U.S. Department of State
Diplomacy in Action

Smart Power: From Theory to Practice

Remarks
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Citizens for Global Solutions Annual Conference
Washington, DC
March 17, 2011

In the spring of 2004 I published an article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine entitled Smart Power (http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/59716/suzanne-nossel/smart-power). In it I countered the idea that either "soft power" – U.S. cultural influence – or "hard power" – military might, could alone be the basis for a winning foreign policy strategy. I argued that the effective exercise of U.S. power must involve multiple tools and approaches, including reliance on allies, outreach to civil society, and robust institutions, in order to deliver results. Four years later, in her confirmation testimony to become Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton picked up the term and made it her own She said that smart power means using "the full range of tools at our disposal — diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural — picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation."

Much of the early discussion of smart power aimed to counter the shrinking of the toolkit of American foreign policy. There were too many years of overreliance on the U.S. military to a point where our armed forces were stretched, and our other tools were overlooked. For too long, we sought to advance our interests through tactics that many regarded as coercive and threatening. Some of our foreign policy muscles became strained with fatigue, while others atrophied. The result was that U.S. influence over global events waned. The failure of this one-dimensional approach was so manifest that by the time Secretary Clinton said she planned to use smart power by expanding the range of foreign policy tools, she was criticized for making a point that was by then too obvious.

"Smart power" has been a touchstone for a series of changes in the way the U.S. goes about the business of foreign policy. The U.S. has invigorated its efforts at public diplomacy, and sees the dividends in the form of improved public perceptions globally. Secretary Clinton, with the noteworthy support of Defense Secretary Robert Gates, has argued that the State Department, its diplomats and aid workers, need to be part of a single, common national security budget, rather than being treated as poor relations of the military. Secretary Clinton, in the first-ever Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, has committed to building up civilian capacity for conflict resolution, reconstruction and stabilization so that it becomes a truly worthy complement and counterpart to boots on the ground. In our operations in Afghanistan and Iraq we have seen the payoff from expanded civilian engagement to help mobilize populations to reject conflict and secure peace in their communities.

Another critical component in broadening the array of power tools at the U.S.'s disposal has come through the Administration's commitment to reengagement across the spectrum of multilateral bodies and international organizations. As a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the State Department's Bureau of International Organizations, this is where my focus lies. Properly leveraged, international institutions – the United Nations and its subsidiary bodies and specialized agencies like the World Food Program, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; regional organizations like NATO and the Organization of American States; and functional bodies like the G-8 and the Community of Democracies – can operate as tools to further U.S. priorities, and as force multipliers to help us deliver on our goals.

International institutions, used well can spread cost, lower political risks, and provide an imprimatur of legitimacy that can reduce resistance to U.S. initiatives. If smart power refers to using the totality of America's arsenal of influence, multilateral institutions represent a critical stronghold that must be kept ready and used wisely.

Mobilizing multilateral institutions as effective instruments of power is not something that will happen automatically. Showing up and stating our demands will not bend these bodies to our will. Effectively using international institutions as part of the smart power toolkit requires a series of tactics reflected in this Administration's approach to multilateral engagement.

Underlying all this is recognition of the ubiquity and importance of the UN system. I'll use this week's latest example in Japan to prove the point. The UN's Pacific Tsunami Warning System put in place by the UN Education, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was the body that issued the initial tsunami warning and allowed scores to escape the deadly flooding.

The UN's World Meteorological Organization offered real-time communication to track the scale of the tsunami so that regional neighbors, the Pacific Islands, Hawaii and the U.S. West Coast knew ahead of time what was about to hit. The International Atomic Energy Agency has been at the forefront of helping manage the unfolding nuclear disaster – dispatching teams of experts, providing technology and offering expert advice. It is UN nuclear scientists that have plotted the path of the radioactive plume and warned countries what to expect.

The UN's Office of Coordination for Humanitarian Assistance activated its network of 80 countries that mobilized 35 search and rescue teams that were on alert within a day of the quake. You can make the same point with respect to a very different crisis on the other side of the world in Libya. The UN is debating the no-fly zone, has imposed sanctions, travel ban, ICC referral, commission of inquiry, and is leading the humanitarian assistance effort.

