

FUNDAMENTALS OF DIPLOMATIC PROTOCOL

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Abstract

Every so often indistinctly designated as both ceremonial and etiquette, diplomatic protocol has come to encapsulate all the formal ingredients bearing on practices of diplomacy and which are not their substantive or factual constituents. Albeit rather decorative, pretentious and ostentatious, protocol in diplomacy has had the commanding role of facilitating diplomatic encounters, communications and negotiations. However, beyond its undeniable merit as the very environment of common sense pertaining to good manners, appropriate behavior and deferent courtesy, diplomatic protocol could be analytically comprehended distinguishing between the variety of nuances and connotations so frequently amalgamated within the conventional nomen of 'protocol'. The present study attempts at clarifying and discerning the plethora of its significances and appropriations. Accordingly, a cautious understanding of protocol references should carefully delineate between protocol and etiquette, protocol and ceremonial, and protocol as precedence, in addition to looking for the proper functions and applications of diplomatic protocol.

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Formal diplomacy: protocol and etiquette

In a sense, the status of protocol in diplomacy in relation to diplomatic actions properly follows the auxiliary role of 'knowing how' type of epistemological claims in relation to the substantive nature of 'knowing that' ones. Pushing forward the analogy, one could argue that the same as 'knowing how' dimension of knowledge is a complementary attachment of the whole process of knowledge and yet detached from its substantial texture, the protocol dimension of diplomacy only supplements the actual practices pertaining to its field. Arguably, the vast literature dedicated to the theory and practice of diplomacy concedes a junior status at best to aspects of diplomatic protocol, ascertaining for its merely formal and regulating functions. Albeit separated and inconsequential in regard to the factual consistency of diplomatic phenomena, diplomatic protocol has, nevertheless, certain objectified meanings and references, beyond its pejorative rendering as 'solemn frivolity' (Cambon). In broad terms, one could find certain incorporated references of diplomatic protocol - as a set of rules guiding formal conduct - grounded on the empirical observation of reciprocal attitudes of respect, deference, courtesy and a shared commonsensical system of norms in the service of good practices of diplomatic international relations. Furthermore, diplomatic protocol also touches upon certain features of elegance and artifice when it comes to exchanging gifts between high-level officials, recognition of titles and statuses, use of emblems and decorations, etc.¹ As deeply entrenched in the traditional diplomatic culture² and truly making both non-verbal and

¹ Alice Hecht, Jean-Marc Boulgaris and Idriss Jazairy, *Practices of Diplomatic Protocol in Geneva*, Geneva: UNITAR, 2015, p. 18.

² Fiona McConnell and Jason Dittmer, "Diplomatic Culture" in Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr and Paul Sharp (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy*, London: SAGE Publications, 2016, p. 104.

verbal communication easier even when strong ties between the actors preexist and render the protocol rules superfluous,³ the diplomatic protocol role is essentially that of closing the gap between power status and ceremonial conventions, i.e., between the factual and the formal in diplomacy, respectively. In fact, in regard to standard behavior in diplomacy, deviations from protocol norms and etiquette are solely tolerated in cases of warm reciprocal relations and amicability.

On the other hand, beyond the consideration of protocol as a regulating function of diplomacy codifying a set of rules and norms specific to formal interactions, the term is frequently used interchangeably with 'etiquette'. It is probably fair to retrieve one of the most appropriate meanings of diplomatic protocol as consistently characteristic for the institutionalization of diplomacy, apart from the wide-ranging scope of diplomatic etiquette. Accordingly, while the latter expands over various manners, courtesy rules and appropriate behaviors in various occurrences of diplomatic settings, protocol should be specifically understood as an institutional ingredient of diplomacy pointing at shared symbols and references (such as the standardization of language), alongside precise mutual regulations and procedures (such as immunity and precedence) and formalism and professionalization (plainly reflected in the establishment of hierarchical diplomatic ranks).⁴ If protocol meaningfully involves certain guiding rules for the preparation of international meetings, summits and conferences, circumstantial procedures for the recognition of new states in the multilateral system of international relations and strict regulations for the admission of non-professional diplomats, diplomatic etiquette rather points at decorum and symbolic gestures, such as meal

³ Adrian-Gabriel Corpădean, "Assessing Romania's Strategic Partnerships – Recent Endeavours in Romanian-Moldavian Relations" in *Der Donauraum, Zeitschrift des Institutes für den Donauraum und Mitteleuropa*, no. 56 (25 Years of Development in the Post-Soviet Space: Civil Society and Participatory Democracy), Vienna, 2018, pp. 107-121.

