The Diplomat in a Changing World

Former top diplomat and strategist Dr Assad Homayoun sees how the world has changed, and sees how the diplomat should be changing to meet the challenges.

The development of instant communications, the advance of science and technology and especially of nuclear weapons, the population explosion and the proliferation of new nations all impact on international relations and the diplomat's life. But man's nature, including that of the diplomat, remains the same.

Revolutionary change in the nature of relations between countries has changed the responsibilities of diplomats, however. Today, diplomacy is a mass, rather than elite, function. But the nature of the mission — like that of the man — remains the same.

Sir Henry Wotton gave his much-quoted definition of a diplomat as an honest man sent abroad to lie for the good of his country. To some extent this remains true, but not entirely. An ambassador may not always tell the truth, or he may seek refuge in discretion. But to be effective he must be credible to attract the confidence of the government to which he is accredited; and to do that he must basically be a man of integrity.

The nature of diplomatic life and duty is such that — given a state of mistrust, suspicion and sometimes deception — he cannot always play the rôle of an honorable man. Perhaps for that reason, the age-old reputation of ambassadors for dishonesty and deviousness will remain.[1]

The aim of diplomacy is to promote the national interest of the country. It is also a technique for accomodating conflicting interests.[2] But it could also be construed that, apart from representing national interests, the rôle of a diplomat includes the bringing about of compromises to ensure a greater peace in an age when conflict has more dire consequences.[3]

Today's diplomat does not enjoy the same prestige, security and immunity of even recent years, and in his home country is often the object of jealousy and suspicion when his countrymen think he's enjoying a privileged life in a foreign country. Diplomats, as a result, have become wanderers between two worlds, and in neither are they fully accepted.[4] As a result, the rôles and responsibilities of diplomats have changed tremendously in recent years, and their horizon has stretched beyond the traditional view of diplomacy.

Today's diplomat must give strong attention to such matters as arms, trade, oil and other resources, cultural and technical matters and intelligence and psychological operations.[5] The change was inevitable: economic, scientific, resource, defense and communications matters have transformed international relations, and the diplomat — as the human element — had to change along with his environment.

Sir Harold Nicolson paraphrases Demosthenes, saying: "Ambassadors have no battleship at their disposal, nor infantry or fortress; their weapons are words and opportuntities." But words are often as important as cannon; men come to power and are destroyed by words.

Even so, an ambassador's activities are not restricted just to the use of words and opportunities today. They have at their disposal specialists in different fields: legal, scientific, military, media, economic, energy, psyops and intelligence experts. And often the funds to pursue research or activities — both legal and illegal — in these areas to further their country's interests.

During the expulsion of 47 Soviet Embassy officials from France this year, because of their involvement in defense-related espionage, French intelligence sources estimated that a third of the 700 officials of Soviet agencies in France were directly responsible to the KGB and Soviet military intelligence, the GRU.[6] On June 22, 1983, the Assistant Soviet Military Attaché was expelled from Norway. The Oslo press reported that the assistant attaché, in addition to his espionage activities, had been trying to gain influence in "the Norwegian peace movement".[7]

Psy-Ops in the Service of Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Today, with the advance of technology, psychological warfare and propaganda have become a most powerful weapon, and have added a new dimension to diplomacy and foreign policy.

Since foreign policy, as Morgenthau put it, is the struggle for the minds of men, then the principles which must guide this struggle should be adopted. Since everything is influenced by perceptions, then everything in the sphere of politics and economics is penetrated and molded by this force.[8]

Implementers of foreign policy must master these principles if they are to know under what conditions, and how, the minds of men will change or react. In this connection, the emphasis is on nothing but *psychology*.[9]

Those who wish to influence other people's attitudes, and possibly their actions, cannot succeed unless they are absolutely clear in what they want those people to think and to do. Today, the main battle is psychological, and the ambassador's task is to deal with, and understand, psychological warfare and psyops.

Iran and Iraq are now engaged not only in a military conflict, but they are also very active on the psychological front. The delivery of the five French AMD *Super Étendard* strike aircraft to Iraq and the Iranian threat to close the Strait of Hormuz was a source of considerable international concern. And it was around these themes that Iran and Iraq, in early September of this year, stepped up their psychological campaigns.

