

Adapting for the Global Diplomatic Arena

*A Report of the Annual Aspen Institute
Dialogue on Diplomacy and Technology*

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Rapporteur



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

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*This report is written from the perspective of informed observers at the
Aspen Institute Dialogue on Diplomacy and Technology.
Unless attributed to a particular person, none of the comments or ideas contained
in this report should be taken as embodying the views or carrying the endorsement
of any specific participant at the event.*

Foreword

This report emanates from the second annual Aspen Institute Dialogue on Diplomacy and Technology. The Dialogue addresses ways that diplomacy can and should incorporate new information and communications technologies (ICT) in the days and years ahead. Given the social, many-to-many nature of these new technologies, it naturally focuses on public and citizen diplomacy, though not exclusively. In the first year, the Dialogue explored how technology has changed the nature of diplomacy in all its facets: traditional, public, citizen, cultural and business diplomacies.

The topic for the 2013 Dialogue examined how social networks, peer-to-peer and mobile technologies can change the landscape of diplomacy, particularly in the uses of soft or smart power. The group focused on the contrasting approaches by the U.S. and China in the context of Southeast Asia, and explored the ways in which ICTs are affecting diplomacy in the region. On the concluding day of the Dialogue, the group of 25 diplomats, business, non-profit and academic leaders from the United States, China and Myanmar/Burma engaged in a role-playing simulation of the U.S. and China rivaling for diplomatic advantage in a hypothetical skirmish in Myanmar/Burma. The purpose was to see what lessons they might learn from exploring the role of new technologies in a highly-charged diplomatic crisis.

The group concluded by calling for a reinvention of the apparatus of public diplomacy in the United States. This will be the topic for the next Dialogue.

The Dialogue owes its origins and thanks to the support of Aspen Institute Trustee Marc Nathanson. Since his tenure as the first Chairman of the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), Nathanson has been concerned with how American diplomacy could more rapidly embrace the changing world of social media and other technologies. We also acknowledge and thank Ambassador Christopher Hill, Dean of the Josef Korbel School of International Relations at the University of Denver, Aspen Institute Trustee Madeleine Albright, and Aspen Institute President, CEO and former Chair of the BBG, Walter Isaacson. We are thankful for our association in this Dialogue with the

Korbel School, and the guidance and leadership of Secretary Albright, whose father is the namesake of the School.

As is the case with almost all of our Communications and Society dialogues and roundtables, the aim is to frame issues, gain insights and make recommendations for important public policy issues at the cutting edge of our society. We do not take votes, however, and the report is the rapporteurs' take on the topic as amplified by participants' remarks. Therefore, not all of the opinions expressed in the report are subscribed by each of the participants or their employers. Unless someone is specifically quoted, it should not be assumed that he or she adheres to a particular position, but rather such statements are the rapporteur's sense of the group in general.

In addition to the above leaders of the Dialogue, I would like to thank Ms. Shanthi Kalathil, our excellent rapporteur; the Nathanson Scholars, Laura Jagla and Emily Winslow, who designed the materials for our simulation at the Dialogue; and Kiahna Cassell, Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program Senior Project Manager, for organizing and managing the dialogue and this report itself. Finally, we thank the Jane and Marc Nathanson Foundation, which is the senior sponsor of this project.

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Washington, D.C.
March 2014

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Shanthi Kalathil

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Shanthi Kalathil

Introduction: Dialogue on Diplomacy and Technology

The revolution will not only be televised, it will be instantly transmitted. When dictators fall, the world watches in real time; when complex negotiations take place, global public opinion has a seat at the table; and in crisis situations, immediately is not soon enough. Widespread access to information and communication technology (ICT) has permanently changed the face of international relations. In particular, it has transformed the conceptualization and practice of diplomacy. As non-state actors become increasingly empowered, diplomacy has come to encompass not only state-state relations, but various forms of state-citizen and citizen-citizen relations as well, all enacted in full view of the public. Diplomatic actors, institutions and processes are in the process of adapting—some faster than others—to these new realities.

At the second annual Aspen Institute Dialogue on Diplomacy and Technology, or ADDTech, held in Aspen, Colorado from July 24 to 26, 2013, participants explored the ramifications of these issues, focusing in particular on the ways in which ICTs are affecting diplomacy, power relations, networks and publics in Southeast Asia. The group used a role-playing simulation to gain new insights into the intersection of social media and diplomacy in Southeast Asia, concluding with a set of general observations and recommendations.

Diplomacy in a Networked World

The transformation of international relations has been described in numerous ways over the past several years, from the “death of distance” to the collapse of hierarchies. For diplomacy, increased transparency and heightened volatility have been two of the most significant phenomena to characterize the emerging information age.¹

For instance, there is now a pervasive belief that diplomacy should operate in the open, a notion that has been thrown into sharp relief by WikiLeaks. This has both positive and negative implications, as increased transparency can allow global audiences to hold public officials to account, yet make it more difficult for diplomats and political leaders to fashion compromises that are the essence of statecraft. At the same time, states are contending with increased volatility as newly empowered non-state actors (both individuals and groups) interact with states in unexpected ways and increase political uncertainty at domestic and international levels.²

These trends have complex implications. Media and policy circle discussions, however, tend to focus on the more superficial aspects of so-called digital diplomacy, such as the novelty of tweeting ambassadors. This tends to divert attention to ICTs themselves and away from the actors and institutions that are seeking to shape and exploit technologies.

