

## **DIPLOMACY: by Geoffrey Miller AO FAIA**

Henry Kissinger once said that diplomacy isn't like engineering—solving problems as they present themselves, moving on to the next one—but more like gardening: cultivating relationships—not for their own sake, as critics of diplomacy claim—but so they can be called on when you need them.

The word “diplomacy” is of course used in various combinations---“ping pong diplomacy”, “second track diplomacy” are examples---even “institution-building diplomacy”, and of course “leaders’ diplomacy”.

The Macquarie Dictionary definition of “Diplomacy” is:

“1. The conduct by government officials of negotiations and other relations between states

2. The science of conducting such negotiations.”

I think we can accept the Macquarie definitions for the purposes of our discussions. I would like to note one implication of the definitions, however, and make two comments. The implication is that diplomacy applies to state-to state relations, and not to the promotion or protection of individuals’ or firms’ concerns, which are the province of consular relations.

The first comment is that while we commonly think of state-to-state relations as being carried out bilaterally, through Embassies in respective capitals, there is a whole other

dimension to diplomacy, namely multilateral or conference diplomacy. This is typically conducted through institutions like the UN---the General Assembly is currently in session, and Australia was recently, and New Zealand is, a member of the Security Council---and specialised agencies and institutions such as the World Trade Organisation and the G20, of which Australia was a recent chair.

Some of the results of multi-lateral diplomacy are clearly of great importance, for example in the fields of international trade and arms control, though sometimes it can seem like a frustrating and never-ending talkfest. And some diplomats make it their life-time specialty. But others don't, and I'm one of those, despite one posting at the UN in New York. So in what follows I'll concentrate on bilateral diplomacy---which can of course also involve many subject areas, as the recent emphasis on bilateral Free Trade Agreements shows. As the 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world, and one deeply involved in international trade, it is no wonder that, as Julie Bishop has said, economic diplomacy is very important to Australia.

The second comment is that the term "diplomacy", like most terms, is sometimes used loosely. For example, I was recently at one of the ANU's annual "Japan Updates", where there was a lot of bemoaning the state of China-Japan relations. Many expert speakers said there should be more "diplomacy" between the two. I think they meant that each government should take a more positive and accommodating attitude towards the other---something considerably more basic, and more to do with policy orientation, than "diplomacy".

And of course all international activities and presentations on behalf of any country are made on the basis of, and depend on, what their country is like. I remember a conversation in India---a long time ago, in the 1970s---involving the very able and experienced chief political correspondent for the "Times of India", Dilip Mukerjee. Mukerjee said that he'd recently been asked by a leading American correspondent what India's view was on a particular matter. He'd answered that India had no view on it worth considering. When the American had queried that, Dilip had said that India was in such a mess, politically and economically, that no country should attach any weight to its opinions! A tough view, but it made an important point.

If diplomacy means government officials carrying out state to state "negotiations and other relations", who are these officials and what does one need to carry them out well?

As to who does them, clearly DFAT officials play a major role. But it is worth noting that now, more so than in the past, many functions of government have an important international aspect and therefore many departments and agencies contain what are in effect "foreign affairs cells", from which personnel may be posted to relevant Embassies and High Commissions. Indeed, very large overseas missions such as Washington, Tokyo, Jakarta and London in a way are more like "the whole of government writ small" than a more typical, smaller, diplomatic post.

As to carrying out state to state relations well, I think the first thing is a thorough knowledge of your own country's interests, priorities and policies---what it, through you, is trying to achieve in a particular country or situation. When I left DFAT, in 2000,

there were various mechanisms in operation to promote this, including Post Reports and Reviews. There may be more now.

The second is sound knowledge of the country in which you are posted, to be gained initially by reading and study (probably books rather than briefs or articles), and later from experience and observation. Sound historical and geographical knowledge can be a great help to understanding and interpretation, and isn't always applied, or in the forefront of people's minds. And sometimes one realises, late in a posting, the effect that a particular past event or turning point had and still has on influential people's stances and attitudes to each other.

For example, one of the most dramatic events of my diplomatic career was the 1965 coup in Indonesia, when the Communist Party was behind the murder of leading Army Generals and the abortive takeover of government by a Revolutionary Council. I don't think any Embassy in Jakarta at the time, including ours, fully appreciated the extent to which the events of 1965 were a sequel to the events of 1948 in Madiun in Central Java, when the Indonesian Army, under then Colonel Nasution, put down a seizure of power by pro-Communist forces. In 1965 Nasution, by then a General, was Minister of Defence, and the only one of the targets for assassination to survive. The Secretary-General of the Communist Party in 1965, D.N. Aidit, had been a very young member of its Central Committee in 1948.

The US---and ourselves---in Vietnam and Iraq are other cases in point.

(In regard to our current preoccupation with China, the importance of the revolutionary background and records of current political players like President Xi Jinping and their families does seem to be properly appreciated, with the help of specialists and authors like Kerry Brown and Linda Jakobson.

