

DIPLOMACY IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

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The international system is changing and no one knows what it will look like when equilibrium is finally reached, perhaps decades from now. Already, nation-states find it necessary to share power with regional or global organizations. Adversarial relations between governments and major economic units have existed for a long time. Now, the relationship takes the form of power-sharing in order to maximize benefits to each side.

Nationalism is still a potent force, and is likely to remain so. But its appearance on the international stage draws a strong response from other nations and international organizations. The effect is to reduce the benefits that the practitioners of aggressive nationalism might expect to receive from a globalized economy were they to curb their nationalistic ambitions. An anti-war effect exercised by the impossibility of one nation enriching itself by seizing assets of another was predicted on the eve of World War I.¹ Is anything different in our time? Judging by Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine, evidently not. So the power-seeking remnants of an earlier age will likely be a part of the international scene for a long time to come and aggressive use of military force will remain a threat to peace and security.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

This points to the need to create a new “global commons,” in the sense that a common response to global challenges is essential to avoid catastrophe for the human race. The structures created at the end of World War II and during the Cold War remain useful in bolstering world order. But they were mainly Western structures. Now a regime-building process is underway in Asia and it already has produced organizations that can be used either to encourage or to thwart the creation of a true global commons. Regional institutions with real power are probably an improvement over unbridled nationalism. But a world of competing regional communities, each dominated by a single hegemon, would not necessarily be more peaceful than is the current system.

Nor would such a world deal more effectively with global existential threats to humanity than the current system. Climate change, water scarcity, nuclear devastation, and pandemics ultimately require a global response. Regional groupings, if linked in a cooperative fashion, could manage these existential threats, and that, perhaps, should be the near-term goal of order-building diplomacy. A global society with real clout is not likely to emerge for decades.

Another feature that defines contemporary international relations shows how inadequate the word “international” really is in conceptualizing what is happening to the system. In contrast to the state-centered system created by a top-down wielding of power by national governments, the emerging global system contains a large people-to-people element that wields power across state boundaries.

The empowerment of citizens through the ability to communicate and acquire information instantaneously has enormous potential for good or ill. Crowd-sourcing can provide answers to complex questions and monitor the implementation of treaties by national governments. The ability to draw together hundreds or thousands of people in a common reaction to events is a powerful

tool. Whether this ability is exercised in a constructive manner depends on factors that transcend technology. It will clearly be a world very different from that in which statecraft has operated for centuries, a world truly in systemic transition, with elements of the old and new contending in a way that promotes complexity rather than simplicity.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE AND THE PRESIDENT IN AMERICAN STATECRAFT

For this section, I interviewed George P. Shultz at the Hoover Institution. Secretary of state for six years under President Ronald Reagan, he reflected on the relations between the president and the secretary of state in the conduct of foreign policy.

Secretary Shultz said the first rule he followed was to be clear about who was elected and who was not. He always emphasized that he did not have a policy: US foreign policy was the president's policy. Key to their relationship was trust. The president knew that he could rely on his secretary of state for honest advice and careful implementation of the president's foreign policy. Shultz, and those he dealt with, came to understand that Reagan's word was meticulously upheld by the president and that he was consistent in his dealings. Soviet leaders learned that they could deal with President Reagan. He and Shultz shared the view that George Kennan, author of the containment strategy, had espoused: over time, the Soviet Union would change, given a strong and consistent American policy of containment. The status quo, nurtured by *détente*, need not be the preferred US long-term objective.

Shultz said that strategic thinking was encouraged in the Reagan administration through twice-weekly private meetings with the president in which they avoided decision-making and looked over the horizon at issues that needed more thought. Shultz also set aside time for himself, to ponder American strategic objectives and assess whether the United States had achieved those.

As regards principles of statecraft, Shultz said, first, that strength and diplomacy must go hand-in-hand. Strength not used to secure an objective loses its meaning. Diplomacy without strength behind it is feckless.

