

Rethinking Global Diplomacy (Op-Ed)

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This summer the world celebrates the anniversaries of two historic diplomatic achievements. The Congress of Vienna, held 200 years ago, ended a long period of turmoil in Europe and laid the foundation for a system of relations that continued in one form or another for almost a century. Forty years ago in Helsinki, leaders signed the final act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe — also known as the Helsinki Accords — establishing harmonized interests on that continent. Today, those two agreements are considered opposites. The first was a classic of diplomatic backroom dealing and superpower intrigues. The second reflected a new values-based approach and included the so-called "third basket" of measures addressing cooperation on human rights and related issues.

However, these two diplomatic achievements are not opposites at all. Both long-term agreements were based on the existing balance of powers and held sway as long as that balance remained intact. Once it shifted, a new period of convulsion ensued.

It is impossible to achieve such a balance of powers today. Diplomacy now takes place amid complete international disharmony and the breakdown of the final remnants of world order. Consider these three recent examples of modern diplomacy: the Minsk process on Ukraine,

the agreement to resolve the debt crisis in Greece and the successful conclusion of negotiations on Iran's nuclear program.

The Minsk process is an example of a desperate attempt to stop massive bloodshed in a conflict without clearly defined participants or goals. Negotiators were forced to use very non-specific language because the participants refused to assume concrete responsibilities or obligations. As result, squabbles erupt not only over fulfillment of the terms, but even over who has the right to make that judgment. At the same time, all parties concur that no better arrangement is possible. And they are right: given the situation, no other approach is possible. Bringing a halt to the large-scale warfare is already a major achievement, but it appears impossible to establish a lasting peace. The situation is fragile and dangerous, but it illustrates a modern reality — namely, that in a world clearly in transition toward an indefinite future, some problems are inherently intractable. At best, leaders can only minimize the bloodshed and hardship they cause.

The talks on Iran's nuclear program took place in the same international milieu, but were the exact opposite in nature. Those negotiations dragged on for so long because the main participants — Tehran and Washington — sought to fix literally every step and contingency in writing, and spell everything out so clearly that nobody could interpret the words for their own purposes. The reason is simple: Both sides distrust the other completely. There was no chance for a gentlemen's agreement: They wanted every point on paper and all the verification and control mechanisms established in advance. Only in that way could they trust in its implementation — and the current agreement does provide grounds for such hope. In contrast to the Minsk agreement, the Vienna process has shown that if the parties know exactly what they want and sincerely want to negotiate, they can achieve a great deal — even in an unstable world.

Greece is another question. The compromise participants reached has left a heavy aftertaste in their mouths, along with the impression that force has been used against them. On the one hand, it has long been apparent that in the absence of a consensus, someone must take the lead and impose order on the euro zone. That "someone" is obviously Germany, the most powerful country in the European Union. On the other hand, that use of force immediately scared everyone and prompted concerns as to whether Germany actually knew what it was doing. Until now, Germany has practically forced Greece and its other partners to continue down a path first chosen five years ago, one that includes severe restructuring of underperforming economies without favoritism or exceptions. Confidence is waning that this is the correct approach, but Germany is a very systematic country: If it starts something, it will fastidiously follow it through to the very end. And this has given rise to a third type of negotiations — that is, when the strongest power dictates its will and the rest either obey voluntarily, or obey reluctantly, with fears and doubts.

The role of diplomacy has clearly increased in the past year and its effectiveness has also risen, in spite of everything. At the same time, there are clear limits to what diplomacy can achieve. One of main events of the past year was the emergence of the Islamic State, whose ability to grow in strength despite the best efforts of politicians, diplomats and armies negates many of the gains mentioned above.

The Islamic State is systematically dismantling the scheme by which the Middle East was

arranged in the 20th century. It is a vortex that sucks in people, states and socio-political structures. The bewildering popularity of the movement's almost inhuman cruelty — that goes beyond anything in Muslim culture or scripture and which groups Europeans and Russians together as a common enemy — calls for creating something even more far-reaching than the roots of Islamic extremism.

For years now the world has been experiencing a painful process of change. But now people are uncertain not only of the future, but of whether time-tested methods for coping with social problems are still effective. The growing influence of both right-leaning and left-leaning populism in Europe, the polarization of U.S. society, the destructive radicalization of the Middle East, the search for a new identity among the former Soviet republics, and even nervousness in China — the honor student in the school of globalization — have generated a demand for alternatives. Nobody can guarantee that this or that model will work, but demand, as always, begets supply — now in the form of new diplomatic and political initiatives.

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