

Businesses, associations and a multi-actor diplomacy

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One of the reasons the science and art of Business Diplomacy is interesting, is because it puts the role of the nation in another, somewhat reduced, perspective. Instead of the nation, it puts a company at the focal point of an exchange of interests with NGO's and other national and international players. This is a reflection of a world that becomes ever more complicated: a truly multi-actor world, implicating great global challenges for international companies. But changing the perspective from the nation state to that of business is not enough, no matter how multinational or big the enterprise is. To have a true perspective on the challenges diplomacy faces, it is better to add another perspective. A perspective where business and the multi-actor aspect merge: in associations. Here the international aspects of associations are defined, a model for change is presented and cases are discussed. Combining this insight and the possible impact of associations with available literature on the definition and nature of business (economic, corporate, commercial) diplomacy, a critique results on the relevance of these concepts. Perhaps it is better to speak about 'multi-actor diplomacy', in which traditional, business and other forms of diplomacy all have their place.



Ill. 1. Two nations flourish through a business association
Plaque after a print of Joan Nieuhof (ca. 1670-90). He accompanied a diplomatic mission to the Chinese court. It was more a trade mission actually, paid for by the VOC, the Dutch East India Company, in fact not a company as such, but more an association of cities doing trade from Holland. (Picture by Marie Cécile Thijs, FD, 17-10-2015.)

Associations

It is good to watch how the once ignored concept of 'business diplomacy' (Saner, Yiu, 2000) has gaining traction and is now becoming an integral part of the body of literature on diplomacy (Ruël, Wolters, 2014). No longer is diplomacy only the privilege of those working in the public domain. Even so, still much needs to be done before the new concepts of diplomacy are put into practice – and meanwhile there are other questions to be addressed. Here the role of trade and professional associations is addressed.

Not unlike (business) diplomacy itself, the number and nature of modern associations gets little attention in scientific circles. This paper starts with addressing this. Among other developments, the internationalization of associations gets attention. It should be clear that a sole and single business action is in practice a rare occurrence. More often than not, associations are involved. However, diplomacy is about the representation of interests. Are trade and professional associations (hereafter: associations) a part of that representation, or do they replace or even hinder this? Can associations be a player in the arena of business diplomacy or even take it over from businesses? The art of diplomacy turns on the knowledge and skills of the person representing an interest in the international arena. Are persons working for associations also diplomats, or are they for instance working in 'public affairs'? If so, what is the difference?

No matter how you look at it, associations complicate the concept of business diplomacy. Ruël defines 'diplomacy' as *"the dialogue via representation and communication between parties (nation-states, business, NGOs, supranational organizations, multilateral organizations, interest groups) that acknowledge each other's existence and accept each other's sovereignty and control over a territory"* (Ruël, 2013, p. 17). Somewhere in this definition associations must be present, but not in an explicit form. That could just be an omission, but it could also be a sign that it is still not clear how complex diplomacy has become. Associations then, are a case in point.

Research questions

This paper aims to look into the nature and role of associations. It distinguishes several forms of associations; beyond classic trade associations it also looks at professional associations and other forms of collective power. Some of them could play a role in business diplomacy, others will not. It also looks at the changing role of associations given the effect of globalization and digitization. A framework will be formulated for the further development of the thinking about the role of associations in influencing the interface between business and non-business actors. Through three case studies conclusions are formulated about the relevance of associations for business diplomacy and for the concept itself.

It must be said that research into this topic is hampered. Not just because the literature on business diplomacy is still limited. The same goes for the literature on associations, even though there is much sector specific information. There is a large amount of literature of a legal nature where associations have a role as regulator of a sector. There is also an increasing amount of literature on the management of associations. Still, when an attempt is made to get a grip on what is known about the institutional nature and international role of associations, not much literature can be found. Searching for arrangements between associations and business and their impact on international relations, a literature search comes up with several groups of titles. International relations, international associations, business and their associations, international activities of businesses associations – examples enough, but they do not connect to a body of knowledge.

