

# **INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD: A NEW DIPLOMACY? EDWARD FINN**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The revolutionary power of technology to change reality forces us to re-examine our understanding of the international political system. On a fundamental level, we must begin with the classic international relations debate between realism and liberalism, well summarised by Stephen Walt.<sup>1</sup> The third paradigm of constructivism provides the key for combining aspects of both liberalism and realism into a cohesive prediction for the political future. The erosion of sovereignty goes hand in hand with the burgeoning Information Age's seemingly unstoppable mechanism for breaking down physical boundaries and the conceptual systems grounded upon them. Classical realism fails because of its fundamental assumption of the traditional sovereignty of the actors in its system. Liberalism cannot adequately quantify the nebulous connection between prosperity and freedom, which it assumes as an inherent truth, in a world with lucrative autocracies like Singapore and China. Instead, we have to accept the transformative power of ideas or, more directly, the technological, social, economic and political changes they bring about. From an American perspective, it is crucial to examine these changes, not only to understand their relevance as they transform the US, but also their effects in our evolving global relationships. Every development in international relations can be linked to some event that happened in the past, but never before has so much changed so quickly at such an expansive global level. In the first section of this article, I will examine the nature of recent technological changes in diplomacy and the larger derivative effects in society, which relate to the future of international politics. Despite all these changes, international entities have the same diplomatic need for communication and negotiation that they always have, though the means be radically new. In the second section, I will attempt to link the present global metamorphosis to a vision of the future coherent with theory today.

## **TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHANGING FACE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

The most important aspect of new technology, information, has revolutionised every aspect of society as it has diplomacy - the new definition of wealth and power, it is superseding everything traditional sovereignty is based on. Companies like Microsoft or the newly spawned AOL Time Warner possess relatively little in terms of physical assets, yet enjoy far more wealth and power than many traditional nation-states.<sup>2</sup> With a change in societal values comes a shift in national interests, and it comes as no surprise that more than twice as many Americans judge a country's strength in economic terms instead of military might.<sup>3</sup> Diplomats today are engaged not in containing the Red Menace but negotiating trade agreements. The changes have touched every branch of society - in George Gilder's words, even the "United States military today is a spectacular example of the replacement of physical assets by information."<sup>4</sup> If diplomacy is fundamentally a means of facilitating communications between two entities, it is hardly surprising that the field has been most affected by revolutions in communications technology. In a larger sense, however, diplomacy is changed by every technology working towards binding the world closer together, physically, electronically and culturally. The changes the Iron Chancellor witnessed in the late-nineteenth century were only the first introduction of complexity in a spiralling series of diplomatic modifiers interrupting the old standard of *Das Primat der Aussenpolitik*.<sup>5</sup> The

effect of democratisation on the field was only extended by the development of mass media and real-time satellite links to virtually every corner of the globe. Even the most minor incident has the power to become a major policy issue if it catches the eye of news corporations - the so-called 'CNN-effect'.<sup>6</sup> The global power of live news has created a new breed of government publicity. The growth of celebrity diplomacy in America and abroad heralds a new alertness to the public policy ramifications of effective media campaigning. From the UN's Goodwill Ambassadors to the employment of Ambassador Holbrooke as a Balkan trouble-shooter, diplomats have realised the power of public relations both to publicise the issues and legitimise their causes. The Bush administration's decision to reject Iraq's peace overture on CNN was more than merely convenient: as Walter Wriston quotes, in 1988 protesters in Prague chanted "the whole world is watching" into the news cameras.<sup>7</sup> Governments are not making these choices because they wish to share their control of the decision-making process, but because they have grasped the necessity of public involvement and acquiescence in public policy. This trend is merely a part of the larger dissolution of sovereignty into the hands of any person or organisation that can present itself as legitimate in the media's eyes. The development of e-mail, video-conferencing and the cellular telephone means that no government official need to be out of touch with his or her superiors for more than a few minutes at a time. The autonomy of diplomats has been steadily reduced as the effective distance between an embassy and its country of origin shrinks, muddying negotiating waters with internal conflicts. On the one hand, both sides are more directly engaged in negotiations, but it puts the diplomats involved in difficult situations, which they felt even in 1979 could "profoundly chang[e] the situation for a negotiator, and quite probably chang[e] his behaviour as well."<sup>8</sup> Combined with the ever-increasing speed and facility of modern transit, diplomacy now often means summitry involving high-level multilateral talks designed to discuss a variety of issues instead of resolving a few.

