

## American Diplomacy in the Current Geopolitical Climate



**Ronald E. Neumann**

President of the American Academy of Diplomacy

**March 2019**

For more information: [bush.tamu.edu/Scowcroft/](http://bush.tamu.edu/Scowcroft/)

## **American Diplomacy in the current geopolitical climate**

By Ronald E. Neumann

*Ronald E. Neumann is president of the American Academy of Diplomacy. He was ambassador to Algeria, Bahrain, and Afghanistan. While the subject is a central focus of the American Academy of Diplomacy, the views presented are personal and do not represent a position of the Academy. This article is adapted from a talk to Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs at the George H.W. Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, March 19, 2019.*

The condition of American diplomacy has received a good deal of discussion but much of what is written mixes up issues of policy and the role of diplomacy. Separating these issues is important to understand both the role of diplomacy and, particularly the need for a professional diplomatic corp. That, of course, leads to the question, how does America's current posture measure up to the need?

### **Difference between policy and diplomacy**

Policy is ultimately the domain of our elected leaders. At the highest level it is the selection of goals that further national interests as conceived by the President and his national security team. Additionally, since America is a nation with worldwide interests, many decisions that constitute policy are made a level lower than the President. Some of those will inevitably be made by career officers, just as some activist ambassadors, of which I was one, pushed policy idea. Nevertheless, while there is some gray area the main distinction still holds; diplomacy is essentially about how we get others to adopt the policies we want.

### **Diplomacy's role**

Diplomacy is not about making nice but neither is it just strong arming others. My favorite short definition of diplomacy is the ability to tell someone to go to Hell in such a way that they look forward to the trip. Why this is important says much about the nature

of diplomacy. It is ongoing. It does not end with the accomplishment of any particular goal. Those one works against today may be necessary allies to accomplish tomorrow's purposes. So a certain degree of politeness and curtesy are not about being politically correct but, rather, about being effective.

This basic realization is the reason that diplomats try not to break crockery unnecessarily. If one alienates individuals and nations it will be that much harder to work with them on tomorrow's issues. Those who mistakenly mix strength with loud mouth bluster make a considerable mistake.

Shouting at someone may make you feel good, but it is an obstacle to reaching agreement. This is as true of diplomacy as it is of personal relations. Even when one has to use pressure it is often possible to do so in such a way that the other party sees the threat very clearly but doesn't feel that he or she has been berated by their interlocutor. The more one can leave the dignity of the other party intact the more likely one is to be able to work with them again.

President George H. W. Bush understood this well. His four rules for working with Congress, and later with others, included "Never get personal" and "Persuade, don't intimidate." Perhaps these lessons were what

made him an effective diplomat at the United Nations and in China.

This is also why diplomats look for a way of reaching our goals in ways that allow others to reach some of theirs. This isn't always possible but the agreements most likely to be respected are those which the other side sees as having value, "looking forward to the trip." An agreement that is seen by one party as having been forced, as being the result of weakness and pressure, creates the conditions for that party to break the agreement when it is able to.

Perhaps the most famous example of this is in the peace treaties that ended WWI. The agreement with Germany was certainly not the only reason for the rise of Hitler but it helped lay the basis for the sense of exploitation that he used in his rise to power. The peace treaty with Turkey was so disadvantageous to Turkey that it led to the overthrow of the government, a new war and the expelling of Greeks who had lived in Turkey for centuries.

Many bad agreements are not this catastrophic. Yet the point stands; if one wants an agreement to be maintained make it as mutually advantageous as possible consistent with our own policy interests. Agreements that give something to both sides are far more likely to advantage us over the long term than one sided "victories" that carry the seeds of new problems and old resentments ready to break out over fresh issues.

Practicing diplomacy also requires certain skills. One is listening. Understanding the limits of the possible in any situation requires understanding what is important to the other

side. It is about distinguishing between preferences, which one may push on or seek to alter, and deeply held beliefs or perceptions of interest that are not going to change. Understanding the difference is crucial to forming policies that can work and recognizing those which are doomed from the start.

