

Diplomacy in the Age of Polarization

Christer Jönsson

Abstract

Two questions are addressed in this essay: (1) Is polarization understood differently in international relations, as compared to domestic politics? (2) How does domestic polarization affect diplomacy and the conduct of international relations? In the international context, polarization traditionally has been understood primarily in terms of power balances rather than irreconcilable conflict, as in the domestic context. A new kind of bipolarity, which combines aspects of power with irreconcilable identities and objectives, seems to be emerging: democratic versus autocratic states. Domestic polarization has several spillover effects on diplomacy in today's world. The inability to compromise at home becomes the *modus operandi* in the international arena. Domestic polarization stands in the way of effective cooperation on burning global issues, entails obvious risks that the venerable norm *pacta sunt servanda* will be violated, and undermines the sense of common domestic purpose that is usually perceived to strengthen diplomacy.

Keywords: Domestic polarization, international system, new bipolarity.

Conflicts and disagreements are natural and inevitable components of social life and of politics at all levels. Democracy is an institution that facilitates the resolution of political conflicts by peaceful means domestically. Its counterpart at the international level is diplomacy. Both institutions rest on a norm of coexistence, allowing antagonists to “live and let live.” Coexistence, in turn, presumes a long-term perspective. Conflicts are then not regarded as one-shot affairs with clear-cut winners and losers, but as episodes of ongoing relations. Diplomatic historian Garrett Mattingly has argued that “unless people realize that they have to live together, indefinitely, in spite of their differences, diplomats have no place to stand.”¹ This long-term perspective applies to democracy as well.

Christer Jönsson is Professor Emeritus, Department of Political Science, Lund University; Member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences; and Research Associate at the Centre for Research on Democracy (CREDO), Stellenbosch University, South Africa. <christer.jonsson@svet.lu.se>

¹ Gareth Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), 196.

Polarization is a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension and disagreements become tribal. Politics and society are perceived in terms of “us” versus “them.” Those in the opposing camp are ascribed nefarious, often immoral, intentions. The norm of coexistence, basic to democracy as well as diplomacy, presupposes recognition of political opponents as legitimate players, whose views are respected even if one does not agree with them. Polarization implies denial of the norm of coexistence and the long-term perspective on which it is based. The assumption that the only permanent solution is the destruction of the other represents a threat to democracy as well as diplomacy. Extreme polarization portends civil war domestically and armed conflict internationally.

This short essay addresses two questions: (1) Is polarization understood differently in international relations, as compared to domestic politics? (2) How does domestic polarization affect diplomacy and the conduct of international relations? The harmful effects of polarization on democracy are treated in detail in other contributions to this theme issue; the question here is whether polarization has comparable effects on diplomacy.

Polarity in the International Systems

For students of International Relations (IR), the terms polarity and polarization evoke associations with the distribution of power among states. More specifically, the contrast between bipolar and multipolar international systems has been thoroughly studied by IR scholars. In a multipolar system—sometimes labeled a balance-of-power system—power and influence are distributed widely among the interacting states, with no clear hierarchy of status among them. None permanently dominates the others. Europe from 1789 to 1939 is often referred to as an example of a multipolar system. In multipolar systems, coalitions are unstable and shifting, members are not dependent upon each other, and ideological issues are rarely prominent. The metaphor of a pair of scales has been frequently used, on which the balancing of power could be accomplished either by diminishing the weight of the heavier scale or by increasing the weight of the lighter scale. The “holder” of the balance constitutes another metaphorical element of a multipolar system. It refers to a state which has neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies but only a permanent interest in maintaining the balance of power. Great Britain is the classic example of a holder of the balance in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe.

In a bipolar system, by contrast, military power and diplomatic authority are concentrated in two dominant states, with lesser states aligning with one of these, like iron filings attracted to either pole of a magnet. The two bloc leaders “dominate or lead lesser units by combining rewards—such as providing security and economic assistance—with implicit or explicit

threats of punishment against recalcitrant allies.”² “Two superpowers, each incomparably stronger than any other power or possible combination of other powers, oppose each other.”³ Conflicts and issues contain strong ideological overtones. The flexibility of multipolar systems and its restraining influence on the power aspirations of the main protagonists have disappeared. The Cold War environment after World War II is the prime example of a bipolar system. Whereas bipolarity and multipolarity are archetypical variants, at times there have been allusions to unipolarity (the United States alone) and tripolarity (the U.S., Soviet Union/Russia, and China).

