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**A STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT
OF
PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

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A Strategic Assessment of Public Diplomacy

by
Lt Col Jim Riggins

Introduction

Just as the Cold War ending forced the US military to reexamine its role, so too does it force a reevaluation of the role of public diplomacy in furthering U S national goals and interests. Compounding the impact of a changing geopolitical framework are reductions in manpower and budget, and rapidly changing technology. Such turmoil does not impact the overarching role of public diplomacy, but it significantly impacts the specific application and execution.

Attempts to assess the role and value of public diplomacy must begin with a clear definition of this instrument and a framework for assessment. An appropriate methodology for analysis is a "top down" strategic planning implemented to answer the following fundamental questions:

If the U S properly executed public diplomacy through a structured strategic approach, then

- a) Does this instrument work best alone or in conjunction with other instruments?*
- b) How much time is needed to create and field this form of power?*
- c) Is public diplomacy usable for multiple kinds of strategic objectives?*
- d) What are the strengths and weaknesses of this instrument?*

These questions do not lend themselves to simple yes or no answers because the proper application of public diplomacy, like all instruments, is situation and context dependent. No "universal" public diplomacy template exists which is equally applicable in Brazil as it is in Armenia. The analysis of how situational dependency impacts the above questions must begin with an acceptable definition of public diplomacy.

Just What is Public Diplomacy?

Public diplomacy, like any instrument of national power, must be defined in terms of the ends it seeks to achieve, and the ways to achieve such ends. Anything short of a complete definition can ultimately lead to an inappropriate application of the instrument.

Hans Tuch, a long term Foreign Service Officer, for example, defines public diplomacy as “the government’s process of communicating with foreign publics to create understanding of U.S. ideas and ideals, institutions and culture, and current goals and policies.”¹ Such a definition begs the question, “to what end?” Public diplomacy, as an instrument, is more than just a process. To be meaningful, the “process” must be aimed at achieving certain objectives.

One also can not define public diplomacy by the tools of its implementation, or the agencies charged with its execution. Those who would equate public diplomacy with broadcasting mechanisms such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty confuse the tools with the concept. Narrowing the definition of public diplomacy such as this can prove to be overly restrictive as the tools available to reach foreign audiences rapidly evolve.

A more reasonable starting point comes from Joseph Duffey, Director of the United States Information Agency (USIA).

Public diplomacy is the studied attempt to understand foreign cultures and institutions so as to enhance the communication and advocacy of the national goals and interests of the United States. It is the active engagement in such communication, based upon study and analysis and thought. It involves exchanges, programmed visits, speakers, conferences, intellectual encounters, broadcasting and, most of all, strategic planning.²

Duffey’s definition provides an endstate, ways to achieve the ends, and the means to carry it out. However, as an instrument of national power, the objective must go beyond simply “enhancing communication and advocacy” of a nation’s national

interests and attempt to directly and indirectly *advance and support* those national interests and goals

For the purpose of this paper, then, I define public diplomacy as **a government's attempt to shape foreign public opinion through overt, structured dissemination of truthful information in such a way so as to support one's own national objectives, interests, and goals.** The tools, techniques, and actors necessary to accomplish public diplomacy, included in Duffey's definition, are critical to the instrument's execution, but not necessary to the definition. Tools may change with time, but the role of public diplomacy is enduring.

This definition provides the starting point for a structured approach to analyzing the role and utility of U.S. public diplomacy. If public diplomacy supports the national objectives, interests, and goals, then U.S. public diplomacy must be linked to those elements as articulated in National Security Strategy.

Strategic Planning Approach to Analyzing Public Diplomacy

The strategic planning framework used in this section is a structured, top down, approach to public diplomacy strategy development and execution that links specific activities to a hierarchy of objectives. The steps include developing the strategic estimate, establishing objectives, developing a resource constrained strategy, and developing supporting tasks and measures of merit.

