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Recovering the Lost Art of Diplomacy

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Diplomacy is an instrument of strategy that great powers use to survive and gain an advantage in competition with other powerful states. Excellence in diplomacy is a vital prerequisite to the success and endurance of great powers. Diplomatic skills atrophied in the United States after the end of the Cold War, as we came to rely on military technology and economic sanctions as the main tools of our foreign policy. But now we are entering a dangerous age in which great powers are competing for the things they have competed over from the beginning of time: territory, resources, influence, and prestige. In this setting, the United States will need to recover the lost art of diplomacy.

First, let me clarify that by diplomacy, I don't mean John Kerry landing in Davos, Switzerland to give a lecture to the world's political and business leaders about climate change. I mean the use of negotiations to reconcile conflicting interests on matters of war and peace. Diplomacy is an art and is best defined by its outcomes rather than by its processes. The most consequential outcome by far is the constraint of the power of one's adversaries—in other words, setting limits to the hostile accumulation of power. Powerful states are naturally constrained by all kinds of things, such as geography, fearful neighbors, and limitations of military technology. Diplomacy works to maximize these constraints in order to restrict an aggressive opponent's options for conquest. Of all forms of diplomacy between great powers, the most important concerns itself with limiting, avoiding, or preparing for war.

I should also define what I mean by strategy: it is the matching of national means, in the form of military and economic resources, to national ends, in the form of foreign threats and opportunities. Danger arises when gaps emerge between the means at a nation's disposal and the ends to which those means must be applied. Diplomacy is critical when a state faces enemies too numerous or powerful to be

deterred or defeated by military means alone. Diplomacy's role in strategy is to increase the external means at the nation's disposal by building coalitions and to reduce the threats arrayed against it through détente. Effective diplomacy permits states to avoid tests of strength that are beyond their ability to bear. There are two erroneous conceptions of diplomacy that have become entrenched in the modern mind, one mostly on the left and the other mostly on the right. The main error on the left is thinking that diplomacy's purpose is to build rule-making institutions that transcend nation-states and that will eventually expunge war from the human experience. A historical example of this is seen in the policies of President Woodrow Wilson after the First World War, as in his promotion of a League of Nations. This way of thinking persists today in the liberal institutionalism of those who advocate for a rules-based international order.

The main error on the right is thinking that human societies can only find true safety and honor in a preponderance of military power, and that diplomacy is more often than not a form of surrender. This view finds expression in the perennial accusations of appeasement or comparisons to Neville Chamberlain and the Munich Agreement of 1938—when the British Prime Minister agreed to Nazi Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland as a means of preventing war—anytime an American president engages in direct diplomacy with a U.S. adversary.

Both of these misconceptions are built on the notion that we can find a cleaner or more efficient substitute to the messiness of compromise, which is diplomacy's stock-in-trade. The entrenchment of these views can be traced to the unusual circumstances that existed after the Cold War. American power was unmatched, liberal institutions were in the ascendancy, and history—in the famous formulation of Francis Fukuyama—had supposedly come to an end. There seemed to be no need for classical diplomacy, because the U.S. had no peer competitor with whom it needed to negotiate or compromise. As a result, American foreign policy embraced a transformationalist agenda of remaking the world—including our adversaries—in our image, through the spread of democracy and liberal economics.

It is clear today, however, that what Fukuyama called history is in fact an ongoing reality and that our vacation from it is over. All the international institutions in the world cannot stop a war, should it come, between China and the U.S. Nor does

the U.S. hold the margin of military superiority it did 30 years ago. Like past great powers, therefore, we will need skill in diplomacy to bring national means and national ends into alignment.

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We know from Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* that in the summer of 432 BC, the leaders of Sparta gathered to consider whether to go to war with Athens. A group of hawks, led by Sthenelaidas, were eager for war "as the honor of Sparta demands." Against this, the aging king Archidamus II argued for diplomacy:

I bid you not to take up arms at once, but to . . . remonstrate with [the Athenians] in a tone not too suggestive of war, nor again too suggestive of submission, and to employ the interval in perfecting our own preparations. The means will be, first, the acquisition of allies . . . and secondly the development of our home resources. If they listen to our embassy, so much the better; but if not, after the lapse of two or three years our position will have become materially strengthened. . . . Perhaps by that time the sight of our preparations . . . will have disposed them to submission, while their land is still untouched, and while their counsels may be directed to the retention of advantages as yet undestroyed.

