

# Commentary

## Ten Principles of Operational Diplomacy: A Framework

The operational level of foreign policy is the essential crucible for the formulation of diplomatic approaches to international challenges. This article identifies ten principles for conducting operational level diplomacy to help practitioners frame the development and implementation of successful foreign policies. Diplomacy – the use of negotiations to advance the international interests of a state – continues to play an important role in the adjustment of state interests and societies to contemporary challenges.

The principles proposed below to strengthen operational diplomacy are: national interest, credibility, clarity, comprehensiveness, understanding, perceptiveness, circumspection, confidence-building, decisiveness, and perseverance.

Diplomacy is defined by the Department of State as “the art and practice of conducting negotiations and maintaining relations between nations; skill in handling affairs without arousing animosity.” Another recent definition from Indian General KA Muthanna described diplomacy as “the conduct of international relations by negotiation and engendering goodwill and mutual trust rather than by force, propaganda, or recourse to law.”

Among these and other classic definitions of diplomacy are a common theme: the essence of diplomacy is communication between different parties with the goal of reaching agreement on an issue or on a basis for state interaction. The proposed ten principles are intended to contribute to diplomatic practice and to the development of effective diplomatic approaches to achieving foreign policy objectives.

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### The operational level of diplomacy

This examination of diplomatic principles focuses at the operational level, that is, the level in foreign policy communities where practitioners plan, design, and conduct diplomacy to achieve objectives in the strategic national interest. In military affairs, the operational level is crucial in the execution of military tasks, and is the focus of

significant doctrine and education. According the Department of Defense, the operational level “links the tactical employment of forces to national and military strategic objectives.”

The operational level in foreign policy melds strategic objectives with diplomatic means and resources. Operational level diplomacy may be described as deliberate activities that link the employment of diplomatic assets to national foreign policy objectives. This level, just under that of strategic decision making and closely connected to the tactics and techniques of negotiation, is sufficiently distinct that introducing some consistent principles may be useful to operational diplomatic practitioners. The 10 principles for operational diplomacy serve as a framework for foreign policy implementation at the level where diplomatic practitioners work toward the accomplishment of specific national goals by negotiated means.

### Recent approaches to framing principles in foreign policy

The complex arenas of American diplomatic engagement since 2001 — often in unstable, nontraditional environments — resulted in several new efforts to describe principles for specialized civil-military interaction. Principles have been developed for counterinsurgency and post-conflict stabilization, but relatively few proposals addresses the challenges of traditional diplomatic operations. The defense field, with a well-institutionalized system of doctrine and training, recognizes nine core Principles of War, and an expanded list of 12 principles of joint operations, to aid U.S. military planners conceptualize full-spectrum military operations.

In the course of the U.S.-led counterinsurgency in Iraq, Australian military officer and analyst David Kilcullen’s “Twenty-eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency” proposed steps tactical military leaders can take to understand and interact with their security environment to achieve local political success. In “Nine Principles of Reconstruction and Development,” USAID Director Andrew Natsios linked the development of civilian stabilization principles directly to the Defense Department’s nine principles of war and described development-focused guidelines.

Traditional diplomacy, however, may seem too diffuse, too situational, or arcane, to match to a set of guiding principles. “Until recently, diplomacy has occupied a place at the margins of international theory, and social theory in general. Academics have noted the resistance of diplomacy to being theorized,” notes a recent comprehensive survey. A few publications from American practitioners have sketched out ideas for principles active in diplomacy. Retired American diplomat Marc Grossman summarized four principles of diplomacy guiding his personal career philosophy: optimism, a commitment to justice, truth in dealing, and realism tempered by a commitment to pluralism.

Writing for the Public Diplomacy Council, retired diplomat Donald M. Bishop highlighted four bottom-up principles for operational public diplomacy (public diplomacy, the long game, public affairs, and public relations). Applying an aphoristic approach in 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell described three principles of diplomacy: power is a prerequisite, but inadequate for diplomacy; it is better to have more partners on your side than against you; and incomplete victories that give an opponent a way out are often the best solutions. (Remarks at the 2004 Annual Kennan Institute Dinner)

### Shaping the principles of diplomacy

In preparing guidelines for operational diplomacy, the principles themselves need to reflect realistic parameters in their design and substance. They should be distinct enough to address the essential purpose and practice of diplomacy, and reinforce prospects for diplomatic success. The list should not be so lengthy as to become a catalog, nor too short to encompass diplomatic situations constructively. The principles should also be adaptable to a variety of diplomatic situations, but not assumed to be unequivocally flexible, or they would not contribute to a systemic approach that distinguishes diplomacy from other disciplines while applicable across a range of circumstances.

