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The Evolution of Great Power Diplomacy: Historical Analysis of Strategic Alliances and Rivalry in International Relations

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Abstract

This article presents a historical analysis of the evolution of great power diplomacy, examining the formation of strategic alliances and rivalry in international relations from ancient civilizations to modern realities. The study employs a structured framework to systematically examine key stages: from the origins of diplomacy in Mesopotamia, Greece, and medieval Europe to transformations during the Peace of Westphalia, Napoleonic Wars, Cold War, and globalization era. The methodology is based on qualitative historical analysis, including examination of treaties (Tordesillas, Westphalia, Congress of Vienna), diplomatic practices (dynastic marriages, balance of power, multilateral institutions), and case studies of key players (Bismarck, USSR, USA, China). The research reveals persistent patterns: the role of balance of power as a stabilizing mechanism, cyclical nature of alliances (e.g., the "Diplomatic Revolution" of 1756), and the impact of technology and economics on geopolitics. The discussion highlights the transition from the bipolar Cold War system to multipolarity, where states coexist with transnational corporations, NGOs, and digital platforms. Special attention is given to 21st century challenges: cybersecurity, climate crises, and hybrid wars that require adaptation of traditional diplomacy. The conclusions emphasize the continuous evolution of diplomacy, where the combination of "hard" and "soft" power, along with flexibility in globalization, remain critical for maintaining stability. The article contributes to understanding the historical continuity of diplomatic practices and their role in managing contemporary international conflicts.

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Keywords

Great powers, strategic alliances, balance of power, historical analysis, international relations.

Introduction

Diplomacy as the art of managing foreign policy relations originated in ancient times, when the major civilizations of the Middle East, Egypt and China understood the need to build certain rules of interaction to ensure stability in the world around them. Already in the era of the Mesopotamian states, not only messages from the rulers were transmitted through diplomatic channels, but also cultural artifacts that served as a guarantee of peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit. Later, this subtle practice spread among the Greek poleis, where temporary alliances or peace treaties were often concluded, supported by oaths and obligations of the parties. During this period, the foundations of international law were born, when Sparta and Athens, seeking to guarantee their security, invited neutral intermediaries and tried to take into account the geopolitical nuances of the region. At the same time, diplomacy remained highly personalized, as the success of negotiations often depended on the charisma and authority of individuals with exclusive powers [Bortsov, 2022]. As a result, a special culture was formed that emphasized the importance of rituals, ceremonies and symbolic actions that confirmed the legitimacy of the agreements concluded. In the context of heterogeneous alliances and competition for resources, the importance of diplomacy only increased, because without transparent communication channels and agreements, any instability could easily turn into an open conflict. Along with formal contracts, there were also informal practices such as secret agreements, hostage exchanges, and dynastic marriages. All these elements of the primary diplomatic network provided the basis for the subsequent development of more complex models of alliances and competition that would later become defining in the political history of Europe and the world. Thus, we can talk about the continuous accumulation of experience, which eventually developed into well-established principles and protocols, which were creatively reconstructed when various political forces collided in modern times.

In the Middle Ages, when the political arena was dominated by feudal states and the boundaries of the Church's influence were expanding, diplomacy became even more ornate. Communication between monarchs included not only formal embassies, but also constant correspondence, in which religious motives and ideas of the divine right of kings often set the tone. The Pope often acted as the supreme arbiter, able to proclaim a crusade or declare excommunication from the Church against an objectionable ruler. This growing authority of the Church made diplomacy a tool closely intertwined with religious doctrine. However, along with religious factors, the economic component remained significant: city-states like Venice and Genoa were forced to play a subtle game, while trading with rivals and trying to maintain a monopoly in their spheres of influence. Geopolitical alignments meant that many conflicts were resolved through dynastic marriages, territorial exchanges, and complex alliances that spelled out support in the event of a third-party attack. At the same time, there was often a situation when one of the parties, changing priorities, violated previous agreements and went over to the side of recent enemies. Under these circumstances, the royal courts widely attracted advisers who were trained in oratory, Latin, and diplomatic etiquette, which contributed to the formation of a professional corps of diplomats. Although there were no permanent embassies in the modern sense, there was already a tradition of establishing long-term missions, when one court could send its envoy for several years to defend the interests of the sovereign and report on the political climate in the destination. Such practices gradually strengthened the credibility of the institution of diplomacy, helping to differentiate its methods and expand the network of international contacts itself. Over time, with the integration of different regions and the increasing complexity of economic ties, diplomacy began to play an increasingly decisive role in the fate of States.

