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‘Guerrilla Diplomacy: Rethinking International Relations’

Daryl Copeland

(Lynne Reiner, Colorado, US, 2009)

Some books illuminate, and also slightly exasperate. Daryl Copeland, an experienced Canadian diplomat and sometime dissident in his country’s diplomatic service, does this in style with ‘Guerrilla Diplomacy’. His book is loaded with relevant ideas that should interest both practitioners and scholars alike. It also proposes a typology that is abstract and rather irrelevant, but overall, that hardly matters.

‘Guerrilla diplomacy’ is a neat phrase. It captures the blend of unconventional actions, moving outside traditional modes and comfort zones, and mobilization of public outreach plus non-state actors that contemporary international relationship building represents. Many professionals would find themselves in agreement with the proactive modes of operation that this book recommends.

In essence, Copeland laments the situation in the West, where diplomacy is devalued in preference to defence spending as the vehicle to deliver security; ‘Diplomats are languishing in the bleachers as the legions go marching by’. Traditional diplomacy is in disarray, as it is not designed to cope with the remedial policies that globalization requires. The number of fragile states around the world grew from 17 to 26 between 2003 and 2005. Finding a new balance in external relations is the function of ‘international policy’, which covers the actions of a multitude of actors, as distinct from ‘foreign policy’, which for the author meant actions between states. Copeland gives prominence to the role of public diplomacy, as a key feature of our times. Effective public diplomacy ‘operates at the grassroots, to take diplomacy to the people...Boring deep into the interstices of power and operating unconventionally...guerilla diplomats can negotiate both the drivers of globalization and the consequences of change.’

Copeland asserts that diplomacy was frozen out of the Cold War and it has been shunted to the sidelines in the global war on terror. Since dialogue and negation is vital at all times, it is ‘time to commit to talking’. A consequence of the above is a need to refocus foreign ministries and diplomatic skills towards reinvention, on the mantra ‘*relevance, effectiveness and transformation*’.

Today, diplomats should be building project-based networks, conventional and virtual, negotiating alliances based on mutual interest, working with the media and the private sector and ‘privileging cooperation over coercion, and exercising influence through dialogue and relationship-building’. This is at the heart of modern diplomacy, even though Copeland chooses to call this ‘public diplomacy’, which needlessly places these actions within a narrow framework. But he is

completely on track in placing emphasis on the innovative nature of public outreach, and the use of image in telling one's story.

During the Canada-Spain fishery dispute of 1994, Canadians mobilized the 'court of public opinion', using the power of image; this included getting their fisheries minister to stand on a barge in East River, across from the UN headquarters, holding up the kind of nets used by Spanish fishermen, producing a visual image that resonated around the world. This and other publicity stunts reinforced what was according to Copeland a weak legal case, preempting Spain's approach to the World Court at The Hague.

The book presents innovative ideas on how diplomats ought to function, the skill sets they need. But according to the author, in the West, diplomacy is 'under-resourced, under-valued' and much more could be done through recourse to this cost-effective method. Copeland is West-centric, and does not mention that in much of the developing world the situation is much the same; for different reasons and in a different context, the value that effective diplomacy brings to countries is not taken into account. What is different is that in the West, as also the large developing states, is that the low quantum of resources devoted to diplomacy is in stark contrast to national spending on defence and security, which is many-fold larger. In small developing states, defence expenditure may not be so vast, but in any event, the diplomatic machine is under-resourced and operated in a capricious manner. Witness the huge number of ambassador appointments from outside the professional stream, of people who have made little contribution to public affairs, and who treat their foreign assignments as a license to an easy life, unconcerned about delivering result. No one holds them to account.

Copeland attempts a novel taxonomy of not so much countries as sections within countries and regions, consisting of: 'A-world' whose economic and political advantages are advancing; 'C-world' whose prospects are uncertain; 'T-world' whose relative position is subservient; and 'E-world' which is largely excluded from globalization. Most of us would find such a classification both clumsy and gauche. It brings to my mind other attempts to dismiss countries and regions as 'peripheral' (like UK's 1970 Duncan Report). It is better to focus on the churning and volatility in our contemporary world, where different clusters and regions show unexpected trends of growth and transformation, whether in Africa or elsewhere. More important from a diplomacy perspective, all countries that have a proactive international agenda find it essential to pursue issue-based coalitions and engage in wide networking. In an interconnected and interdependent age, no country or region is irrelevant.

I am in complete agreement with Copeland that the diplomatic footprint of most countries requires a makeover, and that different kinds of representation should be utilized. This includes envoys unsupported by staff, unencumbered by the usual trappings, which he calls 'gateway missions', as also better use of local staff and

of honorary consuls. Overall, an outstanding contribution to the practice of diplomacy, and its relevance to our time.

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