



Diplomacy is Stalling: How the G20 Can Catch Up with the World



Ambassador Paul Webster Hare

In the past 65 years, diplomacy — in contrast to business, non-governmental organizations and communications — has made few fundamental changes in its operations. The traditional form of negotiations practiced by our governments continues. The forces that are fashioning how we interact as global citizens have not generated effective adjustments in the diplomatic world; governments are not harnessing the power of the “global community” that would add a new dimension to our diplomacy. Now the G20 presents an opportunity to overtake years of sterile debate on institutional reform.

This paper argues that outdated diplomacy contributes to our governments’ failing performance, and proposes four steps the G20 could take quickly that would tap into new sources

of international convergence, provide a new collective vision, and offer more productive approaches to the transnational issues that our leaders talk about. It suggests creating a new Global Calling, an international peace corps operated by governments for the 21st century.

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Diplomacy: Stuck in the Past

Governments’ major international challenge is to translate the shared interests most of them recognize into shared actions, but they haven’t found the diplomatic mechanisms to accomplish this. The post-World War II structures of international relations, founded on strict national sovereignty, have established a system ill-equipped to generate shared actions in key areas like terrorism, chronic poverty, conflict, disease, use of scarce resources, and the environment. Our international institutions (IOs) have equally failed to bring convergence in governmental actions. The dangers of making do with less increase every year. Traditional diplomacy is at risk of losing its relevance.

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Every era has developed diplomatic practices that suit its needs. The resident embassy was established because the principalities of North Italy needed to interact. Foreign Ministries and territorial treaties evolved from a search for balanced coexistence amongst the jostling powers of Europe. The post-1945 system for international diplomacy was designed not just by the victorious powers of World War II but by leaders whose vision soared into new realms. Building on earlier ideas, they established viable institutions for a new era – the United Nations, new international financial institutions, the EU – and gave attention to global issues like genocide and human rights. Their efforts were inspiring and tangible. But there has been no comparable watershed global moment since. Our world has emerged from its Cold War division only to find the battles among competing centers of power and sovereignty replicated in the IOs themselves.

The World Calls on Governments to Follow

The major unexpected opportunity at the start of our new decade is the emergence during the global financial crisis of the G20 group of leaders. The membership – Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, the European Union, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States – provides a platform of governments relevant to contemporary power divisions that could be used for diplomatic innovation and vision. And beyond the creation of

the G20, three factors suggest that there is an opportunity for change in 2010.

First, the world is interacting and is interconnected as never before. Social networking, international business and education, and instantaneous communications are all features of everyday life. Much of this activity is chaotic, sometimes dangerously so, and it often excludes governments altogether. Every nation appears to be seeking its own pay-off in the form of status or jobs for their nationals. Genuine shared actions between

governments of the world – without delegation to UN agencies – are rare. Governments have remained stubbornly self-centered and their international relations machinery reflects this.

Second, world leaders also sense that something is misfiring. But so far their prescriptions for action are less impressive than their statements. Leaders have not suggested how the world might move in practical interaction beyond calculations based purely on national sovereignty. Yet the words of G20 and other leaders leave no doubt that they wish to be ‘internationalist’ as well and that they see the inadequacies of the old system. (See box on p. 3)

Third, analysts are increasingly looking beyond a re-engineering of stale concepts of institutional reform toward a much more fundamental change in approach. A stimulating recent example is a Brookings/CIC study, “Confronting the Long Crisis of Globalization” by Alex Evans, Bruce Jones and David Steven. They argue governments need to find common approaches to the international risks and shocks that will become increasingly inevitable. Flawed design features of our international relations and a clinging to national sovereignty produce a tentative, bureaucratic and non-incremental search for common solutions. Collective planning is currently non-existent and reform ideas promise little innovation.

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New World Visions

“National Sovereignty becomes Responsible Sovereignty when nations pay heed both to the domestic demands of their own citizens and to their international responsibilities. Patriotism requires internationalism.”

— **David Miliband, UK Foreign Secretary, Speech to Beijing students, February 2008**

“A fundamentally new geopolitical situation suggests that all countries join their efforts. It leaves no room for national egoism or attempts to address one’s own problems, be it financial or security ones, at the expense of others.”

— **Sergey Lavrov, Foreign Minister of Russia, February 2009**

“I believe that at present the international situation continues to undergo profound and complex changes. There are growing global challenges, and countries in today’s world have become more and more interdependent. In this context, it is necessary to step up international cooperation.”

— **Hu Jintao, President of China, November 2009**

“If ever there were a time to act in a spirit of renewed multilateralism – a moment to create a United Nations of genuine collective action – it is now.”