Iraq, in a desparate situation, despatched its senior diplomat, Ismat Kittani, to Washington to meet with US officials and institutions such as Brookings and the Carnegie Endowment, to raise US interest in the war, and to convince US policymakers that they should try to influence a peace, and *not* prevent delivery of the *Super Étendard* fighters then awaiting delivery to Iraq.[10]

On the other hand, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, in his September 22 message to the people, said that if harm came to Iran's interest in the Persian Gulf, then Iran would use all its power to close the Strait of Hormuz. Iran could not, in fact, close the strait, and the five Iraqi new fighters cannot in themselves change the course of the war, but psycho-political diplomacy of both states influenced the conduct of the war and international behaviour in regard to it. Khomeini's statement caused several Persian Gulf states to try to stop delivery of the French aircraft to Iraq.[12]

When the Soviets shot down the KAL aircraft on September 1, the US did not want to turn the incident into a Soviet-US confrontation, but the US benefited politically from the Soviet move, putting them on the defensive ever since. However, the Soviets were able to gain respect for their toughness in the Third World, while Europe and the US condemned their actions.[13]

This growing international closeness brought about through new communications techniques has meant over the past decade or so that foreign ministers themselves, who are the chief diplomats of their countries, have become more active. Their own personal contacts have been able to flourish. And, on the other hand, this has often meant that ambassadors could undertake the signing of major treaties because the presence of a foreign minister may no longer be as critical a symbol as it once was when his direct contact on a regular basis — by telephone, for example — was not feasible.

The growth of personal contacts by ministers and diplomats alike, again often brought about by modern communications and trans portation technologies, has also changed the scope of diplomacy. And often, in times of crisis, special envoys can rapidly be injected into situations to affect the outcome. Indeed, the gravity of the situation can be conveyed by the switch from normal diplomatic channels to the use of senior cabinet or political officials.

In the US, John Foster Dulles was the first Secretary of State to combine the cabinet office with that of the more glamorous rôle of presidential agent. He was the most powerful and travelled Secretary of State until that time. After that, Dr Kissinger, with his shuttle diplomacy and back-channel approach as National Security Adviser to the President, and later as Secretary of State, used his domineering style to become a global diplomatic personality. He often gained success through this technique and certainly impacted on world affairs.[14] Nonetheless, the use of symbols such as a Secretary of State (in the US example) carries with it a high psycho-political risk: the buffer between diplomatic effort and the final decision — the Head of State — is narrowed considerably, often limiting, rather than enhancing, negotiating flexibility. In this case, the power to make diplomatic decisions is greater, but the ability to manipulate the situation (perhaps to greater advantage) is reduced.

Michel Jobert, foreign policy adviser and later Foreign Minister under President Pompidou of France, also had a pronounced impact on affairs as his nation's top foreign policy official, as did Egyptian National Security Adviser to President Anwar as-Sadat, Hafiz Ismail, and Ambassador Ashraf Ghorbal in Egypt in the early 1970s, the beginning of the Middle East peace initiatives. They were able to use their considerable influence at head-of-state level to play an important rôle in behind-the-scenes negotiations.

Often, however, the use of a variety of multiple diplomatic options can create competition between national security advisers, foreign ministers and diplomats, and cloud the diplomatic channels, thereby causing great harm to the national foreign policy.

In this regard, the United States policy toward Iran during the Carter Administration in the last year of the Shah's reign is a good case to study. Too many avenues of "diplomacy" caused effects which were unexpected and detrimental to Iranian and US interests.

The Ambassador's Role is Still Important

It is true that the rapid changes in the world have necessitated a transformation in diplomacy. But the rôle of the ambassador and the diplomatic corps remains important. Understanding of a nation, its mind, the attitudes of its elites, its cultural tendencies, and the mechanics of its society, is a difficult thing to acquire and sustain, and yet this knowledge — on a current and ongoing basis — is critical to the formulation of policy with regard to the country in question.

Had, for example, Argentina's leadership in 1982 better understood the cultural, historical and strategic factors within the United Kingdom and the United States — and the relations between the two — then they may have refrained from committing Argentina to war over the Falkland Islands. It is the diplomat's task to understand the traditions and psychologies of the nation to which he is accredited; to be able to know and comprehend its history, language and symbols and what they mean. And then to ensure that these factors are considered in his own government's policymaking and in all actions regarding communication between the two states.

Too often, the diplomat is expected merely to communicate his own country's views without regard to the psychological framework of his host nation, and his effectiveness is diminished accordingly. It is true that, on many occasions, a foreign minister can fly into a country and conclude a successful negotiation, returning home the same evening. But it is the resident ambassador and his staff who should ensure that the stage is set by an understanding of the power structure of their host country, its sensitivities and priorities.

