

Nothing personal: The age of ego-diplomacy

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As could be expected, the events in North Africa and the Gulf have been interpreted as a massive failure of western intelligence. Nobody could have predicted that a desperate Tunisian man would chose to immolate himself in public and that his gesture would trigger a chain reaction that is shaking the world. However, the fact that aging and sick dictators governed Tunisia, Egypt and Libya with no credible plan for their succession and growing social tensions within their countries had been visible for a long time. And yet, nobody acted. Diplomats and the intelligence services are no doubt at fault, but is that the whole story? It may be worth looking at another factor that has acquired increasing importance in the recent past: personal diplomacy.

For a long time in the modern era, states have talked to each other through ambassadors and special envoys. Kings and leaders rarely met, mostly to consolidate alliances already negotiated. The more recent past and, up to now, this century has seen the decline of diplomacy and the rise of ‘summits’. Historians trace the turning point to Chamberlain’s decision to meet Hitler personally because “he thought he could understand Herr Hitler better than the diplomats”. Despite the tragic outcome of his initiative, the practice has developed and has become the predominant way to conduct international relations. There are several explanations for that. First, there is the Wilsonian belief that diplomacy should not be secret, but public and transparent (false: we see leaders meeting in public, but we don’t now what they tell each other). Some also believe that only leaders can break a stalemate (sometimes true). Finally, there is the conviction that personal chemistry is important (sometimes, but rarely, true). The overall result, however, is that vanity and instinct dominate at the expense of realism and sound analysis. The United States and European countries talk to each other all the time, but the only question that seems to bother our leaders is: Will I be invited to Camp David? Will Obama stop to see me on his next visit to Europe? Berlusconi has elevated the practice to an art form, theorizing that diplomacy is obsolete: the medium has become the message. However justified the sarcasm for the flamboyant Italian leader and his kitsch, he is after all doing what many other people do, albeit with more style. We should nevertheless ask the question: Is that the right way to handle dictators?

Few people would challenge the view that in the pursuit of national interest we must deal with all countries, regardless of their internal regime, and that this includes entering into economic and

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sometimes political agreements with them. But to expose the body and the smile of our elected leaders to the television viewers of the country concerned, particularly in places where memories of the colonial past and anti-western feelings are still strong, has a price tag attached to it. The message becomes: this has nothing to do with us; he is a friend of the dictator. In the case of North African rulers, there is even more, and worse, to it. These are people who ignore the separation between their personal wealth and the finances of the state. They and their families amass enormous fortunes that are invested in our banks and companies, but are also used to buy houses and mansions in London, Rome, Paris and New York. They, their wives, sons and daughters become part of the glamorous western social elite: they may be a bit extravagant, but they are part of 'us'. The fact that, exhausted by their wild parties in Megève, Saint Tropez and Sardinia, they go back to torture their people and plunder their resources, is hardly noticed. Our politicians relish invitations and holidays on the Nile.

The personal relationship with our Prime Ministers and Ministers is not only political but it also becomes social and sometimes acquires a business dimension. Is this relevant to the failure of our policy towards those countries? I believe it is. In the past few weeks I have spoken to a number of diplomats and asked why our governments had not been warned that those regimes were becoming increasingly unstable. The answer was that warnings had indeed been delivered (the wiki-leaks cables seem to confirm that, at least for the US), but that the reaction was: "We know them better than you; they tell us they are safe and we believe them." In many cases, overwhelmed by personal diplomacy, those demoralised, underpaid and understaffed 'faceless bureaucrats' in the diplomatic and intelligence services have become increasingly tempted to tell the leaders only what they want to hear. The dictators are declared stable because that is what is expected in high places, even if the facts point otherwise. To speak the truth would not only oblige us to review our policy, but would be a personal embarrassment for our leaders.

I don't claim that a different way to handle the relationship would have allowed us to modify the course of events: our influence on dictators has always been and remains limited. The right policy that the west should adopt implies choices that go well beyond the instruments of diplomacy. However, the more professional approach applied in the past would now allow our leaders to worry more about the national interest and less about their personal image. We would be in a much stronger position to brave the storm if we had exerted more caution, paid more attention to emerging forces in the civil society, overcome our fear that all dissent has a radical Islamist inspiration or noticed what was happening on the internet. Our money would no be less secure and our dignity would be more intact.

Personal diplomacy is going to stay with us and it can still be of value. Not all leaders are as dumb as Chamberlain. Reagan understood Gorbachev better than his diplomats. Only Carter could have sealed the deal between Sadat and Begin. But the process has gotten out of control. Was it necessary that Bulgarian nurses be liberated in Libya in front of the cameras and in the presence of the French President's wife? Is it wise that the British Prime Minister should engage in a tour of the Gulf in the middle of the storm? The problem is particularly acute for Europe. Our mid-sized countries have chosen to hide their decline with gestures. The personal vanity of our leaders has become one of the factors that make it difficult for the EU to speak with a single voice. The process needs to be scaled back. More attention should be paid to sound and unimpeded professional analysis; the wiki-leak's syndrome is a new problem, but there must be ways to cope with it. Ambassadors should be used whenever possible; Ministers when necessary. Heads of Government should make themselves scarce and therefore more effective. More vision and less television. After all, aren't we talking of 'subsidiarity'? This would be a way to implement it.