



# Aviation diplomacy: a conceptual framework for analyzing the relationship between aviation and international relations

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## Abstract

The article aimed to conceptualize the term aviation diplomacy and to map the most typical forms of use of civil aviation for diplomatic reasons. The research included a review of approaches to aviation diplomacy and similar terms available in the scientific literature. The considerations presented in the article allowed for a proposition of tripartite framework for aviation diplomacy, with specific aspects referring either to the location of the diplomatic engagement or the actors engaged. The framework includes aviation as a foreign policy tool, aviation as a means of promoting the state's international image, and aviation subjects as diplomatic actors.

**Keywords** Aviation diplomacy · Public diplomacy · Nation branding · Diplomacy · Civil aviation

## Introduction

Aviation and diplomacy have always been, to some extent, interconnected. The famous visit by UK's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to Munich to hold diplomatic talks over the future of Czechoslovakia in 1938 marked a turning point in this context. Aviation provided the possibility to travel long distances quickly, which changed the face of diplomacy in the twentieth century. However, the relationship between aviation and diplomacy is not only about allowing diplomats and state leaders to meet more easily and perform diplomacy. International aviation enormously changed the world. Air traveling from the domain of rich elites became an ordinary tool of moving from one place to another, often cheaper than other means of transport, contributing to the proceeding globalization.

The air travel industry has been experiencing extremely rapid growth in the preceding decades. According to the World Bank (2019), in 1975, 0.432 billion airline passengers were carried in the world. In 2018, this figure increased to 4.233 billion. This trend is present since the 1970s and the increase of the annual number of passengers became even higher since 2010 (World Bank 2019), even though in

developed societies we could observe a sort of an embarrassment connected to flying because of its influence on the environment—in Sweden, there is even a term *Flygskam* describing this phenomenon (Quick 2019). The trend has been discontinued as a result of global lockdown imposed to limit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2, and once the crisis is over, it will probably take several years before the number of passengers reaches the 2019 level, but in a long-time perspective, aviation should be regarded as an important and quickly growing sector of the global economy. The popularity of air travel is important for economic reasons, but at the same time, it created a straight way for political and diplomatic significance to be attached to civil aviation. It can have several forms. Governments might decide to open or sustain air links with particular countries, which might impact a larger number of people and affect the relations between countries. Airlines might contribute to projecting and promoting national identities, while aviation institutions play roles as non-state actors of international relations. However, civil aviation has not become a common subject of research in the field of political science and international relations yet. Nor is there an established scientific category covering the issue of the interconnection between civil aviation and international relations. This article aimed to fill this gap and to conceptualize the term aviation diplomacy, as well as to map the most typical forms of use of civil aviation for diplomatic reasons.

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## Literature review

Despite the growing importance and scale of international civil aviation, its significance in international relations, or diplomacy, is a rather neglected subject of study. The majority of research on the issue has been conducted by scholars representing other fields than politics or international relations, particularly tourism, transport, or military history.

The scarce IR literature concerning aviation diplomacy, or more generally the aviation in the context of international relations and politics, can be divided into several groups. The first one refers to the international aviation system, an issue that was dedicated relatively much attention. Jönsson (1981) conceptualized aviation in reference to the international system in general, discussing the evolution of the international aviation system. Jönsson reviewed the consecutive stages (regimes) of the international aviation system, including the ‘unrestricted sovereignty’ regime, the ‘Chicago-Bermuda’ regime, and the trend toward a non-regime situation. Jönsson referred to the concept of interdependence and argued that the change in the international aviation regime was driven by its structure and the international organization. Several years later Jönsson (1987) further developed the issue in a book-length study, in which he analyzed air transport regimes from the economic, structural, situational the process model perspectives, employing regime theory and inter-organizational theory in reference to the change of regime in international aviation.

Other scholars have also analyzed aviation regimes. Nayar (1995) examined the international aviation system in light of IR theories, with particular attention dedicated to realism and regime theory. Nayar argued that international cooperation was evident in the aviation regime, exemplified by the existence of two major organizations: International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and International Air Transport Organization (IATA), the first is a UN agency, the second—an INGO with semi-public features. Nayar has also discussed states’ attempts to shape the aviation regime so that it would meet their commercial interests. In turn, a more recent book by Dobson (2017) considered the creation and evolution of aviation regimes and the modern trends such as the establishment of the European single aviation market or the contemporary challenges of civil aviation. The central problem his book addressed was the tension between the national sovereignty over air space and the national control over airlines, and the commercial interests in civil aviation. The international aviation system was also subject of the book by von den Steinen (2006). Von den Steinen explored how national interests influence aviation policies, focusing on the areas of cooperation and conflict, and advocating the integration of national and public interests in international policy concerning aviation.

