



International Relations: The Worlds of Theory & Practice



The Bridge Project
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Both theorists and practitioners have much to gain from closer interconnections and open dialogue.

In the 1990s, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) experimented with a ‘visiting ambassador’ program. Although few senior IFS officers were appointed at JNU, the program was swiftly terminated due to missteps on both sides. This incident left bitter memories at JNU.

Since then, few Indian public universities have reached out to practitioners. We see more change at private universities. The O P Jindal University (now in the Top Global

800 rank), has an able Ambassador Mohan Kumar as Deputy Dean in its International Affairs programme; it helps that Mohan holds a PhD from Sciences Po. Several others, including Ashoka, Symbiosis, and others have former ambassadors on their teaching faculty. That is all to the good.



Diplomacy in Action — 1: Amb Rana (right) with Pope John Paul II (circa 1990)

The Dissonance between Theory and Practice

Dissonance between the theory and the practice of International Relations (IR) is not unique to India. Consider: international relations theory, so beloved of theorists, connects little with the work of foreign ministries and policy planning units.[1] IR models provide no guidance in the management of diplomacy because they deal with obtuse constructs, and are seldom practice-derived. Diplomacy essentially exists in practice; it is singularly not amenable to theorization.[2]

In a fine 2005 essay, Stanford Professor Alexander George wrote about how academics should approach foreign ministries and diplomats. Declaring that the eyes of the latter ‘glaze over’ when IR theory concepts are mentioned, he suggested that practitioners

would benefit if theorists offered historical parallels to the real life problems that practitioners confront. [3]

Some concepts derived from theory capture real issues. One example: Robert Putnam treats major bilateral negotiations as a ‘two level game’; besides the opposing side, the home public are an invisible entity, to be taken into account, to ensure acceptance of what is negotiated. We witnessed it vividly with the 2005 India-US civilian nuclear deal.



Diplomacy in Action — 2: Amb Rana (right) with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl (circa 1994)

Where do we stand now in the theory-practice dissonance?

In the US, that gulf is finally being bridged. At Harvard, former US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Nicholas Burns’s professorial chair includes ‘diplomatic practice’ in the title. A Service colleague, Rajendra Abhyankar, is among former practitioners occupying similar chairs at US universities.

China has a ‘Foreign Affairs University’ at Beijing, managed by the Foreign Ministry, with a diplomat in the top team. China also runs diplomatic studies programs at other

universities, though its current sharply politicised educational environment poses real challenges.

The real blank is Europe, where the stranglehold of IR academics is too strong to permit ideas from the world of diplomatic practice to enter their campuses. This is visible even at the College of Diplomacy at Bruges. In nine years as ‘guest faculty’ at the Vienna Diplomatic Academy, I saw how much graduate class students thirsted for diplomatic practice information.[4]The UK is an exception, where diplomatic studies has a solid pedigree.[5]

I believe that in India both theorists and practitioners have much to gain from closer interconnections and open dialogue. This is a worthy objective that can benefit both academia plus those that study at these institutions, and foreign ministries and their diplomacy networks.

Footnotes

[1] The Indian MEA has taken an important step by appointing academic scholars to assist its Policy Planning Division. The next logical step would be to send some on contract assignments to major embassies, to act as links with academia and think tanks in those countries, as is the practice followed by some other countries.

[2] This was one of the conclusions offered by Herbert Butterfield, eminent British historian and philosopher. He wrote in 1944: ‘History is not the study of origins; rather it is the analysis of all the mediations by which the past was turned into our present’. See also: ‘The English School, Herbert Butterfield, and Diplomacy’, Paul Sharp, Clingendael Papers on diplomacy, 15 March 2005

[3] See: George, Alexander, and Bennett, Andrew, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005, pp. 67–149

[4] When those students were asked if the many Austrian diplomats that lectured at the Academy did not speak of practice, more than once the response was that they too mainly spoke of theory!

[5] Prof. GR Berridge, Emeritus Prof., Leister University is an exception. His *Diplomacy: Theory & Practice*, (5th edition), arguably the best book on diplomacy, makes a splendid bridge. He trawled through more than 400 years of archival papers for a book that looks at the entire history of a single embassy: *British Diplomacy in Turkey, 1583 to*

the present: A study in the evolution of the resident embassy (Martinus Nijhoff: Leiden, 2009). He has been on the teaching faculty of DiploFoundation, and is a good friend. Preparing material with me for a course on 'Economic Diplomacy' he searched through the 1700 'oral history records' available on the US Library Congress website to find concrete instances of diplomatic practice.:

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