Problems with representation

All the more reason to go ahead. Noting the research agenda for business diplomacy as formulated by Ruël (2013), this paper specifically aims to fill in this leading question: *“How do small and medium-sized firms and young international start-up deals with foreign governments and societal and economic stakeholders. ... And how do they improve their business diplomacy capabilities?”* The obvious answer would be that they seek strength in numbers through their association, which in turn tries to influence both its own government and the government and other parties in the international arena. However, there is a reason why associations are not top of mind when it comes to business diplomacy, as we can safely say.

Associations are often seen as local or ‘slow’ actors. Perhaps they are better avoided. Some predict their demise as a consequence of digitization (Susskind and Susskind, 2015). So why bother? They are more platforms than actors and their representative bodies or leaders seem neither nimble nor powerful enough to take the lead in conflicts that require diplomacy. Problems of competition and diverging interest among members hamper the potential of associations to be an active player. Or are these misperceptions, and is the influence of associations underestimated or misunderstood? Sometimes their image is downright bad, or in the end offer little value for their money.

Example: automobile business

The scandal surrounding Volkswagen and its tampering with emission data has had the advantage of throwing light on the lobby activities of the automobile business.

Focusing on the lobby activities in Brussels, according to the Brussels Transparency Register (NRC, 021015), Volkswagen spends 18% of all automotive lobby activities in Europe’s capital, 42% comes from other car companies and sector associations, while 40% comes from non-German car companies and sector associations. When it comes to the number of registered lobbyist Volkswagen has 43 lobbyists. There are 62 other German lobbyists and 135 other non-German lobbyists for the car companies.

The number clearly shows the great weight a single company – in this case VW – can have. At the same time there is an interaction between companies like VW and a great number of sectorial associations.

Leaving aside the discussion about the legitimacy and methods of the lobbying of the automobile industry, certainly in the case of the pollution standards, it is worth noting that this interaction of single company and association is in itself not only logical, but also to be expected. Most associations, and certainly all associations working on an international scale, have a role in influencing the government of nations.

But how different is that image from diplomacy? It is hard to compare both, even when talking about business diplomacy. Saner and Yiu (2005) stated that, “Business diplomacy pertains to the management of interfaces between the global company and its multiple non-business counterparts (such as NGOs, governments, political parties, media and other representatives of civil societies) and external constituencies” (p. 302). From this example it should be clear that associations are of a different order; they represent businesses but are not a business. They are an interface for a business, but most businesses are also part of that interface. Who is influencing whom?

The relevancy of associations

This researcher published a book on ‘Sector wide quality’ (‘Branchebrede kwaliteit’) (Noordhoek, 2011). The focus was on the question which ‘interventions’ can help associations to produce better products and services. Digitization, the economic crisis and a great many ‘incidents’ have reduced trust in associations. How can that be changed? Beside other publications and activities, this author made a visit in 2014 to a

conference of the American Society for Association Management (ASAE) as part of a delegation of Dutch association managers. This changed the perspective of the author concerning the international dimension of associations.

The impact of ASAE itself is huge: out of more than 90.000 American trade and professional associations, as recognized by the US tax authority (Section 501c), it represents more than 21.000 associations and aims to strengthen the position of some 750.000 members of associations with a position of leadership (including volunteers). It is interesting too to see how it functions as an international platform for associations. Some 50 countries are present at their annual meeting, including strong presences from South America and Asia (Source: website ASAE 2015).

To be sure (and to be warned), there is such a thing as a 'Union of International Associations' (UIA), but this is a Brussels based research institute on apolitical, independent and non-governmental institutes, not on trade or professional organizations. Apart from the very influential ASAE, there do seem to be increasingly strong platforms in Asia and the Arab world, whereas the European arena (including ESAE) is not yet up to comparable strength. A movement towards further integration is apparent.

