

How Obama's Nobel can resurrect diplomacy

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Now that the saturation coverage of Obama's big Nobel win has finally subsided, it has become possible to poke around in the ashes of yesterday's news with a view to getting at the real meaning of the story.

The media focused overwhelmingly, and almost exclusively, on whether or not the president deserved the prize based upon his performance in office to date. That is a worthwhile debate, and a respectable case can be made on either side of the issue.

No, Obama has not yet managed to deliver on much of what has been promised, perhaps especially as regards that hardy, and extremely thorny perennial, Middle East peace.

But yes, there have been some very promising initial signs, such as substantially reprofiling European missile defence, reaching out to the Islamic world, banning torture and extraordinary rendition, moving to close Guantanamo Bay and the global network of black interrogation sites and secret prisons, repairing transatlantic relations, and so forth. Much of this has already paid measureable dividends in terms of the restoration of America's global image, reputation, soft power and influence. Brand America is again showing some of its former lustre.

In a sense, however, simply framing the question in that way obscures the more profound political signal transmitted by the Nobel committee. That message boils down to a very public gesture of support for diplomacy in general, and for American presidential diplomacy in particular.

Unilateralism and pre-emption seem to have given way to partnerships and dialogue. Diplomacy, after a protracted period of languishing on the sidelines, appears to have been substituted for compulsion and restored as a legitimate tool of statecraft. Diplomacy was mentioned three times in the committee's four paragraph announcement.

For the US—and the world—the return of a preference for dialogue over diktat is well worth commemorating. But, just before you uncork that champagne.... Having a high-functioning communicator as president is one thing, but bringing diplomacy back into the mainstream as a fully fit instrument of international policy is quite another.

There is a widely held conviction, for instance, that the State Department is not up to the job. And, if you follow the money, and pay more attention to what governments do than what they say, there remains a great imbalance favouring defence establishment as an international policy instrument, at the expense of development and diplomacy.

So, does diplomacy—that oft-mentioned, little understood approach to the management of international relations characterized by negotiation and compromise—still matter here?

I believe that answer to be yes, but. Diplomacy matters now more than ever, but in many countries it has been sidelined. Its practices, practitioners and institutions have not adapted well to the exigencies of globalization, while international policy, at the most elemental level of resource allocation and decision-making influence, remains heavily militarized.

Along with a binary world view and a tendency to see threats and challenges to the world order almost everywhere, the militarization of international policy is a Cold War carry-over that plays to a very particular agenda. Just substitute political violence and religious extremist terrorism for the Red Menace and presto, old becomes new again.

In the public mind, diplomacy has never fully recovered from the legacy of Chamberlain in Munich, when it came to be associated with weakness and appeasement.

That negative association is exacerbated by the prevailing archetypes of spoiled ditherers drinking and dining off the public purse, lost in a haze of irrelevance somewhere between protocol and alcohol, which in turn has reinforced the more substantial issue of failing to change with the times. The result is a double diplomatic deficit: an increasing demand for, but diminished supply of, diplomacy world-wide, and a serious performance gap which afflicts foreign ministries most everywhere.

Diplomacy has been neglected for over half a century. During the Cold War, international relations revolved largely around geopolitical confrontation, ideological competition, territorial disputes, alliance politics, and multilateral organizations. The imperatives of deterrence and mutually assured destruction, all files dominated by the military, tended to leave only small spaces on the margins for diplomatic manoeuvre.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 allowed the

trend towards the militarization of international policy—which was almost derailed in the 1990s by the absence of credible enemies and demands for the payment of a peace dividend—to continue. Like communism, the threat of terrorism was declared to be universal and undifferentiated. Like containment, addressing it would require extensive global facilities for power projection and the declaration of an open-ended, global war on terror, again led by the armed forces.

Throughout this period, the marginalization of diplomacy has persisted, if not become more acute. How so? Most diplomats work for states, and these days states are only one actor among many on a world stage now crowded with multinational corporations, NGOs, think tanks and celebrities.

In recent years the formulation of foreign policy has become more of an executive and specialized function, with leadership passing increasingly upwards into the hands of presidents and prime ministers, outwards to new actors and other government departments, and downwards to other levels of government. Foreign ministries have lost much of their turf.

