosthuizen, 2019, p. 151). This trend has not dissipated and is accompanied by the US federal government's increased budget deficit to where it is now spending more money than its tax collections and other revenue combined. For example, by the 1ˢᵗ of April 2024, the US national debt was a staggering US$34.6 trillion in nominal terms and relative to its gross domestic product (GDP). This means that the US exhibits a large debt-to-GDP ratio of 121.62% as of Q4 2023, reliably indicating its weakening ability to service its growing debts (Adkins, 2024; Kenton, 2024).

Politically, the decline of a hegemon as a 'stabiliser' always twists the world into precarious political circumstances, according to Braudel (as cited in Dilek, 2010, p. 159). This is evident when examining the relative decline of the US, bringing about domestic stresses, apparent in the presidential elections of 2016, spilling over into the international arena (where US allies in Europe and Asia could be making their deals with a newly confident Russia and a rising China because of the US's open policy to place their interests first) (Keaney, 2017, pp. 265–266; Layne, 2018, p. 89). The implications are that the US will struggle to enforce outcomes as rival powers gain ground on them which in turn could only weaken their financial position further. As Keaney (2017, p. 266) predicts, the challenges to Washington's legitimacy will consequently only grow, both domestically and abroad.

In terms of diplomacy, this decline has meant the militarisation of its foreign diplomatic affairs (Suri, 2019). As Jeremi Suri (2019) states, the post-Cold War order shows US diplomacy characterised by military power, wishful thinking and ideological self-righteousness, reaching its pinnacle with the Iraq War. Here the US chose to ignore diplomatic options at its disposal, like heightened international sanctions and closer collaboration with allies, when dealing with terrorism and other threats in the Middle East. Instead, the US opted to follow the path of unilateralism, destabilising the region further with lengthy and expensive military occupation. Philip Stephens (2018, p. 9) elaborates on this by stating that President Donald Trump's administration has lost the international community's support, citing that Europeans will defy all US sanction efforts while Russia and China will just ignore them. It seems that the US has isolated itself and provoked both adversaries and allies, convincing both that its moment as a hegemon has passed (Stephens, 2018, p. 9; Suri, 2019).

The Rise of China

After the global economic crisis in 2008, the world has exhibited signs of a shift in power from the global West to the East (Cai, 2018, pp. 831–832; Evans & Newman, 1998, pp. 41–44; Gamble, 2010, p. 18; Punnoose & Vinodan, 2019, p. 7). This change in the balance of power has two sides. First, it has to do with the decline of the US, as discussed, and second, it is about the push for advancement and growth by the Chinese (Punnoose & Vinodan, 2019, pp. 7–8).

Chinese progress can be traced back to the Chinese human capital and social mobilisation efforts of the 1950s, which formed the foundation needed to open up its economy for extensive foreign investments in the 1980s (Punnoose & Vinodan, 2019, pp. 7–8). It also gave foreign firms access to inexpensive labour, and in return, China could get entry into technology and the market. China also followed a privatisation policy, forming a class of billionaires linked to foreign capitalists. These collaborations made China the second largest economy in the world when it moved past Japan in 2011, surpassing the US's GDP by purchasing power parity (PPP) in October 2014 (see Figure 2). As

