

Article in DIE ZEIT of 24 November 2016

## **Screw-you-too diplomacy**

### **How do international politics treat actors who increasingly indulge in breaching all rules?**

*By Steven Beardsley, Peter Dausend and Michael Thumann*

On the noble parquet flooring of diplomacy, things are getting increasingly like the dirty tarmac of the streets: Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte called US President Barack Obama a “son of a bitch”. The Turkish head of state Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that Iraqi Premier Haider al-Afadi did not play “at my level” and should “know his place”. Russian President Vladimir Putin insulted Ukrainian politicians on the whole as “nationalists, fascists and anti-Semites” – and for his future US counterpart Donald Trump, Mexicans are simply “rapists”. None of these verbal attacks was secretly taped or spread by a malevolent confidant. They were planned and targeted – on air. Where there was once intimate talk, insults are traded openly. Cosmopolitanism has been replaced by backyard jargon.

International diplomacy is undergoing an epochal shift. The times when the diplomats’ task was to decently talk around the hot potato until it had cooled down are over. Gone are the days of attempting to bridge sharp contrasts through dialogue. For the first time since the Second World War, National Socialism is on the rise in the world. In Russia, China and Turkey, the chauvinist perspective of one’s own greatness is replacing the desire to entertain peaceful relations with one’s neighbours. The conviction that the world should simply adopt the British ways led to Brexit. Donald Trump was elected president with his promise to make the USA great again. Authoritarian nationalists are already governing in Hungary and Poland – and maybe in the Netherlands in due course as well.

The thing that all of these actors have in common is that they exclude or even defame the alien, the other and alleged threats in order to come to or to stay in power. From “son of a bitch” to “bugger the EU”, everything passes their lips that makes the other smaller and themselves bigger. Diplomatic rules and formulas merely get in the way. Times are undiplomatic and diplomats are in demand. They don’t get very far anymore with popular empty phrases like “reopen the channels of communication” or “keep the channels of communication open”. There is too much at stake. An increasingly undiplomatic world is an increasingly dangerous one. At a time of ever more complex challenges, heads of state are increasingly dealing in the currency of resentment and humiliation.

It can start with unimportant things. When Frank-Walter Steinmeier travelled to Ankara in mid-November, he entered a diplomatic crisis zone: Erdogan's crackdown on the press and the opposition as a consequence of the attempted coup, the treatment of the Kurdish HDP, German parliamentarians' right to visit the NATO base in Incirlik, Turkey's EU accession – everything is controversial. He was made to feel his hosts' dissatisfaction from the word go. At the airport, there was only a deputy governor to welcome him; there was no German flag on Steinmeier's limousine. And at the president's palace, Steinmeier sat on an Ottoman brocade armchair that was clearly lower than his host Erdogan's chair – so that it was clear who was in charge. How are you supposed to react to such audacities? The German delegation merely shrugged and was rather amused than insulted.

Amused serenity makes you appear confident, but doesn't have much of an impact on your counterpart. So how should you go about it then?

Barack Obama cancelled a meeting with Filipino President Duterte after the latter's railing attack – only in order to shake hands with him later. Al-Abadi complained to the Americans about the ill-mannered Erdogan. The Ukrainians bad-mouthed Putin and the Mexicans bad-mouthed Trump. All these reactions reveal one thing in particular: helplessness. No approach seems to be the right one. Simply remaining silent is an invitation to the opponent to launch further attacks. Speaking candidly with clear words like UN Ambassador Samantha Power recently in the Security Council about Russia's war in Syria ("dead children, destroyed hospitals and schools, barbarism") is met by a tirade that is devoid of facts, but loud nonetheless. And reactions along the lines of "an eye for an eye" only make matters worse. "Responding to aggressive rhetoric in the same tone of a voice is counterproductive," says Jeffrey Rathke, a former US diplomat who now works for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "Mutual abuse only attracts the attention of the media, which likes to work with national stereotypes and resentments. They fuel the conflict further with the result that a solution is often not described and regarded as a solution, but as treason."

In the competition for the most decisive verbal attack, it is easy to come across as ridiculous. If both sides no longer find their way out of the spiral of escalation, they bring to mind Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*. Chaplin plays Hitler, who is talking to Mussolini. Both are posing on big armchairs that they continue to raise during the conversation. Each of them wants to sit at a higher level than the other; both want to outplay the other. In the end, both fall down.

In undiplomatic times, traditional international diplomacy is reaching its limits. There are two ways to move beyond these limits: either diplomacy becomes a bit less traditional and tries new methods, also therapeutic ones; or it becomes a little bit less state-run and tries out new actors.

When Frank-Walter Steinmeier appeared before the cameras together with his counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu in Ankara on 15 November, it seemed to be a normal press encounter at first. Polite remarks, topics, brief conversations were being ticked off. However, soon afterwards Cavusoglu couldn't stop talking about the death penalty that is allegedly greatly desired by the Turkish people and of terrorists who are at large in Germany. Steinmeier answered more directly than almost anybody had previously at such an occasion. He said he was "at least confused" by such remarks, adding that "we fail to understand that". Furthermore, Steinmeier stated that "we do not share" the sole focus on the military fight against terrorism and that if Turkey was of the opinion that it had handed over 4,500 files for extradition, then he had "no knowledge of this".

