
The Lost Art of American Diplomacy

Can the State Department Be Saved?

William J. Burns

Diplomacy may be one of the world's oldest professions, but it's also one of the most misunderstood. It's mostly a quiet endeavor, less swaggering than unrelenting, oftentimes operating in back channels, out of sight and out of mind. U.S. President Donald Trump's disdain for professional diplomacy and its practitioners—along with his penchant for improvisational flirtations with authoritarian leaders such as North Korea's Kim Jong Un—has put an unaccustomed spotlight on the profession. It has also underscored the significance of its renewal.

The neglect and distortion of American diplomacy is not a purely Trumpian invention. It has been an episodic feature of the United States' approach to the world since the end of the Cold War. The Trump administration, however, has made the problem infinitely worse. There is never a good time for diplomatic malpractice, but the administration's unilateral diplomatic disarmament is spectacularly mistimed, unfolding precisely at a moment when American diplomacy matters more than ever to American interests. The United States is no longer the only big kid on the geopolitical block, and no longer able get everything it wants on its own, or by force alone.

Although the era of singular U.S. dominance on the world stage is over, the United States still has a better hand to play than any of its rivals. The country has a window of opportunity to lock in its role as the world's pivotal power, the one best placed to shape a changing interna-

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tional landscape before others shape it first. If the United States is to seize that opportunity and safeguard its interests and values, it will have to rebuild American diplomacy and make it the tool of first resort, backed up by economic and military leverage and the power of example.

ANOTHER ERA

I remember clearly the moment I saw American diplomacy and power at their peak. It was the fall of 1991, and I—less than a decade into my career—was seated behind Secretary of State James Baker at the opening of the Madrid peace conference, a gathering convened by the George H. W. Bush administration in a bid to make progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Around a huge table in the Spanish royal palace sat a collection of international leaders and, for the first time, representatives of Israel, the Palestinians, and key Arab states. They were united less by a shared conviction about Israeli-Palestinian peace than by a shared respect for U.S. influence. After all, the United States had just triumphed in the Cold War, overseen the reunification of Germany, and handed Saddam Hussein a spectacular defeat in Iraq.

On that day in Madrid, global currents all seemed to run toward a period of prolonged U.S. dominance. The liberal order that the United States had built and led after World War II would, we hoped, draw into its embrace the former Soviet empire, as well as the postcolonial world for which both sides had competed. Russia was flat on its back, China was still turned inward, and the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia faced few regional threats and even fewer economic rivals. Globalization was gathering steam, with the United States taking the lead in promoting greater openness in trade and investment. The promise of the information revolution was tantalizing, as was that of remarkable medical and scientific breakthroughs. The fact that an era of human progress was unfolding only reinforced the sense that the nascent *Pax Americana* would become permanent.

The triumphalism of that heady era was nevertheless tempered by some sober realizations. As I wrote in a transition memorandum for incoming Secretary of State Warren Christopher at the beginning of 1993, “alongside the globalization of the world economy, the international political system is tilting schizophrenically toward greater fragmentation.” Victory in the Cold War had stimulated a surge of democratic optimism, but “it has not ended history or brought us to the brink of ideological conformity.” Democracies that failed to pro-

duce economic and political results would falter. And while it was true that for the first time in half a century, the United States didn't have a global military adversary, it was "entirely conceivable that a return to authoritarianism in Russia or an aggressively hostile China could revive such a global threat."

The question, then, was not whether the United States should seize the unipolar moment but how and to what end. Should the United States use its unmatched strength to extend its global dominance? Or, rather than unilaterally draw the contours of a new world order, should it lead with diplomacy to shape an order in which old rivals had a place and emerging powers had a stake? Bush and Baker chose the second option, harnessing the United States' extraordinary leverage to shape the new post–Cold War order. They combined humility, an ambitious sense of the possibilities of American leadership, and diplomatic skill at a moment when their country enjoyed unparalleled influence.

