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Militarism and the Crisis of American Diplomacy

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The late Arthur Goldberg, who served on our Supreme Court and as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, once said that “diplomats approach every question with an open . . . mouth.” No doubt that’s often true at the U.N., where parliamentary posturing and its evil twin, declaratory diplomacy, rule. But the essence of diplomacy is not talking but seeking common ground by listening carefully and with an open mind to what others don’t say as well as what they do, and then acting accordingly.

Diplomacy is how a nation advances its

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interests and resolves problems with foreigners with minimal violence. It is the nonbelligerent champion of domestic tranquility and prosperity. It promotes mutually acceptable varieties of *modus vivendi* between differing perspectives and cultures.

Diplomacy is the translation of national strategy into tactics to gain political, economic, and military advantages without the use of force. It is the outermost sentry and guardian of national defense. Its lapse or failure can bring war and all its pains to a nation.

But diplomacy is not just an alternative to war. It does not end when war begins. And when war proves necessary to adjust relations with other states or peoples, it is diplomacy that must translate the outcome of the fighting into agreed adjustments in relationships, crafting a better peace that reconciles the vanquished to their defeat and stabilizes a new status quo. By any measure, therefore, excellence in diplomacy is vitally important to the power, wealth, and well-being of the nation.

At its deepest level, diplomacy is a subtle strategic activity. It is about rearranging circumstances, perceptions, and the parameters of international problems so as to realign the self-interest of other nations with one’s own in ways that cause

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them to see that it is in their interest to do what one wants them to do, and that it's possible for them to do it without appearing to capitulate to any foreign power or interest. Diplomacy is about getting others to play our game.

Judging by results in the complex post-Cold War environment, diplomacy is something the United States does not now understand or know how to do. Here I shall discuss some of the beliefs and practices that account for America's bungling of foreign policy in recent years. I will end by offering a few thoughts about how we might do better.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union liberated Americans from our fear of nuclear Armageddon, the foreign policy of the United States has come to rely almost exclusively on economic sanctions, military deterrence, and the use of force. Such measures are far from the only arrows in the traditional quiver of statecraft. Yet Americans no longer aim at leadership by example or polite persuasion backed by national prestige, patronage, institution building, or incentives for desirable behavior. In Washington, the threat to use force has become the first rather than the last resort in foreign policy. We Americans have embraced coercive measures as our default means of influencing other nations, whether they be allies, friends, adversaries, or enemies.

For most in our political elite, the overwhelming military and economic leverage of the United States justifies abandoning the effort to persuade rather than muscle recalcitrant foreigners into line. We habitually respond to challenges of every kind with military posturing rather than with diplomatic initiatives directed at solving the problems that generate these challenges. This approach has made us less – not more – secure, while burdening future generations of Americans with ruinous debt. It has unsettled our allies without deterring our adversaries. It has destabilized entire regions, multiplied our enemies, and estranged us from our friends.

South America no longer defers to us. Russia is again hostile. Europe questions our judgment, is audibly disturbed by our belligerence, and is distancing itself from our leadership. A disintegrating Middle East seethes with vengeful contempt for the United States. Africa ignores us. Our lust for India remains unrequited. China

has come to see us as implacably hostile to its rise and is focused on countering our perceived efforts to hem it in. Japan is reviewing its inner samurai. Some say all these adversities are upon us because we are not sufficiently brutal in our approach to foreign affairs and that, to be taken seriously or to be effective, we must bomb, strafe, or use drones to assassinate those with whom we disagree and let the collateral damage fall where it may. But what we have actually proved is that, if you are sufficiently indifferent to the interests of others and throw your weight around enough, you can turn off practically everybody.

Outside our own country, American military prowess and willingness to administer shock and awe to foreign societies are nowhere in doubt. In Vietnam, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Iraq, and many other places, Americans have provided ample evidence of our politico-military obduracy and willingness to inflict huge casualties on foreigners we judge oppose us. As a nation, we nonetheless seem to doubt our own prowess and to be obsessed with proving it to ourselves and others. But there is no credibility gap about American toughness to be remedied. That is not the issue. The issue is whether our policies are wise and whether military campaign plans dressed up in domestically appealing rhetoric equate to strategies that can yield a world more congruent with our interests and values.