Step 1. Develop the Strategic Estimate During this step, the planner gains an understanding of the actors and environment from a macro perspective. Such an understanding is fundamental to the remainder of the process but extraordinarily complicated. This step requires understanding human factors and the intricacies of

complex societies Without this understanding, however, the public diplomacy messages and information can easily be off target, misinterpreted, or even antagonizing—thus degrading the strategy being executed

The public diplomacy strategist must fully understand the nature of the target actors and the environment they operate in Key elements of this understanding might include, but not be limited to

- Culture, religion, ethnicity, and politics of the target region
- Relationship and linkage between the populace and the government
- Linguistics and literacy rates
- Identification and nature of the influential elites
- Macro and micro economic structure
- Role of the media in the region
- Role of intellectuals and universities in the region
- Physical means of information dissemination (radio, television, INTERNET, newspaper, word of mouth, etc)
- Relationship between the pertinent national/sub-national/trans-national elements

Step 2. Establish Clearly Defined Objectives [Ends] The public diplomacy strategist must develop clearly defined, attainable, prioritized objectives linked to, and supporting, higher order objectives This approach is independent of the objective's timeframe—it is a required step for both the long term, broadly defined, peacetime objective as well as the short term, focused, crisis objectives Regardless of the

timeframe, the strategist must show a clear linkage to one or more national security objectives

The top of the objectives pyramid contains the current national security interests and objectives. The broad interests in the 1997 National Security Strategy (NSS) include enhancing security, promoting prosperity, and promoting democracy. Examples of supporting NSS objectives include “enhancing American competitiveness,” “providing for energy security,” and “strengthening democratic and free market institutions and norms.”³ Supporting the NSS, the Department of State defines their general foreign policy objectives in the *United States Strategic Plan for International Affairs*.⁴ The next level in the objective hierarchy would include public diplomacy objectives among others.

Each level increases in specificity and situational dependence, thus, one can not predetermine which NSS objectives lend themselves to a public diplomacy solution, and which ones do not. Maintaining public support for market economy development may be a viable public diplomacy objective in Chile. Applying that same objective to the insular, controlled society of North Korea might be inappropriate. The appropriate solution depends on the particular foreign policy objectives for a given political entity and the assessment parameters of Step 1.

Step 3, Develop a Resource Constrained Strategy [Ways] This is where the science meets the art. The public diplomacy strategist must consider the tools available to execute such a strategy, synchronize and integrate public diplomacy with other applicable instruments, and understand the time domain impacts linking actions to

effects. The strategy must be tailored to the situation, environment, and actors involved (Step 1), and the specific objectives (Step 2).

The public diplomacy strategist, as the practitioner of an informational instrument, maintains a wide assortment of tools. One can disseminate information through methods as diverse as cultural exchanges, pronouncements by U.S. government officials, foreign media, the Internet, and radio broadcasts, to name a few.

In general, however, by the definition of public diplomacy, any government sanctioned activity designed to influence foreign public opinion, has public diplomacy implications. The sale of F-16 fighter aircraft to Greece, or the cancellation of an F-16 sale to Pakistan, both contain a public diplomacy element even though blended with diplomatic, military, and economic instruments. In the area of tools, then, the seams between instruments are blurred. A particular tool is not inherently assigned to a particular instrument, but gains an association through the context of the situation. Likewise, a single tool may support multiple instruments.

The synchronization and coordination of public diplomacy with other instruments plays a critical role in the execution of a coherent foreign policy strategy. *There are no national security or foreign policy objectives that should rely solely on public diplomacy for their attainment, however, there are few national security or foreign policy objectives that would not be supported by public diplomacy.*

The difficulty of predictability between action and result drives the first part of the above statement. Public diplomacy relies on directly and indirectly transmitting information, then having that information processed by individuals and disparate groups, followed by those individuals and groups acting on that information in such a way that it

supports U S national objectives. The process is susceptible to breakdown anywhere in the long chain of events. Backing up or supporting the public diplomacy strategy with other instruments mitigates this uncertainty.

The statement's second part stems from the notion that gaining the support of a foreign public in many cases supports attempts at modifying the behavior of the associated foreign national leadership. Even when that linkage does not exist, the U S government would still likely seek international approval for the foreign policy activity, approval that the United States would garner in part through public diplomacy.

The final element in the successful execution of this step is the understanding of the impact of the time domain on the strategy. The selection of appropriate tools, the means of synchronizing with other instruments, and timing requirements embedded in the objectives all require the strategist to estimate the time involved to set up a particular task, execute it, and achieve the desired effect. As stated earlier, with the human dimension of public diplomacy precise knowledge is impossible, but a valid estimate is critical.

