THE GLOBAL INFORMATION REVOLUTION AND INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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Welcome to an exploration of international politics in the era of the global information revolution

Virtual Diplomacy is an exploration of how our world is being transformed by the global information revolution. It is an assessment of how new technologies of data processing and communication can be used to prevent, more effectively manage or resolve international conflict.

The last major conference sponsored by the Institute of Peace, in late 1994, focused on the theme of *Managing Chaos,* an assessment of the changing character of international conflict in the post-Cold War world.[1] The conference identified new challenges for responding to the humanitarian crises and ethnic conflicts that have become so much a part of our era. One of the primary findings of that enterprise, and its successor conference *Managing Communications,* held in June 1996, was that effective prevention or management of conflict in today's world requires new coalitions of government, international organization and private sector actors. To that end, new communications technologies -- in combination with traditional media such as radio -- make it possible for these organizations to more effectively coordinate their efforts. It is also clear that there are major barriers to adopting the new technologies, primarily institutional resistance to new ways of doing business and to organizational restructuring.[2]

Virtual Diplomacy carries that assessment into the emerging world of cyberspace -- the electronically networked and digitized realm of international communications that is compressing time and space, flattening the traditional bureaucratic structures of governance, and building "virtual" or electronically linked coalitions of "netizens" and NGOs that are the structures of a global civil society. These transformations are creating new opportunities for promoting democracy, national security and international commerce; but they also hold perils to citizen security, vulnerabilities to "wired" governmental operations, and enhanced opportunities for such threats as international terrorist operations and narcotics trafficking.

Why should the U.S. Institute of Peace host this conference? Our mandate from Congress is to strengthen America's capabilities for managing international conflict without resort to war and violence. In the spirit of that charter, we have designed *Virtual Diplomacy* to catalyze new thinking about the changing character of the international system and new approaches to managing conflict by political rather than military means.

Our objectives in organizing this two-day event will be fulfilled if we leave you with new insights about ways in which advances in information technologies are reshaping international relations, and if we highlight for you new opportunities for preventing, managing and resolving international conflicts through political processes that make use of these new technologies.

Presenters: the Secretary of State as crisis manager; an Internet revolutionary

We are fortunate to be supported in this enterprise by an outstanding roster of speakers. Biographical information on each of them is in the conference agenda. Let me highlight here two presentations that, with design aforethought, illustrate the issues we have structured *Virtual Diplomacy* to explore.

Former Secretary of State George Shultz describes in his memoirs his use in 1982, during a diplomatic crisis in Lebanon, of a satellite telephone system (Tacsat) to maintain direct communication with the U.S. envoy in the field Ambassador Philip Habib. This experience, recalled Shultz, made him aware of "an acute problem with the State Department's system of crisis management: the pace of events had outstripped the traditional methods of receiving cabled messages from overseas and responding with written instructions to our posts. . . . This was the first diplomatic crisis handled by instant voice communications via satellite."[3]

This anecdote encapsulates a number of points that will emerge in the sessions of *Virtual Diplomacy*: the "flattened" bureaucratic management of foreign policy, as telecommunications enable senior officials to directly manage government operations anywhere in the world; the accelerated pace of decision making; and the obsolescence of traditional diplomatic practices in an era of instantaneous and widely accessible electronic communications.

While Shultz's description of the first use of the Tacsat system in crisis management is now fifteen years "old," the State Department, as with most government agencies, has been slow -- especially relative to international business -- to incorporate the new communications technologies into its operations. *Virtual Diplomacy* will highlight possibilities, in a time of budgetary stringency, for making the management of foreign affairs operations more efficient and effective.

A second example of the power of telecommunications is of recent date, and -- in contrast to the Shultz story -- comes from the "bottom" of the political hierarchy: the streets of Belgrade. In mid-November 1996, tens of thousands of citizens of the Republic of Serbia (the successor state to Yugoslavia) took to the streets to protest the Milosevic government's refusal to accept the results of local elections which had given power to opposition parties in Belgrade, Nis and a dozen other cities. After two weeks of mounting protests, the government cut off the opposition's use of independent radio station "B92," which was being used to coordinate the demonstrations.

