



DIPLOMACY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

by George P. Shultz

Virtual Diplomacy: Does that mean diplomacy without presence? I'm uneasy. So I take my subject to be, "How to Conduct Diplomacy in the Increasingly Pervasive and Globalized Information Age." To summarize my view, lots has changed, lots remains the same, and lots of dividends will come from thought about the interaction of new volumes and flows of information with the objectives countries seek and their means of getting there.

I come at this subject against a long background of interest in the impact of information technology on organizations and on how work gets done. Three and one-half decades ago, I edited a book entitled Management Organization and the Computer. I issued a wake-up call to management: Realize the vast implications of what is on the horizon and look beyond keeping track of payrolls, personnel records, and other routine activities. And when I was secretary of state, I spoke in 1985 on "The Shape, Scope, and Consequences of the Age of Information." So I have long been impressed with the importance of the information revolution. Nevertheless, some important elements in the practice of diplomacy have not changed. Meg Greenfield (*Newsweek*, January 27, 1997) addressed this point in more general terms: "Decked out in our ever newer skills and abilities and seemingly magical potential, facing the glowing screens of our new life, soaring about the earth, bouncing back from a long dreaded and once mortal disease, guess what? It's the same old us."

So let me set out some aspects of diplomacy that still remain in place, then identify key changes brought on by the information revolution, and finally offer some thoughts on what to make of it all.

What Remains the Same

First, diplomacy is the method--some might say the art--by which relations between nations are managed. It is the manner, as distinct from the content, of foreign policy.

And the diplomat? He or she must truly represent us. To make this point, when swearing in new ambassadors, I used to take them over to the big globe in the secretary of state's office and ask them to point out their country. Almost invariably they would rotate the globe and point to their post--wherever in the world. I would then tell them that when I asked this question of Senator Mike Mansfield, then American ambassador to Japan, he spun the globe and put his finger on the United States and said, "This is my country!"

Diplomacy is a fundamental human activity, conducted between people as well as among nations. There are many kinds of diplomats. Sir Francis Bacon, as the Renaissance reached England, expressed his views

in his essay Of Negotiating: "Put little or nothing in writing, deal face to face where a man's eye upon the countenance of him with whom he speaketh may give him a direction how far to go...." And Bacon would pick different personalities for different diplomatic jobs: "...bold men for expostulation, fair-spoken men for persuasion, crafty men for inquiry and observation, forward and absurd (i.e., unyielding) men for business that doth not well bear out itself." So the proper diplomat must be suited to the mission.

Second, the diplomat must speak with authority for the nation, otherwise no one will deal with him or her seriously: toyed with perhaps, used as a conduit for exaggerations,

ignored. So the true diplomat builds and nurtures his base of authority, recognizing that a great bulk of the work related to diplomacy takes place within, as distinct from between, the constituencies involved.

Third, the good diplomat wants to know that the other party speaks with authority, so a true agreement can be reached. When this is not so, or when games are played about the structure of authority, or when authority is inherently diffused, the task of the diplomat is much more difficult.

Fourth, the relationship or relationships (as in alliances) involved must offer the possibility of benefit to all the parties involved. So there must be stakes worth the effort.

Fifth, most negotiations--exercises in diplomacy--are not one-time events, but part of a process. The process will have ups and downs, which must be understood. So the relationship should be constructed with long-term considerations in mind. I do not mean making the relationship itself the center of concern and attention. That only turns it into a bargaining chip. The quality of a relationship will be a reflection of the parties' ability to solve problems and take advantage of opportunities. Nevertheless, the reality is that major powers will have interactions over time, so short-term tensions need careful, even if confrontational treatment.

I know something about negotiation. I started out in the field of labor-management negotiations back in the days when that was the big league as far as negotiation goes. Now there is a time to negotiate and a time to refrain from negotiation. There are principles that give backbone to your negotiation. Negotiation has to be about something that matters. And it has to be for something that counts. But in recent years we have seen the rise of the idea that anything and everything can be negotiated.

We have seen it asserted that everyone has legitimate needs and concerns and that if only those needs are understood and addressed, then a successful outcome can be negotiated. From this framework of reference, we have in recent times seen principles negotiated away. We have seen violence rewarded with a seat at the table. We have seen dictators legitimized as negotiating partners and rogue states given international recognition. We have seen hard-won international standards set aside--all for the sake of getting a negotiated agreement. We have seen negotiators make deals they know won't be honored--thus poisoning the well for negotiations in future time of need. And amnesty granted to wrongdoers. This is not true negotiation, but just a cheap, quick fix that just pushes the problem down the road where eventually somebody else will have to try to solve it, but with diplomatic tools that have been corrupted by the misuse and abuse that we recently have witnessed.

