The Future of Diplomacy: The Case of the UK and China

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Question 1

Just to pursue that thought on the difference between what is said and what is done, I’m not unsympathetic to your vision of a use for the diplomatic service. But this great, broad engagement that you describe, which has grown up in the last 20 or 30 years, seems to me to be under increasing question from the top. Things like Document 9, the explicit rejection of that list of things. To James’ list I would add that the kind of cultural engagement (sporting, academic, people-to-people engagement) that you describe accurately is going now to come under the control of the security police. I don’t really see that that is a promising step for the future. So I’m interested in whether you see this as something that is said but not done, or as something that will be done. What does that then mean for your thesis? The draft law on non-government engagement, foreign non-government entities, which is so loosely defined as to include universities, cultural groups, pretty much everything that is not government, will now be under the supervision of the security police and will require the permission thereof. This has had already a big chilling effect on that kind of engagement. So I’m just curious, instead of, as we perhaps all imagined, that there would be more and more of this kind of engagement, what we see is a very chilly fog right now on the future of that sort of contact.

Kerry Brown

I can remember doing a project on civil society in 2009, and I think then foreign civil society actors in Beijing particularly said it was a really bad time. I think they would have been dismayed if six years later it had got worse, and it has. I think it has. Civil society is now under an enormous pressure in China. But tactically, I think that is an area in fact that the EU is really well placed to deal with because many projects – not from the UK but from Germany, Sweden – have supported civil society development. There was one big project funded by the EU about village democracy, I think in Yunnan province, from 2000 to 2005, which kind of stopped. But I think those things we shouldn’t give up on, as the EU, on the argument that the EU has a vibrant civil society and is very exemplary in that respect.

I think also the position should be that we do believe that civil society is important for a developed kind of society that is stable and where people are participating. So the government in Beijing at the moment says they believe that too. They believe in participation through township elections and trying to develop these things, but for some reason they have not built consensus among the elite. They have not created consensus. There is a problem. I don’t think these issues are so much a problem – I mean, they are a problem for us because we should show solidarity with actors in China. But to me, the more distressing problem is obviously in China about a fundamentally important thing for the building of a better, more stable and more diverse and more participatory society: there is no consensus at the moment on how they do that. They are therefore, my interpretation would be, stalling.

I think what we can do is to continue to argue and support our belief that civil society is absolutely important. The legal infrastructure, the funding, the support and the participation of civil society is absolutely fundamental for the kind of service sector, consuming, urban middle class. We either believe that or we don’t. I think we believe it and we have evidence, and therefore we should try to intellectually demonstrate it every opportunity that we can. But it’s very distressing at the moment, it’s not an easy time.

Question 2

James, you’re talking about chauvinism in the region, but ‘One Belt, One Road’ is taking shape now. Maybe I can ask you, Kerry: in 20 years’ time, will ‘One Belt, One Road’ be reality?
Kerry Brown

I think in some ways it already is, inasmuch as China in the Middle East and Central Asia has created a kind of zone where most of the governments in that area, from Pakistan to India even, feel that they have a common trading understanding with China and that is the most important for their economic destiny. Will it create a sort of zone of benign diplomatic intent toward China? I would be really suspicious. Russia, for instance, just as an example: we would say at the moment that it's got a great relationship, Russia and China. They've done this big energy deal and Putin has lost all his friends elsewhere, but he still gets to see Xi Jinping all the time. Anyone you ask really in either Moscow or Beijing, what is the common strategic bond, the deep bond between Russia and China, they start to scowl a bit. Where is their real long-term, historic endgame? China wants to be very dominant and Russia also wants to be dominant. Who's got the better chance? So I don't think we can be too relaxed about a kind of new Silk Road of common diplomatic intent. I think it's a bit of a veneer. It's all about trade and as long as that trade flows, it will be cool. When it stops, people will suddenly no longer want the Belt – no longer want the Road, they want the Belt.