As Secretary Clinton has acknowledged, the multilateral system is flawed but indispensible and that if we did not have it, we'd have to invent it. But just because the UN is ever-present doesn't render it an effective partner or tool. Getting multilateral institutions to live up to their potential requires full-throated, energetic engagement across multiple dimensions of diplomacy. I will describe several components that have been key for us over the last two years.

The first is persistent, continuous emphasis on improving the effectiveness of the international system. While polls show that the American public at large holds the United Nations in high regard, perceptions in policy circles and on the Hill are far more skeptical. The UN is criticized as bloated, inefficient and mismanaged. The UN is a sprawling global bureaucracy. Over the years, as in virtually any body politic, there have been major scandals and acts of malfeasance.

The U.S. has demanded change and backed important improvements to the UN's oversight function, its ethics office, its financial disclosure requirements, and the efficiency of its field operation support infrastructure. The UN needs to be pressed to make continuous improvements in management, efficiency and service delivery. Achieving reform is difficult and slow, but we can never let up the pressure.

Driving greater UN effectiveness means getting under the hoods of multilateral organizations so that we understand their strengths and weaknesses, how decisions are made and how to move them. Seamless, hand-in-glove cooperation with the USG – whether it be disaster response teams on the ground at the Libyan border, the U.S. military and UN peacekeepers in

Haiti, and U.S. nuclear experts and their counterparts dealing with Japan. We cannot treat multilateral organizations as foreign bodies – they need to be integral parts of our power grid that we understand and can activate at will. When we have kept the UN at arm's-length, our influence on the system has been diminished.

Effectiveness also means getting in the right people. To effectively tackle global problems, the UN needs world class leadership. We have fought to put in leaders like former National Security Advisor Tony Lake who is now heading UNICEF and former Chilean President Michele Bachelet who is the new head of UN Women.

We have also realized that to drive reform we need to leverage all our touch points with the UN System. We have created a new forum involving IO, PRM, USAID's Office for Humanitarian Coordination, and our missions to the UN system in New York, Rome, and Geneva to drive a shared agenda of continued humanitarian reform and capacity building. We are working to scale up the UN humanitarian response system so it is up to challenges on the scale of the out-migration in Libya, the floods in Pakistan, and the earthquake in Haiti which are coming at a furious pace. We are using our leverage as a donor and through our executive boards to press for reforms, better field coordinators, faster deployments, stronger coordination.

In the UN's political bodies – the UNSC, GA, Human Rights Council – the challenges are different, and require particular forms of diplomacy. As one person recently put it, these forums include "bullies, thugs and dictators." It is true that the composition of UN bodies reflects the make-up of the world, with the result that many of the countries present do not share our priorities or values. They reflect different motives, political agendas, regional loyalties, domestic constituencies, legal interpretations and styles of diplomacy and leadership.

Coalescing support around American priorities is not easy. But challenges relate far less to the UN and its sometimes sclerotic routines, rules and procedures, than they do to the membership and its divergent motives and viewpoints. When we're displeased with the UN's performance, it is usually because we're dissatisfied with the countries of the world around us. To criticize the UN is to criticize the community of nations. Not that we shouldn't call the UN out for its failings, as we often do. But when we are frustrated, we should know and understand what is standing in our way.

When we read with disgust the praise Libya garnered during its Universal Periodic Review process at the UN Human Rights Council, the problem is not the process itself – whereby every country's record comes up for periodic review - but rather the Member States that chose to pander, soft-pedal and deny the truth. When anti-Israel resolutions pass by wide margins, it is because Israel's opponents know they can garner wide support and because – frankly – Israel's defenders are too few. Although these dynamics can sometimes be exacerbated in New York, they originate in the capitals of the world.

Countering the influence of our antagonists at the UN requires assertive engagement to shape issues and debates before they come up for action. We have enormous leverage to shape UN debates, provided we use it effectively and on time. Walking into a UN chamber hoping to win the day on a controversial issue almost inevitably fails. But where we have laid the groundwork, leveraged our bilateral relationships and put forward our best persuasive arguments, our influence is significant.

