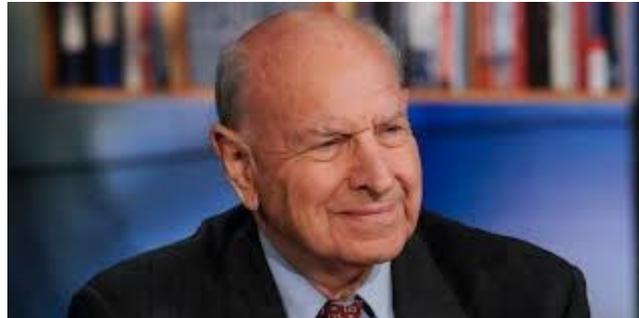


10 February 2022

## Diplomacy, Dignity and Respect: Russia and the US



In the course of a recent interview with a Russian journalist one of Russia's deputy foreign ministers, Sergey Ryabkov, was asked whether there was any US diplomat whom he strongly admired on professional grounds. "**Thomas Pickering**" was the answer. Thomas Pickering, now retired, was a career US Foreign Service officer. He was US ambassador to Russia from 1993 to 1996. He also served as US ambassador to India, at the United Nations in New York, to Israel, to El Salvador, to Nigeria and to Jordan. According to his Wikipedia entry, King Hussein of Jordan once declared him "the best US ambassador I've dealt with". He holds the rank of Career Ambassador, the highest in the U.S. Foreign Service.

Deputy Minister Ryabkov's answer prompted us to ask Ambassador Pickering whether he would be willing to answer a few questions that relate to the diplomatic relationship between the United States and Russia. He kindly consented.

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**Do you agree with a point made recently by Ambassador (retired) Jack Matlock, that since 9/11 US/Russia relations have suffered from a lack of US respect for Russia?**

I agree with Ambassador Matlock. Respect and dignity do not mean appeasement but a willingness to listen, to look for the realities in the other side's efforts to present a point of view and to make the effort to try to understand the viewpoint being expressed.

Listening presents a diplomat with several challenges – to parse carefully to learn what the other side is saying, to understand and explore with that side both the plain meaning of the words being used as well as what lies behind the statements which may signal both openings for change as well as "red lines". Finally, a careful exploration may also bring both sides to understand better the logic of the approach of each, how that logic may overlap or support a mutually acceptable solution and how each side may be brought by such exchanges to understand better both their

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own flexibilities and inflexibilities. Respect and dignity are based in politeness, a willingness to hear the other side out, a resort to questions and conversations to explore their position and the engendering of a mutual willingness to proceed in a manner best described as reciprocal. "I expect you to treat with me as I am engaging to treat you".

As a diplomat for most of the Cold War and beyond, I came to understand both the values and pitfalls of the US approach to Russia and others.

Domestic issues and concerns play a role in most country's outlooks on diplomacy and international relations. For the US there is a strong strain in wanting to be tough. The tradition of American football often insinuates an attitude of little politeness and less grace in dealing with those identified and labeled as opponents. That "Saturday Afternoon Football" mentality dominated much of the Cold War although I learned quickly that the best American negotiators exploited listening, interest, and quiet confidence even when addressed by the other side on the basis that their Communist convictions did not admit of such a reciprocal approach. Détente gradually became an important objective, stabilizing and making more secure a relationship that could otherwise have led to accidental or miscalculated armed conflict. What took place in quiet corners and in the 'walks in the woods' of diplomacy was relatively rare and both sides felt it necessary to reinforce for their public their determination through sometimes harsh and critical public debate and the exercise of leverage.

Leverage has a tendency to be seen in the United States as largely negative. Positive rewards are frowned upon and seen as capitulation. There are prevailing views among American political parties - the Republicans have often sought to dominate the being tough strain in the US approach to Russia, causing the Democrats to attempt to imitate and at times to "out tough" them. That has led to the conclusion that the only way to treat Russians or their leaders is to set down tough positions as a way to influence outcomes. Much of that has taken place in a situation where such leveraging is seen as dispositive in settling the problem on US terms. Negotiations are eschewed or allowed to linger in the background. The unexpressed expectation for many politicians is that harsh leverage – extensive economic sanctions and perhaps military positioning – will cause the other side to accept the US position without engaging in negotiations.

Economic sanctions are favored by the Congress as an area where they can independently exercise an initiative to engage in foreign policy. This application of balances and checks often creates more problems than it resolves. Sanctions are put in place without a thorough examination of who or what they will impact - a foreign public, US economic activities or those of friends and allies on whose help we widely count.

The danger here is that without an effort to convert to a diplomatic goal whatever leverage can be put in place, the US will face the unhelpful choice of either backing down or engaging in armed conflict. In the nuclear age neither seems a useful route to conflict resolution.

**The demonization of President Putin has been a significant feature of America's Russia diplomacy for a decade or more. Is it wise to focus on personalities to such an extent? Would**

**US security and prosperity be better served by seeing state interest (*raison d'état*) as the leading determinant of Russian actions?**

The demonization of the other side and its leadership may be part of buttressing a domestic position. On the US side, this is often in connection with a coming election. Elections are only two years apart for major federal offices in the Congress. For other states such positions are often seen as reinforcing the popularity of the leader at times when he or she is under stress or likely to become so.

There is a difference between a public conclusion about an opposing leader's motivations, which is rarely called for in pursuing successful diplomacy, and the buttressing of future electoral success. Whatever states may say in public about an opposing leader should not cause them to abandon their commitment to national interest in their own behalf and in assessing correctly the motivations of the other side. Demonization supplies an unhelpful negative element to personal diplomacy between Heads of State and adds little if anything to achieving national interest. It quite clearly makes personal relations harder to pursue in finding a diplomatic settlement. Some will see demonization as adding to diplomatic pressure, but history shows little reason to believe that is true. It does quite clearly make improving human relations and contacts on which diplomatic success often depends harder and more elusive.