Ambassadors sometimes fail to understand the issues and dynamics of their host country, failing to predict critical events and issues in time. And because of this failure of so many diplomatic officials to perceive the sensitive two-way nature of their unique positions, they earn the title of "messengers" or "glorified journalists" or "men who either do nothing or act stupidly".[15]

And yet in spite of all the criticisms and drawbacks of diplomats due to the revolutionary change in diplomatic scope and the complicated situation in world affairs, the function of the diplomatic corps remains extremely important.[16]

Admittedly, in an increasingly complex and volatile world, too much is at stake to be left just to an individual ambassador. There is a growing need for objective evaluation and analysis of psychological forces and the motivations of leaders, for example, of revolutionary or dynamic movements within the host country.[17] Much of the need for a broader understanding of, and contact with, the host country is provided by the growing tendency toward the commitment of specialists to embassy functions: the economists, resource experts, intelligence officials, agricultural officials, and, of course, defense attachés.

Even so, in another sense, the ambassador remains himself a symbol of his country and often serves as a target for assassination, kidnapping or vilification. The embassy, until recently a sanctuary in a foreign land, has become increasingly less immune. The 14-month seizure of the US Embassy and diplomats in Tehran was unprecedented in diplomatic history, for example. And the burning of the US Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan; the forced entry of the US Embassy in Tripoli, Libya, in December 1979; and the April 18, 1983, bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, all show that diplomatic life has become difficult, while expectations on diplomats have increased dramatically.

Turkish diplomats around the world have also, for example, served as convenient symbols for terrorist attacks in recent years.

It is true that today the ambassador lacks the prestige, gilt and lustre of a Talleyrand or Bismarck, but envoys such as Charles Bohlen, George Kennan and Loy Henderson of the United States; Huang Hua of the People's Republic of China; Krishna Menon and K. M. Panikkar of India; and Anatoliy Dobrynin of the USSR, could all well fit into the age of "great ambassadors". Moreover, ambassadors like Francis Meloy — who was killed in 1976 in Beirut — or the 52 diplomats who underwent a severe test for 444 days of imprisonment by terrorists in Tehran, and Adolph Dubs who was assassinated in Kabul, performed their duties with the acme of patriotism, courage and dedication which could not be found in the time of Talleyrand and Bismarck.

Because of the expansion of diplomatic scope, due to growing international interdependence and a proliferation of nations, and since a national policy may so easily impact on the policies of many other states and the lives of many, the ambassador of today should care for the cause of peace.[18] And who, in an age so volatile and so dangerous, is better placed to balance the nations than the diplomat, now with so many skills and technologies at his command? ☆

Footnotes:

1. Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics Among Nations*. Alfred H. Knopf, New York, 1960, p.547.
2. *See* Rosenau, James N. (ed.) *International Politics and Foreign Policy*. The Free Press, New York, 1969, p.188.
3. *See also* Plischke, Elmer. *United States Diplomats and Their Missions*. American Enterprise Institute, Washington DC, 1975. Foreword by F. Wilcox.
4. Craig, Gordon A., and Gilbert, Felix. *The Diplomats 1919-1939*. Princeton University Press, 1972, p.3.
5. *See* Trevelyon, Humphrey. *Diplomatic Channels*. Gambit Incorporated, Boston, 1973, p.15.
6. Dobbs, Michael. *47 Diplomats Expelled From France*. Washington Post, April 6, 1983.
7. *USSR Disinformation Campaigns*. Defense & Foreign Affairs Daily. Washington DC, September 23, 1983.
8. *See* Morgenthau, pp.338-339.
9. Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda*. Vintage Book, New York, 1973, p.xi.
10. *US Seeking to Halt Iran-Iraq Conflict*. The Washington Post, September 19, 1983, p.20.
11. Khomeini's speech in Friday Prayer. Kayhan International Edition, Tehran, September 28, 1983.
12. *See* Defense & Foreign Affairs Weekly, Middle East, October 3-9, 1983.
13. *USSR Preparing for Strategy Changes*. Defense & Foreign Affairs Daily, Washington DC, September 30, 1983.
14. *See* Sulzburger, C.L., *Everywhere at Once*. The New York Times, December 26, 1973.
15. *See* Clark, Eric, *Diplomat*. Taplinger Publishing Co., New York, 1974, p.2.
16. *See also* Kissinger, Dr Henry. *Remarks of the Secretary of State to the Foreign Service Association*. November 11, 1974.
17. Langer, Walter C. *The Mind of Adolf Hitler*.
18. Kissinger, Dr Henry. *Speech of the Secretary of State at Swearing-in Ceremony of 119th Foreign Service Class*. June 27, 1975.