

Conference Report

"The Problem of Eurocentrism in Global Diplomatic History"

The conference, entitled "The Problem of Eurocentrism in Global Diplomatic History", which was held in Stockholm on 23-24 January 2025, served to further the Global Diplomacy Network's (GDN) aim of overcoming prevailing eurocentric biases in the field of diplomatic history. As articulated by the conference organiser, Birgit Tremml-Werner, the objective transcends the mere problematisation of established accounts and frameworks, aiming instead to cultivate novel and tangible historical analyses, thereby facilitating the emergence of more truly global metanarratives in the domain of diplomatic history.

On the first day of the conference (23 January 2025), the first panel, titled "**Eurocentrism and the History of Diplomacy in the Islamic World**", featured three speakers who presented recent research on the subject. The speakers highlighted the diverse and intricate historical interactions between different regions, including Egypt, Central Africa, and Istanbul, emphasising the complexity and richness of diplomatic relations.

First, Malika Dekkiche (Universiteit Antwerpen) delivered a paper on hajj diplomacy in 15th-century Mamluk Egypt, underlining the centrality of the practice of pilgrimage as a point of contact and conflict between Islamic rulers. The hajj thus served as an important arena for forging ongoing connections and diplomatic conventions for the interaction of the various Islamic courts of the region.

Following this, Rémi Dewièrè (Università di Napoli L'Orientale) problematized the long-held conceptualization of pre-colonial Africa as a continent without 'borders' through the example of the short-lived territorial boundary between the sultanates of Kanem and Borno in the 1570s. Dewièrè's argument challenges the conventional view of African borders as a product of colonial expansion, proposing instead that pre-colonial Africa exhibited a variety of boundary forms, some of which, such as that between the sultanates of Kanem and Borno in the 1570s, were established and sustained through ritual and diplomatic practices. Dewièrè

thus calls for a more expansive and non-Eurocentric conceptual framework to facilitate a deeper understanding of the unique African approaches to border-making.

Finally, Florian Kühnel (Leibniz-Institut für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz) delivered a paper on 'Sociability' and 'Friendship' in Early Modern Istanbul. In this paper, Kühnel critically examined the conventional view that the Ottoman court did not engage in 'diplomacy' in any meaningful sense, instead maintaining inter-state relations through less formalised social relations of friendship. Utilising the reports of British consuls in Istanbul during the late 17th century as a primary source to challenge this view, Kühnel's contends that the increasing reliance on private and incognito meetings, as well as the exchange of letters, does not necessarily indicate a lack of formalised diplomacy. Instead, he posits that these practices represented a shift in the logics underpinning diplomatic interactions. Crucial to these logics were the mutual use of intermediaries, privacy, and the instrumentalization of tropes of 'love and friendship'.

Roundtable: "The Problem with Eurocentrism in Diplomatic History and International Relations". Chaired by Guido van Meersbergen (University of Warwick), the roundtable featured short presentations by Lisa Hellman (Lund University), Ayse Zarakol (University of Cambridge), Jan Hennings (Central European University, Vienna), and Leos Müller (Stockholm University). All speakers noted the continuing endurance of Eurocentric metanarratives and conceptions within their respective fields, ranging from International Relations (IR) and Maritime History to Global History.

Zarakol argued that within the discipline of IR, there is a common practice of relying on and universalising concepts derived from European history, as if they were applicable to the entire human experience rather than to distinct and provincial contexts. She noted that scholars in IR often assume that what they need to know from the past occurred in Europe and that global difference in past and present reflects the belated or imperfect development of the rest of the world as compared with the supposedly 'universal' West. This tendency is exemplified by the tendency within IR scholarship on the non-Western world to implicitly compare it to a certain European standard.

The historians in attendance noted that the remnants of these metanarratives persist, albeit to a lesser extent, within their own discipline. Hennings, for instance, identified this phenomenon in the tendency to homogenize or essentialize European diplomatic practices as if they constitute a monolith of distinct and internally produced phenomena, thoroughly incommensurable with those from non-European history. Despite this, there was a general

consensus among the speakers that historians should not entirely reject European-derived concepts in favour of localised and effectively incommensurable analytical vocabularies.