Over the centuries, similar arguments have played out time and again in the halls of the great powers. These are clarifying moments when war is foreseeable but not yet inevitable—when the options narrow, tradeoffs loom, and strategy is most critical to the survival of the state.

My most recent book, *Great Power Diplomacy*, recounts ten such moments over a 1,500-year time span. The only way to understand the world, I contend, is to see it empirically, on the basis of the past. And the only way to do that is to study the impulses and actions of individual rulers: what they feared, who they loved, what they were trying to preserve and why.

One such example concerned the young Byzantine emperor Theodosius II. In the summer of 442 AD, his armies were at war with his empire's ancestral enemy, Sassanid Persia, on Byzantium's eastern frontier in modern day Syria. Reports began to arrive that a terrifying tribe of steppe horsemen known as the Huns had appeared across the empire's northern frontier, raping and pillaging their way toward Byzantium's capital, Constantinople. Theodosius's granaries were depleted, and his armies were exhausted. To make matters worse, another hostile force, the Vandals, were threatening his grain supply far to the west in North Africa.

The hawks at court—Gothic generals who ably served Theodosius's late father—counseled an immediate military offensive. But it was quickly apparent that the Huns were capable of defeating even very large formations of the empire's best troops in open battle. Theodosius's court chamberlain, Chrysaphius, argued for a different approach—he counseled sending emissaries to parley with the Hunnic chieftain Attila and to broker a truce, lubricated by a regular schedule of gold shipments.

The generals decried Chrysaphius's plan as being beneath the dignity of a great empire. But it worked. Using the time gained with the Huns, Theodosius surged his forces in the east and brought the Persians to the negotiating table on favorable terms. With the eastern frontier quieted, Theodosius shifted the full weight of his army to the north. He recalled far-flung garrisons, replenished the granaries and armories, and mended the walls around Constantinople. With those pieces in place, he abruptly canceled the gold payments to the Huns.

By doing so, he put Attila in a bind. Attila was an elected leader of a confederation of tribes who expected him to deliver loot. Without the gold, Attila's subordinate chieftains were likely to rebel. Now the Byzantines were in a better position to resist. After a half-hearted fight, the Huns decided to look for greener pastures. They turned their attention from Constantinople to softer targets in the western Roman Empire. Within a few years, the Huns splintered as a fighting force and disappeared from the stage of history.

Diplomacy, of course, doesn't always succeed. Diplomats are just as susceptible to chance and folly as generals. The catastrophe at Munich in 1938 stands out in the Western mind as the prime example of this. But what is most striking about the failed diplomacy of Neville Chamberlain was how widely it *departed from* the logic of constraints that has been the focus of classical diplomacy for millennia. Chamberlain may have been a member of Britain's Conservative Party, but his mindset reflected a prevailing liberal mentality of his time. He started from the premise that Hitler was reasonable and that the job of diplomacy was to make a reasonable compromise—to get on with the normal business of peace. There was no place in Chamberlain's thinking for the traditional goal of diplomacy—maintaining a balance of power—which he saw as antiquated.

In 1938, Chamberlain needlessly squandered the opportunity to amplify the natural constraints on Germany that traditional British diplomacy would have accentuated—including especially the fear among Germany's neighbors of its growing strength and the opportunity that this created for Britain to pursue its age-old policy of coalitions. Rather than constraining German power, Chamberlain's diplomacy removed constraints.

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The situation of the U.S. today is not so different from other great powers throughout history. We face a rising peer in China, a resurgent Russia, plus Iran, North Korea, and numerous smaller opponents like the Houthis. As two consecutive National Defense Strategies have made clear, our military is not postured or equipped to fight all of these opponents simultaneously. That's unlikely to change any time soon. America has a $30 trillion debt. We now spend as much on annual interest payments on that debt as we do on our defense budget.

These are classic conditions for the use of strategic diplomacy. The immediate goal should be to avoid a war on multiple fronts potentially beyond our ability to win—to avoid it entirely if possible and to ensure that if it does eventually come, we are in a better position to wage it than we are now. And to that end, we should buy time to create conditions abroad that support a rigorous program of national rejuvenation at home.

The running focus of U.S. diplomacy should be to ensure favorable balances of power in the world's major regions: Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East. Our diplomacy needs to foster a sufficient degree of indigenous stability in the first two of these regions through the skillful use of coalitions, such that we are able to concentrate greater U.S. military effort against the main threat, which is China.