The link between international polarity, in this traditional understanding, and domestic democracy is weak and far from obvious. The Cold War experience indicated that bipolarity could have a detrimental effect on the evolution of democracy. For instance, the anti-Soviet stance of allies was more important for the United States than their democratic records. Conversely, any sign of democratization in the Eastern bloc was interpreted by the Soviet Union as a slide toward the other pole.

In the international context, polarization has been thus understood in terms of power balances rather than irreconcilable conflict, as in the domestic context. “Intractable conflicts” perhaps may be seen as the international counterpart of domestic polarization. These are “conflicts that have persisted over time and refused to yield to efforts—either by the direct parties, or, more often, with third-party assistance—to arrive at a political settlement.”⁴ Intractable conflicts involve polarized, zero-sum perceptions of identity and enmity. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict along with Cyprus and Kashmir are prominent examples of intractable conflicts. Samuel Huntington’s controversial prediction that the clash of nine civilizations would shape international relations in the post-Cold War world can be seen as an example of international polarization understood in terms of intractable conflicts.⁵

However, another kind of bipolarity, which combines traditional aspects of power with irreconcilable identities and objectives, seems to be emerging in today’s world: democratic versus autocratic states and leaders. This has been, of course, an underlying dichotomy throughout modern history, but recently it has been elevated to a defining polarity in contemporary world affairs. According to the *Economist’s* preview of the world in 2022, democracy versus autocracy

² Kalevi J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 93.

³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 350.

⁴ Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, “Why Mediation Matters: Ending Intractable Conflicts,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, ed. Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk, and I. William Zartman (London: SAGE, 2009), 493.

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

will be a major trend to watch, “a rivalry that will play out in everything from trade to tech regulation, vaccinations to space stations.”⁶

Freedom House entitled its 2021 annual report “Democracy under Siege,” noting that the international balance was shifting in favor of tyranny.⁷ Perceptions of such an imbalance lay behind U.S. President Joe Biden’s initiative to convene world leaders from government, civil society, and the private sector in a first-ever virtual Summit for Democracy, December 9-10, 2021. In his opening speech, President Biden called the defense of democracy against authoritarianism “the defining challenge of our time.”⁸ The summit provided a platform for leaders to make both individual and collective commitments to defend democracy around the world. After about a year, a second summit will take stock of the progress made and forge a common path ahead.

At the other pole, authoritarian leaders, unlike earlier dictators, collaborate and exchange resources in a complex network. Anne Applebaum speaks of “Autocracy Inc.”:

Nowadays, autocracies are run not by one bad guy, but by sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial structures, security services (military, police, paramilitary groups, surveillance), and professional propagandists. The members of these networks are connected not only within a given country, but also among many countries. The corrupt, state-controlled companies in one dictatorship do business with corrupt, state-controlled companies in another. The police in one country can arm, equip, and train the police in another. The propagandists share resources—the troll farms that promote one dictator’s propaganda can also be used to promote the propaganda of another—and themes, pounding home the same messages about the weakness of democracy and the evil of America.⁹

The new autocratic network has no unifying ideology. “Their links are cemented not by ideals but by deals.”¹⁰ International pariahs, such as the regimes in Belarus and Venezuela, get support from other members of

⁶ Tom Standage, “Ten Trends to Watch in the Coming Year,” *Economist*, November 8, 2021.

⁷ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege,” 2021, /Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege | Freedom House/ (accessed January 25, 2022).

⁸ White House, *Summit for Democracy Summary of Proceedings*, December 23, 2021, /Summit for Democracy Summary of Proceedings | The White House/.

⁹ Anne Applebaum, “The Bad Guys Are Winning,” *The Atlantic*, November 15, 2021, /Autocracy Is Winning - The Atlantic/.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Autocracy Inc., Russia and China in particular. Members of Autocracy Inc. tend to be impervious to international criticism; Russia, for one, goes beyond merely ignoring foreign criticism to outright mocking it. Vladimir Putin's decision to attack Ukraine on February 24, 2022, rested on a perception of enfeebled Western democracies that would put up little resistance.