The proliferation and multilevel involvement of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in every aspect of international negotiations has revitalised many debates with new approaches and new options, but also stifled the ability of traditional sovereign actors to operate unimpeded in their own system. In almost every instance, the state must "share the stage with sovereignty-free actors", as Lewis Rasmussen negatively defines them.<sup>9</sup> According to the US Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, "[I]n Bosnia, nine agencies and departments of the US government are co-operating with more than a dozen other governments, seven international organisations and thirteen major NGOs...to implement the Dayton Accords."<sup>10</sup> Diplomats past and present have expressed their frustration at having to watch various specialised government agencies move in to share office space abroad even as the US Department of State's budget suffers under Congress.<sup>11</sup> In a post-Cold War existence, the complexity of international relations is being felt at the higher levels of governmental organisations around the world, all of which have had to suddenly re-evaluate their purpose and responsibilities. This profound realignment of global politics and incredible technological advancement has also forced countries to rethink the threats they are preparing for, in both diplomatic and military terms.<sup>12</sup> Commerce has moved to the foreground as a primary foreign policy objective, not least because of the political clout of wealthy corporations within the US.<sup>13</sup> Recent US efforts to include China as a full member of the World Trade Organisation and the losing battle human rights groups are fighting to hold China responsible for its abuses, are indicative of the changing perceptions of national interest.<sup>14</sup> In purely psychological terms, for example, the deepest fear of the American citizen is terrorism and its new technological derivatives, biological warfare and nuclear proliferation.<sup>15</sup>

These fundamental societal changes have created a new set of expectations for international relations. Just as the procedures have changed, so have the players and their motives. The prospect of a major land war crumbled with the Berlin Wall and now negotiations are intended to prevent local disasters, to avert a Kosovo or promote peace in the Middle East. Negotiators can threaten pinpoint strikes with smart bombs and cruise missiles, back up demands with satellite photographs or freeze millions in electronic assets. Diplomatic implements, like military ones, have been refined to strike the political pressure-points of an opponent, such as the restraining orders preventing top Serbian leaders from travelling abroad.<sup>16</sup> Ubiquitous jet planes make shuttle diplomacy possible and a dedicated press corps ensures that every Holbrooke is a celebrity as well as plenipotentiary.