Since there is no longer a difference between inside and outside, some observers quickly see the "scandal", but the tone of a voice does not match it. It is calm and to the point. This is how direct diplomacy is done, which reveals that, while two people are living on different planets, they still have to get along with each other. It nearly sounds therapeutic when Steinmeier says calmly and slowly, "Mevlut, let me say this again" – and then contradicts everything that Mevlut has said up until then.

Maybe direct diplomacy will be required more often in the future in order to let your interlocutor know what the deal is. Maybe it is needed in order to let citizens know what the deal is with their government in their own country. It often takes many years to reach the goal, however. Disputes often arose while the five permanent Security Council members and Germany were holding negotiations with Iran on its nuclear programme, especially under the regime of radical Islamist Mahmud Ahmadinejad, a leader who wanted to erase Israel completely from the map. After one decade, the treaty, which prevented a war between Israel and Iran, was ratified after all. Maybe this is the most effective weapon that traditional diplomacy has against the undiplomatic approach: perseverance.

New actors have now made their way into the realm of international politics – people who have not played a role for centuries. They are testing diplomacy for its ability to adapt to technological and societal change. The origins of modern diplomacy go back to the city states of early Renaissance northern Italy; the first embassies were founded in the thirteenth century. Delegates negotiated their respective interests with each other in an orderly dialogue. The powerful impact of the media joined the fray later on. When the Greeks rose against the Ottoman Empire in the 1820s, an anti-Greek press dominated in Europe and especially in England. Reporting on the Greeks' struggle for freedom resulted in the insurgents receiving not only moral, but also military support from Europe. In the end, the Greeks founded their own state. Before the First World War, nationalist newspapers fuelled the situation in France, Russia, Germany and England to such an extent that the use of arms was euphorically supported. However, the media were not the last to enter the diplomatic scene.

Since the rise of the new social movements of the 1970s, NGOs have become key actors. Without Greenpeace, there would be no world climate agreement; without Amnesty International, there would be no International Criminal Court for human rights, and without third world groups, no coffee planters in Ethiopia would receive a fair wage.

The newest – and most effective – actors are the online activists. With the triumphal march of social networks, their influence continues to increase. The Arab Spring of 2011 and the protests in Hong Kong of 2014 would have been practically inconceivable without online activists. With their targeted campaigns, these neo-foreign policy actors put their own and other countries under pressure and sometimes even get them to take action. The hashtag campaign #StopKony developed such great dynamism in 2012 that the US government sent special forces to the DR Congo and Uganda in order to stop Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony's killing spree. With the campaign #BringBackOurGirls two years later, online activists kept up the pressure on their governments to do more to free 270 abducted girls from the hands of Islamist militia Boko Haram. These neo-foreign policy actors achieved more in these cases than the traditional political establishment. Diplomats want to learn from such successes.

*Global Diplomacy Lab* is the title of a series of events at which young diplomats, activists and scientists meet twice a year in order to reflect on the direction that diplomacy is taking in a globalised world. They know that the state monopoly on diplomacy is coming to an end. State actors therefore have to increasingly penetrate decentralised digital worlds. At the most recent meeting of the *Global Diplomacy Lab* in Montreal, participants discussed how digitisation is changing diplomacy. Even though the young diplomats primarily focus on the future, some ideas seem fit for the present, for instance the one to set up an international army of drones to supply war victims with medication, food and cell phones.

The diplomacy of the future is the subject of intensive research also elsewhere. Numerous embassies and foreign ministries are hosting “Diplohacks” or “Hackathons” ever more frequently. These are workshops at which diplomats and technicians develop apps together that are intended to help solve problems elsewhere. The Dutch foreign ministry, for instance, is toying with the idea for an app to help farmers in rural Africa identify sick plants. No diplomat has yet developed an app that tells you how to deal with unscrupulously insulting rulers, however.

Focus on civil society rather than the state – this guideline taken to heart by the participants of the *Global Diplomacy Lab* is now also one that is being followed increasingly frequently by traditional diplomacy. While it remains to be seen who will win out in the new diplomatic-undiplomatic competition, the wrong people are scoring points right now.

The authoritarian rulers who are to be avoided block online portals and thus the way to their civil societies. Moreover, they respond to criticism with massive propaganda. While the Western politicians accuse Moscow in traditional media and in social networks of accepting the death of thousands of children and civilians during the bomb attacks on Aleppo, Russian propaganda depicts Europe as a hellhole full to the brim with terrorists and refugees. Campaigns that seek to undermine open discussions have long since become as professional as those of their opponents that are committed to the freedom of opinion.

The diplomatic world is currently experiencing a further shock owing to the conscious breach of regulations. Donald Trump is pursuing his foreign policy single-handedly from the 58<sup>th</sup> floor of the Trump Tower. Those who congratulated him on the election were not – as is usually the case – selected by diplomats according to their importance and their closeness to the USA, but at random. Whoever phoned first, talked first. Trump recommended that the Britons choose right-wing populist Nigel Farage as Ambassador to Washington – thus shocking No. 10 Downing Street. And when Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe paid a courtesy call to the Trump Tower, the president-elect's daughter Ivanka Trump and her husband sat next to him. Such cheerful dilettantism is set to make foreign policy unpredictable.

Haphazardness and the breaking of rules together with rude aggressiveness – all that is part of the new world of diplomacy.