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The New International Security Agenda and the Practice of Diplomacy

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Both the scope and nature of the international security agenda have evolved significantly in recent years (Riordan, 2003). This reflects changes in the geo-strategic environment and in the way we think about security. These changes have serious implications for global governance issues and how diplomatic services should be reconfigured to tackle them.

The new international security agenda

Traditionally, international security was thought of in terms of the security of states within the international system. An international security threat implied a threat to the stability or integrity of a state or group of states. Thus, the international security agenda focused on issues such as the strategic balance of power, regional conflicts, civil wars or weapons proliferation. However, in a post-Cold War world this definition of international security in terms of the security of the state became problematic. For instance, it did not include international terrorism. International terrorism, for example of the Al Qaeda variety, can kill horrific numbers of citizens, but it does not threaten the stability or integrity of any Western state (and few other states). Nevertheless analysts could hardly have excluded terrorism from the international security agenda, especially after 9/11. Even before then, some analysts in the United States began to redefine international security in terms of the economic and physical welfare of the citizen within the state (Brower and Chalk, 2003). This redefinition, by focusing on the individual within the state rather than the state, allowed terrorism to be included within the international security agenda. However, it also inevitably, and radically, expanded that agenda to include a range of new issues such as organised crime, epidemic illnesses, environmental degradation, mass migrations, poverty, competition for natural resources and international financial stability. Ironically, many of these new issues have a significantly better claim to inclusion under the old definition of international

A. F. Cooper et al. (eds.), *Global Governance and Diplomacy*
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security than terrorism. Mass migration, poverty, environmental degradation and international financial instability can (and have) threatened the stability or integrity of states or groups of states (there are numerous historical examples of collapse of states or state systems that can be attributed to one or all of these factors[1]). Of course so too has epidemic disease threatened the stability of states – a topic that will be discussed later in this chapter.

The multiple challenges of the new international security agenda have several features in common:

1. They are all interconnected and interdependent. They can often reinforce each other creating spirals of ever more serious and ever broader consequences (sometimes referred to as positive feedback loops). For example, the poverty and ignorance that drive farmers to overuse land does not only lead to environmental degradation in the form of soil erosion, but yet more poverty. This vicious circle is reinforced by increasing the risk of disease and migratory pressures. Migrations both spread disease and increase poverty and environmental pressures in neighbouring communities. The pressures of migration, poverty, environmental degradation and disease call into question the governmental and other institutional structures of a region or country, opening up opportunities for organised crime and international terrorist groups, quite aside from the increased risk of civil or other conflict. And so it goes on. The key point is that these issues must be tackled as a whole, not individually;
2. There are no ready-made solutions or 'right answers'. Nor is it always clear what policy objectives should be. Expert opinion can disagree radically, with even the broad road to follow in dispute. Solutions (if they exist) or responses must be developed through dialogue and discussion;
3. No single country, or even regional group of countries, can tackle any one of these issues alone, let alone all of them. The new international security agenda demands a new level of global collaboration;
4. Collaboration must extend beyond governments and political élite to the extensive set of civil society actors if it is to be effective;
5. These issues involve high levels of expert knowledge – the old style gentleman diplomat no longer has a role in tackling the challenges of the new international security agenda.

Epidemic disease – an international security threat

The example of epidemic diseases helps to illustrate the issues. The security threat posed by epidemic disease should be clear from the experience of 1918, when the outbreak of Spanish influenza killed more people in one year than the four years of carnage in the First World War, and contributed to the collapse of the German army on the Western Front that same year. A

more recent example has been the economic and social devastation wrought in Sub-Saharan Africa by HIV/AIDS. While some observers may be tempted to dismiss the impact of HIV/AIDS in these countries as a consequence of poverty – and corrupt tyrannical government – the example of the Republic of South Africa shows the impact and security implications of this disease even for a modern and relatively wealthy parliamentary democracy. According to one recent report (Brower and Chalk, 2003), the levels of HIV already in the South African Army are such that it cannot effectively be deployed abroad for African peacekeeping operations, with severe implications for that continent's security. Given the levels of HIV in relevant sectors of future generations, the report warns that South Africa could be left without any reliable security or policing organisations within 15–20 years. Such a reality would question the viability of governance not only in South Africa, but throughout the African continent.

