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?

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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

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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 circulate more widely than ever before; calm and sustained discussion is much too rare.

Many diplomats are overwhelmed – like all of us – with the constant buzz of electronic communications. Emails, text messages and tweets encourage more information exchange, but they crowd out the necessary time for relaxed, face-to-face conversation, sustained 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. Contemporary diplomats suffer from the tyranny of the most pressing minutiae.

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This is why the absence of diplomacy in the university curriculum is so striking. If all of the pressures 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. If anything, we have systematically taught ourselves to do otherwise.

Modern education – in the classroom and in society at large – is individualistic, competitive and, above all, narcissistic. We are taught to get ahead, not to work together. We are told to find successful solutions, not to build open-ended relationships. We are encouraged to enrich ourselves, not to broaden our communities. Modern education, in other words, is fundamentally undiplomatic. 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 democracy and foreign policy has, with notable exceptions, overvalued force and mission. It has simultaneously undervalued compromise and negotiation – and diplomacy in general. The spread of American influence around the globe has, unfortunately, often meant the spread of anti-diplomatic thinking. The innovation entrepreneurship of the 'New World' has not included much sophisticated consensus-building across conflicting points of view.

Americans have never liked diplomacy. The early leaders of the republic viewed the world of court negotiations as an aristocratic holdover from a decaying age – a vestige of monarchical authority, where the minions of hereditary rulers exchanged territories without attention to the interests of the ruled. Nineteenth century Americans refused to create a permanent core of specially trained ambassadors. They relied on temporary ministers dispatched to the major capitals abroad with very limited powers, and without a large permanent bureaucracy to support their activities. As late as the Civil War, American ministers lacked ambassadorial standing abroad, and they had few connections in Washington D.C. If they were lucky, the Secretary of State read some of their letters.

The paradox of American foreign policy is that, although it involved very little sustained discussion with foreign representatives, it encouraged more public talk than any of its counterparts. As Americans avoided negotiations 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 government' 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 that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest."

The chattering diplomats of tradition were Wilson's adversaries. The newly empowered peoples of modern nation-states were the focus of Wilson's attention. Democratic citizens – not aristocratic ambassadors – would forge agreements on common principles for trade and governance. Democratic citizens would affirm peace and freedom. Democratic citizens would reject war and empire. This was the Wilsonian appeal to global public opinion, rather than traditional diplomatic practice. Wilsonian rhetoric about freedom and democracy reinforced an American penchant for promotion above discretion, and for principle above compromise. American political ideals created a strong prejudice against the moral complexities of diplomatic practice.

WW2 set American policy in a new direction – at least temporarily. Fighting alongside allies that included the British Empire, Stalinist Russia and Nationalist China, Americans confronted the constraints of their principled aversion to diplomacy. No one could manage a multinational alliance primarily through the promotion of principle. President Franklin Roosevelt – a 'halfway Wilsonian,' in the words of one historian – merged the idealistic promotion of America's 'Four Freedoms' (freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear) with a realist emphasis on empowering 'Four Policemen' (the US and its allies) to protect international security. The Soviets and the Americans, in particular, would have to work together – often in secrecy, and without public accountability – to address global threats. Roosevelt's efforts to organize a cooperative post-war order through the great power summits of WW2 and institutions like the UN served this purpose. At the infamous Yalta meeting of February 1945, Roosevelt entered difficult secret negotiations with Soviet General-Secretary Joseph 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 contradiction between ideals and realities was 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 borderlands.

Roosevelt was a great public promoter, and also a skilled back-room diplomat. He charmed citizens, and he wooed foreign statesmen. He dragged Americans into murky diplomatic waters amid the unprecedented challenges of a global war. He convinced Americans – above all – to suspend their aversion to diplomacy: to accept flexible negotiations for 'lesser evils,' rather than the rigid promotion of desired outcomes. The war 'emergency' made this possible, but it was always a struggle against strong voices – Republican and Democrat – for idealistic purity at home. Roosevelt understood his domestic opposition better than anyone, and he consistently maneuvered, bullied and even lied to keep his critics off balance. He recognized that American diplomacy had a very precarious base.

Roosevelt's successors lacked his skills and the circumstances to support diplomacy within a polity generally opposed to its practice. The threat of communist expansion encouraged Americans to invest in international applications of their power, but the communist threat also discouraged compromise, negotiation and flexibility. The Cold War was built on the backs of bloated military (and nuclear) forces. The Cold War was both a hindrance to diplomacy, and a sign of its failure.

American citizens felt empowered by their victory in WW2 to demand a realization of their long-held hopes for global change. They simultaneously felt imperilled by a post-war Soviet regime and a communist ideology that they had to isolate and destroy. Utopian visions and existential threats went hand-in-hand. Together, they made diplomacy seem unnecessary and dangerous, outdated and cowardly.

Most of all, Americans believed that the compromises, negotiations and half-measures that preceded WW2 in Europe and Asia had only strengthened their adversaries and weakened their allies. 'Appeasement' became a dirty word because the fascists had used negotiations to further their violent aims. 'Containment' – famously espoused by George Kennan in his February 1946 "Long Telegram" – became the term of choice because it promised to prevent the enemy from slicing away at American advantages. Instead of risking the loss of strength at the negotiating table, the US would assert its predominance and push back without giving-in. 'Peace through strength' seemed the safest route to policy-making. This approach encouraged a strong military, lucrative investments in the national economy, and an active programme of covert operations; but it discouraged diplomacy. Negotiations appeared to be a sign of weakness. The newly created US Department of Defense in 1947 dwarfed the US State Department, despite America's greatly expanded global political presence.

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The Cold War encouraged Americans to promote their way of life abroad, and to disdain alternatives. There was little space for 'neutrality,' 'non-alignment' or other compromises. Nuclear weapons, large modernization projects and compelling public rhetoric became the currencies of power. Diplomats remained necessary, but not respected or empowered in any serious way. Instantaneous communications between capitals – by cable, telephone, email, and then Twitter – further reduced the importance of diplomats as on-the-ground mediators between distant societies. The Cold War and its immediate aftermath marked the decline of diplomacy from its already low esteem in the American policy community.

The historical degrading of diplomacy – especially in the US – is the point of departure for understanding our contemporary world. Since the dawn of the Cold War, Americans and many of their foreign counterparts have practiced more and more promotion, and less and less diplomacy. They have sought clarity and victory in the face of serious challenges, rather than the compromise and coexistence that made Franklin Roosevelt such a skilled politician.

The American turn away from diplomacy is most clearly manifested in the composition of the US's global foreign policy machinery. America has the world's most sophisticated and ubiquitous military – present in every corner of the globe, and performing missions from border protection to rural

development, counterinsurgency and targeted killings (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 overmatched 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.

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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. Those 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 countries, 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 before. Young American citizens, sitting in countless classrooms, must become better-skilled diplomats than their predecessors.

The time has come to insert diplomacy into a mainstream Western culture that is excessively oppositional and militaristic – 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 need focussed 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 societies – 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 reward 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 proliferation 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 relationship-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 circumstances. 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 matchmakers who facilitate global marriages of equals and unequals, long-term friends and frequent foes.

Diplomacy costs money. It requires focussed 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. | GB

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