DIPLOMATIC DRIFT

It proved difficult, however, to sustain a steady commitment to diplomacy. Successive secretaries of state and their diplomats worked hard and enjoyed notable successes, but resources grew scarce, and other priorities loomed. Lulled into complacency by a seemingly more benign international landscape, the United States sought to cash in on

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the post–Cold War peace dividend. It let its diplomatic muscles atrophy. Baker opened a dozen new embassies in the former Soviet Union without asking Congress for more money, and budget pressures during the tenure of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright froze intake into the Foreign Service.

Between 1985 and 2000, the U.S. government's foreign affairs budget shrank by nearly half. Then, shocked by 9/11, Washington emphasized force over diplomacy even more than it already had, and it stumbled into the colossal unforced error of the Iraq war. Officials told themselves they were practicing "coercive diplomacy," but the result was long on coercion and short on diplomacy.

Throughout the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. diplomats preoccupied themselves with social engineering and nation building,



The good old days: George H. W. Bush with Helmut Kohl and James Baker, 1990

tasks that were beyond the capacity of the United States (or any other foreign power, for that matter). Stabilization, counterinsurgency, countering violent extremism, and all the other murky concepts that sprang up in this era sometimes distorted the core mission of U.S. diplomacy: to cajole, persuade, browbeat, threaten, and nudge other governments and political leaders so that they pursue policies consistent with U.S. interests. The State Department often seemed to be trying to replicate the role of the nineteenth-century British Colonial Service.

During his two terms in office, President Barack Obama sought to reverse these trends, reasserting the importance of diplomacy in American statecraft. Backed up by economic and military leverage, and the multiplier effect of alliances and coalitions, Obama's diplomacy produced substantial results, including the opening to Cuba, the Iran nuclear deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Paris climate accord.

Even so, the dependence on military instruments proved hard to break. The number of drone strikes and special operations grew exponentially, often highly successful in narrow military terms, but complicating political relationships and inadvertently causing civilian casualties and fueling terrorist recruitment. On the rugged playing fields of Washington's bureaucratic politics, the State Department too often found itself pushed to the sidelines: assistant secretaries responsible for critical regions would be squeezed out of meetings in the

Situation Room, where the back benches were filled with National Security Council staffers. The Obama administration's commitment to diplomacy was increasingly held hostage to poisonous partisanship at home. Members of Congress waged caustic fights over the State Department's budget and held grandstanding spectacles, such as the heavily politicized hearings over the attacks that killed four Americans in Benghazi, Libya.

As the Arab Spring turned into an Arab Winter, the United States got sucked back into the Middle Eastern morass, and Obama's long-term effort to rebalance the country's strategy and tools fell victim to constant short-term challenges. It became increasingly difficult for the president to escape his inheritance: a burgeoning array of problems much less susceptible to the application of U.S. power in a world in which there was relatively less of that power to apply.

UNILATERAL DIPLOMATIC DISARMAMENT

Then came Trump. He entered office with a powerful conviction, untethered to history, that the United States had been held hostage by the very order it created. The country was Gulliver, and it was past time to break the bonds of the Lilliputians. Alliances were millstones, multilateral arrangements were constraints rather than sources of leverage, and the United Nations and other international bodies were distractions, if not altogether irrelevant. Trump's "America first" sloganizing stirred a nasty brew of unilateralism, mercantilism, and unreconstructed nationalism. In just two years, his administration has diminished the United States' influence, hollowed out the power of its ideas, and deepened divisions among its people about the country's global role.

Turning the enlightened self-interest that animated so much of U.S. foreign policy for 70 years on its head, the Trump administration has used muscular posturing and fact-free assertions to mask a pattern of retreat. In rapid succession, it abandoned the Paris climate accord, the Iran nuclear deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and a slew of other international commitments. There have been glimmers of real possibility, including overdue efforts to get NATO allies to spend more on defense and attempts to improve the terms of trade with rivals such as China. Career diplomats have continued to do impressive work in hard places around the world. But the broader pattern is deeply troubling, with disruption seeming to be its own end and little

apparent thought given to what comes after. Taken as a whole, Trump's approach is more than an impulse; it is a distinct and Hobbesian worldview. But it is far less than anything resembling a strategy.