Sixth, good diplomacy relies on accurate information that is relevant. The job of sifting out what is critical is crucial. So is the process of analysis of what the information means. There is no substitute for touch and feel in these processes. The person on the spot, respected and well-connected, comfortable linguistically, can make essential contributions.

Writing careful dispatches back home has always been a key diplomatic job. It's an art. It sounds easy; it isn't. Reporting has to be solid and well-considered. It has to emerge from deep experience and understanding of the society reported on. Above all, it has to be completely accurate. No colors, no emotions, no advocacy. Fact and commentary must be ruthlessly segregated.

Today we are told that embassy reporting is no longer needed. CNN does it faster and better. That's journalism--and that's great. I'm all for it. But it's not diplomatic reporting. It's fast-breaking, faster than any embassy can match. But as Admiral Jon Howe used to say, "The first intelligence reports are almost always wrong."

And television journalism is not universal. It focuses on places and topics the editors think the viewers are interested in. That's not at all the same list of things that may affect our national interest. And it depends on film footage. Look at the difference between Bob Dole falling off a speaker's platform in broad daylight in front of the cameras, and Bill Clinton falling down the stairs in the dead of night.

Information technology cannot replace solid diplomatic reporting. It is important to distinguish between excellent means of communication and excellent communication. Computers offer the former. And educated men and women can manage the latter. We need to have the discipline to hold our fire until solid and thoughtful reporting--diplomatic reporting--comes in. We need to urge American administrations to stop depriving diplomatic reporting of its most valuable advantage--universality of coverage. When the media are closing foreign bureaus is exactly the wrong time for the U.S. government to be closing and consolidating embassies and consulates abroad.

The information age brings us an overwhelming flood of material. That's wonderful. But the job of sorting it out and making sense of it gets harder and harder. We have, and we need to maintain, a competition among analysts: CIA, DIA, INR. And the private sector and individuals now have access to information that formerly was available only to a few institutions. *The New York Times* had a story about this last month, on "Johnson's List," an internet service carrying all sorts of documents from Russia. So everybody can get into the analysis act. That's good, but does it replace the insightful analysis of the guy on the spot? The foreign service officer assigned to Moscow? No. Not in my experience. Only a Russian in Moscow can make a Russian's judgment. And a lot of Russians, in the aggregate, can move that society one way or the other. And only our people, who are right there, walking around in Moscow with them, can provide insight into what this flood of material means. You just can't get the total feel for it by looking at a computer screen half a world away. We need both: the guy on the ground and the expanding cohort of analysts around the world. They need each other.

Seventh, skillful diplomacy pays attention when there are no acute problems or burning opportunities. I call this gardening. You get the weeds out when they are small. You also build confidence and understanding. Then, when a crisis arises, you have a solid base from which to work.

Eighth, a set of strategic ideas is essential. Without them, you don't know where you are going. With them, you can cope with the constant mini-crises in a way that adds up. And also, when you must act quickly and decisively, you have guideposts on which to rely.

Finally, there is the essential interplay between strength and diplomacy. Diplomacy without strength--military and economic--is fruitless; but strength without diplomacy is unsustainable, particularly in the modern era when people want their leaders to demonstrate that they are searching for solutions. It is significant that permanent embassies arose at the same time as permanent armies. One could be regarded as the antidote of the other. Strength and diplomacy have always gone together--and still do.

And then, after all is said and done, someone must produce good judgment, have some steel in their backbone when the going gets rough, and exercise common sense at those times when most others, even including the vaunted media folks, are losing their sense of direction, if not their heads. So once again as Meg Greenfield put it, in the end, "It's the same old us."

What's New and Different

1. Information is everywhere and widely available to the citizenry generally, not just government officials. So the government no longer has a monopoly over information. Of course, questions abound: what information is reliable, what is incorrect, misleading, or slanted? Who can tell without some independent checks?

2. Information moves around at terrific speed. This point is dramatic when applied to financial markets, which react almost instantaneously to important breaking news. As Walter Wriston long ago put it, "World markets now operate on an information standard." But the raw material of diplomacy is also information: getting it, assessing it, putting it into the system for the benefit or puzzlement of others.

3. The world is much more open than ever before. Even authoritarian, closed societies have a hard time keeping any important development to themselves or keeping their own citizens from knowing what is going on inside, let alone outside, their borders. And any society that aspires to be a part of the modern world simply cannot operate a closed, compartmentalized system.

4. Borders mean less because information and ideas flow across them whether the government likes it or not. Sovereignty is still a clear and powerful concept, but its meaning has been altered. Regions and nationalities transcend borders, as do religious and ethnic ties. The foreign minister of Hungary once pointed out to me that Hungary is the only country in the world completely surrounded by Hungarians. That is not the result of the information age, but the force of this fact and its impact has been sharply altered. The result is increased complexity to the world, only enhancing the importance of a presence on the ground that understands the nuance of developments.