It is often said, usually disparagingly, that the diplomats' main role is to observe and report. What this fails to understand is that this is not a passive occupation but is a vital part of the policy process. It is how one shapes advice to Washington on what policies are most likely to be effective, how policy is working, and how it might be adjusted for success. When I negotiated the extension of a base agreement in Oman I had to work between the desires of the US Defense lawyers to give up as little control over our base and personnel as possible and issues of national pride and sovereignty that were critical to Oman. Drawing the distinctions was critical to success.

An example of not paying attention to these differences came in the 2011 negotiations in Iraq to keep US forces in the country. President Obama's Administration insisted on having the agreement ratified by the Iraqi Parliament. This was a view driven by US lawyers. But those working on the ground in Iraq (I had left Iraq at the time and was not involved but followed the issue closely) knew that this was neither politically possible nor necessary to achieve our purpose. The negotiations failed.

When the Islamic State suddenly burst on the scene three years later we were much worse positioned than we would have been had we kept forces in the country. And we

reintroduced US forces without a vote of the Iraqi parliament and with the kind of diplomatic agreement we could have had before. That is what observing and reporting are all about.

Another characteristic of good diplomacy is understanding the cultural sensitivities of the host government. When then Senator Biden criticized then Afghan President Karzai for corruption, Biden did it in front of much of the Afghan cabinet. But in Afghan culture no friend would attack another in front of others unless one were signaling that the friendship was over and one was withdrawing support. Biden thought he had really told Karzai how serious we were about corruption. Karzai assumed that corruption couldn't be the real issue and went searching for why US policy was changing and why we had turned against him. A lot of our increasingly difficult relations with President Karzai began from this point.

Stories about such misunderstandings and their consequences could be multiplied almost endlessly. The point is that a great deal of effective diplomacy comes from understanding these kinds of issues. That is not always easy but it leads to why it is important to have a professional diplomatic cadre.

### **Why professional diplomacy is needed and how does America's current posture measure up to the need?**

The US has had a professional diplomatic corps for nearly 100 years, currently organized by an act of Congress (the Foreign Service Act of 1980) that recognized the need for a professional service. Like the military, Foreign Service Officers take an oath to the

Constitution, have rank in person (not in the position as the Civil Service does) are subject to selection out for low ranking or time in grade, and are subject to worldwide posting. They are augmented not only by specialists and various types of support but by Civil Service personnel, mostly serving domestically, who have become many of our most import experts in issues from arms control to trade negotiations.

Diplomacy are as much a profession, requiring study and application as any other professional field. This is not to say that gifted armatures can't be diplomats. Our first great diplomat, Benjamin Franklin was not a professional and through the years many distinguished Americans have served as ambassadors. My father was one such, a non-career appointee as we say, although he was somewhat unusual in that he served four presidents, three posts and two parties.

But while all the traditional responsibilities of diplomacy remain present the modern world has added an enormous number of new aspects. Over twenty cabinet departments and agencies are now overseas at our embassies, and all fall under the authority of the ambassador who has the broadest authority of any position in the executive branch. What's more, the ambassador must keep the work of all these folk coordinated, or at least not at cross purposes. Language is particularly important to understanding culture and to communicating.

Diplomacy is sometimes a dangerous profession. While diplomats are neither soldiers nor spies their jobs often require taking risks. There are 250 names on the plaques in the State Department of those who have died in the line of duty. Some, like the

first name of William Palfrey in 1780, were lost at sea or died of yellow fever. But as one turns into the 20<sup>th</sup> century they were killed in ambushes in Vietnam, murdered in Beirut, died in Benghazi, or were murdered by suicide bombers in Afghanistan. That political appointees practically never go to the places where these risks arise says something about the need for a professional diplomacy.

In sum, there are traits of listening, of influencing, communicating, persuading, and accepting a measure of risk to achieve national purposes that are all part of what one needs to learn to be a good diplomat. Together, along with much else, they constitute a professional field. This is why the Congress has repeatedly recognized in legislation that (1) a career foreign service, characterized by excellence and professionalism, is essential in the national interest to assist the President and the Secretary of State in conducting the foreign affairs of the United States; (2) the scope and complexity of the foreign affairs of the Nation have heightened the need for a professional foreign service (SEC. 101. 22 U.S.C. 3901a)

While many Americans seem to focus more on our military than on diplomacy, it is often our own military who have become the foremost proponent of a properly funded and staffed diplomatic service. Every year literally hundreds of former generals and admirals spend time in Congress talking about the need for proper funding. They endless quote General and later Secretary of Defense Mattis, "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately."

