

PRACTICES OF CONTEMPORARY DIPLOMACY

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Final Paper

Spouses and Diplomacy

If Hillary Clinton becomes the first woman to assume the responsibilities of President of the United States in 2016, her husband will become the first “first husband”. Bill Clinton is known for being Hillary’s husband, but he is also the forty-second President of the United States. Besides some minor questions pertaining to what we will have to call him (“first husband”; “first gentleman”; or simply “Mr. President?”), more important interrogations are being raised as to what exactly his role will be once he returns to the White House. Some expect him to be more politically active and engaged than former first ladies, while others see him taking on a more neutral role.

In fact, being married to a head of state is not an easy job, and one fraught with ambiguities. In embassies across the world, the spouses of diplomats have an even tougher time at attempting to define what their role really is. Yet, it extends far beyond the scope of the traditional responsibilities of wives towards their husbands, and husbands towards their wives. Spouses do play an important role in international relations and the practice of diplomacy. Yet their roles have received little academic attention, and have often been neglected even within foreign ministries, where their impact on diplomatic relations is often relegated to the mere anecdotal.

Yet, spouses of diplomatic envoys and heads of state do play an important role, one that has also evolved greatly over the years. In fact, we will attempt to illustrate to what extent the evolution of the role of spouses in diplomacy reflects the evolutions of society and of the diplomatic mission, over the years.

In this paper, we will focus on the roles of spouses of heads of state and of diplomats across the world, in the conduct of diplomatic relations between countries. We will discuss not only the scope of responsibilities that they are granted, but also the evolving perceptions of their roles. First, we will discuss the traditional, symbolic and representative role of the spouse of diplomatic envoys and heads of state in international relations, before discussing how the evolutions of the diplomatic playing field have prompted the role of the “spouse of” to evolve in an attempt to stay relevant.

The symbolic and traditional role of spouses

The traditional, historic, role of the spouses of diplomatic envoys is one that, although devoid of much responsibility, is not to be neglected. In fact, it still is the major occupation of the spouses of ambassadors and consuls across the world, if these

spouses actually decide to accept the role. Indeed, one of the main functions of diplomats is to symbolically represent their country abroad. This is why ambassadors live in beautiful and large residences, and invite their guests over for receptions and dinners on a regular basis. Since diplomats are sent abroad to faraway countries, their spouses often follow suit. Once at the residence, they take on the traditional role of housekeeper and hostess. They are the ones who command the personnel, and greet the guests upon arrival. It is also expected of them to converse with the guests, and to make them feel comfortable. This is a role that is not to be neglected, and is still an integral part of the role of the spouse of an ambassador. Indeed, in diplomacy, representation, symbolically embodying your country, is very important. Whether you have someone over for lunch, tea, dinner or a cocktail sets the tone for the nature of your relationship with that counterpart. These social events are occasions for colleagues to discuss issues in an informal setting, or to strengthen their networks. It can even be the occasion for counterparts to bond and develop friendly rapport which will advance further their professional relationships. However, in recent years, the influence of such events has decreased. David Malone claims “large receptions, while often encouraged by local expectations and protocol, are generally only moderately useful. Key players are too busy to attend.”¹ Furthermore, budget cuts and economic difficulties have made these events less frequent, and they are often perceived as inappropriate and elitist by public opinion. Although smaller receptions still continue to be valuable networking opportunities, their influence has decreased and they no longer are the place where big decisions are made. This, in part, is due to the proliferation of diplomatic missions and actors. It is no longer possible for top-diplomats to attend all the different events that take place. Furthermore, new communications technologies have allowed diplomats to communicate more easily, making face-to-face communication more rare. This has contributed to making the role of the spouse less important in the diplomatic couple. The spouses of heads of state have traditionally taken on the same type of roles when it comes to helping out on foreign policy related matters. Yet, some countries have taken this role much more seriously than others. The American First Lady, for instance, holds an official and institutionalised position. She has an office, a chief of staff, and many advisors. Outside of the United States, she is actually referred to as “your excellency,” just as ambassadors are. In France, however, the “*Première Dame*” (when there is one, that is), holds a somewhat

¹ Malone, David M. “The Modern Diplomatic Mission”. *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*. Edited by Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur (2013).

complicated position. She also has assistants, but she doesn't have a legal status, which sparked some controversy when former first lady Valerie Trierweiler attempted to bring a new impetus to her position, taking on greater political commitments.