part of its rise, China also heavily invests in developing nations in Africa, for example (Punnoose & Vinodan, 2019, pp. 7–9, 26).
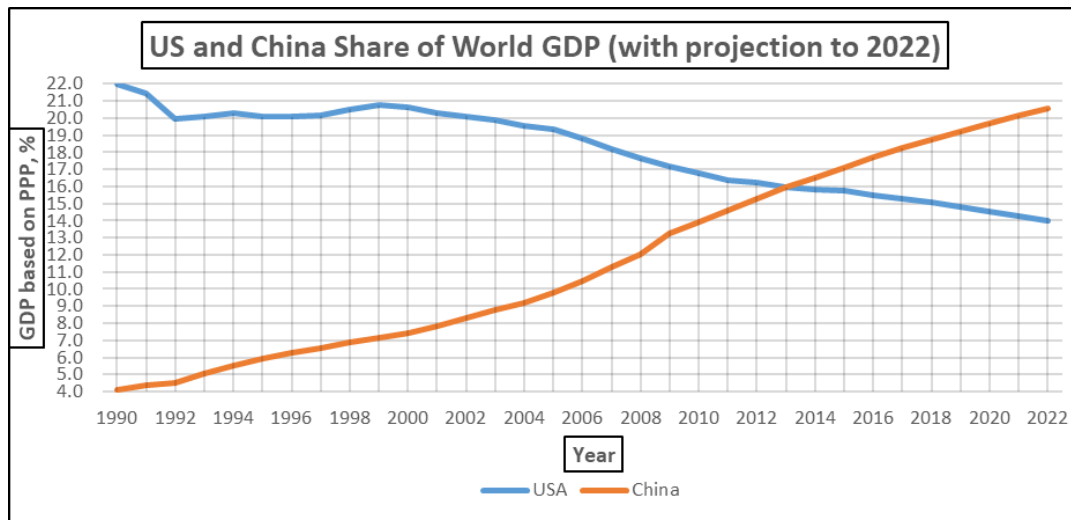

Figure 2:   The US and China's Share of World GDP

Source: Marc Emile Oosthuizen, 2019, p. 117.

In recent history, China declared that it is focused on its economic resurgence and expanding its markets by peaceful means (Punnoose & Vinodan, 2019, pp. 7–9, 16–17). Additionally, the country is aiming to modernise through technological advancement, managerial expertise, and financial resources. Although this seems true, China has also invested heavily in their military since 2000. Statistics show that their government's spending on defence has dramatically increased from USD 59.1 billion in 2008 to USD 148.3 billion in 2017. This means that their military budget has increased by around 330% from 2001 (USD 49.9 billion) to 2017 (USD 228 billion). As a percentage of their GDP, the actual spending on defence has remained relatively steady at about 2% (Punnoose & Vinodan, 2019, p. 17).

When it comes to politics, Chinese history is squarely focused on state border management and has witnessed more territorial disputes than any other state in the world (Cai, 2018, pp. 831–832; Punnoose & Vinodan, 2019, pp. 8, 12–13). As a rising power, China's foreign policy has not changed much since the 1990s, remaining conservative and cautious regarding using force and coercion. In 2017, the Chinese government iterated through President Xi Jinping that it was at the beginning of a 'new era' (Punnoose & Vinodan, 2019, p. 8). This novel beginning was described as one where they will follow socialism but with Chinese characteristics. As part of this, China aims to play a larger role in global governance in this epoch of globalisation. It plans on doing this by suggesting and offering suitable and relevant solutions to the world such as One Belt One Road (OBOR) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Cai, 2018, pp. 831–832, 837–841). Both the OBOR and AIIB initiatives are meant to improve Beijing's influence over the enormous territory of Eurasia while posing multifaceted challenges to the current way things are, especially the power distribution at the international level (Cai, 2018, pp. 833–839, 846; Punnoose & Vinodan, 2019, p. 27).

Diplomatically, one can see the effectiveness of Chinese 'carrot' diplomacy through the OBOR and AIIB initiatives, helping to ease tension with the Philippines over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The previous carrot diplomacy is in sharp contrast with the new forceful brand of 'stick' diplomacy China now uses in countries like Sweden. Ambassador Gui Congyou has, for example, clearly stated: 'We treat our friends with fine wine, but for

our enemies, we have shotguns.' (The Economist, 2020). According to Cai (2018, pp. 831–832), this means that Beijing has made significant adjustments to its foreign policy in several areas since 2012. These adjustments include a Chinese government that has started using diplomacy for its benefit (Cai, 2018, pp. 831–832, 837–841). While China stays on traditional diplomatic principles of non-interference and sovereignty, it also launched OBOR and the AIIB) to pursue the country's economic, diplomatic and security objectives in the future.