During the discussion, the enduring quality of these metanarrative was also described as resulting from a number of structural arrangements. Hellman, for instance, noted how the difficulty of convincing foundations and stakeholders of the importance of truly global approaches to diplomatic history was a hindrance. Hennings identified another impediment: the compartmentalisation of the academic domain within isolated area studies. To this Zarakol added how larger global asymmetries effectively limit the resources available in the Global South and the kind of work publishers and the general public are interested in.

The objective of **Panel 2, titled "Centrisms and Hegemonic Orders"**, was to broaden the discussion of centrism to include male and sinocentrism. In her presentation, Ann Towns (Gothenburg University) explored the evolution of gender roles in modern diplomacy from 1750 to 1960, highlighting the profound and rising influence of hetero-binary gender norms. She noted that modern diplomacy was predominantly shaped by these standards, exemplified by the presence of a male envoy accompanied by a diplomatic spouse and the model of a residential diplomatic mission following the European patriarchal household. Utilising a comprehensive review of extant literature, Towns posits that the prevailing male-centric practices within modern diplomacy are a consequence of European imperialist imposition during the 19th and 20th centuries, leading to the displacement or restructuring of a pre-existing plurality of gender roles in inter-polity interactions. Consequently, Towns challenges the prevailing perspective of diplomacy as a historical phenomenon characterised by the complete exclusion of women from diplomatic activities until the gradual inclusion of women through a Western initiative in the latter half of the 20th century.

Subsequently, Polina Barducci (Lund University) delivered a presentation on *Sinocentrism in the history of premodern East Asian foreign relations*. Drawing upon recent reinterpretations of the regional role of the Ming dynasty of China (1368-1644), Barducci urged scholars to rethink the Chinese tributary system and the agency of non-Chinese polities in the region. In her argument, the Ming court recognised itself as the superior domain, which pointed to an ideological pre-eminence of China as the cradle of civilisation in East Asia, but not as having an actual dominating position in respect to vassal states. Consequently, even exemplary tributary states, such as Joseon Korea (1392–1910), while exhibiting veneration for the Chinese world order, only maintained relations as long as it was deemed profitable in terms of domestic interests.

Panel 3: "Provincializing European Diplomacy".

Vladislav Rjéoutski (German Historical Institute, Paris) argued for the need to pay sustained attention to the plurality of linguistic traditions involved in diplomatic communications in early modern Europe. In his presentation, *Eastern European Diplomacies and the Limits of a Pan-European Lingua Franca*, Rjéoutski noted the widespread use of in particular Latin and Tatar as lingua francas, as opposed to French or Arabic, in Russian diplomacy before the 18th century. Rjéoutski emphasised that a focus on these linguistic aspects is crucial for comprehending the profound levels of confusion and delay that often characterised cross-cultural inter-polity relations of the era. Furthermore, he argued that this focus is necessary to avoid a teleological narrative of the rise of a common European lingua franca.

Subsequently, Tessa de Boer of Universiteit Leiden delivered a presentation on the *Global Dimensions in Diplomatic Financial Services in Europe*. While many other papers discussed global encounters taking place beyond Europe, de Boer's focused on how diplomatic practices within Europe were shaped by larger global constellations, in this case the late 18th-century financial crisis of the French Empire. Faced with massively rising colonial debts, the French monarchy engaged its European consuls and ambassadors outside France as financial brokers, who authorised state borrowing from various private individuals in the form of annuities. In the Netherlands, for instance, the financial transactions facilitated by these European representatives contributed to more than fifty percent of the country's diplomatic expenditures during this period. In light of these observations, de Boer calls upon researchers to direct greater attention towards the role of diplomats in global networks of financing.

