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Implications for Harnessing the World's
Overlooked Statecraft Tools**

by Daryl Copeland
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

COVID-19, CULTURE, SCIENCE AND DIPLOMACY: IMPLICATIONS FOR HARNESSING THE WORLD'S OVERLOOKED STATECRAFT TOOLS

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He who cherishes the value of culture cannot fail to be a pacifist.
- Albert Einstein

I think that the purpose of science and culture is man.
- Fidel Castro

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, our planet finds itself beset by a constellation of difficult and complex issues, ranging from infectious disease, to climate change, environmental collapse, desertification, and to food and water insecurity, to name just a few.

All of these problems share one thing in common. They are wicked issues and are immune to the application of armed force. Each of them cuts all ways; that is, they are cross-cutting, unresolved, transnational and science-based.

Consequently, and confronted now with this extensive range of unconventional security threats, the world is floundering, adrift in a sea of life-threatening challenges.

One need look no further than the U.S. and U.K., two erstwhile science superpowers with some of the most sophisticated systems of science advice and science diplomacy in evidence anywhere. Yet, no matter how deeply embedded and necessary, such innovative constructions are not sufficient to guarantee positive outcomes.

In fact, the performance of these two countries in response to the pandemic has been abysmal, demonstrating indelibly that even the best practices of public administration can come to naught in the absence of informed, effective and attentive political leadership.

Pandemic Implications

In addition to the abject failure of science diplomacy, the cognizance of which is central to the purposes of this assessment, the currently intensifying pandemic has brought into stark relief at least three additional very serious shortcomings:

1. The world faces a glaring global governance gap, characterized by a lack of coherent, co-ordinated and co-operative international action in response to the identified threat. Beggar thy neighbour has become the predominant approach almost everywhere, with comprehensive multilateral remedies notable mainly for their absence;
2. Even more than during previous pandemics or the financial crisis of 2008-2009, the downside of neo-liberal globalization has been dramatically revealed. This dominant paradigm, the defining historical process of our times, has proven to be ruthlessly productive, yet critically flawed. Through the establishment and management of



intercontinental supply chains, and by efficiently allocating resources and identifying productive efficiencies, globalization has generated much wealth. But the benefits arising from those gains have in large part been privatized, while the costs have been socialized or downloaded onto the environment. Within this model there is clearly no place for the valuation of the ecological, public, or, in particular, the public health interest;

3. Inequality, polarization, racial and class divides, and long-standing socio-economic injustices have been significantly exacerbated. The racialized, the poor, the excluded, the exploited and the disenfranchised have borne the brunt of the pandemic.

All of which brings us to the observation that for far too long, culture, science and diplomacy have suffered from neglect in the conduct of international relations. Indeed, these elements are discounted, if not obscure, in the theory and practice of relations among states today. Yes, they share a high-toned reputation, but they have been widely misunderstood – disdained even – by politicians, public servants, scholars, the media, opinion leaders and the public.

We need to see these elements for what they are: undervalued instruments of statecraft. Each should be integral to all activities intended to bolster national image, reputation and brand, to foster co-operation and understanding, and most importantly, to contribute to the construction of a better, more just, secure and sustainable world.

Words matter

To begin our analysis, and to set out the argument's intellectual building blocks, we need to go back to basics. The terms elaborated upon below, though commonly used, are too often inadequately understood.

Culture: Totalizing and all-encompassing, but with a meaning which remains somewhat slippery and amorphous, it can be a difficult concept to fully comprehend. Nonetheless, culture is neither airy-fairy nor fuzzy. Instead, it represents the norms, customs, characteristics, traditions, artistic expression and behaviour of human groups. We learn about culture through literature, art, film, journalism, music, dramatic and documentary enterprise, scholarship and interpersonal exchange – which I think is key.

Science: As an evidence-based form of knowledge acquisition, it is empirical and objective, drawing on postulation, interrogation, experimentation and rigorous scrutiny to provide systematic insights into the nature of things. Scientific methods and findings may be imperfect; they are constantly evolving and sometimes controversial or contested. But science compares favourably to its non-fact-based alternatives: conviction, emotion, feeling, belief, ideology and so forth. In short, science is civilization's best bet for achieving progress in addressing the problems that threaten human survival globally, and for which there are no military solutions.

Diplomacy: A non-violent form of international political communication, it is sometimes described as the world's second oldest profession, and is often negatively stereotyped. But



diplomacy represents an approach to the management of international relations characterized by dialogue, negotiation, representation, compromise, problem solving and complex balancing. Its tools include soft power – the power of attraction – engagement and persuasion, lobbying and branding. Now, more than ever, there is no substitute.