The principles should also be mutually reinforcing, and neither internally contradictory nor obstructive to the diplomatic process. Ultimately, the principles need to be practicable and relevant in a variety of diplomatic activities amidst the growing complexity and interdisciplinary nature of foreign policy challenges and means of implementation.

The ten principles for diplomatic operations are:

1. National interest
2. Credibility
3. Clarity
4. Comprehensiveness
5. Understanding
6. Perceptiveness
7. Circumspection
8. Confidence-building
9. Decisiveness
10. Perseverance

1. National interest. The purpose of a diplomatic effort is to advance the national interest of a state, as determined by its legitimate policymakers, representative institutions, and enshrined commitments and values. Progressive agreements pursued by diplomats are rooted in the national interest and propel it forward. The diplomat applies the national interest first and foremost in preparing to form and implement policy, and is grounded in a deep commitment to the core values and vital interests animating the strategy of the state.

2. Credibility. Diplomacy is by its nature the employment of communication, backed by the inherent resources of each side, to establish an agreement resolving a set of differences and outlining a basis for future relations. The policy presentation must be convincing, conveying the formal attitude of the government, backed by clear, realistic rewards or costs, and underpinned by an institutional and individual reputation for candor and reliability. Any advantage sought by the diplomatic presentation by provoking uncertainty must be grounded in credibility, in order to deliver an opening. The credible diplomatic presentation maintains the initiative and aims to increase prospects for compromise in favor of the presenter's position.

3. Clarity. Diplomacy requires the exchange of views and concepts to weave an agreement together from different strands of interest. However nuanced in

presentation, communication must be precise and without ultimately detrimental ambiguity. This is not to claim that diplomacy is literalist or unsubtle; rather, in diplomacy, even a bluff needs to convey its claims convincingly. But greater effort is directed to the communication of intended consequences. The diplomatic approach, informed by a clear communication of the objectives and constraints of the situation, means to unravel misconceptions and determine whether or not agreement can be reached.

4. **Comprehensiveness.** The comprehensive diplomatic approach seeks to engage and resolve issues that are often inherently multi-disciplinary and inter-departmental; and to account for the effects on multiple parties of an agreement over time. The comprehensive approach incorporates public and social media diplomacy, and appropriate multiple tracks of engagement, in shaping and implementing foreign policy. Comprehensiveness in diplomacy is prepared for a variety of skills, disciplines, and methods to be employed to advance the policy objectives. Comprehensiveness encompasses inherent flexibility and anticipation of variable consequences, so that goals may be achieved through evolving, alternative and opportunistic courses of action.

5. **Understanding.** Diplomatic operations must be thoroughly grounded in a government's policy positions and the circumstances surrounding the issues and flexibility possible in the dialogue. Understanding requires commitment to learning, professional development, and curiosity about the diplomatic situation, environment, incentives, history and motivations propelling policy. Effective operational diplomacy also requires solid understanding of counterparts' goals, beliefs, and underlying cultural outlook.

6. **Perceptiveness.** Perception requires discerning nuance and applying insight to distinguish issues, motives, interests, and positions in negotiating a mutually acceptable solution. Perceptiveness is essential in diplomacy to discern key moments and points of debate, potential consensus and pitfalls. Perceptiveness additionally gauges how the policy approach appears to interlocutors and wider public interests, and the uses of informational and social networks in shaping and honing the approach.

7. **Circumspection.** Diplomatic operations focus on a particular policy aim. While the policy approach should be comprehensive with respect to the issues and implications at hand, the objectives must be focused and delineated. The evolving policy should be wary of distractions and unintended concessions. As fundamentally a representative, the diplomat practices reciprocal discretion within the negotiation and communication process; and works conscientiously according to their policy instructions and ability to undertake commitments on behalf of their government and national interest.

8. **Confidence-building.** Success in diplomatic processes is the product of the parties' willingness to take the risk of trust that a consensus agreement will achieve mutually acceptable objectives. Confidence-building is often the means and method for bridging from a host of disagreements to a consensus on where progress can occur. The establishment of a diplomatic process, dialogue between the parties, and reaching incremental agreements lay the groundwork for accomplishing objectives, as well as for future unforeseen exchanges.



