

Patrick Lawrence

**The diplomacy of no diplomacy.**

*or*

**Power is no longer enough.**

It is a long time now since the United States began to lose interest in statecraft in favor of military power in its relations with others. I have long understood this to be among the more regrettable of the Cold War's many regrettable consequences. By the early 1980s, when I began my years as a correspondent in East Asia, it was evident that Washington did not have a foreign policy in the Pacific: It had a security policy, and the Pentagon, not the State Department, ran it. In time I saw this was so, to one or another degree, across both oceans. How bitterly true were those final sentences in Boutros-Ghali's memoir of his time as U.N. secretary-general when he published them years later. "It would be some time before I fully realized that the United States sees little need for diplomacy," he wrote in *Unvanquished* (Random House, 1999). "Power is enough. Only the weak rely on diplomacy."

Boutros-Ghali was observant of his time but also commendably prescient of what was soon to come. From one administration to the next since the events of 11 September 2001—and I include the commonly misunderstood Obama years, 2009 to 2017—Washington has lapsed more or less completely into a reliance on military power in the conduct of its foreign relations. Who makes this plainer than Donald Trump and his incompetent adjutants? Anything worthy of the term

“statecraft” is utterly beyond these people. And who could make it plainer, as a new world order emerges and multipolarity becomes an irreversible reality, that power is not enough—if, indeed, it ever was or, in history, it ever has been.

Relations with China, relations with Russia, relations with the Europeans, relations with the Zionist regime in Tel Aviv, relations with others in West Asia, the genocide of the Palestinians, the wars in Ukraine and Iran: Each of these crises—and so I count all of them—requires a measure of diplomatic sophistication Washington lost long ago. In the third decade of our century it finds itself weak as Boutros-Ghali used this term. I return to a distinction I have found pertinent the whole of the post-2001 period: The United States is a powerful nation, but strength is something different, and the United States is not strong.

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*The American Prospect*, a journal whose intellectual origins extend back to the justly celebrated I.F. Stone, published an arresting piece on these topics just after the gaudy spectacle Trump staged when Xi Jinping arrived in Washington for two days of talks late last month. Bob Kuttner, Stone’s protégé and *The Prospect*’s editor, began this way under the headline “[Trump’s Pander Diplomacy](#)”:

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Donald Trump’s summit with China’s Xi Jinping was a perfect metaphor for the entire Trump presidency: no strategic goals or coherent plans.... There was zero progress on the real issues in the fraught U.S.–China relationship, which would be a challenge even for a competent president.

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It was amusing to read the American press as it tried to make something out of the most elaborate of the many diplomatic non-events of Trump's second term. "A landmark summit," a *New York Times* reporter described it. "A significant moment in U.S.–China relations," another correspondent for another newspaper wrote. "A dizzying concentration of power," yet another had it. This kind of coverage was as hollow as the summit itself. A red carpet at the airport, multiple military bands, a (deafening) Air Force flyover, ostentatious celebrations at the White House, a ritualistic tea—and nothing said of geopolitical cooperation or competition, China's support for Iran, U.S. support for Taiwan, trade disputes, the management of artificial intelligence, etc. down a list. Per usual—and this has been so for some years' of Sino–U.S. relations—the objective was simply to avoid a diplomatic disaster: The less said and done the better. As a measure of Trump's ineptitude—if not, indeed, his stunning ignorance of the issues—it was subsequently reported that Trump actually offered to sell China weapons on the argument the United States sells them to everyone else.

No strategy, no discernible objective: It is just as Bob Kuttner wrote in the cogent piece I quote above. We cannot call this diplomacy without qualifying the thought. Trump is the apotheosis of all those years during which the understanding in Washington was just as Boutros–Ghali had it: Of what use is diplomacy when there is such power as we possess? The diplomacy of no diplomacy: This is my term for the sclerosis the Trump regime now puts on full, embarrassing display.