Re-embracing a balance of power logic will require changing how the U.S. has approached foreign policy for the past generation. The biggest change is a recognition of limits. "The nature of things in this world," as the 16th century Italian diplomat Francesco Guicciardini wrote, "is such that nearly everything contains some imperfections in all its parts." American foreign policy has been proceeding from the opposite impulse: a kind of grand meliorism that aspires to the loftiest imaginable goal of remaking the world in our image. Effective diplomacy, by contrast, starts from the much more grounded and conservative recognition that national resources and national will are precious and finite, and that the chief duty of leaders is to use them shrewdly and sparingly on the attainable ends that matter most.

An acceptance of limits goes hand in hand with an emphasis on diplomacy's main role in strategy, which is to place constraints on the accumulation of hostile power. There is a modern fallacy that diplomacy's job is to uncover good intentions on the part of an adversary or to remove the obstacles to supposedly

natural patterns of peaceful cooperation. It was that way of thinking that led the U.S., after the Cold War ended, to actively *assist* China's economic rise—based on the faulty assumption that a more prosperous China would be a friendlier China. The effects of that policy bedevil the U.S. to this day. Classical diplomacy is altogether more pessimistic about human nature. As in the parable of the unjust steward, we have to be shrewd in the ways of this world in order to preserve what is good.

Diplomacy is not surrender, and talking to an opponent is not a reward for good behavior. In dealings with China, Russia, or Iran, U.S. diplomatic initiatives must always be measured not by the process or optics—or by whether they support an abstract goal—but by whether the outcome results in greater or weaker constraints on a rival's ability to harm us and our interests. Does it increase or decrease his dependency on us? Does it aid or complicate his ability to concentrate military power against us? Does it ease or impede his path of conquest?

A corollary has to do with allies. America has a larger number of allies than any great power in history. As a maritime power in the style of Venice and Britain, America benefits from having allies at the world's chokepoints and in strategic regions. But diplomacy with allies, too, must be judged by its outcomes. Does the behavior of a particular ally ease or increase the concentration of U.S. military power against the main threat? Does it relieve or add to America's burden in wartime? Does its trade policy help or hinder the goal of reindustrialization here at home in the face of the growing threat from China? Alliances that lack reciprocity in trade or do not share the burden in security need to be fixed. The goal is strategic renovation: to rebalance the ledger of burdens and benefits in U.S. alliances so that they are more favorable to the U.S. and therefore more sustainable.

In a similar spirit, we need to drop the nebulous goal of "order" and keep diplomacy focused on producing tangible benefits for our nation. There is a mantra in establishment circles about maintaining the "rules-based international order." But "international order" is not an intrinsic good—indeed, it can be deleterious to America if it involves rules or commitments that undermine our national welfare or safety. Effective diplomacy always has the national interest as its chief objective.

Finally, we have to build institutions at home that support excellence in the practice of diplomacy. In recent years, the U.S. State Department has taken on a

dizzying array of goals detached from the national interest. These range from fighting climate change to advancing identity politics and advocating for an assortment of supposed global "rights" untethered from the U.S. Constitution. The State Department bureaucracy grew over time to support such causes while neglecting diplomacy's core functions. Foreign service officers lack training in negotiations. The cultivation of particular knowledge of foreign places and languages has been deprioritized. Worst of all, the State Department has devoted significant resources to promoting progressive social causes that the majority of Americans disagree with and that are harmful to America's image and social cohesion. Thankfully, this is now in the process of being curtailed.

I am optimistic that our country can recover the lost art of diplomacy. Over the past year, the Trump administration has undertaken more big diplomatic initiatives than probably all previous post-Cold War administrations combined. The breakthrough in Gaza, efforts to end the war in Ukraine, the ongoing reform of American alliances, and efforts to renegotiate the trade relationship with China show that Americans are capable of wielding diplomacy as an instrument of strategic statecraft in the style of Teddy Roosevelt.

The Trump administration has also had success resolving a number of seemingly intractable regional conflicts, including Azerbaijan–Armenia, India–Pakistan, Egypt–Ethiopia, Thailand–Cambodia, and Rwanda–DRC. And Secretary of State Rubio's reforms are refocusing the State Department on its core mission. We are on the right track, and it is important that we stay on it.