Much has been made in recent years about the rise of network diplomacy. Analysts such as Anne-Marie Slaughter and Joshua Cooper Ramo have discussed the influence of new communications technologies on global structures and institutions, noting an almost inexorable shift in the way that power is accumulated and wielded in world politics. This new state of affairs has altered diplomatic practice, demanding a new sensibility and facility with the tools of webcraft. On the surface, U.S. President Donald Trump seems to have reversed this trend. The president appears to dominate the American foreign policy-making process and is proclaimed “the decider” in the majority of important interactions. In a one-week span in June 2018, the president unilaterally canceled longstanding military exercises with South Korea and un-backed a G7 joint statement. Not only is he the hub of American diplomacy, he appears to have removed all the spokes.

Are we seeing the retreat of network diplomacy? Have we returned to an age of summitry and deal-making, dominated by leaders like Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong-Un, and Trump? Should diplomatic practitioners alter their tactics to better accord with a period of hierarchical, centralized foreign relations? Although Trump’s activities draw a lot of attention, they can obscure the fact that heads of state or government only directly touch a relatively small proportion of international interactions. For example, while there has been well-publicized disagreement between the United States and many of its allies on nonproliferation policies, these countries have recently collaborated on a modernization initiative.
for the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), an international counter-proliferation institution. Meanwhile, national regulators of the world’s securities and futures markets have collaborated under the auspices of the International Organization of Securities Commissions to facilitate dialogue on an important set of best practices surrounding commodities storage and delivery.

Military alliances and partnerships form another layer of deep transnational connections and collaborations. Built around regular exercises, exchanges, and high-level dialogues, military relationships are an often overlooked site of intergovernmental linkage. Trans-governmental networks of national regulators and officials spanning the globe interact on a daily basis, sharing information and cooperating without frequent or direct reference to chief executives. The scope of international collaboration has grown so rapidly in recent decades that it is impossible for heads of state and government to track all of these activities closely. While leaders ultimately oversee these interactions, most discussions occur well below the radar of presidents and prime ministers. Networked, lower-level interactions among civilian and military officials, therefore, remain highly productive and proceed apace. Even in the current era, networked diplomacy is pervasive.

These engagements present an important avenue for advancing cooperation. Networks of national officials represent the beating heart of the liberal international order. While productive, the true potential of these interactions has not been fully realized. Many governments remain unfamiliar with the tools of network diplomacy and are even less sure how to wield influence in the less centralized, more horizontal diplomatic environments being fashioned by advanced communication technologies. These are, after all, the same tradition-bound institutions that continued to use the telegraph late into the 1990s, long after it had fallen out of widespread use.

While government officials take advantage of email and certain online platforms, many remain unfamiliar with the factors that favor influence in networked diplomatic spaces. What is needed is a set of tools and tactics that allow governments to better align their foreign policy ends with means available to them within network-based interactions.

Many governments remain unfamiliar with the tools of network diplomacy.

**Network Diplomacy: Here to Stay**

Today’s world is a deeply connected place. Whether it is networks of hackers, academics, bloggers, or terrorists, there is no escaping the reality of continuous global connection. New communications technologies have also changed the diplomatic
game. In the span of decades, diplomacy has gone from a closed enterprise characterized by embassies, elite recruitment, diplomatic pouches, and formal cables, to a more open and transparent endeavor. Foreign policy can be made on the fly with a smartphone. The new context is a challenging one for foreign ministries, which have relied on expensive international communications and a scarcity of reliable information about foreign developments to safeguard their predominance among other potential foreign policy players.

As Duncan Snidal of Oxford University and I, among others, have shown elsewhere, technological change has facilitated the increasingly informal design of international institutions. Informal institutions are characterized by a lack of international legalization and the absence of organizational machinery such as physical offices and international bureaucracy. Commitments within these institutions are nonbinding, often taking the form of joint statements or memoranda of understanding. Informal institutions occupy an increasingly prominent place within the global landscape. The number of informal institutions has grown exponentially in recent decades, and according to Anne-Marie Slaughter, form the basis for “a new world order” in which networks of government officials interact to further trans-governmental cooperation in areas of technical interest. While these networks may not be based on an international treaty and do not typically have formal organizational infrastructure, their practices are consistent enough to be considered much more than ad hoc cooperation.

Informal institutions are not going away. Even among reluctant multilateralists, the draws of informal, networked bodies will continue to make them attractive venues for coordinating action on important issues. Critics of big international bureaucracy, such as current U.S. National Security Advisor John R. Bolton, welcome their light institutional footprint and their flexibility. Bolton, a chief architect of PSI and other informal bodies, has emphasized the value of trans-governmental linkages among officials with concrete operational responsibilities. These characteristics have made PSI and other bodies a model for future international cooperation. As communication technologies continue to mature, facilitating seamless connections between national capitals, the attraction of informal networked institutions will grow. This more transactional mode of diplomacy can enable an adaptable form of multilateralism à la carte.