Early on, the Trump administration inflicted its brand of ideological contempt and stubborn incompetence on the State Department, which it saw as a den of recalcitrants working for the so-called deep state. The White House embraced the biggest budget cuts in the modern history of the department, seeking to slash its funding by one-third. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reduced the Foreign Service's intake by well over 50 percent and drove out many of the State Department's most capable senior and midlevel officers in the course of a terminally flawed "redesign." Key ambassadorships overseas and senior roles in Washington went unfilled. What were already unacceptably gradual trend lines toward greater gender and racial diversity began moving in reverse. Most pernicious of all was the practice of blacklisting individual officers simply because they worked on controversial issues during the Obama administration, such as the Iran nuclear deal, plunging morale to its lowest level in decades. And Tillerson's successor, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, has managed adeptly his relationship with the president but has had less success repairing the structural damage.

Standing alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin at their July 2018 summit in Helsinki, Trump asserted that he was an advocate of "the proud tradition of bold American diplomacy." But Trump's view of diplomacy is narcissistic, not institutional. When dictators such as Putin see his compulsive need for attention and flattery, his attacks against his predecessors and his political opponents, and his habit of winging it in high-level encounters, they see weakness and manipulability.

TOOL OF FIRST RESORT

For all the injuries the United States has inflicted on itself in recent years, it still has an opportunity to help shape a new and more durable international order. No longer the dominant player that it was after the Cold War, the United States nevertheless remains the world's pivotal power. It spends more every year on defense than the next seven countries combined. It has more allies and potential partners than any of its peers or rivals. Its economy, despite risks of overheating and gross inequalities, remains the biggest, most adaptable, and most innovative in the world. Energy, once a vulnerability, now offers consid-

erable advantages, with technology having unlocked vast natural gas resources and advances in clean and renewable energy accelerating. The task now is to use these advantages, and what remains of the historic window of U.S. preeminence, to update the international order to reflect new realities. That, in turn, will require recovering the lost art of diplomacy.

This endeavor must start with reinvesting in the fundamentals of the craft: smart policy judgment, language skills, and a feel for the foreign countries where diplomats serve and the domestic priorities they represent. George Kennan described his fellow diplomats as “gardeners,” painstakingly nurturing partners and possibilities, always alert to the need to weed out problems. Such a prosaic description may not fit well on a recruitment poster, but it still rings true today. Diplomats are translators of the world to Washington and of Washington to the world. They are early warning radars for troubles and opportunities and builders and fixers of relations. All these tasks demand a nuanced grasp of history and culture, a hard-nosed facility in negotiations, and the capacity to translate U.S. interests in ways that allow other governments to see those interests as consistent with their own—or at least in ways that drive home the costs of alternative courses. That will require modestly expanding the Foreign Service so that, like the military, the diplomatic corps can dedicate time and personnel to training, without sacrificing readiness and performance.

Reaffirming the foundations of American diplomacy is necessary but not sufficient to make it effective for a new and demanding era. The State Department will also have to adapt in ways it never before has, making sure that it is positioned to tackle the consequential tests of tomorrow and not just the policy fads of today. It can begin by taking a cue from the U.S. military’s introspective bent. The Pentagon has long embraced the value of case studies and after-action reports, and it has formalized a culture of professional education. Career diplomats, by contrast, have tended to pride themselves more on their ability to adjust quickly to shifting circumstances than on paying systematic attention to lessons learned and long-term thinking.

As part of a post-Trump reinvention of diplomacy, then, the State Department ought to place a new emphasis on the craft, rediscovering diplomatic history, sharpening negotiation skills, and making the lessons of negotiations—both successful and unsuccessful—accessible to practitioners. That means fully realizing the potential of new initia-

tives such as the Foreign Service Institute's Center for the Study of the Conduct of Diplomacy, where diplomats examine recent case studies.

The U.S. government will also have to update its diplomatic capacity when it comes to the issues that matter to twenty-first-century foreign policy—particularly technology, economics, energy, and the climate. My generation and its predecessor had plenty of specialists in nuclear arms control and conventional energy issues; missile throw-weights and oil-pricing mechanisms were not alien concepts. During my last few years in government, however, I spent too much time sitting in meetings on the seventh floor of the State Department and in the White House Situation Room with smart, dedicated colleagues, all of us collectively faking it on the intricacies of cyberwarfare or the geopolitics of data.

