

International history

History of diplomacy and technology: from smoke signals to artificial intelligence. By Jovan Kurbalija. Malta: DiploFoundation. 2025. 388pp. £45.00. ISBN 979 8 989 80280 7. Available as e-book.

What books should aspiring diplomats read? Whether the study of diplomacy or International Relations (IR) can help you get a job as a diplomat depends on the diplomatic service to which you are applying. For example, the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has little tradition of recruiting IR students, but in countries where university courses map more closely onto careers, an IR qualification can be an asset. Jovan Kurbalija's *History of diplomacy and technology* seems aimed squarely at IR students.

Books about diplomacy are dominated by the memoirs of politicians and diplomats, such as Henry Kissinger's *Diplomacy* (Simon & Schuster, 1994) or Christopher Mallaby's *Living the Cold War* (Amberley Publishing, 2019). Then there are books by ex-diplomats seeking to fuse memoir with analysis with half an eye on the academic market, such as Tom Fletcher's *The naked diplomat* (William Collins, 2017), or Nicholas Westcott's *How to be a diplomat* (Routledge, 2025). Kurbalija, by contrast, makes few references to his own experience as a diplomat, but concentrates on marshalling historic facts.

Kurbalija is Executive Director of DiploFoundation, a non-profit based in Malta. DiploFoundation's website describes him as 'A Takumi Master of AI', a reference to a Japanese word meaning a top craftsman. The book, too, deploys Japanese concepts, saying it uses the '*KaiZen*' or 'continuous improvement' approach, whereby 'Publication evolves in real-time through a blend of human expertise and AI updates. Once a year, the author consolidates updates into a new version of the printed publication' (p. 2). This approach may enthuse some readers more than others.

The book's goal is laudable: to provide 'a comprehensive narrative of how technological change has shaped the practice of diplomacy' (p. 22). It certainly is comprehensive, beginning in pre-history with the inventions of stone tools and fire and the development of speech. As such, it feels designed more like a reference work than a book to be read from cover to cover. For some non-academics, the introduction, entitled 'A methodological toolkit for analysing the co-evolution of diplomacy and technology' (p. 9) and the plunge into theory with 'the Annales School of historiography' may be off-putting.

The first fourteen chapters, around 85 per cent of the book, address historical and technological developments in chronological order. From pre-history we advance to ancient civilizations, with a commendable focus on global narratives, including ancient India, China, Persia and Africa. We then progress through ancient Greece, the Romans, Islam and the Renaissance to modern times. At the end of each chapter, a *What resonates today* section seeks to explore the relevance of events in, say, ancient Persia or Byzantium to diplomacy today.

Academic theory is deployed intermittently—after the introduction there is little until a table that attempts to classify thinkers from Aristotle to Steven Pinker as Hobbesian or Rousseauian (pp. 32–3). The bulk of the book attempts a detailed summary of diplomatic history and technological developments. For example, we learn of the Ishango Bone, a notched tally-stick from 20,000 BCE suggesting counting, trade and communal activity (p. 42). Kurbalija details the development of art, gifts and language as evidence of intercultural exchange and ‘proto-diplomacy’ (p. 46). Later he identifies the world’s first ‘organised diplomacy’ in the fertile crescent, covering Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean, including such technological developments as writing. Kurbalija describes the 3,300-year-old Amarna letters between Egyptian pharaohs and foreign rulers as a ‘sophisticated system of diplomatic correspondence’ (p. 52).

The final chapters include a section on digital diplomacy, exploring the impact of new technology on diplomatic representation, negotiation and knowledge management—one of the most insightful sections of the book. Kurbalija quotes John Kerry: ‘The term digital diplomacy is almost redundant—it is just diplomacy, period’ (p. 313). Finally, the book considers how AI might affect diplomatic practice, for example through translation software and knowledge management. A concluding section argues that ‘The way this book is written by humans with the help of AI serves as a practical case study of this emerging form of collaboration’ (p. 341). Some sections of the book could be edited down: the Amarna letters, for example, are described on pp. 52, 54, 58 and 59. Similarly, Holbein’s *The ambassadors* is described on pp. 139 and 167. Some of the illustrations are illegible in the printed version, such as maps of the world circa 2000 BCE (p. 51) or Inca roads (p. 85).

In summary, the *History of diplomacy and technology* comes across as a wide-ranging miscellany. Its approach is so comprehensive that I found myself recalling Julian Barnes’ *A history of the world in 10½ chapters* (Jonathan Cape, 1989)—less for the latter’s eclectic mix of stories than for its title’s bold claim. Kurbalija’s summary of the history of diplomacy and technology sometimes risks becoming a history of the world. The strength of this book is as a comprehensive and detailed effort to marshal the history of diplomacy and technology. Its weakness is that it sometimes feels like an AI-generated compendium and is not always an easy read.

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Strange stability: how cold war scientists set out to control the arms race and ended up serving the military-industrial complex. By Benjamin Wilson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2025. 488pp. £41.95. ISBN 978 0 674 97608 5. Available as e-book.

The phrase ‘strategic stability’ has long dominated conversations about nuclear weapons, sparking intense debate over what the term means and what force postures are more or less stabilizing. In *Strange stability*, Benjamin Wilson