⁴ Christer Jonsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 40-42.

regulations, greetings and appropriate language, among other mannerisms. However, there are some important etiquette requirements regarding business cards (engraved and never signed), invitation cards (specifying the occasion and the dress wear), courtesy calls (following a certain order and never before the presentation of credentials), correspondence (imposing mandatory rules of address), meals regulations (pointing at seating arrangements, menus, table manners), receptions, introductions (always of lower to higher ranks) and general courtesy codes.⁵ Both protocol and etiquette, albeit restrictive and regulative in nature, allow for uniqueness while simultaneously guaranteeing equality of treatment, and creativity while requiring respect for minimum standards.⁶

Thus, protocol incurs much more explicit meanings in comparison with etiquette; in fact, protocol has acquired more and more institutionalized significances, being integrated into the complex fabric of diplomatic actions, mechanisms and procedures. Contrary to the recent postulate that the dissolution of aristocratic diplomacy has prompted not only the “erosion of older values”⁷ but also the simplification of diplomatic procedures and, consequently, the relaxation of protocol constrictions,⁸ it is precisely the expansion of multilateral diplomacy⁹ and the need to

⁵ Alice Hecht, Jean-Marc Boulgaris and Idriss Jazairy, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-73.

⁶ Kishan S. Rana, *21st Century Diplomacy: A Practitioner's Guide*, London and New York: Continuum, 2011, p. 230. Protocol and etiquette regulations and conventional norms remain mandatory and restrictive in new practices of diplomacy as well; for instance, certain constrictions are imposed on internet protocol, as follows: e-mails should not substitute formal and direct invitations; 'undisclosed recipients' approach should be used in group mailing situations; signature lines, prompt replies and 'out-of-office replies' are mandatory; the sender should provide a subject title, and the use of formality, conciseness and discretion are appropriate (Mary Mel French, *United States Protocol: The Guide to Official Diplomatic Etiquette*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010, pp. 327-330).

⁷ Kishan Rana, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

⁸ Yolanda Kemp Spies, *Global Diplomacy and International Society*, Springer: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 68.

⁹ Adrian-Gabriel Corpădean, „The State of the Union Address – A Useful EU Communication Endeavour under American Inspiration?” in Iulian Boldea (ed.),

maintain permanent diplomatic missions abroad that has further complicated issues of diplomatic protocol, etiquette and ceremonial. The 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations sanctified a set of protocol rules, privileges and immunities specific to all official diplomatic actors, attaching well-defined norms and regulations to the broader field of international legislation. The next section puts forward further specificities of diplomatic protocol as regards its definition, functions and applications; moreover, I will argue that one of the best exemplifications of protocol application is illustrated by ceremonial events, while the rules of precedence and ranking in diplomacy stand for the functional character of protocol. Accordingly, protocol as ceremonial and protocol as precedence, respectively, will constitute the subject matters of the last two sections.

Definition, functions and applications of diplomatic protocol

In the vocabulary of diplomacy, one could hardly notice the existence of a comprehensive definition of diplomatic protocol; instead, one could rather discover ostensive and working definitions, circumstantial to the topic under examination. By and large, the most wide-ranging - albeit too general and minimalist - definition simply identifies protocol with rules of diplomatic procedures.¹⁰ As such, the understanding of protocol is both flexible and overarching: regulations themselves should not be sanctified as immovable, but rather contextualized, both spatially and temporally. As far as diplomatic procedures are concerned, the diversity of diplomatic facts quite often imply careful scrutiny of local customs which bring specificity and refinement of diplomatic rules of protocol. For the sake of exemplification, Ministries of Foreign Affairs in several countries issue the so-called 'protocol handbooks' and appoint protocol departments to

Globalization and Intercultural Dialogue: Multidisciplinary Perspectives, Târgu-Mureş: Arhipelag XXI, 2014, pp. 157-164.

¹⁰ Even the etymology of the Greek term 'protocol' might look far-fetched and obsolete; its recurrence within the present-day practices of diplomacy has a limited reference only, pointing at letters of credentials (Hecht, Boulgaris and Jazairy, *op. cit.*, p. 18).

