

Winning Hearts and Minds

Iraq and the Arab World

Dr Nicholas Beecroft BSc MBBS MRCPsych MBA

Director, Psyplomacy

25th October 2002

The influence of domestic public opinion on international relations

Up to and including the First World War, it was possible for governments to conduct diplomacy and declare war on behalf of their people with minimal consultation.

Increasingly since then, governments with a substantial foreign policy have become used to the need to inform, consult and manage their increasingly sophisticated and assertive domestic constituencies. The US applied the lessons learned from Vietnam to the Gulf war. Even the Chinese government has to respond to some degree to internal public opinion on matters such as Taiwan and the Spy Plane incident. It would be naïve to suggest that foreign policy is fully democratised, but it is moving slowly in that direction.

The influence of foreign public opinion on international relations

Governments are used to taking into account the positions and feelings of other governments. Even the mightiest power, the US, has to work to gain the support of governments of very small countries like Bahrain and Qatar in order to achieve its aims.

However, little attention has been paid to what the people's of other countries think, except to the degree that it influences their governments. Thus the opinion of people in democracies has carried some weight. For example, the strong anti-war feeling of the German people made Chancellor Schroeder come out against war with Iraq in the recent elections, in spite of the clear damage that that may do to relations with the US. US public diplomacy in Germany is thus vital to gain the government's support where desired.

On the other hand, the opinions of the populations in less democratic countries like Jordan or undemocratic countries like Saudi Arabia have traditionally carried little weight. Western, especially US, foreign policy has continued to focus on realpolitik amongst the leaders of those countries.

The balance of power is shifting towards the populations of developing countries

The widening availability of mass communication, the Internet, air travel and of weapons of mass destruction is, in some cases, shifting the balance of power towards the developing countries and within them, towards their people. For those who value universal democracy and human rights, this is a good thing.

However, September 11th and subsequent attacks have made it very clear that the opinions of the general population, individuals and subgroups in developing countries can have a direct impact upon the physical, psychological and economic security of

even the most powerful country. A powerful military and intelligence infrastructure is necessary but not sufficient to secure a country's people.

The need to win hearts and minds

From a Western point of view, priority should be given to winning the hearts and minds of the Arab and Muslim public.

The US and UK have woken up to this and have allocated more resources to public diplomacy. The US set up a radio station, Radio Sawa to broadcast in Arabic. The British government has tried hard to influence the Arab media through a more determined PR operation. The British Council has stepped up a gear in its longstanding work to improve cultural relations with other populations.

There still appears to be an implicit assumption that managing the media, which treads the fine line between PR and propaganda, will be enough to placate the masses. There is evidence that this is not enough.

Persuasive communication

Communication requires the recipient to at least listen, understand and process the message from the person sending it. A message is more persuasive if it is perceived to be balanced (both pros and cons) and come from a credible source. Recent BBC interviews with the intended audience of the US Arabic Radio Sawa generally showed that they enjoyed the music but were very sceptical about the message. Many felt that communications from the US are not credible as they disguise other motivations such as control of oilfields and simply because it is seen as propaganda.

Many media interviews of people in the Middle East and Europe have detected a strong perception that the foreign policy of the US is inconsistent and hypocritical. The US tends to justify its foreign policy in terms of morality and justice, as opposed to pure self-interest. In these terms, US insistence that Iraq must comply with UN resolutions is incongruent with its lack of equal determination in the case of Israel, in the eyes of most Arabs and many Europeans. This inconsistency makes the US government case less credible and, in some, generates anger and hostility.

Similarly, while most Arabs appeared to be horrified by the murders on September 11th, it angers many that the lives of Palestinians or Iraqi's lost, in their view as a result of US policy, are seen as less valuable than New Yorkers. This perceived lack of respect for other people is a powerful motivator of violence.

Perception of motivation

The argument that the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein justifies disarmament by force and regime change may or may not be valid. However, if it is true for him, why not for North Korea, China, Israel, India or Pakistan? Those countries may wonder if they are next on the list. Certainly, it leads many to disbelieve the genuineness of the motivations behind the policy on Iraq.