The binding forces of globalisation and technological transformation have made these new implements of force more efficient, and more terrible, than any the world has known before, but with them new forms of power have come into being. The gunboat diplomacy of the colonial era pales in comparison to the potential for calculated devastation with a portable nuclear warhead or a tailored vaccine, a danger reflected in the range of governmental, especially American, efforts to develop new safeguards.<sup>17</sup> In a matter of a few short years, technology has created entirely new forms of wealth, like software code, and unimagined national resources, like radio frequency bandwidth and the genetic information in local wildlife.<sup>18</sup> Romanian President Constantinescu's pride as he showed President Clinton his desktop computer during a state visit was indicative of the new logic: integration into digital society is equated with success.<sup>19</sup> The Internet is the strongest force eroding our traditional sense of sovereignty. On the one hand, the exportation of American culture and, more recently, the spread of a digital lifestyle and a digital future, have acted as one of the most effective exercises of 'soft' power in history.<sup>20</sup> Yet, it is a force for unregulated expression almost completely out of the power of monitoring forces. Its power to mobilise support will prove even greater than television due to the ubiquitous functionality of e-mail and the interactive nature of the medium. More importantly, it provides the closest interface to that burdensome craving of democracy - a direct connection to the public. The Internet offers instant votes, mass e-mail and the power to reach millions with messages more indelible and more complex than television. Holding policy makers to the demands of an increasingly networked public opinion and, at the same time, eroding the foundations of the electoral system on which their authority is based, the Internet will not overthrow any governments, but it will radically alter them. The explosive growth of a new digital world is in many ways undermining traditional conceptions of sovereignty and our understanding of the international system. The force of the Internet as an equaliser amounts to more than e-mail; one talented individual has the potential to wreak havoc with vital governmental systems. Much ink has been shed over the classic example of an ex-Soviet nuclear weapon falling into sinister hands, but electronic warfare presents us with even greater vulnerabilities since there is no physical border to defend, no literal institution to fortify or visible attacker to guard against. Governments, particularly the US, are motivated to protect the new form of vital infrastructure, but are only now beginning to develop the institutions to do so in a flurry of task forces and working papers.

The field of international relations is in a similar turmoil as some experts, like Wriston, argue that technology will fundamentally change the nature of diplomacy. Others, like Walt, are not impressed with the millenarian flavour of the Information Age, and Rothschild brings up the end of the spectrum, rejecting the novelty of globalisation on the one hand and advancing its idealisations on the other. Every scholar agrees that the system is undergoing change, but nobody can quite agree on what the new reality will be like. In a world dominated by

capitalism, a fundamental adjustment in the forces of supply and demand, such as the rapid expansion of computer hardware and software markets, must have grave ramifications. As Wriston points out, "[T]he competition for the best information has replaced the competition for the best farmland or coal fields."<sup>21</sup>

Disagreement does not indicate any lack of theories, however. One can span the intellectual gulf between Samuel Huntington's infamous 'clash of civilisations' theory to Fukuyama's equally excessive 'end of history' vision. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a time of more intellectual splintering in terms of competing theories. The simplest way to approach the problem is to logically examine those aspects of realism and liberalism directly affected by the transformations we have outlined in society.

### DIPLOMATIC THEORY IN A NEW WORLD

Realism, in the sense of a system of sovereign, self-interested entities interacting in a rule-less atmosphere of diplomatic realpolitik, is not a concept that will disappear. The main reason this classical definition of realism fails to be compelling as such, is the decline of sovereignty as a guaranteed right. The decline is not merely a product of recent technological developments, but is centuries old, as Joseph Nye points out.<sup>22</sup> Globalisation and the advent of the Information Age are acting as catalysts to accelerate a process of redefinition that has been underway since monarchies first became constitutional. There is nothing necessarily wrong with the realist view of self-interested actors engaging in diplomacy in order to achieve their goals most effectively.

The difference instead lies in the realist definition of sovereignty, which may be best summed up by a fourth BC drawing by Kautilya that Michael Doyle includes in *Ways of War and Peace*.<sup>23</sup> The picture shows a series of concentric circles, each of which is an enemy with its immediate neighbours and friends with more distant circles. In a conception of the political universe dominated from the beginning by the ideal of power rooted in territorial, physical integrity, it is a vast leap to the kinds of power we see today. As Richard Barnett and John Cavanagh outline in *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order*, globe-spanning corporations are developing super-national networks of wealth and information that grant them a new kind of sovereignty.<sup>24</sup> As the Princeton University professor, Wolfgang Daspeckgruber, mentioned in a lecture, Kofi Annan's advocacy of a new, more limited understanding of national sovereignty is an official articulation of the frustration the international community often feels in situations like Kosovo where sovereignty and public opinion collide. This trend will only continue as more, non-traditional actors become involved with the global scene. What this implies, to use Gilpin's terminology, is not merely systemic change (the mechanisms of which both realism and liberalism mainly focus on), but a systems change in which the nature of the actors is changing and, with it, the underlying structure in which they compete.<sup>25</sup> The growing interdependence of sovereign states in different fields has left them beholden to the force of public opinion both at home and abroad. No US action goes unnoticed around the world and the American public is becoming more cognisant of its responsibilities as a superpower.<sup>26</sup> A growing realisation of the truly global nature of foreign policy is developing just in time to herald the trend towards sovereignty's increasing irrelevance. It is important at this point to pick up and dust off some of our conceptions of liberalism, which have served us so well as goals and so poorly as benchmarks in the past century. Ten years ago, most international relations experts would have dismissed the information revolution as a force for real political change; now many are changing their minds. The upswelling of quiet popular euphoria over the attainable utopian future waiting for us is at least in part based on the fantastic revolutions we have witnessed in our own