Today, clearly delineated empires are no longer colliding, and the spectre of world war and thermonuclear annihilation has receded. In the globalization era, the most profound threats and challenges to human survival—pandemics, food security, resource scarcity and climate change, to name a few—are rooted in science and driven by technology. The centre of gravity in international relations has shifted; bombs and guns, generals and admirals can't readily address the new set of threats and challenges. Diplomats can and should. But are they? Not well enough.

In the face of challenges of this magnitude, simply dusting diplomacy off or changing the wrapping won't do. It must be re-thought from the ground up. Traditional diplomacy turns on conventions, some formally codified, others embedded in the bureaucratic culture.

A diplomatic renaissance, however, will turn on the unconventional, on the capacity to get well beyond both negative stereotypes of cartoon caricatures in top hats and pearls and the default position of merely going through the well-established motions of conducting relations between states.

The management of today's sprawling suite



Barack Obama

of transnational issues requires not only relentless creativity and tireless collaboration, but the engagement of cross-cutting networks between government and civil society—NGOs, business, universities, think tanks and the media. This means finding ways to build better diplomats—by adopting innovative approaches to recruitment, training, and professional development, for instance. But it also implicates a more fundamental diplomatic transition: from looking to seeing, from hearing to listening, and from transmitting to receiving. These qualities are central to public diplomacy and guerilla diplomacy.

So, does diplomacy matter? You bet, because it privileges talking over fighting—you can't garrison against global warming, or call in an air strike on inequality. If human-centred, long-term development is the essence of the new security, then diplomacy must displace defence at the core of international policy.

But if diplomacy is going to work, then foreign ministries will first need to be fixed—made relevant domestically, made effective in their operations, and transformed into international policy entrepôts for the management of globalization. Making a priority of science and technology, which is the engine of globalization, and bringing coherence to governance and democracy promotion, could jump-start that process.

Policy is the poetry of internal relations, and that is the province of elected representatives. Diplomacy, however, is about the plumbing, and it is for officials to ensure that when the faucet is turned on, something comes out. Provided with the resources required to get the job done, foreign ministries can be restored as dynamic catalysts of grand strategy and broadly-based international policy development for the 21st century. There is evidence that some of these venerable institutions, often against steep odds, are struggling to deliver on that potential.

Public and political support in favour of re-investing desperately needed resources, however, will be essential. That, perhaps, is the meaning of President Obama's Nobel Prize that everyone needs to take on board.

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PAID MESSAGE BY THE EMBASSY OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN CANADA

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As far as the idea of a nuclear-free world is concerned, this is our common ideal, which we have to strive for, but we have to travel a difficult road to get to it, because in order to achieve a nuclear-free world not only the United States and Russia should abandon nuclear arms at some point, but other countries as well should do the same, yet there is no such unity.

Even among our close European partners, by far not all of them share our common opinion with the US President that this issue should be dealt with vigorously.

DER SPIEGEL: The countries in question may only be France and the UK.

DMITRY MEDVEDEV: The threshold nuclear countries demonstrate even less understanding of the subject, let alone the countries that are trying to gain unconventional access to nuclear technologies. Besides, there is a number of countries that do not admit that they have nuclear weapons, but at the same time, they do not deny it either. We should think how to convince them all to abandon nuclear weapons.

DER SPIEGEL: You know that the West fears Iran with nuclear weapons. But as big as this fear is, thus big is the issue. What is Russia's stance in this sphere? How far are you wishing to support Iran both in arms deliveries and in technological development of this country? Will you support tougher Western sanctions against Iran?

DMITRY MEDVEDEV: First, about the nuclear ambitions of Iran. These ambitions can be achieved within the programme on the peaceful use of nuclear energy under IAEA supervision. Nobody is against this. It is only necessary to comply with the existing rules and not to try to conceal any facilities.

If agreements are reached on programmes of uranium enrichment and its subsequent peaceful use in Iran, we will then gladly take part in such programmes.

But if the Iranian leadership takes a less constructive position, hypothetically anything is possible then. We spoke about this in New York during our meeting with President Obama. I would not like all this to culminate in international legal sanctions because sanctions, as a rule, are a road in a very tricky and dangerous direction. But if there is no progress, nobody can exclude such a scenario either.