Many of these phenomena are starkly apparent in Southeast Asia, the region examined by this year’s roundtable. The governments of the countries in the region are dealing with the changing expectations of their domestic publics, as well as competing strategic priorities. Disputes in the South China Sea, the rebalancing of U.S. policy toward Asia, a rising China, political liberalization in Burma, and ASEAN “community-building” processes are converging against the backdrop of shifting demographics. As the number of children in families has decreased, the share of family resources devoted to education has increased, helping fuel the emergence of well-educated, networked and vocal youth.

Diplomatic actors in the region must contend with activated domestic and international public opinion, coupled with the potential for sudden mobilization around flash issues. China, whose impact is felt all across the region, must also constantly fine-tune its political system

in a networked and information-rich environment. For the U.S., this poses a rich array of policy opportunities and challenges, even as its diplomatic infrastructure continues to evolve in keeping with the new information environment.

Roundtable participants discussed these and other issues, beginning with a general discussion of the changes taking place within diplomacy and its evolving offshoot, public diplomacy.

Technology: Driver of Change?

There was general agreement among participants that new technologies, particularly social media, had fostered a dynamic and increasingly unpredictable environment for diplomacy. That said, some cautioned against placing too much emphasis on the role of technology in creating change.

“When dictators fall, the world watches in real time....” -Trygve Myhren

“It’s important to emphasize from the outset that technology doesn’t produce these outcomes, people do,” said Alec Ross, former Senior Advisor for Innovation to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. “What technology does is amplify things on the ground.” Arguing against techno determinism, Ross and others cautioned against attributing too much agency to ICTs.

At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the fundamental transformations taking place in the realm of diplomacy. These changes mirror those in other fields, such as education, said one participant. Trygve Myhren, Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the University of Denver, noted that, “In education, it’s sage on stage. And sage on stage is going to be gone.” Yet while many recognize that information is abundant and easy for many to access, “The wellsprings of wisdom have to be mentored,” he added. Similarly, in diplomacy, the mere distribution of information is insufficient for good diplomatic practice, Myhren concluded.

The Evolution of Public Diplomacy

The Roundtable explored the definitions and goals of public diplomacy, seeking to isolate the shifting distinction between public diplomacy and traditional diplomacy. Public diplomacy has traditionally been defined as the means with which a country communicates with overseas publics in order to inform and influence for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing foreign policy goals.³ Yet, as public diplomacy scholar Craig Hayden writes, diplomacy and public diplomacy may be increasingly fused in what may be thought of as social diplomacy—involving not just the ascendance of public diplomacy, but “the integration of technological tools, publics, and state institutions in the formation of policy and successful programs or interventions.”⁴

**“...public diplomacy is less about public relations
and more about the basic values of American
society, and how we convey those basic values.”**

-Charles Morrison

In practice, “I’ve always had trouble untangling the two,” said Kathleen Stephens, Senior Associate at Georgetown University’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy and former Acting Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. “I see both through the lens of relationship building.” In addition, she noted, some of the United States’ most successful public diplomacy programs have been long-term programs designed to reap benefits over a number of years, such as exchange programs, music programs and so on.

For some, public diplomacy was a very distinct subset of policy, distinguished by the fact that, “In broad terms our public diplomacy should support our stated foreign policy goals,” said Jeff Moon, Vice President of Asia-Pacific Policy and Government Affairs at Cisco Systems. “Public diplomacy must support the goals and objectives of diplomacy,” added Tim Aye-Hardy, Director of Outreach for Burma Global Action Network.

One way to distinguish the two, said Charles Morrison, President of the East-West Center, is to understand diplomacy as the day-to-day work of diplomats, and public diplomacy as a way to “build moral authority that makes the work of diplomats easier.” In this sense, emphasized many participants, the dialogue aspect of public diplomacy is very important. “Public diplomacy is where the U.S. government is actually listening, not just promoting policies we want to ensure,” said Dina Powell, President of Goldman Sachs Foundation.

Some cautioned that public diplomacy needs to be disentangled from the broader space of international communication among peoples and nations. Conflating the two “leads to suspicion and distrust of both the message and the messenger,” said Ivan Sigal, Executive Director of Global Voices.

Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

The term “soft power” generally refers to the ability to influence through persuasion rather than coercion, encompassing a country’s attractiveness as conveyed through culture, diplomacy, multilateral participation, business and other interests abroad, and economic strength.⁵

Public diplomacy, if utilized correctly, can help amplify soft power. “What I’ve thought of as public diplomacy is less about public relations and more about the basic values of American society, and how we convey those basic values,” said Charles Morrison. Thinking about public diplomacy as a component of soft power means having to be smarter, he added, in husbanding the things that give the U.S. moral authority.