Materials and methods of research

The age of Great Geographical Discoveries radically changed the balance of power on the world map, revealing new spheres of influence and stimulating fierce competition for colonies. Spain and Portugal, the first to make significant expeditions outside of Europe, became the largest players in maritime trade, which inevitably affected the diplomatic mechanisms of interaction with other powers. Since the establishment of sea routes to resource-rich lands directly affected the welfare and military potential, many European monarchies joined the race for colonial possessions [Istomin, Levchenko, 2024]. With the advent of active overseas expansion, diplomatic negotiations were often accompanied by the threat of military invasion or economic sanctions, and skilful maneuvering between allied and hostile empires became a matter of survival. During this period, interdependence began to manifest itself: control over maritime communications provided not only economic, but also political advantages, forcing different kingdoms to sign formal agreements on the division of spheres of influence in order to minimize the risk of large-scale conflicts in the open ocean. Thus, the Treaty of Tordesillas, concluded between Spain and Portugal, clearly illustrates this practice: land division lines preceded later claims to new territories. However, such agreements could not eliminate the rivalry forever, because other European powers, such as England, France and the Netherlands, sought to snatch their share of the world's wealth by sending fleets to the shores of America and Asia. The gradual inclusion of new lands in the orbit of European diplomacy expanded the scale of world politics, creating new hotbeds of tension and defining long-term vectors for the development of international relations. Therefore, the colonial contradictions largely laid the prerequisites for many future wars and alliances.

One of the key milestones in the development of the diplomatic system is considered to be the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which ended the Thirty Years' War and laid down the principles of state sovereignty. This treaty formally recognized the equality of Christian states, opened the way for the secularization of political relations and gave them the right to independently determine their religious policy. The most important consequence of the Peace of Westphalia was the formation of a new political map of Europe, on which the balance of power was fixed, depending on complex coalitions and treaties. While religious rivalries had often dominated diplomatic games before, they were now increasingly dominated by questions of national interests, economic gain, and dynastic pretensions. The establishment of a system of state sovereignty stimulated the formation of permanent diplomatic missions, as successful protection of national interests required closer and more regular interaction [Vinokurov, 2022]. It was then that the life of European courts was filled with many professional diplomats, couriers, secretaries and advisers who collected intelligence, maintained contacts with allies and opponents, and often conducted secret negotiations. The practice of mutual visits of high-ranking officials, designed to publicly confirm the union or demonstrate good relations, has been strengthened. At the same time, the role of the international law system has increased: formal rules of diplomatic protocol have been drawn up, defining the rank of ambassadors, the order of ceremonies and the mechanism of diplomatic correspondence. This shift to more institutionalized diplomacy was accompanied by increased competition for influence and spheres of interest in Europe, where France, England, the Holy Roman Empire and later Prussia, Russia and Austria sought to take the lead. At the same time, there was an understanding of the importance of strategic marriage alliances, when dynastic ties could significantly strengthen the ruler's claims to certain territories, as well as become a form of soft power that helps strengthen alliances.

