

Net Diplomacy

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Looking back to the not-so-distant past, one is struck to learn how much the world has changed in the last 30 to 35 years. New developments in major spheres of activity and new ways of knowing have altered, redefined or even transformed, in some cases, the ways we think, act and do things in the world. Changes are evident in all walks of life. In global politics, the end of the Cold War and the fall of communism have brought to the fore new actors and new issues. Nation-states are the principal but not the sole actors on the world stage. International organizations (IOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational corporations, social movements and other non-state entities like media organizations and terrorist groups play an important role in setting the agenda and exerting influence on a global scale. Traditional concerns of sovereignty and security are still important, but policy-makers and academics are asked to re-conceptualize these concepts in lieu of the challenges posed by globalization and new threats to human security, like economic and ecological degradation, terrorism, massive immigration flows, the spread of infectious diseases and contamination of the food chain, to name a few.

To deal and adjust in a very competitive world economy, the corporate sector has espoused flexible accumulation, a regime based upon vertical production disintegration (sub-contracting, outsourcing, etc.) and encompasses innovation and differentiation in the production and marketing of products and services (Harvey, 1990).

Breakthroughs of a similar magnitude have also occurred in the areas of strategic thinking and military organization. Military operations incorporate new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and technological surveillance systems with the aim to bring the enemy to its knees through precision, surgical targeting. For military units to perform optimally, the command system must be decentralized and important decisions must be left to the operating units. Military analysts in the United States (U.S.) have gone so far as to label the new logic in the thinking and conduct of warfare a revolution in military affairs.

Underlying new developments in all realms of human activity has been an information revolution (Keohane & Nye, 1998). The innovations and breakthroughs in the ICTs of the past 30 years have no parallel in history. Developments in telephony have been superseded by fax

and TV, satellites, cable TV networks and, last but not least, the expanding potential of computers connected in networks in the private (intranets) and public (Internet) spheres of life. The Internet and World Wide Web have grown exponentially, with 812,931,592 million people at present capable of accessing the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2004). All major powers that comprise the G-8, with the exception of Russia, figure in the list of top 10 countries with highest percentage of Internet users per capita. The U.S. leads the way, with a 68.8% Internet penetration rate, followed in descending rank order by Canada (64.2%), United Kingdom (58.5%) Germany (57.1%), Japan (52.2%), Italy (49.3%) and France (40.6%). (Internet World Stats, 2004). Other countries on the list include South Korea (62.4%), Brazil (10.8%) and China (6.8%) (Internet World Stats, 2004).

Speed, the vast quantity of information available and easy, low-cost access to information are main features of the information revolution transforming identities and recasting professional practices like diplomacy in a new light. According to Keohane and Nye (1998), information comes in three forms: strategic, commercial and free. Strategic information is ingrained in intelligence and reconnaissance systems and vital for early warning, preventive measures as well as for carrying, if needed, military operations. Companies provide commercial information in exchange for a payment. Products are traded and sold and services are offered over the Internet. The burgeoning activity surrounding e-commerce falls in this category. Free information is the most widespread form in the public sphere. Nation-states and non-state actors alike post information on the Internet to communicate, persuade and motivate their audiences to action. Information's pivotal role in global affairs is acknowledged in the concepts of soft power and information edge. The persuasiveness of free information enables an actor to exercise soft power; that is, to accomplish desired outcomes because other actors acknowledge and follow the lead of the initial actor in setting the agenda and/or establishing norms and institutions that bring about the desired outcome (Keohane & Nye, 1998). Information as a component of soft power can offer a comparative advantage or an information edge to those states and non-state actors that know how to use and exploit the new ICT (Nye & Owens, 1996). For example, some nation-states develop information edge in the area of strategic communication,

whereas non-state actors develop networks, disseminating information over the Internet and mobilizing supporters on global issues.

