

American Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty

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It has been depressing to watch the reaction of the American foreign policy establishment to the Wikileaks debacle. Visceral rage has predominated, of course, but it has been mixed with a misplaced pride in the quality of State Department diplomacy.

The leaks, we are told, provide reassuring evidence that all is working as it should be. Fareed Zakaria, for example, [praised the insight and breadth of the analysis on offer](#). The cables, he wrote, are “well wrought” and reveal “clever minds” at work, with the best of them resembling something “straight out of Evelyn Waugh.”

Such complacency comes as no surprise. In diplomacy, the cult of the gifted amateur took hold early on and has never lost its grip: no matter that governments are failing to manage the world’s most-pressing problems, as long as our man in Buenos Aires, Beijing or Brussels can write as entertainingly as a junior scribe at the Economist.

Fortunately, the Obama administration has proved less easy to please. Halfway through its first term, the administration seems shaken by how few levers it possesses to manage the problems presented by an [“age of uncertainty”](#) -- one in which global forces shape domestic politics and risks are multiplying much more quickly than the capacity of any government [to respond to them](#).

The Obama administration’s response comes in the form of the State Department’s [Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review](#), an unexpectedly bold document that sets out the far-reaching changes that will be needed if U.S. diplomacy is to replace well-crafted cables with the systematic use of its “reach, resources and resolve to mobilize the coalitions needed to solve shared problems on a global scale.”

The QDDR is far from perfect, of course. The approach is often instinctively bilateral, as shown by the emphasis on “strategic dialogues” with emerging powers. In theory, “these Dialogues are sustainable structures that provide a framework for cooperation on the full range of issues.” In practice, they are talking shops that drive fragmentation in the global order. If the US is to have a strategic dialogue with India or Pakistan, then so must the UK and Germany.

The QDDR is also ambivalent about the *purpose* of reasserting America’s global role. Is the main priority to help solve global problems that threaten the security and prosperity of U.S. citizens? Or is it simply to reassure Americans that the U.S. is still top dog in a world where the balance of power is shifting fast? The QDDR speaks hopefully of laying the foundations for “lasting American leadership for decades to come,” as if this were an end in itself, as opposed to a means to something larger.

These quibbles aside, the QDDR’s heart is in the right place. In turbulent times, the core business of foreign policy must be to build coalitions capable of tackling global issues. And that work can only begin once there is some consensus about which remedies should be adopted.

In such a context, diplomacy has to be regional and global, rather than bilateral, with a focus on managing risk rather than on protecting narrow national interests. And it requires teams of professionals working together to exert influence across geographic borders and issue sets, rather than the sporadic efforts of an old-style diplomat working his or her Rolodex to report the latest scuttlebutt back to Washington.

Delivering this vision is a massive undertaking. According to the QDDR, “a de facto global civilian service, with State and USAID at its core, requires a workforce that is innovative, entrepreneurial, collaborative, agile, and capable of taking and managing risks.”

That is a far cry from what is in place at the moment. Root-and-branch reform will be needed if even half of the QDDR’s vision is to be delivered within the next 10 years. Old habits are deeply entrenched, and there are probably only a few hundred staff members in the State Department who are truly convinced of the extent of the changes that will be needed.

Three major obstacles can be identified. First is a lack of capacity, after decades of underinvestment. At present, a quarter of the combined budget for U.S. civilian operations is being sucked into Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan -- where it is delivering results that are patchy at best. That leaves little room for starting on a fundamental overhaul.

Second, the political incentives for risk management are seldom attractive. The U.S. faces economic and environmental problems as well as resource and security challenges, all of which verge on the intractable. If its diplomats take on the hardest problems, they will often fail.

Even success can be unsatisfying, as the Obama team found in its response to the economic meltdown. TARP, which was signed into law by former President George W. Bush but partly implemented by President Barack Obama, is currently expected to [cost only \\$25 billion](#) -- perhaps the greatest bargain in American history, considering the scale of the global damage it averted. But politically, it has been disastrous for Obama, undermining his ability to act forcefully when the next economic crisis hits -- which will probably be sooner rather than later, given the euro’s woes.

This relates to a third obstacle: paper-thin domestic support for a new approach to foreign policy. The QDDR generated little to no reaction among American legislators and no real discussion of its implications. But as the implications of the changes start to become clear, it is likely that resistance to them will grow, as legislators argue for a simpler and cruder projection of American power. Such are the difficulties of trying to present a united front abroad when bitterly divided at home.

So what can the administration do to give the QDDR’s fine words a decent chance of being translated into action on the ground?

First, it must be much more hard-headed about prioritizing its diplomatic efforts. Running trivia contests about American society in local high schools might have

made for good public diplomacy ten or even five years ago, but it can hardly be a priority at a time of global emergency. According to the QDDR, chiefs of mission are to be treated like the chief executive officer of their embassies. If so, they must think like private-sector leaders and rigorously eliminate everything from their portfolio that isn't core business.

The central State Department leadership, meanwhile, should start pulling small global teams out of the hierarchy to act as pathfinders for new ways of doing business. As the QDDR acknowledges, windows of opportunity for reform open only briefly. The United States' civilian service, especially in its embryonic phase, will need "special forces" capable of identifying these windows of opportunity and exploiting them ruthlessly.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's team should also put together a list of the two or three most likely candidates for the next big global emergency. For example, commodity prices -- especially for energy and food -- are already shooting up, as another resource crunch beckons. The U.S. must be ready to respond to the next crisis with the diplomatic equivalent of "shock and awe" in order to convince audiences, both at home and internationally, that a new era of American diplomacy has dawned.

Finally, the U.S. government must use the QDDR to convince its allies that they, too, need to radically rebuild their capacity to drive global change. China and the other rising powers are beginning to scale up their foreign services, but still lack the capacity to go beyond bilateral engagement. Europe's foreign policy machinery remains a mess, while countries such as the U.K. are retrenching their foreign engagement at a time when their leadership is most needed.

The U.S. therefore needs to work harder to shake other governments' complacency. We live in an era where American leadership is necessary, but not sufficient, to shore up an increasingly fragile globalization. Only if a growing number of governments reorganize their response to global instability, and do so in ways that increase interoperability, will we begin to get on top of the multidimensional game that is foreign policy in an age of uncertainty.