even if the diplomatic tradition alerts us to how these terms shift over time and by place. What is a matter of life, death and honor at one point or place barely merits attention at another. What is seen as a great and pressing problem requiring immediate action at one point or place fades into insignificance at another. It is not that nothing really matters. Rather, in social worlds, constituted largely by what we make of them, the problem is that everything, even a simple and innocent effort to feed starving babies, for example, involves people who become a collective actor acquiring an identity and interests capable of generating differences with other collective actors and needing representation as such. And, time and again, the costs of seeking to resolve such differences seem to be so much worse than the costs of merely living with them or even letting the other fellow have his way.

This can be read as a modest claim suggesting that we are able to be certain about very little regarding the issues over which people conduct their international relations and, hence, that we should always proceed with caution. Since the diplomatic tradition’s call for epistemological modesty has its own universal implications, however, it can also be seen as an arrogant one. It purports to cast its blanket of doubt over everyone, especially those who disagree with it and want to say something with sufficient certainty about international relations as to provide a basis of for action within them. It is because people do not like this and find it difficult to accept that diplomacy, diplomats and diplomatic thinking together remain a weak force in international relations. The magic of diplomatic distance comes at a high price in terms of peoples’ aspirations for how they would like the world to be and what they want from it. This price is clearly visible in three injunctions with which anyone engaged in diplomatic theorizing or diplomatic practice has to follow: be slow to judge; be ready to appease; and doubt most universals. If diplomacy is to be a stronger force in international relations, then its advocates have to respond effectively to those who say these injunctions will lead down dark and dangerous roads to places where we do not want to be and keep us there.

**Diplomatic theory and the balance of virtue and right**

In most arguments, most people have some sort of interest in who is wrong, who is right or, if there is no clear answer in these terms, where the balance of virtue lies between the protagonists in terms of both their
respective positions and who they are. The protagonists themselves share this interest, even if only for the instrumental reason that to be regarded as right and good may yield some sort of advantage. However, we probably underestimate the extent to which being right and good matter for their own sake to people. Most of those generally regarded as wicked, after all, inhabit the same worlds of justifications as the rest of us, even if some of them seek to justify what they have done and who they have become only to themselves. One of the more difficult recommendations suggested by diplomatic theory of international relations, therefore, is that this pressure to establish the balance of virtue and right in international disputes should be resisted and attempts to draw conclusions in these terms indefinitely postponed. It is not that diplomats have no interest in the moral dimension to international relations in general or the positions which are taken in particular disputes – quite the reverse. Their interest, however, is of a different sort to the one above. Diplomats want to obtain the best understanding they can of the positions taken by all the parties to a dispute. They are interested in this on prudential grounds, to be sure. Their masters expect them to know the enemy (or rival or partner for that matter). They are also interested in a better understanding for their own reasons, however. Why protagonists adopt the positions they do may have an impact on the prospects for maintaining relations and, indeed, maintaining the system of diplomacy which facilitates relations. A better understanding requires a capacity for sympathy, however, and sympathy requires the ability to tease out what is right in one’s own terms about how other people have arrived at their respective positions.

It is this ability and the value they place on it that provides diplomats with a measure of distance from the terms in which international disputes are framed and conducted. As Butterfield, among others, has argued, with the benefit of distance one can come to see how disputes have rarely had the good lined up on one side and the bad on the other. Rather, we see them taking place between parties, “one half-right that was perhaps too willful, and another half-right which was perhaps too proud” trapped in the “terrible predicaments which have the effect of putting men so at cross-purposes with one another.”

Diplomats, therefore, perform like diplomatic historians of the present. If they can identify the extent to which all international disputes are

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morally complex and ambiguous affairs and persuade their respective masters that this is so, the latter will not, like seventeenth-century Protestants and Catholics, have to fight one another for thirty years to discover it for themselves.

However, is it prudent or right for diplomats to act like diplomatic historians of the present, always pointing out ambiguities and complexities with a view to rendering assessments of the balance of virtue and right both hazardous and unhelpful? It is one thing for A. J. P. Taylor, for example, to seek out the sense in Hitler’s statecraft and attempt a revised estimate of the contributions of others to the ensuing catastrophe from the safety of Oxford twenty years on. Fortunes, other than his own, no longer hang in the balance, and the argument can be pushed to see what insights it yields even though it may be wrong. Can one take such risks with real, live enemies, however, and can one say, after the horrors of National Socialism, Stalinist Communism, Rwandan genocides and the Serb massacres of Bosnian Muslims, that all fights involve the partly right against the partly wrong? Surely we can identify where the balance of right and wrong lies in at least some international conflicts and, when we do, surely power and virtue ought to march hand-in-hand to right wrongs, if this can be accomplished without creating greater evils?