Whereas the Sino-Soviet split from the late 1950s onward threatened to undermine the bipolarity of the Cold War and paved the way for the U.S.-Chinese rapprochement in 1972, today China and Russia are united in their front against Western democracies. Xi Jinping and Putin have had thirty-seven video meetings, according to Chinese media. "Certain international forces under the guise of 'democracy' and 'human rights' are interfering in the internal affairs of China and Russia," said Xi in connection with one of these meetings in December 2021. Russia and China support each other in the UN Security Council, conduct joint military exercises, and engage increasingly in mutual trade and technology exchanges. While the two countries do not have a formal alliance, Xi has assured Putin that "in its closeness and effectiveness, this relationship even exceeds an alliance."¹¹ The strong economic sanctions against Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine have made Russia more dependent on the economically superior China, and have elevated China to a leading role in Autocracy Inc.

In this new bipolarity, autocracies try to undermine democracies by means of propaganda, disinformation, cyberattacks, interventions in elections, and support of extremist politicians and parties within democracies. Democracies, for their part, impose personal sanctions on individual leaders and firms within autocracies, while supporting harried prodemocracy forces. The fact that democratic countries rely heavily on trade with autocracies, especially China, reduces their ability to effectively influence developments in Autocracy Inc. The war in Ukraine has revealed the irreconcilable nature of the bipolarity between democracies and autocracies and has exposed the relative strengths and vulnerabilities of the poles.

In contrast to the bipolarity of the Cold War era, the emerging new bipolarity is directly linked to domestic politics. In this new conceptualization, in fact, the nature of the domestic political system is the defining characteristic of international polarization. And the evolution of the global polarization will be a contributing factor affecting the resilience or vulnerability of democracy. In other words, polarization in the international system will have an impact on polarization in democracies in the years to come.

¹¹ Anton Troianovski and Steven Lee Myers, "Putin and Xi Show United Front amid Rising Tensions with U.S.," *New York Times*, December 15, 2021, /Putin and Xi Hold Video Summit - The New York Times (nytimes.com)/, and Marianne Björklund, "De enas i drömmen om en ny världsordning" [They are united in a dream about a new world order], *Dagens Nyheter*, January 31, 2022, A12-13.

Domestic Polarization and Diplomacy

Polarization in the international system affects domestic democracy and, conversely, polarization in democratic polities may impact the conduct of international relations. The remainder of this essay focuses on the interrelations between domestic polarization and diplomacy in today's world. This exploratory and tentative exercise concentrates on five crucial aspects of diplomacy: (1) recognition, (2) negotiation, (3) international cooperation, (4) *pacta sunt servanda*, and (5) representation.

Recognition

Diplomatic recognition has become essential to statehood in the modern world. Recognition is a “ticket of general admission to the international arena.”¹² International lawyers, diplomats, and statesmen agree that statehood requires a central government that exercises effective control over a defined territory and a permanent population and has the capacity to enter relations with other states. Yet, there are examples of nonrecognition of units that fulfill these criteria as well as recognition of units that do not fulfill them. Thus, recognition is ultimately a political act.

The Congress of Vienna in 1815 established that states would not be regarded as sovereign unless recognized by other powers, primarily the great powers of the day. The Final Act of the Congress listed thirty-nine sovereign states in Europe, much fewer than the number of units claiming to be sovereign.¹³ After 1815, in the Concert of Europe era, members of the Holy Alliance tended to treat revolutionary or republican governments as outlaws to be excluded from the “club.”¹⁴ Nor did the European states allow non-European states into the “club.” Despite commercial relations with Asian states, whose rulers were treated as if they were sovereign, none was recognized as a state. Imperialism implied “civilizing” rather than recognizing state-like units.¹⁵

After World War II, recognition and nonrecognition became prominent political instruments because of three major developments. Most important was the ideological and strategic rivalry of the two superpowers, but concomitant processes of decolonization and the proliferation of international organizations also contributed to bringing issues of diplomatic recognition to the forefront.¹⁶

¹² Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 16.

¹³ Kalevi J. Holsti, *Taming the Sovereigns: Institutional Change in International Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 128.

¹⁴ Peter Malanczuk, *Akehurst's Modern Introduction to International Law*, 7th revised ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 83.