In recent years, the United States has killed untold multitudes in wars and counterterrorist drone warfare in West Asia and North Africa. Our campaigns have spilled the blood, broken the bodies, and taken or blighted the lives of many in our armed forces, while weakening our economy by diverting necessary investment from it. These demonstrations of American power and determination have inflicted vast amounts of pain and suffering on foreign peoples. They have not bent our opponents to our will. Far from yielding greater security for us or our allies, our interventions – whether on the ground or from the air -- have multiplied our enemies, intensified their hatred for us, and escalated the threat to both our homeland and our citizens and friends abroad.

It is a measure of the extent to which we now see the world through military eyes that the response of much of America's political elite to

the repeated failure of the use of force to yield desired results has been to assert that we would have succeeded if only we had been more gung ho and to argue for the use of even greater force. But what we have been doing with our armed forces has not halted dynamic change in the global and regional distribution of economic, military, and political power. There is no reason to believe that greater belligerence could yield a better result. Most Americans sense this and are skeptical both about the neoconservative agendas the military-industrial-congressional complex seeks to impose on our nation and the wisdom of staking our future on the preservation of a rapidly crumbling post-Cold War status quo.

Every nation's political culture is a product of its historical experience. The American way in national security policy, like that of other countries, is steered by unexamined preconceptions drawn from the peculiarities of our history. In the aggregate, these convictions constitute a subliminal doctrine with the authority of dogma. Legions of academics now make a living by exploring applications of this dogma for the United States Department of Defense. They have produced an intellectual superstructure for the military-industrial complex in the form of an almost infinite variety of ruminations on coercion. (No one looks to the Department of State for support for research on less overbearing approaches to international relations. It has neither money nor a desire to vindicate its core functions by sponsoring the development of diplomatic doctrine.)

Americans are right to consider our nation exceptional. Among other things, our experience with armed conflict and our appreciation of the relationship between the use of force and diplomacy are unique – some might say “anomalous.” So, therefore, are our approaches to war, peace, and foreign relations.

War is the ultimate argument in relations between states and peoples. Its purpose is sometimes the conquest and subjugation of populations. More commonly, however, war is a means to remove perceived threats, repel aggression, restore a balance of power, compel acquiescence in a shift in borders, or alter the bad behavior of an adversary. Since war is not over until the defeated accept defeat and accommodate their new circumstances, other people's wars usually end

in negotiations directed at translating military outcomes into mutually agreed political arrangements that will establish a stable new order of affairs. Not so the wars of the United States.

In our civil war, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, the U.S. objective was not adjustments in relations with the enemy but “unconditional surrender,” that is a peace imposed on the defeated nation without its assent and entailing its subsequent moral, political, and economic reconstruction. The smaller wars of the twentieth century did not replace this idiosyncratic American rejection of models of warfare linked to limited objectives. We fought to a draw in Korea, where to this day we have not translated the 1953 armistice into peace. We were bested in Vietnam. In Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989, and Iraq in 2003, we imposed regime change on the defeated, not terms for war termination and peace.

So Americans have no recent experience of ending wars through negotiation with those we have vanquished, as has been the norm throughout human history. Our national narrative inclines us to equate success in war with smashing up enemies enough to ensure that we can safely deny them the dignity of taking them seriously or enlisting them in building a peace. Our wars are typically planned as military campaigns with purely military objectives, with little, if any, thought to what adjustments in foreign relations the end of the fighting might facilitate or how to exploit the political opportunities our use of force can provide. As a rule, we do not specify war aims or plan for negotiations to obtain a defeated enemy's acceptance of our terms for ending the fighting.

