

# Horizon 2020<sup>1</sup>

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THIS CONFERENCE HAS DEALT WITH IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES confronting diplomats. Authors have sedulously addressed the diplomatic and management issues of the day. But what about the more distant future of diplomacy—say horizon 2020? How relevant will be today's wisdom? Will our grave thoughts lie discarded in a grave, or will these musings prove to be harbingers of developments to come?

As Greek oracles well knew, predictions are a risky business. They solved the problem by muttering prospective ambiguities—cheap and effective. I could do the same, or I could extrapolate blindly, or build all sorts of implausible scenarios. I would rather address the future in a free-wheeling manner, urging the reader to 'think outside the box', for one thing is sure—the future will be quite unlike today, ambitions of intelligently designing an 'American century' for the world's future notwithstanding.



For good or worse, by 2020 we'll know the answer to some issues of today. Time—like death—resolves and dissolves many a worry. We'll also know, possibly, that there is no answer to some of them. Here are a few examples:

<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to both Ambassador Kishan Rana and Dr Jovan Kurbalija for providing me with a forum for my musings as well as major structural input to this piece. It is a pleasure to acknowledge their graciousness and generosity as, perched on their shoulders, I presume of a longer view.

- We'll know whether global warming and ocean acidification are for real or a case of scientists' hysteria.
- Resources will have become patently scarce, or technological ingenuity will have shown its ability to overcome any obstacle.
- China and India will have taken their rightful place in the world's concert of nations—as soloists or in the choir among the many.
- The world's demography will show winners and losers: some countries will have moved into ageing decline, others will flourish due to a young, motivated, and educated workforce.
- We will have progressed in dealing with medical scourges like AIDS and tropical diseases, or we'll be facing a forever losing battle against resistant viral and bacterial strains and mutant illnesses.
- Market forces will have lifted all boats with the tide, or worsened social tensions by creating ever-increasing disparities of wealth. Even before political reactions emerge against the ever-increasing rents of the few, the many will have voted with their feet—unstoppable migrations will have transformed old countries into new.
- Religion will have taken its place in the modern world—either as personal spirituality, or guiding social ideology.
- Economic and technological 'best practice' will have spread worldwide—thanks also to international organizations like WTO, IMF, and IBRD, leading to broad similarities in economic legislation—or globalization will have been broken into block regionalisms.
- The communication revolution will have made everyone a stakeholder, or drowned meaning in throughput noise.

In a rather philosophical and poetic moment, a past US Secretary of Defense uttered these profound words: 'There are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say there are things that we now know, we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know. And each year we discover a few more of those unknown unknowns.' We'll now be guided by them and, quite humbly, we'll concentrate on a few known unknowns in the following.



Will diplomacy still exist in 2020? Diplomacy with a small 'd'—the methods and skills needed to inform and convince decision-makers this

side and that of national borders—will certainly have flourished. Will diplomacy with a capital ‘D’—that practiced by today’s nation states—have remained, or morphed into something else? To answer this question, we must first usefully reflect on what the states—the diplomats’ masters—are likely to evolve into.

Nation states will have radically changed. Robert Cooper<sup>2</sup> has pointed out that we are evolving towards a basically tri-polar typology of states: post-modern assemblages like the EU, nation states in the mode of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and failing states in the hands of rogue forces.

*Postmodern assemblage*—the term is used to denote the fact that the borders are dictated more by evolving common values and the changing dynamism of its economic forces than by geographic, ethnic or other necessities or limits, hence its tendentially open-ended character. The survival of the component states has been secured by having once predatory neighbors struggling for mastery over each other sit together around the same negotiating table within an irreversible framework of shared sovereignty—an evolving mix of supranational and pluri-lateral rules. The countries within the assemblage will skilfully maintain a moving relative balance through diplomatic negotiations over ‘policy preferences’. The result will be artful ‘fusion’ of different national flavors. The EU is the forerunner of such postmodern states. It will be inspiration, not a template for other such constructs.