Question 3

You've used the word 'efficiency' a couple of times when referring to dialogue with civil society, in the context of human rights and also political discussion. I'd like to press you on that, whether you're talking about it being only possible at what you might call a mechanistic type of level – efficiency, values-free – and whether in effect that's the only way that it would be tolerated by the security services and so on. What is the scope? Is it as limited as that?

Kerry Brown

When you have no consensus between two parties, as sometimes seems to be the case between China, for instance, and the UK, then going for relatively easy things like the mechanistic option is probably a means to an end. But what is the end we want to get to? I would say it's not a super great thing that in China, certainly a couple of years ago and it's probably not gone down, they spend $111 billion per year on domestic security. That's $5 million more than on national defence, which is an extraordinary – how can you spend so much on the 200,000 disputes that happen every year? I think any policymaker would look at that and think, we could do something different here. If we had even 0.1 per cent of that amount of public dispute in the UK, I think we would be really, really worried.

So I think talking in those terms where it's obvious from the budget line of domestic security that this isn't working, it's rather more fruitful than to come along and say there are generic issues of justice and we therefore think – we believe that and we think you should accept that. We may well get to that point one day. I don't think there's any great difference, when you look at classical Chinese texts on issues of justice, there doesn't seem to be a very profound difference on the values placed on human life and these things. But it seems to me that when you're looking at the political context in which we talk about them, that is different. We don't spend $111 billion of our budget on domestic security. I don't think any Western government would be super happy about creating a security service with that amount of money. Once you create these goons they just go and cause bedlam everywhere. You just don't want them, they're a pain in the – sorry, we're being recorded. They're problematic and I think we'd better be spending it on transparent diplomacy rather than smoke and dagger stuff.
Question 4

I’m a Scottish merchant trading in China, and I am extremely optimistic about China. I’ve been doing it for 50 years and I’ve never seen China more open or more helpful than they are at the moment. I think we have enormous businesses in China now and I think in 20 years’ time they will be even bigger. Our experience of China is we have absolute accessibility to leadership. We can discuss any problem with anybody. In private we can even talk about things they want to talk about, such as human rights. I don't think, on the other hand, that megaphone diplomacy does any good with the Chinese. I think our leadership can say anything they want to them in private and I’m sure they do so. You had a bit of a swipe at the Foreign Office, Kerry. I think people have got to stand on their own feet. The Foreign Office have got to do their own thing. There are occasions when the Foreign Office can be quite helpful. On the other hand, there are occasions when they can be very unhelpful. The tragedy of British-Hong Kong relations was the appointment of Lord Patten as governor of Hong Kong. That was a very unwise thing to do and we’re still suffering from that at the moment.

James Kynge

Kerry writes about that extensively in the book.

Question 4

Anyway, I’m not asking you a question, I’m just saying I’m an optimist about China.

Question 5

I wanted to come back to the Foreign Office but in a different sense. As you’re trying to convert the Foreign Office into a think tank, I’m just wondering what will you do to persuade the chancellor of the exchequer that he should make money available for that kind of activity. As you know, embassies are being turned into sort of trade missions. No doubt the Foreign Office is going to have more cuts before too long. So how do you think you can get this activity going?

Kerry Brown

I think it’s making them fairly entrepreneurial. Secondments is a good thing. We don’t really have many secondments from academia. The Chinese service does and that’s a way of enriching the kind of diversity of embassies and consulates, so that’s one way. But I think you’re right, the Foreign Office has a crushing budget reduction. That’s true in Australia too. Foreign services are always easy to attack but they’re very small amounts of money. I think if there's more visible public service, certainly to businesses and universities and other important institutions, these people hopefully speak up for you and lobby their MPs and politicians to give more resources. But maybe I’m being realistic.

James Kynge

I’m very sorry but my brief here does say ‘close the meeting promptly’, and it is two o’clock now. I’m sure Kerry will hang around for a bit later if you have any more questions, but please join me in showing our very warm appreciation to Kerry. Fantastically insightful.