¹⁵ Holsti, *Taming the Sovereigns*, 129.

¹⁶ Margaret Doxey, “‘Something Old, Something New’: The Politics of Recognition in Post-Cold-War Europe,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 6, no. 2 (July 1995): 303-322.

For example, the three developments in the first postwar decade combined to create an impasse in the United Nations concerning the admission of new member states. The United States and the Soviet Union long attempted to win recognition and membership for those newly independent states in the Third World which they supported politically, while denying admission of those supported by the rival superpower. The most striking manifestations of political use of the recognition tool during the Cold War were, of course, the cases of China and the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

With the end of the Cold War, the political use of recognition did not disappear but changed character. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet empire, and the violent break-up of Yugoslavia entailed complex issues of state succession and contested recognition.

As this truncated historical review indicates, diplomatic recognition is to a considerable extent a political instrument to indicate approval or disapproval. In the same way that bipolarity has tended to exclude diplomatic recognition of states from the opposing bloc, domestic polarization in many countries today tends to deny the legitimacy of the other party or parties. There are few signs of domestic polarization spilling over to withdrawal of diplomatic recognition of states perceived as allies to the opposing camp. Once a state has been granted wide diplomatic recognition, it continues to be treated as a legitimate counterpart, even in the face of severe differences and conflicts—in contrast to the treatment of opposing parties in polarized societies. Putin’s refusal to recognize Ukraine as an independent state is a notable exception, which has less to do with domestic polarization than with the emerging new global bipolarity.

Negotiation

Negotiation is commonly seen as the core of diplomacy. In fact, several authors define diplomacy in terms of negotiations. For example, Adam Watson, in a classic work, characterizes diplomacy as “negotiations between political entities which acknowledge each other’s independence.”¹⁷ Negotiations rest on the confluence of cooperative and conflictual elements (common and opposed interests) as well as interdependent decisions.¹⁸ “Without common interest there is nothing to negotiate for, without conflict nothing to negotiate about.”¹⁹

The negotiating process can be seen as a chain of mutual influence attempts, but also of mutual adjustments. It should not be forgotten that “negotiation requires of each participant the ability not only to persuade but to be persuaded.”²⁰ If the negotiating parties lack the willingness to adjust their

¹⁷ Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1982), 33.

¹⁸ Christer Jönsson, *Communication in International Bargaining* (London: Pinter, 1980), 2.

¹⁹ Fred Charles Iklé, *How Nations Negotiate* (New York: Praeger, 1964), 2.

²⁰ Suzanne Keller, “Diplomacy and Communication,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1956):181.

initial positions, negotiations turn into what the French call *le dialogue des sourds*—the dialogue of the deaf.²¹ This is precisely what happens in polarized political systems. The polar opposites refuse to listen to the other side's arguments or, even for a moment, acknowledge the validity of some of these arguments. Concessions are seen as signs of weakness: one's own refusal to concede is seen as evidence of firmness and righteousness; a concession by the other side is seen either as a trap or as an indication that one has overestimated the strength of the opponent and should increase one's demands.

By the same token, compromise is a concept with negative rather than positive connotations in a polarized setting. To secure one's own objectives and defeat those of the adversary is regarded as the essence of politics, rather than finding common ground. The polarization between Republicans and Democrats in the United States is a case in point. Deadlock is preferred to compromise.

In this regard, domestic polarization has a spillover effect on diplomacy. The inability to compromise at home becomes the *modus operandi* in the international arena. William J. Burns, a veteran U.S. diplomat, argues that the United States "is stuck in the mud of its own polarized dysfunction." The aversion to compromise goes back to the years of the Obama administration. Burns cites a bizarre example:

Even when Bob Dole—grievously wounded in World War II, and later a Senate majority leader and GOP presidential candidate—sat in his wheelchair on the Senate floor in 2012 and asked his fellow Republicans to ratify an international disability treaty modeled on U.S. law, nearly all of them walked past him to vote nay, bent on denying Barack Obama a victory of any kind.²²

Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran testified to the administration's view of concessions as signs of weakness. Viktor Orbán's Hungary and Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil are other examples of the aversion to negotiations and compromises by the leaders of polarized states. The conclusion that domestic polarization has detrimental effects on diplomacy as far as negotiations are concerned is ineluctable.