5. The media, particularly television, play a larger role than ever. After all, they are in the information business and have developed the skills of quickly gathering information and sorting out what is newsworthy. Sometimes, the pictures are dramatic and as real as life. I remember the sharply increased difficulty of handling the terrorists who took over TWA flight 847 in 1985 because the American media

and their cameras were not only covering the crisis, they were in amongst the terrorist establishment giving the terrorists every opportunity to propagandize their views.

I also remember how dramatic and basically helpful were the scenes of mass protest in the Philippines on CNN. Here the picture was of a vital reality.

I have a physicist friend at Stanford, Sid Drell, who has given me the concept of quantum diplomacy. An axiom of quantum theory is that when you observe and measure some piece of a system, you inevitably disturb the whole system. So the process of observation itself is a cause of change. That is all too often the case with a TV camera. The true reality is hard to record.

So the possibilities of distortions, let alone selectivity, mean that an independent base of information is essential. Even so, the compelling image on the screen--accurate or not--can have a powerful impact on the citizenry.

Reflections

1. In this age of openness, we need to think in fresh terms about the collection and analysis of the information needed to inform and carry out our diplomatic objectives. Of course, the photographic and electronic intelligence we have long had should continue. We should be set up to exploit what can be gleamed from the internet. Beyond that, what we need to know about most countries is readily available from open sources.

I see no reason to continue with the notion that every embassy should have a station, with all the extra expense and exposure that brings. Clandestine human collection will still be needed in some countries and with regard to a few subjects, such as terrorism. Such collection efforts should be specifically tasked, and, therefore, managed with care and looked to aggressively for results.

I also favor more, not fewer, small consulates operated on an open basis. A few trained people on the ground can help in the analytical, as well as collection, functions. A small, open consulate can be operated on a low budget. The expense comes when the station comes, with all the accompanying security and secrecy gear.

2. The struggle for position to speak with authority for your country will be more difficult. The secretary of state, to pick an example at random, must struggle not only with colleagues in the executive branch and with members of Congress, but with groups with widely diverse, sometimes even conflicting, agendas who will parlay their access to information into an ability to command attention. A lot of meeting and listening will be in order. A lot of exposition to home constituencies will be needed. The job of spokesperson for the State Department will be enhanced in importance and so should draw people of high talent to the task

The people you are dealing with will have similar problems. How well are they coping and can they deliver on a commitment will be constant questions.

There are always people who simply assert themselves and pressure to speak for the country. The expanded openness will probably encourage that kind of behavior. Such efforts must be dealt with firmly, even if a former president or secretary is the person acting off the reservation. I had to tell the

Soviets repeatedly and forcefully that Armand Hammer did not speak for the president--and to tell Hammer to butt out.

In any case, the secretary will have to expend tremendous intellectual energy to keep up with the flow, will have to bring more people into the analytical and decision-forming process earlier than ever. Consensus building skills will be needed.

3. The information age should enhance accountability in diplomacy as well as most other activities. I am personally leery of the bail-out mentality implied by the IMF's new \$40 billion facility to handle "future Mexicos." Accountability is necessary in our fast-moving world of global finance. I like the way Barings was handled by the Bank of England and Orange County by California Governor Pete Wilson. People and organizations who make large mistakes should have to live with them.

In the field of diplomacy, what you do and say is increasingly in the public domain. The quality of your decisions and your capacity to effectively execute them is increasingly on display. This spotlight, unnerving to some degree, should result in improved performance. Accountability practically always does.

4. Speed is still another characteristic of the information age. When combined with the wide access prevalent even now, the pressure is on for rapid reactions, for operation in real time. Of course, you need not let the pace of information pace your decisions, but there are times when there is hardly any alternative. It is especially at such times that a set of strategic ideas can pay off handsomely in facilitating not only quick, but good decisions.

5. One of my concerns in this age of instant communication, often by telephonic or other informal means, is the problem of record keeping. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan put it well, "The true diplomatist is aware of how much subsequently depends on what clearly can be established to have taken place. If it seems simple in the archives, try it in the maelstrom." I hope that special attention can be paid to this issue of record keeping. In some ways, the vast computer memories automatically help with this problem. But there are also big incentives, in what is also an age of litigation, to purge records, erase memories, or soften cable -- or not keep records at all. We need to be careful lest we become a society without a history.

No doubt the way the world works has changed permanently and dramatically. Yet, when it comes to the conduct of diplomacy, many key attributes remain. This conference will make a much needed start at thinking through how the new affects the old and vice versa so that, from a new platform of understanding, our diplomacy can be strong and true.