The sweeping winds of the information revolution could not leave unearthed even areas of activity known for their conservatism and skepticism to adjust to rapid change like the practice of diplomacy. Up to the present, diplomats as a profession have privileged courtesy, patience and compromise as modes of operation. Diplomatic time is slow and change is accomplished by an incremental step-by-step approach. Diplomats, as members of the diplomatic corps, observe formal as well as tacit rules of behavior and share a communal sense of belonging reinforced by their socialization practices and ritualized interactions. In terms of skills, diplomats rely upon face-to-face interpersonal relationships and have been lagging behind the military officers in upgrading their technical skills. In mediating conflicts and negotiating settlements, diplomats are inclined to favor secret meetings among state elites over open communications and deliberations engaging broader segments of societies. In terms of training, their educational backgrounds originate from a number of academic disciplines (i.e., history, literature, political science, economics, international relations, etc.) and the glue that seems to bind professional diplomats together is their common realist orientation to the understanding of world affairs (Onuf, 1989, p. 249). One can easily surmise that the profile of diplomats is not conducive to the fast pace, transparent and publicly debated mode of communication engendered by the information revolution. Perhaps diplomacy and information and communication technologies may not be a good match but the former can afford to ignore the later at the risk of its own peril.

There is widely held agreement that the key diplomatic functions involve representation, communication and negotiation. To these functions one may add promotion of economic-commercial and legal interests, promotion of cultural relations and policy advice to decision-makers (Jönsson, 2002, p. 215). What remains, though, still in dispute is who represents what entities. Narrow conceptions of diplomacy, advanced by the realist school in international relations, acknowledge professional diplomats as agents of states in an international system of nation-states. Broad conceptions of diplomacy, more attuned to critical and interpretive perspectives in International Relations extend representation to include non-state actors and define diplomacy as “a regulated process of communication between at least two subjects, conducted by their representative agents over a particular object” (Constantinou, 1996, pp. 25-26). Diplomacy involves the sustained exchange of information and the practice of persuasion among state and non-state actors for reaching agreement and solving problems on national

and global issues. The communication function remains central to both conceptions of diplomacy and inquiring into the effects of the information revolution on diplomatic practice is pertinent as ever.

The key question to ask is how the information and communication technologies, along with the force of globalization and the emergence of a vocal global civil society, are impacting the conduct of diplomacy. To address this question, we will examine changes that are occurring at the substance and the practices of diplomacy. We will then proceed to demonstrate, by reference to a number of examples, how governments have adjusted to the information revolution and how non-state transnational actors have been empowered by information and communication technologies.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the force of globalization have undermined territorially-based state sovereignty. Territory as a dimension of world affairs is downgraded and the conception that the world resembles more a network of nodes representing organizations, individuals or portals in cyberspace warrants serious consideration. Nation-states are still the principal actors and retain the power to grant or withhold recognition in a system of states. However, interdependence among nation-states, the effacing of the domestic-foreign divide in addressing global issues and problems and the new opportunities afforded by the use of information and communication technologies, have brought about both a re-conceptualization in the substance and practices of diplomacy and a diffusion of diplomacy to transnational non-state actors that comprise global civil society. Presently, diplomacy is “shared by all who speak and act on a global level to arbitrate, negotiate, mediate, or any way represent the multiple perspectives that make up these publics” (Brown & Studemeister, 2002). As a consequence, diplomatic activities are carried out not only by professional diplomats but also by others like nongovernmental organizations, social movements, activists and representatives of transnational businesses. All these entities address global issues either collaborating through the formation of global policy networks or coalescing against policies of states and international organizations. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the actors of the new networked global society appeal and attempt to persuade a global public opinion of a multilayered and ever-shifting composition of interests.

As already mentioned, speed, easy access to vast amounts of information and transparency characterize the information revolution. Each of these characteristics is impacting diplomacy in a number of ways. Speed allows high-level officials in foreign ministries to process and analyze information. In this respect, officials charged with decision-making benefit in the sense of receiving information in a matter of seconds from a variety of sources, not

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