International Cooperation

Several of today's most urgent issues are global in character. National efforts at solutions are inadequate, and international cooperation is necessary. Efforts

²¹ Ross Stagner, *Psychological Aspects of International Conflict* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1967), 157.

²² William J. Burns, "Polarized Politics Has Infected American Diplomacy," *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2020, /Polarized Politics Has Infected American Diplomacy - The Atlantic/.

to achieve international cooperation can be seen as a “two-level game.”²³ Successful cooperation requires a “win-set” that is determined not only by strategies at the interstate level, but also by preferences and coalitions as well as institutions at the national level. Thus, diplomatic actors simultaneously need to take account of and, if possible, influence the expected reactions of other actors, both at home and abroad.

To the extent that global issues constitute part and parcel of domestic polarization, such win-sets cannot be identified. Hence, cooperation across national boundaries becomes more difficult or virtually impossible. Climate change is a case in point. In the United States, Democrats and Republicans differ radically in their approach to—and trust in—scientific reports. In Hungary, Orbán has dismissed EU plans to tackle climate change as a “utopian fantasy,”²⁴ while facing growing heat from the opposition. Referring to rising energy prices, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of Poland’s ruling party, has similarly ridiculed the EU plans, arguing that “citizens will simply not agree to further increases in the name of some unproved theory.”²⁵ Meanwhile, the Polish government faces citizen lawsuits over its alleged failure to protect the population from the impact of climate change.²⁶ During Bolsonaro’s administration, deforestation rates have surged by 50 percent, and encroachment of protected land more than doubled. A group of indigenous leaders and human rights activists has requested the International Criminal Court to investigate Bolsonaro for “ecocide.”²⁷ As these examples indicate, climate change policy, while high on the international agenda, is also an important divisive force in polarized societies.

Migration is another issue area poisoned by polarization. The mass movement into Europe of more than a million refugees and migrants (many fleeing conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq) in 2015 provided extreme nationalist parties with a favorite political platform and strengthened their popular base in many countries. The struggle between a humanitarian approach, on the one hand, and currents of xenophobia and racism, on the

²³ Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 428-460, and Peter B. Evans, Harold K. Jacobson, and Robert D. Putnam, eds., *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

²⁴ Reuters, “‘Utopian Fantasy’: Hungary’s Orban Dismisses EU Climate Policy Plans,” October 21, 2021, /‘Utopian fantasy’: Hungary’s Orban dismisses EU climate policy plans | Reuters/.

²⁵ Reuters, “Russia Is Making EU Climate Goals Look ‘Ridiculous’, Says Poland’s Kaczynski,” October 20, 2021, /Russia is making EU climate goals look ‘ridiculous’, says Poland’s Kaczynski | Reuters/.

²⁶ Reuters, “Poland Faces First Citizen Lawsuits over Climate Change,” June 10, 2021, /Poland faces first citizen lawsuits over climate change (trust.org)/.

²⁷ Luciano Huck, “Brazil’s Bolsonaro Needs to Get Real on Climate Change,” *Financial Times*, March 11, 2021, /Brazil’s Bolsonaro needs to get real on climate change | Financial Times (ft.com)/.

other, has contributed to the polarization of politics in Europe and the United States. This, in turn, has precluded wide-ranging cooperation on migration in either the EU or the Organization of American States (OAS). In short, domestic polarization stands in the way of effective cooperation on some of the most burning global issues.

Pacta Sunt Servanda

Ever since the beginning of recorded diplomacy, a vital benchmark has been that treaties and agreements should be honored. In the Ancient Near East, treaties invariably ended with summons to the deities of both parties to act as witnesses to the treaty provisions; and explicit threats of divine retribution were envisaged in case of violation. Oaths were sworn by the gods of both parties, so that each ruler exposed himself to the punishment of both sets of deities should he fail to comply.²⁸ Moreover, the conclusion of treaties was accompanied by sacrifice and other gestures symbolic of the punishment that would follow a breach of the treaty. In addition to sacrificing an animal in connection with swearing the oath, each ruler was said to “touch his throat.” Possibly he drew a knife, or perhaps a finger, across his throat, symbolizing the fate of treaty breakers.²⁹