Nuclear Proliferation and Disarmament

During the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union spent enormous amounts of money on amassing massive stockpiles of nuclear weapons (Evans & Newman, 1998, pp. 386–393; McGowan & Nel, 2002, pp. 27–28). Today, it seems the world is heading towards another of these nuclear arms races due to the fragmented and rapidly changing international relations we observe in the world (Lüdeking, 2020, pp. 14–15; Plous, 1993, p. 166). This state of flux has resulted in the reappearance of great power politics or a resurgence of nationalism, leading to a greater probability of conflict. Additionally, tensions between the US, Russia and China have escalated in recent years, resulting in renewed nuclear proliferation. To explain this proliferation, the prisoner's dilemma can be used as seen in Table 1.

Table 1:   The US-USSR Prisoner's Dilemma

US	USSR/Russia	
	Disarm	**Arm**
Disarm	US = 3; Russia = 3 Mutual disarmament	US = 1; Russia = 4 Russia arms while the US disarms
Arm	US = 4; Russia = 1 The US arms while Russia disarms	US = 2; Russia = 2 Both the US and Russia arming
*The score between 1 and 4 indicates the desirability of the outcome where 1 < 2 < 3 < 4		

Source: Adapted from Heywood, 1997, p. 16; Plous, 1993, p. 164.

Both sides of the matrix in Table 1, representing the US and Russia, would prefer the other side to disarm while they arm, as represented by the 4 to 1 and 1 to 4 desirability scores (Heywood, 1997, p. 16; Plous, 1993, p. 164). A score of 1 indicates that the worst fear of each party is that they will disarm while the other keeps arming themselves. If Russia, for instance, chooses to reduce its nuclear stock while the US keeps arming itself, the US will be assured of the most favourable outcome. On the other hand, if they keep arming themselves, they will both avoid the outcome they most fear, a unilateral reduction of arms. This option is represented by the 2 in the table. The dilemma is that if both sides still choose to arm, they will be worse off than choosing to cooperate and mutually disarm, as represented by the score 3. The complicating factor for states is the belief that war is unavoidable in international politics. This causes countries to distrust each other and to think they are close to the last move in the prisoner's dilemma. Therefore, the suspicion that other states or opponents will defect makes it easier to rely on itself and then, rather than cooperate, states risk defecting (Nye & Welch, 2017, pp. 21–23). Scott Plous (1993, pp. 164–166) calls this the *perception* that the other side favours unilateral armament. According to the research, the simple answer to overcome this perception is when one side can persuade the other that they truly prefer mutual disarmament, instead of unilaterally arming itself (Heywood, 1997, p. 16; Plous, 1993, p. 166).

To curb the production and stockpiling of nuclear arms, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was signed in 1968 and came into effect in March 1970 (Evans & Newman, 1998, p. 386; Lüdeking, 2020, pp. 15–16). However, the NPT is failing, given that the two nuclear superpowers are now pushing to increase their already huge nuclear weapons stockpiles even further. Furthermore, North Korea is going ahead with its ballistic missile tests, regardless of the US pressure on them not to pursue nuclear weapons capabilities. Then there was also the unilateralist move by the US to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, leaving the door open for Iran to produce highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons without the opposition a nuclear deal could have provided (Lüdeking, 2020, pp. 15–16).

Diplomatically, the discussed prisoner's dilemma is a vital tool for nuclear and other forms of diplomacy (Nah, 2019, pp. 90–91; Nye & Welch, 2017, pp. 141, 148, 210). As certain historical views indicate, the Cold War started because US diplomacy was defensively orientated, while the Soviet stance was more expansive and decidedly more aggressive at the time. A recent example shows that the Hanoi summit failed because neither Washington nor Pyongyang submitted to the denuclearisation negotiations. Both parties rather hardened their stances while insisting that the other side should begin nuclear disarmament and concessions; neither was willing to concede.

