Beyond Public Diplomacy

Where next for UK influence

Speech given by David Steven to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office
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Back to the past…

Speaking in the simple surroundings of the India Office Council Chamber, it is easy to see what is about the FCO that encourages many outsiders to hark back to a golden age, and to suppose that, if only diplomats could regain their sanctity as a distant, but all powerful, priesthood fanning the flame of the national interest, then the UK's place in the world will once again be secure.

Take the reaction of Paul Reynolds, the BBC's World Affairs correspondent, to the FCO's recent troubles over the forthcoming visit to Britain by the Pope. The FCO's leaked brainstorming memo, he wrote, was indicative of a Foreign Office which risks no longer being regarded as a serious organisation.

His evidence?

On Fridays, apparently, FCO officials come to work in jeans and shabby shirts, a practice that he says horrifies:

> Diplomats from small countries trying to look their best in what they, perhaps naively, regard as an august institution.

The FCO has also started to broaden its outreach. He charges it with becoming obsessed with dealing with 'stakeholders' rather than doing business with other governments.

Worst of all, when "you look on the Foreign Office website," he writes, "[it] is loaded with blogging and links to Twitter and YouTube and Flickr. The foreign secretary himself has a blog, though it…is usually hidden away in an act of annoying modesty."

The message from reading his piece: public diplomacy is pushing the FCO in a direction it shouldn't follow.

…or the future

My argument today will be the diametric opposite of Reynolds's.

I believe that:

- Foreign policy is at the early stages of a far-reaching transformation as governments finally get serious about the challenges of dealing with a world characterised by (i) complex transnational issues, (ii) rapidly mutating networks, and (iii) an information environment that operates at a furious pace and intensity.

- The UK's experiments with a new approach to public diplomacy and digital engagement are the harbingers of this transformation. The occasional lack of depth of these experiments indicates the need for greater conviction and commitment, not a retreat and a loss of confidence.

- We are moving towards a point where the Foreign Office should abandon for ever the term public diplomacy, and should instead see that what it brackets under that designation *is* its core business, and should therefore suffuse everything it does.

- It should then reconceptualise state-to-state diplomacy as *part* of this broader programme of engagement, with other governments a *primary* target audience to be sure, but not one that is set apart from other audiences, nor one that is sufficient to achieve most policy goals.

- The FCO can then cohere around a single, coherent theory of influence that can drive all its work, while enabling it to collaborate much more systematically with the rest of Whitehall, non-state actors, and other governments.

- It should then tie influence to strategy, defining influence as "a systematic programme of interventions designed to alter the beliefs and actions of others to achieve concrete outcomes against a strategic objective."

- Finally, it should use this much broader vision of its work to regain its place at the heart of Whitehall, demonstrating not just its relevance, but the essential nature of its existence to a British public whose lives are increasingly defined by global forces.

Seizing the Moment

This is, I believe, a time when almost everything a government does overseas should be up for grabs. We live at a time of profound, but unpredictable, geopolitical change. The international agenda is growing relentlessly, but the resources devoted to this agenda are not. This has created a mismatch that has the potential to threaten our security as a nation.

If this seems alarmist, then look back at the three defining events of the last decade, a time in which the world has experienced considerable, and unexpected, volatility.

In 2001, the events of September 11th took Western government by surprise, challenging at a fundamental level their sense that they understood and were in control of the world we all live in. The reaction to 9/11 merely confounded the problem, as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq revealed moral, strategic and tactical weakness.

In 2008, we experienced an unexpected energy and food price spike, which revealed how little control we have of volatile resource markets, and demonstrated the lack of food and energy security in many of the world's most fragile states. Again, it is the reaction to the shock that we may live to regret – as rising powers are tempted to conclude that the future will be defined by resource nationalism, not open global markets – and this expectation begins to create a self-fulfilling zero-sum dynamic.