Subsequently, Dorothée Goetze (Sundsvall University), presented a paper on the predominance of Eurocentric narratives within early modern peace studies. According to Goetze, this field treats Europe as the self-evident spatial frame, and as a consequence, there is a lack of scholarly focus on non-European conceptions of peace as well as peace diplomacy with and among non-Europeans. In her presentation, Goetze linked this spatial framework to the foundational European philosophies of peace and of the ruler's responsibility for making peace – from Augustinian and Thomasian philosophy to 16th-century Desiderius Erasmus – which presented peace-making as a uniquely Christian and therefore European trait. Goetze recognised the weight of this tradition in the still common

distinction between 'peace treaties', which are supposedly a European phenomenon, and regular treaties.

Keynote by Ayşe Zarakol: **Dealing with Eurocentrism – Trade-offs and Dilemmas.**

Zarakol firstly presented the main points from her book *Before the West – The rise and fall of the Eastern World Order* (2022) and its description of the established historical narrative of IR. Zarakol contends that scholars of international relations (IR) demonstrate a limited engagement with historical scholarship, and that the prevailing narrative within IR scholarship traces the evolution of modern diplomacy through a highly simplified historical trajectory. This trajectory, as outlined by Zarakol, begins with the Peloponnesian War in the 5th century BC, traverses the Westphalian Congress in 1648 (and in Vienna in 1814), and culminates in the world wars of the 20th century. Instead, Zarakol proposes a more comprehensive Eurasian perspective, emphasising the emergence of a global order from the foundations of Eurasian empires, beginning with the Mongol empire in the 13th century.

In her presentation, Zarakol further observes that a significant aspect of IR scholarship implicitly asserts that diplomacy, in its true sense, is exclusive to Europeans. Furthermore, she asserts that this field is characterised by silo-thinking, which takes a reductionist approach to the spatial units in question. This is exemplified by the tendency to consider 'the nation' or 'civilisations' (typically organised according to religion) as the point of departure, and by studying these in isolation. The recent endeavour by IR scholars to counter Eurocentrism by focusing more on China is encumbered by similar forms of silo-thinking and consequently falls short of transcending the conventional notion of Europe as self-contained and self-generated.

Nevertheless, Zarakol does not advocate for the complete dismissal of European categories as analytical concepts, such as sovereignty or territoriality. Instead, she proposes a broadening of IR concepts to encompass a multitude of polities, facilitating analytical commensurability across diverse contexts. This, she contends, is imperative for the discipline to evolve beyond the confines of microstudies, which, as some historians do, rely heavily on smaller contexts and extensive archival research. The effective counterargument to Eurocentric narratives, she contends, is the development of new, less Eurocentric narratives. With regard to the use of European concepts, however, Zarakol acknowledges the difficulty of distinguishing between a concept with excessive 'baggage' and one that is sufficiently salvageable for transfer to different regions.

During the subsequent discussion, Ann Towns, Gothenburg University, posed the question of whether it would also be beneficial to derive analytical concepts from the world outside the West. Zarakol considers this a potentially significant development, given the limitations of European concepts in accounting for diverse pasts and experiences.

On the second day of the conference (24 January 2025), Panel 5, entitled "**Conceptualizing Commensurability and Diplomatic Agency, 1500-1800**", engaged with a range of approaches and cases pertaining to the discourse on (in)commensurabilities in the context of cross-cultural diplomatic relations within the broader framework of global history.

The first presentation was delivered by José Miguel Escribano Páez (Universidad Pablo de Olavide in Seville), and focused on the subject of *Malukans, Iberians and the Formation of a Global Spice Diplomacy from 1511 to 1606*. Páez observed that the historical record has predominantly focused on the violent aspects of Iberian colonialism, thereby overshadowing the intricacies of diplomatic interactions among different polities within the region. However, he emphasised the crucial need to understand these diplomatic practices to gain a comprehensive perspective on the underlying causes and dynamics of cross-cultural violence, particularly between Malukans and the Portuguese. Building on previous research, Páez described the Malukan polity as having a flexible and resilient diplomatic culture that was able to combine traditional knowledges with European political concepts, though the history was sometimes also one of European imperialism and the destruction of indigenous diplomatic practices.