The second trend in the existing literature on international aviation from the IR perspective refers to international aviation organizations as political actors. Such issues were partly undertaken by the authors mentioned earlier, whereas the book by Sochor (1991) dedicated to ICAO is probably the most complex piece of research in this area. Sochor focussed on the political aspects of ICAO activities, and its evolution as a political body. He undertook such issues as the international aviation system, the technical evolution of air transport, problems connected to aviation in the developing world, terrorist threats, international conflicts, or air safety. Sochor argued that despite the expectations of its founders, ICAO was a political body. On the other hand, it was not able to oversee the development of civil aviation since it was never granted enough authority.

The third trend in the literature considering civil aviation from the political perspective refers to its usefulness as the tool of states. A book authored by Gidwitz (1980), which examined how political forces influence civil aviation, is a great example of this trend. It included such issues as airlines as instruments of governments, regulatory processes governing civil aviation, air routes, or national aircraft manufacturing. Gidwitz observed that governments used airlines for their non-aviation purposes and that the whole industry could be characterized as politically weak.

More contemporary approaches to aviation as a political tool were more or less concentrated on the importance of civil aviation in shaping the image of a country. The issue was partly undertaken by Raguraman (1997), who investigated national air carriers in Malaysia and Singapore. Even though his research focused on nation-building and national identity, Raguraman argued that airlines can be symbols for national identity and have been used by governments in projecting it internationally. More recently, several authors researched aviation in the context of soft power, public diplomacy, or nation branding. For example, several papers dedicated to Turkish Airlines (Bilkay and Kemal 2017; Selçuk 2013; Anaz and Akman 2017; Akilli 2018) were published recently.

Even though several books and articles more or less directly refer to the issue of interconnections between civil aviation and international relations, this relation remains strongly under-investigated, with greater attention dedicated only to the international aviation system. Moreover, even in this case many of the seminal books were published more than 30 years ago. Another problem is the fact that there is a general lack of theoretical frames for the research of the diplomatic significance of aviation. Top handbooks on diplomacy or public diplomacy published by Routledge, Sage, or Oxford University Press referred to many forms of diplomatic engagement but failed to acknowledge aviation diplomacy. However, the existing literature appears to justify the importance of air transport in international



relations, particularly in the context of state interests. This article aimed to fill this gap by proposing the theoretical framework for the research on aviation and diplomacy.

## Defining aviation diplomacy

Traditionally perceived diplomacy refers directly to the management of interstate relations (Bull 2012). According to Morgenthau (1993), diplomacy is an instrument of securing peace aimed to foster national interest with the use of peaceful means. However, such a state-centric approach to diplomacy is no longer exclusive. For example, according to Der Derian (1987), diplomacy is a mediation between mutually estranged individuals, groups, and subjects. Already in the 1960s, Nicolson (2004) noticed such changing nature of diplomacy. This trend continued, leading to what Cornago (2013) referred to as the pluralization of diplomacy, claiming that nowadays, we should speak of diplomacies rather than diplomacy. Accordingly, we should also think of diplomacy in reference to various actors. Apart from traditional subjects—states operating through ministerial headquarters, embassies and consulates, it includes engagement of NGOs, activists, local governments, indigenous leaders, think tanks, media, scientists, corporate CEOs, celebrities, terrorists, etc. Pluralization of diplomacy means not only plural actors but also multiplied locations, which refers, for example, to the growing importance of the new communication networks.

The new trends in diplomacy are exemplified by the establishment of some new forms of diplomatic engagement, stemming from the fact that the contemporary world presents new challenges to the states' foreign services, which are expected to take action in reference to the growing number of issues and preoccupations (Cooper et al. 2013). Aviation diplomacy can be regarded as one of such examples. It is the result and exemplification of the pluralization and democratization of diplomacy. It embodies a particular location of diplomatic engagement—the realm of international aviation, which significance has been increasing throughout previous decades as a result of the growing number of travelers. At the same time, it concerns the new diplomatic actors' engagement, particularly international aviation organizations or airlines.

Aviation diplomacy is first and foremost yet another type of diplomatic engagement. Researchers have occasionally used the term itself, but as a scientific category, it did not gain an established position yet. Different authors stress other elements of the term or generally perceive it in different ways. There are also several ways in which bonds between diplomacy and aviation are called. Apart from aviation diplomacy, various authors referred to air transport diplomacy, air diplomacy, aviation-based diplomacy, the use of air transport in diplomacy.

