Engaging Home in International Diplomacy: Introduction

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Governments, their foreign ministries and other international actors are increasingly busying themselves with dialogues with people, the smallest units of society. There seems to be a distinct pattern towards more inward-directed conversations on external relations issues and the impact of international and global challenges on the domestic sphere. Arguably, this home dimension of diplomatic work takes place on the margins of international talks and relationships, but we submit that an understanding of things peripheral in diplomatic practice may inform us about shifts in professional culture and what is commonly assumed to be the hard core of diplomacy.

Debates on foreign policy-related concerns, once the preserve and pastime of elites and those orbiting around government, are touching base with society at large. The importance of enhanced state-society dialogue on foreign affairs is now firmly on the radar of national governments in, for instance, the United States, Germany and South Korea, where the phantom of unreachable or fickle publics has swung policy-makers into action. Efforts at informed dialogue and the support of ‘ordinary people’ at home, on a variety of international questions affecting domestic welfare, safety and security, can be seen as symptoms of the changing nature of foreign policy and the politicisation of diplomacy. The stakes can be high. Such domestic interchange often touches directly or
indirectly on topics such as democratic values, populist challenges to the political establishment, the need for democratic revitalisation of parliamentary democracy, people agency outside the sphere of formal politics, and governmental access to the whole of society as well as legitimacy.

The origins and drivers of such participatory practices in diplomacy are likely to be both political and more process-oriented. We maintain that these practices are important and deserve better understanding. Societal discourse on global affairs — which does not stop at the border — is too important to be met with international actors’ relatively uninformed experimentation with national conversations on foreign relations.

This Forum aims to push forward the research agenda on domestic engagement in the practice of diplomacy. Anna Geis, Christian Opitz and Hanna Pfeifer critically assess the case of Germany to show the potential of new dialogue formats in the outreach of foreign ministries directed at citizens, rather than bodies standing for certain sectors of civil society, and they give suggestions for the kind of research that is needed to keep up with these developments. Minseon Kiu’s theoretical discussion of the potential agency of audiences in summit diplomacy contributes significantly to the existing literature, which has so far given little attention to the political space for the general public in international dialogue at the highest level. Yun Zhang’s case study on Japanese foreign policy towards China illustrates how embedded societal norms can exert a moderating effect on foreign policy. He proposes that state-society policy deliberation, at variance with the traditional elite perspective on diplomatic practice, is hence to be understood in terms of the internal projection of diplomacy and hence its societisation.

Moving on to the level of sub-state or paradiplomacy, Scott Michael Harrison and Quinton Huang look at global relations between cities. They make a case against actor-centric thinking and underline the importance of examining relations between local actors and the physical and discursive spaces that constitute the productive middle ground of municipal twinning relationships. Equally at the local level of engagement, Anna Popkova and Jodi Hope Michaels draw attention to the importance of making subaltern ‘counterpublics’ visible in the practice of citizen diplomacy. Their argument is in essence about access to society as a whole, which cannot be taken for granted, and recognition of domestic diversity, equity and inclusion in international exchange. Going one step further in the analysis of grassroots diplomacy, Štěpánka Zemanová introduces the Junior Diplomacy Initiative (originally Czech) as an example of civic participation in international affairs, underscoring the significance of independent youth interactions in diplomacy. Alisher Faizullaev concludes the Forum with a normative argument on the nature of social diplomacy as
relationship-building and its domestic socialisation, which is the diffusion of diplomatic norms and practices in a broad social and domestic context.

We hope this Forum shows that there is a need for better theoretical and empirical understanding of state-society relations as an integral part of the narrative on contemporary diplomacy. The ‘mood of the country’ has always influenced foreign policy capacity and international state behaviour, but society across the world has become more dynamic, is expressing more pronounced opinions on foreign policy-related matters affecting the domestic sphere, and people are claiming greater agency. We suggest that national governments and other international actors have some way to go in their conceptual understanding and practices of diplomatic engagement with ‘ordinary people’ and we hope that students of diplomacy will further analyse the trends touched upon in this Forum.

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