— **Ban Ki-Moon, UN Secretary-General, September 2009**

“Partnership and cooperation among nations is not a choice; it is the one way, the only way, to protect our common security and advance our common humanity.”

— **President Barack Obama, Berlin, July 2008**

“Let us reach for the world that ought to be.”

— **President Barack Obama, Nobel Prize ceremony, December 2009**

“The task before us is as great as the achievements of the men of good will who wanted to build peace on a new political,



economic and monetary world order after the Second World War. The world will change. It cannot be otherwise. Universal conscience is calling out for this change. But will it change because collectively we are able to show that we will act together with wisdom, intelligence and courage to imagine and build a better world than yesterday’s world? Or are we going to wait until change is thrust upon us by fresh crises that we may not be able to control?”

— **Nicolas Sarkozy, President of France, UN General Assembly, September 2009**

“The global system is in serious trouble. It is simply not capable of solving the challenges of today. None can be solved by any government alone.”

— **Javier Solana, EU High Representative, February 2008, quoted in Managing Global Insecurity, Brookings Institution, November 2008**

“I am convinced that people seek peace and harmony. They want to cooperate, do business and exchange cultural and educational achievements. They want to meet and communicate as friends and neighbors. And I have no doubt that these humanitarian factors will yet manifest themselves in a meaningful and robust way.”

— **Dmitry Medvedev, President of Russia, October 2009**

“Interdependence in a globalised world means that no country, however powerful it may be, can take on the entire burden of economic adjustment and economic decision-making. There is, therefore, urgent need for coordinated action by the global community on several fronts.”

— **Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, September 2009**

“We are convinced that tolerance building, an urgent task for 2010, must be the center of the world’s 21st century agenda, just as much as nation-building preoccupied the 20th century.”

— **Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, President of Indonesia, December 2009, *The Economist, The World in 2010***

“Enhanced international cooperation is needed to overcome possibly divergent national interests and so achieve meaningful reform in 2010.”

— **Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, *The Economist, The World in 2010***

Diplomacy As Usual: Why Is It Not Delivering?

What are the particular characteristics of the diplomatic system today that present obstacles but, once identified, can help reform?

Institutional Reform: The Issue of Status

International institutional reform is currently central to our global debate, but it is largely driven by the search for status. More nations seek influence in institutions and they argue their status and national interests justify it. Once achieved, such status rarely equates to influence on world events. National governments and parliaments are beholden to immediate concerns of national electorates and they, like political leaders, rarely look beyond their boundaries. But the issues that confront us go beyond the capacity of institutions to solve. Permanent institutions develop a life of their own and become an arena for national sovereignty rivalries. They concentrate on fighting for survival, wary of new rival institutions that come to deal with similar issues.

Embassies: Status Again

Yes, we still need embassies. But much of their daily routine is of limited relevance to the problems the world collectively faces. The essential task of embassies today is protecting the nationals of countries who pay the taxes for their services. Yet currently the competitive bilateral activities of embassies, particularly in capitals of the developed world, are not helping to deliver true shared actions. They compete against each other for attention, they accentuate the sovereignty tensions, and duplicate functions in a largely self-serving game where the prize is status. Leaders and their officials are the targets of embassy lobbying in the host state, but leaders simply have no time to be badgered by dozens of ambassadors. Ambassadors themselves increasingly seek to justify their bilateral existence. Every country plays the same game. The EU will soon add another layer. Ritual activities of embassies like the arrangement of bilateral

visits and the entertainment of other diplomats reinforce the national sovereignty basis of addressing international issues. Ambassadors are concerned about survival and vie for successful self-promotion against candidates from political life or non-governmental organizations.

Foreign Ministries: Status Declining

Foreign Ministries were once the centre of foreign policy, setting the agenda of international relations, deploying their diplomats overseas, and receiving those of other countries at home.

Now every department of government has its overseas relations. Lines between domestic and foreign policy have disappeared. And our leaders with domestic policy responsibility for a “global issue” direct international contacts in areas like the environment, education and migration. The Foreign Ministry is increasingly struggling for resources and influence, so it is not in a position to promote innovation. It is true that Foreign Ministries as organizations have changed greatly. They embrace modern communications, employ professional advisors, management consultants and budgetary controls. To enhance their effectiveness in their bilateral functions they even employ lobbyists in key foreign capitals. They are often impressively efficient in crises to protect citizens. Sovereign interests are indeed in good hands but like ambassadors and embassies, Foreign Ministries could deliver much more.