The true number of associations and their impact

There are several reasons not to take information on the number of associations at first sight. Many countries do not have a reliable count of associations and changes in numbers can often be due to the merging or splintering of existing associations. It is quite rare that a completely new association arises. The digitization of society is one of the few sources of new associations (for instance: the association of web journalists). In practice a limited number of often large, old associations determine the image of associations in a county (for instance: estimating that there are more than 12.000 associations in The Netherlands, only 2-300 really carry weight).

At the same time there is something more fundamental going on. One the hand there is the rise of the (semi) independent professional, rapidly increasing the number of SME's and giving a new dynamic to the whole group. On the other hand, you get many tentative and informal ways of cooperation between professionals. Is a LinkedIn group (72.000+ at last count in The Netherlands) or even a WhatsApp group an association or not? Many of these informal groups can have a big impact on government policy and the business environment. The consequences of these 'non-classic' changes in the way professions and professionals organize themselves will be dealt with later in this paper. Here it is worth mentioning that NGO's are themselves part of (networks of) associations, and they, even more than governments, seem the natural counterpart of businesses.

Internationalization of associations

In a short article on the internationalization of associations (Noordhoek, 2015), I stated that there are three kinds of (classic) associations with an international dimension:

1. purely national associations. Each may or may not have a link to an international platform of sister associations, but its international activities are limited, so is its impact in that respect. Multinational enterprises usually leave it to their national affiliates to be a member;
2. international platform associations. There is a strong effort at coordinating the policies of national associations and the international platform has a strong position in at least one continent. Multinational enterprises almost always play a role;
3. purely international associations, with multinational enterprises as their dominant members; headquarters on every continent, but no national representation function.

It almost goes without saying that the third category is most relevant to business diplomacy. However, associations of true multinationals are still a tiny group indeed. An example is to be found in the oil business, a sector where all relevant players are international by nature. In fact, all three categories can be relevant. The first because of its sheer volume of combined business interests, and because this is where most SME's can be found. The second category is interesting because international platform associations are really flexing their muscle. Even in Europe, where true integration seems harder because of the relative strength of national associations, those platforms are gaining cloud.

It must be said associations are both part of globalization and an instrument of fighting this. The internationalizations as described in this three step build-up is the inevitable result of globalization, yet it is not hard to see that even associations working on an international level carry the characteristics of the dominant nationality of its members, and there can be no doubt that international associations can function as a vessel for national interests. It is therefore important to make sharp cultural assessments of an association before declaring it a multinational platform fit for business diplomacy.

Conceptual change within associations

Here a conceptual framework is presented regarding the development of associations in the light of changes in society. Later on a translation will be made to International (platform) associations and there will be a reflection on the definition of business diplomacy in the light of all this.

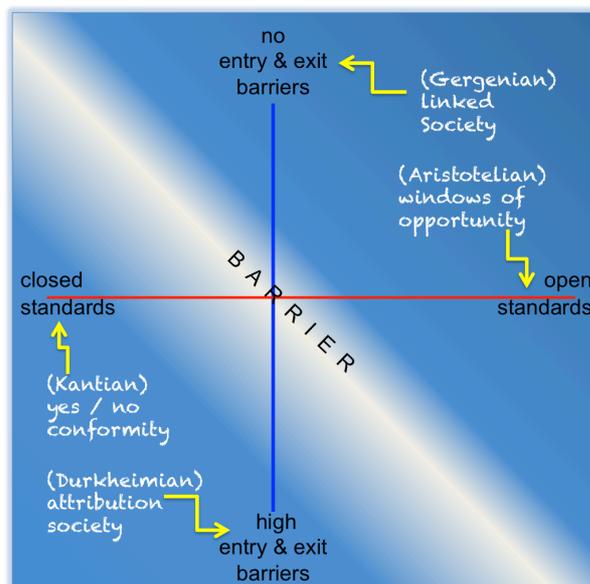


Fig 1. Sector matrix

In its essence an association is a group, in this case a group of people sharing a profession, skill or craft. From Durkheim on, studies into their nature show that it is hard to define a group. How to measure a 'shared value'?; though this is what distinguishes a group most from a collective. Out of the many ways of doing so, the best way to do so is by defining its outer borders, thus creating Durkheim's 'social facts'. Outer borders that

can be known by the symbols and attributes as shared by the members of the group: the doctors white coat, the judge's toga, etc. This can be explained from a social psychological point of view when it speaks about an 'attribution society', where the behavior of individuals both within and outside a group are influenced by external attributes. In combination with 'closed standards' you get high entry and exit barriers to join or leave the group.