The pace of advances in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and synthetic biology will only increase in the years ahead, outstripping the ability of states and societies to devise ways to maximize their benefits, minimize their downsides, and create workable international rules of the road. To address these threats, the State Department will have to take the lead—just as it did during the nuclear age—building legal and normative frameworks and ensuring that every new officer is versed in these complex issues.

It will also have to bring in new talent. In the coming years, the State Department will face stiff competition from the Pentagon, the CIA, and the National Security Agency, not to mention the private sector, as it seeks to attract and retain a cadre of technologists. The department, like the executive branch in general, will have to become more flexible and creative in order to attract tech talent. It should create

temporary postings and launch a specialized midlevel hiring program to fill critical knowledge gaps. New fellowships can help leverage the tried-and-true tactic of using prestige as a recruiting

*Renewing American diplomacy
will be impossible without a
new domestic compact.*

tool, but more dramatic changes to compensation and hiring practices will be necessary to build up and retain in-house expertise.

The State Department will also have to become more dexterous. Individual U.S. diplomats can be remarkably innovative and entrepreneurial. As an institution, however, the State Department is rarely accused of being too agile or too full of initiative. Diplomats have to

apply their gardening skills to their own messy plot of ground and do some serious institutional weeding.

The State Department's personnel system is far too rigid and anachronistic. The evaluation process is wholly incapable of providing honest feedback or incentives for improved performance. Promotion is too slow, tours of duty too inflexible, and mechanisms to facilitate the careers of working parents outdated. The department's internal deliberative process is just as lumbering and conservative, with too many layers of approval and authority.

During my final months as deputy secretary of state, I received a half-page memo on a mundane policy issue—with a page and a half of clearances attached to it. Every imaginable office in the department had reviewed the memo, including a few whose possible interest in the matter severely strained my imagination. A serious effort at reducing the number of layers in the department, one that pushed responsibility downward in Washington and outward to ambassadors in the field, could markedly improve the workings of a bureaucracy that too often gets in its own way.

AN OPPORTUNITY, NOT AN ELEGY

No matter what reforms the State Department undertakes, renewing American diplomacy will be impossible without a new domestic compact—a broadly shared sense of the United States' purpose in the world and of the relationship between leadership abroad and middle-class interests at home. Trump's three immediate predecessors all began their terms with a focus on "nation building at home" and a determination to limit overseas commitments. Yet each had trouble, some more than others, marrying words with deeds, and they ended up taking on more and more global responsibilities with little obvious benefit. Most Americans understand instinctively the connection between disciplined American leadership abroad and the well-being of their own society; they just doubt the capacity of the Washington establishment, across party lines, to practice that style of leadership.

The starting point for reversing this trend is candor—from the president on down—about the purpose and limits of the United States' international engagement. Another ingredient is making the case more effectively that leadership abroad produces beneficial results at home. When the State Department plays a valuable role in nailing down big overseas commercial deals, it rarely highlights the role of diplomacy in

creating thousands of jobs in cities and towns across the United States. There are growing opportunities for diplomats to work closely with governors and mayors across the country, many of whom are increasingly active in promoting overseas trade and investment. Policymakers have to do a better job of showing that smart diplomacy begins at home, in a strong political and economic system, and ends there, too—in better jobs, more prosperity, a healthier climate, and greater security.

The next administration will have a brief window of possibility to undertake imaginative transformations that can move the State Department into the twenty-first century and reorient American diplomacy toward the most pressing challenges. Trump's disregard for diplomacy has done substantial damage, but it also underscores the urgency of a serious effort at renewal, on a competitive and often unforgiving international landscape.

What I learned time and again throughout my long career is that diplomacy is one of the United States' biggest assets and best-kept secrets. However battered and belittled in the age of Trump, it has never been a more necessary tool of first resort for American influence. It will take a generation to reverse the underinvestment, overreach, and flailing that have beset American diplomacy in recent decades, not to mention the active sabotage of recent years. But its rebirth is crucial to a new strategy for a new century—one that is full of great peril and even greater promise for America.❸

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