The informal quality of international institutions is precipitating a movement away from more procedurally structured modes of diplomacy. While formal intergovernmental organizations, such as those of the UN system, will continue to occupy a prominent place in the international landscape, informal bodies are...
poised to continue to increase progressively their “market share” among consequent international interactions. Accordingly, the tools of diplomatic influence have changed. Rather than directly controlling outcomes, international actors increasingly “orchestrate” others to reach the targets of their cooperative agenda. They participate in multi-stakeholder initiatives and operate through regime complexes. In a world of instant communications where global actors can engage directly with the public of another state, persuasion and less-tangible power tools are of increased importance. Foreign policymakers must now navigate this messier and less clearly defined diplomatic landscape.

Establishing Network Centrality

Given the ongoing transformation of diplomacy into an informal, networked form, how do international actors maximize their influence in these settings? As the traditional certainties afforded by membership within formal international organizations wither and new players emerge on the scene, states must contemplate new means of preserving their relevance internationally. This issue is particularly important for small and medium-sized states, which do not enjoy immediate influence by virtue of their size and resources.

The principal challenge in this landscape is to secure and maintain network centrality. This is achieved principally through maximizing the number of connections with other actors and by serving as the most efficient and direct point of connection between a large number of actors. “Nodal” players maintain substantive ties with hundreds of relevant global players. Those at the center of networks are able to shape international outcomes through, among other things, influencing the flow of information—the currency of diplomacy. Absent formal organizational structures, such as international secretariats, which make pertinent information available to all sides, network centrality can enable states to exercise a significant influence on international outcomes.

Actors secure network centrality through two main avenues. They must first work deliberately to increase their connections with state, non-state, and sub-state actors. These links may be bilateral, regional, or multilateral. Embassies that build effective national linkages beyond their designated foreign ministry interlocutors can achieve this, including through the strategic use of social media. The Canadian government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has, for example, used Canada’s deep ties with the United States to campaign aggressively across multiple levels of the U.S. government as a means of building support for Canada’s trade policy aims within the recently concluded U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement trade negotiations. Trudeau, as well as Canadian cabinet ministers and provincial premiers, engaged in a coordinated campaign to visit U.S.
governors, senators, and civil society organizations, underlining the importance of the Canada-U.S. trading relationship. On a bilateral basis, actors wishing to deepen connections can draw upon historical, cultural, linguistic, diasporic, or other types of existing social linkages to strengthen connection across borders. South Korean embassies, for example, have organized commemorative events to recognize Korean War veterans in countries that fought to defend South Korea from North Korean aggression in the early 1950s. These events draw on historic connections to deepen relations and build links across societies.

Military exchanges and exercises are another highly effective means of strengthening relationships across governments. Effective webcraft requires maintaining and resourcing a well-connected set of embassies abroad. Rather than populating these missions with traditional foreign service officers, however, effective networking requires staffing embassies with representatives from multiple domestic agencies and organizations that can best deepen substantive interactions.

Participation in a large number of regional or multilateral fora can serve as another means of maximizing transnational connections, the bread and butter of effective network diplomacy. Participation in a wide array of institutions related to an actor’s international policy aims is vital. It is better to be at the table. From this perspective, the American withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations left the United States less connected and less able to wield influence. Membership within large international organizations, such as UN agencies or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, is not enough. Important action is increasingly occurring within smaller, apparently technical bodies that enable connections across states, such as the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision or the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction. Because of their size and informal set-up, these types of lower-level networks are not often the subject of international media attention but play host to a whole set of important international interactions. In addition, effective practitioners of network diplomacy are linked with other, more ad hoc, venues of substantive engagement and connection. These settings are often non-state in character. Transnational corporations or other types of non-state actors frequently organize critical fora where consequential discussions occur. “Track-two” diplomacy, which facilitates interstate dialogue via backchannels such as nongovernmental organizations or academics, is another example of these types of non-state venues. Dense, multi-level, multifaceted relations are the objective here.

It is not enough to be a part of networks, however. States must work to increase the centrality of their position within these networks. They must aim to become the most direct point of contact between actors relevant to advancing their international agenda. This imperative is especially relevant in a world where
international relations are taking on an informal, decentralized quality. The absence of organizational machinery within informal institutions can result in a much larger proportion of multilateral engagements taking on a distinctly bilateral character. In many formal international organizations, consequential decisions are made through intergovernmental bodies in which all member states have representation. The existence of permanent delegations to these organizations, working in close physical proximity, facilitates genuinely multilateral exchange. Secretariats are charged with supporting these interactions.