Epidemic diseases also have severe economic consequences that fall within the new definition of international security. HIV/AIDS has wrought economic as well as human devastation in Sub-Saharan Africa. But even less severe diseases, with lower rates of mortality, can have serious consequences in a globalised economy. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), for example, killed relatively few and disappeared quickly. It nevertheless caused serious short-term damage to the Asian tourist industry and the airlines that service it. The overall effects of Avian Flu are yet to be seen, but even if it remains contained as at present, its impact on the agricultural and tourist sectors of the countries where it has occurred is nevertheless quite substantial.

Nor are epidemic diseases primarily a problem for developing countries, with few if any implications in the West. Westerners are in many ways more vulnerable than ever before. The interdependence of a globalised world and the mass movements of people and goods across borders offer ample opportunity for disease transmission. Modern means of transport exacerbate the risk. Whereas even 60 years ago, a journey from India to Europe took weeks by boat, ample time for a disease to emerge and the ship be quarantined upon arrival, the same journey now by plane takes hours – well within the incubation period of most diseases. A passenger can board and disembark from a plane visibly healthy, with a disease emerging much later once the individual has been reintegrated into society. By the time the disease has been diagnosed, it may already have spread, and be established within the community. The vulnerability is reinforced by the abuse of antibiotics for minor ailments in Western societies (not to mention the mass use of antibiotics in animal feeds), which has radically reduced their effectiveness by allowing viruses to develop antibiotic immune strains. This is compounded by the devotion of resources by drug companies to research treatments for profitable 'diseases of the rich'[2] rather than epidemic disease. Taken together, these factors imply that if, or when, a major epidemic disease does reach Western shores, the West's armoury to combat it will be much reduced.

A security strategy for epidemic disease

Tackling the security threat from epidemic diseases requires a proactive strategy of engagement involving those countries in which these diseases are likely to emerge. This should include the enhancement of public health systems to ensure prompt diagnosis, effective response and the global, early warning of new disease strains, as well as effective public health education to reduce unnecessary health risks. Although the broad lines of such a strategy may be clear, it will still require a genuine dialogue, both to understand the local cultural and social realities that will affect implementation, and to secure the full, willing collaboration of those countries with weaker public health systems and at most risk of primary outbreaks of epidemic diseases. The dialogue and collaboration will have to extend beyond governments and political élite to medical professionals and others involved in public health at all levels. Furthermore, the dialogue must extend beyond governments in the West, to medical professionals, drug companies and relevant NGOs, to name but three.

More to the point, governments and diplomats may not be the most effective agents for the implementation of such a strategy. Firstly, foreign governments may not be reliable interlocutors. It is, for example, now clear that the Chinese government initially sought to conceal outbreaks of Avian Flu from the international community. Even if a foreign government is well-intentioned, it may not have the internal structures required to monitor health developments within its own borders. Without engaging with a broad range of health professionals, Western governments may have little hope of discovering what is happening in much of the world. However, such an engagement may prove difficult as diplomats often do not have the necessary expert knowledge; attempts to engage may be misinterpreted by host governments as interference in their internal affairs (or even espionage); and such attempts equally may be treated with suspicion by foreign health professionals themselves.

The recent scare with the Avian Flu outbreak demonstrated that these health issues are at last being taken seriously, at least while they remain in the headlines. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the techniques being deployed at the diplomatic level are ready for the challenge. The reaction to the discovery of Avian Flu in Turkey both illustrates the problems and indicates some of the solutions. Western governments and their diplomats provided Turkey with ready-made solutions, and then criticised the country, often in public, for not following the advice adequately or quickly enough. The diplomatic activity concerning this outbreak was limited to government and political élite circles. Little thought appears to have been given to whether this patronising and top-down approach improved Turkey's response to Avian Flu: it is unclear whether it really garnered the collaboration sought by Turkey's health care professionals, or whether in fact it alienated

both the political élite and health care professionals (not to mention broader Turkish society). Even if it can be argued that, in the short-term, the outbreak was contained without loss of human life, it ignores the longer term costs. The threat of epidemic diseases requires a continuous vigilance that only willing collaboration can provide.