Businesses or their employees joining those groups gain the strength and privileges connected to the exclusiveness of the group / association, but might also share in its negative traits. For instance, the membership of the board of association of (oil refining industry) may be essential for just being in business. At the same time, they may get captured in a certain way of doing things that may hinder them when adapting to new realities. Being a business sponsor connected to FIFA, the International Football Association may be fantastic when you are an American firm trying to enter this European sport. The moment this association is hit by scandal you find your reputation suffers along with the association. Associations are more than just a collective with formal structures (Merton, 1957). They have both an integrating and a regulating force (Durkheim, 1897) that can have strong and stabilizing effects. Sometimes they are a platform, sometimes a prison, but on the whole they are recognizable as such.

In contrast there is the modern 'network society'. Here it is for instance the number of 'likes' that determines the group. We now know the 'likes' from Facebook and other social media, but here we refer to Kenneth J. Gergen's 'relational view' of people and their groups, connected to social constructionism (Gergen, 1991). Only the slightest connection or interest – a 'like' – can be enough to become part of a collective that still calls itself a group.

As each group is changing ever so fast, with no or hardly any entry or exit barriers, it is the size of the group that determines the definition of the group, with open standards as the only way to capture some of its nature. Sometimes a network arises around a single issue of common interest; sometimes it is just a group of gamers sharing their technique of killing certain digital monsters. It is an ever-changing landscape of informal groups in which regular business can find what they want - or lose themselves. Classic associations often lack the speed and flexibility to adapt to this reality, though many try to rethink their 'business model' or adapt to the wishes of upcoming generations.

In between those extremes there is the ebb and flow of groups forming around something parties have in common.

Most of the classic associations and their members feel the pressure of these different ways of grouping themselves. In the context of the PhD study by this author, it can be seen that a combination of digitization and economic crisis can lead to high tensions within classic associations. While many of the older associates may want to reconnect to their values and way of doing business, many others seek a new future through routinizing, disrupting or virtualizing their business model.

Example: digital industry

Once there was a strong classic association for the typewriter industry. A newcomer, IBM, led the demise of both the industry and its association. Present associations for the digital industry have a business model that runs on organizing conferences, but are so dominated by a few large companies that they have relatively less cloud than their classic predecessor. Meanwhile, a technical development like virtual reality (VR) arises because of the existence of an informal group of 'nerds' with financial clout that spots the talent of one of its members and serves as a breeding ground for the new 'Oculus Rift' technology

(Wired, Oct., 2013). This group is no more than a digital platform, yet at the same time getting invited to join is hard. There is no visible attribute to be seen, though it may be that all member wear jeans, a T-shirt and a baseball cap behind their keyboard. Together they operate as an effective network with much influence.

The dynamic is influenced by the presence of internal systems of self-regulation or that of oversight bodies. Almost all larger associations are heavily influenced by government relations and regulations and partly exist in order to influence them. Associations serve as a buffer between the members and the state, though there are many free riders that go their own way, depending on the nature and history of the association.

