

RESHAPING OR DEMOLISHING DIPLOMACY

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Abstract

We are currently nearing the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Geologists were able to prove that we ended the Holocene epoch, which began at the end of the ice age, and 11,700 years later we entered the Anthropocene, an era in which the influence of humanity on the planet is irreversible. Humanity managed, beyond the traditional planetary ambience, which includes the hydrosphere, atmosphere and biosphere, to create the technosphere!

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Economists confirm, with spectacular, layered graphs and polychrome statistics, that we are currently going through the Fourth Industrial Revolution with uneven strings and rhythms. Manufacturing technologies are ennobled by automation and intensive data transfer. Sophisticated processes such as cyber-physical systems, the Industrial Internet of Things, cloud computing and Artificial Intelligence proliferate. In fact, they highlight the fact that we are on the threshold of the Fifth Industrial Revolution, in which intelligent machines and robots work together with man, focusing on creating added value and raising to a new level the concern to personalize products in order to meet human needs.

But the wonderful and optimistic portrait of our century is complemented by complementary stridencies. Psychologists inform us that in human history two instinctive approaches to access to resources have been persistently defined and refined: Negotiation or confrontation; Diplomacy or violence. And the current options are risky and tough.

Disconcerted, contemporary philosophers try to signal, unsuccessfully and without convincing, that we are slipping into a period of intolerance, hostility and chaos. With imperturbable vigilance and sobriety, strategists and politicians warn us,

as happened at the recent Munich Conference on International Security, that, for global peace and stability, it is not beneficial to enjoy the negative stakes of the zero-sum game. It has been recognised that, unfortunately, in the current liberal international order, some must win, while others must lose. Of course, the international landscape is boiling. We are witnessing a rapid deglobalization, the erosion of the authority of multilateral institutions, the shifting of the global balance of power, increasing socioeconomic stress, the rise of nationalism and protectionism and the proliferation of transformative military technologies.

Ukrainian and Russian forces are locked in a war whose final horizon is nowhere in sight. In Gaza, bloodshed and a revanchist policy incapable of producing political solutions continue. A veteran British diplomat with an unorthodox penchant for applied reflection bitterly declares: the global system of diplomacy has been “vandalized by the very great powers that should have been its protectors and promoters!”

Not very few believe that due to the strategic prestidigitation masterfully executed by the major protagonists of the global stage, we, most of us, have not noticed that, since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, diplomacy has begun to agonize. It went through the phases of atrophy, it was suffocated by the pandemic and it is currently in danger of asphyxiation. As its operational arsenal crumbles, its values and principles at the service of nation states and interstate cooperation are compromised or ignored. The tactics of persuasion are no longer resorted to, in a gentle and reasoned manner, whereas the effort of shaping mutual understanding, mutual trust, recognition of

common interests or preventing the escalation of a dispute is no longer patiently executed.

On the contrary, in a skilful effort to plunge into irrelevance and derision, all this is qualified as "old diplomacy," with the conviction, more or less audibly declared, that, in our times, precisely these are no longer acceptable and effective – whether we are talking about a confidential dialogue, obstinate and discreet negotiations, mutual concessions or arrangements with temporary half-measures. In fact, they are believed to be responsible for the decline of diplomacy.

The leaders of large states instinctively practice attention deficit diplomacy: they are very much trapped, engaged, at the tactical level, at the level of daily, provisional gestures and messages, at the level of immediate competition, with short- or medium-term electoral stakes. They have neither time nor patience to weigh the overall or long-term strategic implications of their decisions.

In a paradoxical manner, which is not just a haphazard metaphorical portrayal, today's diplomacy has become a "trench warfare," an immobile and rigid clash of positions. The lessons of the Cold War are revitalized, which taught us, on both sides of the time, to reduce diplomacy to the irreducible and principled proclamation of each other's values, to stick to the redoubt of our own convictions, to draw delimitations and to circumscribe ourselves strictly to the circle of friends. We have become, almost without realizing it, conservative, static and defensive. During the Cold War, disputes were difficult to resolve and the immediate reaction was to prevent them from being resolved by military means, so the necessary gesture was to configure an impressive threat that would intimidate, inhibit and demoralize.

Contemporaneity draws inspiration from the playbook of those practices and skilfully proceeds to reshape diplomacy. How?

Diplomacy becomes the way to communicate disagreement, signal awareness of differences and dramatize them! To block changes or reforms – more than visible imprisonment in handicapping multilateral formats – such as the World Trade Organization or the World Health Organization, but especially in the frequent incapacitation of the UN Security Council. Consequently, they call

for updating the fundamental tactic of the Cold War: military deterrence! In fact, it represents the demolition of diplomacy.

The vitality and continuity of diplomatic practices has always consisted in the persistence of communication and negotiation efforts, even after the escalation into the violent war phase of conflicts between states. However, as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza prove, the current definition of peace and understanding seems to have narrowly gone to one extreme: diplomacy is expected to return only when the adversary collapses shattered, bleeding profusely, on his knees, and prostrates himself unconditionally before the winner.

Peace does not mean reconciliation, solution, but defeat, annihilation. Diplomacy has fallen into this trap! Try to find a recent conflict that ended definitively and satisfactorily through diplomatic negotiations. Take one by one – the war on the Korean peninsula, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Bosnia, Iraq, Libya or Afghanistan.

The significant protagonists of the international arena were periodically struck by amnesia. It has been completely forgotten and easily ignored that diplomacy is a process in which argumentation, persuasion and negotiation can lead to the suspension of controversies and acceptance of mutual adjustments and accommodations, convergent or shared interests. No matter in which area they got hot, sensitivities and predispositions to collision ignited: the complexity of bilateral relations, the drawing of borders, commercial or technological competition, the bellicose ornamentation of military posts.

As a veteran diplomat, I wonder, with melancholy, what subsists, but also with a vindictive feeling, difficult to repress. Can anyone still take diplomacy seriously? Or is it perceived as a sign of weakness, defeatism? Or is it just an amateur sport, an unserious and irrelevant exercise, to buy time until the cavalry arrives or until F-16 pilots connect the onboard computer and take off?

The spontaneous response, based on what we see and feel, quasi-automatically, can only be conventional. Diplomacy aspires to remain relevant. Action and effectiveness are shaped by dynamic factors, geopolitical events, the authority of political leaders, cultural and economic

context, and all of which maintain a constant pressure for adaptation. Diplomacy remains the projection form of a state's power, of long-term commitment, on multiple levels. But, we must honestly admit, it will remain deficient, because, like a mirror, it will faithfully reflect the

performances, but also the imperfections of the century in which we live and all its human weaknesses.

For bibliographical references please address the author.