So what is the state of the diplomatic profession? In a word, poor, but not nearly as

bad as it was in the first year of this Administration, which was a disaster. The cuts inflicted by then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson did more harm to our diplomacy in a year than I would have thought possible. We lost about 25 percent of our most senior diplomats, the equivalent of three- and four-star generals. This is a huge amount of experience to lose at one time. Intake was cut. Like the military the Foreign Service recruits only at the bottom. If the military does not recruit enough lieutenants in one year then in ten years there won't be enough majors and in 20 not enough colonels. The same is true of the Foreign Service.

A mindless hiring freeze was kept in place for over a year leading to massive shortages at posts and in Washington. To give just one example that can be found in a February 2017 report of State's Inspector General, the South Asia Bureau that handles Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, refugees in Bangladesh, and Central Asian states was short 14 percent of its overall staff and 25 percent of its Civil Service staff. Perhaps worst was that aside from the cuts themselves there was no plan for what the work force was supposed to look like with smaller numbers, what tasks would no longer be performed, or what responsibilities given up or moved to others.

To his credit, Secretary Mike Pompeo has ended the worst of these practices and lifted the hiring freeze. But there is not yet hiring authority to replace what has been lost, and replacing experience takes years. Some of the damage turns out to be much more difficult to unwind than to cause. For example, because funding is limited State is going through a long drawn out exercise to decide which of

the empty positions need priority in filling and what others to continue empty.

On the good side, the Foreign Service today is recruited competitively; getting past the entrance exams is slightly harder than getting into Harvard. But it is just barely bringing in officers at a level sufficient to keep pace with attrition. Additionally, the Foreign Service does little to train or professionally educate its staff. Currently, too many embassies have no ambassador and too many critical senior positions for running the Department at home remain empty; the worst performance of any Administration that I have seen in the almost half a century that I have been engaged in this profession.

Secretary Pompeo and his team are trying to rebuild. They are concerned about morale and are working to staff senior positions and ambassadorships; doing better I think than many give them credit for. But they are working in an administration that radiates contempt for diplomacy in the budgets it sends to congress; budgets that congress regularly rejects on a strong bipartisan basis (one of the very few areas that has not been subject to bitter partisan wrangling that has infected so many other subjects in congress).

So where does this leave America's diplomacy?

There is a need for a professional diplomatic corps to achieve the nation's foreign policy goals. We have one, although we do less to professionally educate it than is the case for almost every other major nation.

The habits, knowledge and skills required merit a professional corps loyal to the constitution and dedicated to carrying out the policies of whatever administration is elected by the American people. We have such a group. It has taken some hits and it is bruised but it is very much there and still capable of rebuilding.

But it needs to be supported, trained, and funded just as any other professional corps does. America's diplomats are in some 275 posts around the world. They are looking after Americans in trouble, fighting drugs and terrorists, implementing policy, and taking risks to make sure Washington has the best judgment of complex realities that our men and women can give them.

And they are worth the support of the American people.

***The Views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of The Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs, The Bush School of Government and Public Services, or Texas A&M University***

## **Ronald E. Neumann**

*President, American Academy of Diplomacy*

Formerly a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Ronald E. Neumann served three times as Ambassador; to Algeria, Bahrain and finally to Afghanistan from July 2005 to April 2007. Before Afghanistan, Mr. Neumann, a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, served in Baghdad from February 2004 with the Coalition Provisional Authority and then as Embassy Baghdad's liaison with the Multinational Command, where he was deeply involved in coordinating the political part of military actions.