Results and discussion

In the 18th century, increased competition between the leading powers contributed to the development of the concept of "balance of power", which became not only a diplomatic doctrine, but also a kind of principle of pan-European stability. Its essence was that no state should gain overwhelming superiority over others, because this would automatically provoke the creation of counter-coalitions seeking to restore balance on the continent. Thus, a system of checks and balances emerged, in which the Powers sought to prevent the collapse of the traditional order through complex schemes of alliances and temporary associations. France, Great Britain, Austria, Russia, and Prussia were constantly fighting for footholds of influence, making one agreement after another, often breaking old alliances and forming new ones. This was a period of frequent wars, but also active diplomatic congresses, which became an integral part of the political life of Europe [Chubaryan, 2023]. A striking example is the so-called "Diplomatic Revolution" of 1756, in which former enemies — France and Austria — united against Prussia and Great Britain. Such changes, which seemed sudden and illogical, were based on a completely rational calculation and a desire to maintain or strengthen their own positions in a complex international architecture. The economic potential of the powers began to play a special role, because the financing of large-scale armies and fleets was a heavy burden on the budget, and skillful maneuvering in this area could give a decisive advantage. Therefore, diplomats increasingly raised issues of trade agreements, customs tariffs and colonial expansion, forming interstate blocs based not only on the military power, but also on the financial stability of the allies. Thus, step by step, the world system of geopolitical interests was formed, which at that time was represented mainly by European powers and their colonies, but it had already begun to expand beyond the borders of one continent.

The Napoleonic Wars were a vivid illustration of how a violation of the balance of power can lead to total conflict and the restructuring of the entire diplomatic system. The French Revolution not only changed the internal structure of France itself, but also challenged the traditional monarchies of Europe, radically revising the previous norms of interaction. When Napoleon Bonaparte began to actively expand the boundaries of his influence, he forced almost all the major powers to enter a series of coalition wars, then trying to gain the upper hand over France. The goal was to suppress Napoleonic expansion and prevent the establishment of French hegemony in Europe. Although at certain times Napoleon was able to control a significant part of the continent, eventually this rapid expansion caused the consolidation of the opponents' efforts [Krivokapich, 2022]. The result of the Napoleonic Wars was the Congress of Vienna of 1814-1815, which laid the foundation for a new system of international relations based on the principle of the "European Concert". The main achievement of the congress was the settlement of territorial issues, the return to the balance of power system and the consolidation of agreements between the participants designed to ensure a lasting peace. The fact that the great Powers collectively reviewed the map of Europe and agreed on rules of conduct was a significant step forward in shaping the culture of multilateral diplomacy. At the same time, the Congress of Vienna also showed a conservative character: it sought to preserve the existing order, restore the old dynasties and limit the influence of liberal and nationalist ideas, which in the future would become more and more assertive. But the architecture of the "European Concert" remained relatively stable for several decades, until the Crimean War and the subsequent new national movements that finally destroyed the principles laid down by the Congress of Vienna.

In the second half of the 19th century, Otto von Bismarck's skillful diplomacy became a model of how an individual statesman can construct a whole network of alliances and counterweights in the

interests of one state. Bismarck sought to unite the German lands under Prussian rule and bring the new German Empire to a leading position in Europe, while preventing the creation of hostile coalitions. To achieve this goal, he consistently entered into alliances with Austria-Hungary, then with Russia, supported the neutrality of Great Britain and skillfully used friction between other powers. Thus, a complex system was formed, in which Bismarck played the role of an architect capable of deterring potential opponents of Germany and buying time to strengthen its power [Orlov, 2020]. Despite the fact that his diplomatic masterpiece was based on specific historical conditions, he laid out the practice of subtle combinations of open and secret agreements, and also demonstrated the importance of personal contacts and "real politics" when national interests dominate. However, after Bismarck's resignation, German diplomacy became less sophisticated, which created the prerequisites for the formation of hostile blocs in the early twentieth century. Accelerated industrial development, colonial ambitions, and nationalist sentiments in various countries created an increasingly explosive environment, where previous alliances were rapidly losing their relevance. The European powers, fearing being pushed out of the geopolitical scene, began to form more rigid coalitions: the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy) and the Entente (France, Russia, Great Britain). There was a two-way standoff, exacerbated by an arms race and propaganda, where diplomacy gradually gave way to military plans and strategic calculations in the event of a global conflict, which eventually resulted in the First World War.