While the prisoner's dilemma can be used to explain these diplomatic failures, it can also be used to better negotiate future denuclearisation, according to Nah (2019, pp. 90–92). This is useful because the dilemma clearly shows that self-centred advances only lead to overall losses for both parties, while mutual non-ideal compromises could be the way forward and lead to possible advances for all parties involved. Thus, nuclear diplomacy can be used to convince all parties involved in nuclear weapons escalation of the merits of working together to make the NPT effective (Lüdeking, 2020, pp. 16–17). However, to be successful, highly skilled, and professional diplomats will be needed to bridge these divisions.

Climate Change

Climate change, as per William Nordhaus (2020, pp. 10–12), is the main environmental issue faced by the world today. Due to its progressively worsening outlook, it has also become a principal problem in international relations, especially because states have failed to mitigate this significant problem.

Since climate change's inception in 1992, the world has failed to stabilise greenhouse gasses through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and all the Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings. There have been 25 of these COP meetings in a series of multilateral negotiations since 1995, producing only the failed Kyoto Protocol (which started in 1997 to construct an international framework for harmonising the policies of different states) and the unsteady Paris Accord (started in 2015 to keep the increase of global average temperature far below 2°C). The failure of a binding international agreement on climate change means that greenhouse gasses are becoming progressively more concentrated in the atmosphere, causing dangerous anthropogenic interference with our climate system (Hannah, 2015, pp. 365–367; Nordhaus, 2020, pp. 10–13).

A large part of the problem, as is the case with nuclear disarmament, is the fact that individual states have an enduring desire not to adhere to their commitments to cooperating on climate change (Heywood, 1997, p. 16; Nordhaus, 2020, p. 12). This stems from a state's longing to rather follow its own political or national interests, set against a worldwide and mutually beneficial plan. This means that international cooperation is forfeited, resulting in selfish attitudes and outcomes. Some of the major collaboration obstacles are as follows:

- International climate agreements have too weak an incentive structure to deal with such an important and complex problem as climate change.

- International climate treaties are undermined by myopic or corruptible leaders who do not take the issue seriously and have little or no interest in longstanding global matters.

- The sheer scale, difficulty, and cost of slowing climate change is a significant hurdle.

- States do not understand the challenges associated with global warming as a prisoner's dilemma, one where the negotiated agreements are not, in fact, voluntary or able to tolerate free riding (countries that rely on the emission reduction of others without making costly domestic reductions themselves).

- As per Figure 3, states like the US, with some of the highest emissions of greenhouse gasses, are also the ones that refuse to cooperate in international climate agreements or treaties. An example of this is the voluntary Kyoto Protocol, which ended in December 2012 because, ultimately, no nation wanted to be a part of it (Hannah, 2015, p. 368; Nordhaus, 2020, pp. 12–13).
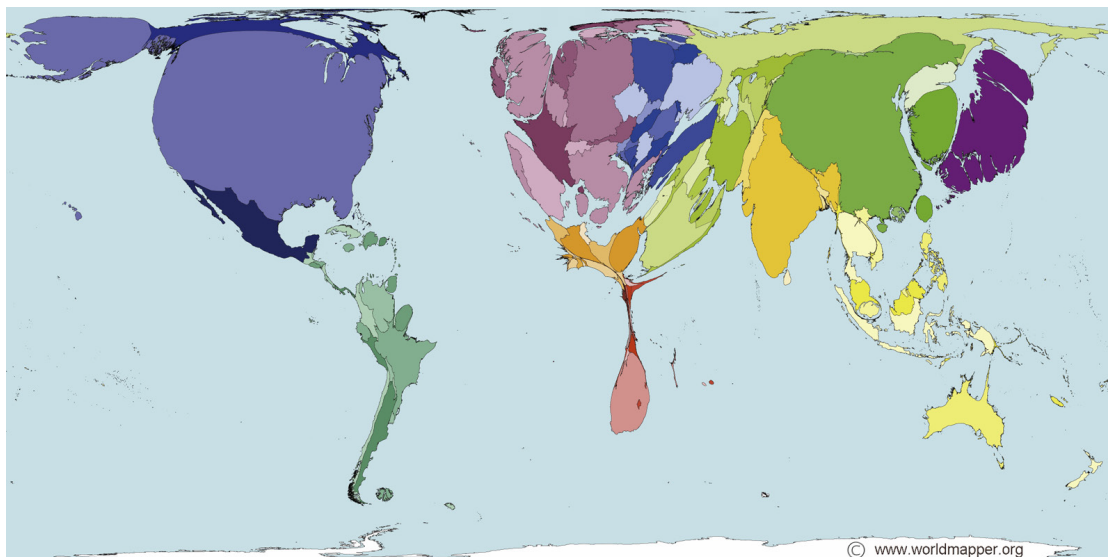

