Meditations on the future of old diplomacy, the nature of new diplomacy, and the fate of the world’s complex conversations

BY JEREMI SURI

HOW DO WE TALK TO ONE ANOTHER?

Scanning the course catalogues of the major universities around the world, one finds very few classes on diplomacy. Every serious post-secondary academy offers extensive training in biology, chemistry, statistics and, of course, economics. Literature, politics, history and philosophy also get much attention – especially in institutions that emphasize the ‘liberal arts.’ What about diplomacy? Why does the word appear so infrequently in educational settings?

Diplomacy, of course, is not a technical science. Nor is it a ‘liberal arts’ discipline, defined by a deep immersion in central questions of human meaning. Although it draws on knowledge of science and the liberal arts, diplomacy is a process, a method, a mode of behaviour. It involves the nurturing of relationships with diverse and often antagonistic partners. As writers from Machiavelli to Kissinger have explained, the diplomat is imbued with patriotism, but he or she is not a policy-maker, an ideologue or even a politician. The diplomat facilitates, connects and opens options beyond war for the adjudication of conflict. The diplomat is a talker and a reporter, a negotiator and a friend of many who are not friends among themselves.

The work of diplomacy in the 21st century is increasingly difficult. There are more international actors than ever before. Their distance and diversity make it almost impossible for any individual to forge relationships with more than a fraction of the powerful political figures across the globe. In addition, new communications technologies have made it almost impossible to manage discussions with discretion. If anything, Wikileaks has shown that even the most sensitive documents are subject to mass distribution through the Internet. Diplomats have lost their most powerful weapon: the control of information.

In addition, diplomacy is imperilled by the hyper-politicization of foreign policy. Under the microscope of the modern media, and subjected to immediate editorial comment, diplomats are discouraged from taking risks. The political costs of a bad gamble – overtures to an adversary or negotiations to end a conflict – are simply too great. Instead, diplomats are most secure in our modern world when they join the chorus of politicians who articulate simple principles, shun ‘evil’ enemies, and flex their muscles when threatened. Due in part to the

Jeremi Suri is the E. Gordon Fox Professor of History, the Director of the European Union Center of Excellence, and the Director of the Grand Strategy Program at the University of Wisconsin.

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Cold War, diplomats have largely lost their ability to break through the divisions of modern society. In place of 18th century France’s apolitical diplomat extraordinaire, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, the 21st century is dominated by ideologues like John Bolton and Dominique de Villepin. Shouts and recriminations crowd out dialogue more widely than ever before, and calm and sustained discussion is much too rare.

Many diplomats are overwhelmed – like all of us – by constant bursts of electronic communica-

tions. Emails, text messages and tweets encourage more information exchange, but they crowd out the necessary time for relaxed, face-to-face conversa-
tions – the exploration of complicated ideas and intensive interpersonal relationship building. Diplomacy implies the wisdom of patience, thought and experience. Our electronic, hyper-speed world shrinks the space for these qualities. Contempo-
ary diplomats suffer from the tyranny of the most pressing minutiae.

This is why the absence of diplomacy in the university curriculum is so striking. If all of the pres-
sures of modern society push against the big picture strategy relationship-building and negotiation that are integral to policy success, then universities have a vital educational vacuum to fill. Just as we teach mathematics and literature because they are necessary – but not organic – to the maturation of a citizen outside of the classroom, we should teach diplomacy because it too is necessary – but not organic – to contemporary circumstances. We do not talk to one another effectively as citizens, professionals and leaders because we have not learned how to foster that dialogue in a culture that is already highly connected.

Modern education – in the classroom and in society – is devoted to individualistic, competitive and above all, narcissistic. We are taught to get ahead, not to work together. We are told to find successful solu-
tions, not to build open-ended relationships. We are encouraged to enrich ourselves, not to broaden our communities. Modern education, in other words, is fundamentally unpedagogical. No wonder diplomacy and diplomats have little voice in the curriculum.

The ‘unlearning’ of diplomacy is particularly striking in the American experience. This is not a recent phenomenon. The historical development of American nationalism and foreign policy has, with not-

able exceptions, overvalued force and mission. It has simultaneously undervalued compromise and negotiation as tools of diplomacy in general. The spread of American influence around the globe has, unfo-
tunately, often meant the spread of anti-diplomatic rhetoric, because it has seemed to contradict the ideology of freedom, an ideology that the US has in abundance. The US is an exceptional power, able to dispatch to the major capitals abroad with very limited powers, and without a large permanent bureaucracy to support its presence and, without public ac-
tountability – to address global threats. Roosevelt's efforts to organize a cooperative post-war order through the great power summits of WW2 and institutionalize the UN served this purpose. At the infamous Yalta meeting of February 1945, Roosevelt entered difficult secret negotiations with Soviet General Secretary Josef Stalin for the division of war-devastated Europe into Western capitalist and Eastern communist spheres – even as he publicly espoused a world free from communist repression. The reality was that Russian ideals and realities were evident to the US President. He believed that he had to continue his espousal of an American world order, while he accepted the necessity of Soviet power on the Bolshevik territories.

