



## INTERVIEWS

This section of the *Journal* features an interview with Wess Mitchell, former Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. In the interview, Michaela Dodge asks questions about Mitchell's recently published book *Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft from Attila the Hun to Kissinger*.

### **An Interview With Wess Mitchell, author of *Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft from Attila the Hun to Kissinger***

***Q. What was the most surprising lesson learned from studying careers of successful diplomats in the past?***

A. One thing that struck me while writing the book is how much past practitioners of diplomacy conceived of their trade in terms of constraints. Classical diplomacy has been the art of using negotiations to constrain the options of another power, especially a potential adversary, while keeping one's own options as open as possible.

I was also struck by how limited the uses of money have been in diplomacy. In the modern era we put a lot of stock in financial leverage and sanctions. Historically, money has not been a very powerful motivator. I found a lot of examples of states using money successfully to persuade another country to do something *for* them, but not many examples of them using money successfully to prevent someone from doing something harmful *to* them. Money in other words is better at attraction than coercion or compellence.

***Q. Your book is short on policy recommendations for today's practitioners. Why is that?***

A. Books with policy recommendations don't age very well. There are several reasons for that. One is that they inevitably lead the author to think about the past in terms of the present, which hampers his understanding of the past itself. Another is that policy is fluid. The policy debate is constantly shifting, so a book written with the present in mind will generate insights that quickly become irrelevant. When you pick up a book written during the Cold War about the policy debates of that time, it's like stale bread. It only holds interest to a narrow segment of people who are studying the decision-making dynamics and personalities of that time. I wanted to write a book that would aspire to some timeless truths. Something a person can pick up twenty years from now and learn something useful about diplomacy without knowing today's foreign policy debates and personalities involved in contemporary foreign policy decisions.



***Q. What would be your top three policy recommendations how to restore diplomatic competency within the U.S. government?***

A. We need to get back to the basics of diplomacy as a tool for advancing the national interest, narrowly defined. After the post-Cold War, U.S. foreign policy embraced a transformationalist agenda. We wanted to remake the world in our image by spreading liberal economics, which was supposedly going to lead to political liberalization. The idea was to eventually transform other countries, including our main rivals Russia and China, into liberal democracies.

That project has failed, and now we are in a very different era of history where great powers are competing for the things they have competed over for millennia: territory, resources, allies, prestige. We would benefit from refocusing diplomacy on its age-old fundamentals, which revolve around cultivating skills for advancing core interests in competition with other states.

Diplomatic bureaucracy has to maintain a disciplined focus on those skills. Bureaucracy emerges in the history of diplomacy as a way of gaining advantage in competition. The Byzantines for example created a “Bureau of Barbarians” and its job was to gather and preserve certain forms of strategic knowledge that gave the empire an edge. Those included things like amassing particularist details about the geography, languages and habits of neighboring states and tribes, keeping records of past treaties, teaching envoys how to negotiate.

Since the Cold War, U.S. diplomacy has strayed from these core missions. Over time, the State Department developed a bigger and bigger bureaucracy, and its mission strayed into all kinds of things that aren’t directly connected to diplomacy. Like other U.S. public institutions, the State Department embraced prevailing progressive political orthodoxies. Everything from public diplomacy to hiring and advancement practices came to reflect “woke” proclivities. And along the way, the Department allowed the truly important disciplines, like deep regional expertise and negotiating skills, to atrophy. I found this out when I was an Assistant Secretary. We were negotiating an agreement with another country. I asked my people who in the Department was seen as a good negotiator to advise us on the process. The response was silence. The system is not designed to reward good negotiators. It actively discourages deep accumulation of expertise.

Secretary Pompeo took a big step to address that with his initiative to professionalize the State Department. Marco Rubio is building on that now with his reform effort. That’s consistent with the pattern I saw in my book. Time and time again, bureaucracies stretch their missions as they grow, but when the geopolitical scene worsens, states refocus bureaucracy on its main mission. Most of the great practitioners of diplomacy were also great reformers, who wrangled bureaucracy back into alignment with the needs of the state or bypassed it and created their own channels.