Figure 3: The Area Size of each State corresponds to their Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Source: Hannah, 2015, p. 368.

Diplomatically, climate change is one of the biggest challenges the practitioners in the field could face (Hannah, 2015, pp. 365–368, 376; Nordhaus, 2020, p. 10). The reason for this is that in 2020 after the climate change issue was identified in the 1970s and almost three decades after the UNFCCC was initiated, the world is still no closer than it was to any binding international agreement. For Nordhaus (2020, p. 10), the answer lies in stricter measures called the 'Climate Club'. This Climate Club is where nations throughout the world can overcome freeriding behaviour by implementing a penalty or reward system as a club would. The penalties or rewards can be aimed at states that do not participate in climate change initiatives, agreements, or treaties. For any approach, be it a penalty club framework or a more appealing incentive scheme, for mitigation or adaptation to work, proficient diplomatic negotiations would be needed. These negotiations are required to facilitate the buy-in and participation of these actors as well as facilitate the fact that there are clear winners and losers in the steps that need to be taken towards climate change (Hannah, 2015, p. 376).

Thus, while certain parties or states will need to be motivated to work together or even penalised for not doing so, others will need less motivation but the same expertise and professionalism. Also, both the solutions and the science behind climate change are highly complex, leading to delays and even more uncertainty regarding policy responses in the past. This does not allow room for error or diplomatic practitioners not fully versed or capable of dealing with these issues during complex and difficult negotiations (Hannah, 2015, pp. 365–368, 376; Nordhaus, 2020, p. 10).

Globalisation

Globalisation comprises political, economic, environmental, and social-cultural dimensions (see Figure 4) and although it started in the late 1400s, it was not until the Cold War ended that political developments became progressively more intricate (Kazimov, 2020, p. 431; Latifi, 2020, pp. 94–95; Rennen & Martens, 2003, pp. 137–139, 143).
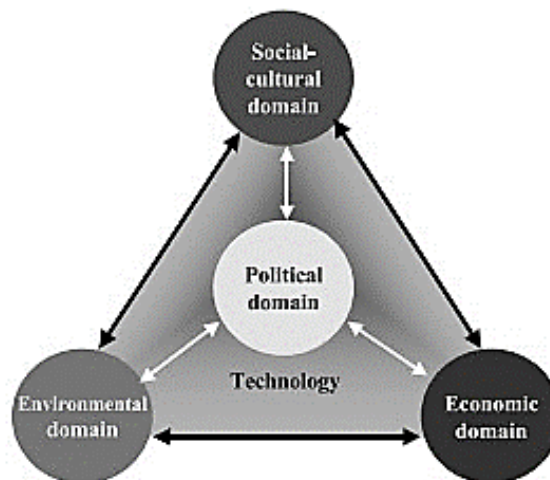

Figure 4:   The Dimensions of Globalisation

Source: Rennen & Martens, 2003, p. 143.