The absence of clearly stated war aims for U.S. combat operations makes it easy for our politicians to move the goal posts. Our wars therefore almost invariably entail mission creep. Our armed forces find themselves in pursuit of a fluid set of objectives that never solidifies. With victory undefined, our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines cannot say when they have accomplished their missions enough to stand down.

Our habit of failing to define specific political objectives for our military also means that, in our case, war is less “*an extension of politics by other means*” (as Clausewitz prescribed) than a brutally direct way of punishing our foes linked to no

clear conception of how they might take aboard the lessons we imagine they should draw from the drubbing we give them. Our chronic inattention to the terms of war termination means that U.S. triumphs on the battlefield are seldom, if ever, translated into terms that reward military victory with a stable peace.

The U.S. armed forces are highly professional and admirably effective at demolishing our enemies' power. But their expectation that civilian policymakers will then make something of the political vulnerabilities they create is almost always disappointed. The relevant civilian policymakers are almost all inexperienced amateurs placed in office by the spoils system. Their inexperience, the theories of coercive diplomacy they studied at university, the traditional disengagement of American diplomats from military operations, and our now heavily militarized political culture converge to assure that American diplomacy is missing in action when it is most needed – as the fighting ends.

Thus, our military triumph in the 1991 war to liberate Kuwait was never translated into terms to which Saddam Hussein or his regime were asked to pledge their honor. Instead, we looked to the United Nations one-sidedly to pass an omnibus resolution imposing onerous restrictions on Iraqi sovereignty, including inspections, reparations, and the demilitarization of portions of Iraq's territory. Saddam assumed no explicit obligation to comply with these dictates. To the extent he could get away with ignoring them, he did. The war never really ended. In our 2003 re-invasion of Iraq, U.S. planners assumed apolitically that military victory would automatically bring peace. No competent Iraqi authority was left in place to accept terms and maintain stability. Subliminal doctrine instead prevailed. The U.S. government devised no mechanism to translate its success on the battlefield into a legitimate new order and peace in Iraq.

In Iraq, we were guided by the historically induced, peculiarly American presumption that war naturally culminates in the unconditional surrender and moral reconstruction of the enemy. The Department of State was excluded from all planning. The notion that a political process might be required for war termination on terms that could reconcile the enemy to its defeat never

occurred to the White House or DOD. Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Libya offer different but analogous examples of Washington's blindness or indifference to the utility of diplomacy in translating battlefield results into political results. As a result, our military interventions have nowhere produced a better peace. We Americans do not know how to conclude our wars.

American confusion about the relationship between the use of force and political order-setting extends to our approach to situations that have the potential to explode in war but have not yet done so. Our country learned how to behave as a world power during the four-decade-long bipolar stalemate of the Cold War. The Cold War's strategy of containment made holding the line against our Soviet rivals the central task of U.S. diplomacy. Americans came to view negotiated adjustments in relations as part of a great zero-sum game and as therefore, for the most part, infeasible or undesirable, or both. After all, a misstep could trigger a nuclear war fatal to both sides.

The Cold War reduced diplomacy to the political equivalent of trench warfare, in which the absence of adjustments in position rather than advantageous maneuvering constituted success. It taught Americans to deter conflict by threatening escalation that might lead to a mutually fatal nuclear exchange. It conditioned us to believe that it is often wiser to stonewall – to freeze a situation so as to contain potential conflict – than to waste time and effort exploring ways of mitigating or eliminating it.

We Americans have yet to unlearn the now largely irrelevant lessons of the Cold War. We still respond to adverse developments with threats of escalating pressure calculated to immobilize the other side rather than with diplomatic efforts to resolve the issues that motivate it. We impose sanctions to symbolize our displeasure and to enable our politicians to appear to be doing something tough, even if it is inherently feckless. Sometimes we decline to speak with our adversary on the issue in question until it has agreed to end the behavior to which we object. But, almost invariably, the core of our response is the issuance of deterrent military threats.

