



## **UNCONVENTIONAL APPROACHES TO DIPLOMATIC THEORY**

**by Garrett Jones**

In my years of government service, I have spent quite a bit of time as a briefcase carrier and “go-fer” for some pretty capable and talented diplomats in the U.S. Foreign Service. While being a diplomat was not my primary job, I did pick up a few pointers from these diplomats on how the game of international diplomacy is played between nations. It appears either that these sorts of basic points did not make the criteria for inclusion in Foreign Service training or that the State Department’s guardian of the “tribal memory” has retired.

Whatever one may think of current U.S. foreign policy in general, even its supporters will admit to the appearance of clumsy execution, poorly briefed officials and a focus on short-term spin vs. long-term policy goals. In short, despite being a superpower, we have not won many lately. North Korea and Iraq are the headliners in what seems to be a widespread uncertainty of where the foreign policy ship of state is headed next.

Most Foreign Service officers operate at a level far above their pay grade, with little or no thanks from anyone. But despite their hard work, there seems to be an ignorance of “street smarts for diplomats.” At the risk of being called “cheeky”, here are a few things they might not have covered when going through basic diplomat training in Northern Virginia. If you already know this stuff, then make sure you pass it on to the next generation. .

**ENTHUSIASM vs. COMPETENCE.** Do not confuse the two concepts. Just because an individual agrees with you on everything, they still may lack competence. First, you have to get it done. Then you can explain at length how your correct thinking deserves the credit. The corollary to this is do not confuse ideology with competence. It is much easier to live with a competent heretic than it is a witless zealot.

**AID AND CHARITY ORGANIZATIONS LIE.** You cannot place much confidence in the reporting of any U.S. government aid agency or international charity group about what the conditions on the ground are at any location. They are only human. They often work in terrible conditions with those who are very needy. It is understandable that they often view their own clients or situation as “the worst off.” There are more in need than there is money available to help. Your job as a U.S. diplomat is always to give the policymakers in Washington accurate information on which to base a rational decision. Another reason to be a little leery of situation reports from the charity and aid folks is not mentioned in polite company, but it is true. Careers are made, promotions are gained and organizations expand when they can identify with a juicy disaster (insert pitiful pictures of starving children here.) This is not most of the folks you will run into, but such people are out there. A rough guide is how many superlatives they use to describe the situation on the ground. If they use more than half a dozen in a 15-minute conversation, either the end is near or you need to take a firm grip on your wallet.

**DICTATORSHIPS ARE PERSONAL.** In a dictatorship, there is no space between the Supreme Leader and the government of the county. Criticizing the Big Man’s necktie will go over about the same as calling all the citizens buffoons. In many places, it is far worse to impugn the omniscience of the Great Leader than sending a nasty diplomatic note. He might never know about the note, but someone will tell him the American called him names. This rule also applies to de facto dictatorships, it does not matter what the national constitution of the country says. If the Padrone thinks he owns the government, then comments on the national soccer side can be the moral equivalent to breaking diplomatic relations. The inverse sometimes applies. “Wow” the Grand Jefe and you can then get away with the diplomatic equivalent of larceny with threats. If the Big Guy likes you, no one working for him is going to throw too much of a fit. They understand the game, even if you do not.

**MONEY IS FUNGIBLE.** Even by giving aid to the victims it is abusing, you are in fact supporting a repressive government. Money not spent on either feeding or repressing its restive citizens is money available to the regime. These funds are then used for corruption or other means of propping up the government. This may not be what you want to do, but understand your charity is in effect going into the government’s pocket.

**GET OVER YOURSELF.** You were sent overseas to lie, steal, and cheat for your country. If you are uncomfortable with that, then

you do not understand your job. You are not there to do good; you are there to do well while looking good. We hope that your being an advocate for the U.S.'s interests will result in good things, but not always. Have you considered hiring on with a charitable organization? Many of them do "good work."

