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Report

New Diplomacy

Wednesday 15 – Friday 17 March 2017 | WP1531

In association with:





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Background

Diplomacy, and the furtherance of foreign policy objectives, is now the work of experts of many kinds. The expert exchange brought together 50 practitioners for creative engagement on new approaches to decentralised diplomacy in an increasingly networked world. A cross section of ‘creative insiders’ - senior diplomats and ‘unusual suspects’ - agile thinkers from business, media, philanthropic foundations, campaigning bodies, multi-lateral and regional bodies, academia, alumni networks and diaspora, met to:

- provide thought leadership on new ways of doing diplomacy in a complex and fast moving environment;
- consider practical ways in which to build on existing assets, maximise resources and increase impact;
- develop ways to further enhance partnerships with key influencers, particularly non-traditional actors;
- explore opportunities for innovative ways forward.

The inter-active programme featured a mix of plenary and ‘break-through’ sessions and was informed and shaped by digital engagement with external stakeholders. Cross-cutting themes included: **women; private sector engagement; next generation.**

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Executive Summary

The notion of a “new” diplomacy is not new. It reflects the continual need to find ways to innovate in order to solve complex problems in ever-changing, always-challenging contexts. This sense of diplomacy in a constant process of renewal and evolution is therefore essentially a question of rethinking the basics of better collaboration in light of new tools, new actors and new circumstances. In the new diplomacy, not everything will be “new”, but there is an evolving “normal”.

Key points

- Diplomats cannot do everything alone. They must find ways to bring diverse perspectives into their teams.
- Diplomats must learn to balance their traditional roles with some more inspirational skills: passion, leadership, boldness, innovation and disruption. They should be more than just diplomats.
- Diplomatic skills are highly transferable and particularly useful for the young. Diplomats may need to become educators in order to shape the evolution of the field and the context in which they operate.

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“Collaboration involves harnessing diversity of thought”

“Diplomats must face these challenges by being less like bureaucrats and more like leaders”

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- Digital technologies are no longer a new part of diplomacy, but the impact of algorithms, bots and hackers is poorly understood. Quality of relationships should be the focus.
- It is essential to embrace a variety of perspectives in order to burst social media filter bubbles and overcome news ‘echo chambers’. This may require a rethink of the approach toward influencers in diplomacy and public diplomacy. It is time to start thinking about the “unusual suspects”.
- Many actors have the ability to impact upon diplomatic issues. Room for dissent, for a plurality of perspectives, and a norm of “optimal distance” are essential to the future of the field.
- The new “normal” for diplomacy is complex, multi-faceted campaigns conducted in multiple arenas with multiple partners. These require leadership, ownership, strategic thinking, coordination, and a sense of urgency.

Why do we need a new diplomacy?

1. Diplomacy is too important to be left to diplomats. How should the formal hierarchies of governments and their diplomatic institutions respond to ad-hoc networks driven by tremendous expertise, legitimacy and capacities to influence? On the one hand, diplomats represent the interests of their governments and domestic constituencies; on the other, many issues are global in nature and cannot be solved by one country or one type of actor. Though often skilful in treading the thin lines between generalist and specialist, objective and passionate, listener and speaker, the contemporary diplomat cannot do all things alone.
2. Collaboration involves harnessing diversity of thought. Diplomats cannot simultaneously see issues through the eyes of their ministers, the host government, private sector, journalists, NGOs, professors and the young; they must find ways to bring these diverse perspectives into their teams. There are many “new” diplomats, or actors capable of impacting upon diplomatic issues, but are they willing and able to work together to improve the condition of humanity? How can these groups achieve common outcomes while retaining an “optimal distance” from one another, in terms of remaining credible to their constituencies? Avoiding “group-think” and embracing diversity – yet remaining effective in “getting things done” – is a considerable challenge that requires boldness to overcome.
3. The sense that diplomacy is ever-evolving drives this agenda. Diplomacy takes places in a world with a plethora of tools, actors and interests, and diplomats must embrace this changing context and get better at tapping into this diversity of actors and channels for action. Diplomats must face these challenges by being less like bureaucrats and more like leaders; to take risks, bring broad constituencies with them, and be prepared to grasp windows of opportunity. They need to act as reliable interlocutors, but also develop the instincts to know when to be disrupters and innovators.

What are the skills of the new diplomacy?