My third prerequisite is empathy; understanding what makes another country tick is not the only task of a diplomat or diplomacy, but it's a very important part of it. You need to be able to see why a government is doing what it is, taking the stances it is, thinks as it does. That doesn't mean you support those things, or agree with them. But without that understanding it's very difficult to engage effectively.

That understanding, as I have said, can be given a sound start from reading and study, but also of course depends on a mission building up a sound and varied range of local contacts, at various levels, and hopefully representing different interests and points of view. It's very important to realise that in almost every country there will be many differing points of view on an important issue: phrases like "China thinks" or "France believes" are bound to be wrong, as well as simplistic. A diplomat can get access to local views partly because of his or her position, and the standing of the country he or she represents. But personal qualities, and the amount of interest shown, can also make a difference.

(Speaking the local language is obviously desirable and a help, but no diplomat can hope to speak the language of all the countries in which he or she serves. A Foreign Service can however plan to see that missions, rather than all individuals in them, do have that capacity.)

And of course access depends on the nature of the society in which one is serving. I never served in a totalitarian country, but I did serve in one then quite authoritarian one. I came to realise that my movements and those of my wife were monitored, and that when I entertained political dissidents reports were made to the authorities.

But generally speaking people everywhere respond to an interest being taken in what they are doing; over the years I suppose I tended to talk to officials, politicians, businessmen, journalists and academics more than other groups, but I also became involved with others over particular issues.

Of course a diplomat may be seeking to engage on very different tasks. Diplomatic posts can have very different priorities and emphases at different times---and they can double up. For example when I was in South Korea in the late 70's there was a very strong trade element in our relationship; but there was a strong strategic element to the relationship as well, particularly when President Park, the father of the current President, was assassinated. What this meant, what North Korea might do, were questions on which our government wanted the best possible information.

My time in Indonesia in the '60s is an example of a posting when understanding the political situation and managing the bilateral relationship were the prime tasks; while in Japan in the '80s trade and the fortunes of our resources exports---iron, coal and foodstuffs---took pride of place, and took up most of my time as Ambassador---as they may do now in China. But, to repeat the "doubling-up" point, both China and Japan, and the relationship between them, are of high strategic importance to Australia.

I should note in regard to strategic and political matters that it's not just the sending of reports from diplomatic posts that's important. The next question is who reads them, and what they do with them. Of course every Ambassador would like his reporting and advice to be read by the Foreign Minister, and even the Prime Minister. And sometimes it is. A good example can be seen in the volume "Australia and the Formation of Malaysia", published by DFAT's Historical Section, which shows the lively inter-action between Ministers and some very talented Australian Heads of Mission---Critchley in KL, Pritchett in Singapore and Shann in Jakarta. Shann's reporting on Indonesia's "confrontation" of Malaysia and on the 1965 communist coup attempt was much read and commented on at the highest governmental levels in Canberra.

It was also a credit to Shann's professional skills that he was able to maintain the access he did in Jakarta at a time when Australian and Indonesian troops were clashing in Borneo. Of course it also represented each country's assessment of its national interest.

Often however diplomatic reporting is not read at the highest levels. But it forms an important part of the basis for assessment and policy formulation and recommendation. In Australia this policy work is largely done in the so-called "policy Departments" of DFAT, Defence and PM&C, and often by people who a year or two earlier had been providing input themselves from overseas posts.

But sometimes reporting isn't heeded at all, or at least sufficiently, by policy-makers. A recent example is the failure to prevent ISIS's lightning sweep from Syria into Iraq. President Obama criticised the US intelligence community for lack of warning. It defended itself, with the help of the media, which was able to play tapes of officials'

briefings to Congress, for example. Failure to anticipate and prevent Saddam's invasion of Kuwait is another example, although in that case there was ample distraction for Western policy-makers in the collapse of the Soviet Union that was going on at the time. They may also have felt that Iraq had got its fair share of attention during the then just-concluded Iraq-Iran war. At any rate, according to intelligence community legend repeated warnings from one quite senior CIA analyst went unheeded at higher levels.

And that leads me to a fact that officials just have to live with. Most modern systems of government, however efficiently arranged, funnel decisions upwards to a small group of decision-makers, perhaps ultimately to one person. And that person almost certainly will have many things on his or her plate at any given moment. A particular foreign policy question, however pressing, may not reach the top of the pile.

Reporting is of course one of the things diplomats do, but it's far from the only one. Sometimes they have to put very tough positions to host governments. An example that comes to mind involved my former colleague and Head of DFAT, Philip Flood, in regard to the "Sandline" affair of 1977, involving the PNG Government's attempt to use foreign mercenaries to re-take control of the island of Bougainville, after a long insurgency. The introduction of foreign mercenaries into the South Pacific was absolutely anathema to the Australian Government, and Philip, as head of a delegation of three officials representing Prime Minister Howard, had to tell the PNG Prime Minister, Julius Chan, that if he went ahead it would mean the end of Australian defence support and development aid for PNG.