As a result, within formal international organizations, the institutional set-up favors inclusion. In the absence of permanent missions, secretariats, or even a headquarters, informal institutions favor a more decentralized type of diplomacy that can take the form of a series of networked bilateral engagements between officials based in national capitals. These government officials communicate frequently over email and telephone, sharing information on an ongoing basis. While these bilateral interactions occur in the context of a multilateral forum, inclusion becomes a deliberate choice that increases the organizational burden on states. This is often the case for rather mundane reasons, such as simplicity, time zones and ease of coordination.

Less centralized multilateral interactions present opportunities for able diplomats to build and exploit a nodal position to achieve their foreign policy aims. Actors that establish and sustain network centrality become known as hubs for information and relevant knowledge. In addition to maintaining frequent communications with their contacts and strengthening linkages progressively, effective practitioners of network diplomacy are connected to a more diverse set of players than their peers. A varied set of contacts increases the likelihood that an actor will serve as the most direct and efficient linkage between two other actors within the system. By building linkages with a wide and diverse set of contacts, states are able to form brokerage links. For example, Sweden’s maintenance of contacts in Pyongyang and strong relations with the United States has given that Scandinavian country more influence in North Korean disarmament issues than it would otherwise enjoy. Other Western countries that did not have such diverse linkages were not in a similar position. Although other actors could connect directly, a less connected actor often engages a nodal player with whom they have strong existing ties to save time and to ease interactions. A nodal actor may also become the equivalent of one-stop shopping among participating states, able to share information and analysis on the bargaining position of multiple states at once. This position can confer a high degree of influence on
actors enjoying network centrality, since they can frame and select the information they share.

Nodal players often serve a convening function among states. In informal institutional settings, which typically lack headquarters, the ability to host meetings can confer agenda-setting power. Acting as chair of international meetings—another privilege typically afforded to host countries—can serve as a further means of enhancing network centrality. States may also serve a convening function by acting as the drafter of any agreements or understandings under negotiation. By drafting documents, incorporating—sometimes selectively—comments from all sides, international actors may function as the chief contact for a number of participants within a negotiating setting. French negotiators are, for instance, well-known for insisting on serving as the drafter of international agreements, recognizing the potential influence it can confer.16

Most international actors cannot join every international forum, open embassies across the globe, and extend their tentacles into thousands of spheres of global social interaction. The costs of this form of diplomacy would be enormous and would favor only the biggest and richest states. At the same time, the strategic and deliberate targeting of connection as a vital means of enhancing diplomatic influence is justified in a changed international landscape. States that build connections in a targeted fashion and then work to move to the center of networks are more likely to succeed in promoting and protecting their vital international interests in the 21st century.

Using Network Centrality

Nodal players capitalize on their favorable position within networks through a number of means. First, they can exploit informational advantages vis-à-vis their competitors to achieve their foreign policy aims. By virtue of their many linkages, well-connected actors are more likely to obtain advantageous information than less well-connected ones. This information allows them to assess more accurately the probabilities of uncertain global developments and to understand better the bargaining positions of others. During the Suez crisis in 1956, for example, Canada’s foreign minister Lester B. Pearson masterfully used privileged information about the underlying negotiating stances of key players to help bring an end to the crisis and launch the United Nations Emergency Force.17

Possessing information that other actors do not, nodal players can find themselves in a position to control the rate and extent to which information is disseminated. They can omit pertinent details in their interactions with others and can control the format in which it is presented. They may also withhold or frame information in a manner that is most advantageous to them. In negotiations, they can
shape understandings of agenda items and sequence the release of information to advantage their position.

Second, nodal players are in a position to gatekeep within the international system. Gatekeepers can include or exclude players from network activities. This can be done informationally, as noted above, or through controlling access to certain negotiating spaces. Conveners of international meetings can help determine who is invited to the negotiating table. The ability of nodal players to exercise gatekeeping power is increased in settings that are less formal and when participation is more fluid. While the ability to exclude any other player can be limited by established expectations about participation, most institutional settings feature a host of informal side discussions that include only a subsection of the institutional population. Nodal players frequently instigate these types of discussions or are an obvious participant in consultations convened by another state.

With rapid and cheap international communications, interstate interactions can take on an ongoing, bilateral quality with states participating in a continuing dialogue from capitals. Actors exercising network centrality are frequently at the core of such interactions and can exclude other, less central players from these exchanges. Nodal actors can often exert as much influence through strategic inclusion as they can from exclusion. The capacity to include important non-state players can shape agendas and influence outcomes. Expectations concerning non-state participation are generally less established than for state-based actors, leaving more room for discretion among conveners.