There is a striking similarity with treaty rituals in Ancient China. There, too, an animal was sacrificed. The treaty document was bound to the sacrificial animal, whose left ear was cut off. Both the document and the lips of the rulers were smeared with blood from the ear. The document, one copy of which was buried with the sacrificial animal while the signatories kept one copy each, contained an oath invoking the wrath of the gods upon anyone who violated the covenant.³⁰

Even if the graphic symbolism of early treaty-making has been extenuated via libations to the gods in Ancient Greece to ritual champagne toasts in modern diplomacy, the dictum *pacta sunt servanda* remains vital in international relations. Polarization implies that, in the case of a change of power between the polar parties, the agreements entered by the predecessor are not considered valid. For instance, the Trump administration scrapped deals made by the Obama administration: “The Iran nuclear deal (‘an embarrassment’), the Paris climate accord (‘very unfair’), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (‘a rape of our country’), all negotiated by the administration of his Democratic predecessor, wound up on the trash heap.”³¹

²⁸ Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), 80-81.

²⁹ Joan Margaret Munn-Rankin, “Diplomacy in Western Asia in the Early Second Millennium B. C.,” *Iraq* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1956): 89-91; complete article, pp. 68-110, reprinted in *Diplomacy*, vol. II., ed. Christer Jönsson and Richard Langhorne (London: SAGE, 2004), 1-43.

³⁰ Richard I. Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China* (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1953), 82, and Roswell Britton, “Chinese Interstate Intercourse before 700 B. C.,” in *Diplomacy*, vol. II, ed. Christer Jönsson and Richard Langhorne (London: SAGE, 2004), 100.

³¹ William J. Burns, “Polarized Politics Has Infected American Diplomacy,” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2020, / Polarized Politics Has Infected American Diplomacy - The Atlantic/.

Based on his own experiences as a U.S. diplomat, William Burns reflects upon what consequences the effect of polarization may have:

If our elected representatives won't give a negotiated agreement a fair hearing, support it, or at a minimum avoid undercutting it even before the ink dries, why would any friend or foe enter into any kind of good-faith negotiations with the U.S.? And why should they have any confidence that the American government will deliver on its commitments if they do? I remember an Iranian diplomat asking me during an especially difficult moment in the nuclear talks why he should believe that an agreement wouldn't simply be thrown overboard in a different administration. With less than total conviction, I replied that if all parties complied with their obligations, our system would uphold it. I certainly got that wrong.³²

The problem of the effects of polarization is illustrated by the six-month-long talks in Vienna on the future of the Iran nuclear deal, initiated by the Biden administration. One of the sticking points concerns the guarantees Iran is seeking that the U.S. will not repeat Trump's withdrawal from the deal in May 2018. The crux is that the United States cannot offer a legally binding treaty since the Senate would never agree to one. Tehran therefore demands binding commitments that if the U.S. quits the deal, the EU will bypass U.S. sanctions.³³

Domestic polarization, in short, entails obvious risks that the venerable norm *pacta sunt servanda* will be violated. This, in turn, affects the credibility and reliability of the government in the eyes of other states and undercuts the ability of its diplomats to conclude international agreements and pacts.

Representation

Representation, in the sense of standing and acting for others, is a core function of democracy as well as diplomacy. Historically, diplomats represented individual rulers; today they represent states. From Antiquity to the Middle Ages, diplomats were perceived to embody their sovereigns when they represented themselves at foreign courts. Early envoys were to be treated "as though the sovereign himself were there."³⁴ Today, the fiction

³² Ibid.

³³ Patrick Wintour, "Iran Nuclear Talks Deadlock Risks Dangerous Vacuum," *The Guardian*, January 17, 2022, /Iran nuclear talks deadlock risks dangerous vacuum | Iran nuclear deal | The Guardian/.

³⁴ Grant V. McClanahan, *Diplomatic Immunity: Principles, Practices, Problems* (London: Hurst, 1989), 28.

of direct correspondence has been replaced by a common understanding of symbolic representation.