familiarize foreign diplomats with the specificities and peculiarities, yet convergent of local diplomatic procedures.¹¹ Apparently, protocol is a distinct function, an embedded part of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs activities, alongside all its political, legal and administrative issues;¹² this is probably the reason why, at the state level, there is a special service of state protocol and the official responsible with carrying out tasks of protocol is unambiguously called chief of protocol. Moreover, according to article 17 of the Vienna Convention, a procedural rule of protocol requires that the heads of missions have to submit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in their receiving country a hierarchical list following the order of precedence criterion applicable to their staffs for pure protocol presentation reasons; additionally, the staff members of diplomatic missions have to send their visiting cards to those members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the receiving country with whom they expect to have contacts, with the initials 'pp' (*pour presentation*).¹³ These are but two examples of the complex web of relations between diplomats, not to mention the privileges and duties of their personnel and families; bottom-line is that, from a procedural standpoint, diplomatic protocol is required on any occasion marking the beginning and termination of diplomatic missions. The procedure of formal acceptance, arrival and presentation of credentials, arrival visits and/or the end of diplomatic missions – all engage specific protocol events. Among the most usual occurrences, it is worth mentioning the presentation of letters of credence by the new diplomat (in which case the original is handed in to the head of the receiving state and a 'true copy' to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the exchange of cabinet letters (between the corresponding Ministries of Foreign Affairs through charge d'affaires), the arrival visits (preceded by the presentation of credentials and letters to

¹¹ Rana, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

¹² Yolanda Spies, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

¹³ John R. Wood and Jean Serres, *Diplomatic Ceremonial and Protocol: Principles, Procedures & Practices*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1971, pp. 32-33.

homologous persons), and rituals marking the end of diplomatic missions (including private ceremonies, decorations, souvenirs, farewell dinners).¹⁴

In accordance to well-established rules and procedures which define the diplomatic protocol and provide for its ultimate *raison d'être*, there are certain general functions traceable to specific roles of protocol services, as follows: i) the provision of general regulations for diplomatic representatives by the protocol departments of foreign ministries; ii) the ordering of rules of precedence; iii) the annual management of the list of diplomats; iv) the admission of flying flags on diplomatic buildings and cars; v) the defense of diplomatic privileges and immunities, and vi) the regulation of written communication, personal etiquette, table and seating arrangements, gifts and other diplomatic rituals.¹⁵ The functional character of diplomatic protocol allows for equidistance and eliminates contingent misunderstandings and frictions; in other words, it simply facilitates diplomatic proceedings and provides for the smooth work of diplomatic institutions and their daily operations. In this respect, protocol might be conceived as the guardian of functional egalitarianism between states and actors involved in diplomatic encounters, attempting at reducing diplomatic discrimination and contributing to making interactions predictable.¹⁶

Eventually, apart from protocol's procedural/ regulative and functional meanings, there is a large array of events and occurrences which reveal, so to say, diplomatic protocol at work. This complementary meaning of protocol encompasses numerous applications, regulative as well, such as: 1) participation at ceremonials, processions, parades and official visits in the receiving state; 2) participation at religious ceremonies, including funeral events and church arrangements for the diplomatic corps; 3) adherence to rules of collective precedence for the diplomatic corps,

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 39-43.

¹⁵ Rana, *op. cit.*, pp. 232-234.

¹⁶ Spies, *op. cit.*, pp. 202-203.

according to the basic principle of seniority at the post; 4) compliance to rules of individual precedence, in keeping with deference for grade, seniority at the post and age; 5) acceptance of institutionalized internal precedence; 6) recognition of consular precedence, including formal distinctions between career and honorary consuls and between identical consular grades by considering the order of exequaturs; 7) specification of regulations for flying the national flag in the receiving country; 8) conventions for the decreeing of official mourning, including the signing in the official registry; 9) invitations to receptions, including rules of appropriate conversation and official speeches; 10) respect for the hierarchical ranking of nobility titles and official ones; 11) conventionality regarding the form of visiting cards; 12) requirements in regard to ceremonial dress and wearing decorations, etc.¹⁷

Protocol and ceremonial

The above-mentioned applicative component of diplomatic protocol is a fundamental tenet of its institutionalized facet, apace with the procedural, regulative and functional characteristics. One enduring challenge for testing the applicative efficiency of protocol has been put to work on ceremonial occasions. Ceremonies, festivities, funerals and other events associated with the general etiquette of ceremonial stand for the complementary tool of institutionalized diplomatic protocol, i.e., the ritualization of protocol. Essentially, any ritual involves symbols, repetition, formality and fixity;¹⁸ in the case of ceremonial rituals, they point at decorum and basic etiquette, address and greeting phrases, status, deference, courtesy, exchange of gifts, etc. Some of the most popular events of diplomatic ceremonial are clearly marriage ceremonies, funerals, presidential inaugurations, awards and decorations festivities, ceremonies for the presentation of military personnel, etc. A very appealing and

¹⁷ John Wood and Jean Serres, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-101, 116-157.