It has been nearly impossible since the end of the Cold War to explain politics at the world, national, regional, or local levels without considering the mammoth impact of globalisation (Kazimov, 2020, p. 431; Latifi, 2020, pp. 94–95; Rennen & Martens, 2003, pp. 137–139, 143).

Traditionally, states only operated on a national level, using vertical power, a hierarchical power based on the traditional power structure of a state and its statecraft (Garcia, 2013, p. 910). However, globalisation has introduced the concept of horizontal power, a power structure based on how interconnected a state is in the network or 'web' of the world. This means that the more connected a state is to this international network, the greater its power and ability to exercise horizontal power (Garcia, 2013, p. 910; Kazimov, 2020, p. 433). The decline in the vertical power of states is perhaps one of the main reasons many authors assert states are shrinking, weakening, and losing their influence and sovereignty over time. However, even though the challenges of globalisation are highly problematic for states, they have remained functional and one of the most important actors in the international arena (Ciongaru, 2019, p. 71; Kazimov, 2020, p. 433). What is obvious, however, is the fact that states must modernise to accommodate the effects of globalisation, leaving behind old ways of functioning due to recent advancements.

At the heart of the fast and sometimes uncertain changes in the world lies contemporary globalisation's revolutions in telecommunications, computing, and the internet (Garcia, 2013,

pp. 903–906). Through these revolutions, modernity has virtually eradicated space and time as substantial aspects in numerous areas of social interaction. With these developments, states cannot control the free flow of information, communication, and transnational movements (Latifi, 2020, pp. 94–95). Globalisation has also changed how current-day diplomats function as well.

The globalisation-linked changes in diplomatic practice have occurred due to societies and political systems that no longer function in isolation, being increasingly influenced by their counterparts throughout the rest of the world (Latifi, 2020, p. 96). Furthermore, for diplomats to exert influence, they have to be in the foreground of the new information and technology advances, working effectively and efficiently in a new technological 'battle for ideas' or to enhance their presence and image as Barston (2019, pp. 25–26, 39, 160–162, 169) explains. This differs from previous eras because diplomats now must function in an increasingly integrated world using digital platforms through the Internet as a novel diplomatic instrument. These new practices known as digital diplomacy are now essential if diplomats want to promote diplomatic ideas effectively and advertise certain positions on diverse issues worldwide (Adesina, 2017, p. 5; Sevin & Manor, 2019, p. 325).

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)

The First, Second and Third industrial revolutions are all part of history now, each one based on some form of energy discovery (Davis, 2016; Sinton, 2019, p. 20). The initial revolution around 1784 was powered by steam, the second one around 1870 by electricity, and the third revolution in approximately 1969 by nuclear power. What is important to realise is that the third revolution is described as a digital revolution, where this first machine age gave rise to automated production, personal computing and new forms of telecommunications, like the internet (Vandenberg, 2020, pp. 194–196). Currently, the world is bracing itself for the advent of smart and autonomous systems that use machine learning and data as their driving force in the second machine age or what is called the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (Groscurth, 2019, pp. 4–6; Maule, 2019).

In this new machine age, a great convergence between the physical, biological and digital spheres is occurring (Groscurth, 2019, pp. 4–6; Maule, 2019). This conjunction can be illustrated by curing conductive hearing loss by reconstructing the broken bones of the middle ear through 3D printed technology and then surgically replacing the complete middle ear with the printed version (Pace, 2019). Thus, technology is becoming progressively more embedded within societies and even inside the human body. Other examples of this second machine age are genome editing, innovative forms of machine intelligence, breakthrough materials and new approaches to governance that rely on cryptographic methods like blockchain (digital information as a 'block', which is stored in a public database or a 'chain') (Davis, 2016; Hayes, 2023).