In an age where network effects give rise to the type of winner-takes-all dynamics that have contributed to the disproportionate dominance of popular online platforms such as Google and Facebook, the threat of exclusion and the benefits of inclusion are a potent power source internationally. Such a dynamic can motivate what Joshua Cooper Ramo calls “hard gatekeeping,” in which states provide or deny access to important networks based on adherence to certain principles. Even absent the formalized “gate land” structure proposed by Ramo, the ability to influence the process of inclusion and exclusion from key international conversations is an important source of power in network diplomacy.

Through the processes described above, nodal players can stack the negotiating deck to their advantage. Those at the center of networks are well-placed to manipulate what Harvard University’s James K. Sebenius calls “negotiation arithmetic.” These players can influence who is at the table and what is on the table for negotiation. By adding or subtracting players and, when a nodal actor plays an agenda-setting role, the set of issues up for discussion, these actors can manipulate bargaining outcomes. They can influence the likelihood of productive issue linkages and open the door to deals that would otherwise have been unattainable. Similarly, when actors increase their network centrality by drafting
agreements in international negotiations, they can make certain bargaining packages more or less likely to emerge. In doing so, they are more likely to achieve their preferred outcome.

Finally, nodal players benefit from superior go-it-alone power. Extensive and varied contacts can afford nodal players with strong alternatives to agreement, allowing them to walk away from bad deals. By virtue of their strong outside links, they are also less prone to being coerced by powerful gatekeepers. They can more easily cultivate alternative arrangements, increasing their bargaining leverage. For example, by fostering linkages with China and the United States in 2018, North Korea has been able to leverage a form of network centrality to loosen sanctions enforcement and obtain a U.S. commitment to end military exercises with South Korea. Go-it-alone power can also facilitate “forum shopping,” enabling well-connected players to find the most congenial institutional forum in terms of rules, procedures, and membership. Less well-connected players participate in fewer institutions and risk being excluded from important activities. Effective forum shopping can link an issue under negotiation with another issue that is currently under consideration within the chosen institution. Networks provide options and options bring leverage.

**Network Centrality Below the Media Radar**

Although the era of Donald Trump and leader-driven politics seems to have brought a return to summit deal-making, a productive set of lower-level engagements continue to advance international cooperation. Summit diplomacy is just the tip of the proverbial international cooperation iceberg. Advances in communication technologies have enabled a set of decentralized, networked linkages across governments to proliferate. Informal institutional networks have progressively become more prevalent, facilitating global collaboration in hundreds of discrete fields of endeavor. These networks have a significant impact on global affairs. This development has helped to produce a more decentralized, less hierarchical form of diplomacy that presents opportunities for international policymakers to advance their foreign policy aims.

Growing linkages have not necessarily been employed by states in a strategic manner to date, however. I have outlined a set of tools and tactics that target establishing and maintaining network centrality as a chief foreign policy objective in the age of network diplomacy. States and other types of international actors can achieve network centrality first by deliberately fostering linkages with state,
Growing linkages have not been employed by states in a strategic manner to date.

non-state, and sub-state actors. These connections must be built upon genuine connection and foundation, and can be nourished through bilateral, regional, and multilateral interactions. Nongovernmental and intergovernmental settings should not be neglected, as these are often dynamic platforms for global engagement.

Once a part of networks, international actors should seek to move to the center of these networks. They can achieve this through a number of means. First, they must deepen and diversify their international linkages, recognizing that even multilateral institutions are taking on an increasingly bilateral character that is networked through a set of ongoing communications conducted among officials from national capitals. Diverse contacts make it more likely that a given actor will serve as the most direct means of communications between any two other actors. Convening international engagements or serving as the drafter in negotiations can further enhance network centrality.

It is important to emphasize that network centrality is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. Effective statecraft relies on an ability first to identify clear and coherent goals before employing the tools of webcraft discussed in this article.21 Like any other instrument of international influence, network centrality is pursued at a cost and should be focused on a clear foreign policy aim. The more specific and precise that aim, the more likely it is to succeed. Given the material and social costs of maintaining such a heavily engaged posture, most states cannot serve as central players within all diplomatic settings. Choices must be made. At the same time, achieving a greater overall awareness of the factors that favor success in network diplomacy is likely to increase the general influence of actors that bring such a sensibility to their diplomatic relations. In addition, since the global context can change swiftly and international policy goals can change with it, building network centrality can be an important means of being prepared for the unknown.

Notes