The core idea is a convergence of diversities replacing hegemonic ambitions. It is also its limitation. This model is unlikely to find an avatar wherever there is a lone and naturally dominant country within a group. The other limitation is the assemblage’s tendency to look inward. The negotiating process among the parties tends to turn it into a juggernaut that, once set on an (internally) negotiated course, is difficult to sway. Finally, such an assemblage will tend to express unbending belief in the virtue of negotiations even in the face of evidence that its ‘vital interests’ are threatened by third countries. Appeasement is the instrument of choice. When challenged by a more brutal reality, diplomats of such an entity are likely to hum wistfully Dr Higgins’ aria: ‘Why can’t they be like us?’ Diplomatic skills of an assemblage will reflect both these strengths and weaknesses.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Cooper: *The breaking of nations. Order and chaos in the twenty-first century*. New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003.

*Nation states* in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century mould—i.e. born out of the struggle for supremacy in Europe—will be concerned with preserving their identity and territorial integrity against all comers. Such a Western-style nation state is unlikely to change its spots and seek accommodation with others, particularly if it perceives ways of consolidating a historically given geostrategic advantage. Empires have been built on the ‘fear of aggression’—beginning with the Roman Empire. Such a Western-style nation state will try to be the strongest and consequently prone to overstretch. Built on an ideological national identity, it will have difficulty in finding accommodations with ‘the other’—no matter what the other’s intentions. In extreme cases, such a Western-style state might refuse to speak to a perceived ‘axis of evil’ altogether—requiring lesser countries to act in its stead and to do the inevitable, namely negotiate. No longer going between or above the fray, but acting at their peril as agents for the hegemon, such lesser countries will tend to act as (often unloving) foster parents.

The temptation of military adventure will remain great for the hegemonically oriented nation state. Good intentions will be no bar, rather a cover. Yet conditions have surreptitiously changed to its disadvantage. Total war, based on mass conscription armies, are a thing of the past, both for social and technological reasons. Modern armies may defeat an enemy country in the battlefield but are no longer in a position to occupy it. The mercenary armies of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were used to ‘make a point’ and cover the ruler into signing an unfavourable treaty. The post-modern army too is limited to ‘making a point’—the ‘shock and awe’ approach—hoping to subdue the opponent. If the point is not taken—and it hardly ever will, given the people’s unwillingness to accept foreign impositions—occupation might quickly degrade as insurgency takes hold. This road hardly has a decent exit.

It is fascinating to note that Cooper fails to envisage nation states able to be accommodating of other nations on a permanent basis. Emerging nation states for him are ‘preoccupied with economic development and with internal security and cohesion’. Once this process is completed, the process of struggle for supremacy will begin. Yet South America—despite the occasional meddling or tilting of its northern neighbor—seems to be headed for permanent accommodation. Whether this template might not be conceivable in other regions remains to me an open question.

For a majority of today’s nations, accommodation through multilateralism would seem the only path ahead. This evolution might

be said to be ‘post-modernism lite’—without the trapping of explicitly shared sovereignty in the framework of a post-modern assemblage but based on a de facto sharing in the framework of multilateral negotiations on a multiplicity of ‘policy preferences’. Too small to aspire to regional hegemony, too large and structured to fail—they might yield the stable ‘middle class’ of nations that ensures humdrum, though solid stability.

Cooper sees a last set of states—*failing states*. These are countries where the governing elite has abused the monopoly of power and thus lost its legitimacy and where ‘minimum standards’ of statehood and human rights are no longer heeded. Such states may be run by drug lords (Myanmar), or the ruling elite may have abandoned any responsibility for the common weal (Zimbabwe). They may or may not have become havens for rogue elements bent on transnational mayhem. Such countries are unlikely to be left to their own devices, because in a globalized world, we have all become in a fitful and incoherent way, each others’ keepers—be it for moral or security reasons. The urge to intervene is great, be it with the word or the sword. Defensive imperialism—be it temporary or enduring, multilaterally backed or unilateral—may be the eventual result. This interventionist evolution would be in derogation of the Westphalian system of unfettered and unassailable national sovereignty, and thus controversial. The problem is the inherent double standard—one may not claim with impunity both a right to intervention and to exceptionalism or even moral superiority.

What about the *war on terror*? To the extent that it is the voice of a major group—be it religious, ethnic, or social—seeking recognition, it will have to be dealt with in the corresponding context. A political solution is inevitable, as the rise of Iran in the aftermath of recent Middle East upheavals shows. To the extent that terror is used (by either side) to push covert aims, success will depend on making the trope stick.