4. The skills demanded of these new diplomats are surprisingly traditional; many of the basics one would identify today – discretion, integrity, empathy, judgement, a good listener – are consistent with the classic treatises on diplomacy from the 18th Century. However, the ability to communicate and engage in a wider variety of contexts represents a new demand upon the skillset. A new boldness, perhaps even fearlessness, is required for a diplomat to effectively mediate between foreign and domestic contexts; an ability to speak truth to power (in private) and to retain confidence among diverse partners (in public and private) is essential. Somehow the expectation is that the new diplomats will be more than just diplomats.
5. Training is an essential step, and new diplomatic academies in the UK, Australia and the Netherlands testify to an increased interest in identifying and honing the skills that

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contemporary diplomacy demands. However, some of these skills need to be instilled earlier into broader portions of the population, both to widen the pool of future diplomats (state or nonstate), and to improve the general public understanding of foreign policy and its processes. Furthermore, the transferable skills associated with diplomacy – listening, analysis, communication – are beneficial for all young people regardless of their future careers. Diplomats may need to become educators in order to shape the evolution of the field and the context in which it operates. Despite being an ancient, often archaic institution, the broader promotion of “thinking diplomatically” at youth level might be a safeguard of rationalism and democracy, and indeed make the future conduct of diplomacy proceed more smoothly. MOOCs (massive open online courses) represent a clear area of opportunity for diplomats to engage at a societal level.

6. One arena for these skills that is no longer new, but undoubtedly still evolving, is digital. Digital platforms change the timeframes for diplomatic relationships, offering a transformational potential with regards to agenda-setting and the framing of issues. It has become increasingly important for diplomats to be present on Twitter, even if only to monitor the debate or to have an informal point of contact. Communication departments at foreign ministries play a key role preparing and distributing agenda-setting materials for their networks in a way that supports tailored engagement and organisational coherence. Many foreign ministries have been progressive, allowing diplomats the freedom to make mistakes; if they have good judgement when speaking behind closed doors or to the traditional media, shouldn't they also be able to manage social media accounts? It is becoming accepted that the advantages of these platforms – the ability to monitor, network and advocate using mixed media – outweigh the risks.
7. Many lessons have been learned regarding social media. Quality of contacts is more important than quantity; in this sense, the social media presence should be as carefully curated as real-world contact lists. Likewise, being abroad involves harnessing both traditional media and social media influence structures, and learning to use the material that circulates through these networks in earlier phases of policy-making. This is disruptive, in the sense that the consultation function between foreign ministries and posts is disturbed by these evolving patterns of information circulation. Such processes are increasingly harnessed in challenging ways by algorithms, bots and hackers capable of destabilising and de-legitimising these valuable policy networks. Data scientists are a necessary addition to the diverse perspectives used by diplomats, and their skills should inform all foreign ministries and their posts. Digital technologies have the potential to empower everybody, regardless of their intentions, but ultimately the quality of relationships must be the focus for diplomats.

Who are the new diplomats?

8. Many actors engage in activities that have an impact on diplomacy. These actions are sometimes positive and sometimes pernicious. A general trend is a broadening of the diversity of interlocutors, particularly in peaceful settings. However, those situations in most need of diplomatic solutions are often those with more challenging security contexts. Security concerns often limit diplomats to the capital city or embassy compound. In such countries, diplomats are playing less of a role in informational networks centred upon the ex-pat community, which limits their ability to draw upon informal connections. They are also finding it difficult to meet face-to-face with influential figures who represent violent groups or who live in the periphery of a country. The broadening range of “new” diplomats therefore includes ‘diplomats for hire’; professional mediators who can prepare the groundwork for negotiations by acting in the periphery of diplomatic networks.
9. The private sector has always had a diplomatic role. Business representatives function as diplomatic agents with their own agendas, which may or may not overlap with the interests of host governments or the countries in which their headquarters are based. Nonetheless, in appropriate circumstances they can be interlocutors, help to develop

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networks, and perform a convening role around important questions. They act as advisors, conduct back-channel diplomacy, and sometimes drive agendas in the public sphere. Tendencies include an important role for the private sector in questions around cutting-edge technologies, whether from the perspective of trade and investment, regulation, foreign policy or knowledge transfer. An increasing interest in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and other international development activities points to a significant intersection between countries’ soft power efforts and corporations’ reputational and image work.