Societal changes and the necessary evolution of the role of spouses

With this in mind, we move to consider why today, spouses are increasingly at odds with what their role should be. Indeed, over the course of the twentieth century, married life has evolved towards greater balance and equality in terms of both professional and private responsibilities. The vast majority of spouses of diplomats today are still women. Yet, they are no longer content with being simple housemaids. Women are increasingly pursuing their own careers, and husbands are increasingly expected to take on household tasks. Yet, the obligations of diplomats require them to move across the globe at frequent intervals. Their wives, if they decide to follow them, generally have to abandon their careers, and have difficulty finding jobs abroad, due to the rather short duration of their stay, the sometimes difficult to navigate working environments of foreign countries, and of course due to the risk of conflicts of interests with their husband's job. Indeed, in a recent survey, it was found "that against 60% of the respondents who worked before their first posting, only 16% worked on their return and only 22% were able to pursue their chosen professions."² As a former US ambassador to Zambia puts it humorously, "These underemployed women, if left to their own devices, will, in about 70 percent of the cases, choose to play the diplomatic lady; about 20 percent will busy themselves with good works; while the remaining 10 percent will seek to seduce someone else's husband."³ However, foreign offices often still expect of their envoys' wives that they take on housekeeping responsibilities, and do so without pay. In recent years, spouses have come together to protest such practices, claiming that foreign offices shouldn't obtain "two employees for the price of one". The difficulty for these women is that they either have to decide not to follow their husbands abroad, forcing them to renounce to family life altogether, or they do decide to follow them, only to find it difficult to find a job once they arrive. This has prompted many of the wives of diplomats

² Hendry, Annabel. "From parallel to dual careers: Diplomatic spouses". *Modern Diplomacy*. Ed by J. Kurbalija (1998). Web. <http://www.diplomacy.edu/resources/general/parallel-dual-careers-diplomatic-spouses>

³ Churchman, Deborah. "Foreign service wives seek recognition for their diplomatic work". *The Christian Science Monitor*. June 3, 1981. Web. <http://www.csmonitor.com/1981/0603/060312.html>

to call for their roles as spouses to be more recognised, if not rewarded with pay. The difficulties lies therein: either the role of spouses needs to evolve, or it will disappear altogether. Hillary Clinton, for instance, was one of the most transformational first ladies in US history. She propelled her function towards new heights, like Eleanor Roosevelt, who was married to Franklin D. Roosevelt, and became the first US representative to the United Nations, did before her. This led Hillary Clinton to sometimes replace her husband, like in 1994 at Nelson Mandela's Inauguration, or more famously, in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Indeed, in 1996, Mrs. Clinton visited Tuzla, her husband's visit having been considered too dangerous by the Secret Service.⁴ She went to Bosnia to show US support, hence directly representing the country and its foreign policy. On such occasions, the first lady was taking on tasks beyond the traditional scope of a first lady's function. Increasingly, first ladies, and diplomatic wives, are pushing for more transformational work, no longer wanting to be taken for granted. Another example can be found in the original take on her role that Brooke Barzun, the wife of the US ambassador to London, has introduced. Revamping the traditional role of hostess, she puts herself forward in the press, and has managed to attract high-profile guests to her receptions. She hosts conferences on women's issues, independently from her husband, and has her own agenda. She even shares her insights on diplomacy, claiming her "goal is to create an environment that is contained and relaxed, where people feel they can share. That is what diplomacy is about."⁵

Yet, if social transformations have prompted interrogations about the roles of spouses in diplomacy, the evolutions so far mentioned are merely a-political, and symbolic in nature. We will now turn to the more politicised, and the more transformational tasks that are increasingly allotted to spouses. Indeed, the struggle is not only to get spouses to continue to want to accept their role, but it is also to find a way to keep the job relevant in an evolving diplomatic landscape.

⁴ During her 2008 presidential campaign, Mrs. Clinton famously claimed she landed in Tuzla "under sniper fire". These claims were quickly proven to be highly inaccurate by video footage.

⁵ Sands, Sandra. "Mrs Ambassador, you really are spoiling us: why the US ambassador's wife Brooke Barzun is the ultimate hostess with the mostess". The London Evening Standard. March 12, 2015. Web. <http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/mrs-ambassador-you-really-are-spoiling-us-why-the-us-ambassadors-wife-brooke-barzun-is-the-ultimate-hostess-with-the-mostess-10103263.html>

