

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

At Wilton Park, Public Diplomacy Edges Forward ^[1]

While attending a Wilton Park (UK) conference on the future of public diplomacy, I was pleased to see this facet of foreign policy gaining traction. About 50 diplomats and a handful of academics took part in discussions ranging from the military use of soft power to the roles of religion and sports in public diplomacy.

If there were no epiphanies, there were certainly moments when it became clear that foreign ministries are gradually treating public diplomacy more seriously and that those of us who favor greater emphasis on this approach to international relations have reason to hope.

The conference was well populated by representatives from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office who seemed to appreciate that they have much work to do, as do their American counterparts. During the conference, the BP oil spill crisis became more acute in its effect on the British public, with headlines in the British press such as, “Obama Has His Heel on the Throats of British Pensioners.” This referred to the breadth of investment in BP, by pension funds and individuals, and underscored that in this era of broad and fast information flow, more attention must be paid to the volatility of public opinion or valuable relationships will be put at risk. Chats between an American president and a British prime minister will not suffice.

Other countries, as well as international organizations, were represented at the conference, ranging from Liechtenstein to China, and each faces its own public diplomacy challenges. Israel, which has so long nurtured its “brand” as a democratic haven in the Middle East must deal with worldwide anger about the Gaza flotilla debacle. NATO and the EU are still trying to shape public perceptions of their identities. Pakistan is looking for ways to emphasize its steps toward democracy rather than its suspected affinity with the Taliban. Turkey is crafting its more visible global presence. Afghanistan wants to be seen as more than a place of constant conflict. The list goes on.

At conferences such as this, diplomats and scholars have a chance to retreat from daily work pressures (Wilton Park is located in the beautiful West Sussex countryside) and look beyond “what is” and consider “what might be.” Among those attending, there was growing recognition that public diplomacy is not simply a nice gesture and that it requires more than hucksterism. But some important questions remain to be answered: What skill sets do public diplomats need? Should public diplomacy be an all-of-government venture or be centrally managed? How should Internet and mobile phone technologies be used more effectively as diplomatic tools? What roles do diasporic populations and “virtual states” play in international affairs?

During the three days at Wilton Park, these issues were discussed but certainly not resolved. On departing from the conference, our agenda was longer than the one we entered with.