So where does all this leave diplomacy? The world to come is certainly no less complicated than the Cold War world. Just the opposite (I remember UN-ECE meetings where we would convene on a Monday and adjourn in mutual recriminating silence for a week—no diplomatic skills needed then, just an inordinate tolerance for boredom). Diplomatic skills will evolve in reaction to this changing structure of international relations

regarding pre-, post-, and modern states, becoming more diverse and embracing challenging complexity. Diplomacy will expand into uncharted substance.

On the one side much of the day-to-day negotiating will have become technical and 'more of the same'. In these areas the locus of the negotiation is likely to migrate from MFA to technical ministries, once these have acquired a minimum of diplomatic manners. Trade was the first to do so. There is no reason that other ministries cannot achieve this. A minimum of national policy coherence is needed. This laudable (if somewhat quixotic) goal does not necessarily imply a unique locus of negotiation. So expect diplomatic capabilities to diffuse and change, as many actors coming from widely different backgrounds get into the act. Expect diplomats to withdraw from these activities.

Relations among states on security and related vital interests will evolve markedly between now and 2020. Involvement—nation building—will become a core mandate. Whether this is done multilaterally under the auspices of the UN or a regional organization or by an individual state makes little difference to the task at hand. What counts is the capability to achieve the goal. Let's face it—these skills hardly exist today. The classical nation state practiced a 'hands-off' policy of reciprocal respect of sovereignty. Colonialism—whatever its stripe—has left a telltale odor. At the moment we have much 'do-goodism' drowning in a sea of perfection, or bullying, be it of the technocratic or autocratic variety. So diplomacy is confronted with a daunting challenge, for which there is no precedent. Nurturing and fostering legitimacy and empowerment abroad has never been really tried, despite the stream of jargon that the emerging definition of the task has triggered.

Expect much slow and painful learning by trial and error here. If all foreign policy is domestic policy, the converse is also true. To the owner of a hammer, all problems look like nails. 'Orientalism' is the intellectual term for this truism. Expect nations to want and export 'their' approach, and express non-plussed hurt when their good intentions are rebuffed. Misunderstandings will emerge between post-modern and nation states as much as between the two groups and failing states. But then, solving intractable problems has always been the core business of diplomacy.

Cooper has spoken of 'defensive imperialism'. That would seem to have been a recipe for disaster ever since Lord Auckland tried to subdue Afghanistan in 1837 or the Americans reached Baghdad four years ago.

For defensive imperialism aims not to (re)build a nation, but to freeze it in Bantustan-like impotence.

On the process side, much is changing. More interest and interested groups are getting into the diplomatic act—the plethora of stakeholders that orbits around the decision-makers in an attempt to bend their ears and minds. Celebrity diplomacy is the latest rage—a true bonfire of the vanities—as can be attested by the photo op where Bono has pushed Tony Blair into a bemused background. As the state articulates internal structures better to deal with its growing complexity, it gives these (often self-appointed) stakeholders a voice. As their positions mature, so will be their sense for the whole. The (r)evolution of the Green Parties from single-issue and radical opposition to willingness to bear responsibility for the whole is a case in point. Expect then the political decision-making process to be more diffuse, complex, and chaotic—and unpredictable. Information technologies that spread any news or rumour in real time will compound the problem. As stakeholder groups fight for control of the metaphors, one can expect the side that ‘says it loud and early’ to have the ground advantage. Competition for ‘the truth’ will increase. Public diplomacy—winning the hearts and minds—is the task ahead. Diplomacy has just become more complex and demanding, not withered away.



*‘What’s in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet’*

—*Romeo and Juliet*, II, ii, 43

Diplomacy is immortal—not its structures. The Prince of Lampedusa recognized this when he married off his son to the beautiful daughter of a town merchant. Power—particularly new power—manifests itself in people, and people cluster around structures and bend them to their purposes. Structures, just like mud walls around a city, are weak defences against powerful attacks. Expect structures to crumble, vanish, adjust, morph, and accommodate new power equilibria.

How does this insight square with the ambition of a very integral, holistic requirement of external policy management? Hitler, the very embodiment of integral and holistic policies, destroyed state structures. He did not need them. Checks and balances are the sign of a healthy

and vibrant democracy. And competition is a precondition for innovation. Even more, competition and articulated structures are essential for reality to percolate back up to power, especially where power is by necessity isolated from reality. Vertical structures are a sign of decline and neo-classic boredom.