Democracies: Let's Admit the Problems

Democracies help make leaders accountable and they balance aspirations. But democracies

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in the 21st century have developed populist and authoritarian features. At its best democracy should ensure accountable governments of competence, integrity and vision. It should also provide non-violent change with a regular new injection of ideas to extend the rule of law and constructive cooperation to international issues. But much remains to be done by democracies to improve the delivery of such international “public goods.” The domestic electoral cycle of democracies make international voices harder to hear. Democracies are another feature of our diplomatic system that skews attention towards national interest rhetoric, even though, as we have seen, our leaders know that such simplistic solutions do not work.

Leaders: Our Hope for the New Era?

Political leaders are our current hope for incremental progress in international affairs.

Ideas for reforms will not come from the professionals of diplomacy. Yet our hope in leaders currently seems misplaced. Our last visionary leaders acquired authority from victory in war and a mandate to redesign the world. What of the generation of 2010?

The G20 leaders who attended the Pittsburgh summit in September 2009 were a mixture of lawyers, economists, scientists, academics, businessmen and military leaders all of whom have risen to the top because of attention to national issues. Few elected heads have been in office for more than five years and many are term-limited. Even fewer show any sustained interest in international relations. For example, among those who served as Ministers at the UK Foreign Office between 1997–2009, the average length of stay was 21 months. Then they moved on or out. As Henry Kissinger wrote in *Diplomacy* in 1994, “They run bureaucracies of such complexity that often the energy of these statesmen is more consumed with serving the administrative machinery than with defining a purpose. They rise to eminence by means of qualities that are not necessarily needed to govern and even less suited to building an international order.”

The United Nations: One Room in the House

The UN has proved a doughty survivor. But it has not provided a motor for convergence amongst the 192 sovereign nations which assume the rights and duties of the UN Charter. The UN is like a family doing things together in one room of a house and then living apart for the rest of the time. This one room is increasingly lavishly furnished and funds activities that resemble a vast international non-governmental organization. The governments who pay the budget are happy to devolve responsibility to UN agencies and “Special Ambassadors.” Several agencies, like the World Food Programme and UN Development Programme, are larger than most national Foreign Ministries.

The valuable work of UN agencies has become diluted by overlapping and duplicative functions. UN agencies currently deploy over 100,000 people overseas in 150 countries. Najam and Muñoz (*4 Steps for Targeted Coherence*, 2008) have shown that at least 44 UN groups are involved in formulating approaches to international environmental issues. No UN agency — bar the Trusteeship Council — has ever been disbanded. UN agency directors remain largely anonymous and are inadequate substitutes for the lack of true global leaders. UN-organized peacekeeping operations have proved more successful than the UN’s political capacity to solve divisive issues.

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Is the World Doing that Badly?

Conferences and regional groupings on global problems are valuable. UN-sponsored intergovernmental conferences have shown useful progress on issues like the Law of the Sea and climate change. Intergovernmental expert panels produce a consensus for change but such dialogue does not produce diplomacy for action. Without a new foreign policy toolkit, the nation states will continue to address key common issues like nuclear proliferation and poverty resolution through a prism of national status and sovereignty. Any new approach will

take time. Country problems like Myanmar, Zimbabwe and North Korea, whose governments threaten the well-being of their own populations and regional stability, will not disappear overnight.

Governments do not currently have mechanisms to break out of this impasse. Indeed UN Security Council expansion, by introducing another set of permanent members, might exacerbate the problems. Expansion would create a more complicated geometry of status. Regular summitry at the G20 level is likewise no guarantee of improvement if politicians choose again to construct a document-heavy bureaucracy. The G8 — with its massive and largely pointless preparatory machinery — is an inauspicious model to follow.

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The G20 countries have come together in many other groups since World War II. The UK is typical. It is a member of NATO, the G8, the EU, the Council of Europe, the Iran contact group, The Commonwealth, The Missile Technology Control Regime, The Nuclear Suppliers Group, the OECD... and so on. Its Foreign Office employs 14,900 people operating in over 170 countries. These diplomatic groups provide valuable fora for discussion. Yet, to date, they have generally not produced the desired solutions. Even after 60 years, members of NATO differ widely on agreed outcomes and support for actions when its members are called on to do something. Afghanistan continues to show this. The EU has built much consensus-producing machinery and a single market but sovereignty and status still count for much. Squabbles over appointments of new EU commissioners — supposedly representing all 27 countries — and on foreign policy issues are based on the oldest of sovereignty rivalries. For all their achievements, the EU and other regional groups are not sufficient for diplomacy in our world.

