


Nov 04, 2016 by [Daryl Copeland](#)

Getting it Right Down Under? ^[1]

In my recent book touring travels down under, I was struck repeatedly by the sense in which New Zealand and Australia seem for a North American at once remote yet accessible, exotic yet familiar.

They are in, but not of the Global South.

And while we might think of the Antipodes as the ends of the earth, it all depends which end of the telescope you are looking through.

In public presentations and in meeting with colleagues at foreign ministries, I was impressed by the extent to which the necessity of adapting to the reality of power shift  – notably from the North Atlantic to the Asia Pacific – has registered at both the official level and among the population writ large in both countries.

Kiwis and Aussies didn't seem to need much convincing that if they are going to prosper in the Pacific Century, then they will have to make the most of their diplomatic assets in an increasingly heteropolar world.

As Anglophone outliers on the fringe of a former empire, this strategic re-orientation is understandable, especially given the stunning rise of China and India, the steady progress of integration in Southeast Asia, and the extant economic accomplishments of Japan and Korea.

Barack Obama likes to refer to himself as the first Pacific President, but from what I could detect, key players in the public and private sectors in New Zealand and Australia are doing much more than the USA, Canada or the countries of the EU to prepare for the inevitable.

In part due to its sheer size and complexity, when it comes to branding and public diplomacy - in the Asia Pacific as elsewhere - the USA faces some obvious challenges. Even the best communications content and practices can never compensate for weaknesses in policy: when pronouncements and behavior, or content and instruments do not align, a perilous say-do gap opens like a yawning chasm.

For smaller and medium sized countries, however, embarking upon a global public diplomacy and branding strategy would play to the advantages of being generally well-regarded internationally, while helping to overcome capacity limitations and the absence of hard power options.

If your posture is not threatening, if you carry little historical baggage, if you are not seeking to dominion over others, and if your name evokes a positive pre-disposition - a smile rather than a scowl - then in PD and branding terms you are positioned for the advantage.

For New Zealand, Australia or Canada, therefore, the logic of forging joint ventures with business and civil society, engaging in partnerships with the like-minded, and using the new

and conventional media to maximum effect should be second nature.

That said, developing a strong place brand is one thing. Branding a nation – which consists of a country and its people – is somewhat more complicated and difficult. That kind of brand is formed over time, and comes less from what you say than from how you act and what you do.

For New Zealand and Australia, the use of hard power or coercion is simply not an option. And even if people are not shouting from the rooftops that a grand strategy is urgently required, most of those whom I encountered were far less quiescent about their place in the world than your average North American.

Many of those I spoke with agreed that diplomacy does, or at least should matter.

Nonetheless, in the Antipodes as elsewhere, diplomacy has been marginalized, sidelined, and is in crisis. It is suffering from the same “triple whammy” which has exacted such a devastating toll just about everywhere:

- the continuing militarization of international affairs, through which policy has become an instrument of war, rather than reverse, and as a result of which foreign ministries find themselves severely under-resourced;
- the substantial failure of diplomatic institutions to adapt their practices to exigencies of globalization, resulting in structures that remain far too risk averse, hierarchic and authoritarian, and largely without the capacity to manage the emerging suite of transnational issues which are rooted in science and driven by technology;
- the debilitating image, if I may paraphrase the London cabbies whom I focus tested last fall, of diplomacy as synonymous with weakness and appeasement, and diplomats as dithering dandies, hopelessly lost in a haze of irrelevance somewhere between protocol and alcohol.

Diplomacy is suffering from grave problems of both image and substance universally. It is not delivering the results which it otherwise might for governments or for citizens.

That performance gap is exacerbated by an environment in which the demand for diplomacy vastly outstrips its supply. Evidence of this yawning diplomatic deficit is found not only in the rising tide of suffering, inequality, and unaddressed threats which beset us, but also in the ongoing socialization of globalization's costs and the privatization of its benefits.

The resulting polarization, coupled with the abject failure of diplomacy to engage remedially, in my view constitutes a peril far greater than than any kind of terrorism, political extremism or religious violence.

So, if you don't want to live in some variation of a surveillance driven, razor wire encrusted green zone, with security provided by Blackwater/Xe and sanitation by KBR, what to do?

Voyages down under have brought me back to first principles on this.

In the first instance, the art of international political communication through dialogue, negotiation and compromise needs a new, more contemporary narrative which goes well beyond the current discourse on either traditional or public diplomacy.

There are signs that the project to develop a new diplomatic narrative is underway.

Secondly, analysts require a whirled view, a model of global order which extends well beyond the obsolete and territorially distinct notions of first, second and third worlds.

This, too, may be in train.

Finally, a radical and comprehensive reconstruction of mainstream thinking about the essential nature of international relations is long overdue.

Evidence of that enterprise - a basic rethinking of security and development - remains scant.

On this climate change challenged, pandemic disease ridden, chronically resource scarce planet we live on, governments need to find a better way forward, one without the enormous human and financial costs associated with the use of armed force.

I would suggest that they start by investing in the creation of a cadre of diplomatic professionals adept at knowledge-based problem solving, and able to apply complex balancing skills among and between sharply competing values, policies and interests.

Defense departments have the money, but the military is the wrong box. This isn't a job for soldiers.

And aspiring international policy bureaucrats - those who favor life "in the bubble" to that in the street and prefer chatting with colleagues about what might be going on outside to finding out for themselves – need not apply.

It is time to hold on dispatching the expeditionary battalions and to invest instead both in diplomatic alternatives – and alternative diplomacy.