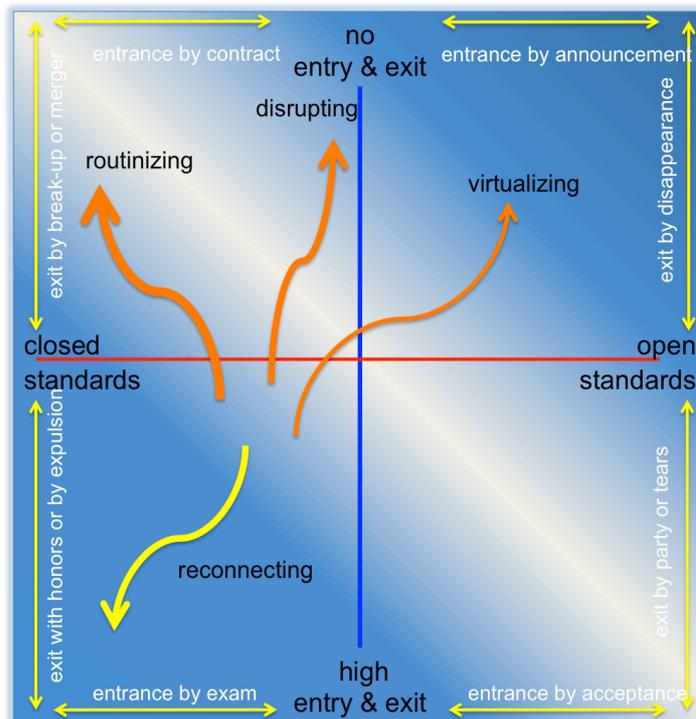


Fig. 2 Sector matrix tensions

Implications

All of this may seem to have only limited relevance for the issue of business diplomacy, but if associations are important to the conduct of diplomacy, these implications can be presumed:

- Businesses and their employees will organize themselves in order to profit from the exclusive and combined positions of associations. As the world gets both more fragmented and complex, some form of representation through association will become more and more logical;
- The truly large multinational enterprises (MNE's) have started to behave like 'free agents'; sometimes profiting, but more often chasing their own interest at the possible expense of smaller ones and their associations;
- MNE's have also gained much cloud in relation to nation states; yet at the same time have become more vulnerable to criticism. This can lead them to hide or seek legitimacy with or within their chosen associations;

- Meanwhile associations are becoming more professional, more interconnected and more outward looking. The best of them manage to renew their sectors;
- Even so, these associations will remain the subjects of high tensions, connected to changes in the way people and their businesses rearrange themselves outside of classic associations;
- Scandals, incidents and true disasters will keep on following in the path of businesses misbehaving themselves. They cannot hide in associations for too long. Associations will become awkward partners for (multinational) governments to ensure better oversight and governance;
- The average association has always been highly attuned to all relevant political agenda's, but through better knowledge and more professionalism their association managers become significant figures in their own right: representatives of the better associations will be the economic diplomats of the future.

Testing definitions

All this is to be presumed on an abstract level. Here three more examples are presented of situations where the world of business diplomacy and that of associations may meet in a more recognizable way. All three cases end with an assessment by the author whether or not the activities fit definitions as proposed by Saner, Ruël and others.

1. associations and the energy business

Oil and other energy companies are fierce competitors, almost by definition. There are corporate giants that truly work on a global basis, and then there are 'wildcat' operations consisting of just a few guys. Suppliers and contractors, and specialists of all sizes circle the industry. Despite all the fierce competition, the businesses - as do their many enemies - do organize themselves. This runs from multinational organization like OPEC to a great number of associations. All the larger companies have specialists in governmental affairs. So many in fact, that they have organized themselves into an association. Many associations. An overview on www.oilsheetlinks.com names more than 50, indicating that worldwide there must be hundreds. The business of oil and energy associations is big business in itself - especially when national associations merge into international ones. Large one like the International Association of Oil & Gas Producers (IOGP) "serve industry regulators as a global partner for improving safety, environmental and social performance", and have the clout to do so, if only because they represent members producing over half of the world's oil. Yet, many of the same companies also get together under the umbrella of IPIECA, the 'global oil and gas industry association for environmental and social issues'. What you see in the last example, is that next to 'general interest' associations, connected to a trade or profession, you also get associations with an 'agenda' that makes them act like an NGO.