The most common approach to aviation diplomacy appears to refer to governments negotiating agreements on air transport. Dobson (1993), in his article in *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, acknowledged that civil aviation has always had political significance and impacted on such matters as sovereignty, defense, and national status. The approach to aviation diplomacy presented in his article (although the term only appeared in its title) referred to governments negotiating bilateral air service agreements. For example, it has traditionally been the objective of the U.S. government to move aviation toward a market-based and competitive regime (Warren and Shane 2010). A fairly similar approach to aviation diplomacy was presented in Newton's (1978) book *The Perilous Sky: U.S. Aviation Diplomacy and Latin America, 1919–1931*.

Perceiving aviation diplomacy in reference to international negotiations between governments refers not only to negotiating bilateral agreements on air links or access to markets but also to negotiating multilateral agreements on civil aviation, which was most typical in the years of the development of civil aviation in the twentieth century (Dierikx 2008). Interestingly, until today the principles of civil aviation are set based on bilateral negotiations between the United States and the United Kingdom and the international negotiations held in the 1940s which resulted in the signing of the Chicago Convention and Bermuda Principles (Milner 1993).

Lespinois (2012) presented an approach to aviation diplomacy, which more directly corresponds to various types of diplomatic engagement distinguished in modern diplomatic studies (see Constantinou et al. 2016), although the term he used was 'air diplomacy.' Lespinois described it as the use of air assets to support foreign policy. This included achievements of aviation pioneers such as Charles Lindbergh—the first man to cruise through the Atlantic Ocean; opening of the air connections to foreign countries (and its diplomatic significance of shaping alliances); states attempting to shape the international air system; the development of military aviation for the sake of propaganda and intimidation. This approach is, therefore, much more complex and moves the term beyond traditional diplomacy since it includes public diplomacy aspects as well.

Engel (2007, IX) observed another aspect of aviation diplomacy, although his approach refers to the Cold War reality. Engel referred to Western governments' attempts to control strategically valuable aviation technologies to 'keep them from communists hands,' even though Western corporations producing aircrafts were interested in selling their technologies and products commercially. Such an approach, however, has not been shared by other authors in their attempts to define aviation diplomacy and does not correspond directly with the post-Cold War reality.



The diplomatic significance of civil aviation can also be perceived differently as well. As Raguraman (1997) argued, although he did not use the term ‘aviation diplomacy’ or any similar, airlines can be symbols for national identity and have been used by governments in projecting it internationally. Airlines might thus be employed as drivers of soft power, means of projecting states’ identity to the external audiences. Such an approach refers to many types of diplomacy used in the contemporary world. For example, sports diplomacy includes ‘reputational advantages of sporting mega-events and elite sport’ (Pamment 2016, p. 234). From this perspective, if we equal, for example, sports diplomacy with aviation diplomacy as different types of diplomatic engagement, then it can serve the states’ purposes of shaping their positive international image. It can be done through, for example, national flag carriers, fancy airports, air shows, etc. Aviation diplomacy perceived this way could be placed within the realm of public diplomacy, while the means mentioned above can be perceived as soft power assets.

Based on the short review of the meanings attached to either aviation diplomacy, air diplomacy, etc., it can be concluded that it is a versatile term with several meanings and ways of perceiving it. Apart from the definitions presented above, it could be explained in different ways as well. Contemporary diplomacy, besides states, also includes actors such as NGOs, cities and regions, corporations, etc. Consequently, aviation institutions such as the ICAO and IATA may also take diplomatic roles. As long as ICAO is a UN agency, its diplomatic status is natural. IATA, on the other hand, is an association of airlines, an INGO with semi-public features. Still, its officials engage in international negotiations with other actors of international relations (Page and Spence 2011) what can speak of its diplomatic merits. By taking these considerations into the lower level, even airlines themselves could be regarded as independent diplomatic actors. For example, they engage in negotiations with states or other public entities, in a way typical for corporate diplomacy.

To summarize, aviation diplomacy can be perceived in several ways. They include using aviation by governments to affect international relations (for example through establishing or suspending bilateral air links), aviation as a soft power asset (in the context of airlines as drivers of projecting national identity, airshows, airports, etc.), governments’ engagement in shaping international air system, international actors such as IATA or ICAO (and possibly airlines) as diplomatic actors. Aviation diplomacy can, therefore, be defined as all sort of diplomatic processes and structures pursued within the area of civil aviation. It covers both traditional diplomatic practices and public diplomacy tools and includes activities of states and non-state actors.

To further understand the concept of aviation diplomacy, a tripartite framework can be proposed, based on (1) aviation

as a foreign policy tool, (2) aviation as a means for shaping country image, and (3) aviation subjects as diplomatic actors. The first two aspects refer to the activity of a state. Governments either directly or through non-state actors such as airlines may attempt to use civil aviation to reach or foster foreign policy goals or to shape the international image of their countries. They are, therefore, the forms of aviation diplomacy perceived as a location of diplomatic engagement, both in its traditional and public forms.