An alternative bottom-up, or dialogue-based approach, might have implicitly admitted that Western countries had no ready-made solution. Furthermore, it might have focused on working with medical professionals in the field rather than government officials in Ankara (perhaps through Western health-oriented NGOs). It even could have emphasised the value of, for example, Britain as a partner based on its recent exposure and experience with both Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) and Foot-And-Mouth Disease (FME), and thus the valuable knowledge this partner could have shared. It is suggested that such an approach would have secured a far fuller and more genuine collaboration at all levels of Turkish society; discouraged the Turkish bureaucracy from hiding uncomfortable evidence that they might otherwise have found embarrassing; and built a solid base for long-term collaboration in the future.[3]

Implications for the practice of diplomacy

The new international security agenda has serious implications for how diplomacy is done, and who are the players. While diplomats retain an important role in engaging in debate with other governments and political élite, they are often not the ideal (and can even be counterproductive) agents for engaging with foreign civil societies. As government representatives, they can lack credibility and detailed expert knowledge of the crucial issues. Their key role of maintaining relations with government officials can conflict with engaging with broader civil society, especially if the government concerned is corrupt or repressive and is hostile to the possible implications of the engagement. Diplomats may not have established ways of engaging with key elements of civil society – they may not encounter them in the course of their normal diplomatic duties or social life: creating artificial channels of approach can provoke suspicions that they have hidden agendas or ulterior motives, both within the civil societies with which they are trying to engage and with the governments to which they are accredited. In many countries, the appearance of being too close to foreign diplomats can be dangerous, both professionally and/or in terms of one's own safety.

Engaging with foreign civil societies may often best be done by the non-governmental agents of our own civil societies (Riordan, 2004). More often than diplomats, these agents have credibility – at times to the extent that they are seen as critical of their own governments. Many do have specialist knowledge of the key areas. They often already have relationships through the global NGO networks that allow access to civil societies, or can draw on

shared interests or areas of expertise to establish them. They are deniable in a way that diplomats are not, so that their engagement with civil society can be pursued in parallel to maintaining normal diplomatic relations with existing governments. The role of government, and diplomats, in relation to these non-governmental agents is primarily as a catalyst, coordinating their activities within a broader strategy, encouraging those not already engaged in such activities, and on occasion providing discreet technical and financial support. But government officials must bear in mind that many potential agents will be reluctant to be seen as too close to, or acting at the behest of, government. Indeed, such an appearance could undermine the very credibility that otherwise represents much of their added value. Actors within government will therefore need tact, openness and understanding.

NGOs are not entirely unproblematic interlocutors for foreign civil societies. They have their own agendas, which may on occasion provoke as much conflict as collaboration (e.g., the insistence of human rights NGOs on gay rights can provoke problems in more conservative societies). Nor are they necessarily particularly representative of their own societies – they have no formal democratic legitimacy and frequently leave much to be desired in terms of internal democracy. Many of the larger NGOs have professionalised themselves to the extent that their 'executives' differ little from government diplomats (or even corporate executives). The key is not that NGOs are better interlocutors for foreign civil societies than diplomats because they are in some sense more moral, but that often their existing networks mean that they are already better plugged in to those societies than government representatives. Nevertheless, they should never be more than part of a richer mix of less formal networks, such as academics, journalists or local chambers of commerce. The criteria should be practical: above all, access and credibility in any given civil society.