10. Historically, diplomacy has struggled to fully include women and youth. Research shows that the role of women in society is a strong indicator of a society’s stability. Therefore it is essential for every aspect of the new diplomacy to be more inclusive of women: in the diplomacy profession, in the choice of interlocutors, in policy development, and in interactions with society. Simply put, the inclusion of women in diplomatic processes is likely to lead to better and longer-lasting outcomes. At the same time, young people must become more engaged. A major risk is that the successor generation does not learn the skills to help them lead diplomatic initiatives in the future. This has, for example, been seen in conflict areas where the older generation of leaders have been replaced by a successor generation who are capable of perpetuating violence, but lack the skills to end it. More generally, diplomacy needs to get into schools at an earlier stage, to foster key transferable skills and encourage children with different backgrounds to get interested in foreign affairs. Encouraging diplomats to demonstrate how much their work is driven by passion could be a way of connecting with groups who do not fully understand the values that motivate a diplomatic career.
11. The types of new diplomats now impacting on foreign affairs are profoundly varied. A lone hacker in their bedroom can potentially cause international chaos, while groups of excluded citizens in the periphery – globalisation’s “losers” – have found their voice in recent years. These groups, often ignored because they might be considered “non-influencers” in the traditional sense, are playing a more influential role than ever in populist political movements. It is therefore essential to embrace a variety of perspectives in order to burst social media filter bubbles and overcome news ‘echo chambers’. Developing ideas in consultation with these diverse perspectives – co-creation of policy – should lead to more robust policy. However, this may require a rethink of the approach toward influencers in diplomacy and public diplomacy; a long diplomatic tradition of focusing on key decision-makers and elites may be coming to an end. It’s time to start thinking about the “unusual suspects”.
12. There can be little doubt that these new diplomatic actors represent a remarkable range of perspectives. Yet, diplomacy remains all-too characterised by “group-think” and a lack of diversity. Even in foreign ministries where diversity of gender and race have been somewhat addressed, there remains a tendency to recruit from similar social and class backgrounds, particularly in senior positions. A key question relates to the values needed to create a culture of diversity of thought. Room for dissent, for a plurality of perspectives, and a norm of inclusion seem essential to the future of the field. Many of the challenges prompted by diplomacy’s evolving practice point in this direction.

How does the new diplomacy work?

13. The techniques that are emerging in this context are eclectic. Bilateral diplomacy still has its place, as does the strategic use of Official Development Assistance as an incentive or for income substitution. Building capacity and lasting relationships with host governments, empowering local champions, and strengthening regulation in cooperation with local law enforcement, play their part. Engagement based solutions for relatively small shared problems is a tried and trusted technique in even the most challenging of diplomatic contexts, while hi-tech industries provide an opportunity for convening knowledge, skills and investments in the common pursuit of better future prospects. Similarly, multilateral platforms can help to raise awareness, funds and build

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a sense of momentum. A challenge remains in turning global pledges into local change, which perhaps indicates the need for a stronger focus on organisations and the need for them to enforce globally-agreed policies in the workplace and throughout their supply chains. In many respects, the traditional tensions between hearts and minds, carrots and sticks remain relevant; what is changing is the coordinated nature of efforts to harness these varied partnerships and techniques.

14. Asserting values through packages of culturally resonant messages appears to be important. This can be supported by strategic narratives that assert those values within a broader framework, addressing aspirations of security and prosperity among the young. Neutral venues capable of creating spaces for exchanges of values are important, such as sports, educational institutions and knowledge industries. Transparency of data and the pressure of rankings and indices can act as important agenda-setting resources. Techniques that simplify and visualise issues and actions have a major role to play, particularly on social media. Campaign tactics, including leadership, ownership and strategic alignment of activities have proven to be effective; in some cases, these can be localised efforts tailored to specific contexts, coordinated with a “global surge” to accelerate the process. A strong sense of urgency – of the need to identify accelerants for action – pervade these techniques.

Conclusion

There will always be novelties in terms of media technologies, the changing communications toolset and the innovative tactics they allow. This is not what characterises the current sense of a new diplomacy. Rather, it is a developing understanding of the value of genuine partnerships, of preserving diversity of thought without those differences leading to fragmentation or “group-think”, and of maintaining momentum across temporary alliances. It includes education and training, along with a sense of active listening and a readiness to learn. It combines long-term concerns about the limitations of structures such as foreign ministries, embassies, states and national representatives with the potential for harnessing their disruption to achieve positive outcomes. New platforms for engagement are emerging, and an inclusive attitude challenges, but also strengthens, diplomacy as an institution. Perhaps above all else, the new diplomacy carries with it the sense that diplomacy can become a platform for actors to convene upon in order to solve problems together.

James Pamment

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