Undaunted by the loss of this one channel of communication, the leaders of the demonstrations rerouted B92's broadcasts to the Internet, whose RealAudio transmissions were picked up by VOA and the BBC in the Netherlands and rebroadcast back into Serbia -- thus maintaining the coherence and the morale of the opposition protests. This new communication mechanism, which had been put into operation only weeks earlier, enabled the demonstrators to sustain their mass protest for eight more weeks. Their pressure in the streets was reinforced and protected by international radio and television coverage of the demonstrations, which held the government visibly accountable before international public opinion and political institutions. On February 1, 1997 the Milosevic government acceded to the results of the November elections.[4]

This dramatic demonstration of cyber-democracy illustrates how networked international communications empower people to act against government authority irrespective of national

boundaries and traditional notions of sovereignty. In this way, the Internet can build coalitions that are unconstrained by physical or political frontiers.

We are fortunate to have with us for *Virtual Diplomacy* Veran Matic, editor of Radio B92; and for the conference special events Secretary Shultz and former Citicorp CEO Walter Wriston, whose pathbreaking 1985 study *Twilight of Sovereignty* gave us an early and far-sighted look at how telecommunications were restructuring the international economy.

Conference design: from structural transformations of the international order to new approaches to managing conflict[5]

We have designed the flow of the conference sessions to open with a broad exploration of how information technologies are transforming the global environment and the structure of international relations. Subsequent sessions assess how the information revolution is influencing foreign policy decision making and the shaping of public opinion. Case studies demonstrate how the new technologies can be used to better manage conflict situations or promote political reconciliation. The final session draws together themes developed during the two days to evaluate the cost to foreign affairs-oriented organizations of implementing -- or *not* implementing -- these new tools of communication and information management.

Sessions on the first day **(Tuesday, April 1 --** no foolin'**)** begin with an exploration of how the 17th century notions of the nation-state and state sovereignty are being undermined by information technologies. Networked communication systems are creating new, non-governmental coalitions that are oblivious to notions of sovereignty and national frontiers. We will hear how these technologies are affecting the way we work and relate; how they are accelerating global economic development; and how they will affect patterns of conflict and political action. Afternoon panels then discuss the new technologies and their potential uses for decision makers and practitioners who must manage international programs and relationships.

These sessions will also highlight the barriers and inhibitions to incorporating the new technologies into established institutions and their organizational cultures. They will identify new threats to national security that, under the concept of "information warfare," will bring dangers as well as opportunities in an emerging era of inexpensive and secure networked communications.

Sessions on the second day **(Wednesday, April 2)** explore how the mass media are impacting on the traditionally closed world of foreign policy decision making and management. In so doing they are taking the initiative away from elected officials and setting agendas by mobilizing public opinion and reshaping "political will" through international television and Internet dissemination of images and information about events around the world.

The final sessions on day two (Wednesday afternoon) focus on the "bottom line" issues of how information technologies are being used to advance our capabilities for managing international conflict: to improve possibilities for conflict prevention, containment or management; and to promote conflict resolution and reconciliation.

Finally, in recognition of the fact that incorporating information technologies into the workings of governmental operations is neither cost-free nor without institutional resistance, a concluding panel will

examine the issues of who will pay to "wire up" Uncle Sam, and how bureaucratic obstacles to advancing America's entry into the information age can be overcome.

Exhibits of the new technologies and their applications

Paralleling the discussion sessions will be exhibitions of many state-of-the-art technologies and their applications to international operations. These include demonstrations of virtual offices and working groups, teleconferencing and satellite communication systems, data bases in support of elections, and interactive networking systems relevant to foreign policy decision making and operations. Also on display will be information systems for monitoring and analyzing pre-conflict situations in support of preventive diplomacy or arms control regimes, and information processing capabilities that can be used to enhance negotiating encounters. (A roster of conference exhibitions, which are accessible in rooms next to the main conference hall and across from the registration area, is available in the conference program.)

Communications and conflict management

The Institute's interest in these technologies and their applications is only in part related to their transforming effects on international relations. Communication patterns have always been central to an understanding of human conflict and its management.

Normal or "healthy" relations among individuals and societies are characterized by open and rational communications, with relatively infrequent misunderstandings and low levels of distrust. Some of the clearest indicators of an emerging conflict situation are "misunderstandings," misreadings of intentions or imputations of hostile motives to the other party. At worst it involves demonizing a potential adversary, or projecting one's own hostility or malevolent intentions on to the opponent. The move to overt conflict is usually accompanied by a breakdown in direct communication between parties ("The ambassador was called home for consultations.").