¹⁸ Christer Jonsson and Martin Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43.

distinguished occurrence of diplomatic ceremonial is the monarchical ceremonial, covering the officializing of alliances, marriages, coats of arms rituals; the protocol and pomp on such occasions are notoriously high and sometimes criticized for their display of aristocratic grandeur and anachronistic mannerism.

The subtle interconnectedness between protocol and ceremonial in diplomacy could be illustrated by postulating that “protocol codifies and puts into practice the rules of ceremonial and supervises their application”.¹⁹ The extraordinary display and significance of ceremonies resides not only on their public character contrasting the secrecy of traditional diplomatic endeavors, but also on the historical awareness regarding their prestige and impact upon the legitimacy of international encounters and interactions. For instance, the importance of ceremonial could be traced back to the medieval period: the Byzantine emperor, Constantine Porphyrogenius wrote a detailed *Book of Ceremonies*, and, later, official receptions in Venice were advised by a *Libro Ceremoniale*.²⁰ Nowadays, protocol within ceremonial is mostly visible in multilateral diplomacy, international visits, signing of treaties and speech-making practices. In order to highlight the prominence of conducting and organizing ceremonials, the vocabulary of diplomacy generated two technical and professional denominations, i.e., maître des ceremonies in France and master of ceremonies in the English-speaking world. However, under the impact of the French Revolution’s egalitarian ideas and the rational and utilitarian orientation of modern diplomacy, critics started to dismiss ceremonials as pompous grandiloquence, ridiculous excesses and irrelevant misrepresentations of diplomatic phenomena.

Still, funeral diplomacy outweighs other forms of ceremonial as regards opportunity and effectiveness in the current practice of diplomacy. Alternatively called working funerals, death ceremonies have become

¹⁹ Wood and Serres, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

²⁰ Jonsson and Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48.

prominent public diplomatic events especially after the 1960s; commonly occurring as impromptu summits, funeral ceremonies are operational 'side consultations', amplifying the consequential roles of diplomatic encounters. Their peculiar advantages are either auspicious or momentous: from the opportunity to meet a new government or the favorable occasion of receiving an enemy as a compassionate mourner, up to situations facilitating negotiations, follow-up developments, rapprochement and reconciliation, funeral diplomacy may consistently contribute to augmenting outcomes of commonplace diplomatic conjunctures. Moreover, they are favorable circumstances to be exploited in the benefit of searching for peaceful solutions or compromises under the solemnity of the moment, and solemnizing or strengthening previous fragile international agreements. Risks and disadvantages are notable as well: the host countries have usually to confront the task of calibrating the attendance level and eliminating possible disparities, the time pressure for optimal organization of the event is high and they have to minimize the effects of uncomfortable head to head meetings between high-level representatives of unfriendly states. The most notorious and impactful funeral ceremonies in the second half of the twentieth century were prompted by the deaths of the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, of the three Soviet presidents in the 1980s and of the Japanese Emperor Hirohito in 1989.²¹

Protocol as precedence. Privileges and immunities.

Diplomatic protocol reveals its full-fledged functional character in matters of statuses; thus, precedence, ranking, prerogatives, privileges and immunities are governed by protocol standardization of hierarchies and granting of diplomatic rights. In no other sector of diplomacy, the functionality of protocol is more obvious; in fact, functions in diplomacy are the result of codified international standards in regard to i) precedence

²¹ G. R. Berridge, *The Counter-Revolution in Diplomacy and Other Essays*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 103-119.

(official state hierarchy of dignitaries, ranking of similar positions within the diplomatic corps, ordering of seats at international conference tables, order of signatures on collective treaties, etc.), ii) privileges and immunities of diplomats (inviolability from killing, robbery or detention, extraterritoriality of embassies' buildings, diplomatic asylum, exemption from taxation, etc.), and iii) ranking (system of classification and order of diplomatic ranks).

Precedence has been the most typical norm of social protocol since early modernity.²² In the medieval era, up to the end of the 15th century, papal representatives came first, preceding the dignitaries of the Holy Roman Empire; moreover, precedence was regulated by the papal ranking of European monarchs.²³ During the 16th and 17th centuries, it incorporated a series of symbolic functions and expressions of competition, power, reputation, dignity, honor and authority. More precisely, precedence has stood for socialization of diplomatic relations, covering and being indicative for a multitude of daily practices in international relations, such as the regulation of guests' entry order at the city gates, the preeminence on receiving rather than making visits, the ordering of signatures, the organization of receptions and coronations, etc. In the 'status-conscious age' of the 17th century, peace negotiations could be gravely endangered by neglecting strict consideration of precedence rules.²⁴ For instance, medieval and modern history depicted at length the enduring conflict between France and Spain on issues pertaining to precedence, until its 1761 settlement due to a bilateral agreement. Most recently, it has been decided that mere alphabetical order should prevail in cases of precedence irresoluteness or confusions.²⁵

²² Harry W. Kopp and Charles A. Gillespie, *Career Diplomacy: Life and Work in the US Foreign Service*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011, p. 69.