***Q. In your book, you illustrate that diplomacy can delay a state having to fight a multi-front war. But it seems to me that in doing so, successful diplomacy contains seeds of a***

***state's own demise because a sense of security makes it more difficult to muster support for the military capabilities a state needs to counter the rising challenge. What do you think?***

A. There are probably examples in which that dynamic is present. But diplomacy's job in strategy is to provide an expedient for bridging gaps between the means at a state's disposal (especially its military power) and the ends, or external threats, to which those resources can be applied. This comes into play most when a state faces threats too numerous to deter or defeat with the power immediately at its disposal. That does not mean of course that the resulting policies are always wise or that they will always succeed. Late in his negotiations with Hitler, for example, Neville Chamberlain came to believe that his diplomacy would *remove* the need for Britain to continue its military buildup. But in most cases I looked at, states were using diplomacy with rivals at the same time that they were engaged in military buildups to deter the adversary.

One of the most important roles of diplomacy historically has been to facilitate strategic concentration. In the early 1900s, British leaders used a series of diplomatic agreements to temporarily "turn off" several theaters of competition demanding their naval and military attention. This enabled the British to concentrate naval assets in the North Sea vis-à-vis the main threat, which was Imperial Germany. There are numerous examples in my book of great powers using diplomacy in this way. Properly understood, diplomacy is a tool that aids a state in making the optimal use of its military resources. As I say in the book, it is the instrument *par excellence* for rearranging power in space and time. So its role is intimately connected with force.

***Q. Is diplomacy, then, the art of delaying the inevitable?***

A. It can be, and it has played that role on occasion in the past. That role is important and we should not trivialize it. For example, the Edwardian Brits extended the life of their empire, and all the benefits that entailed, by perhaps a generation or more.

But it is not categorically true. Great powers also use strategic diplomacy in their prime to expand or enhance their power position. A great power doesn't have to be in decline to perceive gaps between means and ends, or to have a practical need to delay or avoid a major war. Look for example at Otto von Bismark. He was a Chancellor when the German Empire was at the peak of its power. He used diplomacy astutely to keep Germany's rivals divided and avoid a situation where his empire would get strangled in the cradle by a two-front attack by Russia and France. That didn't just avoid war, it also helped Germany avoid open-ended defense buildups.

Diplomacy really is an art of managing time and devising a system of constraints in ways that are affordable, but this is not done only in moments of decline.

***Q. What is the most striking difference between the past and the present conduct of diplomacy?***

A. In the modern era, diplomacy has come to be thought of as something separate from competition. In the liberal conception, it is a kind of escape hatch from competition. On this view, people are rational and conflicts arise from misunderstandings. Diplomacy's job is to clear up the misunderstandings. And build multilateral institutions that will eventually transcend the nation-state itself and expunge war from the human condition. That would allow mankind to reach a kind of nirvana, where would realize Immanuel Kant's dream of a world without conflict.

Historically, diplomacy was widely understood not as a tool for escaping competition but for *excelling* at it. It was an instrument of strategy that leaders use to gain an advantage. In other words it was integral to conflict. I think this is the classical form of diplomacy that we will have to rediscover in the emerging era of great-power competition.

***Q. What is the most surprising consistency?***

A. Throughout history the most consistent feature of diplomacy has been the manipulation of constraints. Properly understood, diplomacy is a defensive tool that was historically used by conservative states to prevent a hostile power conglomeration. Negotiations with an opponent are not a gift or a form of surrender. They are about gaining time and leverage and allies for oneself and limiting their availability to an opponent who would use them against you.

We see this mentality re-emerging in the current international landscape. The diplomacy of the Trump Administration is inherently competitive in nature. It is about reshaping the gameboard to America's advantage, and not about advancing a nebulous "rules-based international order." It puts the national interest back where it belongs, at the forefront of our statecraft.

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