The ostensible purpose of sanctions is to coerce the targeted country into submission. But, once imposed, sanctions invariably become ends

in themselves. Their success is then measured not by how they modify or fail to modify the behavior of their targets but by the degree of pain and deprivation they are seen to inflict. There is no recorded instance in which the threat or actual imposition of sanctions not linked to negotiations about a "yes-able" proposition has induced cooperation. Sanctions do not build bridges or foster attitudes that facilitate concessions. They harden and entrench differences.

And, in many ways, sanctions backfire. They impose the equivalent of a protectionist wall against imports on the target nation. This often stimulates a drive for self-sufficiency and induces artificial prosperity in some sectors of its economy. Sanctions hurt some U.S. domestic interest groups and benefit others. Those who benefit develop a vested interest in perpetuating sanctions, making them hard to use as a bargaining chip.

Perversely, sanctions also tend to boost the political authority of the leaders of the countries they target. They place decisions about the distribution of rationed goods and services in these leaders' hands. To the extent that sanctions immiserate populations, they unite nationalist opposition to the foreigners imposing them. As the examples of north Korea, Mao's China, and Cuba attest, sanctions prolong the half-life of regimes that might otherwise fall from power as a result of patriotic resistance to their misrule. Eventually, as we now see with Cuba (and China before it), sanctions have the ironic effect of transforming the places we have walled off into exotic tourist destinations for Americans.

The pernicious effects of sanctions are magnified by the American habit of combining them with diplomatic ostracism. Refusal to talk is a tactic that can gain time for active improvement of one's bargaining position. But meeting with another party is not a favor to it. Insisting on substantive concessions as the price for a meeting is self-defeating. Diplomatic contact is not a concession to an adversary but a means of gaining intelligence about its thinking and intentions, understanding and seeking to reshape how it sees its interests, looking for openings in its policy positions that can be exploited, conveying accurate messages and explanations of one's own reasoning, manipulating its appreciation of its circumstances, and facilitating concessions by it.

Efforts at deterrence invite counterescalation by their target. Controlling this risk necessitates reassuring one's adversary about the limits of one's objectives. Reassurance requires accurate messaging. That cannot be assured without direct communication with the other side. This underscores the importance of the diplomatic relations and contacts we sometimes unwisely suspend. It is a sound rule that one should never lose contact with an enemy on either the battlefield or in the diplomatic arena.

Our frequent violation of this rule is a special problem for our practice of deterrence, now virtually the only technique of statecraft in our kit other than sanctions and military assault. To avert perceived challenges to our interests or those of the nations we have undertaken to protect, we declare that attempts by another country to seek unilateral advantage will invoke retaliation to impose unacceptable levels of loss. The penalties we promise can be political and economic. But, in the case of the contemporary United States, they are almost invariably military.

Deterrence substitutes military confrontation designed to freeze risk for diplomacy directed at eliminating its underlying causes. It sets off a test of will between the two sides' armed forces as each considers how best to demonstrate its resolve while causing the other to back down. Deterrence can, of course, be the starting point for a diplomatic effort to resolve conflicts of interest. But, if deterrence is not paired with diplomacy, such conflicts are likely to fester or intensify. Then, too, with the end of the Cold War, the danger of escalation to the nuclear level has lessened. The threats of escalation inherent in deterrence are now less intimidating and more likely to face challenge.

In our attempts to limit uncertainty through deterrence alone, without diplomatic efforts to resolve the underlying crises that generate the uncertainty, Americans preserve the status quo, even when it is disadvantageous or evolving to our disadvantage. But by assuming that the immensity of our power makes deterrence in itself an adequate response to threats to our interests as we see them, we inadvertently perpetuate the danger of armed conflict, store up trouble for the future, and give potential adversaries time to increase their power relative to ours. This is the ap-

proach we are currently applying to China in the East and South China Seas and to Russia on its western borders. It is no more likely to succeed now than on the multiple occasions in the past in which it failed. The same is true of our latest attempt to apply military technical solutions to the political problems of a disintegrated Iraq.