Next, Zoltán Biedermann (University College London), presented a paper entitled *Conceptualizing Commensurability in Diplomatic History: The Early Modern View*. Biedermann's paper, based on a critical reading of Sanjay Subrahmanyam's pioneering and influential work in diplomatic history, warned historians of the danger of too readily assuming that global diplomatic relations can be characterised by commensurability and thus by a shared ability and willingness to overcome linguistic and cultural divides. While Subrahmanyam rightly critiques the emphasis on incommensurability, which risks essentialising and orientalisising cultural difference, Biedermann contends that the reverse approach may also be problematic. In his experience, early modern global inter-polity relations were always marked by a complex and case-specific mixture of cultural commensurability and incommensurability and thus of mutual efforts in understanding and crossing transcending cultural boundaries that to some degree remained insurmountable.

Consequently, scholars are compelled to navigate two distinct perspectives concurrently: sign-theory and universalism.

Finally, Mathias Karlsmose (Stockholm University) presented a paper on *Tranquebar's Tamil Protector: The Case of Rama Nayak, 1657-1698*. The focus of the paper was on a local nobleman, Rama Nayak, who played a key but largely overlooked role in maintaining and defending the Danish colony of Tranquebar in Southeast India. Karlsmose showcased how powerful indigenous intermediaries like Rama Nayak could sometimes utilize the diplomatic environment created by European expansion to their own advantage. His position as the colony's visiator (an Indian headman appointed by the Rajah of Thanjavur to rule over the native population), enabled him to benefit from trading under Danish (and at the time neutral) flag, while also using his private army to fortify and defend the city. Rama Nayak's role as an intermediary between different sovereignties (such as the Danish, Dutch, and Thanjavurian) is also highlighted. He used his diplomatic role to create his own domain of power and wealth. According to Karlsmose, the fact that Rama Nayak's interests largely coincided with those of the Danish colonials was an important reason for their willingness to cooperate and transcend cultural divides.

Plenary discussion: **"Function over Form: Mechanisms of inter-polity Relations beyond Written Treaties"**. Chaired by discussant Stefan Eklöf Amirell (Linnéus University), the discussion featured papers from Tim Lubin (Washington and Lee University), Birgit Tremml-Werner (Stockholm University), Kathy Wellen (KITLV, Leiden), and Badriyah Yusof (Universiti Brunei Darussalam). The papers presented evidence and arguments regarding treaties or inter-polity agreements in various regions of Asia and Oceania prior to the early modern European-led colonial expansion. The objective of this was to challenge the Eurocentric concept of treaties as a European invention.

In his paper, Tim Lubin concentrated on the various extant sources on the non-Islamic South Asian treaties prior to the colonising era. Generally, he argued, there existed a distinct and widely recognised set of terms and norms involved in treaty-making. However, it would be erroneous to view these practices as timeless and isolated products of 'the Orient', as evidence points to the importance of wider Eurasian interconnections. The sources also make clear that in these diplomatic practices, the documents themselves were not what was most important, a fact which helps explain the little efforts rulers apparently made to preserve them (the exception being land endowments to monasteries).

Next, Birgit Tremml-Werner discussed cross-cultural treaties in the Philippines from the 16th to the 19th century between Spanish colonizers and indigenous rulers. In her analysis, Tremml-Werner (2022) notes that recent studies have underscored the significance of indigenous agency and cross-cultural commensurability. However, in the context of the Philippines, it is crucial to recognise the evolution of indigenous agency over time, which increasingly became ceremonial and aligned with Spanish norms. While treaties in the 16th century took the form of blood pacts or oaths as was customary in the region, in the 19th century they took the form of acts of submission, following European standards and with greater primacy given to documents and their signing. However, the impact of this Europeanisation was highly uneven in the region, particularly until the 19th century.

Subsequently, Kathryn Wellen presented a case study focusing on pre-colonial alliances between rulers in South and West Sulawesi from the 13th century onwards. While acknowledging the paucity of sources and the challenges in interpreting them, Wellen recognised in these practices of treaty-making a shared emphasis on providing mutual aid and respecting the distinct traditions of the parties involved. In a conceptual sense, Wellen concurred with other speakers in the conference that scholars should continue to label these inter-polity agreements as 'treatises'. Otherwise, there is a risk of exotifying those peoples, whose inter-polity agreements have been deemed too different to be termed as such. Conversely, we should not expect European categories to be universal.