The First World War proved to be a disaster for Europe and demonstrated that even well-established diplomatic mechanisms can be powerless in the face of escalating confrontation and mass mobilization. Long years of balancing and coalitions did not prevent the war, but only delayed its beginning, giving it even greater destructive power. The result of the first global conflict was the Versailles Peace Order, where the defeated Germany was subjected to strict demands for reparations and restrictions on military power [Mazarchuk, 2023]. However, these conditions, signed largely under the influence of the emotional background and the desire to punish the "culprit of war", sowed the seeds of future aggression and revanchism. The new system of international relations included the League of Nations, which was conceived as a universal body for preventing another world war, but in practice it turned out to be too weak and unable to withstand the growing challenges. Most of the great powers were either skeptical of it, like the United States, which refused to ratify the League's charter, or used its rostrum solely to their advantage. The interwar twenty years were a period of contradictions: on the one hand, the desire for peace and disarmament found more and more supporters, on the other hand, socio-economic crises and nationalist propaganda once again pushed peoples to militarism and totalitarianism. Thus, the diplomacy of that time was balanced between democratic ideals and openly authoritarian tendencies, which ultimately led to the complete inability of collective security to contain the aggression of Nazi Germany and its allies.

The Second World War demonstrated an even greater degree of involvement of States in the global conflict and became a test for any diplomatic channel. The horrors of this confrontation were recognized by all, and after the end of the war, there was an urgent need to create new mechanisms for maintaining international peace. The conferences in Yalta and Potsdam determined the post-war world order and the division of spheres of influence between the USSR, the United States and their allies, which consolidated the bipolar structure of the future system of international relations [Ryabova, Ternovaya, 2020]. At the same time, the United Nations was being formed, designed to become the successor to the League of Nations, but with a broader mandate and participation of key countries, especially permanent members of the Security Council. It seemed that the established order would be able to keep humanity from a new global tragedy, but soon the contradictions between the capitalist

and socialist camps led to the formation of the "iron Curtain" and the beginning of the Cold War. World diplomacy was divided into two poles, with allies and satellites grouped around them, and tense negotiations mostly focused on trying to avoid a direct clash with the use of nuclear weapons. One way or another, in the post-war period, diplomats played a crucial role in preventing local conflicts from turning into a hot phase of confrontation between superpowers, while simultaneously trying to find ways to defuse tensions.

The Cold War period was marked by the creation of military blocs of NATO and the Warsaw Pact Organization, which formalized the division of Europe and actually legitimized the bipolar format of world politics. The most important tools of the diplomats were the nuclear deterrence strategy, when each side realized that any strike would lead to an inevitable response and the potential destruction of both sides. This phenomenon, called "guaranteed mutual annihilation", although it frightened all of humanity, but partially kept the superpowers from a direct military clash. In such circumstances, diplomacy increasingly came to the forefront, becoming a mechanism for detente, mediation in regional conflicts, and arms control [Konyshov, 2020]. It was during this period that the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties (SALT) were signed, as well as agreements on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons were reached. But despite cooperative efforts, rivalries continued in the ideological, economic, scientific, and space spheres. Diplomats on both sides had to maneuver between harsh rhetoric and the need to communicate to prevent a global catastrophe. The world during this period remained extremely unstable, as each side constantly feared that the other would try to gain a critical advantage—whether by deploying missiles in neighboring states or intervening in local conflicts in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Thus, the diplomatic platform was used for information exchange, propaganda, and bargaining, which could contain escalation. Crises like the Caribbean in 1962 have clearly demonstrated the fragility of the world order and the critical importance of dialogue, even in the most tense of circumstances.

The detente of the 1970s gave hope for a gradual softening of the confrontation, but it resumed in the 1980s under President Reagan and the former Soviet leadership. Only when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the USSR did a real turn towards dismantling the totalitarian system and revising the foreign policy course begin. Gorbachev's meetings with Reagan, and later with Bush Sr., led to the signing of important agreements on nuclear disarmament, military reduction, and cooperation on global issues. [Istomin, Baykov, 2020] By the end of the 1980s, it became apparent that the USSR was unable to maintain its influence at the same level, and the Eastern Bloc began to rapidly collapse. The unification of Germany, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created a new geopolitical reality in which the United States was the sole superpower. The diplomacy of the post-Soviet space acquired specific features, as many new states appeared, each of which sought to determine its place in the world order and build relations with world centers of influence. This transition period saw renewed interest in multilateral organizations, increased importance of international financial institutions and regional associations, and increased globalization. News about major summits and international meetings became a key factor in shaping the new agenda, which was dominated by the topics of security, economy, human rights and environmental challenges.