A second cardinal principle was that a global diplomacy was essential. The United States needs a global involvement all the time. In following those precepts, Shultz found it necessary to develop a relationship of trust and confidence with leaders in all parts of the world. Only in that way could frank conversations be conducted that would point to solutions to issues as they arose.

Speaking of governance in the area of external relations, Shultz spoke of alternative ways of analyzing issues and making decisions. The one he thought produced better decisions is where presidents rely on cabinet officers and senior sub-cabinet officials for advice and the National Security staff serves the principals of the National Security Council. The alternative of relying primarily on White House staff deprives the president of the best advice available from the major departments and their career personnel. It results in less consultation with the cabinet and the departments and limits the ability of presidents to receive broadly based advice on key issues.

Shultz also spoke of the need for spending time with members of Congress. A good reason for this is that they have worthwhile ideas. Another is that ratification of treaties goes more smoothly if senators have been involved and understand the issues. Shultz also observed that it is hard to build an A-team in government when the confirmation process has become so elaborate and unpredictable.

THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE AS AN INSTITUTION

To grasp the enormous systemic changes that have occurred since the rise of the United States as a global superpower at the end of World War II, consider the recommendations of the Hoover Commission on the conduct of foreign affairs published in 1949.²

The commission, chaired by former president Herbert Hoover, was established by Congress to review the operations of the executive branch and make recommendations for improvement of its organization. President Truman sent a special message to Congress on Reorganization of the State Department on March 4, 1949.³ He asked for four more assistant secretary of state positions “to permit the Department to organize its principal activities on a geographic basis.” Truman also stressed the importance “strongly recommended by the Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, *of clarifying the lines of responsibility and authority within the Executive Branch.*”

In recent years conventional wisdom has been that instead of vesting responsibility for important diplomatic activities in the State Department’s line bureaus, special offices or “czars” should be created. If one looked at the State Department’s telephone directory in 2015, one could find at least twenty such special offices.⁴ This practice does not clarify the lines of responsibility and authority within the executive branch. Moreover, the idea of concentrating the principal activities of the State Department in its major bureaus, as advocated by the Hoover Commission, is undermined by peeling off important projects and handing them to persons or offices that typically are ad hoc and temporary. The expertise necessary for the successful conduct of diplomacy can only be developed by a sustained effort to recruit, train, and consciously assign personnel to a succession of increasingly complex and responsible positions.

Obviously, the challenges the United States now faces are very different from those the Hoover Commission saw in the aftermath of World War II. But in at least one way, there are similarities. The Hoover Commission reported:

The State Department, since the war, has at all levels been too much concerned with “details” and not enough with “policy.” The Secretary-Under Secretary top command is

overburdened by being drawn down into participation in too many daily decisions with the consequence that the entire Department lives day-to-day, and policies tend to be determined in terms of short-range decisions.

The first step in considering the reorganization of the State Department in the second decade of the twenty-first century should be to identify priority challenges. Bearing in mind that the international system today consists of remnants of the old and emerging features of the new, approaches to policy and application of resources will necessarily be complex.

CHALLENGES OLD AND NEW

This complexity is underscored by several issues that are features of a new global system:

- The long-standing state system for bringing order to the world is under pressure globally.
- The security and economic commons built up over several decades in the twentieth century is at risk everywhere and in many places no longer exists.
- The process of governance is changing rapidly and the advance of technology underlying this development suggests that this pressure will only intensify with time.
- Private groups empowered by technology can damage the coherence needed for effective governance.

Challenges that have been episodically present in the state system for centuries now appear simultaneously in large areas of the globe:

- State borders are being challenged in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.
- The dispersion of sovereignty away from states has left national governments less able to be the main engines of action in the international system.

- Horizontal ideological solidarity encouraged by the communications revolution presents a threat to the border-defined states system.
- The re-entry of religious extremism into interstate relations threatens states and their ability to govern over diversity.