And then there was the financial crisis, which shattered all assumptions about how economic risk is controlled, especially as it crosses the borders between organisations, countries, and sectors (including from the risk itself, to various financial instruments derived from that risk). While governments reacted unexpectedly well to the initial, acute phases of this crisis – notably at the London Summit – over the past few months, we have seem a depressing failure in Europe to respond to the next stage of the crisis.

Much worse, I fear, is to come, as countries – the UK included – attempt to balance books that are loaded down by vast amounts of public *and* private debt.

Here it is worth remembering that the amount British citizens owe on their mortgages *dwarves* the national debt. The public has a dizzying level of exposure to higher interest rates, rising unemployment, or a fall in a property market that is still overvalued by a third, using historical measures.

On this dimension alone, we are very far from being a resilient society.

The Long Crisis

Look at these three events together and you see the key ingredients of what we termed the *long crisis of globalization* in a recent Brookings paper that was commissioned by the FCO.

The common threads are:

- *Scarcity*, limits to the sustainable consumption of highly strategic commodities such as energy, land, water, food and 'atmospheric space' for emissions.
- *Instability*, the tendency for complex systems to experience unpredictable and unsettling shifts in a world where the number of people is still growing fast, while the number of connections between these people are multiplying at a dizzying rate.
- And finally, the potential for the *deliberate disruption* of fragile global systems – whether by terrorists, rogue states, or the financiers who invented the weapons of mass financial destruction that have brought the global economy low. Each of these actors uses the technologies that globalisation has provided to undermine the global order on which globalisation relies.

The UK's International Choices

So how to respond?

For Chatham House, we are currently engaged in a project looking at how these drivers will frame the UK's international strategic choices. We have reached the following provisional conclusions.

First, *global risks will continue to drive domestic policy*. Voters will not actively call for a more effective foreign policy, but they will notice and bemoan its absence. Global forces will continue to have considerable impact on their lives, with the main sources of strategic surprise coming from beyond the UK's borders.

Over the next ten years, moreover, *most risks will be on the downside*. We have lived, as I have argued, through a volatile decade. There is every reason to expect risks to continue to proliferate. Each new crisis will create political aftershocks with demands for governments to clear up the mess, matched by inquiries into why they failed to prevent the problem in the first place.

Finally, the government will find that, in most cases, *it does not have the levers to manage risks as effectively as it would like to*.

Most important risks:

- Pose complex collective action challenges – look at the failure to make much progress at Copenhagen.

- Rely on both the emergence and effective performance of new global governance structures that reflect shifts in the global balance of power. The trajectory taken by the G20 is a critical test case of how easily this will happen.

- Require action from broad alliances of state and non-state actors, meaning that 'deal-making' governments will have to equip themselves for the complex task of building and animating coalitions that have sufficient heft and unity of purpose to manage a given risk effectively.

An Agenda for the Next Government

I therefore believe our next government, of whichever political stripe, should:

(i) Define its international mission as *managing global risks on behalf of British citizens*.

(ii) Commit to *upgrading and reforming all aspects of its international work*, recognising the need to harness all diplomatic, development, military and other government capabilities to this overarching mission.

(iii) *Work to build a consensus* among elites and the public as to what government is 'for' in the international context, even as the diverse nature of British society, multiplying connections between citizens and the global sphere, and a frenetic media cycle make this consensus harder to achieve.

(iv) Recognise that the UK's international investment will *only* be effective if other countries – and not just our close allies – make a similar commitment to working towards a more resilient globalisation.

Theory of Influence

This is where influence comes into play – as a paradigm for all the UK's international activities.

When we look at most global issues, we see that they are stuck in what is far from an ideal state.

Imagine a golf ball that has come to rest in a bunker. That ball is not going to progress towards the hole through incremental effort. You can't putt out of the sand. Instead a concerted application of effort is needed – a wedge – that can dig the ball out from where it is trapped, and force it towards a more favourable equilibrium.

The UK needs to conceive of its international challenges using a similar logic. It therefore needs to develop influencing strategies that have two main components.

