40. Decor and decorum in diplomacy

Herman van der Wusten

The Dutch Presidency of the European Union in the first six months of 2016 was largely based in Amsterdam, at the Marine Etablissement, the capital city’s historical naval dockyard. This location – which is currently well-designed for security and has good transport links by road with Schiphol Airport – was the site of ministerial councils and other meetings, with the festive highlights being held at the nearby National Maritime Museum (Scheepvaartmuseum). Incidentally, the European Councils and other European institutions remained in their usual locations – which, in most cases, will be Brussels. According to Iver Neumann, author of Diplomatic Sites (2013), the choice of these locations and the way that they are designed is all part of the art of diplomacy, i.e. serves to facilitate and maintain international political ties. Politicians tend to perform the most visible roles on this pre-planned diplomatic stage.

In the dominant diplomatic tradition, diplomacy forms part of the system of nation states and is largely confined to the capital cities (disregarding the unique situation in the Netherlands, where there is a split between Amsterdam as capital city and The Hague as the seat of government). The average capital city tends to have a fairly clearly-delineated area in which political functions are concentrated, with prominent addresses for the head of state and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who play the main roles in official dealings with the members of the local diplomatic corps. Partly for this same reason, embassies tend to all be based in the same area.

Incidentally, in the history of Europe, it took a considerable amount of time before state diplomacy assumed the classic form which is now considered the leading tradition. It is curious that the key diplomatic entities from before that time – cities and the Pope – now are once again reprising this role, for example when
it comes to issues such as climate change. They are even joining forces to do so, with NGOs, which act as an additional force, mobilising awareness and support. Their public meeting in July 2015 in the Vatican ended in an ‘agreement’, but was clearly also intended to point the way for the UN Climate Change Conference, dominated by nation states, held in Paris in late 2015. Incidentally, in addition to all the meetings of national representatives from the EU Member States, the Marine Etablissement was also the site of a Mayors’ Meeting, bringing together the mayors of the EU capitals.

Over time, the way in which diplomacy is conducted has undergone tremendous changes as a result of the overall increase in international relations and the instant availability of information from everywhere to everyone via new, and increasingly fast, forms of media. All this has resulted in a growing interest in what is happening in the world of diplomacy, and a clamour for greater openness. In a lot of ways, diplomacy has lost its exclusive character. It largely takes place on a stage that has been designed with an appropriate decor for the performance, but in order to be effective it also needs a certain level of secrecy. It is becoming more and more difficult to find the right balance between the two. In many situations, diplomatic efforts require a certain level of decorum – i.e. an appropriate degree of restraint and adherence to protocol – but this is not always beneficial for diplomacy’s effectiveness, either in public or behind closed doors. Striking the right tone at the right moment is an art in and of itself – it always has been, and it is so now more than ever.

Cities that specialise in diplomacy

Much diplomatic activity is still concentrated in cities, and more specifically in cities that explicitly specialise in diplomacy. In addition to the capital cities, these are the seats of important international institutions – New York and Geneva in particular
at the global level. At the macro-regional level, these institutions tend to be based in capital cities, and their presence can supersede even the importance that the diplomatic function of being a nation’s capital confers on a city. Brussels is the best example of this. If we look at things in this way, we are essentially considering the presence of diplomatic posts – the offices of diplomats – to be an indicator of the level of diplomatic activity. While this is not entirely inaccurate, it does not reveal the complete picture.

More than any other group of public servants, diplomats are by definition mobile, which means that diplomatic practice can, for brief periods of time, perfectly well take place away from its regular location. However, if we look for example at those places in which multilateral agreements have been concluded over time, we see that there has been, and remains, only limited flexibility in terms of location for these important types of diplomatic activity. Of the nearly six thousand multilateral agreements that have been ratified in the past four centuries, it turns out that, of those in which the location could be determined, 76% were signed in capital cities.

Of course, these types of agreements have also come into being outside of cities from time to time: in castles, at battlefields and in locations that resulted from all sorts of priorities and considerations as to what would constitute the ideal place (halfway between the different parties; exemplifying a position of power that had been obtained; at a beautiful location; at a place of historical significance; somewhere as remote as possible).

The comparative advantage of seats of government as locations for international diplomatic activity is further augmented by the creation of particularly favourable conditions. For a number of years, The Hague has been working on optimising its so-called International Zone. This has partly been driven by the need to manage security risks as effectively as possible while maintaining an open living environment. All in all, this can increase the quality of the zone and contribute to the further
expansion of the city’s role on the international stage. This is a
long-term approach to setting the stage for diplomatic activity.
And when effective solutions are found, sometimes the thought
is entertained of marketing this design to other cities as well.

Iver Neumann emphasises that diplomats choose the sites for
international relations and prepare them with a view to the ef-
fect that is to be achieved. Aesthetic considerations are employed
in a functional way as part of this process. The effect must be
felt by the participants – but now, more and more, directly and
indirectly (i.e. through the media), spectators are involved as
well. However, the idea is one that, in and of itself, has a long
history. Byzantine diplomacy in Constantinople, for example,
employed a great deal of pomp and circumstance. In the 1,000
years before its fall in 1453, the Byzantine Empire maintained
relations with its many neighbours and neighbours’ neighbours.
The Byzantine rulers’ sophisticated attempts to wow their guests,
with an ornately-decorated urban setting unrivalled in its splen-
dour and a code of behaviour aimed at enforcing respect, played
an important part in this. Neumann considers diplomacy to be
a display of the sublime.