The first category of issues—new challenges that cannot be handled well by reliance only on conventional diplomacy—requires rethinking of the American agenda and how governance should adjust to manage the new environment. The second category—familiar challenges to the states system and the reason that system was created in the first place—requires a change in the way Washington conducts its international business.

A third category of challenge is the threat to humanity posed by climate change, water scarcity, nuclear weapons, and pandemics. The challenge that existential threats like these pose is whether states can cooperate in a sustained fashion to roll back or contain the threats. By moving rapidly to create a coalition of nations dedicated to meeting existential threats, the states system will position itself to better meet the exigencies of an emerging global system in which individual states are not, and cannot be, the supreme actors. This consideration is extremely important for the future development of structures of governance.

REGIONAL DIPLOMACY

Regional diplomacy is becoming a higher priority for statecraft than it has been in the past. This is so not only for economic and security reasons, the traditional motivators of regional cooperation, but also because some existential threats require at least regional cooperation, if not global cooperation. For example, climate change will produce water shortages in some parts of the world and regional cooperation can help to deal with this. Climate change will also generate migrations away from equatorial regions toward more hospitable climes. This flow of migrants will

dwarf what has recently been seen in Europe and the Middle East. Again, if states can find a way to cooperate on a regional basis in dealing with this challenge, the states system will be strengthened. If not, populations will unite to erase borders and global chaos will prevail until some new form of governance can be devised.

EXECUTIVE-LEGISLATIVE RELATIONS

The complexity of these issues requires constant, timely consultation between the executive branch and the Congress. Many of the primary issues today have a large domestic component. The Hoover Commission saw the need for close consultation but the separation of powers was more pronounced and unbridgeable in the 1940s than it can be today. Even so, the commission recognized a new role for Congress. Here is what it said:

The constitutional doctrine of separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches results in a duality of authority over foreign affairs which complicates the machinery of Government in that area, especially in contrast with the machinery of countries operating under the parliamentary system of government. . . .

Recent events have changed the situation and made the Congress a much more significant and regular participant in foreign affairs. As a consequence, the solutions of today's problems require joint legislative-executive cooperation on a scale heretofore unknown in American history. . . .

The Constitution is not at all precise in its allocation of foreign affairs powers between the two branches.

Given the present constitutional framework and the attitude of the legislative branch toward foreign affairs, the situation calls for mutual cooperation and restraint. The executive branch must appreciate the role of the Congress and the propriety of its participation in foreign affairs

where legislative decisions are required. Similarly, the Congress should appreciate that leadership in the conduct of foreign affairs can come only from the executive side of the Government and that the Congress should not attempt to participate in executive decisions in the international field.

Today's global diplomacy makes joint executive-legislative policy-making a necessity in several fields: climate, energy, and humanitarian interventions, among them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE

What do the current and likely future challenges to the well-being of the United States mean for the State Department? These challenges call for a greater emphasis on policy planning and the conduct of diplomacy in the following areas:

1. Managing challenges posed by the arrival of the leading edge of a new global system.
2. Creating global and regional regimes necessary to deal with a set of existential threats to humanity.
3. Responding to broad threats to the states system derived from traditional challenges, such as a desire to erase borders or enlarge the scope of religious or secular ideologies in the governance of states and eventually the system as a whole.

This introduction of new priorities or a re-ordering of priorities does not require a wholesale reorganization of the State Department. Most of the traditional business of the State Department should proceed with little change, except for a heightened awareness on the part of policymakers and those who practice diplomacy of the broader context in which they are operating.

Relations between the major world powers will still require

careful tending. Security threats arising from military programs or operations will have to be confronted. Economic interests will require support. The human dimension will remain an important factor determining the quality of the relationship. But changes are required in the American agenda with other major powers. The emphasis should be on:

- More conversations about ground rules as features of a new global system become more apparent.
- Creation of a set of new or revised global commons.
- Adjustments in the way the states system has worked to confront, for example, new modes of power-sharing between national governments and private groups and threats to diversity posed by the introduction of violent private groups with doctrinaire ideologies into the international system of states.