Public diplomacy is best described as the efforts of states to inform, engage and influence by connecting directly with populations abroad. It occurs in practice when governments use culture and science, together with education, public relations and advocacy to pursue their international objectives, promoting policies and projecting values. This typically involves strategic use of the digital and conventional media, and the forging of mutual interest partnerships with elements of civil society – opinion leaders, universities, business and NGOs, among others.

The essential combination of science and diplomacy – science diplomacy – particularly if practised within an international culture of co-operation, should have been the first choice of governments everywhere when faced with the COVID-19 challenge.

Instead, science diplomacy has been almost completely ignored. It is worth unpacking and examining more closely the connections between these crucial, but too often overlooked aspects of foreign policy.

Diving Deeper

Diplomacy uses active listening and meaningful two-way exchange, choosing talking over fighting, and it supports the peaceful resolution of differences. It encourages and reinforces co-operation, accommodation and peace as elements of culture. Diplomacy's art content – creativity, innovation and improvisation – remains largely unappreciated, as does its main comparative advantage: the possibility of changing behaviour on both ends of the conversation.

Science is used to inquire into, and to extract findings which provide empirical and theoretical knowledge concerning anything which can be observed and recorded. Scientific endeavour can address problems of under-development and insecurity, ranging from climate change and diminishing biodiversity to urbanization, public health and management of the global commons. Through collaboration and rigorous peer review, science encourages and reinforces openness, transparency, co-operation and constructive dissent as constituent elements of culture. In the search for truth, science stands as the best bet available.

Culture is humanity's glue. It can overcome political and ideological barriers, drawing populations together by cementing shared bonds, and by nurturing and cultivating a collective body of creative imagination.

Culture, science and diplomacy transcend borders and can serve as a bridge between nations, groups and peoples.



International cultural relations and artistic expression deepen understanding and contribute to the establishment of networks and partnerships which help to weave together the exquisitely delicate fabric of civilization. Together, they represent an antidote to some of the downsides of globalization mentioned earlier, and address the paradox of connectivity, which, even as it homogenizes and integrates, tends to fragment and alienate, disrupt and divide.

At a practical level, cultural diplomacy can also help to advance national interests, sometimes in surprising ways.

Beyond the Theoretical

To provide a modest illustration of the transformative power of this under-valued instrument: In 1984, I was posted as the political and public affairs officer at the Canadian embassy in Thailand. Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal was touring Southeast Asia, and headquarters in Ottawa instructed me to deliver the troupe's visit to Bangkok. I was initially opposed because 35 tonnes of equipment had to be cleared through Thai customs, 55 Canadian dancers and staff needed work permits, there were endless logistical complications, and no obvious local partners ready to step up to the plate.

It looked to me like a bad idea, devoid of any prospects for deepening and broadening the bilateral relationship. In the end, however, I realized that I had misjudged the opportunity. The results were exceptional.

The troupe staged several well-reviewed evening performances at the National Theatre, mostly for the benefit of Bangkok's then small cosmopolitan elite but including attendance by several members of the Thai royal family, which guaranteed broader attention. Better yet, we convinced a number of dancers to hold free workshops at local ballet schools, and arranged for the company to put on a no-charge charity event for students and young people.

All of that allowed us to reach new audiences, attracting significant and very positive media attention, but the real trigger occurred on the company's last night in the country.

I hosted a large dinner party for all of my political and cultural contacts, as well as the full retinue of Canadian participants. At the end of the evening, after all of the dignitaries and most of my other guests had departed, a group of dancers expressed an intense interest in going out on the town. I suggested a number of high-line hotel discos, but my now animated group of adventurers insisted on something more authentic.

After some discussion and a careful weighing of risk versus reward, we hopped into the embassy vans and went off to Bangkok's notorious entertainment district, Pat Pong. The dancers swept through a series of bars and nightclubs like a tsunami. Their sophisticated kinetic skills generated admiration and amazement, and drew large line-ups instantly at every venue.



By morning, and reinforced by the buzz created by the previous days' more formal (and alternative) performances, Canada's reputation in the Thai capital had moved from mooted – think maple syrup, Mounties and mountains – to avant-garde: artistic, urban, even hip. It was a quantum leap, although the gains in the aftermath were not consolidated. Several days later, it was business as usual at the embassy. Nothing was built upon.

Plus ça change...

There is, however, a more profound point associated with this anecdotal digression, besides perhaps offering a bit of levity to lighten somewhat the prevailing pandemic gloom. I learned that international cultural activities can help to instil deeper habits of co-operation in other areas – a quality which has shown itself to be altogether too scarce in the context of the world's response to COVID-19.

Not Enough

To recap, I have tried to make the case for prioritizing culture, science and diplomacy in international policy and relations. If the relationship between these potentially great swaths of diplomatic enterprise can be better understood and more effectively implemented, then the possibilities are, at minimum, promising.