This brings me to the question of whether and how we can learn from our mistakes. George Santayana famously warned that “those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” He was right.

But what if every four or so years, you administered a frontal lobotomy to yourself, excising your memories and making it impossible to learn from experience? What if most aspects of your job were always new to you? What if you didn’t know whether something you propose to do has been tried before and, if so, whether it succeeded or failed? To one degree or another, this is what is entailed in staffing the national security functions of our government (other than those assigned to our military) with short-term political appointees selected to reward not their knowledge, experience, or skill but campaign contributions, political sycophancy, affiliation with domestic interest groups, academic achievements, success in fields unrelated to diplomacy, or social prominence.

Alone among major powers, the United States has not professionalized its diplomacy. Professions are human memory banks. They are composed of individuals who profess a unique combination of specialized knowledge, experience, and technique. Their expertise reflects the distillation into doctrine – constantly refreshed – of what can be learned from experience. Their skills are inculcated through case studies, periodic training, and on-the-job mentoring. They are constantly improved by the critical introspection inherent in after-action reviews.

By contrast, Americans appear to believe that the formulation and conduct of foreign relations are best entrusted to self-promoting amateurs, ideologues, and dilettantes unburdened by apprenticeship, training, or prior experience. The lower ranks of our diplomatic service are highly regarded abroad for their intellectual competence and cross-cultural communication skills. With some notable exceptions, our ambassadors and the senior officials atop the Washington foreign

affairs bureaucracies are not similarly admired. The contrast with the superbly professional leadership of the U.S. armed forces could not be greater. It should surprise no one that our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines often wait in vain for guidance and support from the civilian side of the U.S. government’s national security establishment. Current trends suggest they may have to wait a long time for their civilian counterparts to shape up.

The post-Cold War period has seen major expansion in the numbers of political appointees and their placement in ever lower foreign policy positions along with huge bloat in the National Security Council staff. This has progressively deprofessionalized U.S. diplomacy from the top down in both Washington and the field, while thinning out the American diplomatic bench. Increasingly, the U.S. military is being thrust into diplomatic roles it is not trained or equipped to handle, further militarizing U.S. foreign relations.

In the absence of major curtailment of the spoils system, the prospects for improved U.S. diplomatic performance are poor. Amateur ambassadors and senior officials cannot provide professional mentoring, yet the United States invests little in training its career personnel in either the lore or core skills of diplomacy. No case studies of diplomatic advocacy, negotiation, reporting and analysis, or protection of overseas Americans have been compiled. There is no professional framework for after-action reviews in American diplomacy and they seldom occur. (To the extent examining what went right or wrong and why might reflect adversely on ambitious political appointees or the administration itself, it is actually discouraged.) This ensures that nothing is learned from experience even if there were career diplomats in senior positions to learn it.

Diplomacy, as such, is not part of civic education in the United States. A large percentage of our political elite has no idea what diplomats do, can do, or ought to do. Not for nothing is it said that if you speak three or more languages, you are multilingual. If you speak two languages, you are bilingual. If you speak only one language, you are American. And if you speak only one language, have never studied geography, and do not have a passport, you are probably a member of Congress.

It is also said that, if we can't get our act together at home, there is little reason to hope that we will get it together abroad. But we cannot afford not to. We are entering an era of strategic fluidity in which there are no fixed lines for Cold War-style diplomacy to defend, there is declining deference to our leadership, and there are ever more challenges that cannot be solved by military means. We need to raise the level of our international game.

It is time to rediscover the deep diplomacy that creates circumstances in which others become inclined out of self-interest to make choices

and do things that serve *our* interests and that advance those interests without war. It is time to rediscover non-coercive instruments of statecraft that can persuade others that they can benefit by working with us rather than against us. It is time to exempt the foreign affairs elements of our national security policy apparatus from the venality and incompetence that the spoils system has come to exemplify. It is time to staff our diplomacy, as we have staffed our military, with well-trained professionals and to demand from them the best they can give to their country. Our country.