

Humanitarian Diplomacy: A Discussion

The concept of humanitarian diplomacy which began to be used in international politics in the early 1900's appeared when a commission established in Geneva in 1863 was transformed into the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The organization, which has been carrying out humanitarian activities such as helping those who are injured in wars around the world, has developed the content of the concept. According to the ICRC, humanitarian diplomacy is about persuading decision-makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles. However, there is no universal definition of this concept.

The concept of diplomacy, which is the way of building and executing international politics in the global system, has changed in the wake of the Cold War and has gained different dimensions including humanitarian aspects such as humanitarian intervention. For this reason, it would not be wrong to say that the theory and practice of the concept of humanitarian diplomacy have also evolved.

Today, humanitarian diplomacy began to be used by non-governmental organizations generally as a solution to protect the vulnerable people in conflict zones. However, the concept of humanitarian diplomacy is not understood and used in the same sense by all humanitarian actors. The main common point is that 'it is the humanity that is essential' in the process of humanitarian diplomacy carried out by non-governmental organizations.

Today, humanitarian diplomacy is mostly compared to traditional diplomacy. The reason is that humanitarian diplomacy resembles the classical diplomacy in terms of negotiation and communication processes. However, while the main role in humanitarian diplomacy is played by civil actors, classical diplomacy refers to the process that only official diplomats are involved. Within this framework, it is more appropriate to call the diplomacy method followed by states as 'humanitarian as a diplomatic practice' rather than the concept of 'humanitarian diplomacy'.

Besides, when humanitarian diplomacy is being carried out, it is humanitarian ends that are taken into consideration rather than political and national priorities.

Humanitarian diplomacy is sometimes wrongly called as "intervention diplomacy". However, these two concepts differ in terms of both actors and means. A humanitarian intervention is mostly a military initiative or such kind of an operation held by governmental actors. On the other hand, humanitarian diplomacy lacks any military enforcement and conducted by non-governmental organizations.

In addition, humanitarian diplomacy is sometimes inaccurately identified with 'humanitarian aid', since both terms are related to improving the living conditions of those in need. It is necessary to point out that humanitarian diplomacy is a process that is carried out for humanitarian ends also including humanitarian aid. Humanitarian diplomacy is more than humanitarian assistance. It is not only concerned with delivering aid to the people in conflict zones, but it also endeavors to prevent the problems that occur in combat areas and solve them effectively without involving in any political and military issues.

The civil society organizations are more appropriate for and more flexible in humanitarian diplomacy activities than states, since the latter has many bureaucratic obstacles to overcome in order to intervene in a crisis and reach a humanitarian outcome clear of selfish political ends.

Moreover, NGOs act in concordance with the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality, humanity, and neutrality which make them more trustworthy than states from the perspective of the host country. The credits of humanitarian organizations are also higher than those of states in terms of humanitarian actions in conflict zones. Additionally, NGOs take more risk to reach the people in need than the state actors.

So, it can be said that humanitarian diplomacy practices should be done by NGOs to get the optimum positive results. That's why we cannot entitle the diplomatic activities of states in humanitarian operations as 'humanitarian diplomacy'.

NGOs conduct their humanitarian diplomacy in three ways: negotiation, bargaining, and pressure. They negotiate, bargain and even make pressure to the parties or states in a particular crisis to access to the conflict zone and deliver aid to the people in need. Also, NGOs do such diplomatic activities to save the prisoners of war.

Humanitarian organizations are operating all over the world. They help to save lives and lessen the sufferings of civilians, who are deprived of the basic necessities of life. Additionally, the concept of humanitarian diplomacy itself is a bit ambiguous for both “humanitarian workers” and “humanitarian organizations”. Humanitarian workers do not see themselves as diplomats, although they perform some sort of diplomacy in the crisis regions every day.

If we are to define the humanitarian diplomacy concept, it is all about protecting the vulnerable people’s interests, in its most general sense. And the NGOs rather than the states as actors fit well to this end on account of the reasons explained above. International NGOs carry out ‘humanitarian negotiations’ only for the interests of those in need, rather than seeking political gains as states.

Even though the NGOs rather than the states conduct humanitarian diplomacy activities, norms of international and humanitarian law must be respected. As a matter of fact, humanitarian diplomacy which is driven by basic humanitarian principles such as independence and impartiality must be implemented without making any distinction between the people who are affected by a crisis. Also, humanitarian diplomacy actors should not become part of any dispute. In other words, they must act autonomously from a particular actor’s political, economic, military etc. purposes. Plus, the actors who carry out the humanitarian diplomacy activities, must be transparent and learn every single detail of the issue thereby. They should protect the critical balance between what is political and what is humanitarian action. Meanwhile, NGOs must make risk assessments, form communication channels, comply with the confidentiality rules. Last but not least, the humanitarian organizations should be apolitical, humanitarian and neutral. They should treat all people in an equal manner in need regardless of who they are.