In general, public diplomacy falls neither in the category of a short range nor a long range instrument, either in time to setup, execute, or achieve results. Under appropriate conditions, public diplomacy is capable of impacting both long and short range objectives. For example, to support development of a strong market oriented economy in Brazil, the United States may offer Fulbright grants to five promising young economics students. It may take ten to fifteen years before one or more of these students are in a position to influence Brazilian economic policy. Alternatively, in the midst of an economic crisis, a public pronouncement announcing U S economic aid

only if Brazil maintains open market policies may generate sufficient immediate public pressure on the Brazilian government to accept such a policy

Step 4. Establish Supporting Tasks and Measures of Merit A detailed explanation of public diplomacy task development falls outside the scope of this paper. However, a brief discussion of measures of merit is important because it raises a difficulty with executing public diplomacy.

Strategy development and execution is a dynamic process, relying on constant evaluation of progress toward achieving the stated objectives. The measures of merit necessary to evaluate progress thus become an essential part of the process. With public diplomacy determining such measures can be difficult because of the complexities listed earlier. How, for example, does one accurately measure progress toward the international affairs goal of increasing “foreign government adherence to democratic practices and respect for human rights?”⁵ The State Department proposes such indicators as “international public opinion surveys,” “international media coverage of human rights issues,” and “evaluations of human rights practices and actions.”⁶ Such indicators are open to subjective interpretation. Indicator changes may result U.S. instruments other than public diplomacy, or even non-U.S. factors such as pressure from the Vatican.

Conclusion

An assessment of the application of any national instrument is impossible to state in universal terms because of situation and context dependency. This is certainly true with public diplomacy as the preceding analysis demonstrated.

Does this instrument work best alone or in conjunction with other instruments?

While the answer depends on the exact objectives one seeks, in general, the broad

international affairs and national security objectives require public diplomacy operating in conjunction with other instruments

How much time is needed to create and field this form of power? This answer depends on the tools of execution and the situation. A public statement from the Secretary of State aimed at the Serbian population might be created and fielded in a matter of hours. Creating a network of AM, FM, and short-wave radio stations, and developing the program content for a Radio Free Asia might require years of work. The time between executing the public diplomacy strategy and achieving desired effects varies over a wide range and again is dependent on the situation.

Is public diplomacy usable for multiple kinds of strategic objectives? Operating either to directly support a strategic objective, or indirectly support another instrument, public diplomacy is useful across a wide spectrum of strategic objectives. This does not mean, however, that public diplomacy would be the *primary* instrument across this spectrum. During the build-up to the Persian Gulf War, public diplomacy supported diplomatic and military objectives by building coalition nation public support through media dissemination of U.S. government policy statements. Public diplomacy does not have to be the primary instrument in a given situation for it to be useful. The situational context drives the utility of public diplomacy as much, if not more, than the generic type of the strategic objective.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this instrument? Finally, the strength of public diplomacy lies in the relative ease with which it can be executed, and the relatively low (but not inconsequential) risks involved if the instrument fails to meet its desired effects. The weakness of this instrument is the difficulty in building a viable

strategy due to the complexity of target audiences and societies. Understanding the intricacies of foreign publics, difficult as that appears, is insufficient. The strategist must also understand the role of that public in shaping, modifying, or directing the appropriate power base. Without this link, public diplomacy might educate the foreign public to American policy, ideals, and values, but it will do nothing to achieve national security objectives.

¹ Hans N. Tuch, "Improving Public Diplomacy," *Foreign Service Journal* 67 (May 1990): 14.

² United States Information Agency, *Public Diplomacy Forum*, September 1998, available from <http://www.usia.gov>, Internet.

³ The White House, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, May 1997.

⁴ United States Department of State, *United States Strategic Plan for International Affairs*, September 1997, available from http://www.state.gov/www/global/general_foreign_policy/spia_index.html, Internet.

⁵ United States Department of State, *United States Strategic Plan for International Affairs*, September 1997, available from http://www.state.gov/www/global/general_foreign_policy/democracy.html, Internet.

⁶ Ibid.

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