In the 1990s, the so-called "unipolar moment" was formed, when the United States was able to determine the basic rules of the international game, intervene in regional conflicts, and spread ideas about democracy and the free market as universal values. The Balkan wars, the first Gulf War, and operations in Somalia and elsewhere have shown that the United States is ready to use both military force and diplomatic mechanisms to influence the course of local conflicts. At the same time, the EU deepened the integration process, creating a single currency, forming supranational institutions, and

trying to act as an independent geopolitical player [Gromyko, 2023]. Russia, which is experiencing difficulties of economic and political transition, could not effectively counteract the expansion of NATO and the influence of the West in the post-Soviet space. China at that time was still far from the economic giant that it became at the beginning of the XXI century, but the prerequisites for its future growth were laid. A new diplomatic agenda was emerging, focusing on the fight against terrorism, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, global trade and finance, and humanitarian intervention. Under these conditions, diplomacy increasingly assumed a multilateral character, being implemented within the framework of the UN, the G7 (and later the G20) and many regional forums, in which the leading powers sought compromises and tried to agree on rules of conduct in various spheres. However, the rise of nationalist sentiment and the asymmetry of forces continued to set the stage for conflicts, where diplomacy faced new challenges in a globalizing world.

The events of September 11, 2001 in the United States changed the global security agenda and led to the beginning of the "war on terrorism", and American diplomacy began to actively form coalitions for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. These conflicts demonstrated the complexity of interaction even between allies, as many EU countries and other powers did not share Washington's methods and goals. Nevertheless, the global fight against terrorism has become a catalyst for the development of international cooperation in the field of intelligence sharing, strengthening control over the financing of extremist groups, as well as improving transparency mechanisms in the security sector [Morozov, 2024.]. At the same time, China's role on the world stage continued to strengthen, actively developing trade and investment, carefully playing the diplomatic game, avoiding direct confrontations, but systematically moving towards the status of an economic leader. Russia, under Vladimir Putin's presidency, has sought to restore its influence by using energy resources and military-diplomatic leverage, seeking recognition of its interests in the near abroad. Meanwhile, the European Union has repeatedly expanded to include Eastern European countries, which has brought conflicting notes to relations with Russia and changed the configuration of forces in the region. Competition for energy routes and resources has become more pronounced, causing local crises like the conflict in Georgia in 2008. New centers of power were being created on the world map, forming around high technologies, financial markets, and access to raw materials. The transformation of the international system has made diplomatic actions even more multifaceted and requires players to take an integrated approach to security and development issues.

Gradually, the world was plunging into a phase of conditional multipolarity, where, in addition to the United States, China and the EU, such powers as Russia, India, and Brazil began to play a significant role, and regional organizations, such as ASEAN or the African Union, increasingly loudly declared their interests. In such a system, the importance of economic and technological factors as the basis of diplomatic weight increased: a country that could offer partners profitable investments, attractive technological solutions, or access to strategically important resources received additional trump cards in diplomatic negotiations [Litvak, 2020]. The struggle for influence in the Arctic and outer space was intensifying, as major powers sought to be the first to stake out promising areas. During the same period, the number of non-standard challenges for world diplomacy increased: cybersecurity, the fight against climate change, epidemics and migration crises required concerted action. Despite attempts to engage in a multi-pronged dialogue, each State tried to preserve its freedom of movement as much as possible and prevent the loss of sovereignty in favor of supranational institutions. This dynamic created new opportunities for small countries that were able to balance between centers of power and use diplomatic platforms to protect their interests. However, the deep contradictions between the great powers have not disappeared and have even escalated, reflected in trade wars, discussions about UN

reform and increased geopolitical competition in hot spots.