Roosevelt was a great public promoter, and also a skilled back-room diplomat. He charmed citi-
zens, and he wooed foreign statesmen. He dragged Americans into murky diplomatic waters amid the unprecedented challenges of a global war. He convinced us above all – to suspend our aversion to diplomacy: to accept flexible negotiations – with the constant buzz of electronic communica-

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phone, email, and then Twitter – further reduced the time that diplomats need to spend as mediators between distant societies. The Cold War and its immediate aftermath marked the decline of diplomacy from a valued and broad role in the American policy community.

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As Americans avoided negotia-

tions in aristocratic courts, they made strong calls for what constituted a diplomatic revolution: ‘open doors’ for trade, ‘open covenants’ for relations between societies, and ‘open govern-
mament’ in general. President Woodrow Wilson gave this argument its most eloquent articulation when he demanded, in his January 1918 ‘Fourteen Points’ speech: ‘that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly fit so that the aspiration to peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice, and to secure the good of the peoples of the world as against force and strong-

aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect citizens outside of the classroom, we should teach diplomacy because it too is necessary – but not organic – to the maturation of a citizen outside of the classroom, we should teach diplomacy because it too is necessary – but not organic – to contemporary circumstances. We do not talk to one another effectively as citizens, professionals and leaders because we have not learned how to foster that dialogue in a culture that is already highly connected.

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development, counterinsurgency and targeted kill-
ing (as with the recent assassination of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan). At the same time, the US has a grossly inferior diplomatic corps – underfunded, minimally trained, and frequently outmatched by more seasoned practitioners from Western Europe, East Asia, and other regions. Americans would never think of promoting a big political donor to battlefield command, but they commonly place campaign contributors in ambassadorships to foreign lands. When it comes to resources, Americans value war-fighting capabilities far above diplomacy. When it comes to global problem-solving, Americans favour force over negotiation.

This has to change. Beginning at home, Americans must find new ways to emphasize creative negotiations, bridge building, as well as open-ended deliberations with adversaries. During the Cold War and the decade after its conclusion, Americans could often get their way through sheer domination. These days are long gone – if they ever really existed. The recent wars in the Middle East, the challenges in East Asia, and the rise of new powers in Europe and Latin America highlight the limits of American dominance. As a very strong nation among other powerful coun-
tries, the US must learn to accept productive political outcomes that are short of the nation’s preferences. The US must learn to practice diplomacy rather than domination. It must learn – above all – to talk with more people, and with more discretion. American power has become more deliberative than ever be-
fore. Young American citizens, sitting in countless classrooms, must become better-skilled diplomats than their predecessors.

It is time to insert dip-

macy into a mainstream Western culture that is excess-
viously oppositional and militai-
ristic – especially in the US. This process should begin where this article began – with a concerted focus on education. At a time of declining budgets and pervasive programme-
cutting, we needed investment on preparing our brightest young people to become diplomats. This involves more courses – taught by scholars and former practitioners – on the topic. It involves more close study of past diplomats in diverse societ-
ies – how they acted, what they did, and what they can teach us for today. It involves deeper language study – beginning early in a student’s academic career. Most of all, a diplomatic renaissance will require sustained efforts to recruit, train and re-
ward the brightest young minds with career paths that involve cross-national compromise – not just competition and consumption.

That will be very hard, but it can be done, and with some short-term results. Universities around the world are grappling with revenue shortfalls and challenges to their relevance. Partnerships between governments, businesses, foundations and post-secondary institutions to create diplomatic ‘centres of excellence’ on campuses would likely receive widespread support. Imagine a prolifera-
tion of programmes that engage top students in serious discussions of diplomacy as a historical, contemporary, and indeed career subject. Imagine an expansion in the mentoring opportunities for students looking to learn life skills from a successful government or business negotiator. Imagine the creation of new internships and fellowship opportunities for a large group of recent graduates committed to public service.

Some of these things are already done – on a small scale – in many societies. The point is not to reinvent the wheel, but rather to increase the scale and scope of these programmes for the sake of building needed diplomatic capacity, and for bringing diplomacy into mainstream culture. Young people are certainly the place to start. They are uniquely open to intellectual transformation. They also set the tone for public discussions in a world that increasingly valorizes youthful consumers and bodies. If our youngest citizens make diplomacy cool, it will immediately gain new traction in society – especially through the social media that connect people more than ever before.

What will cool young diplomats-in-training do? Given some limited opportunities, they will build cooperative relationships across societies, political parties and cultures. Diplomacy is all about relation-
ship-building. They will also provide assistance for cases where military force is necessary – helping to calibrate power to the particularities of people and place. Diplomacy is all about adjustment to cir-
cumstances. Given some attention from politicians, young diplomats-in-training will push back against the public search for simple solutions. Diplomacy is about managing complexity. Most significantly, young diplomats-in-training will invest in a new ethic of building a better world – step-by-step – with diverse partners. Diplomacy is all about investing in ourselves as a human civilization. We need deeper, sustained relations among peoples across societies.

Twenty-first century diplomats will be the match-
makers who facilitate global marriages of equals and unequals, long-term friends and frequent foes.

Diplomacy costs money. Frequent focused efforts. It demands patience. It is not, however, out of reach in our troubled world. We know where to begin, and we have the resources – particularly in the US, Canada, and Western Europe. We need to bring diplomacy into classrooms, into the professions, and into the public square – in its traditional and virtual manifestations. We need to give diplomacy a chance.