Prior to working in Iraq, he was Ambassador in Manama, Bahrain (2001-2004), Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Near East Affairs (1997-2000) with responsibility for North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and Ambassador to Algeria (1994 to 1997). He was Director of the Office of Northern Gulf Affairs (Iran and Iraq; 1991 to 1994). Earlier in his career, he was Deputy Chief of Mission in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, and in Sanaa in Yemen, Principal Officer in Tabriz, Iran and Economic/Commercial Officer in Dakar, Senegal. His previous Washington assignments include service as Jordan Desk officer, Staff Assistant in the Middle East (NEA) Bureau, and Political Officer in the Office of Southern European Affairs.

Ambassador Neumann is the author of a memoir, *Three Embassies, Four Wars: a personal memoir* (2017) and *The Other War: Winning and Losing in Afghanistan* (Potomac Press, 2009), a book on his time in Afghanistan. He has returned to Afghanistan repeatedly and is the author of a number of monographs, articles, and editorials. His writings have focused most heavily on Afghanistan, stabilization, and Bahrain. At the Academy he has focused particularly on efforts to maintain adequate State and USAID budgets and staffing and upgrade professional formation to enable these institutions to carry out their responsibilities. Ambassador Neumann is on the Advisory Board of a non-profit girls' school in Afghanistan, the School of Leadership, Afghanistan (SOLA) and the Advisory Board of Spirit of America. He is on the board of the Middle East Policy Council and the Advisory Council of the World Affairs Councils of America.

Ambassador Neumann speaks some Arabic and Dari as well as French. He received State Department Superior Honor Awards in 1993 and 1990. He was an Army infantry officer in Viet Nam and holds a Bronze Star, Army Commendation Medal and Combat Infantry Badge. In Baghdad, he was awarded the Army Outstanding Civilian Service Medal. In 2018, he received the American Foreign Service Association's award for Lifetime Contributions to American Diplomacy. He earned a B.A. in history and an M.A. in political science from the University of California at Riverside and is a graduate of the National War College. He is married to the former M. Elaine Grimm. They have two children.

## **The Bush School of Government and Public Service**

*Mark Welsh, Dean and Holder of the Edward & Howard Kruse Endowed Chair*

Founded in 1997, the Bush School of Government and Public Service has become one of the leading public and international affairs graduate schools in the nation. One of ten schools and colleges at Texas A&M University, a tier-one research university, the School offers master's level education for students aspiring to careers in public service.

The School is ranked in the top 12 percent of graduate public affairs schools in the nation, according to rankings published in U.S. News & World Report. The School now ranks thirty-third among both public and private public affairs graduate programs and twenty-first among public universities.

The School's philosophy is based on the belief of its founder, George H.W. Bush, that public service is a noble calling—a belief that continues to shape all aspects of the curriculum, research, and student experience. In addition to the Master of Public Service and Administration degree and the Master of International Affairs degree, the School has an expanding online and extended education program that includes Certificates in Advanced International Affairs, Homeland Security, and Nonprofit Management.

Located in College Station, Texas, the School's programs are housed in the Robert H. and Judy Ley Allen Building, which is part of the George Bush Presidential Library Center on the West Campus of Texas A&M. This location affords students access to the archival holdings of the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, invitation to numerous events hosted by the George Bush Foundation at the Annenberg Presidential Conference Center, and inclusion in the many activities of the Texas A&M community.

## **The Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs**

*Andrew S. Natsios, Director and E. Richard Schendel Distinguished Professor of the Practice*

The Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) is a research institute housed in the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. The Institute is named in honor of Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, USAF (Ret.), who had a long and distinguished career in public service serving both as National Security Advisor for Presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush. The Institute's core mission is to foster and disseminate policy-oriented research on international affairs by supporting faculty and student research, hosting international speakers and major scholarly conferences, and providing grants to outside researchers to use the holdings of the Bush Library.

*“We live in an era of tremendous global change. Policy makers will confront unfamiliar challenges, new opportunities, and difficult choices in the years ahead I look forward to the Scowcroft Institute supporting policy-relevant research that will contribute to our understanding of these changes, illuminating their implications for our national interest, and fostering lively exchanges about how the United States can help shape a world that best serves our interests and reflects our values.”*

— Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, USAF (Ret.)