One of the most important factors influencing the evolution of diplomacy has been the emergence of new players who do not necessarily have the status of a state: transnational corporations, global non-governmental organizations, mass movements united by interests or ideological views. They began to form parallel channels of influence, seeking to bring their agenda to both national capitals and global forums. As a result, classical diplomacy focused on negotiations between governments received a significant addition in the form of "people's diplomacy", when public opinion and civil activity exerted direct pressure on the foreign policy course of states. This shifted the usual decision-making framework and required governments to communicate transparently, taking into account the interests of voters and activist groups. At the same time, the rapid development of digital technologies made it possible to instantly disseminate information, forming public campaigns and protest movements, which created new challenges for traditional diplomacy. Information warfare, propaganda, and cyberattacks have become integral tools of competition, turning the diplomatic arena into a field for global media manipulation. However, this transformation also opened up new opportunities: virtual meetings, online summits, and various electronic interaction platforms expanded access to the diplomatic process and allowed for the involvement of a wide variety of participants.

Conclusions

Today, looking back on the path we have traveled, we can say that the diplomacy of great powers has always been a reflection of profound changes in the world, moving from local alliances to the formation of global structures where the interests of political blocs, economic giants and ideological trends collide. Strategic alliances and rivalries that shape the international system remain key tools for conflict management and resource allocation. The complexity of the modern world, where issues of ecology, technological progress, and sociocultural identity come to the forefront, only increases the need for subtle diplomatic mechanisms and negotiations that can prevent the devastating consequences of direct clashes. Any major Power tries to combine hard power with soft power tools, using cultural diplomacy, economic partnerships, and scientific and technological cooperation to strengthen its image and expand its influence. As a result, the evolution of diplomacy is a continuous process in which past models, experiences and mistakes are intertwined with the latest developments in the field of communications and management, forming a complex dynamic network of interactions on the world stage. It is this continuous search for a balance between competition and cooperation, hard power and soft power, national ambitions and the global good that defines the face of twenty-first-century diplomacy, continuing the development of a centuries-old tradition and drawing on the lessons of all previous history.

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**Эволюция дипломатии великих держав:
исторический анализ стратегических альянсов
и соперничества в международных отношениях**

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Аннотация

Статья посвящена историческому анализу эволюции дипломатии великих держав, исследуя формирование стратегических альянсов и соперничества в международных отношениях от древних цивилизаций до современных реалий. В работе применена структура, что позволило систематизировать исследование по ключевым этапам: от зарождения дипломатии в Месопотамии, Греции и средневековой Европе до трансформаций в эпоху Вестфальского мира, Наполеоновских войн, Холодной войны и глобализации. Методология основана на качественном историческом анализе, включающем изучение договоров (Тордесильянский, Вестфальский, Венский конгресс), практик дипломатии (династические браки, баланс сил, многосторонние институты) и кейсов ключевых игроков (Бисмарк, СССР, США, Китай). Результаты исследования выявили устойчивые паттерны: роль баланса сил как стабилизирующего механизма, цикличность альянсов (например, «Дипломатическая революция» 1756 г.), влияние технологий и экономики на геополитику. Обсуждение подчеркивает переход от двуполярной системы Холодной войны к многополярности, где наряду с государствами действуют транснациональные корпорации, НПО и цифровые

платформы. Особое внимание уделено вызовам XXI века: кибербезопасности, климатическим кризисам, гибридным войнам, требующим адаптации традиционной дипломатии. Выводы указывают на непрерывность эволюции дипломатии, где сочетание «жесткой» и «мягкой» силы, а также гибкость в условиях глобализации остаются критическими для поддержания стабильности. Статья вносит вклад в понимание исторической преемственности дипломатических практик и их роли в управлении современными международными конфликтами.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

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Ключевые слова

Великие державы, стратегические альянсы, баланс сил, исторический анализ, международные отношения.

Библиография

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