Evolving practices of diplomacy and the struggle to stay relevant

Indeed, diplomats are increasingly preoccupied with public diplomacy. That is, “an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes, and behaviour; build and manage relationships; and influence thoughts and mobilise actions to advance their interests and values”.⁶ Hastedt and Eksterowicz use the concept of “complex interdependence”⁷ developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, which describes the current state of international relations, to explain why spouses have increasingly been put forward as actors of public diplomacy. Indeed, diplomacy has necessarily evolved, and public diplomacy is an essential tool in this evolution. It has become increasingly important to appeal to other countries through soft power, as the importance of hard power has tended to decline. As Hastedt and Eksterowicz claim, “complex interdependence has enlarged the universe of political actors who can engage in diplomacy and the goals whose realisation diplomacy can advance.”⁸ Spouses are thus a useful tool. Almost all first ladies of the twentieth century have had so-called “pet projects”. That is to say, a few a-political and generally morally tinted causes that they have defended throughout their husband’s tenure. Pat Nixon championed for volunteerism and charity, while Roselyn Carter raised awareness around mental health issues, and Nancy Reagan advocated against drug abuse. First ladies and diplomats’ spouses are too often seen as appendages to their husbands, incapable of acting independently. Yet, like Eleanor Roosevelt, Hillary Clinton decided to take on a more politically permeated stance. She advocated for women’s rights, but did so in a way that could be considered more engaged than others had done so in the past. One of Clinton’s pet projects in the White House were women’s Rights. For instance, upon her trip to China for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, in 1995, she made a speech in defence of women’s rights in a country where the plight of women is far below human rights standards. At the time of her speech, the relations

⁶ B. Gregory, ‘American Public Diplomacy: Enduring Characteristics, Elusive Transformation’, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 6:3/4 (2011), 353.

⁷ Hastedt, Glenn P. and Eksterowicz, Anthony J. *First Lady Diplomacy: The Foreign Policy Activism of First Lady Clinton*. *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*. Summer/Fall 2006.

⁸ Hastedt, Glenn P. and Eksterowicz, Anthony J. *First Lady Diplomacy: The Foreign Policy Activism of First Lady Clinton*. *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*. Summer/Fall 2006.

between Washington and Beijing were very complicated, due to the tense situation around Taiwan. Her speech drew attention from all over the world, and was reviewed by Madeleine Albright, as well as the Assistant Secretary of State and other high-profile policy-makers, according to Clinton's own recollection, transcribed in her book *Living History* published in 2004.⁹ Indeed, this speech was a political statement, motivated by more than simply defending women's rights, Hillary Clinton was actively influencing her country's foreign policy toward China. In a move from pet projects to political activism, Michelle Obama is, to a lesser extent, also using her status as a way to prompt change across the world. Indeed, in many countries, the current first lady is much more appreciated than her husband, and she uses this popularity internationally. In fact, her actions are so intensely scrutinised, and have such weight, that the dress she wore to Saudi King Abdullah's funeral this year sparked outrage and controversy across the world. Diplomats are fully aware of the importance of their spouses' image and activities. They too have increasingly put their wives and husbands under the spotlight, in an attempt to attract more positive press and attention. In a prime example of the types of playful form public diplomacy can take, the German ambassador to India participated in making a Bollywood themed music video starring his wife, which was published online and widely shared across the world.¹⁰ Public diplomacy has become one of the prime occupations of spouses diplomatic missions across the world. Their influence is, however, is mitigated. Spouses serve as a means to make the ambassador seem more approachable and humane, highlighting his family life. Yet, it is hard to probe a spouses' ability to make a difference through public diplomacy. Generally speaking however, we can say that they help to convey a more positive image of their country.

Transformational roles and personal diplomacy

Where spouses can truly make a difference, however, is in the field of personal diplomacy. Diplomacy is a matter of interactions between countries, but these interactions necessarily involve interpersonal relationships. Counterparts need to be able to trust each other, and if possible, appreciate each other, in order for their professional relationship to be fruitful and balanced. This is where spouses can come in handy. Pat

⁹ Clinton, Hillary R. *Living History*. New York: Scribner. 2004.

¹⁰ Youtube link: German Embassy India: Lebe jetzt - Kal Ho Naa Ho, Published April 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XK3BVXbVsU>

