

The Ambassadors: Thinking about Diplomacy from Machiavelli to Modern Times

Robert Cooper, 'The Ambassadors: Thinking about Diplomacy from Machiavelli to Modern Times,' (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 2022) 579

Sharjeel Siddiqui¹

The world is going through a tumultuous time. Open warfare between sovereign states in Europe has broken out for the first time since World War II. At the same time, the United States and China are gearing up to participate in a Cold War-esque competition for global dominance. In these chaotic times, it is more important than ever to learn from those who have come before us and to navigate the troubling international waters. Robert Cooper's masterpiece, "The Ambassadors: Thinking about Diplomacy from Machiavelli to Modern Times," offers exactly the same.

Cooper is a British diplomat who has served in the European Union (EU) in various capacities including Director-General for External and Politico-Military Affairs. In his work, Cooper blends his vast diplomatic experience with his deep grasp of history to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the world has been viewed and shaped by diplomats for over 500 years. Admittedly, Cooper himself claims that he only focused on the "winners" i.e. those diplomats who had a significant effect on the development of international affairs.

The name of the book however is a misnomer. Very few of the personalities described by Cooper served in an ambassadorial role. Many were statesmen like Adenauer and Paasikivi or served as the head of their nation's foreign offices like Acheson and Bevin. Only

¹ Reviewer is a Research Intern at Islamabad Policy Research Institute, Pakistan.

Sharjeel Siddiqui

some such as Kennan and Sugihara served in an ambassadorial role. And for Keenan, his acclaim is not due to the time that he spent as an ambassador, but due to his services after he had left Moscow. On that note, another point to be appreciated is that Cooper did not solely focus on the big names i.e. those whose actions changed the fate of millions. Rather, by mentioning Sugihara and Cameracescu, he showed that even diplomats who are not greatly renowned can and have impacted the world, in their own way.

Author's masterful writing style makes the reading delightful. Cooper approaches the book like a screenplay, depicting events as a progression of some tale. This is helpful in an uninterrupted reading despite it being a rather weighty tome. The author utilises this book to illustrate the importance of diplomacy. According to him, diplomacy is not just about expanding a state's power and influencing others to your benefit. For, numerous smaller states such as Denmark and Finland, which are incapable of maintaining a strong military presence and are surrounded by much stronger states, diplomacy becomes the only way to ensure their survival. In these circumstances, diplomacy becomes essential to secure their territorial sovereignty and independence.

The author states that "Diplomacy is an art, not a science." Through his writings, he tries to convey those truths of diplomacy which are not formally written in any manual or training guide. One of the most important lessons that Cooper teaches is that successful diplomacy is often not about the skill of the diplomat but rather due to the right circumstances. For instance, the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community was as much due to the skill of Monnet as it was to the European realisation that German industry could neither be curtailed nor suborned after two devastating wars. Another equally important lesson that he imparts, is the importance of persistence for a diplomat. To Cooper, stubbornness in negotiation is just as important

as resolution in war. He highlights this fact by extolling the efforts of Mazarin, Kennan, and others.

The author expertly conveys to the reader the nuances of diplomacy through the acts of others, accompanied by his own experiences. He vehemently reiterates that diplomacy is not just about cooperation and compromise. Often, a diplomat has to get his hands dirty and break all protocols, if he is to create a consensus that is favorable to his nation. This was one of the major reasons for Kissinger's early success.

In the book, Cooper seems to believe and portray in the book that the best diplomat is not loyal to a single person or even his government. A good diplomat is rather loyal to his nation, even if his ideal of what the nation should look like is different from others. Perhaps, this is why the author keenly states that his favorite diplomat is Charles Maurice Talleyrand Perigord. Whilst one can argue for Cooper's version of a diplomat, his choice of favorites leaves much to be desired. However, he betrayed his masters at every turn and broke almost every vow that he made. While it can be stated that he did what he thought was the best for France and that without his leadership and diplomatic skills, France could not have survived Napoleon's destructive wars. However, his moral and ethical failings should not be discounted and he should not be considered the epitome of a diplomat and someone others should try to emulate.

Overall, the book is an excellent addition to current literature on diplomacy and diplomatic history. The author suggests as far as to say that it should become mandatory reading for all trainee diplomats and scholars of diplomacy. Learning from the wisdom of the past is the only way to be prepared for the challenges of tomorrow. Only by getting to know the struggles that their predecessors faced, both domestically and abroad, diplomats ready themselves. They will be helped immensely in this regard by this book. ■