Aviation diplomacy as a foreign policy tool most directly refers to the negotiations between governments concerning the establishment of the international aviation system, bilateral air service agreements, or the conditions for their national airlines. It also covers public diplomacy endeavors. Most ultimately, this includes the use of aviation to bring states closer together or to communicate dissatisfaction with the other country’s policy within the general deterioration of bilateral relations. These two forms could be described as positive and negative aviation diplomacy.

Aviation diplomacy can also be understood in reference to the use of aviation within promoting and projecting national identity. It is most evident for airlines, which can be regarded as drivers of public diplomacy, or soft power assets. Because of their resources and specificity, airlines are capable of presenting the country’s identity to the international public, and because of the reversed country of origin effect can contribute to strengthening the awareness of the country or create other positive associations. It may be pursued in several ways and can result from direct state initiatives or the independent activities of non-state actors, for example, through marketing campaigns aimed to increase the level of incoming tourism.

The third aspect of aviation diplomacy concerns the non-state aviation-related subjects and their ability to engage in diplomatic processes independently. This refers most directly to the regulators of international aviation—ICAO and IATA. Because of the complicated, multilateral nature of international aviation, their engagement is essential for the whole system to work. Airlines can also be regarded as independent diplomatic subjects, capable of engaging in diplomatic processes with other diplomatic or para-diplomatic actors. Their diplomatic capacity originates from their position as firms operating internationally.

## Conceptualizing aviation diplomacy

From a theoretical perspective, aviation diplomacy can be associated with several concepts. Most directly, it builds upon multistakeholder diplomacy and soft power. Moreover, it can be conceptualized both in reference to public diplomacy and traditional diplomacy. All these issues were



discussed in this section in relation to the tripartite framework presented above.

In principle, the category of aviation diplomacy builds upon the concept of multistakeholder diplomacy. According to Hocking (2006), diplomacy becomes an activity oriented at creating networks of state and non-state actors focused on the management of issues that demand resources over which no single participant possesses a monopoly. The concept assumes the complexity of processes connected with pursuing politics, the need for wider cooperation, and the engagement of many new actors in diplomatic processes. As Jönsson (1981) observed, the development of international aviation has contributed to the trend (at the time) of interdependence and influences such political aspects and issues as national security interests, sovereignty, and the prestige of countries. What is more, within aviation diplomacy, the engagement of non-state actors is necessary. Airlines, for instance, are of key importance in implementing some of the governments' decisions, such as establishing air connections or running branding campaigns.

The multistakeholder approach to aviation diplomacy connects with the concept of diplomacy as agency. In principle, the diplomatic agency refers to the capability of the actors (or agents), both states and non-state subjects, to engage in diplomacy (Adler-Nissen 2016). Diplomacy as agency approach is centered on the rationality and/or psychology of individuals involved, in contrast to the structural approach focused on the distribution of state capacities (Pouliot 2016). From this perspective, aviation diplomacy can be conceptualized on two levels. Firstly, governments may try to employ non-standard diplomatic tools with the use of aviation to overcome the barriers posed by the structure of the international system. For example, mutual estrangements or issues related to national prestige may stand in way of cooperation. Thus, establishing an air link (the issue will be further discussed in reference to aviation and public diplomacy) can only have a symbolic significance as an ice breaker, but in some situations, it may be the only possible move. Secondly, such activities often may not be pursued independently by the government. Airlines should be seen as particularly important agents, both in the context of fostering foreign policy goals and in reference to building the international image of the country. Of course, the exact motivation of such undertakings may be different in various situations. In principle, airlines have their motivations, such as maximizing profits, strengthening the commercial brand, increasing their market share, etc. For instance, airlines may run promotional campaigns aimed to increase their sales or to promote destinations from which they operate, which indirectly can also draw attention to their countries. They can also establish a connection between two countries or cities hoping it would be financially beneficial, with a political goal being an unintentional but welcome consequence.

However, there are also situations when airlines realize the political objectives of the governments of their countries very directly, which may stem from their ownership structure, with governments often being majority shareholders, or through campaigns purchased by governments.