Management of conflict situations requires special, "protected" channels of communication between adversaries that are trusted as to accuracy, intent and authority. (As one example, recall the unique informal channels of communication that were set up between the Kennedy White House and Soviet leader Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis.[6]) "Intelligence," accurate information about the adversary, is essential to effective performance in a conflict situation. And reliable, authoritative communication is required to maintain coordinated coalition activity.

The effort to de-escalate or resolve conflict usually requires, or is facilitated by, the intervention of a third party or mediator who helps to reestablish broken communication links and begin the process of rebuilding trust. (Note, for example, the Nixon administration's use of Pakistani President Yahya Kahn in 1970-71 as the intermediary between the U.S. and China. Yahya Kahn vouched for the good intentions of two leaderships that had been locked in confrontation for decades and helped them establish a secure channel of communication by which to begin the process of normalizing relations.[7]) And reconciliation among parties to a conflict is usually facilitated by a neutral yet sympathetic third party who can help dissipate the emotional burdens of conflict and help reestablish rational communication.

Technologies of communication, in and of themselves, cannot play the role of third-party mediators. Hardware, and software, are "merely" instruments of action; yet they facilitate interaction and significant exchanges of substantive content. (See, for example, the exhibit in space #15 of the

"PowerScene" mapping technology which facilitated the Dayton negotiations on a Bosnia peace agreement.) They can help establish rational assessments of an adversary's preparations for combat when the tendency in a pre-conflict situation is to impute capabilities that are commensurate with assessments of ill intention. (Consider the use of U-2 spy aircraft in deflating fears of a U.S.-Soviet "missile gap.") They can maintain "transparency," the contemporary equivalent of the gamblers who keep their hands on the table to relieve fears that the other players are dealing wild cards or concealing revolvers. They can enable coalition partners to maintain effective coordination of action. And they can mobilize the political force of public opinion in circumstances where a repressive authority might seek to act unfettered and in secret.

Communications technologies and social change

Innovations in technology have long been recognized as drivers of social change; and the dynamics of communication and conflict are as old as human history. Yet new technologies of communication today are profoundly altering the pace and pattern of conflict situations just as they are facilitating new forms of social organization.

The innovation of more efficient modes of communication has made possible ever higher levels of social organization -- from the tribe to the nation-state, and now the global village. Warfare has evolved by exploiting the possibilities of new communication technologies, from the smoke signal, drum and flag to computer and satellite-mediated communication systems. We know that American society evolved along the telegraph lines and railroads that opened up the West, and in the spaces created by the interstate highway network built after World War II. What *Virtual Diplomacy* hopes to do is anticipate how society will evolve along the complex international pathways of the world wide web, the Internet, the global information superhighway, and how new information technologies can be used to more effectively manage conflict.

It may be too early to assess the long-term impact on contemporary society of computer-managed information networks and associated systems of information collection, analysis, communication and storage, yet we can already see some of their profound implications for social organization and action:

* **Decentralization, and centralization.** The new technologies are producing a "flattening" of bureaucratic structures as more readily accessible information and lateral communication systems, such as e-mail, reduce the need for hierarchy and middle management, permitting those "on the ground" to take informed and organized action. At the same time, however, more accurate and accessible information gives those in senior leadership positions the ability to act directly if they choose to do so, increasing their effectiveness -- and also their personal accountability.

* **Fragmentation, yet integration.** The new technologies tend to have a fragmenting effect on social organization, facilitating the creation of "virtual" or electronically linked communities of identity along lines of language, religion and race, or by work function or special interest. (Stamp collectors of the world can now unite electronically.) That said, networks also integrate these communities and make possible coordinated action irrespective of their spatial separation. The impact of these new patterns of association on politics, as single-issue constituencies begin to play a larger role in relation to multiple-issue, territorially based communities, is a matter of growing speculation.[8]

* **Transparency.** The information revolution, above all, is making the world more "visible" by promoting the collection, analysis and dissemination of information about just about anything of interest to anyone. In matters of international politics this has meant, for example, bringing into the open previously classified information about any nation's weaponry gathered by space reconnaissance vehicles and other collection systems, or making available instantaneously and globally information about human rights abuses -- from Timor to Tian An Men. Transparency facilitates arms control regimes, democratization, and political accountability. It is also creating for decision makers issues of how to cope with information overload and pressures for early action before information has been fully analyzed and assessed.

