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In Pursuit of Crisis Diplomacy

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Diplomacy is increasingly practised under conditions of perennial crisis. By identifying a crisis situation, diplomatic interaction is framed in terms of escalating threat, uncertainty and urgency. Under crisis conditions, diplomats are multi-tasked to engage extra-carefully with stakeholders, more precisely to communicate with them and the public, but also to defuse the crisis and contain its impact, negotiate ways and terms of disengagement, and, where appropriate, to seize opportunities for change or gain. Special crisis sections have been established in foreign ministries and international organizations, and there is currently considerable interest in enhancing the role and scope of crisis managers and negotiators in the profession. Still, less recognized and discussed is a major puzzle complicating the pursuit of crisis diplomacy — specifically, how its practice entails not just *crisis management* but *crisis-making and sustaining*.

It has been persuasively suggested that crisis diplomacy is different from, and at times antithetical to, crisis management.¹ Crisis management provides ‘overtone of technical rationality and efficiency’,² which glosses over the range of policy goals and diachronic predicaments of diplomatic actors. It is possible that, for one or more stakeholders, the crisis is but a means for the exercise of coercive diplomacy, or indeed used as a pretext for escalating crisis into war. To that extent, the famous aphorism during the apogee of the Cuban Missile Crisis by the US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara that ‘there is no longer such a thing as strategy, only crisis management’ has a limited purchase. This absolutist dictum might work only with regard to the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. In all other kinds of crisis, diplomatic strategy is very much part of the equation. Crisis management can function as a euphemism for the strategic pursuit of a range of objectives in and through crisis.

James Richardson has only looked at crisis diplomacy in the context of the great powers, whose aim was to make or avoid war.³ However, we need to widen our crisis diplomacy purview beyond the conventional war problematic

1 James L. Richardson, *Crisis Diplomacy: The Great Powers since the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

2 Richardson, *Crisis Diplomacy*, p. 25.

3 Richardson, *Crisis Diplomacy*.

and to include other actors — both state and non-state — that have stakes in a widened crisis equation. We should also consider how they might use knowledge about crisis in order to practise particular kinds of diplomacy.⁴ Put differently, we ought to come to terms with how not only powerful actors but subaltern actors engage in crisis-making as a means of redressing global power asymmetries and how actors engage in diplomacies that deliberately seek instability, disorder and dysfunction — doing this as a means of putting pressure and exercising power on rival actors, but also in order to open up possibilities for alternative action and the creation of new worlds. In this regard, consider the crisis diplomacies of the World Social Forum: on the one hand, building alliances and solidarities that minimize the negative socio-economic impact of globalization and supporting those that suffer from its recurring manifold crises; and, on the other hand, seeking to accentuate and intensify the crisis of the global capitalist system so as to bring its eventual downfall.

If crisis is the disruption of the routine operation of a system,⁵ if it is a turning point that transforms relationships,⁶ then different actors have an interest in initiating or sustaining the disruption of a system, which they rightly or wrongly perceive as exploiting and marginalizing them. In other words, some actors may be threatened by routine failure in the operation of the system, while others may see this as an opportunity for destroying or changing the system. Not all actors will thus act by *raison de système* — the diplomatic principle that English School scholars have suggested as running in parallel to *raison d'état*, taming national interest and protecting the international society.⁷ Some diplomatic actors may simply act by *raison contre de système*, whether against a system of states or any other system whose operation they view as problematic.

There are two interesting tendencies in crisis diplomacy that are based broadly around the *crisis management/crisis-making* dichotomy, or *raison de*

4 Costas M. Constantinou, 'Between Statecraft and Humanism: Diplomacy and its Forms of Knowledge', *International Studies Review*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 141-162.

5 Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern and Bengt Sundelius (eds), *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

6 Coral Bell, *The Conventions of Crisis: A Study in Diplomatic Management* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

7 Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue Between States* (London: Methuen, 1982).

système/raison contre de système binary: 1) the institutionalization of crisis management mechanisms into integrated forms of regional and global governance whose aim is to avoid or minimize systemic failure; and 2) the targeted disruption of the system's operation so as to bring its disintegration and/or radical change rather than its gradual transformation.

With regard to the *first* tendency, it concerns upgrading and supporting crisis management processes to respond adequately to a range of complex crises. Specifically this approach seeks to bring about the situation whereby emerging crises are governed from a centralized unit rather than from fragmented and uncoordinated crisis units — that is, to integrate dispersed units that often have opposing interests and perspectives on crisis resolution, and that may ultimately inhibit management and exacerbate the crisis. It may help to understand this integrated process by reference to medical practice.

Much like intensive care units (ICU), crisis experts seek constantly and closely to monitor 'the situation', explore and test available options, take measures to stabilize and remedy the situation, and create, where feasible, the conditions for a return to 'normalcy'. Unlike ICUs, however, crisis teams cannot incarcerate political situations in the way that medical practitioners do with physical bodies. Their ministrations cannot take place within a controlled professional environment that is governed by clear codes of conduct and protocols of engagement. Integrated global governance thus seeks, as much as possible, to centralize decision-making and synthesize opposing national, sub-national and supranational positions that complicate and exacerbate the crisis situation. Good examples of this are the current institutional changes with regard to the euro crisis, which are leading to an EU banking union — that is, more centralized control and coordination, and a more resolute and speedy response to banking crises that can have spill-over effects on Eurozone economies.