Considering airlines and their role within aviation diplomacy, it should be underlined that their diplomatic capabilities are connected not only with their roles as state agents. Airlines, or more generally aviation actors, can also be regarded as diplomatic subjects on their own. In the case of airlines, their independent diplomatic capabilities are connected with the concept of business diplomacy. As firms operating on an international scale, they need to collaborate with other stakeholders (see Ruël and Wolters 2016). That includes other airlines, airports, local and regional authorities or international aviation organizations, with whom they are capable of engaging in negotiations, representation, and mediation. Most interestingly from the perspective of this research, airlines may become important partners for governments and sub-national entities. It could be observed recently during the early stage of the COVID-19 crisis. In response to the decision of LOT Polish Airlines to suspend operations to China, Chinese ambassador to Warsaw in an interview given to Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* expressed his expectation that LOT service to Beijing is resumed as soon as possible. He also claimed that Polish national airlines had assured him that the suspension had been a technical issue only (Bielecki 2020). The diplomatic engagement of airlines may be even more direct on a paradiplomatic level. For example, airlines, particularly the so-called low-cost airlines, may sign agreements to promote cities or regions. This was, for example, the case of Swedish municipality Nyköping, which in 2003 signed with Ryanair a 10-year co-branding agreement. The municipality paid Ryanair approximately 5.5 million euros in exchange for exposure of its name and logo on Ryanair aircrafts, website, advertisements, and commercials. The agreement was later criticized as a trick to make Ryanair choose Skavsta airport as its entrance to Stockholm (Lassen et al. 2012). Such deals assume promotion of cities or regions to avoid accusations over illegal public aid, but their obvious goal is to persuade airlines to operate from such regional airports, which for many reasons is beneficial for local municipalities.

The issue of the diplomacy of aviation subjects is not limited to airlines. It also connects with international aviation organizations: IATA, an international non-governmental organization, and ICAO, an international organization. They both became a sort of regulators of the international aviation system, and it can be assumed that they can exert influence or impose their decisions on states. Both of them are also capable of engaging in negotiations with other actors of international relations, including states. For example, ICAO has been negotiating a plan for carbon-neutral



aviation growth recently, facing opposition from China (Horton 2019). IATA, an INGO composed of most airlines, formally was never engaged in international negotiations (OECD 2016), but more informally, its representatives are expected to be active in this field as well. Such negotiations to a large extent are purely technical, aimed to ensure that its services are provided properly (Page and Spence 2011), but the important fact is that they take place.

The concept of multistakeholder diplomacy is useful in explaining all of the proposed aspects of aviation diplomacy. Both in the case of aviation as a foreign policy tool and as a means for shaping country image, states remain the key subjects, but because of the specificity of the field, they often need to act through other actors, such as airlines. On the other hand, aviation subjects can act not only as agents of states but also as independent diplomatic actors. In such situations, they can be considered as states' external stakeholders.

The second main theoretical concept that aviation diplomacy refers to is Joseph Nye's soft power. It assumes that a state may sometimes fulfill its objectives without resorting to coercion or payment because other states could aim to follow its path by admiring the values it represents, emulating its example, or aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. Soft power rests primarily on three resources: culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye 2004). Neither of them can be connected to aviation directly. However, soft power is mostly about producing attraction, and certain aviation subjects definitely have such capacity.

The most obvious aviation subjects that may be considered as soft power assets are the airlines. Generally speaking, airlines may contribute to improving the image of their countries of origin in several ways. One of them is their prestige. Airlines, such as Singapore Airlines, Emirates, or Qatar Airways, through their prestige as the world's leading airlines and high position in airline rankings, may influence the positive associations with their country of origin—often their owner, through the reversed country of origin effect (see White 2012). Airlines can also serve in presenting their country through their names, national symbols painted on the aircrafts, etc. For example, Singapore Airlines, Emirates, Qatar Airways, Air France, or British Airways have their countries implemented in their names. If British Airways are considered, in the 1990s the airline attempted to resign from its British links in pursuit of graduating from a mere national airline to a global travel brand. It included re-branding it into BA and resigning from the Union flag on the tails of the aircrafts. The airline, however, quickly returned to the British component in its name and symbols on the aircrafts. According to Anholt (2007), British Airways overlooked that being a global brand does not mean coming from nowhere. Through distancing from its British roots, the airline lost the advantage of being associated

with the country perceived as a logical origin for any brand in air travel, hospitality, and tourism. Some airlines do not use their countries of origin in their names but expose them otherwise. For example, Australian airlines Qantas have kangaroos painted on the tails of their aircrafts.

We should also note that even though many of the originally national airlines have been privatized, they can still be regarded as symbols of statehood. Kosovo is a good example of this significance. After declaring independence in 2008 its foreign policy was centered around securing universal international recognition. With this in mind, briefly after declaring independence Kosovo founded Kosova Airlines (Markessinis 2010), which alongside other steps, such as the attempts to be recognized by international sports federations or to become a member of international organizations (see Brentin and Tregoures 2016) was to be an argument for Kosovo's statehood. This particular issue, at the same time, reveals the political potential for this kind of initiatives. Airlines may thus serve as banners presenting the name, flag, or symbols of respective nation-states. Interestingly, though, they do not always present their own countries this way. For example, Latvian Air Baltic recently painted a large Estonian flag on one of its planes to celebrate its expansion out of its base in Tallinn (Tietz 2019). It is an exception connected to Air Baltic commercial goals, but in principle, it is the country of origin that airlines expose on their planes.