In how far do these associations meet the descriptions as put forward by Ruël (Ruël, 2013) and others? Defining commercial diplomacy (also in contrast to economic diplomacy), Ruël roughly defines it as 'policy-making' and 'business support'. From the example it is clear that associations perform both functions for their members. The 'policy-making' function is clear, when for instance 14 oil and gas industry associations lobby the US congress not to tax their industry to make up for the decreased revenue after the government breakdown in November 2012. 'Business services' are also very much the task of associations, connecting in fact local, national and international goals and facilities. Yet, does this all amount to 'diplomacy'? For sure the persons representing the associations do not have diplomatic status in a public sense, but is that decisive for

their role and influence? Most of the associations mentioned in the example above have a professional staff, with a task that is not limited to secretarial functions. Certainly an agenda setting association like IPIECA has staff that is (very) active when it comes to promoting the interest of the businesses involved. The point is though, that even when actions are very 'diplomatic' in their nature, they will much sooner be seen as actions of a public affairs or communication nature than of a diplomatic nature. As yet there is no match between for public affairs or communication on the one hand and diplomacy on the other. In the standard handbook for association management (Cox, 2007) ten connected activities are summed up, but diplomacy is not one of them. But maybe that should change.

2. associations and the prowess of a profession

The notary function – mostly, the formalization of private documents and the execution of wills – is present everywhere in Europe. However, its position and task is very diverse indeed. The profession has characteristics that can run from being a truly public function (France) to a common law function (England) or in between (Netherlands, Scotland). Until recently, most of what notaries do is governed by national civil law. But like all over Europe, there is pressure to make it easier to move across borders. As families become more multinational, issues of inheritance law become inevitably more complex, properties are bought and sold across borders, and companies have to deal with complex different tax schemes. One of the ways to deal with that is a new European ruling on inheritance (EC, 2015). It settles for instance the question which law is applicable when someone passes away; is it the place where he or she was born or the place where he lived? The ruling says: the latter.

This ruling is in quite some measure the result of close consultation between the European Commission and the association called the 'Council of the Notariats of the European Union', the CNUE. This example and others has led the association to think on the future of the European notaries, with all their differences. By 2020 the association wants to 'anchor the profession in a permanent way in the Union'. They may well succeed.

Hardly anybody outside the experts know about this ruling (Six, 2014). Yet it is a remarkable phenomenon to see a collective of mostly SME's, though with a partly public, even legal, function (Otterlo, 2010), move like it is a truly policy making body. The people representing the CNUE act like true diplomats: in the background, well informed, step-by-step, taking into account all stakeholders. Business diplomacy at its best? It is not likely anyone will call it that.

3. associations and the import needs of the State of Dubai

The Dubai World Trade Centre and the Dubai Chamber of Commerce work together on behalf of the government of Dubai in order to 'import' trade associations in that country. Why? Because most of Dubai's workforce is foreign born and how does the government know that they are certified according to international standards? The numbers of people to be trained and audited are huge, and go from manual laborers to technicians with rare knowledge. All need to be certified. Why not give a foreign-based association a permit to train people in the skills they need? Indeed, why not. So now you can see representatives of Dubai in expo centers around the world selling their country as a perfect place for an association to be.

Is this part of 'strategic' business diplomacy? As innovative and strategic as it is, and as much as it is about a nation and its economic ambitions and the commercial reaction to

that, it is not logical to count it as part of business diplomacy. The nature of the contact between nation and association is private and mostly (though not all of it) governed by civil law. In terms of attitude, it does not compel the parties involved to use the kind of open standard skills that is a hallmark of diplomatic negotiations. It certainly does not fit the latest description by Ruël en Wolters on Business diplomacy (2014).

