WikiLeaks Revelations: The Implications for Diplomacy

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DARYL COPELAND, DEC 1 2010

In my book Guerrilla Diplomacy, I argue that if development is the new security in the age of globalization, then diplomacy must displace defence at the centre of international policy.

More recently, in a short article on science diplomacy, I observe that when it comes to assessing the role of science and technology (S&T) in international relations, one is confronted by a significant paradox.

Unlike religious extremism or political violence, most of the threats and challenges which imperil life on the planet – climate change, resource scarcity, public health – are rooted in science and driven by technology. While S&T can provide the remedies which contribute materially to the achievement of security and development, for instance through remote sensing, agronomy, or the introduction of game changing information and communication technologies, it can also give rise to the opposite – insecurity and underdevelopment. Here I refer to the scourge of weapons of mass destruction, the mismanagement of toxic wastes, the repression of human rights and civil liberties, and so forth.

In other words, in addition to its key function as a driver of globalization, when it comes to understanding the dynamics of contemporary international relations, S&T plays the part of a powerful, two-edged sword. It can provide solutions to some of the world's most vexing problems, even as it creates new ones.

Nowhere has this observation been brought into sharper relief than in the case of the most recent, and on this occasion phased release by WikiLeaks of what will amount eventually to hundreds of thousands of classified diplomatic reports. The very technologies which facilitate modern diplomatic communications have also made possible their unauthorized duplication and mass dissemination.

Even when posted in relatively small batches of only several thousand messages at a time, however, this latest information dump is simply far too much for most individuals to meaningfully absorb. Except for a very few researchers with mountains of time on their hands, or a handful of well-resourced media outlets, the source material itself will remain largely beyond direct access. In my estimation, that is precisely why the previous releases, concerning Iraq and Afghanistan and made available all in one giant gulp, had rather less public impact than might otherwise have been imagined. Or hoped.

This latest chapter has produced an explosion of coverage, focussed mainly on the sometimes salacious content of the communications. In the USA, the many and familiar voices of the rabid right are calling for blood. With some exceptions, however, few analysts or commentators have considered the implications for diplomacy.

What are they? Clearly, in the era of the internet, it has become very difficult for governments to keep secrets, and that fact may render the conduct of certain very sensitive types of traditional, state-to-state diplomacy more difficult. Information obtained in confidence is now likely to be more highly classified, and hence less likely to be as widely shared within government. On the other hand, much of contemporary diplomacy is already public, and that form of interaction will be little affected. Governments also tend to get over embarrassment rather quickly.

Nonetheless, this episode is not without consequence. When the dust settles and the sensational tid-bits are

forgotten, some of the longer-term impacts on diplomacy may in fact be *positive*.

How so?

Diplomacy suffers from a negative image – it has never really recovered from the iconic, debilitating image of Chamberlain in Munich, announcing that he had successfully negotiated "peace in our time" when in fact he had done nothing of the sort. Today, many still see diplomats as dithering dandies, dining off the public purse and lost hopelessly in a haze of obsolescence somewhere between protocol and alcohol.

The WikiLeaks documents suggest something quite different, and in so doing subvert the myth of diplomatic ineffectiveness. The information contained in the cables illustrates that diplomats are in fact very busy pursuing interests, advocating policies, making contacts and managing networks. Rather than spending all of their time at receptions and ceremonial events, envoys get out and about, talk to decision-makers and opinion leaders, make representations and perform analysis.

This is good news for foreign ministries, who could certainly do with more of that kind of PR.

On the substantial side, it is certainly true that diplomacy has not adapted well to the change in the operating environment heralded by the shift from the Cold War to the globalization age. Diplomatic practice remains too hierarchic, authoritarian, convention-bound and risk-averse.

That said, the content of these cables shows clearly that the work of diplomats is highly relevant; they are engaging on the critical issues of the day. Moreover, diplomats are shown to be effective. Their reporting and advice adds unique value – you are unlikely to have read about much of this stuff previously in the newspapers or on the splash page of your favourite e-zine. It is not policy, as Secretary Clinton has emphasized, but this material demonstrates that diplomacy makes a real contribution to international policy development. It follows that re-investment in the diplomatic function is in order.

Last word? Though frequently scorned, rebuked and ridiculed, even in the era of globalization there will always be a place for diplomacy, which is nothing less than an approach to the management of international relations characterized by dialogue, negation and compromise. If nothing else, the WikiLeaks correspondence underscores the argument that political communications represent an attractive, cost-effective and non-violent alternative to the use of armed force. Perhaps by the time all of the missives have been published, diplomacy will be back in the running as the international policy instrument of choice.

I'm not holding my breath. But at minimum, amidst excessive secrecy and message control, this is one way to get the word out.

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