Our diplomacy works in concentric circles, beginning with those that are closest to us. We work with our allies in Europe, Canada, Australia, Mexico and elsewhere to set priorities ahead of time and make sure we understand what one another wants to get done. The group of countries who are consistently like-minded is small, and we need to make it as cohesive as possible.

We are also working to expand our group of partners. This is a long-term investment in building relationships, establishing trust, and being willing to take on board the perspectives and priorities of others. Indeed, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Nigeria and South Africa are among many countries that see multilateral diplomacy as key to their foreign policy. They do not share our ingrained skepticism of international institutions. They send their best and brightest diplomats to postings in New York, Geneva, and throughout the UN system.

As their influence rises and their participation expands, these institutions shape the outlook they bring to their role in the world. The UN debates underway now will shape these countries' perspectives on when military intervention is warranted and what their obligations are to counter human rights abuses beyond their borders. We have used the UN as a vehicle to deepen our engagement and partnership with these countries. I have travelled to Brasilia, Santiago, Buenos Aires and Pretoria for multilateral dialogues, and close colleagues have done the same in Jakarta, Delhi, Abuja and elsewhere.

One example of how this is paying off. Last fall the United States championed a new Human Rights Council resolution on freedom of assembly and association, creating a new rapporteur who will help civil society withstand the increased pressure and restrictions that too many governments are imposing on NGOs and civil society writ large. In pursuing that resolution we worked with a broad coalition including Indonesia, Nigeria and Mexico as lead co-sponsors. We stressed that this basic freedom is a priority issue not just for the United States and its Western allies, but for democracies everywhere.

As the negotiation drew to a close one powerful, non-democratic delegation approached us to ask whether we would consider omitting from our text a provision that protected human rights defenders. In years gone by this country could have easily mobilized a coalition of others that have no interest in seeing their NGOs protected and empowered to defeat our effort. But because we had built such strong cross-regional support we were able to say a flat no, and to be confident that we had the votes to prevail over their objection. They stood down, and the resolution passed by consensus.

Increasingly, we are looking to partners not just to follow us but to lead in their own right. We do this because the real value of partners goes beyond sharing the work—we find that, for example, on human rights issues African countries are much more influenced by what other Africans are doing than by anything we say. For this reason, we have encouraged other countries and regions to step up and offer leadership on issues that concern them. When we initially proposed a Special Session of the UN HRC to address the situation in Cote d'Ivoire in December, the Africa Group – after initially being reluctant – took the idea on board as their own and led the session while we stepped back.

Likewise, after we began a debate several weeks ago on suspending Libya's credentials for the Human Rights Council, the Arab Group decided to lead the charge. At the HRC session now underway in Geneva the African Group – which has traditionally opposed Council action on country situations - is leading five resolutions on African human rights situations; we were instrumental in four of them but they have taken on all of them. Had we not been making it our practice to develop other "power generators" on the grid, we would have been forced to front these issues on our own, while facing perceptions of politicized motivations. We would have to expend large amounts of political capital to achieve inferior results.

Turning multilateral institutions into effective instruments of power also involves countering those that want them to be anything but. Iran, for example, looks to the UN as a forum to gain legitimacy, win friends, and multiply its influence. We have pushed them back at every turn. In the UNSC we built a coalition to impose the toughest sanctions ever. When Iran ran for a seat on HRC, we reached out worldwide to make the point that their record made them unqualified for membership. Their bid got no traction, and they dropped out of the race rather than face humiliation. When they ran for UN Women we pointed out that their egregious treatment of women would undermine the institution, and they lost the race.

It is only by being there and doing the hard work of diplomacy that we can achieve these results. It does not work when you are on the outside looking in.

Let me give an example. Each year at the UN General Assembly three countries earn condemnation for their egregious human rights records: Burma, North Korea and Iran. Of these three, Iran is the only one that is not the subject of a standing UN mandate focused on its conduct – a high-profile expert who puts a spotlight on the problems year-round.

This glaring gap has existed since 2002 when the United States was for the first time voted off the Human Rights Council's predecessor body, the UN Commission on Human Rights. With the U.S. gone, others moved to abolish the Iran mandate. We were absent, and they succeeded in voting it down by just one vote. Nine years later, the United States has rejoined the UN human rights system, and we are working to bring this mandate back which should happen by next week. But our absence cost nearly a decade of pressure on the Iranian regime.