Second, our national policy and my decisions are based on assumption that we will supply only those types of weapons that have a pronounced defensive nature. We will not deliver any offensive weapons.

DER SPIEGEL: Do you see any risk that the West will follow the destiny of the USSR when it had to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan after so many years of war with many thousands of Soviet soldiers lost?

DMITRY MEDVEDEV: Yes, I do. If the alliance forces, the forces now present in Afghanistan, do not help the country to gain statehood, then any attempts from outside to stabilize the situation will fail no matter how many thousands of soldiers of the international contingent are present there, unless the Afghan population wishes to create statehood and govern its state as an integral whole.

The election committee made a decision to declare Hamid Karzai the elected President of Afghanistan. This is an additional element of stability. I am not assessing now the manner in which these elections took place. We have been talking about the flaws of our election system just now that is why I do not consider it fair to criticize other electoral systems even though, and I cannot fail to mention this, some time ago our American colleagues qualified both the elections in Afghanistan and in Iraq as the triumph of democracy. Well, if that is the triumph of democracy, then you are welcome to give your own assessment of the electoral tendencies that exist in our country.

The most important thing is that the Afghan people should feel the appetite for building up their own political system, for creating their own state following their idea of the rule of the

people so that it is not imposed upon them but is experienced by them, that such an attitude to these processes is felt in each Afghan province irrespective of the nation that lives there. It is crucial that the radical forces that are present there pull back, be defeated, and the distressful Afghan land at last sees peace.

DER SPIEGEL: You said that after the fall of the Berlin Wall there were expectations that came true and those that did not. What did you mean by this?

DMITRY MEDVEDEV: The expectations that have come true are evident: Europe is unified and a common German state exists, even though the process has been difficult as well.

As for the hopes that have not been fulfilled, well, we believed that after the fall of the Berlin Wall Russia's place in Europe will be a bit different. We hoped that the termination of the Warsaw Treaty will be followed by a different level of integration of Russia into the pan-European area. What do we get as a result? NATO remains a military alliance that possesses missiles aimed at Russia.

I will say a few words about the idea of the treaty on European security. It is aimed precisely at creating a framework to give all of us, both NATO members and European countries that are not NATO members, the possibility to discuss the most urgent issues. Otherwise the states with no NATO membership will not be fully at ease. It does not mean that I want to oppose the idea of this treaty against NATO. We should create a comprehensive mechanism to communicate, discuss the most difficult situations and ways to settle our intra-European disagreements on various matters.

The last year's conflict in Georgia demonstrated that our security in Europe is not guaranteed. That was a European conflict. I am convinced that we must think about how to enhance the European security. It is our common need.

DER SPIEGEL: I would say that today's Europe is, in the first instance, a community united by common values, namely democracy and human rights. These values play a

special role. The future role of Russia in Europe will depend, to a large extent, on when you achieve your goals of democracy and human rights in Russia. But are these goals realistically achievable in Russia?

DMITRY MEDVEDEV: We share the same values which are recognized in the West. I see no major deviations in the concepts of human rights and freedoms, especially if Russia is compared to the new members of the European Union. They are no better than us in terms of political culture and the level of economic development, but they are small, and they regularly claim they have to face multiple threats.

DER SPIEGEL: Do you now refer to Poland and Baltic Republics?

DMITRY MEDVEDEV: The only difference between us and them is that Russia is a big, very big country with its own nuclear potential. It would, therefore, be utterly wrong to state that there is some monolithic Europe with fully accomplished democracy versus a primeval, ignorant Russia which is not yet ready to be invited to join Europe.

DER SPIEGEL: One can hear a great deal of bitterness in your words...

DMITRY MEDVEDEV: It is not only Russia who seeks foreign investment. You also wanted and want now to cooperate with Russia on the Opel, Wadan Yards and other projects. It shows that we have absolutely identical economic agendas and our economic convergence is very high.

Then the question is: what divides us today? I hope that there's almost nothing to divide us.

I hope that we will be able to continue strengthening our relations with our European neighbours. I hope that the degree of mutual understanding on the majority of issues will be growing. I hope that many of the problems that the European continent is facing today, which are quite obvious, will be solved through our active joint involvement