**The simplest way to reconceptualize public
diplomacy...is to adopt a basic tenet of storytelling
and show, not tell. –Ivan Sigal**

Peter Manikas, Director of Asia Programs at the National Democratic Institute, generally agreed, adding that often the U.S. intends not merely to promote a set of U.S. values but a broader set of democratic

values. Because of this, the platforms that may be most effective will not be national, U.S.-based platforms, but rather international ones. The nature and credibility of the platform may have “a big impact on the acceptability of the messages that are being projected,” he said.

Ivan Sigal elaborated on the significance of platforms, noting that it is critically important to understand that the question of who owns the platform matters. “When you invite people to come to our house and interact on our territory, that’s an assertion of authority,” he said. The simplest way to reconceptualize public diplomacy, he added, is to adopt a basic tenet of storytelling and show, not tell. “If we want to show the world the way the U.S. functions, with all its diversity and complexity and freedom of the individual in relation to the state, the way to do that is to show the world that, not to dictate that.”

Bringing the Public into Diplomacy

One of the most striking ways in which technology has affected diplomacy is the penetration of the political non-elite into the nuts and bolts of statecraft. In the past, “American public diplomacy was oriented toward the elites, the future leaders of a country, the current leaders, the military,” said Marc Nathanson, Chairman of Mapleton Investments and former Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. With the advent of social media, public diplomacy has “brought in the people.”

As a result of these new complexities, governments must understand that “decisions are not just made in presidential palaces or foreign ministries,” said Christopher Hill, Dean of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver and a four-time ambassador. “If you have a policy of trying to get a country to do something, you can’t just do it with talking points in the foreign ministry. You need a broader audience for that policy.”

Scholar David Faris calls the current epoch “The Age of Sharing,” in contrast to the “Age of Secrecy,” which characterized much of traditional diplomacy. He notes that the traditional “two-level games” of foreign policy—referring to negotiations between states, and then again between states and their domestic audiences—have become “three-

level games,” adding in the networked elite as an intervening variable between policies and mass audiences. In the era of the three-level game, diplomats continue to mediate state relationships, but must do so with a new appreciation for public opinion as channeled through social media.⁶ Moreover, they must comprehend that global publics are now part of *creating* diplomacy, not merely consuming it.

“American public diplomacy was oriented toward the elites, the future leaders of a country, the current leaders, the military.”With the advent of social media, public diplomacy has “brought in the people.” – Marc Nathanson

The implications of the growing power of global civil society and its impact on diplomacy are still not completely understood, many participants noted. Because of this, noted John Rendon, President and Chief Executive Officer of The Rendon Group, some essential diplomatic skills may be missing. “Our challenge is to understand how to take 21st century statecraft and turn it into 21st century streetcraft,” he said. “We have all sorts of tools in our diplomatic toolkit that have been honed over time, and we don’t have any tools in the streetcraft kit.”

One potential role that civil society might play would be to help create broad acceptance of policy, noted some participants. This might help “strip away conflict that prevents policy resolutions,” said Orville Schell, Arthur Ross Director of the Center on U.S.-China Relations, Asia Society.

Yet there are implicit challenges as power arguably devolves away from central governing authorities toward networks of non-state actors. “Civil society cannot run a country, movements cannot run a country,” said Madeleine Albright, Chair of Albright Stonebridge Group and former Secretary of State. “How do you get from Tahrir Square to governance, in other words?”

“Our challenge is to understand how to take 21st century statecraft and turn it into 21st century streetcraft.” –John Rendon

Adapting Bureaucracies to the Information Age

Roundtable participants considered various ways to amend diplomatic and policy structures to render them more nimble and responsive to new challenges. Dina Powell argued that it is important that Foreign Service officers not only see public diplomacy as essential, but as a career-track field. This also requires having public diplomacy people in key policy meetings, she added. “If no one’s thinking about how policies are communicated, it’s a really big miss,” she said.

Of course, changing highly entrenched structures within large bureaucratic structures is often not only challenging, but impossible given the realities of political timeframes, priorities and incentive structures. “The barrier to making great thinking a reality is risk,” and the risk tolerance of bureaucracy is low, noted Alec Ross. During his time at the State Department, he said, he was lucky to have been given the permission to make mistakes of commission rather than omission, allowing his team to provide seed funding for a number of non-traditional ideas generated by embassies. Ultimately, diplomatic bureaucracies must recognize that some things will fail, and be comfortable with that, he concluded.

At least one recent change in the U.S. may open the door to a more creative set of approaches to public diplomacy. The U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, commonly referred to as the Smith-Mundt Act, laid out the terms under which the U.S. government could engage with foreign audiences. It also prohibited the U.S. government from disseminating domestically the programs it produced for foreign consumption. Since its inception, there have been calls for termination of this prohibition, most particularly in recent years given the easy access to such content by domestic audiences through the Internet. Earlier this year, the ban was repealed, thus enabling U.S. government public diplomacy materials to be disseminated within the United States.

