

Taking Celebrity Diplomacy Seriously in International Relations

Written by Andrew F. Cooper

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ANDREW F. COOPER, SEP 14 2009

A decade ago, the notion of “celebrity diplomacy” could be dismissed either (in a positive vein) as unnecessary in that celebrities need only be considered a subset of other forms of transnational activism or (more negatively) as opportunistic faddism. This is not to say that criticism of this phenomenon has abated. But the tone and nature of this backlash has altered considerably. Celebrities, both in the world of entertainment and business entrepreneurship, are vibrant and embedded actors on the global stage and as such, need to be taken seriously as a component of International Relations.

One of the most significant elements of this phenomenon is its hybridity. Institutional linkages with the United Nations, for example, provide enhanced access and legitimacy for some of the most significant celebrity diplomats. Actor George Clooney, as a United Nations’ Messenger of Peace, has conducted ambitious tours of UN peacekeeping missions in Darfur, Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Beyond the frontlines of fragile states, in 2008, Clooney went to India where he met then Indian Defence Secretary, Vijay Singh, along with then UN Assistant Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations, Jane Holl Lute, and also visited the home base for the majority of the Indian peacekeeping personnel.

Individual star power, however, can be utilized in an autonomous fashion from the UN. The full extent of Clooney’s access only came with his close personal interaction with the new, celebrity-friendly, Obama administration. Getting entry that would be extremely difficult for NGOs, Clooney has had meetings with Vice President Biden and President Obama. From the White House lawn, Clooney spoke live to Larry King about the Darfur crisis and the need for a special representative. A special representative has since been announced.

Clooney is also the founder of – along with other Hollywood notables Don Cheadle, Matt Damon, Brad Pitt, David Pressman and Jerry Weintraub – Not On Our Watch, a charity organization which encourages governing bodies to take meaningful, immediate action to focus global attention and resources towards putting an end to mass atrocities around the world.

With even more publicity, Angelina Jolie has more recently travelled to Thailand, Afghanistan and Baghdad in her capacity as a UN Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Refugee Agency. Although the Iraq trip was supposed to be a technical-oriented mission, with a focus on the plight of the 2 million internally displaced Iraqis, the tour was most notable for the manner by which Hollywood’s top celebrity was able to gain ready access at the highest level of the political and military hierarchy. Not only did she gain a bilateral meeting with Gen. David Petraeus, at the time the top US military commander in Iraq, she gained an audience with Iraq Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as well.

Yet, again Jolie is more than willing to work independently from the UN, as demonstrated by her presence in The Hague at the International Criminal Court at the trial of warlord Thomas Lubanga in May of this year and through her work with Witness, an organization co-founded by Peter Gabriel.

These cases indicate that celebrity diplomacy is both complementing and challenging traditional forms of statecraft. “Old school” national diplomats may talk about public diplomacy, but they still are most comfortable behind closed

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doors or with set scripts. Celebrities know, aided by the sophisticated experts with which they surround themselves, how to work the media. Clooney and Jolie's diplomatic trips, intentionally or not, elicit huge amounts of press attention.

Yet, while significant, Clooney and Jolie remain on the conformist side of celebrity diplomacy. Both have chosen to operate on the institutional oriented dimension of their activities through established institutions, an approach exaggerated in the case of Jolie by her appointment to the elite-based Council on Foreign Relations. Both hint at criticisms of state-based foreign policy activity, whether on Darfur or Iraq, but neither makes the jump to outright confrontation either with the US or indeed other national governments, such as the Sudanese regime with its deplorable record.

If there is to be a cutting edge in this activity, it will inevitably come from two other components of the larger construct of celebrity diplomacy. From one side comes the decidedly confrontational and non-conformist face epitomized by Mia Farrow, who has mobilized a highly effective campaign on Darfur. The key ingredient in her repertoire has been the power of linkage. Instead of tackling the Sudanese government head on, she has turned the attention onto Khartoum's main backer, the People's Republic of China. She was able to exploit Beijing's sensitive spot via its hosting of the 2008 Olympics with her successful appeal to Steven Spielberg to step down from his role as one of the overseas artistic advisers to those games as a visible sign of how her campaign is gaining ground.

Farrow's more recent hunger strike to draw attention to Darfur led to the creation of a network of high profile politicians, entrepreneurs and celebrities who now fast in solidarity for the cause.

If the humanitarian crisis in Darfur reveals the possibilities of celebrity mobilization on select issues, it also reinforces the limits on where this type of action can and should be applied. Pushing on Darfur does not stretch into action on the Middle East or the Korean peninsula. Moreover, this activity can stimulate a state-centric response. Beijing, well aware of the power of celebrities, has moved to mobilize its own star power as illustrated via the Olympics.

It is on the structural issues relating to such matters as health governance where the other component of celebrity diplomacy has gained considerable traction. The face that stands out here is that of hyperactive celebrity diplomat Bono, the lead singer of U2. The risk that Bono has had to deal with is not that he is too confrontational, but that he has become too much the insider associated with an unpopular political leader, President George W. Bush. Where other American celebrities (above all Oprah Winfrey) provided early and strong endorsements to Barack Obama, Bono displayed a strong loyalty to President Bush on the grounds that he has delivered on his long-term promises to Africa, especially on AIDS treatment.

The buzz that celebrity diplomacy provides certainly cannot be discounted. While traditional statecraft is usually opaque to the uninitiated, celebrities mesh international problem solving with the world of entertainment. But some components of this phenomenon provide not just a different sort of excitement, they offer some prospect of hope that issues too long neglected can be ratcheted up on the global agenda.

Sometimes, as with Mia Farrow's efforts on Darfur, this means pushing fast and hard beyond the accepted notions of sovereignty. Other celebrities, above all Bono, confront the credibility (and fatigue) factor by playing a longer game, privileging areas of public goods that fall by the wayside in a state-centric and still hierarchical diplomatic system.

The criticism directed towards celebrity diplomats has moved in consequence from their superficial qualities to the implications of their apparent ascendancy. This is especially true when some definitional clarity is provided. If being recognized as a celebrity diplomat means having some degree of global reach (not just being an advocate on a single issue) and having contact with state officials, the individual stars accorded this status is appreciably narrowed.

Still, these groups are negatively scrutinized on a number of other fronts. Some critics, especially in Europe, decry the erosion of civil society – and especially radical NGOs – at the expense of celebrity diplomats. American conservatives see the ascendancy of 'insider' celebrity diplomats as another sign of the triumph of Hollywood liberalism. This image is reinforced by the activism of 'anti-diplomats,' such as singer/actor Harry Belafonte, who are

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usually conflated into the same box by the American right.

Finally, the criticism is made that this cluster of celebrity diplomats are North-centric actors. At the present time, this is almost uniformly true, although some individuals such as singers Youssou N'Dour and Wyclef Jean and popular Uruguayan actor Osvaldo Laport have broken through in terms of global reach. Celebrity diplomacy, however, will only reach representational authenticity when more stars from the global South are elevated to the same stature as Bono and Angelina Jolie.

As in all areas of International Relations, it is precisely the waves of criticism that signal the breakthrough of celebrity diplomacy as a serious enterprise deserving sustained scrutiny. As long as this was a marginal activity it only attracted a minor degree of interest with little need or interest in conceptualizing what the phenomenon means in either issue-specific cases or in conceptual terms. Rather than being viewed as an unanticipated intrusion that diminishes the discipline, taking celebrity diplomacy seriously reveals IRs rich capacity for inclusion and adaptation.

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