Affirmative answers to this last question lie at the heart of a new post-Cold War consensus around the foreign policy of humanitarian intervention. Moral judgments and the actions for which they call should no longer be subordinated to narrow conceptions of state interests or self-serving devices like the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs. Instead, the wickedness of states, both at home and abroad, must be identified and dealt with because it is wrong and because it is a potential source of international disorder. Indeed, the arguments are no longer about who is wicked; that much is said to be clear. Among the western great powers and their allies, at least, they are about how forcefully the wicked should be dealt with and how they should be prioritized for treatment. Even many serving diplomats subscribe to the view that we live at a moment of opportunity for raising international and domestic

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standards of conduct for governments and peoples alike. We should not miss this opportunity, and we should not return to the days when thousands, indeed millions, might be murdered by wicked governments allowed to shelter behind their sovereign status by their more virtuous fellows under the advice of diplomats about avoiding precipitate actions based on moral judgments.

Difficult though it may be, however, diplomatic theory still encourages skepticism about this view and the new consensus that has emerged around it. It does so on empirical grounds. The arithmetic of death and suffering in Kosovo and Iraq before, during and after the respective interventions, for example, cannot provide clear evidence that the benefits of righting wrongs in each case outweighed the costs. Yet the salience of the notion of intervention to right wrongs provides cover for all sorts of interventions. The tradition also suggests skepticism, by employing what may be best termed a historical logic of probabilities. Even when a strong international consensus exists on where the balance of virtue and right resides, it is never a complete consensus. A case can be always made for the “other side’s” point of view and historical experience suggests that with the passage of time, this case strengthens and the consensus about who was right and who was wrong almost invariably weakens. It is also never a consensus that is beyond criticism in terms of proportionality. The passage of time sharpens doubts about, for example, whether Serb wrongs outweighed those perpetrated by Croats, and why Serb wrongs were equated with the scale of wickedness achieved by the Nazis to justify an intervention at the same time as no such intervention took place in Rwanda. And, of course, skepticism is suggested on grounds of prudence. No matter how wicked men and women may be in your judgment and even nearly everybody else’s, it rarely helps to treat them as wicked in the course of diplomatic relations. Diplomats from both sides will find it easier to maintain relations between those they represent if they can be somehow insulated from such judgments and their consequences.

In a sense, therefore, the diplomatic tradition of international thought offers the morality of suspending judgment. One ought to resist the temptation and pressure to act otherwise if one wishes to resolve

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differences without damaging or ending relations, and if one cares about the sort of more considered assessments of the balance of merit which the passage of time permits. What the tradition does not do, however, is provide a basis for its own theorizing about when to make such judgments and when to refrain from making them, not even in extreme cases. Suppose, for example, Nazi Germany had combined the extermination of its Jewish population with a peaceful foreign policy. Even in such terrible circumstances, diplomatic theory would suggest caution about making judgments with the sort of substantive consequences that might have materially affected the Nazis’ behavior. It would do so by pointing to the likely indeterminacy and unforeseen consequences of such actions (killing more people than you save, for example, and creating new monsters even as you slay the old one), and contrasting this danger with the disposition to believe that civilized conversation always holds the potential, at least, for finding a way out of a jam.

**Diplomatic theory and appeasement**

This latter disposition, of course, highlights the dangers of the second injunction, namely that we should be ready to appease. What if those with whom we negotiate are not interested in diplomacy and are prepared to obtain what they want at all costs by deception, bluff, threats and force? If this is so, then it may be claimed that neither diplomatic theory nor diplomats themselves may have much to tell us about how to deal with such people, and that what they do tell us can get us into a great deal of trouble. The archetypal figure in this regard, although he was not a diplomat, is Neville Chamberlain, and the archetypal episode involves his dealings with Hitler in the late 1930s. Chamberlain’s mistake is said to have been that he regarded Hitler as a gentleman and, thus, was predisposed to see his demands as rooted in a reasonableness that might be discovered and accommodated. Since Hitler was not a gentleman, his demands could not be accommodated, only countered, and attempts to accommodate him, therefore, merely increased his appetite. By the time that Hitler had been given every chance to demonstrate that he was genuinely interested in diplomacy, and by the time everyone else had discovered that he genuinely was not, the

position of Nazi Germany had been greatly strengthened. As a consequence, and in the name of averting pain and suffering in the short term, greater pain and suffering were stored up for the medium to long term by the diplomatic desire to seek good relations and peace at almost any price.