The interconnection between soft power and aviation can also be observed in the context of airports and airshows, although in the first case it probably more directly corresponds with the category of nation branding. Airport's efficiency and convenience can serve as proof of a state's vitality and efficacy, while big international hubs can generate tourism, for example, through extending stays of transit visitors (World Travel Tourism Council 2018). Airports such as Singapore or Dubai are even regarded to play important roles in the development of tourism in their regions (Castro and Lohmann 2014), thus fostering the goals of nation branding. Translating it more directly into soft power, it can be assumed that countries with big international hubs not only attract visitors but are also expected to be better recognized internationally. Since the network of air connections a particular country has can be regarded as an attraction factor, leading to greater internationalization, it can also be considered from the perspective of soft power.

Also, the design of the airport may serve the needs of nation branding, or, more generally, projecting the state's identity. It is, for instance, the case of the Tallinn Airport, with interiors designed to expose the Estonian character, including table legs made of raw birch branches to expose Estonians' ties to nature and seats covered with folk patterns from different regions of the country (Pawlusz and Polese 2017). These are strategies typical for nation branding, but since culture is one of the key sources of soft



power such endeavors may also contribute to strengthening the global appeal of respective countries.

Aviation-related soft power assets also include airshows—the events organized worldwide, during which aircrafts are exhibited (static exhibition) or/and pilots demonstrate their skills. The biggest of them are held in Le Bourget (France), Farnborough (UK), Dubai (UAE) and Singapore. According to Preston (2010), such events could also be regarded as aviation diplomacy. They attract aviation enthusiasts just as sports events attract sports enthusiasts. They can, therefore, be regarded as public diplomacy events in several ways, such as attracting visitors and facilitating people-to-people contacts. What is more, during such air shows, pilots and aerobatic teams from various countries present their skills—in a way similar to athletes competing in sports events oversea. Air forces of some countries have such teams, for example, Saudi Hawks from Saudi Arabia. During the opening of the air show in Gdynia (Poland) in 2019, the team flew near the beach presenting Polish and Saudi Arabia's flags made of smoke—a perfect way to signal international friendship and national flag of the team.

Aviation can thus indirectly fall within the cultural source of soft power. Still, the interdependence between aviation and soft power is centered mostly around being a tool rather than an asset, which connects with the category of public diplomacy. This link will be further discussed in the proceeding paragraphs.

Aviation diplomacy can be conceptualized both in reference to traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy. At first glance, it is more directly linked to the first of the two. After all, the most narrow approaches to aviation diplomacy limit it to the intergovernmental negotiations of bilateral air service agreements (Dobson 1993) or multilateral agreements on civil aviation (Dierikx 2008). Such negotiations are still held these days. For example, India and Brazil signed Air Service Agreement in 2011. It addressed such issues as the number of flight connections between both countries, the capacity of the aircrafts used in such operations, and opening the skies for all cargo operations (Pandit 2011). Such negotiations often seek to gain a competitive advantage for national airlines, for instance through securing favorable conditions within the international aviation system or acquiring the right to operate over certain territories or to certain airports. It was the case of Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki who supposedly attempted to use his visit to Japan to help LOT Polish Airlines receive slots at one of Tokyo's airports. According to the Polish Press Agency, Morawiecki requested Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe to intervene concerning an additional slot for LOT (Stus 2019). More successfully, Finnair, an airline with majority owned by Finland, enjoys convenient access to Asian airports owing to an agreement between Russian and Finnish

governments and an allowance to make 80 flights weekly over Siberia (Rosendahl 2017).

Governments may also have to engage in international negotiations concerning aviation on an ad hoc level. We could have observed it during the COVID-19 crisis. The spread of the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 in 2020 led to a global lockdown. Many countries decided to ban air connections, leaving their citizens in other countries, often without the possibility to return and creating the need to repatriate them. Considering the restrictions, repatriation had to be coordinated by foreign ministries and embassies (see Chaudhury 2020; Government of the United Kingdom 2020; Swajaya 2020). For obvious reasons these actions had to be pursued in cooperation with airlines, for example, the repatriation of Polish citizens was operated by state-owned LOT Polish Airlines (Polish Tourism Organisation 2020), revealing the usefulness of the multistakeholder diplomacy concept discussed earlier.