Rethinking the Broadcasting Board of Governors

Participants discussed various ways that the end of the Smith-Mundt era might open up various possibilities, including potentially restructuring the Broadcasting Board of Governors (the independent federal agency that oversees all U.S. civilian international media). Specifically, participants imagined transforming the missions of Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Asia, or re-examining the function of State Department bureaus such as International Information Programs, and Educational and Cultural Affairs. Participants also discussed using newly raised or redirected funds—from the U.S. government, other governments or private sources—to amplify the power of independent journalism or alternative narratives in foreign countries.

...global agreements and norms will have an impact on the development of the Internet as a medium.... “We need to think about the Internet as a space with values of its own.” –Lokman Tsui

Finding fresh funding for new public diplomacy initiatives might be problematic, however. If U.S. government funding drops off, other groups may not pick up the slack, maintained Marc Nathanson. “I don’t want us to be naïve” in expecting various other governments or companies to come together to provide platforms for cross-cultural communication and other initiatives. If the U.S. government considers enhanced and expanded communication platforms to be in its interests, many participants observed, then it will have to commit to the changes in funding and bureaucratic structures to enable this.

Flipping the Question: How International Diplomacy Impacts Technology

A few participants noted that the interplay between diplomacy and technology is not unidirectional, despite frequently being framed that way. Much of the session focused on how new technologies were affecting the practice of diplomacy, but Lokman Tsui, Head of Free Expression for Asia and the Pacific at Google Asia, pointed out that

international relations can also affect how technologies are developed, adopted and used. Tsui highlighted ongoing discussions between governments and civil society regarding the multistakeholder nature of Internet governance, its open architecture, acceptance of freedom of expression online, and so on. He explained that these types of global agreements and norms will have an impact on the development of the Internet as a medium, particularly as more and more users in developing countries come online. “One thing we should not take for granted is the technology itself,” he argued. “We need to think about the Internet as a space with values of its own.”

The U.S., China and Southeast Asia: New Platforms, New Dynamics

In many ways, the issues discussed by Roundtable participants in the context of changing diplomacy—partnership, listening, dialogue—are highly valued in the Southeast Asian context, explained Charles Morrison of the East-West Center. “Partnership and respect in this region is very important, the idea of listening as part of public diplomacy is very important,” he said. “The most negative thing you hear about the U.S. in Southeast Asia is that the U.S. is constantly lecturing and hectoring,” without understanding specific Southeast Asian situations and needs.

In fact, Southeast Asia has long been a region caught between the needs, dictates and advances of two major powers: the U.S. and China. As Morrison noted, Southeast Asian countries tend to be wary when the U.S. and China are at loggerheads—and even warier when they are too friendly. In the region, he said, they have a saying: “When the elephants fight, the grass suffers. But when the elephants make love, the grass also suffers.”

The U.S. “pivot,” or rebalancing toward Asia, was met with mixed reactions in Southeast Asia. While some countries welcomed America’s policy attentions, they also worried that China would respond by increasing its military capabilities. Given existing disputes over the South China Sea, a more militaristic China is seen by many as problematic. Moreover, some worry that the rebalancing may divide Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) based on territorial disputes with China. As a result, many countries are pursuing a hedging strategy toward both China and the U.S.⁷

Even as they negotiate the delicate causeways of great power politics, the countries of Southeast Asia are growing increasingly networked, utilizing a wide variety of communication platforms. There are currently almost as many cell phone subscriptions as people in the world, with more than half in the Asia-Pacific region.⁸ Consulting firm Accenture predicts that 194 million new Internet users will come online in the ASEAN—6 countries between 2010 and 2020, 91 million users in Indonesia alone.⁹ Civil society in many Southeast Asian countries has a tradition of being particularly vibrant, a trend that has been enhanced with increased access to ICTs. In countries from Thailand to Indonesia to Burma, ICT-enabled grass roots organizing has taken off, not without sparking accompanying debates over the limits of free expression in traditional cultures.¹⁰

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Domestic political dynamics have also been tangibly affected by the information revolution in Southeast Asia. In some cases, there has been a shift away from traditional political power centers, although this has not necessarily had the effect of either further democratization or the emergence of new political players. In Thailand, for instance, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who has been in self-imposed exile since 2008 to avoid corruption charges, is able to govern by proxy through various forms of communication with his sister—the country’s current Prime Minister—and senior government officials.¹¹ Thaksin’s “growth and expansion were rooted in his telecom network and alternative political communication paths, in his support of community radio and cable/satellite television, and linked and supported by social media products, which could circumvent traditional Thai national broadcasters,” said Ivan Sigal, Executive Director of Global Voices. “So an entire political movement grew up around moving away from the centralization of Bangkok as center of Thai political life.”

The South China Sea, Nationalism and New Platforms for Expression

Roundtable participants focused on the South China Sea as a particular hotspot concerning the U.S., China and Southeast Asia. Parts of the South China Sea are claimed, via sovereignty over land features or maritime rights, by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. Competing claims have led to tensions and flare-ups, primarily between China and its maritime neighbors. Rising nationalism in China and other Southeast Asian countries has helped fuel the conflict, and many speculate that such nationalism is amplified (sometimes intentionally by the state) through digital and other communication networks.

