

Speak Softly and Carry a Big Book

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It is not easy to define diplomacy. What is its essence? Is it an art, a craft, or something in between? What is good diplomacy . . . what isn't? As you will read in this book, there are manifold perspectives on diplomacy—and countless definitions, too. One of the most famous stems from President Theodore Roosevelt, who was known for his “big stick diplomacy” and described his diplomatic maxim by referring to a proverb: “speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far.”¹ For this book, we engaged in what can be called “big book diplomacy” and adopted an only slightly adapted version of Roosevelt's dictum: speak softly and carry a big book. We hope it sticks.

The reason for this book is simple. In April 2021, Wolfgang Ischinger, our long-time boss and mentor at the Munich Security Conference and beyond, turned seventy five. To celebrate him and his lifetime achievements, we decided to compile seventy-five contributions about the art of diplomacy. Neither we—nor he—wanted this to be a book about him. We wanted to edit a book *for* him—and for all the others who, like him, believe in the power of diplomacy. *Ceci n'est pas une Festschrift*—or so we thought.

To end up with seventy-five contributions we decided to write to one hundred of Wolfgang's closest associates and long-standing friends and partners and ask them to send us their favorite instructive anecdotes about the myriad ways in which diplomacy works. What we got back stunned us. For one, not seventy-five, but almost all one hundred immediately agreed to contribute. Second, despite our instructions to the contrary, almost everyone handed in anecdotes that included Wolfgang in one way or another. While we engaged in hefty “editing diplomacy” (try telling a sitting president to rewrite his contribution), it quickly became clear just how important personality and character are to a diplomat's success. Without them, not much is possible. With them, almost everything is. As the many references to him we had to remove testify, Wolfgang Ischinger has both in abundance.

In a way, Wolfgang is the “Forrest Gump” of German diplomacy. Since the early 1980s, he has almost always been where the real action took place. Starting as a young diplomat in the office of then foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, he witnessed the heated debates about the deployment of Pershing II missiles

in Germany and the ensuing détente that allowed the Cold War to end peacefully. At the end of the decade, he was one of the West German diplomats who accompanied the trains with East German refugees who had fled to the German Embassy in Prague. As head of the Political Department in the German embassy in Paris, he witnessed the birth of the Charter of Paris in 1990. As head of Policy Planning and political director of the Federal Foreign Office, he was in the midst of Germany making its first steps as a unified country trying to find its role in a different era. He represented Germany in the Contact Group during the Balkan Wars and was among the negotiators in the Dayton Peace Agreement. He also participated in the negotiation of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, another milestone of diplomacy in the 1990s. As state secretary, he played a key role in the negotiations that led to the creation of Operation Allied Force and the Balkan Stability Pact in 1999. Given this background, it is perhaps not surprising that he was the German ambassador in the United States on September 11, 2001. In fact, it was his first day in office. To this day, his reputation in the US still draws on the very special mark he left during his tenure in Washington, DC.

Following two years as ambassador to the Court of St. James's, including a stint as the representative of the European Union in the Kosovo Troika that tried to find a solution to the status of Kosovo, in 2008 the German government asked Wolfgang to take over as chairman of the Munich Security Conference (MSC). He quickly breathed new life into this venerable organization that was founded by Ewald von Kleist as *Wehrkundetagung* in 1963, and over the years has become an indispensable family gathering for the transatlantic community. What started out as an annual conference, is now a highly efficient private diplomacy service provider and the world's leading platform for the debate of foreign and security policy. Still transatlantic to its core, the MSC regularly hosts the world's top decision makers on its stages around the world and publishes reports to draw attention to particular challenges. Almost all the pictures illustrating this book (in a way adding the art to the diplomacy) have been taken at MSC events over the past decade.

Even while steering the MSC through the last decade, Wolfgang continued to accept special diplomatic missions. For instance he served as the Representative of

the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for National Dialogue Roundtables in Ukraine and as the chairman of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project, as well as in countless track two efforts or expert commissions, trying to find peaceful solutions to difficult problems—from nuclear arms control to cybersecurity. In each of these roles, he could rely on his key strengths, which make him the quintessential diplomat—his readiness to engage, to listen, and to remain open to other views; his ability to adapt to different groups and environments; and his clear moral compass.

Along the way, he built one of the best diplomatic networks in the world. This big book is testament to it. In it, nearly one hundred prominent authors share their personal views behind the scenes of world politics. Almost all of them are masters of diplomacy themselves—many of them spent their careers negotiating difficult agreements or trying to peacefully solve conflicts. Many of them have served as presidents, foreign or defense ministers, heads of international organizations, ambassadors, military leaders, or parliamentarians, while others have influenced the global debate as journalists, scholars, activists, or thought leaders. Each of them offers insights and lessons for diplomacy today and tomorrow.

Of course, this book is not an all-encompassing handbook, discussing every single aspect of diplomacy. Rather, the authors offer their very personal takes on the art of diplomacy. While the charm of the book is the fact that this plethora of views, opinions, and experiences comes relatively unsorted, there is an underlying structure to it all.

The first section of the book deals with some of the key elements of successful diplomacy. Our readers may not be surprised to read about the importance of trust or of personal connections, or to learn about the role of ambassadors and parliamentarians. But they will also learn about the role that tea can play in diplomacy or why diplomacy is, in many ways, like jazz.

The contributions in the second section focus on some of the core challenges for diplomacy today and in the future. Our authors not only reflect on some of the big issues—such as managing great-power competition or

defending liberal-democratic values—they also discuss how diplomacy itself, its decision-making structures, its reach, and tools need to be adapted to changing circumstances, including the rise of technology and ever new ways to communicate.

In the third section of the book, our contributors discuss specific episodes of diplomacy in action—some of them very successful, others at least partially helpful, still others complete failures. In many cases, our authors for the first time publicly share their personal stories about these episodes. All these stories provide instructive insights for tomorrow's diplomats.

The final section of the book brings together some more general reflections on diplomacy. Based on their long-time experience, the contributors spell out some of their key diplomatic lessons. Like all the others writing in this volume, they believe that diplomacy has not had its day. If anything, it will become even more important in the future.

Instead of writing a conclusion ourselves, we have asked Wolfgang to distill his career into a number of key takeaways, which you will find at the very end of this book. As we know from experience, his intense diplomatic life has produced a treasure trove of diplomatic insights, hilarious stories, and more-or-less-funny jokes. Many of these stories, especially the jokes, are for a different book, but their essence runs through this one and, in particular, through Wolfgang's epilogue.

We very much hope that you will find the collection of stories about diplomacy both instructive and entertaining. We tried to strike a balance between the serious and the more lighthearted, between the instructive and the descriptive, all in the hope that the overall result provides a valuable glimpse behind the scenes of world politics. The one thing to take away from all the stories is that diplomacy really is an art, best practiced by those who, like Wolfgang, are willing to treat it as such.

Wolfgang Ischinger at the Launch of the Munich Security
Report *Zeitenwende* | *Wendezeiten* in October 2020.

