

AGDA Reflection

Half a Century of Insights from an East European Arabist Diplomat

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An oft quoted Chinese curse wishes the accursed to "live in changing times". I was sure to suffer the curse but have no reason to complain. The 1960s to the present was anything but dull and static, and change seems to gain additional pace, for better or worse. Left unbridled, it may spell doom, and the young diplomats of today will have to play their role in taming it.

My diplomatic journey started even before I became a diplomat. To my great benefit my dad was a diplomat, specialized in economic diplomacy. His first assignment was Indonesia, half a world from my country. It is there that my interest in Asia and in the world of Islam was awakened.

Indonesia was just out of its colonial epoch with the huge country facing daunting challenges to extricate itself from backwardness – and to find its place in a Cold War world. The struggle between East and West pushed the country into a horrific civil war that I, as a child, was witness to. Exposed to history in the making, I was captivated by politics and saw my future in diplomacy.

My academics helped too. As an exchange student in Syria, I attended Damascus University and obtained a degree in history. My formative years there were a combination of fascinating learning and travel overshadowed by episodes of ubiquitous violence as resistance to president Hafez Al-Assad's iron-fisted rule met with repression. I departed hoping to remain connected with the troubled region that I learnt to view critically but with empathy.

Concluding my studies as an Arabist in my home country Hungary I joined the foreign service. One of very few Arabic speakers in the ministry of foreign affairs, I was posted to Egypt. The Camp David borne isolation crumbling, Cairo reconnected with Arab capitals and reemerged as a major diplomatic hub. It was the place to be for a young diplomat and I was fortunate. Egypt was diplomacy 101 for me and a lesson for a lifetime, albeit in charming 'old school' fashion, 'over tea at the Gezira Club'. Diplomacy was in slow motion, like the Nile, reports written on typewriter, encrypted and dispatched via radio.

My next posting took me to Libya, then called "The Socialist People's Libyan Arab Great Jamahiriya" (as Egyptian former president Anwar Sadat sarcastically remarked, you need to take a breath in between while uttering it). Diplomacy in Libya was akin to "tyrannology", trying to understand Muammar Qadhafi and predict his next move. Heading the United Nations Security Council Lockerbie Sanctions Committee, my country was in a delicate position, and I, even more so. Survival (professionally speaking) was contingent on connections in the Libyan strongman's court and foreign envoys competed for news about palace intrigue in this surreal setting of diplomacy.

My love affair with Asia resumed when appointed ambassador to Indonesia. Watching the country emerging from the chaos of the post-Suharto era, and embarking on its impressive march to become Southeast Asia's economic heavyweight, was exhilarating. What marred the experience was a wave of terrorism (Bali bombing) and the cataclysmic tsunami of December 2004. Recurring natural disasters made diplomacy in Indonesia tied to humanitarian relief work.

Conflict Prevention

With lessons learnt about counter terrorism and post-calamity recovery, my next stop was Afghanistan – a stark contrast to my previous postings. In the confines of forlorn Baghlan Province, I doubled as political and development advisor to my country's International Security Assistance Force Provincial Reconstruction Team contingent. The ground-level work in rural Afghanistan was diplomacy of a complex kind. Conflict prevention and resolution in an environment rife with terrorism, sectarian and ethnic tensions taught me much about a genre of diplomatic work that I call 'battleground diplomacy'.

Inspired by my Afghanistan experience, my next destination was Iran. As I arrived, struggle between advocates of reform and defenders of ossified conservatism was reaching a crescendo culminating in the aborted 2009 protests. Meanwhile, the world was pressing Iran to reveal its secretive nuclear programme. My presence coincided with early efforts to lay the groundwork for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. During my country's rotating presidency of the European Council, I was the European Union's representative in Tehran. Serving in 'secretive' Iran was diplomacy reminiscent of medieval times.

My Iran assignment over, I joined the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, set up to advise and assist the Baghdad government. As Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, my task was to oversee the mission's political and electoral work. Iraq was a lesson in conflict prevention and resolution day in and day out as the country, recovering from occupation and civil war, headed into a new phase of conflict. The Daesh rampage was a tragedy that Iraq should have been spared – had the great powers applied more presence of mind and the UN given more teeth. Divisions in the Security Council made UN diplomacy in Iraq an art of dancing hamstrung.

My long and winding road traversing Southeast Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East subsequently took me to Singapore to work with the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore. My two-year assignment researching the nexus of Arabia and Southeast Asia in the realm of ideas provided valuable insights. I am now looking forward to putting to good use my diverse and collective experience in training diplomats at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy.

Ground Rules

My journey acquainted me with many faces of diplomacy. Moreover, I was privileged to meet many world leaders and shapers of international politics. Memorable among them were charismatic Nelson Mandela, cryptic Hashemi Rafsanjani, daunting Hafiz Al-Assad, engaging Boutros Ghali, difficult-to-decipher Yasser Arafat, idiosyncratic Muammar Qadhafi, and entertaining Ramos Horta, just to name a few. These encounters added valuable experience to my diplomatic baggage. Based on this, here's some elementary advice to the next generation of diplomats:

- Never be over-awed by any domineering personality you meet while performing your duty. Your job is to deliver messages, find common ground, and seek understanding, a task you best accomplish through self-assurance, straightforwardness and honesty.
- Ensure clarity of messaging. When you deliver a clear, coherent message it can be driven home seamlessly. Make sure this is the case particularly when discussing contentious issues with interlocutors.
- Standing your ground in an argument should never be pretext for 'grandstanding', lecturing or shaming a dialogue partner. Such behaviour can backfire.
- Truthfulness is paramount because subterfuge and double speak, so often associated with diplomacy, are counterproductive. Never believe in outsmarting a partner.
- Building confidence happens through winning hearts and minds. This helps overcome obstacles in a dialogue. A partner's negative disposition can be overcome by sheer empathy and kindness that is normally reciprocated. From there on tackling thorny issues becomes easier.
- Seek good understanding of the mindset of partners you engage. Try to 'be in his/her shoes'. Look for common ground while skirting stumbling blocks.
- Always be respectful. Avoid offending a dialogue partner through cultural insensitivity. Showing respect for an interlocutor's culture is paramount.

There is no universal user's manual for diplomacy. Still, the rule "do not do unto others what you do not wish to be done unto you" is a fundamental principle that holds even when diplomatic battles rage. Coercion, rudeness, harsh language, and intimidation are to be avoided at all costs. Diplomacy ought to remain the preserve of jointly accepted norms and values. This helps maintain dialogue, differences notwithstanding. 'Wolf diplomacy' and 'gunboat diplomacy' lead nowhere.

Change and Continuity

In the half century of my service the world witnessed major transformations. The Cold War morphed into great power competition and bipolarity into multipolarity. Human rights, the rights of women, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, and the environment writ large have become central to diplomacy. The challenge of climate change and nuclear proliferation gave multilateral diplomacy a new lease on life. Localized and specific concerns gave birth to minilateralism.

Diplomacy was transformed with the advent of digitalization and the information technology. Unexpectedly, social media generated a 'parallel diplomacy' with mass involvement. Still, the fundamentals of 'classical' diplomacy remain unchanged. At their root are time honoured, if seemingly atavistic, traditions like why we call a written message to a foreign ministry 'Note Verbale'? And what about a *démarche*?

Metternich and Talleyrand would not entirely feel strangers in the contemporary world of diplomacy. More complex than ever, imbued with 21st century technologies, diplomacy is still engagement between humans, and we have, alas, not fundamentally changed during the millennia – be it clay or electronic tablets we use to write our reports. Milestone as it is, artificial intelligence may inform diplomacy but will never conduct it.

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