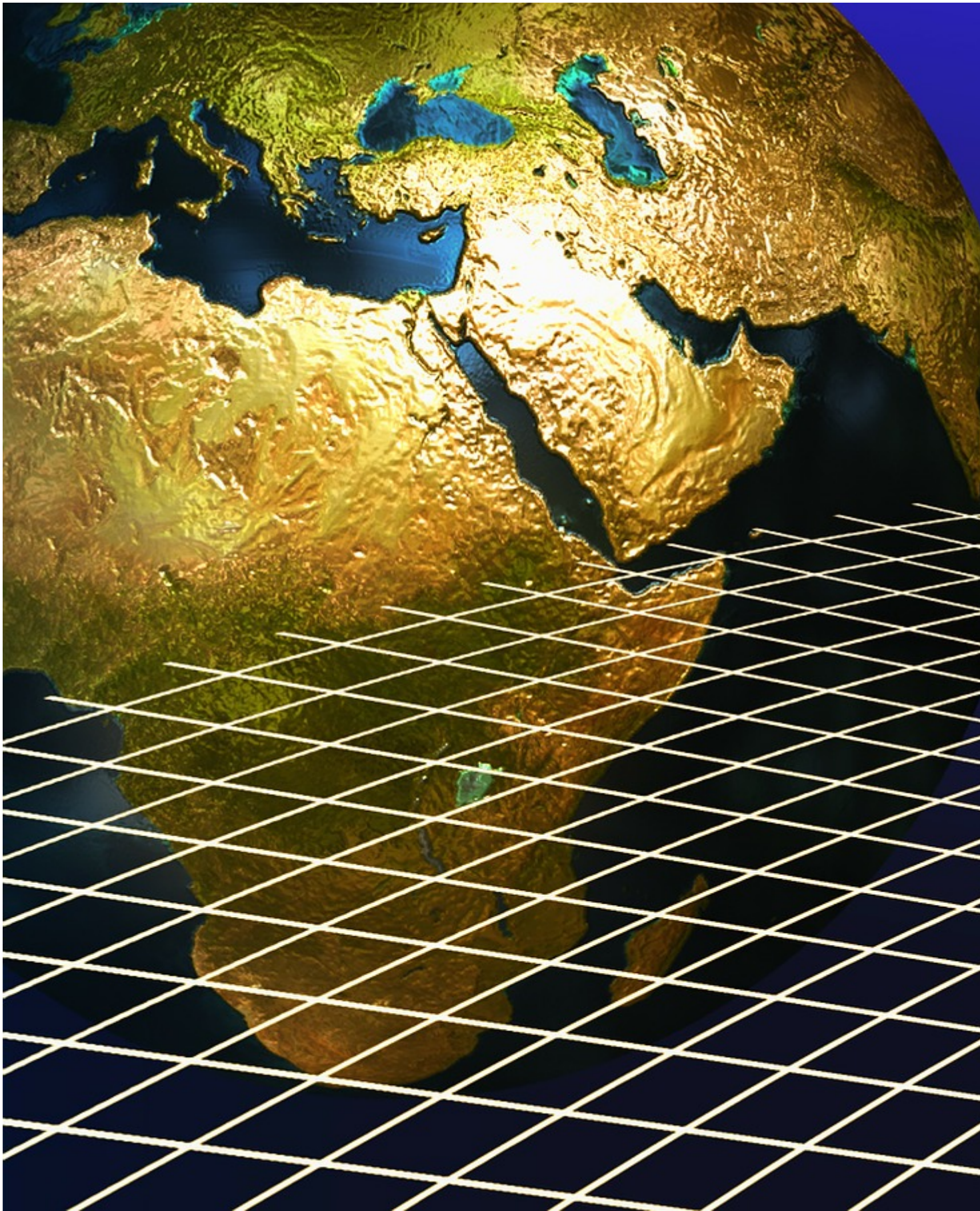


**Thumbnail Image:**



# You Can't Be Successful Globally Without This... <sup>[1]</sup>

## **Contextual Intelligence.**

Often overlooked and rarely explored in global leadership programs, contextual intelligence is essential in an international environment as individuals and organizations must learn to adjust and adapt their expectations and operations to local norms. Contextual intelligence is critical for corporate and public diplomats alike. It is as essential to the effective practice of public diplomacy as it is to the global business environment. And as someone who has taught in various law enforcement and military academies, I would even argue it has direct application to our broader counter-terrorism and infrastructure protection efforts.

“Context matters...” and as Khanna defines it, “Contextual Intelligence [is] the ability to understand the limits of our knowledge and to adapt that knowledge to an environment different from the one in which it was developed.”

In the current issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, contextual intelligence is explored by [Tarun Khanna](#), Professor and Director of the South Asia Institute at Harvard University. Khanna argues what I and others in corporate diplomacy have been underscoring for years: that companies must be willing to adapt--and where appropriate, overhaul--their operational models to succeed in new markets. “Context matters...” and as Khanna defines it, “Contextual Intelligence [is] the ability to understand the limits of our knowledge and to adapt that knowledge to an environment different from the one in which it was developed.”

In business schools and leadership programs, students rigorously study and put into practice a variety of universal analytical tools, frameworks, and management practices to apply to their decision-making in the real world. These models serve very real purposes, in that they help guide the decision-maker through webs of complexity and uncertainty.

[Contextual intelligence] requires one accepting that they know less than they think they do and leading every new global and cross-cultural experience with humility and an openness to learning.

The takeaway should be that there are various tools available to support complex decision-making with a set of underlying universal principles that one can bring forward when necessary. When operating globally though, as Khanna advises, it is important to recognize and appreciate that “The most difficult work is often the ‘soft’ work of adjusting between mental models and learning to differentiate between universal principles...and being open to new ideas.” As many companies have learned the hard way, merely replicating business practices and models from one part of the world to another can oftentimes be a prescription for disaster. In the same vein, global organizations should resist the temptation of transplanting successful managers from one country to the next without arming them with the

proper mindset and a wide range of tools they'll need – contextual intelligence, corporate diplomacy, and strategic influence – to succeed.

**Accept that you know less than you think you do, be patient...then go forth and change the world.**

Contextual intelligence is essential to a successful global career. It requires one accepting that they know less than they think they do and leading every new global and cross-cultural experience with humility and an openness to learning. For global organizations, contextual intelligence should be factored into their global strategy as well as reinforced in any international training effort.

As a foundation for increasing contextual intelligence both institutionally and individually, consider the following approaches, several of which Khanna underscores (indicated by \*):

### **Global Organizations**

- Ensure all global training programs include **contextual intelligence, corporate diplomacy, and strategic influence**; Make available for spouses
- **Partner** with local companies\*
- Develop **local talent**\*
- Hire more people who are **fluent in more than one culture**\*
- Do more **fieldwork**\*
- Develop **social capital** across sectors in every location
- **Be patient**

### **Individuals/Corporate Diplomats**

- Prior to an overseas or new global assignment, **insist on global training for you and your spouse** that includes contextual intelligence, corporate diplomacy, strategic influence, and cross-cultural fluency
  - Build experience with **cross-discipline and cross-functional** teams
  - Build social capital and strategic influence across sectors (local companies, NGOs, and govt) on the ground
  - **Be patient**
-