Media and communication platforms throughout Asia are transforming rapidly, even in censored contexts such as China. Although China is one of the Internet's most aggressive censors, various platforms—from traditional media to microblogs—are nonetheless diffusing previously verboten ideas and debates throughout the general Chinese public. At the same time, because the Chinese government is known to take a proactive approach toward shaping public opinion, it is difficult to discern the extent to which the government has a hand in shaping nationalistic impulses online.

Although nationalism can be amplified—and often manipulated—through social media, it has also taken on added complexity in recent years. “Nationalism and social media in China is a double-edged sword,” said Filip Noubel, Country Director for China at Internews and Co-founder of BeijingAwareness. Noubel referred to the common theme of anti-Japanese sentiment twinned with Chinese nationalism re-emerging with the blessing of the government every few years. The last time this happened a little over a year ago, he explained, something curious happened. “On [microblogging platform] Sina Weibo you saw alternative voices, Chinese average citizens saying ‘I’ve been to Japan, it’s a great country, I have Japanese friends,’” Noubel said. “Social media in China is interesting now because it gives space for the two voices, for extreme nationalists, but also for people sensible about not demonizing Japan.”

The increasing wealth and mobility of mainland Chinese also means that they can visit other countries and form their own impressions first-hand, which also has the effect of countering extreme national-

ism. Michael Anti, a journalist and Nieman Fellow who is from China, recounted the profound experience of living in Tokyo for a couple of months as a visiting scholar and how it changed his perspective. Participants agreed that international visits, long a fundamental component of public diplomacy, can be extremely powerful, particularly when embedded in authentic personal or local narratives.

Soft Power: the Chinese Experience in Asia

The Chinese “charm offensive” in Southeast Asia and elsewhere has drawn much attention in recent years—for both its successes and its failures. On one hand, China has demonstrated its growing sophistication in the nonmilitary arena by strategically deploying cultural, media and economic resources around the world and amplifying these efforts in the global networked information space. The country’s success in controlling and manipulating information within its borders leads many to believe it will encounter similar success in wielding soft power in the international sphere.¹²

On the other hand, while China has invested several billion dollars per year in Southeast Asia to bolster its regional influence and advance its strategic interests, its development projects in the region have increasingly alienated local populations, even as its nationalistic rhetoric over the South China Sea has strained relations with ASEAN neighbors.¹³

Some participants expressed the view that China’s overall approach has not helped it curry favor in Southeast Asia. Even as China’s emphasis on its lack of preconditions for aid and investment may seem appealing in the short term, the lack of consideration of long term consequences, environmental or otherwise, “helps drive Burma away from China,” said Tim Aye-Hardy, Director of Outreach for the Burma Global Action Network. “Even though the Chinese government has provided protection for the last 20 years, the anti-Chinese sentiment is growing each day.”

China might look to recent history to better understand its soft power trajectory, said some. “At one point we thought Japan was eating our lunch in Southeast Asia,” but ultimately they did not gain the influence they sought despite their aid and investment, said Charles

Morrison. “That’s because a lot of what they were doing...looked self-ish” on the part of Japanese companies and interests.

The fallout over China’s attempts to exercise soft power is fascinating, given that the concept has been prominent in Chinese political circles for years. Almost all Chinese officials are familiar with the concept of soft power, said Michael Anti, blogger and Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. “But I think they misinterpret the idea of soft power. In their minds, soft power is a very soft propaganda.” Anti pointed out, however, that there was a shift in official attitudes toward the concept in 2008. That year, after the Olympics, officials got a nasty shock when protests against the Chinese government continued despite what was widely perceived to be a very successful Olympics. Officials may have thought that they “invested so much money to show the good image, and to show that China wants to be part of the international community, so why are you still hostile?” Anti noted that since then, the emphasis on soft power as a key foreign policy concept has weakened.

Soft power is most effective when expressed through culture, civil society and other non-governmental institutions, and is most persuasive and credible as a bottom-up organic phenomenon, rather than a managed top-down program.

–Lokman Tsui

But Chinese officials misunderstand the locus of soft power, argued some participants, and this is why they may be disappointed when they do not get the results they would like. “There is a total lack of credible civil society in China” which hampers their efforts to build soft power, said Lokman Tsui. Soft power is most effective when expressed through culture, civil society and other non-governmental institutions and is most persuasive and credible as a bottom-up organic phenomenon, rather than a managed top-down program, he argued. In China, because of the lack of civil society, attempts at harnessing soft power were “top-down, money-infused and government-funded...there is no third party that can speak on behalf of” the state.

One participant disputed that the Chinese government was spending the type of large sums being reported on soft power, as well as the notion that all state papers were simply propaganda organs being propped up by the state. Larry Lee, President and Executive Editor-in-Chief of the official *China Daily* newspaper, argued that his mission was not propaganda, but rather to try to “build an incredible newspaper.”

Evolving U.S. Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

Several participants observed that the environment surrounding U.S. diplomacy in Southeast Asia had changed in recent years, partly because of the information revolution and the new information landscape of the region. Kathleen Stephens noted the emergence of new and innovative approaches toward social media and diplomacy in recent years. Countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand feature vibrant social media environments, and “embassies with support from Washington are doing different things” within those environments, she said. “It is very culturally specific and country specific.” Stephens added that new initiatives might range from training NGOs how to use new media as part of capacity building programs, to using technology to build on face to face encounters.