countries, if only in terms of sheer wealth generated by companies like Amazon. Few experts today would argue against the idea that the freedom to trade, to one extent or another, serves to advance freedom of thought and action. Some writers hurl themselves gleefully into a utopian future, producing works with titles like *Infinite Wealth: a New World of Collaboration and Abundance in the Knowledge Era*, essentially extrapolating the extraordinary creation of wealth we have witnessed into a new social harmony.<sup>27</sup>

These authors are balanced on the other side by those who see encroaching corporate power as a developing trend bound to result in multinational corporations too powerful and dispersed to prove an effective target for any government, like the authors of *Global Dreams*. Doubtless pundits have already begun to argue that AOL Time Warner's incredibly diverse portfolio of news and entertainment services will prove too tempting for a corporate culture fixated on branding and melding content and advertising in efforts to garner loyalty and profits.<sup>28</sup> The naysayers point out, rather convincingly, that the Internet is not going to ameliorate global hunger or resolve Africa's AIDS crisis, at least not directly. Instead, they attempt to question the fundamentals of a purely capitalist system, which does not encourage fundamental questions. As David Korten introduces *The Post-Corporate World*, "In the 1980s capitalism triumphed over communism. In the 1990s it triumphed over democracy and the market economy."<sup>29</sup> Somewhere between these antipodal visions lies our future. The strongest unifying factor between these two projections is their unconditional acceptance of constructivism. The world is going to be revolutionised by ideas, whether they be for corporate fiefdoms or technological emancipation. In terms of international relations, it seems more likely to accept at least an increased corporate presence in shaping foreign policy. Already the influence of lobbying and campaign contributions has shaped our China policy, to name just one salient example. Just as democracy revolutionised diplomacy a century ago, increasing corporate influence is going to bring a whole new set of issues and constraints to negotiating tables.

Natural resources, malleable though the term may be, will grow into a major concern, particularly for developing countries dependent on fossil-fuel resources when supplies of oil and natural gas become exhausted (or politically tenuous, as in Central Asia). These concerns have shaped US policy in Central Asia's new Great Game, notably with the recent signing of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline agreement.<sup>30</sup> Already intellectual property rights have become an issue, particularly involving international software piracy, genetic engineering and industrial espionage, all of which have the potential to spark major controversy as governments and corporations become more enmeshed in the business of developing and producing goods in a globally competitive market. It is hard to imagine a serious war over software piracy in ten years, but perhaps in thirty years a company will find the potential rewards of undercutting its competition worth the risks. The resource most frequently contested will, of course, be information. As countless entities continue to star the skies with communications and surveillance satellites, the power to see and the power not to be seen (a concept familiar to us as 'stealth') will become increasingly important. As the size of standing armies becomes insignificant compared to their training, readiness and equipment, military power will become increasingly defined by technological skills - better weapons, certainly, but more importantly better countermeasures to blind the enemy. As the potential sources of conflict multiply, the scale of engagement will shrink as countries develop more accurate ways to punish their opponents, just as the likelihood of actual war will decrease in light of the less risky and more effective limited strikes we have already witnessed in Afghanistan and Iraq. The limited scope of warfare will necessitate a wider range of diplomatic options to cope with situations that public opinion is not willing to expend lives to resolve. The development of international