* **Mobilization, and rationalization.** Information can mobilize people to act; and the most intense action is usually driven by emotional responses. Television images of starving refugees or of civilians being shot by riot police build public pressures on governments to "do something," even if a more considered initial reaction might be: "Don't just do something, stand there" (and take time to assess the situation and plan the most effective course of action). At the same time, information -- accurate information -- can have a rationalizing effect on behavior. Ongoing assessments of the impact of the press and television on U.S. foreign policy indicate that the tension between the emotionally mobilizing and rationalizing effects of more readily available information about world events is a dynamic unlikely to be resolved any time soon.[9]

* **Acceleration.** The information revolution, like the effects of hyper-gravity, is doing strange things to time and space. Global satellite and computer mediated communications systems have eliminated the constraints of distance and time zones on international financial markets. The global positioning system (GPS) of satellites is giving militaries, peace keepers and humanitarian relief organizations precise information about the physical location of objects -- with evident benefits for targeting precision-guided munitions or locating refugee populations, water resources, airstrips and supply warehouses. For foreign policy decision makers, instantaneously available information about global events is accelerating the pace at which decisions must be made. More generally, information and its communication is accelerating the pace of all human interactions, speeding up processes of scientific innovation, commercial exchange, and social change. The old phrase, "Stop the world, I want to get off" seems likely to acquire new currency as humans try to control the pace of life at a tolerable level and limit information overload.

* **Virtuality.** One of the buzz phrases of the information revolution is "virtual reality." This concept initially referred to computerized simulations of real locations -- but as perceived in the goggles and head gear of flightless pilots or in the electronic games of mall-bound teenagers. "Virtual diplomacy" is real diplomacy -- in the sense of authoritative interactions between officials of different governments -- but it is "virtual" in the sense that the exchanges are electronic rather than face-to-face. We are early in the process of learning the many effects of interacting electronically across national and cultural boundaries, across distance and time, and the implications for international relations of managing conflict by "virtual" means. We know that electronic communications work better if the participants already "know" each other through prior direct physical interaction. Yet we can anticipate that as the

era of electronic communication advances, our interactions with people will be increasingly "virtual" as opposed to physical.[10]

What we do not know, and what *Virtual Diplomacy* is designed to help us explore, is whether we can learn to deal with the enduring human capacity for conflict in less destructive ways through the "virtual" processes of information gathering, analysis and communication that are the pathways of the global information infrastructure.

Notes:

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[1] The *Managing Chaos* conference was held in Washington, D.C. in late 1994. For an overview of the conference see the February, 1995 issue of the Institute's newsletter *PeaceWatch.* Keynote presentations are available in issues 3, 4 and 5 of the Institute's *PeaceWorks* publication series. See also the volume resulting from the conference, Chester A. Crocker and Fed Osler Hampson, with Pamela Aall, *Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996).

[2] These barriers to incorporating new communications technologies were explored in the Institute's June, 1996 conference *Managing Communications: Lessons from Interventions in Africa.* An Institute *Special Report* summarizing the results of the conference will be published in April, 1997.

[3] George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years As Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), p. 44.

[4] See David S. Bennahum, "The Internet Revolution," *Wired,* April, 1997, pp. 122-128, 168-173.

[5] Special recognition for their innovative work in designing *Virtual Diplomacy* is due Sheryl Brown, director of the Institute's Office of Communications, Margarita Studemeister, director of the Institute's library program, and Bob Schmitt, the Institute's chief information officer.

[6] See, for example, Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), esp. pp. 185-244.

[7] See Henry A. Kissinger,*White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), pp. 701-2, 713-14, 723-27.

[8] See Jean-Marie Guehenno, The End of the Nation-State (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); and David Ronfeldt, "Cyberocracy is Coming,"*The Information Society Journal*, Vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 243-296.

[9] This issue will be discussed in Session 7 of *Virtual Diplomacy* on Wednesday, April 2. See also, Ted Koppel, "The Global Information Revolution and TV News," *PeaceWorks*, No. 3 (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1995); Warren Strobel,]*Late-Breaking Foreign Policy: The News Media's Influence on Peace Operations* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997); and Johanna Neuman, *Lights, Camera, War: Is Media Technology Driving International Politics?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

[10] As Nicholas Negroponte would put it, the interaction will be between electrons as opposed to atoms. See his *Being Digital* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).