Our engagement must be deep. Finding common ground and winning support for our priorities hinges on making a coherent, persuasive arguments that countries find convincing, or at least give them a face-saving way to accede to U.S. power. This country-by-country approach, of course, is a task that requires no small amount of work. It involves extensive research in to official speeches, constitutions, laws and other documents. It involves an understanding of history, both political and institutional. It involves individual conversations held with foreign officials in capitals around the world. It involves active participation and leadership from the regional bureaus of the State Department, our embassies around the world and the White House.

It often involves engagement with small, perhaps neglected, countries whose vote in the UN counts for as much as ours does. The good news is that when operating at full tilt, our political machinery at the UN can be second to none.

We must engage broadly, bent on defending and advancing U.S. national interests whenever and wherever possible, including in bodies that are noticeably flawed, such as the Human Rights Council. It is no secret that we are deeply frustrated with the Human Rights Council's shortcomings. In selecting its membership the Council defers to the niceties of regional relations, fearing competition and overlooking the criteria that we agreed should govern eligibility for election. It continues an unfair and imbalanced focus on Israel. Too often, the Council focuses more on avoiding offense to governments than paying attention to the pleas of human rights victims and defenders seeking solidarity and help.

But we face a stark choice over whether to leave the global debate on human rights issues in the hands of rogues and repressive regimes, or to reclaim it and mobilize the rights-respecting countries of the world to speak up and take action. This Administration has concluded that the cause of human rights is too important to give up on, and that through our engagement we can bring positive change. We've made the decision to engage in the Council and are bringing about reform there session by session and resolution by resolution.

Maximizing our influence in multilateral fora means recognizing that not every point of engagement is a battle, and that not all battles are worth fighting. It means accepting, and sometimes even supporting, initiatives that, if it were up to us, would not be pursued. Doing so conserves our power, and to oppose them would cost us power with no resulting benefit. We need to conserve our power for fights that count.

If we seek to push our priorities but ignore those of others, we will not build the coalitions of support needed to get things done. As Assistant Secretary Esther Brimmer often says, engagement cannot be à la carte.

The term "political capital" is a financial metaphor that we often misuse. As typically used, it implies a balance in a checking account—you make deposits and withdrawals. But capital shouldn't be spent—it should be invested. Expenditures should come from the dividends, the return on investment. For several years, our multilateral engagement on too many issues was characterized by stubborn tactics that were lauded as principled stands. But these measures passed anyway over our votes, and the U.S. was left isolated.

The dividends were negative and we spent down the capital itself. Over the past two years, my colleagues and I have been traveling around the world, to foreign capitals as well as in Geneva, New York and Paris, for face-to-face meetings with our counterparts and to engage in strategic dialogue and genuine consultation. We've worked on initiatives that have brought diverse delegations together, and sought to turn the page on polarizing battles. In doing so, we have begun to restore our depleted political capital.

And our investments have already begun to pay dividends. In the Security Council, we have negotiated the toughest and most comprehensive sanctions ever on Iran and North Korea. We have also used the Security Council to adopt travel bans and asset freezes on terrorists. And we have taken advantage of the UN's peacekeeping capabilities to more effectively address some of the most challenging security situations in the world, including in Sudan, Haiti, Cote d'Ivoire, Lebanon, Congo and Liberia.

Finally, our multilateral engagement must a responsible engagement. We must pay our dues. In recent weeks, there has been discussion about UN funding, including calls in some quarters for withholding contributions or eliminating support for certain agencies. But returning to the days when the U.S. was in arrears on our financial dues to the UN—our legal obligations under a treaty we signed—does nothing to advance U.S. interests. In fact, it compromises our voice.

If we do not pay our bills we cede the political high ground to others who will not advance our interests. In the past two years, we have turned a corner from a time when military and economic coercion were the primary foreign policy tools we relied on. We have the multilateral system moving in a direction that is doing more to fulfill its mandate and serve our interests.

It would be a grave mistake to again deplete our political capital, just when it has begun to pay dividends again.
