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Places in diplomacy

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Naoko Shimazu, final draft of a Guest Editorial for *Political Geogragraphy*, to be published online in May 2012

'Places in Diplomacy'

In the world of diplomacy, what does Vienna or Paris evoke, for instance? For the historian, there is the inevitability of associating these imperial capitals of the Old World with major diplomatic events such as the Congress of Vienna of 1815 and the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. International conferences have a peculiar habit of acquiring nicknames taken after the cities in which they take place. Historians talk in the shorthand of 'at Versailles', 'at The Hague', 'at London' and so forth, implicitly drawing boundaries of shared knowledge and expectations. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, these places were overwhelmingly located in Europe, which was largely a reflection of the configuration of political power in the world. But, also, it exposes limitations in how we have come to conceptualise diplomacy as predominantly a Western-centric process. Notable exceptions were diplomatic events that marked the decline of the once mighty empires, such as the Treaty of Nanking of 1842 ending the first Opium War, one of the ignominious of the nineteenth-century treaties.

In the days of empire, there were very few independent states in the world. 'At Paris', for instance, which still stands as *the* monumental conference in human history, only five Asian and African states were invited to attend, namely Japan, China, the Hedjaz, Liberia and Siam. Hence, the diplomatic map was confined to a very small area of the world, namely the European imperial capitals, as reminders of how a handful of empires carved

up the global map. In the early twentieth century, we also bear witness to the rise of new centres of power in the Pacific. The increasing dominance of the United States in world affairs corresponded with an increase in major diplomatic events taking place in American cities, such as Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where the treaty concluding the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 was negotiated (and for which President Theodore Roosevelt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize), Washington Conferences of 1921-22, and the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951. During the Second World War, the Japanese Empire tried to enact its own vision of the world order through the Tokyo Conference of 1943. But, the Japanese challenge remained an exception to the Western dominated paradigm in the pre-1945 world.

The geographical appellation of international conferences in the modern era reveals our desire to map out physically the boundaries of international diplomacy. In creating a cosmopolitan mental map, it connects these seemingly disparate cities of the world into a common global space. In this respect, the second half of the twentieth century offers the most dynamic example of how such a mental map can grow in size due to the sudden increase in the number of decolonized states in every corner of the world. Paradoxically, this mental effort has also the effect of making the world into a smaller place, by making faraway places more accessible and thereby more 'manageable' in one's cognitive world.

Why then have scholars of diplomacy generally not shown interest in the places where diplomacy takes place? The most powerful, and self-evident, explanation lies in the somewhat narrowly defined view of what constitutes

'power' in diplomatic relations. Developments in scholarship, particularly since the emphasis on 'soft power' by Joseph Nye, have contributed to increased explanations of the power of culture in international relations (Nye, 2004). Diplomacy is classified traditionally as belonging to the realm of high politics. As a result, it has created its own closed 'discourse', a particularly inaccessible one at that, open only to a handful of privileged practitioners. Even in the realm of high politics, the staging of the diplomatic event in terms of where it takes place has considerable bearings on the geopolitics of the participating states. This explains for the popularity of Switzerland, and Geneva in particular, as a reputable, neutral, international 'place', where participating states can feel less constrained by locational exigencies in diplomatic negotiations.

After 1945, we see a sudden surge in Asian and African places as bearers of significant diplomatic events. Particularly from the late 1940s to the 1960s, there was an explosion in the frequency of international diplomacy, as new states busied themselves forging alliances in Asian and African places – New Delhi, Bandung, Cairo, Algiers, Accra, Addis Ababa, to name but a notable few. It was an exciting, dynamic period in world history where new states were being created every few months in the remotest corners of the globe. These world developments affected not only the cosmopolitan elite but filtered down to deeper layers of society. School children would attempt to locate these unheard of places on their maps of the world obligatorily plastered on their walls. In some sense, this epitomised the cultural attitudes of the day – there was the semblance of the world growing larger by the day,

as seen in the profusion of 'new places'; whilst at the same time, it still felt finite because it somehow all fitted cosily on our map on the wall.

In some respects, shifting the focus of analysis to 'places in diplomacy' has the effect of re-contextualizing the 'diplomatic stage' from the abstract sphere of high politics to the concrete sphere of the local milieu in which the performance takes place. The explicit 'localization' of diplomacy by privileging the place where diplomacy physically takes place allows an insight into different layers of meanings that would otherwise elude traditional approaches to the study of diplomacy. This is why 'places in diplomacy' become increasingly relevant in the twentieth century, because place provides the 'public space' in which diplomacy can be made to be seen to be accountable. Hence, the idea of diplomacy as 'public performance' that takes place in 'public space' is an approach that creates concrete 'sites' of interaction between the local (be it the place or the people) and the global. To this end, political geography is particularly well placed as a scholarly field to explore the richness that 'places in diplomacy' can offer, yet the topic is rarely, if ever, mentioned in reviews of the field (e.g. Story, 2009, 243-253).