But technology and diplomacy are not the only things that mattered, many participants asserted. Stephens noted that the U.S. now has an ambassador to ASEAN, and has made several tangible gestures to build relations with the region and strengthen multilateral capabilities. This, in turn, has positioned the U.S. to try out the previously mentioned new approaches toward public diplomacy.

Roundtable participants discussed the fact that, even as the diplomatic landscape was being transformed, the U.S. was still grappling with evergreen questions such as how to balance the important, if sometimes dueling, emphases on human rights and economic growth in Southeast Asia. While the two goals often come into tension, they are “not necessarily in conflict with each other,” said Charles Morrison. “It’s important in the business community that the justice system works, that intellectual property rights are protected, that there is rule of law.”

Ideally, said some, these two goals would go hand in hand. “When we go into a country to invest, what we want is good labor policy and good health policy, so we do the two together,” said Madeleine Albright.

These issues are often brought into focus in Burma, which was long shunned by the U.S. investment community due to its human rights abuses. Now that the political system has begun to open up and the U.S. has restored relations at the ambassadorial level, U.S. investment is beginning to pour in—but the country still lacks some of the basic infrastructure needed to ensure reliable investment and rights protections. From the Burmese perspective, said Tim Aye-Hardy, the U.S. has a significant role in the transition process, one that the Burmese hope continues as Burma’s transition continues to unfold; the U.S. should be “building capacity from the ground up, building the components” of democratic governance that will allow the country’s transition to move forward.

The Snowden Fallout

Although the Roundtable did not set out to discuss U.S. domestic affairs, many participants made the case that the recent revelations by Edward Snowden about the activities of the U.S. intelligence community had had dramatic effects internationally, touching on many roundtable topics. For instance, said some, authoritarian governments were newly empowered to employ advanced surveillance on their citizens, justifying their actions by saying that even the democracy-championing U.S. engaged in such activities.

...all messages are inherently bound for international audiences.

The day of the initial Snowden revelations was “the darkest day for Internet freedom,” said blogger Michael Anti. Chinese dissidents, and other dissidents around the world, perceived that they had lost “the biggest ally of Internet freedom, the American government.” Indeed, he said, the Chinese government was already using the example to justify their Internet policies.

Moreover, said some, the U.S. government’s loud proclamations to Americans that they were not the target of spying did nothing to

reassure the rest of the world. In the past, it may have been possible to say one thing to a domestic audience and another version to an international audience, but no longer; all messages are inherently bound for international audiences. “The rest of the world hears what we say when we say ‘we would never do this to an American,’” said Kathleen Stephens. “Our standing as the legitimate leader of technology ethics standards can be undermined by this, and we need to be serious because it will have knock-on effects” in many areas.

Charlie Firestone, Executive Director of the Communications and Society Program at the Aspen Institute, noted that it is not only countries and civil society that might be affected, that U.S. technology companies might be hurt as well. “This issue has affected public diplomacy in the sense of erosion of trust in the U.S., our businesses and our institutions,” he said.

“The Snowden affair was destructive in many ways, but in one curious way, it ended up being positive....Who wants to negotiate with someone with purity on their side? China now feels there is space to negotiate.” – Orville Schell

The perceived security of cloud computing was also hurt by the Snowden affair, said some. More countries might be encouraged to insist on having physical servers within their own borders—a model favored by countries like China, and generally seen as unfavorable by companies. “One of our arguments is not to have local data centers,” said Lokman Tsui of Google, in part because it might make it easier for various governments to demand access to data. In light of the revelations, however, many are erroneously assuming that the reason is to ensure that all data stays within U.S. borders so it can be accessed by the U.S. government, he said. If more and more countries insist on local data centers “it really goes to the integrity of the Internet as one Internet,” he said. “The worst case is fragmentation of the Internet.” The breakdown of a crucial global common medium would be one of the worst knock-on effects of the Snowden revelations, he and others argued.

One participant noted an interesting potential silver lining. “The Snowden affair was destructive in many ways, but in one curious way, it ended up being positive,” said Orville Schell. Because the U.S. is always seen as lecturing other countries on Internet freedom, and holding up China as a negative example, in some sense the Snowden affair has balanced out the positions of the two countries. “Who wants to negotiate with someone with purity on their side? China now feels there is space to negotiate.”

Conclusion: Transparency, Volatility and Adapting to Change

Roundtable participants engaged in a role-playing scenario involving Burma, China, the U.S. and other actors in an information-rich environment. Many participants noted that the exercise had, in general, highlighted the ways in which increased transparency and volatility affected the day-to-day realities of diplomatic actors engaged in delicate transactions. Time frames were accelerated, non-state actors affected processes in unpredictable ways, and negotiations and communications that might have been intended to be secret were eventually broadcast and/or manipulated. After the exercise, participants came together again to highlight observations gleaned from the scenario, and to offer recommendations for policymakers, activists and others.