9. Decisiveness. Diplomacy is a means of state policy to produce results. Diplomats must possess the judgment, capacity, and sense of consequences to make decisions at the appropriate moment, or when their moral authority can advance national interests and values. Decisiveness enables diplomats to take advantage of uncertainty and hesitation in their counterpart which subtle and dynamic diplomacy can create, setting conditions for a favorable outcome. Decisiveness bridges all levels of policy – the strategic, operational, and tactical – and, far from being a delaying tactic, effectively applied diplomacy can establish change and initiate significant results.

10. Perseverance. The commitment to diplomacy uses dialogue to seek policy ends through negotiation. The outcome of diplomatic processes depends not only on the merits of proposals envisioned, exchanged and debated; but also on the persistence, optimism, and imagination for interlocutors to envision an acceptable end-point to the dialogue. Perseverance includes the commitment to see agreements realized and put into. Diplomacy does not end if a crisis shifts to violent conflict; coalition-building, de-escalation, and conflict resolution dimensions remain. Operational diplomacy thus reflects a strategic framework, while working to achieve incremental steps that accumulate successes and clear a path to accomplishing the policy end.

#### Application

Foreign policy informed by the principles of diplomacy would be proactive, goal-oriented, and responsive to an array of foreign policy challenges while shaping conditions to accomplish vital national interests. Foreign policies informed by the 10 principles would be based on an openness to rigorous engagement on diplomatic problems, and on dedicated service to provoke analysis and consideration of bold options to achieve state interests.

At the operational diplomatic level, the principles may be applied to the formulation of policies and alignment of diplomatic assets to pursue national objectives. The 10 operational principles are designed to assist policy developers, students, decision-makers, and practitioners of operational diplomacy to achieve their objectives, and to stimulate debate on core considerations in devising diplomatic approaches.\*

Looking ahead, we may infer some characteristics of foreign policy that incorporate the 10 Principles. First, the strategy seeks to accomplish an important goal, risks considerable resources, and can be effectively communicated (*National interest and Clarity*). Second, the dimensions of the strategy are backed by institutional capacity, deliverable consequences and resources for resilient implementation (*Credibility and Comprehensiveness*).

Third, the strategy is based on sound information, contextual knowledge, and anticipation of opportunities and consequences (*Understanding and Perception*).

Fourth, the strategy is based on an interactive, accountable, coherent and continuous range of diplomatic engagement (*Confidence-building and Circumspection*). Finally, the strategy grounded in operational principles is dynamic and evolutionary in face of opposition, opportunity, and unexpected challenges (*Decisiveness and Perseverance*).

Foreign policy-makers and diplomats seeking to achieve a policy goal may consider the 10 Principles as they develop proposals and approaches to a diplomatic forum. Stress-testing expected policy plans and resources against the implications of a principles framework may help shape the stages of diplomatic outreach, negotiation, and mutual agreement. Policy points that contradict or fail to meet the parameters of the 10 Principles could indicate a gap in the overall approach, which can be modified or compensated for as the dialogue proceeds.

### Conclusion

The ten principles of operational-level diplomacy provide a framework for the design of diplomatic approaches to accomplish national policy goals. The principles are designed to address the challenges that undergird the diplomatic approach and to be functionally effective in the development of foreign policy planning and implementation. These principles, a product of the present state of diplomacy, should retain some applicability to analysis of past diplomatic situations, and be applicable to future foreign policy development. The 10 Principles of Diplomacy are intended to contribute to improved achievement of foreign policy objectives by diplomatic operations. ★

\* While this paper is concerned with operational diplomacy rather than the traits of a diplomat, the following eight attributes may be taken to characterize the accomplished diplomat working at a range of policy levels: *a Remover of Obstacles; an Achiever of Objectives; an Effective cross-cultural Communicator; a Reliable Representative; a Proactive Learner; an Illuminating analyst; a Principled Decision-maker; and a Positive Team-builder.*

Ten principles of operational diplomacy:

1. National Interest
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Eight attributes of a diplomat:

1. A remover of obstacles
2. An achiever of objectives
3. An effective cross-cultural communicator
4. A reliable representative
5. A proactive learner
6. An illuminating analyst
7. A principled decision-maker
8. A positive team-builder