One of the most iconic moments of twentieth-century diplomacy was the Bandung Conference of 1955 when the twenty-nine newly independent states and 'states-to-be' of Asia and Africa gathered in Bandung, a hillside city of West Java, for the largest ever international conference held without the presence of a single Western state. Officially, it was called the Asia-Africa Conference of 1955 (Konferensi Asia-Afrika), and continues to be known as such in Indonesia today. For the rest of the world, 'Bandung' soon came to

resonate nostalgically the collective, symbolic moment of decolonization when charismatic revolutionary leaders like Sukarno, Nasser, Nehru, and Zhou Enlai dominated world headlines. What is most striking about the Bandung Conference is how Bandung as a symbolic 'place' came to acquire a multitude of emotive meanings for generations of oppressed peoples. Its influence was considerable as the conference had even raised hopes for the American civil rights movement as witnessed by the attendance of some of its illustrious sons in Malcolm X, Eugene Gordon and Richard Wright whose *The Color Curtain* remains still the most popular writing on the conference (Wright, 1956). Moreover, world historical dimensions of 'Bandung' as a site of political synergies and shared dreams have attracted a healthy body of scholarship, of what one might even call 'Bandung Studies'.

Whilst the rest of the world was projecting its own romanticized or, as the case may be, disenchanting feelings on Bandung as a symbolic place, it is worth pointing out that Bandung was a place of great political and cultural resonance for the Indonesians as well. In the late nineteenth century, Bandung came into its own as the desirable hillside city, 'Paris van Java' (Paris of Java) and 'Bandung Kota Kembang' (Bandung City of Flowers), the jewel in the crown of the Dutch East Indies. As a result, it became the most westernized colonial city in the Dutch Indies, and triggered a fierce competition in the construction of colonial Art Deco architecture in the 1920s when the decision was taken to move the capital from Batavia (Jakarta) to Bandung. At the same time, Bandung with its large student population became the hotbed of the burgeoning nationalist movement in the 1920s,

giving rise to the eponymous 'Bandung nationalism' (Legge, 1972: p. 89). It was in Bandung that Sukarno established himself as the undisputed leader of the nationalist movement in 1927. Because of the intensity of early revolutionary experiences, Bandung as a place carried a particular resonance for the new political elite in post-independence Indonesia.

In April 1955, Bandung gained an even more illustrious name – 'Bandung the Source of Glory of Asia and Africa' so enthused the local newspaper, *Pikiran Rakyat*. Much excitement was in evidence about Indonesia's favourite hillside city being selected to take the centre stage in the world for a week, as Bandung was being compared with Geneva as an 'international city'. Not only was this civic pride demonstrated lyrically in poetry such as in the 'Ode to Bandung', but even a billboard poster was created with Bandung visually situated at the centre of a map of the Afro-Asian world (*Buku*, 1955: p. 91). Nehru paid tribute and called 'Bandung the capital of Asian and African nations'. During the conference, a special conference zone was created and cordoned off from the rest of the city. Herculean efforts were made by the people of Bandung to spruce up the conference zone by scrubbing the streets quite literally on their knees, painting everything in sight in white such as roads, bridges and buildings. Sukarno added the magical last minute touch as he re-anointed the core zone to reflect the atmosphere of the historic gathering, as the renamed Jalan Asia Afrika (Asia Africa Street) and the Freedom Building (likened by the Indonesians to the recently constructed United Nations Building in New York) received thousands of international delegates. During the conference, the people of Bandung were given access

to the special zone and played a major part in creating the atmosphere of popular excitement and democratic energy that captured the imagination of the international press. No doubt, it all contributed to the myth-making of the 'Bandung' moment in world history (Shimazu, 2011). Local civic pride reached its peak when conference delegates allegedly concluded that Bandung should replace Jakarta as the capital of Indonesia.

Associating diplomacy with places has the effect of integrating locality to the diplomatic process. In a sense, this is both a natural and logical development that mirrors the changing nature of the state in the twentieth century, marked by increased popular participation in political processes. The case of the Bandung Conference outlined above suggests how 'place' can work conceptually to offer new perspectives on international diplomacy. Studies of diplomacy need to integrate 'the people' more centrally to their analyses and interpretations as befitting the social reality of contemporary world. And, one obvious way of doing this is to pay closer attention to places in diplomacy.

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