Latter-day changes to the environment in which diplomacy
takes place, in particular the pressure of public opinion and the
omnipresence of the media, have led to new forms of diplomatic
display: different decors, different decorum. While the city as a
site of diplomatic activity has by no means been relegated to the
background, it does sometimes seem that, in urban diplomatic
settings, the ‘sublime moment’ has. This may be related to the
fact that many urban sites are difficult to manage and keep
secure, and due to the disturbance to residents that can be
caued by mass orchestrations of political events. The severe
congestion in the entire Randstad conurbation caused by the
2014 Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague served to illustrate
this. To explore this issue in some more detail, I will compare
diplomatic practice in the EU with the meetings held by what
has, at different points in time, been known as the G6, G7, G8
and G7 again.
Summits and their diplomatic flavour

The constitutional treaties on European cooperation bear the names of the cities in which they came about as a result of multilateral negotiations (Rome, Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice, Lisbon). With the exception of Rome, these locations relate to the rotating Presidency of the European Union and the organisation that preceded it, and to the city in which the Presidency was based by the time that the long-term preparations had progressed to the stage of final negotiations on a treaty.

Those long-term preparations have increasingly come to be concentrated in Brussels, which, under the Treaty of Nice, has been the seat of the European Council since 2002. This idea was not only championed by the Belgian lobby, but also supported by practical considerations: the need for permanently-available facilities and established meeting protocols. These came in very handy only recently. Between mid-June and mid-July 2015, four European Council meetings and nine meetings of the Eurogroup (the finance ministers of the eurozone) were necessary in order to prevent, for the time being, a resurgence of the crisis surrounding the situation in Greece – and it was clear that even these extensive talks were extremely unlikely to be the end of it.

These sorts of events in Brussels have come to follow fixed patterns of regulated publicity, with press opportunities when the delegates enter the conference venue – the schedules of which have been announced, down to the minute, in advance, often along with a basic gist of the information that will be given – more in-depth press conferences with the participants at the end of the conference which are also carefully regulated, and live tweeting during the meetings, primarily to announce the moment that a meeting is concluded or adjourned. If you are looking for the sublime, the group photo amid a panoply of flags, with carefully orchestrated positions for all the attendees, is the closest you will get. The team photos of the football teams at the start of the season look playful by comparison.
The G6/G7/G8 meetings reveal a systematic shift in preference away from urban meeting locations and toward non-urban ones. At the instigation of Giscard d’Estaing and Schmidt (the French and German leaders at the time), the leaders of what were initially six major economies convened in 1975 for a fairly informal gathering aimed at discussing the most pressing economic issues of the day (at the time, the world was still in the throes of the first oil crisis). It was to become an annual event, with slight variations in the number of core members and including, eventually, the President of the European Commission, as fixed attendees, as well as a variable number of invited guests, depending on the agenda.

The first G6 Summit took place in Rambouillet, fifty kilometres outside Paris. After that, the meetings went on to be held in a wide range of different places – at first primarily in the capital cities or other major cities, but more recently often in remote luxury resorts which appear to have been selected for their natural beauty, security opportunities and their ability to hold demonstrations at arm’s length. This change clearly came into being following the violent disturbances in Genoa in 2001. During riots involving 200,000 protesters, one person was killed. The change in the choices of location can be clearly seen when we look at the subsequent locations that were selected in the UK and Germany. Before Genoa, three meetings had taken place in London and one in Birmingham, two in Bonn, one in Munich and one in Cologne. The meetings following on from Genoa took place at Gleneagles in Scotland, on the shore of Lough Erne in Northern Ireland, in Heiligendamm in deepest Mecklenburg on the Baltic Sea coast, and recently in Schloss Elmau outside Garmisch in Bavaria.

The G7 Summit in Elmau in June 2015 was guarded by a massive police presence: more than 17,000 German police officers provided the core security, with a further 2,100 colleagues available at the nearby Austrian border. The protests remained predominantly confined to the city centre of Munich, about 100 kilometres away. Extensive negotiations were held with the
organisers in advance about these protests, and what would and would not be allowed. A total of 5,000 journalists travelled to Elmau to report in-depth on the summit.

At the luxury resort, informal pictures were taken by the Chief Official White House Photographer Pete Souza, which were published straight away. Souza and his staff take these types of photos on a constant basis – up to 20,000 per week. On the most popular of these photos from Elmau, we see Obama from behind as he leans back on a bench with his arms stretched out on the backrest, looking out onto a stunning mountain panorama in the distance. We are outside in a rolling meadow. Chancellor Angela Merkel is standing in front of him, addressing him (and partly addressing us too). They are most likely discussing the climate, as that was the main topic of the final declaration of the summit. In his photos, Souza is constantly looking for the sublime moment.

The sublime in diplomacy and the city

The Marine Etablissement, the EU Presidency’s main working site, was the property of the Ministry of Defence, but soon the Ministry will withdraw. It will instead be redeveloped as a prime location in the city centre, a permanent decor for the sublime. But this stage will then be exclusively set for urban life itself. As far as the EU Presidency was concerned, the interest in the sublime remained confined to the nearby National Maritime Museum. On future occasions the Byzantine example of the sublime in diplomacy within the city will perhaps even have to be increasingly confined to settings away from the city altogether.

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Further reading