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*Responsible Statecraft*, published daily by the Quincy Institute, which does policy research in Washington, put out a thought-provoking piece Sunday under the

headline, ["Is China Trump's only hope for ending the Iran war?"](#) It is a good question. While the People's Republic tends to avoid involvement in conflicts for which it bears no responsibility, in the Iran case it has a lot of skin in the game, as we Americans say, and its gestures since the U.S.–Israeli attacks began on 28 February suggest something different. "China's decision to sharply reduce its oil demand," Trita Parsi and Tom Pickering note, "has been the major reason world petroleum prices never surged to \$150 a barrel." This seems to me, however diverse Beijing's motives, to be an indirectly delivered favor to the Trump regime.

Parsi and Pickering also note that Xi, at the recent summit of BRICS nations in New Delhi, "hinted at a Chinese diplomatic intervention." And further: "Chinese diplomats have told us privately that Beijing is ready to step in if requested by the parties." Subtle. There are two millennia of diplomatic practice behind quiet openings of this kind.

How pitiful it is to put China's *démarche* next to Trump's latest posture toward Iran.

While he has "lost control of the war," as Parsi and Pickering bluntly note, he stood at the podium during the U.N. General Assembly last month and threatened, yet again, to "annihilate" the Islamic Republic if its leaders don't "make a deal." That was his reply to a new offer from the Iranians to restart talks on the basis of the memorandum of understanding Washington and Tehran signed in June—which Trump swiftly abandoned and which he now says is unacceptable. Tehran's most recent attempt to resume negotiations follows, in turn, Washington's multiple betrayals of the Iranians in previous negotiations. On at least two occasions, readers will recall, the Trump regime launched new attacks on Iran midway through scheduled talks.

This is what I mean by the diplomacy of no diplomacy. But let us also note: The war against Iran is an unambiguous demonstration of the inadequacy of power alone amid the emergence of non–Western powers such as Iran and those who support it, chief among these the People’s Republic and the Russian Federation.

And so to the Russians. Sergei Lavrov, the very able Russian foreign minister, made it perfectly clear some time ago that Moscow considers Washington “agreement-incapable”—an excellent variant of my point here. President Putin proves always willing to keep the door open to more talks toward a settlement of the Ukraine crisis, but this seems a matter of principle, not expectation: It is evident he does not take Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, two New York landlords Trump uses as “special envoys,” the slightest seriously. *The New York Times* now reports that when Putin last met with these two amateurs, on 5 September, he suggested that the Trump regime might be interested in negotiating a multibillion-dollar agreement whereby American investors purchase some of the assets—oilfields, refineries, service stations—of Lukoil, Russia’s largest privately owned oil company.

So has diplomacy between Moscow and Washington degenerated. Is Putin secretly snickering at the pecuniary obsessions of the Americans? I do not read his strange suggestion, whatever its true substance, as anything other than an expression of despair that there is any chance of getting anything useful done at the mahogany table when the Americans sit on the other side of it.

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The Chinese insist rightfully that the Americans address them—their rights under international law, their aspirations, their security interests—as equals. The Iranians, who appear to have no intention of returning to the state of diplomatic and

economic isolation they have endured since the 1979 revolution, are committed to the same. And so are the Russians. More than land in Ukraine's eastern oblasts, and certainly more than the sale of a petroleum company's assets, Moscow seeks a new security framework with the West by way of which its geopolitical interests are recognized as legitimate.

The sclerosis I mentioned earlier arose after the 1945 victories, when the United States came fully into its own as a global power with no rival. There was no longer a need for diplomacy, as Boutros-Ghali so well put it, and in time the State Department grew ever less capable of the wisdom, imagination, and sometimes courage sound statecraft requires. Trump and his people are abjectly devoid of these three virtues, to state the obvious.

But there is another, equally compelling feature of our moment that we must not overlook. The 21<sup>st</sup> century confronts the United States and the other Western powers with the reality of a new world order, one in which parity is fundamental and in which power will no longer suffice in relations among nations. This requires not a surrender on the West's part so much as an acceptance and—best outcome, in due course—an embrace of this order as the key to global peace and mutual security. Apart from the incompetence of those running policy in Washington (and in the other Western capitals by extension), there is a formidable refusal even to acknowledge this 21<sup>st</sup> century imperative.

Should we—or the Chinese, the Russians, the Iranians, others—be surprised that performative diplomacy, the diplomacy of no diplomacy, is all the Americans can manage to bring to the table?

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