Leaving aside problems with the historical accuracy and, more importantly, with the completeness of this account, it may be seen that diplomatic theory would challenge each element of the general characterization of international relations to which it gives expression. Hitler may not have been a gentleman, but he was quite capable of acting as a gentleman towards those he believed entitled to, or requiring, such treatment. He was also bound by a moral code of obligations in his relations with them which most of us would recognize, trying to keep his promises as he understood them, and trying to justify his actions and how his departures from this code in certain circumstances were warranted right down to the very end. This claim is very hard to swallow unless one realizes that it is not as important as it sounds. It merely serves to underline that whatever mistakes the British prime minister did make, treating the German Chancellor as a gentleman was not one of them. Gentlemanliness, or whatever general notion of civilized humanity this term seeks to convey, is not a necessary condition for the ability to conduct diplomacy. Bounders, cads and even monsters may engage in it, although they may be more likely to defect, or more quickly defect, from its commitments if they judge this to be necessary than the rest of us. Nor, as other historical episodes demonstrate, is gentlemanliness a sufficient condition for conducting diplomacy. Many “gentlemen” have been deeply implicated in the sort of international relations that attract moral condemnation. Gentlemanliness, therefore, is best viewed, not as a personal quality, but as an expression of a moral code of action which becomes operational in certain circumstances, specifically when people are dealing with those whom they believe to be, are prepared to accept, or wish to regard, as their equals. Thus, the only people with whom a diplomatic relationship is impossible for certain are those with whom you do not attempt to conduct one because you do not want it, and those who do not want one with you. Until that point is reached, diplomatic relations of some sort, even with Hitlers, are always a possibility capable of generating other possibilities.

What then of the objection that some of these possibilities may be bad, specifically that by seeking to appease the ruthless you strengthen them and weaken yourself? Diplomatic theory highlights the extent to which certainty in this regard depends on hindsight and confidence about who is being appeased and who is doing the appeasing. The “guilty men” of the 1930s did not know for sure that Hitler could not be satisfied; he did not know himself until the eleventh hour of the Polish crisis. As noted above, all they knew on the morning after the Munich settlement had been reached was that many more people would remain alive over the next few months than would otherwise have been the case, and that the possibility of keeping them alive remained open. One suspects that had they been privy to subsequent events—a total war involving the deaths of millions, the expansion of Soviet communism and the collapse of their own international positions, then the resolve of the Anglo-French governments to abandon the course of appeasement during the final Polish crisis would have been weaker rather than stronger. Even the Poles might have reconsidered their policy of refusing to transfer their corridor back to Germany for, as Taylor asks, by 1945 was it better to have been “a betrayed Czech or a saved Pole.” The same question might be asked today of “saved” Kosovars, Iraqis and South Ossetians. Regarding confidence about the identity of appeasers and appeased, diplomatic theory alerts us to what is happening on the other side of the hill. Hitler believed that Germany’s position as a revisionist state in the 1930s resulted not just from defeat, but from being willing to be put upon by the victorious allies in the 1920s. He was by no means alone in Germany (or elsewhere) in this regard, and it might be argued that it was Germany under the Nazis which took the “lessons of appeasement” to heart long before his opponents did.

These are difficult arguments to make, and my intention is not to launch a specific defense of appeasement in the 1930s. If, however, they

7 The term is from Michael Foot, Guilty Men (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940).
can at least be raised in so iconic and apparently straightforward a case as this, then their relevance to situations that are typically far more ambiguous becomes clear. In these, we can see how the very indeterminacy and possibility of creative situations which diplomatic theory suggests we should value and preserve by talking are often sources of fear for governments and peoples alike. For the possibility exists that even in negotiations with those we regard as unprincipled, ruthless and fanatic, we may be maneuvered, not by bullying and lies, but by reasonable diplomacy, towards concessions which we do not want to make. Fear of this sort is present on both sides in the dispute between the US and Iran over the latter’s nuclear energy policy. President Bush’s administration worries that it may be talked into accepting a situation in which Iran acquires the ability to produce nuclear weapons. President Ahmadinejad’s administration worries that it will be talked into accepting one which rules out that possibility. Thus, the Americans offer talks providing the Iranians will first give up their research into the manufacture of nuclear fuels. The Iranians, in their turn, offer talks that will return Americans to God’s way under the guidance of Iran.