The move to integrated governance/crisis management is very positive assuming that agreement exists among the stakeholders about the merits of the routine operation of the system and the hazards of its disruption. That is to say, if there is consensus that the crisis threatens core values or life-sustaining practices and a return to the 'normal' is thus equally valued by all, it follows that the more regional and global the 'intensive care' response, the better and likelier it is that the return to 'normalcy' will occur. The global integration of emergency assistance to natural disasters is one such example where, irrespective of the complex politics of aid, the coordination of efforts has been greatly enhanced for the benefit of people in need. More contested is the *raison de*

système of the emerging regime of 'humanitarian diplomacy', its relation to state diplomacy 'and its links to the operational activities of humanitarian organizations and the wider issues of peace and war'.⁸

Nonetheless, and this takes us to the *second* tendency, diplomatic practice does not just respond to crises that 'fall from the sky'. Besides natural disasters, crises result from direct or indirect human action, initiated by actors that in different contexts exhibit clashing interests and varying degrees of actor autonomy from, or dependence in, the system. Especially significant is the case of diplomatic actors who operate within the radical or revolutionary tradition, who consider systemic disorder or the possibility of violence as positive, and who identify the system in operation as dysfunctional, unjust or structurally violent.⁹ Notwithstanding that the system is always able to co-opt some of them, others or new actors constantly resurface as troublemakers and crisis-initiators.

Crises can be initiated and subsequently highlighted by actors as a means of gaining recognition, registering a problem, and underscoring the urgency of resolving it. Anti-colonial struggles — violent and non-violent — can be explained and understood in that context; namely the creation of political, security and moral crises whose aim has been the disruption and delegitimization of the existing system of governance, locally as well as internationally. Anti-colonial action therefore had no interest in managing a crisis, but rather in exacerbating it by way of challenging routine operations and ultimately dismantling the colonial system of governance.

This does not mean that there might not be some kind of crisis management within crisis-making and crisis-sustaining. Stakeholders with opposing views may still agree that a total or abrupt failure of a system may be disastrous or too costly for all concerned. Some may strategically opt for particular kinds of crises rather than others. For example, India's Mahatma Gandhi insisted on passive resistance to colonial rule, creating moral crises and by extension crises of legitimacy, rather than supporting violent insurgencies that would have created a direct security crisis. Gandhi cooperated with the colonial regime on a number of occasions in order to manage security crises and limit casualties. By contrast, Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh — who reportedly admired the Gandhian struggle and considered adopting it — seems to have judged that the moral

8 Larry Minear, 'The Craft of Humanitarian Diplomacy', in L. Minear and H. Smith (eds), *Humanitarian Diplomacy: Practitioners and their Craft* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2007), p. 8.

9 Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 22-38.

crisis that Gandhi brought to the British Empire could not have been emulated within the French Empire, also bearing in mind the United States' interest in the region, so he opted for violent insurgency as a way to change the system.

When considering the role of leadership in crisis, one must thus realize how leadership is ambivalently and opposingly defined in its ability *both* for effective crisis management and successful crisis creation. It is also defined in terms of the *different kinds* of crisis management and crisis creation that it promotes. For example, it is sometimes defined in its ability to balance crisis creation and crisis management or to shift from one to the other when circumstances demand (for example, Nelson Mandela's leadership in South Africa before his conviction and after his release from prison). Leaders can be praised for defusing crises, following the *raison de système* rather than nationalist or populist demands, yet they can be praised for initiating crises of recognition and delegitimization, getting people to agree to sacrifice routine benefits and thus appreciate the importance of acting contrary to the *raison de système*. Consequently, it is not possible to judge the role of leadership in crisis diplomacy independently of an assessment of *the system* that the leader's actions support or challenge. There will, of course, be differences in that assessment.

Furthermore, the pronounced critical tasks and skills of 'crisis leadership'¹⁰ are changing given the radical changes in the practice of contemporary diplomacy. If we are moving from club to network diplomacy,¹¹ and if a main feature of networks is that they trump hierarchies,¹² then crisis leadership can no longer function in the way that many scholars imagine. 'Sense-making' and 'meaning-making' of crises are not exclusively produced by a leader or within a restricted club space to be subsequently communicated to the wider public, but from plural sites that cultivate and exploit connectivity and circulation. 'Decision-making' in crises is also hindered by the fact that networks promote dispersed, bottom-up or amorphous leadership. Crisis continuation or termination greatly depends on the mobilization of ties and the optimization of connectivity within networks. To that extent, crises that are initiated or sustained and popularized by such diverse groups as al-Qaeda, the Occupy Movement, WikiLeaks, Anonymous or Invisible Children display not only the ability of non-state actors and civil society for asymmetrical crisis-making, but also the difficulty of negotiating terms of disengagement, since such groups

10 Boin, 't Hart, Stern and Sundelius (eds), *The Politics of Crisis Management*.

11 Jorge Heine, 'From Club to Network Diplomacy', in A.F. Cooper, J. Heine and R. Thakur (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12 Jamie F. Metzl, 'Network Diplomacy', *Georgetown Journal International Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2001, pp. 77-87.

are not organizationally 'deep' but symbolically and loosely held together, meaning that franchise and splinter groups can easily be formed to continue or initiate new crises.

Crisis diplomacy can ultimately be seen to pursue an obscure object, although from the technical perspective of each stakeholder, the object may be clear enough. Crisis is sometimes ugly and threatening to the system that delivers order and life-sustaining goods; at other times, it is beautiful and pregnant with possibility for radical change; and sometimes it is more ambivalent and contains both. Those claiming to be doing crisis management may, at the same time, be engaging — intentionally or unintentionally, discursively or materially — in crisis identification and creation, or be part of groups or networks that engage or have invested in crisis perpetuation. Increasingly, 'managers' are less able to control crises because of the intensification of global networks, but their role is not likely to disappear any time soon. If 'risk society' is what characterizes our contemporary condition,¹³ coming to terms with the multiple ways and means of crisis diplomacy will remain crucial for both defenders and challengers of social and political systems. It will also remain an important testing ground for cultivating and exercising political judgement.

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13 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992).