Neither vertical nor chaotic management are viable solutions. Expect very unique local adaptations to the problem of balance between stakeholders in and out of government, and the need for information flow. Some countries will opt for a unified foreign ministry, reflecting their preference for budgetary economy. Others will keep separate structures, wishing to give real interests independent voices in the cabinet.

In what directions will external representation networks evolve? The likely trend is a differentiation along diplomatic, commercial, consular, and foreign aid functions in reaction to increasing complexity—possibly even leading to separation.

*Consular functions* are a case in point. As more individuals travel, they will be more exposed to risks—from the catastrophic to the self-inflicted (drugs, sex tourism, hasty marriage). At another level, immigrants are no longer expected to fend for themselves in a new and often deeply prejudiced environment and essentially to surrender their identity to nativist pressures. A tentative multiculturalism is emerging that engages the countries of origin and of choice. Diasporas will retain or regain many of their original rights—like the vote in national elections in their place of origin—as they exercise increasing influence there thanks to uncompromising ideology backed by newly acquired wealth.

Globalization has transformed the challenge of exports into a humdrum activity for many firms. Whole service industries have sprung up to assist newcomers. The *external commercial networks* of diplomatic missions are at a disadvantage compared to the private sector. To what extent 'national branding'—which the state can provide at great cost—will provide a real competitive advantage for home-based firms and thus help the national economy, remains to be seen. For the moment, it is an unavoidable fashion. Attracting *foreign direct investment* is high on just about any country's official agenda, thus making it likely to be a zero-sum game. But then, knowledge that gambling is less than a zero-sum game has never stopped gamblers from investing fortunes in their star.

Diplomacy may be defined as the art of winning influence abroad (and at home). As the number of opinion/decision-shapers and takers

increases, the task becomes more complex—even daunting. How best to reach those actors in a foreign country is an issue that demands an in-depth knowledge of local conditions and corresponding adaptations. The ‘one tool fits all’ approach—a *diplomatic representation* at the court of the (now democratic) ruler—is a thing of the past. The current difficulties of the 3000-plus American diplomats locked up within the Green Zone without more than a handful of Arabic-speaking colleagues are a case in point.

During the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, beleaguered diplomats within the Legation Quarter wrote to each other formal notes when desperately asking for urgent supplies. Rituals impart a perception of understanding with which better to deal with a puzzling reality. Reality is the supreme corrosive of rituals. Expect the last bastions of form to crumble as our mercantile age prizes effectiveness above all else. And why not? All rivers carry water to the sea, but none is like the other. Who is to say that the fast river hurtling over cliffs is better than the slow meandering stream? Even a lake has its uses—like driving a downstream hydropower project. Who is to say that a rational river control system is more efficient than a multiplicity of channels that absorbs the impact of a sudden flood? What we might expect in 2020 is less a unified structural model than a multiplicity of adaptive systems, reflecting the specific configuration of each host country, and the shifting policy goals of the home countries.



The world is not divided manicheally into ‘knowns’ and ‘unknowns’—rather into ‘puzzles’ and ‘mysteries’. Puzzles arise from lack of information, mysteries from our failure to make sense of the information we have. So let me conclude with the following quote:

Several years ago, Admiral Bobby R. Inman was asked by a congressional commission what changes he thought would strengthen America’s intelligence system. Inman used to head the National Security Agency and was once the deputy director of the CIA. (...) His answer: revive the State Department, the one part of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment that isn’t considered to be in the intelligence business at all. In a post-Cold War world of ‘openly available information’, Inman said, ‘what you need are observers with language ability, with an understanding of the religions, cultures of

the countries they are observing.’ Inman thought we needed fewer spies and more slightly batty geniuses.<sup>3</sup>

In order to prepare for the Horizon 2020, it seems to me, diplomats only have to do in novel ways what they’ve always done best: *comprendre et faire comprendre*—to understand and explain. If only diplomats are confident enough of their skills to practice them passionately and modestly, they may look back in fifteen years’ time in bewilderment at how they have transformed the world as they have been transformed by it.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, ‘Open secrets. Enron, intelligence, and the perils of too much information’. *The New Yorker*, 8 January 2007.