THE PRACTICE OF DIPLOMACY

Crisis management, another form of diplomacy frequently practiced by the State Department, will remain necessary with large and small states alike. Two other forms of policymaking and diplomacy will have to be elevated significantly in the State Department: “preventive” and “order-building” diplomacy.⁵

Preventive diplomacy is defined by the United Nations as: “Diplomatic action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflict and to limit the spread of conflicts when they occur.”⁶

Order-building diplomacy means the step-by-step creation of norms, rules, and institutions among states, aimed at building a lasting order based on common values. Joining with other nations in pursuit of some common goal is perhaps the most familiar example of the building-block approach to creating a stable international order.

In a time of transition and uncertainty, American diplomacy

must improve its capacity to head off conflicts while building the framework for global order. These are not tasks that should be bundled into a new bureau or special office. Each geographic bureau in the State Department has the capacity to identify and foresee the likely course of conflicts. Solutions to existential threats to humanity and ideas about adapting to the new characteristics of global relations are readily available in many corners of the department. What seems to be missing is a mechanism for senior officials to deal with the important, instead of the merely urgent. This is probably more a matter of mindset than of organization.

This kind of exploration of mega-trends and the American response to them is conducted effectively by the National Intelligence Council (NIC) and by private groups like the International Crisis Group. Institutionalized meetings of senior State Department officials with the NIC or, on occasion, with private organizations would strengthen the State Department's capacity for preventive and order-building diplomacy.

STAFFING THE STATE DEPARTMENT

The Foreign Service of the United States is supposed to be a corps of professional diplomats capable of carrying out the nation's foreign policies both at home and abroad. The civil service provides a permanent staff for the State Department which allows it to be the repository of a depth of expertise in certain areas that Foreign Service officers sacrifice by their frequent rotation from post to post. In an important study released on April 1, 2015, entitled "American Diplomacy at Risk," several senior American retired diplomats presented their findings regarding the profession of diplomacy in the United States.⁷ The report persuasively argues that the intention of the Foreign Service Act of 1980 to create a professional corps of top-notch diplomats has been undermined by a failure to encourage this goal in practice. This has led to the de-professionalization of America's diplomatic corps. The report

contains several recommendations regarding the relationships between the Foreign Service and the civil service which deserve careful attention and action by this and future administrations.

One of the most important issues relates to current personnel policy. Writing in the *Foreign Service Journal* of January/February 2016, Ambassador Thomas Boyatt spelled out the differences in personnel practices between the early 1980s and the present time:

Then, only one of the regional assistant secretaries was a political appointee and all deputies were career officers. Ninety-nine percent of the officer-level positions in the regional bureaus were FSOs, as were more than fifty percent of the functional bureau positions. There were perhaps two special representatives or ambassadors at large.

Today, political appointees at the assistant secretary level and above outnumber career officers, and political deputy assistant secretaries approach thirty percent.

Obviously, the goal of endowing the nation with a top-notch corps of professional diplomats is not possible to achieve under these circumstances. Future administrations will have to reverse these personnel policies or accept a second-rate diplomatic establishment that will not match the diplomatic corps of other advanced nations such as the United Kingdom.

The first approach to policy formation has to be diagnosing a problem properly so that policymakers are addressing real issues rather than fanciful ones. The late Stanford professor Alexander George identified this deficit in American foreign policy machinery over twenty years ago, but the deficit remains with us today.⁸ He wrote that “in thinking about the kind of policy-relevant knowledge that needs to be developed we should give more attention to its contribution to the diagnosis of problem situations than to its ability to prescribe sound choices of policy.” What he was talking about can be summed up in his remark

about President Kennedy's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis: "As Llewellyn Thompson's contribution during the Cuban missile crisis indicates, area experts and diplomats have a particularly critical contribution to make to the development of sophisticated images of adversaries."