It is only governments — not NGOs, not charities or “special ambassadors” — that can harness the positive aspects of interaction we see in the world. Yet the “Age of Convergence”, as Jeffrey Sachs has called it (BBC Reith Lecture 2007), is viewed with suspicion by risk-averse leaders who want to get re-elected. A few days every September at the UN General Assembly is generally enough of the vision stuff. Yet there are reasons to be hopeful. Many of the younger generation see beyond crude nationalism and consumerism. For them pride in one's country is entirely compatible with being internationalist. Self-interest, national interest and international interest are often complementary. Our leaders have left a visionary void and rarely demand commitment from citizens. The impact of the internet accelerates at a frantic pace with governments unsure how to respond to or influence what reaches the voracious appetite of the world. Diplomats retreat to their safely enclosed system, bewildered with a world that is heading in a different direction.

Practical Change: A New Global Calling

If we are to generate change, we need to produce the first move. Beyond inviting more countries to stylized summits, a “crane” to build a new shared platform in international relations is as elusive as ever. Our leaders distrust each other. They have days when they get along and others when they don’t. We need a new measure of their collective performance which is the best stimulant to change. As Evans, Jones and Steven say, the long-term goal is to make collective international solutions the main motivation of our leaders – to make “interdependence more valuable than independence.”

How can we create this new performance measure for our leaders without which little will happen? The catalyst for change must come from outside the system. This is not the time to set up another commission of experts, another team of career “sherpas” or another UN conference attended by competing nations. We need to look to those for whom status isn’t the problem, those whose motivation will be in their commitment to shared actions for international well-being. As President Kennedy said, “Mankind is the business of governments. With better understanding of the problems of each other and the responsibilities that each of us bears then surely the business of mankind will prosper.”

Volunteerism and service were both strong motivations in the pioneering rebuilding of the world after World War II. Most countries emerging from the War had programs for national service or the military draft. In 1961 President Kennedy also proposed a non-military cadre – a US Government-sponsored Peace Corps – a calling to youth to “sacrifice their energy, time and toil to the cause of world peace and human progress.”

The G20 group is not yet associated with ineffectual diplomacy and offers an opportunity for radical change. It needs to prove itself different from the increasingly irrelevant G8. It could revolutionize how major powers interact by taking a fresh look at diplomatic mechanisms, making them appropriate for the new decade. This could lead to changes in decision-making processes and the performance measures our leaders accept. Shared interests might then generate genuinely shared actions.

G20: Some Shared Actions for 2010

Here are four actions which G20 governments could launch at their 2010 meetings. They would inaugurate a new diplomacy, one aimed at future cooperation on tougher issues.

First, create a cadre of new internationalists from each of their countries who would commit two years to cooperating on shared projects.

This would be a new Global Calling, a small international peace corps, based on the respected US model. Such a cadre would be a new conscience and convergence incentive for governments. It would operate throughout the year irrespective of “national interest” differences that will still occur. Each G20 member would pay exactly the same sum to set up the corps and recruit the same number of volunteers. It would draw from the already interacting youth of the world. For example, Chinese would work with Americans, Indonesians with Russians, Mexicans with South Africans, British with Turks. Its members would pool their ideas, serve in international projects, brainstorm solutions and agree on practical outcomes. After two years they would leave and their successors would replace them.

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Second, establish a foundation to apply collective funds to projects agreed between the member states.

The funds would come directly from governments and would be the focus of the work for the new Global Calling group of volunteers described above. The group would already be recruited so inertia would not be an option. Only modest resources by governmental standards would be required. The US Peace Corps finances over 7,000 volunteers annually for around \$350 million.

Third, each government would appoint a political figure (not a career official) who would work within the G20 to produce further shared actions.

Each G20 government would be assigned lead responsibility on one transnational issue to develop shared actions for the international agenda. G20 embassies in the target countries of the projects would redirect part of their activities to promote shared action.

Fourth, announce that a televised live discussion between leaders would feature in future G20 summits.

Questions would be supplied from a global audience. This too would be a new performance measure and would be an important first step.

With these simple steps, internationalism might start to become a part of new currency of power. Leaders will respond and, as the UK Foreign Secretary has said, patriotism will increasingly require internationalism. Performance measures work and the Global Calling will help create a new measure. Behaviorism will develop where political leaders will imitate what is increasingly accepted in society.

Postscript

The author wishes to deny any utopian sentiments. But it is time to try something different to produce first steps to shared actions. National interest and sovereignty will still need to be part of the legal basis of international relations. And what is envisaged here does not mean even a remote possibility of global or federal government. However, we need to rise above the arcane debate about whether the world is multipolar, bipolar, or non-polar. We are all in it together. ●