**HIERARCHY OF NEEDS.** There are four basic levels of interest for a sovereign country that are taught in academia and then one unspoken interest that trumps everything else. In more or less descending order, survival interest (preventing a nuclear attack, for instance); vital interests (ensuring access to oil or water); national interest (protecting a country's citizens and corporations); and general interests - promotion of a country's ideals, etc. The one that triumphs all other interests is the political survival of the government in power. Long-term vital interests, citizens and everything else will usually be sacrificed to permit a government to continue in power. This is true for the U.S., as much as it is anywhere else.

**SECOND LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS.** All systems tend towards entropy, including political systems. The longer a government or political party has been in power, the greater the level of corruption and incompetence among the people in charge. Individuals improve their skills and competency over time; political administrations do not.

**TALK TO ANYBODY.** I have often thought there should be a Deputy Assistant Undersecretary of State in Charge of Talking to Anybody Who Walks in the Door. Often the prohibition on talking to some faction or government comes from the top, but it is almost always wrong. Someone, at some level, should always talk to whoever will talk to us, even if it is just to get an accurate copy of the abusive press release. Interesting things can happen when dialogue is opened.

**ENVY AND SPITE AS MOTIVES.** Never underestimate national envy and personal spite as motives in international relations. Simply to be seen as opposing the U.S. is good politics in some countries. Some societies view the U.S. as a country of mixed breeds and are annoyed that it exists and continues to be successful, despite having an "inferior" culture. More than a few diplomats have been bested by the U.S.'s economic or military power, our supposed allies included. Their egos are every bit as big as ours are. We should also remember that modesty is not one of our cultural strong points.

**JUST BECAUSE THEY ARE CRAZY DOES NOT MEAN THEY AREN'T IN CHARGE.** One of the more difficult things for many U.S. diplomats to accept is that the intelligent, articulate, well-educated person across the table from them can and will act in an irrational manner on some subjects. On many occasions, I have read reports where diplomats assure Washington that some country's leadership will act in their country's best interest, only to watch the same country doing the exact opposite. Sometimes, on some issues, the cultural divide is not rational. Keep that in mind the next time you think something is a slam dunk.

Having pointed out some concepts that may have been forgotten, let me now presume to suggest some longstanding concepts that desperately need a visit from the diplomatic version of "Extreme Makeover".

**THE POTTERY BARN RULE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.** In the twentieth century, international law operated on the basis of you break it, you own it. If your country overthrows a government, then your country is responsible for creating and establishing a replacement government. Unfortunately, in the twenty-first century this rule is not working out very well (see the Balkans, Iraq, Palestine, Somalia and other cases). This idea needs to be rethought. The old model of conquering a country and then making it a vassal state against the will of its citizens is well past its expiration date. Some problems need to be eliminated by military force, but subsequent rebuilding may be best left to someone other than the original military organization.

**MANY INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES ARE NOT REAL.** Sometimes, neither are the countries they delineate. More governments than anyone would care to admit hold sway over their capital cities and little else. While the international community limits itself to the "recognized" government of the day, the people who can actually affect the conditions on the ground are foisted off on nongovernmental groups. While this may make shaky governments around the world breathe easier, ignoring reality generally causes more problems than it solves. The international community needs to come up with a new designation or category, not quite a sovereign government, but not to be ignored, either. The politically correct term would be "legitimizing all the stakeholders."

**AT SOME POINT, IT IS HISTORY.** At some point in time, every culture, ethnic group or nationality has been done an injustice by some other group. But squabbling about historical wrongs is almost never useful. The international community needs to put a cap on how far back one can reach to raise a legitimate grievance. A hundred years, two hundred years? At some point, no matter how justified, the grievance is the stuff of history books, not legitimate international discussion. It will not stop the domestic scoundrels from exploiting the argument or issue, but tying this principle to international aid and loans will certainly slow it down.

**CRY HAVOC! GET A GRIP ON THE LAWS OF WAR.** The laws of war clearly need to be reassessed and brought up-to-date by new treaty language in the Geneva Convention. Transnational and armed civilian militias have rendered many of the old notions of "combatant" meaningless. Indeed, some groups make it part of their strategy to use groups or locations protected by the Law of War to further their ends. Unless modern definitions and the responsibility for committing certain acts are brought up-to-date, the current muddle will get worse, not better.

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