Shared Awareness

First, *the UK needs to build the shared awareness which creates a basis for action***.**

For most key policy challenges, the UK's first task internationally will be to work with others to reframe an issue, developing the data, analysis, ideas and policy proposals needed to underpin a new consensus.

This will be relevant in a range of contexts (how to operate in a failing state, for example; or the regulatory framework needed for financial institutions) and among groups of all sizes (from a handful of heads of state, through broader networks of opinion formers, to the general public).

Most importantly, it will require sustained effort. This is not simply a matter of running a seminar or releasing a policy paper, but requires a commitment to *disrupting* the old consensus and *shaping* a new one.

This work places the UK in the role of *thought leader*, recognising that it may be better placed than larger powers to act as a *convenor* for debate, discussion and dialogue. On many issues, in other words, it may not be a top tier player – but that may give it more latitude to be an agent of change, moulding an environment in which progress becomes possible.

Shared Platforms

Shared awareness is the precursor to *building the shared platforms needed to deliver policy outcomes.*

The UK therefore needs to increase its capacity to build and animate alliances. In a global age, it is surely time to stop seeing the world as a series of bilateral relationships. I think the way forward is to:

- Systematically upgrade resources devoted to alliances, international institutions and task-based networks, with funding decisions made on the ability of each platform to respond to a given risk.
- Prioritise these multiparty relationships over traditional bilateral relationships, which are too fragmented to achieve sustained policy advances.
- Aim to manage, as far as possible, bilateral relationships as a set of clearly-defined groups, with the UK pursuing consistent priorities across all members of the G20 for example, or with all NATO countries, or with all our partners in the EU.

Given the fluidity of the international environment, the unpredictable nature of many risks, and the difficulty of reaching agreement between large numbers of actors, I expect informal alliances are likely to become increasingly important in future years. But whether or not this is the case, the principle remains: UK resources and effort should be directed to networks at times when they are able to deliver results.

Such work will place the UK in the role of *campaigner* – as it attempts to sustain alliances over time and keep them focused on developed the *operating systems* that can manage risk effectively.

Conclusions

Let me draw a few conclusions:

- First, I have argued that the new public diplomacy has been a pathfinder for a more open and dynamic foreign policy. It offers a path forward for FCO, a department that has, I think it is fair to say, struggled to find a role during the years since 1997.

- The agenda is much broader than traditional government to government diplomacy. It is focused on managing the risks that can have a dramatic impact on the lives of British citizens, through work that creates the solutions, consensus, and coalitions needed to affect change.

- The FCO's role is become a platform for synthesis – its USP is that it can look *across* issues and geographies, integrating ideas and bringing together agents of change from different geographies and sectors.

- Accomplishing this new role requires building on reforms already underway in the Foreign Office, but will also require significant changes of structures, culture and personnel.

Towards Networked Diplomacy

Finally, let me end with a last reflection on why the term *public diplomacy* may soon have had its day.

To many, it implies a *publicised* diplomacy, when much of this new work may happen behind the scenes. (That is not to say that much greater openness will not be crucial in many cases.)

It also tricks some into thinking that the challenge is to work with *the public* as a whole, when in fact we should be looking to tightly defined groups – indeed, the smallest group possible to achieve a particular change. The FCO, in particular, will very often be addressing itself to key intermediaries who themselves have disproportionate influence in a broader network.

It is that word 'network' that I think is critical to what we are working towards. Once we had state-to-state diplomacy, then public diplomacy was added to this core activity, like icing on a cake.

Now the cake itself is a new type of *networked diplomacy* – and it is in this diplomacy of networks that I believe the Foreign Office's future lies.

Further reading:

Alex Evans, Bruce Jones and David Steven, *Confronting the Long Crisis of Globalization: Risk, Resilience and International Order*, Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 2009

Alex Evans and David Steven, 'Towards a Theory of Influence' in *Engagement: public diplomacy in a globalised world,* Foreign & Commonwealth Office, London, 2008

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