While effective (and discreet) public diplomacy at home with NGOs and other civil society groups may be an essential precursor to their engagement in successful public diplomacy abroad, equally important may be 'semi-detached' governmental bodies, which retain a certain independence and cultural/intellectual prestige. These bodies are able to engage with civil societies at home and abroad, acting both as a catalyst and entrepreneur in promoting exchanges across a range of cultural, social and political topics. In the United Kingdom, the British Council is increasingly playing this role, to some extent giving it priority over its traditional English teaching or narrower cultural promotion roles (or even subsuming these latter roles in its broader engagement of overseas civil societies). Within the British Council there had been an attempt to redefine this broadening of its activities to promote dialogue between different civil societies and different cultures, using the term 'Mutuality' to distinguish it both from public diplomacy and traditional cultural relation (Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004). The Council is seen as a leader in this field, with both the Goethe

Institute and Alliance Française keen to follow (and there is debate in the United States about establishing an analogue to the Council).

Re-thinking the structure and culture of foreign services

Managing the new international security agenda also has significant implications for the structure and culture of foreign ministries. Dialogue-based or collaborative diplomacy needs time to work: it does not produce instant results. Foreign ministries therefore need to be able to anticipate better which will be the key issues in the medium- to long-term and the international climate in which they will operate. This in turn implies the need to develop a capacity for long-term policy thinking and geo-political analysis. Western foreign ministries are notably weak in both. Overly hierarchical decision-making processes, and their consequent administrative burdens and emphasis on conformism rather than innovation or creativity, condemn officials to short-termism, both of policy-making and analysis.

The gathering of good intelligence or information and its effective and timely analysis are as essential to the new international security agenda as to its Cold War equivalent. But just as the agenda itself has broadened, so has the type of information needed and the most effective ways of gathering it. If the traditional diplomat has lost his monopoly on the management of international relations, so has the traditional intelligence officer lost his monopoly on the gathering of intelligence. Rather than depending on the secret services of the nation state, whether human spies (Humint) or interception of electronic and other communications (Sigint), much of the information on the new international security agenda is to be found in the dense networks of interaction between NGOs, academics and other non-state actors. Accessing this information will be less a question of covert operations than developing effective collaborative relations, whether directly or indirectly, with the actors in these networks. Some may argue that non-democratic governments cannot be trusted even on the less traditional aspects of the new security agenda (e.g., the initial reaction of the Chinese government to the outbreaks of both SARS and Avian Flu), and that thus even in these areas covert operations will still be necessary. While both Humint and Sigint will indeed continue to be necessary to deal with issues such as terrorism and organised crime, they are likely to be counterproductive in other areas. The point of a collaborative paradigm of diplomacy is precisely that it releases flows of information that might otherwise be concealed within xenophobic and defensive government structures. Indeed, the issue in most areas of the new international security agenda may not be the lack of information so much as an excess. The key then will be to develop analytical tools that enable governments to navigate successfully in a highly complex and interconnected world.

In fact, historically the problem with foreign policy-making may always have been poor analytical techniques rather than lack of information (the latter is a convenient excuse for both analysts and policy-makers). Foreign ministries should learn from the experience of the private sector, which makes extensive use of the scenario planning techniques developed by Shell in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as newer modelling techniques derived from network and complexity theory (Ormerod and Riordan, 2004; Riordan, 2006). Traditional 'predict and control' models, in which analysts predict a single 'most probable' future and decision-makers then design a maximising strategy for that single future, no longer function in an ever more complex world. The private sector increasingly uses the newer techniques to generate multiple scenarios or possible futures. Possible strategies are then tested and refined across the possible futures for robustness and adaptability. In other words, the chosen strategy is one that does acceptably well in all the scenarios, not just exceptionally well in only one. Drawing on these techniques, foreign policy machines should be restructured to allow the development of medium- to long-term objectives against various future possible scenarios which can provide the framework in which a foreign policy strategy to secure these objectives can in turn be developed.