And yet the national and international responsibility and accountability for practising and promoting public diplomacy, culture, arts and science remain splintered, atomized, diffuse and disaggregated. There is no central institution, no strategy and no plan.

Globally, the situation represents nothing less than a miasma. Governments and international organizations everywhere face daunting public policy and administrative challenges, and the setting is anything but ideal.

For example, we must take into account the fundamental geopolitical and geo-economic re-ordering which is swirling all around us. Power is restless and never stays in one place for too long. It now is shifting inexorably from the North Atlantic to the Asia Pacific, accelerated especially by the retrenchment and retreat associated with President Donald Trump's unilateralist America First policies. China, meanwhile, is increasingly ambitious in its attempt to reclaim a pre-eminent place in the world, while Russia's sometimes brutal dedication to restoring its status as a great power has sown disruption far and wide.

Add to that the rise of authoritarianism, identity politics and populist nationalism, which have occurred principally at the expense of respect for human rights, democratic norms, the centrality of the rule of law and a codified, rules-based system of international organization. The picture becomes disturbingly clear.

This is not the world envisioned by those who framed the Atlantic Charter, nor that conjured by the gloating triumphalists who, in the immediate wake of the Cold War, foretold the end of history.



We are in uncharted waters and the race to the bottom, or into the abyss, however incoherent and diffuse, is on. A course correction is imperative.

What Is To Be Done?

Here are three remedial takeaways:

- Identify culture, science and diplomacy as international policy priorities. Situate them within an integrated and co-ordinated framework, strategy and plan. This is the precinct of foreign ministries, which should serve as central agencies for the management of globalization. They don't, and for the most part remain sidelined, marginalized and deeply mired in outdated conventions. Radical reform and reconstruction are necessary.
- Rebuild. Wicked issues respect no borders and can only be managed co-operatively. Expeditionary forces cannot be dispatched to occupy the alternatives to the carbon economy. Air strikes will not slow global warming. Garrisons are useless in stopping the spread of infectious disease. Effective solutions require shared understanding and co-ordinated collaboration. Reinvest, therefore, in culture, science, diplomacy and multilateralism. There is a direct dialectical relationship between results and resources, yet under-performance is ensured as long as capacity remains anemic. Fledgling initiatives such as the Alliance for Multilateralism, championed by Germany, Japan, France and Canada, and rolled out at the Munich Security Conference in April 2019, show some promise. That effort has now attracted the attention of some 60 countries, although few concrete gains have been achieved thus far.
- Public diplomacy, including the promotion of culture, science, the arts and education, connects demonstrably with democratization, transparency and openness. Progressive and enlightened new ventures are urgently required. In response to the rising tide of right-wing populism sweeping the planet, these activities must be pitched to the people, not just the elites. Cultivate the "grass tops": the opinion leaders, essential organizations and associations, and influence aggregators. But don't forget the grassroots: students, labour and the general public. Focus not only on the usual suspects, but also the strange bedfellows. Go storefront, go retail and go on tour with an inclusive, egalitarian and appealing vision of our common future.

How should we pay for this fundamental change in direction and orientation?

Reallocate resources from defence, the intelligence agencies, the police and other hard security institutions in favour of diplomacy and development, social programs and education. Increase marginal rates and close tax loopholes that favour corporations and the rich. Tax away the profits from those who have benefited from the pandemic, and deploy that financial infusion in support of those most in need. Tax wealth, and undertake a much more concerted, co-ordinated campaign to identify and recover the personal and corporate assets stashed away in tax havens abroad, those



assets to which the Panama Papers and other sources refer. The trillions of dollars which could be generated from this initiative alone would more than cover current requirements.

The Wrap

There is no substitute for a comprehensive approach to prioritizing culture and science, each combined with diplomacy, as instruments of international policy.

Culture and science, along with the international political agency inherent in diplomacy, can help build relationships that go beyond commercial or state-centric alternatives. These currents run deeper, and tap into something very elemental and very human. They are based upon genuine interpersonal communication and meaningful exchange. They enlarge understanding. They encourage empathy and underscore the importance of collaboration.

Most of all, however, they penetrate places of the heart and mind that are immune to the machinations of politics, to the appeal to narrow economic interest, or to the blunt application of armed force. Military instruments are both too sharp and too dull to deal with the daunting intricacies of globalization.

Instead, the connections that are forged through the pursuit of non-violent options tend to be more strong, resilient and enduring. The potential is there, and governments and international organizations desperately need to nurture and cultivate these kinds of partnerships if we are to avert reaching the tipping point beyond which remedial measures and recovery will be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

It has been 100 years since the Spanish flu killed tens of millions more than died in the First World War. British author Robert Fisk once memorably observed that the only thing we ever learn is that we never learn. The tools and the critical path are there, and the promise enormous.

Carpe diem.

► About the Author

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