Of course, area expertise can be acquired through many years of overseas postings. In years past, it could be acquired through studies at universities. That source of knowledge of foreign societies and their leadership is less available now. The problem is described in an article written by Charles King in a recent edition of *Foreign Affairs*.⁹ As he puts it:

Educational institutions and the disciplines they preserve are retreating from the task of cultivating men and women who are comfortable moving around the globe, both literally and figuratively. Government agencies, in turn, are reducing their overall support and narrowing to fields deemed relevant to U.S. national security—and even to specific research topics within them.¹⁰

THE EDUCATION OF DIPLOMATS

The situation cries out for some method of building area expertise within the Department of State. For the first time in its history, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office has established a diplomatic academy. The British foreign minister at the time of the announcement, William Hague, told the House of Commons that his vision was:

. . . a Foreign Office that is an international center of ideas and expertise; that leads foreign policy thinking across government; that is recognized as the best diplomatic service in the world; and that is able to defend our country's interests in an unpredictable and competitive international landscape for the long term.¹¹

That statement could also become the goal for the George P. Shultz National Foreign Affairs Training Center (NFATC). The director of the British diplomatic academy, Jon Davies, visited the center in November 2014. He later remarked that the British had drawn heavily on the experiences of the center and envied the resources secured for it.¹²

In the introduction to “American Diplomacy at Risk,” the authors raise some fundamental criticisms about today’s Department of State:

- American diplomacy is increasingly politicized, reversing a century-long effort to create a merit-based system of high professionalism.
- The State Department and the Foreign Service have weakened the capacity for diplomacy by failing to pay sufficient attention to professional education and assignments that develop America’s future leaders.

Recommendation 19 of the report envisages “the establishment of the National Diplomatic University at the National Foreign Affairs Training Center.” Explaining the purpose of this, the authors of the report simply said it “would manage and deliver the professional education needed to prepare FSOs and staff to meet the challenges of 21st century diplomacy.”

Thomas A. Shannon Jr., under secretary for political affairs, has urged that scholars and diplomats cultivate a close working relationship.¹³ The basic purpose would be “to create a public policy intellectual setting where we can benefit mutually from our work. We need to create a setting where we can build a narrative and purpose to describe and inform our long diplomacy.”

Ambassador Shannon points out that in academia there has been “a decline in the ability to analyze and synthesize information across disciplines and then to build a narrative that explains political, economic, and social phenomena.”

He obviously hopes that this deficiency can be overcome through the process of systematically organizing studies involving scholars and diplomats. To launch a program like this he suggests a gathering convened by the secretary of state “to bring together presidents of leading universities, respected academics, and influential opinion makers to set an agenda for cooperation and create the mechanisms necessary to promote collaborations.”

This idea certainly deserves serious consideration, yet I wonder whether the gap between scholar and diplomat can be bridged in this fashion. I suspect that an institution will have to be created that becomes a model for the kind of policy analysis that Shannon rightly says is so badly needed in a time of transition.

Charles A. Ray, a retired FSO, has written a thoughtful article in the same issue of *The Foreign Service Journal* in which the establishment of a British diplomatic academy was reported. One of Ray’s conclusions was that “a system of professional education” should be established for the Foreign Service. He suggested that it could be either at the Foreign Service Institute or through a cooperative agreement with universities in the Washington area.

My own conclusion is that the NFATC should become the core of what Ray calls “a system of professional education.” It is not that now. As Ray observes, “We in the Foreign Service are lucky to get much beyond language and tradecraft training.”

The next administration should make it a priority to raise the stature of the NFATC in area studies to the equivalent of a first-class American university. In a 2014 report of a group set up by the American Foreign Service Association, a recommendation was offered that the Foreign Service Institute should become an accredited degree-granting institution as soon as practicable, citing master’s degrees as the place to begin, possibly in collaboration with universities. This goal should certainly be endorsed by a future administration as an early step in reinventing the Shultz National Foreign Affairs Training Center.