**“People matter in outcomes.” Ultimately...
diplomacy is “based on personal relationships
and trust.” –Madeleine Albright**

Technology matters, but do not neglect the importance of people. Although technology frequently forced actors’ hands in the scenario, results depended on individual decisions by principals. “People matter in outcomes,” said Madeleine Albright. In the scenario, technology created disruptions, but its impact was mitigated and filtered by the people in the field. Ultimately, she said, diplomacy is “based on personal relationships and trust.”

Another example of the importance of personal relationships during times of crisis could be found in the case of the Arab Spring uprisings, said Marc Nathanson. Although there was an extensive diplomatic presence on the ground, the people who knew the most about what was happening were the NGOs, he said, who “had a lot of contact with the people in the street.”

Hierarchies can collapse and unpredictable actors may emerge, particularly during crisis. The interplay of actors during the scenario gave added credence to the long-held assertion that power was devolving away from traditional hierarchies and toward networks of non-state actors, or even individual empowered non-state actors. This, in turn, gave rise to several questions about the role of non-state-actors during crisis. Are suddenly emergent actors “acting on their own behalf or for an organization? It is very difficult to discern their interests,” said Peter Manikas of the National Democratic Institute. “There are not a lot of tools to deal with a charismatic troublemaker, although people like that emerge in times of crisis.”

At the same time, the U.S.’s own longstanding belief in the power of citizens may give it some added resilience in a situation where traditional leadership structures have eroded. “Power is diffused a lot in this country,” said Howard Berman, Senior Advisor at Covington and Burling and former Congressman. “The relative decline of leadership authority may be less in the U.S. than in other countries” simply because it has always wrapped citizen agency into its governing institutions.

Amidst information, misinformation and disinformation, trust is the most highly prized commodity. Roundtable participants repeatedly stressed the difficulty of dealing with an abundance of information, reliable or not, during the simulation. “Information is not knowledge,” said Chris Hill. Jeff Moon, Vice President of Asia-Pacific Policy and Government Affairs at Cisco Systems, drew an analogy to inflation: “One dollar doesn’t mean anything because there are a million dollars out there. There are a million pieces of information and not any one is useful,” he said. “It’s important to know for sure that the information is reliable.”

Moreover, in addition to misinformation and disinformation, there is the problem of simply too much information on too many platforms. In the past, a statement by the President or Secretary of State was “like gold; it wasn’t hard to get people to pay attention,” said Kathleen Stephens.

“Now it is a more crowded platform,” and information streams have become much more personalized. Getting the attention of multiple audiences amidst the constant stream of information is both a challenge and a potential skill-set for up and coming diplomats.

**...trust has re-emerged as the most prized
coin of the realm.**

Given all of these phenomena, trust has re-emerged as the most prized coin of the realm. “You have to build up the trust base, that should be a real priority” with public diplomacy and other endeavors, said Charles Morrison. Ivan Sigal noted that “norms about who to trust and who not to trust are built into Internet culture, but it takes a while to understand how these networks work.” The lesson for U.S. diplomatic actors here, then, is that trust is not something that comes with simply setting up a social media presence; diplomatic actors must slowly cultivate that trust with its networks, over time, in ways that comport with Internet culture.

Social media literacy is a new, crucial component of diplomacy. For U.S. government actors as well as all other diplomatic actors, understanding how to parse and use social media is simply a necessity in the information-rich diplomatic environment. In essence, social media literacy is now a required component of diplomacy itself, noted several participants. Assessing the validity of information is an important component, as well as understanding what may or may not be appropriate to communicate through social media, said Filip Noubel of Internews and BeijingAwareness. Game-playing may be a vehicle through which the general public as well as diplomatic actors could sharpen their social media literacy.

“Education and critical thinking will reduce misinformation coming from the Burmese media,” said Tim Aye-Hardy, pointing out that there have been real-life critical consequences, in Burma and elsewhere, of disseminating wrong or misleading information.

Diplomatic structures must adapt to stay relevant. The scenario again highlighted the need for more nimble, adaptable diplomatic

and foreign policy structures, observed many of the participants. “Traditionally, embassies are layered...and the cable structure is slow and cumbersome,” said former Ambassador Chris Hill. “We need to understand this is a fast moving game. You better have all your bases covered, and don’t rely on those layers.” Most importantly, the first job of an ambassador or diplomat is to keep the door open with the government in question, he added.

...social media literacy is now a required component of diplomacy itself.

Marc Nathanson pointed out that the scenario demonstrated that public diplomacy might be effective over the long term, but less useful during a time of crisis. Future study and/or reform efforts might focus “specifically on how we make more relevant American public diplomacy” and its corresponding institutions, both for the long-term and for short-term crises.

“You can’t immediately be on your back foot because all these things are happening in the blogosphere, and governments are also manipulating what’s happening in social networks,” said Alec Ross. The U.S. must increase its capabilities, “so as these powers shift we are placed as best as possible.”

But doing so requires time, resources, strategic thinking and commitment from a number of U.S. government institutional players. “Somebody has to think through all the tools available and how they’ll play out five years into the future,” said John Rendon. “Cut the past and let it go. We learn lessons from it but we can’t live in it.” Instead, focus on training, particularly for the older workforce generation for whom technology simply seems like an added burden.