At its core, the 4IR is the global penetration of information and communications technologies (ICTs) (Adesina, 2017, p. 2; Groscurth, 2019, pp. 4–6; Maule, 2019; Vandenberg, 2020, pp. 194–196). These new technologies are leading to innovative capabilities that reform communication and the exchange of information between people, even altering the world's social, economic, and political settings. ICTs have also transformed the production of information and how it is consumed (Navarro, 2019, pp. 164–165). The result is that information is now only a keystroke away, making the wealth of information out in the world available to even private consumers. In line with this, international communication has become an instrument to model and shape international information. This means that many different international society stakeholders, whether they are states, International Organisations, NGOs, private companies, or the press, want to control the media and the flow of information as much as possible. For a state, this control of information can, for example, take the form of portraying the correct image of their country while propagating a favourable reputation (Wang, 2011, pp. 1–2).

For diplomacy, the 4IR allows for the possible design and development of better strategies for both propaganda and public relations, not to mention digital diplomacy and its applications (Navarro, 2019, pp. 152, 164–165). These strategies are now possible because of the new global connections that exist between the different actors within international society, even regarding civil society and between individuals (this statement incorporates the world society's view of common humanity where there are areas that unite all people outside of states or any other political entity) (Alejo, 2019, pp. 106–107; Ruacan, 2013, pp. 3–5; Yanovska et al., 2019, p. 1). The result is that international communicators can operate and manipulate the information flows due to this increased global connectivity. However, the increased connectivity also entails the possibility that modern communicators can use technology to influence information toward selfish and perhaps even nefarious ends. To combat these possible bad influencers, states will need superior diplomats to assess, counter and even reject manipulated information or fake news, which can be counterproductive to a country's image, people, and economy. However, these new diplomats will have to be experts at digital diplomacy and using ICT towards furthering their diplomatic goals and functions. If diplomats are unwilling or unable to adapt, like those governments in some African states that are prone to underdevelopment, the 4IR will pass them by and they will face more trials (for example, job losses and an even greater digital divide). It might even result in the 'digital' recolonisation of the African continent, as Onwughalu and Ojakorotu (2020, pp. 81–84, 86–88) suggest.

The Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)

One of the stark reminders of how integrated the world has become, was the spread of the COVID-19 virus into a global pandemic (Onwughalu & Ojakorotu, 2020, pp. 81–84, 86–88). The virus started in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019 and quickly spread. Described as the worst crisis in a century, it is a pandemic that has perplexed political, economic, and diplomatic activity. To cope with the outbreak, states have closed borders, imposed lockdowns or at the very least ordered their citizens to stay at home as far as possible. With these measures, most of the world's economic activity came to a sudden standstill (Cociu, 2020, p. 19; Smith & McClean, 2020, p. 16).

Authors such as Duran (2020, p. 81) affirm that the COVID-19 pandemic was projected to have a more severe economic impact on the world than the 2008 economic/financial crisis or even the Great Depression (Duran, 2020, p. 81; Emmerson, 2020, pp. 107–109; Smith & McClean, 2020, p. 19). This economic effect is because as of June 2020, the pandemic had already killed over a third of a million people, resulting in hundreds of millions of job losses and a further worsening of the plight of the global precariat. For example, in the US alone, the pandemic's effects on their tourism sector will equate to a loss of USD 910 billion in economic output, the equivalent of more than seven times the impact witnessed on 11 September 2001. China, likewise, has witnessed economic strain in the form of a 6.8% shrinkage of its economy by the 1st quarter of 2020, dropping its forecasted growth rate to a possible and meagre low of 1.3% (Emmerson, 2020, p. 109; Smith & McClean, 2020, p. 19). Outside of the economic sphere, Duran (2020, p. 81) predicts that the pandemic could result in significant political upheavals, the further deepening of human tragedy in zones where there is already conflict, the emergence of new blocs, a new wave of erratic migration, the collapse of fragile states and the rise of populist nationalism and authoritarianism (Duran, 2020, p. 81; Emmerson, 2020, p. 109; Smith & McClean, 2020, p. 19).