It is for debate where the analysis and planning operations should be located. One suggested possibility is linked to the extent to which European governments have moved coordination of European policy, and indeed European strategy, out of foreign ministries and into the equivalent of the prime minister's office. Thus European policy in Britain is now decided by the European Secretariat of the Cabinet Office, in France by the Secrétariat general du Comité interministirériel pour les questions de cooperation économique européenne (SGCI) and in Germany in the Federal Chancellor's Office. In the United Kingdom, the Assessment Staff responsible for analysis and assessment is in the Cabinet Office. This suggests the creation of strategic overseas planning and analysis departments 'above' foreign ministries in prime ministerial or presidential offices, along the lines of the National Security Council.

There needs to be a change of culture as well as structure. Western foreign ministries remain tied to a 'closed' paradigm of decision-making, in which policy is decided and then 'sold' to other governments. Policies once decided may indeed be changed, but only as a result of 'defeat' by foreign governments. This paradigm largely holds true even between close allies. But it is inadequate, and even counterproductive, if the aim is to secure the collaboration of a broad range of partners and their civil societies. Dialogue-based diplomacy requires a more open decision-making process, in which broad policy objectives are set, but in which detailed policies emerge as part of the dialogue process. Dialogue involves listening as well as talking, and accepting that one does not have all the answers and that others might have alternative valid solutions.

Although a major part of the new diplomacy will fall to non-governmental agents, embassies and diplomats abroad will continue to play an important role. They too will need radical changes of culture and structure. Diplomats will continue to have an important role in engaging members of the political élite, and in many cases, key journalists and commentators as well. To do so they will need to be more open and willing to go 'off-message' and to engage in genuine dialogue and debate. Their knowledge of the countries in which they are posted, which will remain of enormous importance, will need to be augmented by greater expert knowledge of key national and international issues to give them credibility. To perform this role successfully, embassies and diplomats need to be encouraged to, and rewarded for, taking risks. In the engagement with broader civil society, their primary role will be as 'diplomatic entrepreneurs', looking for and identifying opportunities for engagement; communicating these opportunities to the relevant non-governmental agents; and, where necessary, facilitating the first steps in engagement. They will only be able to do this effectively if they are part of the informal network established with the non-governmental agents at home. These diplomats will also need to get out into the action, and not only in capital cities. The current departmentalised embassies, and the increasing micro-management from foreign ministries, pose serious obstacles to these public diplomacy roles.

Larger Western embassies tend to spend too much time in self-administration, managing both personnel and large embassy estates, and interacting with other diplomats. A premium is placed on the ability to handle the paperwork sent from headquarters, rather than local networking. Future embassies need to be slimmer and more flexible; less tied to prestigious buildings and more structured around functional networks. In the future five or six well-prepared and well-motivated diplomats with clear objectives, travelling constantly and linked to the foreign ministry network through their mobiles and laptops will be far more effective than the current 30 to 40 diplomats bound to their desks.

Other newer management techniques derived from network theory may also need to be introduced to deal with the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the new international security agenda. The British Diplomatic Service has already introduced, albeit on a modest scale, crisis teams ready to be deployed at short notice to respond to an emergency. This could be further developed with databases of diplomats deployed in routine positions at home or abroad, with details of specialist skills and abilities, who can be brought together rapidly into a unit for a specific purpose or crisis, and then disperse again afterwards. The concept is similar to that of swarming (Arquilla and Rondfeldt, 2000), developed in the military context in recent years at RAND. If technology has produced a much vaunted 'Revolution in Military Affairs', it is quite possible that the new international security agenda may demand a similar 'Revolution in Diplomatic Affairs'.

Notes

1. See Jared Diamond (2006) *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, New York, NY: Penguin Books Ltd.; Joseph Tainter (1988) *The Collapse of Complex Societies,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Investment in R&D by pharmaceutical companies continues to focus on diseases such as cancer and heart disease, which by being prominent mainly in wealthy countries offer better prospects of financial gain (as well as such 'vanity' drugs as Viagra).
3. See Jan Melissen, ed. (2005) *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; see also Mark Leonard and Vidhya Alakeson (2000) *Going Public*, London: Foreign Policy Centre.