Finally, Badriyah Yusof delivered a presentation on the subject of *Symbolic gestures and social contracts in pre-protectorate Brunei*. In this presentation, Yusof observed that prior to the first formal treaty between Brunei and Great Britain in 1846, inter-polity relations in and around Brunei were governed by symbolic gestures and behaviours, many of which had their origins in 5th and 6th century sources. Among these was a strong emphasis on gift exchange to demonstrate allegiance and subordination, as well as marriages to formalise alliances between kingdoms.

Following the presentations, Stefan Eklöf Amirell observed that the various presentations highlighted the necessity to go beyond written sources, such as archaeology, to gain a more profound comprehension of indigenous agency. Subsequently, a query was raised concerning the role of trust in treaty-making, positing that lack of trust, just as well a lack of will or ability to reach a common understanding, is a crucial part of might disrupt inter-polity relations. In response, Birgit Tremml-Werner observed that the establishment of a treaty does not inherently imply mutual trust, while Badriyah Yusof emphasised that in numerous historical contexts and geographical regions, the significance of specific cosmologies and

cultural norms has often led to the parties' commitment to honoring their agreements. Concluding the discussion, Jan Hennings cautioned against the potential risk of Orientalizing non-European practices if they are primarily presented as reliant on performances, and European practices as primarily dependent on documents. In reality, early modern Europe also recognised the significance of the performance of the ritual surrounding the written agreement in establishing its binding nature.

Panel 6, entitled "**Treaty Making in Oceania in the Nineteenth Century**", featured two presentations that partially overlapped on diplomatic practices in the pre-colonial and colonial Indo-Pacific region. The first presentation, titled *A Late Entry into the World System: Diplomacy in 19th century Oceania*, was delivered by Lorenz Gonschor (University of the South Pacific, Fiji). In this presentation, Gonschor noted the long-lasting isolation of the Eastern Indo-Pacific, which only came to an end during the 19th century, as indigenous Polynesian polities such as Hawai'i and Samoa first entered into treaties with Western empires until eventually being colonized towards the end of the century. In a second presentation, Keanu Sai (University of Hawai'i) discussed the legal ramifications of the occupation and subsequent incorporation of Hawai'i as a state within the United States of America. Sai's presentation challenged the established narrative of US-Hawai'i relations, proposing that, from a legal perspective, the island's sovereignty remains with the Kingdom of Hawai'i.

The conference concluded with a discussion on "**Writing a Global Diplomatic Handbook**". The organisers of the Global History Network, namely Guido van Meersbergen, Birgit Tremml-Werner, and Lisa Hellman, presented their thoughts on the future publication of a handbook on inter-polity relations in the early modern world, 1400-1900, which they and Kristoffer Edelgaard Christensen (Lund University) will co-write and edit during the following three years. In the words of Guido van Meersbergen, the idea behind the handbook is to

- provide a guide on how to write global diplomatic history: showcasing exemplary research from the field in chapters, which combine methodological and theoretical reflection with empirical analyses and case studies (chapters preferably about 8,000 words).
- push the boundaries of "new diplomatic history" in order to produce a truly global history of diplomacy, which do not compartmentalize the different interconnected

regions of the world or ignore the role of global dynamics in the shaping of European diplomatic practices and in the genealogy of the modern diplomatic system.

- build new syntheses as steps towards producing new grand narratives without aiming to produce the new definitive account: it is not enough to merely to problematize Eurocentrism and, in the process, to reinforce it through excessive navel-gazing on Europe, but we need to produce and disseminate new macronarratives to replace the old and prevailing.
- produce viable analytical vocabularies to be used across contexts, being broad enough to encompass, connect, and compare the heterogeneity of past global practices.

Written by Kristoffer Edelgaard Christensen (Lund University)