The relationship between representatives and those represented is often analyzed in terms of *principals* and *agents*. Principal-agent relations arise whenever one party (principal) delegates certain tasks to another party (agent). Elected politicians and diplomats are obvious examples of agents, who have been entrusted with certain tasks from their principals (voters/governments). The liberty of action by agents is a matter of intense debate, especially in the literature on representative democracy. At issue is whether agents have an “imperative mandate,” being strictly accountable to their principals, or a “free mandate,” being authorized to act on behalf of their principals.³⁵

Principal-agent relations become problematic in polarized societies, both domestically and in international affairs. Diplomats must ask themselves: How can I represent a polarized state? There are several dimensions to this dilemma. A sense of common domestic purpose is commonly perceived to strengthen diplomacy. “Politics stops at the water’s edge” was an idea first suggested by Republican Senator Arthur Vandenburg and widely adopted under the Truman administration. It implied that diplomats should always present a united front to other countries, despite disagreements at home. But when polarization is rampant and transparent through global media, this dictum becomes unattainable, and the apparent lack of domestic consensus enfeebles diplomacy.

The lack of a firm consensus can be a serious liability in international negotiations, as the other side may try to exploit internal divisions and opposing standpoints. One common dynamic, well-known from repeated Cold War occurrences, is that hard-liners of both sides tend to reinforce each other’s position.

Professional diplomats have at least two personae: their own and that of the state that employs them. “It is a fortunate diplomat who finds the two entirely compatible.”³⁶ This dilemma is aggravated when representing a polarized state. Moreover, a diplomat is a representative not only *of* a state, but also *to* another state. Diplomatic representatives, in this respect, find themselves in *boundary* roles, to use a term favored by organization theorists. As intermediaries between their own organization and its environment, boundary-role occupants must not only represent the organization to its environment, but also represent the environment to their constituents. Living under conditions of separateness, diplomats are, as it were, professional strangers, experiencing distance from both home and abroad. This makes for a specifically diplomatic understanding of the world, “with a sense of distance from the issues and interests which

³⁵ Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 101-108.

³⁶ Montague Stearns, *Talking to Strangers: Improving American Diplomacy at Home and Abroad* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 73.

their senders and receivers think that their international relations are about.”³⁷ Diplomatic thinking emphasizes sustaining dialogue and seeking modes of coexistence, rather than taking an unequivocal stand. All this runs counter to the logic of polarization.

No wonder, then, that polarized states have experienced turbulence within their diplomatic corps. Among U.S. diplomats, there was widespread distress during the Trump administration, and many chose to leave the service. After the July 2016 coup attempt, Turkish authorities recalled about three hundred diplomats from missions abroad; several went missing after failing to meet a deadline to return to Ankara; and three Turkish diplomats sought asylum in Germany. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro incensed the diplomatic establishment when he dispatched three top-level diplomats, who were foreign ministers under the former president Dilma Rousseff, to less prestigious posts in Croatia, Egypt, and Qatar. In interviews with the *Guardian*, doyens of Brazilian diplomacy described their bewilderment, unease, and indignation at the direction their foreign service was taking.³⁸ A unique solution to the representation problem was made by Afghanistan’s ambassador to Sweden, Abbas Noyan, who considers the new Taliban regime illegitimate but remains in office representing “the Afghan people” and keeps the embassy open without support from Kabul.³⁹

In short, the record shows that representing a polarized state is problematic for diplomats. The diplomatic corps has been affected in several ways. For some diplomats, exit has come to be the preferable option.

Conclusion

We are entering an era in which international and domestic polarization intersect and reinforce each other. This short essay has, first, discussed different conceptualizations of polarity in international relations as compared to domestic politics. It has pointed to an emerging bipolarity that is not based on the distribution of power but pits democracies against autocracies. Then, the essay identified five fundamental aspects of diplomacy that are in varying degrees interrelated with polarization at home. The selected themes are by no means exhaustive—other analysts and practitioners no doubt can point to other repercussions—but it is truly difficult to discern any positive effects of polarization on diplomacy.

³⁷ Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 102.

³⁸ Tom Phillips, “Brazilian Diplomats ‘Disgusted’ as Bolsonaro Pulverizes Foreign Policy,” *The Guardian*, June 25, 2019, / Brazilian diplomats ‘disgusted’ as Bolsonaro pulverizes foreign policy | Brazil | The Guardian/.

³⁹ Erik Ohlsson, “Ambassadören utan land vägrar ge upp” [The ambassador without a country refuses to give up], *Dagens Nyheter*, January 24, 2020, A12-13.