Richard Haass (cited in Duran, 2020, pp. 81–82) predicts that the COVID-19 pandemic could signal an epoch of great uncertainty rather than an era of cooperation, as seen after World War II. This means that the world will witness a continued US decline, an additional wavering in international cooperation and a deepening of great powers rivalry (especially between the US and China).

Although there might not be a new world order, as some have speculated, the ensuing period after the pandemic seems to be represented by disorder.

The speculations of the severity of COVID-19 and its possible impact on international order have led to two opposing narratives, as discussed by Graziano Palamara (2020, pp. 377–378). First, there is the opinion that radical transformation can take place, strengthening individual states but leading to a rise in world political tensions that can further hamper international cooperation. The second view is that the pandemic could lead be the birth of a global infrastructure aimed at multilateral cooperation. This means that once the closure phase of the world is over, a new kind of internationalism will arise to benefit all (Palamara, 2020, pp. 377–378). The reality is that countries have politically opted for national isolationism, worsening the effects of the pandemic due to insufficient international cooperation. Furthermore, US-China relations have taken a great deal of strain with the Trump administration threatening to impose unparalleled economic sanctions on China. Conversely, China has become more ambitious as a possible world leader, believing its model of state capitalism combined with digital authoritarianism to be the way forward. These issues could have extensive negative implications for the rest of the world in terms of spill-over effects (Duran, 2020, pp. 81–84; Lüdeking, 2020, p. 14; Palamara, 2020, p. 379; Smith & McClean, 2020, p. 22).

Interestingly, the pandemic has also assisted with the further spread of digital technologies (AdGully, 2020, p. 4; Aksoy & Çiçek, 2018, p. 915; Duran, 2020, p. 81). This technological escalation is because communication/actions must be taken online due to the physical isolation effects of the pandemic, for example, in sectors such as healthcare, education, financial actions, and media, where work and contact are needed but people are unable to meet each other face to face or in person. For diplomacy, this has comprehensive consequences as well because now diplomats can stimulate foreign policy interests using the 4IR tools over the internet, ICTs, and other communication technologies as mentioned before. This promotes the new field of digital diplomacy even further, which can henceforth be even more effective in information management, public diplomacy, strategy planning, international negotiations and even crisis and threat management (Aksoy & Çiçek, 2018, p. 915; Barston, 2019, p. 3).

Conclusion

Today's international arena is one permeated by globalisation, the 4IR and heightened complexity due to the decline of US hegemony, the rise of China, nuclear proliferation, climate change and pandemics. It is a modernity almost controlled by economics and technology, which has resulted in forces of change that are mostly outside political leadership and diplomacy's control. This lack of control is perhaps part of the reason why authors like Alejo (2019, pp. 106–107) argue that the rapid changes in international politics have made modern diplomacy ineffective.

Where traditional diplomatic practice focussed on political and government security concerns, the post-Cold War era has saturated the field with many other serious global issues as discussed in this article. This diversification and intensification of global challenges have culminated in a pivotal question: How can 21st-century diplomacy maintain its efficacy within this increasingly complex and expansive context while remaining a viable tool for mitigating these major issues? Henrikson (2005, pp. 2–3) sees this as an opportunity for diplomats to identify and interpret the vital messages of globalisation because of their direct experience with its upheavals and the associated instabilities it can cause. However, to ensure continued effectiveness and relevance, contemporary diplomats will have to specialise. They must employ the most advanced and up-to-date techniques and technologies to address the diverse array of high and low political issues outlined here. Accordingly, the author advocates for a more expert-driven diplomatic corps. These new specialists should be drawn from

a pool of generalists and trained within four streams of specialisation to overcome these modern political trials as discussed in more detail in another article (Oosthuizen, 2024).

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