Impact

In a recent advertisement the Dutch Federation for the Metal Industries (FME) for a new international secretary, the first qualification demand mentioned was for an expert in 'economic diplomacy'. Slowly, the concept of economic, commercial, corporate or business diplomacy is getting traction, and not just for multinational enterprises. In fact, it makes this author doubt whether focusing on MNE's is such a logical approach. Not because those enterprises are unimportant, but because from the perspective of scientific observation it is not useful to observe an entity without its network - 'a spider without its web'. Or to put it differently: observing the network brings more than observing the elements that can be found within it - 'the web shows both the spider and its prey'. As society is in general moving from the quadrant with high entry and exit levels and strict norms to one where the size of groups can change by the hour and standards change as fast, we should aim for an approach that is less explicit about the shape of institutions or organizations and pays more attention to the things that stay as long as we are not replaced by robots: human insight, skills, smart interaction and representation. In other words: the focus should move to the uniqueness of diplomacy as an instrument for intervention, and less on the actor.

The limits of Business Diplomacy as a concept: there is more to business than business

Business diplomacy can be used as an overall concept for aspects of 'commercial' or 'economic' diplomacy and more. Yet, writing this article, and after having been away from the subject for over some years, this author cannot help but reflect that its title does not do justice to the breath and relevance of its topic. Looking at how authors like Ruël are interpreting it, the scope is not embracing enough when it comes to 'business', and lacks clear focus when it comes to the 'diplomacy'.

Instead of suggesting that associations should have a place in business diplomacy, I would rather go one step further and would suggest that in the future we speak of '*multi-actor diplomacy*'. As 'MAD' as this may sound, it does more justice to the reality of new definitions of group formation. Neither empires nor enterprises are immune to the speed of a tweet, but people still need to look each other in the eye before reaching true agreement on anything.

The limits of business diplomacy as a concept: more focus on the art of diplomacy

These changes in society will make the potential need for diplomacy larger, not less. When Saner and Yiu wrote their article on business diplomacy 'management' in 2000, traditional diplomacy was in urgent need of a fresh look at the 'behavioral complexity' facing diplomats (2000, p.14). Modern management techniques, international business acumen and insights for personal maturity came into demand. At the same time business

Note:

¹ Also considered: Multi Party Diplomacy, but the word 'party' suggest a possible conflict that need not be there, plus that 'party' always suggests some form of collective, while it is still very much possible that it is all about just a single company. Jan Melissen ((2011) quotes George Wiseman (2010) when he pleads for 'polylateralism', but unfortunately this is still defined from a state - non-state perspective, so still not polylateral enough.

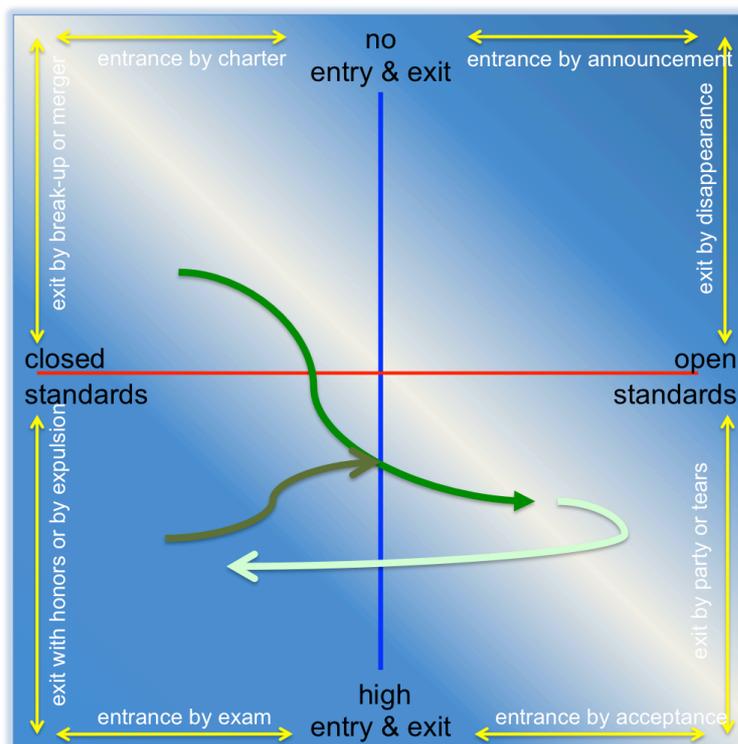
leaders had to master political and media skills, plus a multicultural mindset. The great breakthrough of business diplomacy is that it made clear on both the national and the business side that there was a great need for 'role versatility and tolerance for ambiguity' (Saner, Yiu, 2000, p. 16).

