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The Real Lesson of Wikileaks: Virtues of Diplomatic Confidentiality

By Alan Chong

Synopsis

The Wikileaks controversy is not simply about the triumph of a liberal philosophy of holding governments accountable for their secret diplomacies. It is not just about nefarious governments scheming against one another. It should provoke reflection about the advantages of confidentiality in aiding effective diplomatic communication.

Commentary

ON 28 NOVEMBER 2010, the maverick website Wikileaks.org claimed to have published 251,287 United States embassy cables, billing it as “the largest set of confidential documents ever to be released into the public domain”. Its website claimed this would provide an unprecedented level of scrutiny into US foreign policy. On the face of it, this would have been a researcher’s dream come true. Every foreign news desk journalist would be preoccupied for months in combing such a rich trove of political mea culpas and backroom deals. But the sheer timeliness of the majority of the cables addressing the geopolitical issues that occurred following the 9/11 terrorist attacks calls into question the operational wisdom of Wikileaks’ action.

Another controversy is the source of the original leak – the rogue idealism of a certain Private First Class Bradley Manning of US military intelligence. Every other government referred to in the leaked documents privately took umbrage at such disclosures while maintaining a stony public silence about the ultimate consequences of information leakage. Both top US foreign policy officials, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defence Secretary Robert Gates have slammed Wikileaks’ action as irresponsible, fearing it would endanger America’s diplomatic standing and its information sources. The embarrassment of making public private comments by kings, presidents, and ministers is symptomatic of a wider issue raised by Wikileaks – the price of good diplomacy. That price is confidentiality.

Being Diplomatic

Diplomacy is fundamentally a practice of official communication between representatives of nation-states. Government officials make up the bulk of these representatives. Occasionally, ex-ambassadors and ex-ministers play their part in conducting state-to-state ties through think-tanks. But rarely do ordinary citizens get assigned formal roles. The point is that historically, diplomacy was conducted as an exchange among elites under the assumption that sincere communication was best managed through channels of level-headed emissaries insulated from the passions of public opinion.

After all, the man-in-the-street is unaccustomed to the need to keep passions in check when negotiating interests; while filibuster and various types of posturing – samples of which were exhibited loudly by North Korea in recent weeks – are a measured instrument of conveying pressure. For the seasoned diplomat, pressure ought to be calibrated in order to succeed in convincing the other side. In that regard, the Wikileaks exposure of indiscreet remarks by assorted dignitaries on nuclear programmes, their neighbours' leaders, leadership vanities and the like, need to be understood in some form of studied context.

World public opinion should not react with umbrage simply because one president treated his or her counterpart with derision behind closed doors. Personal views can be offered to make a policy point to third parties. Occasionally, harsh words are used strictly in private to vent frustration productively to aides and allies in equal measure to provoke proactive diplomacy. Obnoxious words can be deployed as the indirect means for nudging diplomatic players towards embracing strategic stability in tense confrontations.

Being the undisputed military superpower, it is not surprising that the US employs "sharp elbows" occasionally, as the International Herald Tribune put it. Even China too, treads a fine line between its private communication with its counterparts in the Six Party Talks over North Korea's periodic outbursts.

Appraising Confidence in Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a virtue in diplomacy because it allows candour to penetrate the sometimes dissembling behaviour of open diplomacy. In the history of diplomacy, there have always been two channels: the public and the private. The former serves the needs of posturing, or if a comprehensively win-win situation can be derived, the triggering of public acclaim for an arms control agreement or a peace treaty. The private channel serves to clear the air of the fog of propaganda for negotiation from the real baselines of national interest. Most successful diplomatic engagements are conducted through this duality of channels. In this way, the much hackneyed phrase "going forward in negotiation" can reflect genuine progress. This progress begins with private expressions of reservations, untested prejudices and other stereotyped assumptions being aired.

The counterpart responds likewise, in private. Then the horse-trading takes place. Occasionally, both sides will resort to the public channel to jockey for world sympathy without fully letting public opinion in on the talks behind closed doors. In this way, in fits and starts, like the slow boring of hard wooden boards, diplomacy makes its mark. The great arms control treaties of the Cold War occurred this way, so did the successful rounds of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and its predecessor GATT.

Asian Diplomacy & Confidentiality

In Asia, governments appreciate confidentiality far more. Sceptics might argue that it is because there are too few liberal democracies to make transparency matter. But this misses the point about constructive diplomacy amongst Asian states that are newcomers to one another following decolonisation which began a mere six decades ago. Diplomatic confidentiality kept unruly passions at bay such that ASEAN could come into being and welcome even its erstwhile Cold War adversaries into its ranks.

Quietly too, China, Japan and South Korea have kept a lid on territorial tensions through back channel communication. They are trying with Pyongyang's latest outburst too, notwithstanding Washington's harder line on North Korea. Wikileaks and idealist rogues should take note of the virtues of the locked bag labelled 'diplomatic confidential'.

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