

War on Peace: The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Power

Review of Ronan Farrow's Book

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Members of the political corps of the U.S. writing about U.S. foreign policy have a particular insider viewpoint that can provide some good insights into how their diplomacy works along with the personal peculiarities of some of the actors involved. Ronan Farrow's War on Peace – The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Power works quite well at presenting some of the personalities involved within the U.S. State Department, a perspective gained from his own role within the department. For how the department actually works the writing is somewhat poorly defined, and while not fully contradictory, does pose some problems with the rationale behind the actual work of the State Department.

The main idea behind the work is an exploration of the downfall of the State Department and its losing out to the military, the Pentagon, rather than continuing the use of diplomacy to solve global problems. According to Farrow the U.S. has lost “the kind of thoughtful, holistic foreign policy analysis, unshackled from exigencies, that diplomacy once provided America.” This is “the story of a transformation in the role of the United States among the nations of the world.”

Along with the missing links in the above rationale Farrow also – not surprisingly – maintains a standard U.S. centric view of events, as he indicates Vietnam was “the first modern attempt at counter-insurgency...securing vulnerable populations while winning its loyalty through social programs.” If removing peasants from their villages by force, or simply massacring them as in My Lai, and if the Phoenix Program is an example of the “social programs”, then modern counter-insurgency is understandably violent and militarized. But I cannot be sure if this was being used as a positive example for his argument or a counter indicator. If diplomacy had been used in Vietnam, the UN sanctioned vote would have been held and Vietnam would have settled into a peaceful socialist state – one that admired the U.S. constitution!

Military threats – the not so hidden fist

From these early positions the argument for the downfall of the State Department wends its way through the various international scenarios common to anyone who has followed the mainstream news. Richard Holbrooke dominates the first section of the book, and is credited with using strong diplomacy to solve the Yugoslavia mess with the Dayton Accords. However, “Holbrooke achieved in Dayton only with the backing of the White House and the threat of military strikes he could meaningfully direct.”

Further on, Farrow writes, that Holbrooke “often talked about using the period of greatest military pressure as leverage to bring parties to the table. It was a tactic he used to great

success in the Balkans.” A logical conclusion to these two statements is that it was the military that provided the success and not the diplomacy. With an overwhelming preponderance of military force to call upon, Holbrooke’s “diplomacy” was essentially threats to use military force, not exactly diplomacy: “skill in managing international relations; adroitness in personal relations, tact.” [Oxford English dictionary].

While discussing relationships with Pakistan and the Taliban, Farrow argues that opposition to Holbrooke “may have squandered the United States’ period of maximum potential in the region. When U.S. troop deployment was high, both the Taliban and Pakistanis had incentives to come to the table and respond to tough talk.” Okay, once again the argument for diplomacy relies on military power rather than any “adroitness in personal relations.”

Foreign policy objectives?

When presenting his arguments about Trump’s full denial of diplomacy in favour of military solutions – essentially Trump capitulated responsibility to the military [hmm, much as Bush capitulated to Cheney and the neocons for government policy] – Farrow cites a State Department employee concerned that a military campaign in Syria was “at the expense of the longer term U.S. foreign policy objectives in the region.” Summarizing a few paragraphs later he argues, “these relationships [with foreign proxy militaries] invariably carry with them acute compromises to human rights and to broader strategic interests.”

What is undefined throughout the work are what are these “broader strategic interests”, what are the “foreign policy objectives in the region”? Democracy? Freedom? Rule of law? Modernization? Containing Russia? Protecting oil? Protecting the U.S. petrodollar? Global hegemony? Full spectrum dominance? From what you do speaking so loud I can’t hear what you are saying, I know which of the above would be the answer, yet they remain outside the arguments in the book.

A hint of these objectives is provided in the last chapter where Farrow presents a viewpoint on China’s rising diplomatic power, concluding that, “If China can mature as a diplomatic power as rapidly as it has as a force for economic development, America will have ceded one of the most important ways in which great powers shape the world.” It is an interesting argument in that it leaves out the military: China’s economic and diplomatic power across Asia, Africa, and into Latin America does not rely on a military backup as its military reach is only just now pushing back at the U.S. presence in the western Pacific.

State Department policy

When I think of those who have occupied the position of Secretary of State it seldom if ever falls under the rubric of diplomacy. Hillary Clinton’s diplomacy included a military coup in Honduras overthrowing a democratically elected government attempting land and social reform. Later she argued her way into Libya to get rid of Gaddafi not because of his lack of democracy or a supposed looming genocide, but in order to prevent the sale of Libya’s oil in other than U.S. dollars to the Chinese. U.S. diplomacy in Libya’s case was full on military.

The list extends on back. Condoleezza Rice oversaw the rejection of the democratic elections in Palestine in 2006, leading to Israel’s creation of the Gaza open air prison. Colin Powell is well known for his false presentation to the UN concerning Iraq and the ignoring of the best intelligence indicating Iraq did not have nuclear or other WMDs. Madeleine Albright’s brightest comment was her admission that the price of five hundred thousand

deaths in Iraq was worth the price of sanctions against Saddam Hussein, a comment worthy of U.S. diplomacy. James Baker's diplomacy included a threatened nuclear strike to eliminate Hussein and Iraq during the Kuwait crisis in 1991. Henry Kissinger played a role in U.S.- Soviet détente, but also supported Pinochet's military coup against Allende, and supported Argentina's 'dirty war' with its use of U.S. trained death squads.

But it is more than that. Yes, as Farrow argues, U.S. diplomacy has become weaker and the Pentagon has become dominant. The reality is that U.S. diplomacy has always relied on U.S. threats of military power, often spoken, often demonstrated. From its inception, the whole impulse of U.S. expansion has been based on military aggression. With current events, the façade of diplomacy has simply disappeared, unless one counts Trump's "Rocket Man" threats as diplomacy, as "adroitness in personal relations".

What is really happening is the overall loss of U.S. power in all aspects: economic, diplomatic, and military. The transformation is not just because the Pentagon has overridden the State Department although that is part of it. The full context of international relations is not discussed, omitting the rise of Russia as a military power, acting independently of U.S. interests, omitting the formal and informal economic and military/security ties between Russia/China and other Asian partners. It is also the rising awareness globally that U.S. intentions are entirely self centered for hegemonic control, along with the ability of countries to resist that control militarily and economically. When discussing U.S. diplomatic initiatives that all needs to be presented as context to the overall discussion, and it is not.

The initial premise of "War on Peace" is correct, but the missing contextual information implies that at some point diplomacy actually worked – as it did backed by military threats and actions as presented by Ronan Farrow. Apart from the logical flaws of the argument which I have dwelled on at length here, "War on Peace" is well enough written in an anecdotal manner that it does present a view of the infighting and manipulations occurring within the government.

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