It is possible that a lot of the emotional energy in the current pressure on Iraq is displaced fear, desire for revenge, need to do something, to control as a displacement from the anxiety generated by fear, powerlessness etc as a result of September 11th.

Perceived double standards and self-interest

Another major flaw in the policy of the West in the eyes of the developing world is the perceived double standards on freedom and democracy. There is a compartmentalisation between what standards and morality are considered appropriate for “us” and “people like us” and “others.” This is linked to identity and cultural relativism.

If democracy, security, prosperity and freedom are good for the US, why are they not good for Arabs? There have been several traditional justifications for this. The moral argument is that it is not for the US to interfere in internal affairs of others. The cultural relativist argument is that Arabs and Arab culture is different and that it is their natural choice to have absolute monarchies and one party states. The developmental argument is that Arab cultures are not yet ready for democracy and that it is not for the West to hurry them along. These arguments are weakened by the inconsistency in their application globally.

Thus the cynic is free to conclude that the real reason for Western support for the regimes in the Middle East is simply about maintaining control over resources and trade.

Hundreds of thousands of Arabs attempt to migrate to the US, Europe and Australia every year. It seems likely that they want a share of the relative freedom, prosperity and opportunity available there. Given the ongoing power shifts in the world, it would be wise for Western governments to be seen to align themselves with these aspirations and at the very least, not be perceived to stand in their way.

Coalition building

To achieve its aims in Iraq and on the War on Terror, the US needs the support, participation and at least the acquiescence of other countries. Those countries must make the decision as to which side, if any, to support. This decision depends upon the perception of ones’ interests, the alternatives, the expectation of risks, costs and benefits, allegiance, attachment, identity and mass group dynamics.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have much more to gain by regime change and disarmament in Iraq than the US. But why should they risk becoming a target and take on other costs-financial, military, political and cultural by openly supporting the US? It would be much easier for them to sit back and let the US bear all the costs and risks.

Why should Germany, France, Russia and China support the US position? They may lose out if the regime changes to one installed or favourable to the US. They stand to gain by opposing action if the regime stays the same. Whatever happens, they reduce their risks and costs by avoiding getting involved.

The dimensions of relationships

International relations are basically the relationship between individuals, groups and subgroups of people. The shifts in technology and power mean that increasingly these relationships are between whole groups and not just the leaders.

If one tried to manage the relationship between friends and family by acting solely in self-interest and justifying it in other terms, it would quickly cause problems. Increasingly, this is true of international relations.

All Relationships include broadly three dimensions:

- Emotional attachment
 - Mutual trust
 - Liking
 - Empathy
 - Respect
 - Understanding
 - Attachment
 - Support
- Rational cooperation
 - Machiavellian realpolitik
 - Negotiation and bargaining
 - Manipulation
 - Game theory
- Power, aggression and violence
 - Threat
 - Deterrence
 - Power balance

All three dimensions exist in every relationship, even if only as a potential, dormant characteristic. The balance between them depends upon the situation, the participants and the established pattern. No one dimension is universally effective. The equilibrium between the alternative patterns derives from the evolution of behaviour and personality.

A mother-child may usually function on the basis of love, trust, attachment and understanding, but also involves the balance of manipulation between the two and the occasional threat of hard power and force. There is plenty of manipulation and conflict in social, sexual and familial relations.

A car dealer may mainly operate based upon a cold analysis of self interest, but this will include an awareness of the value of reputation, ongoing relationships and the threat of the law, if transgressed.

A soldier may be the last person to want to fight and will be best placed if he respects, understands and communicates with his enemy.

Countries need to build mutual trust, respect and understanding to be secure

When applied to international relations, the psychology of relationship management needs to be a combination of all three types of approach. Military power, Intelligence Services and a robust pursuit of self-interest remain necessary but are no longer sufficient to ensure the freedom, prosperity and security of countries. The changes in the realities of power mean that it is increasingly necessary to work on the “soft” side of relationships too so as to build mutual trust, respect, and understanding. This is essential to make cooperation more likely than conflict. To be sustained and effective, this must go beyond media management and start with genuine dialogue. That means listening as well as talking.