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Cairo Burning: Implications for the Defense vs. Diplomacy Debate [1]

This is one of those rare, defining moments in world history. In Egypt - as well as Tunisia, Sudan, Yemen and elsewhere - change is unfolding at almost blinding speed. The reactions of the USA, EU, and UN so far have succeeded mainly in positioning the international community well behind the curve, scrambling to catch up. Developments on the ground continue to outpace responses by a wide margin.

Between concerns over secure access to oil, radical Islamic politics, and the prospects for Middle East peace, Western interests are heavily engaged in the region. What, then, are the the broad strategic considerations which policy planners and decision-makers could usefully take into account?

In Washington, Brussels, Paris, London and elsewhere, the deepening crisis, with Cairo at its epicenter, underscores the difficulties inherent in trying to balance values - democracy, human rights, good governance, the rule of law - and interests, and in expressing that balance through the articulation of coherent international policy. When autocratic regimes have been supported for decades, and even when the status quo becomes obviously untenable, it is difficult to know how best to react.

Diplomacy front and center

Just as durable security can be regarded as the flip side of human-centered development, it is clear that underdevelopment breeds insecurity. To effectively engage this kind of complexity, the negotiating, knowledge-based problem solving, and complex balancing capacities inherent in diplomacy should be invaluable.

For instance, conventional, state-to state representational mechanisms can be used to help ease former friends from office and into exile. There is undoubtedly much maneuvering to that effect going on constantly behind the scenes in Cairo.

Public diplomacy may be used to support peace and progress, and to communicate the views of concerned governments directly to foreign populations. Although PD is typically associated with dialogue, much of the recent US activity in this area has in fact been monologic, and expressed in the form of statements and speeches on the part of President Obama and Secretary Clinton. Beyond that, it is difficult to estimate the extent to which the full range of PD tools are being used.

Guerrilla diplomacy, an ambitious extension of public diplomacy by other means, is among other things ideally suited to the cultivation of ties with the emerging resistance leaders, and to generating intelligence at the grass roots level. According to Harvard's Joe Nye, "Great powers try to use culture and narrative to create soft power that promotes their advantage, but

they do not always understand how to do it. Critics in the United States complain that the over-militarization of foreign policy undercuts its credibility. Instead, they advocate diplomacy "on steroids," staffed by diplomats trained in new media, cross-cultural communications, granular local knowledge, and networks of contacts with under-represented groups." Adds Secretary Clinton, " ... in the twenty-first century, a diplomat is as likely to meet with a tribal elder in a rural village as a counterpart in a foreign ministry, and is as likely to wear cargo pants as a pinstriped suit."

Unfortunately, guerrilla style diplomacy, although it is attracting an increasing amount of lip service, remains next to non-existent, and foreign ministries most everywhere, under-funded and struggling to adapt, are ill-equipped to perform.

A role for the military?

In many underdeveloped countries, and certainly in Egypt, the bureaucracy is reviled as corrupt and inefficient while the military is respected, if not revered as one of the few national institutions that functions. That observation, in addition to vested institutional interests, helps to explain their power brokerage activities. In the industrialized world, however, although the civilian agencies of government work passably well, what really sets the armed forces apart from other international policy instruments is their receipt of the lion's share of available resources. This represents a serious misallocation, and even more so given levels of public debt and combined with program and service reductions .

There is certainly a place in international relations for military power, but Western might is near irrelevant in dealing with the events unfolding in the Middle East. Sending in the marines, blockading the ports or calling in an air strike will not encourage the outcomes desired. Nor can bombs and guns be used to address the most far-reaching and profound threats facing the planet – climate change, pandemic disease, poverty, environmental collapse. We seem to have forgotten what should have been the main lesson learned from the Cold War, namely that armies work best when they aren't used. Take the sword out of its sheath - in Afghanistan, Iraq - and it makes a terrible mess.

Both too sharp and too dull to deal with the challenges and extremely costly to maintain, hard power is of very limited utility in a heteropolar world. Nuanced understanding and effective civil assistance are more likely to produce positive results.

In crafting both tactical and strategic responses to breaking events in Egypt, diplomacy in general, and public diplomacy in particular, should represent the international policy instrument of choice.