The dynamics in play are well illustrated by what happened when Ahmadinejad sent an open letter to Bush in May 2006. In it, he acknowledges commonalities – a shared God and shared responsibilities of government, for example. He expresses a measure of sympathy with Americans for the attacks of “9/11” and the resulting concern with US security. Ahmadinejad also attempts to justify Iran’s nuclear energy program. It only wants that to which all countries are entitled. However, these kernels of diplomatic understanding and diplomatic arguments are surrounded by a shell of criticism and doubt about US motives which extends to suggesting that the “9/11” attacks were staged to provide a pretext for waging war on America’s enemies. Ahmadinejad asks how current US foreign policy can be reconciled with the teachings of Jesus both Christians and Muslims respect. It is on a mistaken course, and its only hope of salvation lies in changing its heart and changing its course to follow God’s will, a will already divined by the President of Iran.

As an exercise in diplomacy, Ahmadinejad’s letter presents a number of problems. The Americans noted that it did not address their core concern at all, that its offensive form suggested an appeal to Ahmadinejad’s domestic constituencies rather than to them and that, as such, a reply in kind would not be forthcoming. Talks with Iran until it agreed to stop its work on nuclear fuels would be, in Secretary Rice’s word, “pointless” and those who advocated talks were accused of appeasement (although not by her), because talking would allow the Iranians to carry on their work and make it harder to stop them if this was decided upon at some point in the future. Diplomatic theory, in contrast, would suggest that Bush should have replied, and it would do so without taking issue with the Americans’ characterization of Ahmadinejad’s démarche as a stunt. Far more important than the Iranians’ reasons for the letter being sent, it would suggest, might be the potential consequences of their having sent it. It involved an explicit attempt on the part of the Iranian president to talk to those with whom, in his view, there is just no talking, and to frame Iranian and American identities as distinctive from one another, but with common roots and common ground. It offered a basis for talking about how stable relations of separateness between the two countries might be established. Certainly, this took the form of a claim that the Iranians spoke for God and that the Americans should move towards them. As we have already seen, however, this declaratory approach has deep roots in Muslim diplomacy stretching back to the days of Muhammad, when it did not prove an obstacle to the development of stable, bilateral relations between Mecca and Medina, on the one hand, and other independent entities on the other. Replying, therefore, would have given the Americans the chance to offer their own framing of the basis on which stable relations might be achieved and, together, the two letters could conceivably have pushed the whole question of Iranian-American relations out of the realms of subjective foreign policies and into the world of diplomacy between the two states where the possibilities of a world with or without an Iranian bomb might be more freely reflected upon.

One has to feel either secure enough or desperate enough to be willing to take the risk of being outmaneuvered or simply led in unanticipated directions by the open-ended potentials of talks. Clearly in this case

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neither party felt itself secure. Diplomatic theory would suggest, however, that a shared determination to avoid appeasement on the part of both the US and Iran could very quickly provide the sense of desperation required to take a chance. Considerations of security and risk, however, apply not just to one’s own people and interests but to others as well. It may be objected, for example, that when one talks with dictators, ayatollahs and Great Satans, one is recognizing them and, in so doing, one is telling the people who live under them to accept their lots, at least for now. Again, diplomatic theory would suggest that the recognition implied by talking is a small price to pay for the possibilities inherent in such talks. Behind the recognition theme, however, sits a much bigger problem, the idea that one can tell other peoples to put up with their lot under dictators, despots and Satans in the cause of international peace. Modern diplomacy especially has a long association with images of whole peoples being left to their suffering, or having new suffering inflicted upon them, in the cause of supposedly greater goods achieved by compromises with their respective oppressors. The partitions of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Europe after Yalta can be all cited as examples of diplomatic attempts to purchase peace at the expense of others, as can the present predicaments of the Palestinians and the Kurds. Most people feel uneasy about the propositions that the Czechoslovaks did the right thing by capitulating and resigning themselves to their fate on at least two occasions, and that the Poles made a mistake by fighting and accepting help in a disastrously unsuccessful attempt to maintain their freedom and independence, no matter what the arithmetic of deaths suggests. However, these concerns move us beyond the issue of diplomacy and appeasement per se and towards the broader set of problems generated by diplomatic theory’s third injunction, namely, to doubt most universals. It is this injunction that provides sanction for acting as if peace is, indeed, divisible in the sense that the peace of some and even most can be purchased at the expense of others. In so doing, however, does it reveal diplomatic theory and the practice from which it is distilled as obstacles to the implementation of more solidarist conceptions of how human beings might live?

Diplomatic theory and human solidarity

The answer to this question has to be “yes.” Diplomatic theory can work against the development of solidarist possibilities in the world. It