**A focus on the personality of foreign leaders invites moral judgements. Since Hume the prevailing view among philosophers has been that moral judgements are expressions of emotion. Is diplomacy better based on rational calculation or emotion?**

It is hard to find fault with the view that rational not emotional issues should inform the nature and pursuit of foreign policy interests. It takes us into questions which have begun to characterize the nature of diplomacy in this century. What Americans have traditionally called functional issues. Different from bilateral problems, they often cover the concerns of many if not all states and are dealt with multilaterally. One among the most consuming has been the long-standing US interest in promoting democracy and human and civil rights as a feature of American foreign policy. Are they emotional – some may answer “yes”. For the US they are seen as helping to create a world in which the principles of state sovereignty, equality, mutual respect and fair and just treatment can prevail. Others quite stridently disagree but those principles are interpreted by many US experts and academics as part of our rational national interest.

Differences do arise frequently over which approaches should be used to pursue them. In a world where force is reserved for self-defense, the effort to use it to impose democracy and respect for human and civil rights should be set aside.

**To what do you ascribe a US tendency to allow double standards to enter into the conception of a “rules-based international order”, which Russia and China dismiss as an order based on “rules elaborated in private” and distinct from an order based on “universally recognized formats and mechanisms that are consistent with international law”?**

Over recent years there are a number of cases where others have with good reason felt the US might be adhering to double standards while advocating a rules-based international order. Paramount among them may well be the differences over commitments to limit NATO actions made in the extensive and difficult negotiations around German re-unification and the subsequent expansion of NATO. A recent series of extensive articles – [National Security Archive](#) - by experts in diplomatic history and document declassification at The George Washington University and others examine this situation.

Various conclusions regarding the reasons for US actions apparently changing the commitments include the fact that the situation in the region has changed as a result of President Putin's accession to power and his own actions; in the US political appointees made decisions without the benefit of the advice of professionals fully aware of the commitments; and the classification of the documents and their obfuscation behind that firewall for a long period of time.

These reasons do not excuse changes in commitments, leaving aside the negative impact such unilateral shifts in position have on the evolution of international relations for the US. Some have argued (mistakenly I believe) that the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) is not a US constitutionally-sanctioned advice and consent treaty and therefore has less or no binding power. The US must consider this issue with care since it reflects heavily on the degree to which it is seen as a trusted and trustworthy partner in international relations and reflects negatively on its leadership position based on trust in both its commitments and judgements. So far, under international law as I see it, you are either bound or not bound to observe an agreement. Third options do not exist.

Following the Second World War the US had a large military capacity, economic strength and prosperity, and held to principles and values widely admired and accepted and a position in diplomacy and international affairs where many looked to it for leadership. Many states still ask in any crisis what the US thinks and what it intends to do. There is no question that American diplomats felt they had to continue to earn their place on the world scene and for many of them being part of international organizations such as the UN and NATO and hearing the ideas and criticisms of others made earning that place a regular diplomatic occupation of significance.

It is historically possible to assign the beginning of a decline for the US with the end of the Cold War and a sense the US was motivated by an alleged unipolar moment as well as a shift from diplomacy to the use of the military in Afghanistan and Iraq. Armed conflict in wars of choice before all other options are exhausted and without the broad backing of the international community is a serious mistake as is armed conflict without diplomacy to organize the political shaping of the outcome.

As an American diplomat in the Cold War I was impressed by the UK's role in advancing useful ideas often adopted by the US in the quiet diplomacy that made a difference. While pundits and academics argue now about multipolarity, certainly current US attitudes both toward China and EU reflect an acceptance of their important roles. As a large power the US can mobilize personnel and funding, much of it to benefit the less fortunate around the globe. Its leadership in regional organizations may or may not endow it with special power depending on its ideas and support

from its fellow members. The US in dealing both with China and the EU now accepts a wide degree of multipolarity but has not adopted the view that nothing can be done unless there is broad agreement among all of the multipolar states.

**Jerry Brown, former Governor of California, recently advocated “strategic empathy” as a basis for US diplomatic engagement with Russia and China. What does “empathy” mean to you? Do you believe that empathy has an important part to play in diplomacy?**

Strategic Empathy in its simplest definition appears to be the application of the Golden Rule - do unto others as you would have them do unto you. As noted above, empathy can well mean seeking to hear and understand what the other side is saying. Empathy to me means taking those understandings to the next stage – can we use them for crafting ideas that might find common understanding and can be used to bridge the gaps between us. It is a useful approach and may well describe what successful diplomats have been doing or trying to do over time to work out arrangements for conflict resolution.

The Cuban Missile Crisis points up one such approach. An important element in the development of the crisis solution and in avoiding conflict was the fact that the Soviet Union agreed to remove its missiles and warheads from Cuba in response to the quarantine but sought a quid pro quo. The US had earlier decided it was going shortly to take its Jupiter missiles out of Turkey and then later agreed that it would do so in return for the Soviet action in Cuba. The US insisted the step remain confidential and it did for a considerable time.

President Putin has insisted that regarding Ukraine and other states the door to NATO admission should be closed with which many NATO members disagree. However, it is also clear that some NATO member states for the foreseeable future will not agree (as is required for membership) to admit Ukraine or Georgia. A settlement built around such an understanding (with or without a time limit on non-admission) should be looked at as a way forward on this key unresolved issue.

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