'villains' seems to me a diplomatic and political failure on the part of the international community. Sadly, it is a trend with too many benefits for the West to end. One headline stood out from a cynical humour publication, which reported half-truthfully: 'State Department to Hold Enemy Tryouts Next Week.'<sup>31</sup> Certainly Hussein and Milosevic constitute two of the worst examples of humanity ever to damn the earth with their presence, but this hardly seems like a good reason to isolate them from staying international influences and allowing them to terrorise the millions in their countries. Refusing to deal with a leader on any constructive level because he is morally repulsive is not only selfish, it costs lives, as in the case of sanctions on Iraq.<sup>32</sup> Diplomacy does not have to be a capitulation to human evil; at the very least, it can act as a drain on the dictator's destructive energies, if not a force for positive good. These new diplomatic options will come to rely increasingly on NGOs and the panoply of organisational connections, quasi-official agreements and ideological buffering they provide. As corporations become increasingly internationally influential, co-operative efforts in international organisations involving NGOs and sovereign states will prove increasingly effective. This will force diplomacy to explore new avenues of interaction, bilateral to multilateral, from broad treaties to ever more specific agreements outlining specific privileges and specific responsibilities in the far less semantically forgiving world of global competition. By opening a single chip factory this summer, Intel will more than double Costa Rica's annual revenues.<sup>33</sup> The incentives that countries are willing to offer mobile corporations to lure capital and jobs will only further empower new capitalist power structures at the expense of traditional sovereignty. All this is not to say that the future of diplomacy is threatened if the next century is going to revolve around information, diplomacy, the art of leveraging information into power, will only become more important. As the international community diversifies with non-profit organisations and corporations with governmental ties, the necessity for effective diplomatic communication will become paramount. In a world of real-time access to countless streams of information, there is no substitute for a direct exchange of ideas with the other side. In terms of realism and liberalism, the power of ideas is going to engender a new capitalist power structure based on the acquisition and interpretation of information - this does not spell the end of the nation-state, at least not in the next few decades, as successful states have always needed to maintain an exceptional ability to process information in just such a manner. **SOME CONCLUSIONS**

In the next few decades we are going to see a world with bigger and bolder corporations, more conscious of public opinion as a global market gradually coalesces, but more willing to exploit weaker institutions in the international political system to gain access to resources and special economic status. In the next ten years, the practice of diplomacy will be revolutionised by the first major international issues originating in the information revolution: telecommunications, intellectual property rights, censorship. Companies and states alike will be forced to deal with a smorgasbord of regulatory agencies, NGOs, patent holders and even international criminals too powerful to destroy and too difficult to catch.<sup>34</sup> As rapidly as technology will change the world, however, diplomacy will be the same recognisable business of communication and compromise it has always been.

While the players in the international system will change, as will the qualities, which they use to rank one another, the fundamental realist drive for survival, coupled with the occasional flash of idealism, will remain dominant. At the end of Diplomacy, Henry Kissinger lays out a series of policy directives for the United States in the next century, knowing full well that the bicentennial of the American century depends on qualities of adaptation and vision in her leaders. The continued dominance of traditional sovereign states is a strong possibility because of their excellent position to retool themselves as providers in the new information

economy. No corporation has seriously considered fulfilling the fundamental responsibilities of government, and if sovereign states can continue to fulfil these obligations while establishing successful diplomatic relationships with the new power players, corporations will not attempt to destabilise such an economically efficient system. There will be no global epiphany, no descent into anarchy, but the nature of diplomacy must adapt itself to a new system, with some new rules and some new players.