The aspect of aviation subjects as diplomatic actors also connects with traditional diplomacy, referring to the diplomatic processes in which subjects such as airlines or aviation organizations are engaged. As has been discussed earlier, actors such as IATA, ICAO, or airlines can pursue negotiations with other actors of international relations, including states.

Even though aviation is linked to traditional diplomacy, it is equally interconnected with public diplomacy. This link was visible already while discussing aviation and soft power. According to Nye (2008), public diplomacy is an instrument of mobilizing the resources that produce soft power to communicate with and attract the public of other countries. Subjects such as airlines can be regarded not only as means of attraction but in particular as instruments of drawing attention to a country. They increase visibility, which can be described as a 'door opener,' with initial insight into the country creating the desire to learn more and thus familiarize people with a country (Leonard and Small 2003). Thus, with the use of such assets as airlines countries can increase their global presence and send particular messages to the international public. This can be done, for example, through specific campaigns run by the airlines for the governments. For example, LOT Polish Airlines ran a campaign promoting 100 years of Polish independence, within which two aircrafts have been painted in national colors, whereas small symbols of the anniversary were painted on all others (*LOT świętuje sto lat niepodległości* 2018). Public diplomacy significance sometimes may also be attached to flight attendants, directly or indirectly. In the first case, an interesting initiative has been conducted by Israel. In 2011 Israeli Foreign Ministry, in cooperation with its flag air carrier El Al, decided to run a project within which selected pilots and flight attendants during the obligatory breaks between flights abroad would give lectures and engage in contacts with locals. According



to El Al, its employees were the ‘beautiful face of Israel reinforcing the identity of society and state’ (Medzini 2011). Airlines may also promote the culture of their country of origin more permanently, for example, by serving local food to their passengers. The indirect public diplomacy significance of flight attendants, on the other hand, connects with the international contacts on the people-to-people level, since their job specificity naturally requires contacts with people from many countries. This issue, however, appears to have lost some of its impetus since these days many airlines employ flight attendants of various nationalities.

The interconnection between aviation and public diplomacy is also visible on other levels. According to Pamment (2013), public diplomacy is the communication of international actor’s policy to citizens of foreign countries. It is based on the assumption that it is possible to affect relations between governments by engaging citizens whose opinions, values, activities, and interests might help to adjust another government’s attitude. Establishing air links between two countries appears to be a very clear example of such engagement. Creating an air connection between two estranged nations not only enables people-to-people contacts but can also send a message about the possibility of cooperation, despite possible political obstacles. Such symbolic actions by the governments have the obvious capacity of paving way for political rapprochement or building further proximity between nations.

Historically many situations could be interpreted this way. For example, during the Cold War, the US government was establishing direct flight connections with Cuba and the Soviet Union within its wider public diplomacy endeavors aimed to improve bilateral relations. If the US–USSR relations are considered, establishing an air connection was one of the provisions of the famous Cultural Agreement in 1958 (Molander 1991). More recently, there were several attempts to bring Venezuela and Arab countries closer together in a similar way. As a part of this initiative, Venezuelan state-owned airlines Conviasa began direct flights between Caracas and Damascus in March 2007 (Commins and Lesch 2014). A similar connection was to be launched in March 2020. It was believed to have little economic potential, but possible political significance (Bewicke 2020). Establishing air connections has also been an important element of Taiwan’s foreign policy. When a direct connection between Taipei and Tokyo was established in 2010, Taiwan’s President Ma Ying-jeou claimed that it was ‘indicative of the strong relationship between Taiwan and Japan.’ President also claimed that ‘launching direct flights between Taipei and other major Asian cities, such as Tokyo, Seoul, and Shanghai, has long been one of his major political platforms’ (Hsu 2010). Of course, in the contemporary world vast majority of air links are motivated by economic reasons and airlines’ pursuit to maximize their incomes. Governmental

agreements played a greater role in the past, particularly during the Cold War, but these days they may still foster the creation of air links, both to increase the competitive advantage of their national airlines and to reach political foreign policy goals.

An issue nation-state public diplomacy pursued with the use of aviation indirectly could also be observed during the recent COVID-19 crisis when international aid provided through air cargo became an important public diplomacy tool of some countries. Particular activity in this field can be associated with China. The assistance included sending medical products that were the most necessary in fighting the outbreak of COVID-19, as well as sending medical staff to particular countries. There were many aid recipients, for example as of March 31, spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared that his country has provided masks to 120 countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020a). China claimed to have helped other countries to reciprocate the assistance it received earlier and out of humanitarian considerations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020b). International medical aid was also provided by other countries, for example, Russia sent medical supplies and staff to such countries as Serbia, Italy, or the United States (Walker 2020). Such activities connect with public diplomacy independently. However, since the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic required air transport for such assistance, it was also partly connected with aviation. In the end, the assistance was welcomed by local authorities at the airports, with cargo aircrafts serving as the background during such ceremonies.

