

Understanding diplomacy: The act of negotiating with foreign countries

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The foreign ministers of China, Russia, the United States, the European Union and Iran, among others, attend a meeting in 2015 to discuss how much nuclear power Iran could use. Photo from U.S. Department of State

Diplomacy is a way to influence foreign governments through dialogue, negotiation and other measures short of war or violence. Historically, diplomacy involved the conduct of official relations between two countries. By the 20th century, however, that had changed to include a wide range of activities.

The Nature Of Diplomacy

Diplomacy is often confused with foreign policy, but the terms are not synonymous. A country's foreign policy includes the goals it aims to achieve with respect to other countries, and the means of achieving them.

Although diplomacy is the primary means of carrying out a country's foreign policy, it is not the only one. Countries also use secret agents and war to reach their goals. Foreign policy is mainly set by political leaders, but most diplomacy is conducted by career professionals called diplomats. Often, diplomats are also called envoys.

Diplomats try to develop good will toward their home country, and to expand international cooperation. However, diplomats may also threaten other countries with economic or military force.

Diplomats specialize in carrying messages and resolving disputes. Words are their tools. Their words are backed by the power of the country or organization they represent. Diplomats help political leaders understand the attitudes and actions of foreigners, but they also help develop ways to influence the behavior of foreign governments.

Diplomatic Agents And Agencies

The United Nations, or U.N., is an international organization with a purpose to support diplomacy between its member countries. In 1961, the U.N. adopted the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. This convention spells out the different levels of diplomatic agents.

The highest-ranking diplomats are ambassadors, who personally represent the head of state (president or prime minister) of their home country. Next in rank are envoys and ministers; these agents also serve as diplomats, but they are not direct representatives of their head of state.

Some countries have ministers of foreign affairs. They are government members. Their job is to handle foreign policy and talk to other diplomats. Instead of a minister of foreign affairs, the U.S. has a secretary of state.

Diplomatic Missions



A diplomatic mission is a group of people sent to a foreign country to carry out the tasks of diplomacy. The term "mission" is frequently used to describe an embassy. This is a permanent resident diplomatic mission located in the capital of the host country. The embassy is the office for ambassadors and staff, but it may also include the ambassador's residence.

Another type of mission is a consulate. Consulates handle the business and legal interests of citizens living, visiting or doing business in the host country.

Rights And Privileges

By international agreement, all heads of diplomatic missions receive the same protections. Most diplomats and their families are inviolable, meaning they cannot be searched or harmed in any way. This immunity exists even in wartime.

In their host country, diplomats are free to talk about their home government's policies. They can do this even when the policies are unwelcome to their hosts. However, direct criticism of the host government may result in a diplomat being asked to leave.

The physical property of the mission is protected as well. The mission's archives and official correspondence are inviolable, even if relations are severed or war is declared. The head of a mission's residence and the embassy are extraterritorial. That means they are treated as if they were part of the home country's territory, not that of the host country. No official of the host country, not even local firefighters, can enter the embassy without its consent. For this reason, political opponents of harsh regimes often seek asylum in embassies.

Diplomatic Tasks

A diplomatic mission carries out many tasks. These include representing the sending country in the host country and protecting the interests of the sending country and its citizens.

The mission also negotiates agreements with the host country and gathers information on its local conditions. Missions promote friendly relations between the two countries and further economic, commercial and cultural contacts.

Role Of The Ambassador

A diplomat's primary daily activities are collecting and studying information as well as negotiating. An ambassador also entertains and attends receptions frequently.

Ambassadors send reports to their home country, usually in an encrypted form to maintain secrecy. The ambassador must inform his government in detail about the content of his conversations with government officials in the host country.

Negotiation

Negotiation is a complex process that leads to agreement, which is usually based on compromise. Each ambassador must negotiate with other countries as instructed by his or her superiors.

Negotiators usually demand far more at the beginning than they expect to receive in the end. Each side tests the other side's firmness and its willingness to reach an agreement. There may be bluffing to gain an advantage, though it is important for diplomats not to be caught bluffing. Lying in diplomatic negotiations is considered a mistake, but stretching the truth, or not telling the whole truth, is permitted.

Diplomatic Instruments

If negotiation succeeds, the result is written in a formal diplomatic instrument. There are several types.

Treaties

The most solemn type of instrument is a treaty — a written, binding contract between countries. They may be bilateral, involving two countries, or multilateral, involving three or more. International organizations also forge treaties both with individual countries and with each other.

Conventions

A convention is an agreement among several countries, and it creates international laws or regulates the behavior of countries. Treaties and conventions require ratification, or an act of final approval. In the United States, the Senate must consent to a treaty by a two-thirds vote.

Agreements

Agreements are usually made between two countries and generally deal with narrow, technical topics.

Protocols

A protocol extends or replaces an existing instrument, like a treaty or an agreement. The protocol may contain new details to that previous effort. These details can include a new deadline or a technical change in wording.

Conferences And Summits



In conferences, political leaders, not diplomats, usually play the key role. This is especially true of summits, or meetings attended by heads of state. Larger conferences are called to address specific international problems, like climate change or trade.

Diplomatic Personnel

Diplomats must be well trained, and most are professional people with university degrees and some knowledge of foreign languages. In the U.S., however, presidents often give ambassadorships to people who supported them during their campaigns.

The most common languages for diplomats are English, French and Spanish. Arabic, Chinese, German, Japanese, Portuguese and Russian are important as well. Most countries require that diplomats have a knowledge of economics, geography, international politics and law.

The Need For Diplomacy

Diplomacy has been practiced since ancient times, and today there are thousands of diplomatic missions worldwide. The number of independent countries and international entities has grown, as have the tasks for diplomacy.

Through diplomacy, it is possible to tackle thorny issues like ending drug trafficking and promoting human rights. It may be hard, and sometimes impossible, for countries to reach an agreement. Even so, diplomats spend their lives making this happen.

Quiz

- 1 The sentence below from the section "Negotiation" helps prove the claim that honesty is essential in negotiations.

Lying in diplomatic negotiations is considered a mistake, but stretching the truth, or not telling the whole truth, is permitted.

Which sentence from the section provides further support for the claim?

- (A) Negotiation is a complex process that leads to agreement, which is usually based on compromise.
 - (B) Negotiators usually demand far more at the beginning than they expect to receive in the end.
 - (C) Each side tests the other side's firmness and its willingness to reach an agreement.
 - (D) There may be bluffing to gain an advantage, though it is important for diplomats not to be caught bluffing.
- 2 Which section from the article BEST explains why diplomacy is distinct from foreign policy?
- (A) Introduction [paragraph 1]
 - (B) "The Nature Of Diplomacy"
 - (C) "Diplomatic Tasks"
 - (D) "The Need For Diplomacy"
- 3 What is the MAIN reason why the author includes the section "Rights And Privileges"?
- (A) to distinguish the responsibilities of sending and hosting countries
 - (B) to predict that diplomats will never get in trouble
 - (C) to explain how diplomats are able to do challenging work safely
 - (D) to identify individuals authorized to enter the mission

- 4 Read the introductory paragraph of the article.

Diplomacy is a way to influence foreign governments through dialogue, negotiation and other measures short of war or violence. Historically, diplomacy involved the conduct of official relations between two countries. By the 20th century, however, that had changed to include a wide range of activities.

How does this introduction develop the main idea of the article?

- (A) It provides an example of how countries use diplomacy to solve problems.
- (B) It introduces the duties and responsibilities of diplomats in the 20th century.
- (C) It defines diplomacy and how that definition has evolved.
- (D) It explains why diplomacy is necessary in the 20th century.