Things have changed. On the one hand we come to grips with the complexity of the field. The influential role of associations should teach that not even on the side of business itself things are one-dimensional. A multi-actor approach is needed. Yet on the other side we should perhaps clear the concept of diplomacy of all its semi-modern additions and go back to the roots, art and skill of diplomacy as a vocation. How would that look?

Esprit du corps diplomatique

Looking at the matrix, it would seem that a new esprit de corps diplomatique is in order. Not a lobbyist who wasted too much time in university, not a communication specialist who starts to believe in his own 'frame', but a professional analyst and connector who can easily move from one arena to the next without losing his or her independent view, and as such is trusted to do complex and sensitive negotiations.

Neither Durkheim with his attributes, nor Gergen with his likes are in itself enough, but some kind of mutual recognition of professionalism should occur. How would the path towards association look like?



Scheme 3. Sector matrix diplomacy

Using the matrix as development tool, movement could come from two directions. One is the trained public diplomat coming from down left. The other is the business / commercial / communication diplomat coming from the upper left.

Conclusion: different phases in the development of diplomacy

The assumption is here that both from the public and from the (collective) private sphere a network will form through co-optation. From this a new professionalism, the new diplomat, will rise and start laying the foundation for a new association of diplomats.

To put it in another, broader and more historic perspective, four phases are formulated, also serving as a conclusion to this paper:

In the **first phase**, there is the **public** and nation-bound diplomat. It knows it needs to modernize, adding for instance economic knowledge and commercial skills to the profession. Many diplomats move on to the semi-public sphere of NGO's, applying their craft in the world of development aid.

In the **second phase**, the 'other side' discovers there is a diplomatic challenge. In 2000 it is coined as '**business diplomacy**'. It shows companies the way to a subtler dealing with developments and agendas and pushed by political parties, action pacts and NGO's. These institutional stray cats can be as stubborn as anything and not easily bought or silenced by influencing governments. The companies had to learn a different language, use other negotiation skills. However, it must be said that most companies did not see the value of the new concept and preferred to solve problems by throwing mountains of communication dollars at the problem. At the same time classic public diplomacy tries to reinvent itself as 'new public diplomacy'. The goal is basically the same, though approached from the government side.

In the **third phase**, about now; 2015 and a little beyond, we should see how the concept of diplomacy evolves into a **multi-actor** approach.

All the reasons for business diplomacy are here and at play. Sustainability, stakeholder management, diversity – they remain illusive goals, but it can be said that they are no longer on the periphery of business awareness and much more central to the business model. New issues come up like cyber security and privacy, but the question is more when and how they will be tackled, not if. The focus shifts from the single multinational to the multitude of companies that bind themselves within associations. If there is a conceptual problem these years, it is the fact that diplomacy does not distinguish itself enough from public affairs and other communication activities. The effort is aimed at formulating a new set of skills for the profession, strong enough to acquire a new identity. Perhaps this effort will come from those within the multinational active in the field of 'government relations', but more likely the effort will come from those who have worked both within and outside public diplomacy. The best place to exchange experiences and reflections is in a new association.

There could or should be a **fourth phase**. A phase that is a sort of rebirth of **diplomacy** as diplomacy. The multi actor perspective stays, if only for the fact that disruptive technological goes on and is constantly changing the nature of society. However, it is no longer connected to the business or association side of the equation. It is as much about public diplomacy as anything, because nations are feeling the same disruption and reaction to that with both internationalization and regionalism. We will see (possibly through that new association) a new diplomatic corps arises, supported by academia and education institutes, available after graduation for new challenges all over the globe.

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