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1 Walt, Stephen M., 'International Relations: One World, Many Theories', *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1998, pp. 29-46.2 Microsoft (pending dissolution) has a market value of over half a trillion dollars. <http://www.forbes.com>

3 Rielly, John E., 'Americans and the World: A Survey at Century's End', *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1999, p. 102.4 Wriston, Walter B., 'Bits, Bytes, and Diplomacy', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 5, September-October 1997, p. 178.5 Kennan, George, 'Diplomacy without Diplomats?', *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 76, No. 5, September-October 1997, p. 204.6 Nye, Joseph S. Jun., 'Redefining the National Interest', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 5, September-October 1997, p. 26.7 Wriston, Walter B., *op. cit.*, pp. 174-75.

8 Winham, R. Winham, 'Practitioner's Views of International Negotiations', *World Politics* 1979, Vol. 32, No. 1, p. 130.9 Rasmussen, J. Lewis, 'Peacemaking in the Twenty-First Century - New Rules, New Roles, New Actors', Chapter 1, in I. William Zartman and J. Lewis Rasmussen (eds.), *Peacemaking in International Conflict- Methods and Techniques*, United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997, p. 42.10 Talbott, Strobe, 'Globalisation and Diplomacy: A Practitioner's Perspective', *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1997, p. 79.11 Cf. Particularly George Kennan's defiant lament, 'Diplomacy without Diplomats?' and Talbott's resigned acceptance of this state of affairs in *op. cit.*, pp. 69-83.12 In passing, it is interesting to note that there is a strong argument for linking the collapse of the Soviet Union with the rapid pace of scientific innovation in the West.

13 Talbott, Strobe, *op. cit.*, p. 77 describes the Department of State's efforts to advance the interests of private companies in over 60 countries.14 <http://www.usia.gov/regional/ea/uschina/clin0110.html> contains official documents on President Clinton's delicate course on US-China policy.15 Rielly, John E., *op. cit.*, p. 111.

16 Prof. Wolfgang Danspeckgruber in lecture.

17 Cf. the prominently featured 'National Plan for Information Systems Protection' at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.18 Boyle, James, *Shamans, Software, and Spleens: Law and the Construction of the Information Society*, Harvard University Press, 1996 discusses several aspects of intellectual property rights and international law.

19 Talbott, Strobe, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

20 Nye, Joseph S. Jun., *op. cit.*, p. 24.

21 Wriston, Walter B., *op. cit.*, p. 176.

22 Nye, Joseph S. Jun., *op. cit.*, p. 30.

23 Doyle, Michael W., *Ways of War and Peace*, New York: W. W. Norton & Comp., 1997, p. 164.

24 Barnett, Richard J. and Cavanagh, John, *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1994.

25 Gilpin, Robert, 'The Nature of International Political Change', Chapter 1, *War & Change in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press 1981, pp. 41-43.26 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

27 Carter, Barry C., *Infinite Wealth: a New World of Collaboration and Abundance in the Knowledge Era*, Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999.

28 <http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,33550,00.html> presents a run-down of reactions from the 'usual suspects'.<sup>29</sup> Korten, David C., *The Post-Corporate World*, Kumarian Press, 1998, p. 1.

30 <http://www.usia.gov/regional/nea/mena/caspia16.htm> contains the text of Clinton's remarks on the occasion.<sup>31</sup> <http://www.theonion.com/onion3412/enemytryouts.html> contains the entire article.

32 Mueller, John, and Mueller, Karl, 'Sanctions of Mass Destruction', *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 78, No. 3, May-June 1999, pp. 43-53.<sup>33</sup> <http://www.svtc.org/letters/leter12a.htm> is a newsletter detailing the move put out by a Silicon Valley activist group.

34 The recent case of a Russian hacker attempting to blackmail a commercial Web site by stealing 300,000 credit card numbers will be mirrored again and again as the Internet continues to precede regulatory efforts. <http://cnn.com/2000/TECH/computing/01/10/credit.card.crack.2/index.html>