Nixon was one of the early first ladies to understand this. Indeed, she travelled more than 160,000 kilometres across the world during her stay at the White House, and visited countries like Peru after devastating natural catastrophes.¹¹ She strived to better the relationship between the United States and other countries by developing fruitful personal relationships between herself and her counterparts. However, before her, one of the most memorable first ladies in the history of the country, permanently marked the position, by accomplishing memorable diplomatic feats. Jacqueline Kennedy was an immensely popular, bright and well versed figure. On numerous occasions, she used her charming personality to help her husband in bettering his relationship with counterparts, or even obtaining concessions from them. In what is probably one of the most memorable examples of personal diplomacy, Jacqueline Kennedy managed to obtain from French president Charles de Gaulle, that he lend Leonardo Da Vinci's famous *Mona Lisa* to the United States. In 1961, she organised a trip to Paris, after which the President remarked: "I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris – and I have enjoyed it".¹² De Gaulle, usually unimpressed with Americans, was seduced by Jacqueline, who easily managed to charm him into accepting her request. He even claimed the first lady "knew more French history than most Frenchwomen."¹³ After the *Mona Lisa* was shipped to the United States, John Kennedy used the occasion to stress the importance of the relationship between the two countries, at a time when De Gaulle was increasingly opposed to US intervention and meddling in Europe. André Malraux, at the time Minister of Culture, spoke at the occasion, and stated that through President Kennedy "and through Mrs. Kennedy, always present when art, the United States and my country are linked – through [them] the world's most powerful nation pays today the most brilliant homage a work of art has ever received,"¹⁴ hence recognising the importance of the role Jacqueline had played. The first lady, who's domestic engagements were however quite

¹¹ Pat Nixon Biography. bio.com. Web. <http://www.biography.com/people/pat-nixon-9424065#family-life-and-early-politics>

¹² Jacqueline Kennedy in the White House. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Web. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/Jacqueline-Kennedy-in-the-White-House.aspx?p=4>

¹³ S. Demetriades. *The Public Diplomacy Impact of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy: 1961 – 1963*. University of Southern California. 2012. Web. http://connectingthroughculture.weebly.com/uploads/2/7/3/6/27365241/jacqueline_kennedy.pdf

¹⁴ S. Demetriades. *The Public Diplomacy Impact of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy: 1961 – 1963*. University of Southern California. 2012. Web. http://connectingthroughculture.weebly.com/uploads/2/7/3/6/27365241/jacqueline_kennedy.pdf

limited (she was mainly preoccupied with refurbishing the White House), was nevertheless a remarkable hostess. She organised numerous events with prestigious guests, and saw them as an occasion to allow her husband to advance his relationship with many different people. Today, it is one particular relationship between first ladies that draws much attention. Michelle Obama, who last visited China in early 2014, used the occasion to promote the United States in China, but also to develop a more friendly rapport with China's own first lady, Peng Liyuan. Mrs. Peng is a modern first lady for Chinese standards, having become famous for her singing, she is put forward in China and abroad to promote her husband's policies. At the time of her visit, *Foreign Policy* claimed "the US first lady's trip offers a symbolic expression of a genuine commitment on the part of the United States to do everything it can to achieve a breakthrough in relations with China."¹⁵ This type of "first lady diplomacy" is an essential asset in the current efforts at bettering US-Sino relations, heralded by the Obama administration. Obama and Xi Jinping had already met in the Sunnylands resort, where many heads of state have already been welcomed when the Americans wanted to develop more personal and friendly rapport.¹⁶ Finally, Nicolas Sarkozy's first great feat during his presidency came only a few weeks after his election, when he succeeded in obtaining the liberation of five Bulgarian nurses who were being held in Libya. Sarkozy called on his wife at the time, Cecilia Sarkozy – now Cecilia Attias – to help him in to negotiate with Muammar Gaddafi. She made numerous trips to Tripoli in an attempt to charm the former Libyan leader into freeing the nurses, ultimately succeeding in doing so. This form of personal diplomacy can indeed be very useful in obtaining concessions from counterparts, and in bettering relationships between countries. However, one can wonder to what extent this type of diplomacy can truly have a long term impact on international relations.

Social and geopolitical transformations have ramped the role of spouses of diplomats and heads of state to evolve over the years. Increasingly, women who do decide to take on such a role, and to become the "spouse of," demand greater responsibilities in exchange for their sacrifice. Although the role of spouses in diplomacy does remain

¹⁵ Schell, Orville et al. "First Lady Diplomacy". *Foreign Policy*. March 20, 2014. Web. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/20/first-lady-diplomacy/>

¹⁶ Landler, Mark and Calmes, Jackie. "U.S.-China Meeting's Aim: Personal Diplomacy". *The New York Times*. June 4, 2013. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/us/politics/us-china-meetings-aim-personal-diplomacy.html>

limited, we witness increasing trends towards more transformational and politicised responsibilities. Such an evolution is attributable to the more general changes in diplomacy over the years. In modern diplomacy, soft power and image cultivation, have become increasingly important. Wives and families play an important role in such efforts, and allow diplomats and heads of state to develop more fruitful relationships. Yet, confronted with increasing demands on the side of the women, scarcely recognised for their work, the job of being married to a public official still runs the risk of becoming being increasingly swept aside.