²³ Jonsson and Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

²⁴ Matthew S. Anderson, *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy 1450-1919*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 15-18, 64-65.

²⁵ Jonsson and Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

Privileges and immunities have resulted out of controversies between states regarding the protection of their officials on the territories of the receiving states; originating in the Roman code of *ius gentium*, the fact that foreign diplomats are exempted from the receiving country's legislation has been under criticism for generating the so-called 'legal bubble' phenomenon.²⁶ The debatable status of diplomats was solved by a series of international conventions on prerogatives, privileges and immunities. First, article 105, paragraph 1, of the United Nations Charter – adopted June 26, 1945 – stipulated a principled respect for certain privileges and immunities which should be guaranteed to United Nations members. Second, the above-mentioned resolution further prompted the adoption by the General Assembly of the Convention on Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, on February 13, 1946, granting certain diplomatic and functional immunities. Then, on November 21, 1947, the General Assembly moved towards the ratification of Convention on Privileges and Immunities of Specialized Agencies, expanding the individual prerogatives of the kind to specific agencies of the United Nations. Finally, the two Vienna conventions on diplomatic and consular relations (adopted 1961 and 1963, respectively) amalgamated all previous efforts with the goal of finding reasonable solutions to privileges and immunities dilemmas.²⁷ Articles 29-39 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations listed and enumerated precise privileges and immunities of diplomatic agents. The most important of them point at the inviolability of the person, communications and premises, the ascertaining of criminal and civil jurisdictional immunities, the courtesy prerogatives on immigration, religious freedom, tax exemptions, customs and social security issues, war immunities and the issuing of diplomatic passports.²⁸

²⁶ Harry Kopp and Charles Gillespie, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.

²⁷ Hecht, Boulgaris and Jazairy, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

²⁸ Wood and Serres, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-63.

The establishment of *diplomatic ranks* completes the functional distinctions between statuses, dignities, prestige and merits, further refining the diplomatic professional hierarchies. The idea of awarding individual ranks has deep-rooted origins in ancient Greece, where formal ranking distinctions were made between heralds, envoys, messengers and proxenoi (consuls). Later in the 17th century, the procurator, who was not only assigned to mere deliverance of messages, but also to negotiate a treaty, was awarded the rank of 'plenipotentiary'. In the end, the 1815 Congress of Vienna and the 1961 Vienna Convention, respectively, reached clear-cut distinctions and classifications of ranks, generally distinguishing between ambassadors, ministers, charges d'affaires and secretaries.²⁹

Coda

Advanced reflection upon the in-depth meanings and references of functions and applications of diplomatic protocol, and – more challenging – upon its institutionalization and ritualization would be necessarily conducive to adopting an overall distinction between what I would call *protocol in diplomacy* and *protocol on diplomacy*, respectively.

Protocol in diplomacy consistently points at its roles, functions and placement within the comprehensive system of diplomatic facts. Accordingly, it enters the structural configuration of integral diplomacy, being a substantial component of the system per se. Following the line of the argument, it means that protocol in diplomacy is one of the instruments of diplomacy, operating in conjunction with other 'branches' of diplomacy; consequently, it would be consistent with its functional and procedural attributes and would bear upon certain institutional arrangements specifically created in the service of diplomatic ends. The present study approached protocol functions and protocol as precedence, prerogatives, privileges and immunities as meaningful instantiations of protocol in diplomacy.

²⁹ Jonsson and Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

Protocol on diplomacy would be the auxiliary add-on to substantive diplomacy by essentially attempting at formalizing diplomatic facts and phenomena. Accordingly, it overtly performs administrative duties in relation with diplomatic events and carefully supervises on the display of smooth and good practices in the field. In order to ensure the rigorous progress of diplomatic events, protocol on diplomacy would be about the enforcement of regulations and commonsense rituals codified in symbolic gestures, good manners and courtesy conduct. Being external to substantive diplomacy, it applies a set of norms and regulations as guiding formalities with the specific aim of securing the success of diplomatic interactions. Protocol as etiquette and protocol as ceremonial are explanatory references of protocol on diplomacy.

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