Aviation as a foreign policy tool may also have a darker side, aimed at estranging others. In this context, aviation diplomacy connects with the term ‘anti-diplomacy’ which according to some authors is also associated with public diplomacy (see Merlingen and Zenet 2003). Der Derian (1993) described anti-diplomacy as the ‘displacement and continuation of international conflict by other means.’ (p. 32) It is generally understood as the opposite of diplomacy (Cornago 2013). In the aviation context, it is exemplified by governments’ decisions to suspend air links between particular countries as a form of sanction. It was, for example, the case of relations between Russia and Georgia. After violent protests against a visit by Russian MP in Tbilisi in June 2019, Russia banned its airlines from bringing Russian citizens to Georgia. At the same time, parliament was to provide for the return of Russian citizens from Georgia, while travel agencies were recommended not to send Russian clients there. A direct objective of the decision was to put pressure on Georgia’s tourist industry (Roth 2019), whereas indirectly, it was part of the escalation of the mutual estrangement. An ultimate example refers to South Africa during the apartheid era and bans on cross-border aviation with its African neighbors. Between 1963 and 1990 airports,





airlines, and air space became part of the strategy of African countries against minority white-ruled South Africa. The prohibition of commercial airline flights was gradually lifted in the 1990s after the transition in South Africa (Pirie 2006). There were also softer attempts to impose sanctions on air links between particular countries, for example, American restrictions on Aeroflot flights to New York in response to the Afghanistan invasion, or Saudi Arabia's refusal of Concorde overflights in response to the showing of the film *The Death of a Princess* on British television (Jönsson 1981). Situations, when air links were suspended, were also resulting from one state's concerns over security, which were not met by another country—this was the case of, for example, relations between Israel and Turkey or Russia and Egypt, although this aspect does not have an ultimate diplomatic dimension.

Traditional and public forms of aviation diplomacy are present in various aspects of the tripartite framework in an uneven way. If aviation as a foreign policy tool is considered, it can take the form of both traditional and public diplomacy. When states pursue negotiations concerning aviation, it is an obvious example of traditional diplomacy. On the other hand, establishing an air link to communicate a will to improve bilateral relations is an example of public diplomacy. In turn, when aviation is used to improve the international image of a country it more directly refers to public diplomacy, at the same time coinciding with nation branding. Lastly, the diplomatic merits of aviation subjects in principle connect with traditional diplomacy. However, their diplomatic subjectivity can sometimes stem from states' public diplomacy goals. In such situations, they are regarded as external public diplomacy stakeholders.

## Concluding remarks

Civil aviation has not yet become an established research subject in diplomatic studies. Still, aviation diplomacy appears to be no different from other types of diplomatic engagement, such as economic diplomacy, citizen diplomacy, digital diplomacy, science diplomacy, or sports diplomacy. The diplomatic significance of aviation stems from the great popularity air travel has gained throughout previous decades. This article argued that aviation diplomacy deserves more attention from researchers of diplomacy, international relations, or political science.

Aviation diplomacy lacks a clear definition, and different authors tend to focus on different aspects of the term. As a scientific category, it coincides with traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy, covering such issues as interstate negotiations on aviation, using aviation as a means of international communication and shaping state image, and the diplomatic processes in which aviation subjects are engaged.

Review of the ways of understanding aviation diplomacy and the theoretical conceptualization of aviation in reference to the concepts of soft power and multistakeholder diplomacy allowed to propose a definition of the term. Accordingly, aviation diplomacy can be defined as all sort of diplomatic processes and structures pursued within the area of civil aviation. Apart from that, a tripartite analytical framework has been offered. Its first aspect assumed aviation as a foreign policy tool. Accordingly, governments may employ civil aviation to foster their goals, such as the shaping of interstate relations, or assisting their national airlines in increasing their competitiveness. The second aspect assumed that aviation may be a useful means of promoting the state's international image, for example, through the prestige of national airlines. These two aspects considered civil aviation as a location for diplomatic endeavors. The third aspect focused on aviation subjects, such as international aviation organizations or airlines, which are capable of engaging in negotiations, mediation, and representation with other diplomatic actors, including states and sub-state entities.

The intention of writing this article was to initiate a wider scientific discourse on aviation diplomacy as a subject of research. It is not an entirely new area, and several publications have appeared, but the state of literature is scarce. This situation offers a lot of perspectives for future research, both theoretical and empirical, and the theoretical framework proposed in this article could be used as a starting point.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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