Chan took a tough line at first but conceded the next day, so Philip's mission was successful. But it was a close thing, and illustrates the sort of face-off that diplomacy can involve.

It can of course involve almost the opposite kind of thing as well. My last diplomatic post was as High Commissioner in Wellington, and of course Australia-New Zealand relations are very close. But I was flabbergasted one day to receive a letter from then New Zealand Prime Minister, Jenny Shipley, asking me to give her a report "as part of the regular assessment process", on the way the head of the New Zealand Prime Minister's Department was doing his job! (After consideration I did as I was asked.)

I'd like to move to something of a warning note. When thinking about what's going on in foreign countries it's easy to assume that things probably operate there much as they do in one's home country, with of course some differences, including differences in degree. But they might be totally different. One example that comes to mind is elections. We live in a country where election results can be trusted (despite the fairly recent isolated instance of some lost votes in Western Australia!) Because of this I believe we tend to trust elections overseas as well. A comment I've seen many times over the years from Australian election observers is "there was some vote-rigging, but not enough to affect the overall outcome". But it might absolutely have been enough to affect the overall outcome. Analyses of the last Presidential election in Afghanistan indicate that 2 million out of 8 million votes allegedly cast were fraudulent - certainly a proportion big enough to affect the final outcome.

Because the stakes in Afghanistan were so high the international community, and the US in particular, faced up to what happened and took steps to correct it, leading to the current “power-sharing” arrangement between the two candidates. Secretary of State Kerry’s visit to Kabul to bring this about would have been the kind of mission I described earlier in relation to Philip Flood’s visit to Port Moresby.

And of course diplomats representing great or super powers like the US are more likely to be involved in such instances of the use of influence and pressure than those representing the bulk of the international community. A diplomat’s role can vary not only with his country of accreditation, but also with his own country’s standing with and relationship to that country.

I think this elections example is a good lesson for everyone involved in diplomacy and foreign affairs to look at events clearly and dispassionately, without pre-conceptions, and not on the basis of assumptions that hold good in one’s own environment. I had a CIA friend who worked on the Middle East. He used to say that he reckoned he could understand Saddam; he’d grown up in a tough neighbourhood in the Bronx, with lots of people like that. He felt he knew what made Saddam tick, unlike people from more genteel backgrounds and life experiences who cut him more slack. Think of Hitler and Neville Chamberlain.

So realism is an important watchword, and I think we’ll need all the watchwords we can get in trying to navigate the current international environment.

I was very struck two years ago by the cover of the September/October issue of "Foreign Affairs", which reads "See America, Land of Decay and Dysfunction". It was certainly surprising to see that on the cover of the flagship magazine of the US Council on Foreign Relations. And that theme, of United States decline, also emerged from another icon of US foreign policy, Henry Kissinger, in interviews given in the context of his last book, "World Order". He said that the US "has made itself a bystander in the Middle East", and that "the future of the Ukraine is being negotiated without the US". The very concept of world order, he says, is not accepted by Russia, China or in the Middle East.

These concerns about the mood and stance of the US shape a daunting prospect for a country like Australia, deeply concerned about developments in North Asia, affronted by Russian actions on its borders, alarmed to the extent of military involvement by the repugnant developments in the Middle East, and gripped to an extent we hadn't anticipated by the saga of American politics, and its consequences.

In these circumstances Australian diplomacy has some achievements to its credit, including the passage by the Security Council of the resolution on MH17, and Julie Bishop's negotiations in the Ukraine, with Putin and over access for the SAS to Iraq. But in terms of policy Australian diplomacy will have to be based on the most realistic assessments possible not only of adversaries but also of our prime ally and our most important trading partners.

And that won't be easy, for political prediction is not easy. I recently came across a striking reminder of how difficult it is in the issue of "Foreign Affairs" I referred to

earlier. The prime article on American dysfunction was written by Francis Fukuyama, a prominent American academic. He's still prominent, obviously, but the prediction that made him famous hasn't stood up too well. About 20 years ago he wrote "The End of History", in which his thesis was that "history had ended" because the Western model of democracy and free market economics had attained universal acceptance. Tell that to Putin, Xi Jinping and the leaders of ISIS! In fact, given how enormously wrong Fukuyama was it should be encouraging to Americans that he was the one asked to write about American dysfunction!

There are many other things I could discuss; one is the pressures of modern media and the 24-hour news cycle, of the internet and globalisation. Kissinger has spoken of the difficulty politicians have in these circumstances in "developing a perception of the world and of themselves". Another problem is the difficulty of maintaining an informative network of local contacts at a time when random and lethal security threats are rife. But these are big issues in themselves, and we can't deal with every issue in one paper, or one discussion.

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