Developing new information technology capabilities also requires the full participation of IT managers, added Jeff Moon of Cisco Systems. In order to understand user needs and project goals, IT managers must be included in all project development activities. This approach will ensure that projects can be implemented on time and within budgets while also fully taking into account any special security considerations.

For any kind of significant restructuring, noted Howard Berman, former U.S. Congressman, support from Congress at the outset is crucial. “If you want to reinvent the instruments of public diplomacy, get some congressional investment in that process in the beginning,” said Berman. “Otherwise it will just be the next report.”

“Cut the past and let it go. We learn lessons from it but we can’t live in it.” – John Rendon

Ultimately, the new diplomatic environment explored by roundtable participants is not simply going to vanish. As the scholar David Faris writes, “The United States can respond in two ways: either it can try to wish the old world back into existence, or it can try to seize the very real opportunities for networking, engagement and alliance-building that are built-in features of the new environment.”¹⁴ States that work to be more resilient, credible and adaptable have a higher likelihood of success in the information age.

Endnotes

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APPENDIX



The Second Annual Aspen Institute Dialogue on Diplomacy and Technology

Aspen, Colorado · July 24-26, 2013

Participants

Madeleine Albright

Chair
Albright Stonebridge Group
and
Former U.S. Secretary of State

Michael Anti

Blogger
and
Neiman Fellow
Harvard University

Tim Aye-Hardy

Director of Outreach
Burma Global Action Network

Howard Berman

Senior Advisor
Covington & Burling, LLP
and
Former U.S. Representative,
28th District of California

Charles M. Firestone

Executive Director
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Christopher Hill

Dean
Josef Korbel School of
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University of Denver
and
Former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq

Walter Isaacson

President and Chief Executive
Officer
The Aspen Institute

Shanthi Kalathil

Adjunct Professor and Senior
Fellow
Center for Conflict Studies
Monterey Institute of
International Studies

Larry Lee

President and Executive
Editor-in-Chief
China Daily

Peter Manikas

Director of Asia Programs
National Democratic Institute
(NDI)

Note: Titles and affiliations are as of the date of the conference.

Jeff Moon

Vice President, Asia-Pacific
Policy and Government Affairs
Cisco Systems

Charles Morrison

President
East-West Center

Trygve Myhren

President
Myhren Media, Inc.
and
Chairman of the Board of
Trustees
University of Denver

Marc Nathanson

Chairman
Mapleton Investments

Filip Noubel

Country Director
Internews
and
Co-Founder
BeijingAwareness

Dina Powell

President
Goldman Sachs Foundation

John Rendon

President and Chief Executive
Officer
The Rendon Group

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Former Senior Advisor for
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Orville Schell

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Asia Society

Ivan Sigal

Executive Director
Global Voices

Kathy Stephens

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About the Author

Shanthi Kalathil is an adjunct professor at the Monterey Institute of International Studies and a Senior Fellow at the Institute's Center for Conflict Studies. As an international affairs consultant and adviser, Kalathil focuses on the intersection between development, democracy and international security, with an emphasis on the ramifications of the information age. Kalathil is co-author of "Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule," a widely cited work that examined the Internet and political transition in eight authoritarian contexts.

Kalathil has extensive experience advising the U.S. government, international organizations and nonprofits on the policy and practical aspects of support for civil society, media, technology, transparency and accountability as a function of good governance and security. Previously a Senior Democracy Fellow at the U.S. Agency for International Development and a regular consultant for the World Bank, the Aspen Institute and others, she is currently co-director of the Monterey Institute's Colloquium on Evolving Global Security Challenges. She has authored or edited numerous policy and scholarly publications, including the recent "Diplomacy, Development and Security in the Information Age (ed.)," published by Georgetown University, and "Developing Independent Media as an Institution of Accountable Governance," published by the World Bank.

A former Hong Kong-based staff reporter for *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, Kalathil is a member of the Advisory Board to the National Endowment for Democracy's Center for International Media Assistance.

Kalathil holds degrees from U.C. Berkeley and the London School of Economics and Political Science, and is fluent in Mandarin. She lives in Monterey, California with her husband and two children.

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The Communications and Society Program is an active venue for framing policies and developing recommendations in the information and communications fields. We provide a multi-disciplinary space where veteran and emerging decision-makers can develop new approaches and suggestions for communications policy. The Program enables global leaders and experts to explore new concepts, exchange insights, develop meaningful networks, and find personal growth, all for the betterment of society.

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The Program's Executive Director is Charles M. Firestone. He has served in this capacity since 1989 and also as Executive Vice President of the Aspen Institute. Prior to joining the Aspen Institute, Mr. Firestone was a communications attorney and law professor who has argued cases before the United States Supreme Court. He is a former director of the UCLA Communications Law Program, first president of the Los Angeles Board of Telecommunications Commissioners, and an appellate attorney for the U.S. Federal Communications Commission.

Previous Publication from this Series

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Clifton Martin and Laura Jagla, rapporteurs.

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