Transcript

Only Diplomacy: Hard-Headed Soft Power for a Time of Risk, Scarcity and Insecurity

John Ashton
Foreign Secretary’s Special Representative for Climate Change, FCO, UK

21 February 2011
John Ashton:

You may think, after two decades, that climate diplomacy has come a long way. We have built a mountain of words. But the view from the top of it shows we have hardly started.

Today I want to talk about the way ahead, as seen from the top of that mountain.

We face a simple choice. We can do what we think we can, knowing it will not suffice. Or we can stay focussed on what needs doing, knowing that to do it we must find the will to expand the limits of the possible.

Our mission as practitioners of foreign policy is to summon collective will among nations in order to protect national interests. We now need to make the climate project - not just the negotiation but the project - central to that mission. We should have done that long ago.

Why climate change is different

Humanity has never faced a problem like climate change.

Unlike poverty, hunger, disease, and terrorism it affects everybody.

Climate change is a ticking clock that we cannot stop or slow down. Once the burden of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere exceeds any given level, the climate it represents is gone for good.

We normally respond to problems by doing our best. If that’s not enough we try again. The ticking clock means that the first attempt has to succeed. The essence is not what we must do but how quickly we must do it.

Climate change is systemic risk with a deadline and without the option of a bailout.

We need to make the global economy essentially carbon neutral in little more than a generation, and resilient to the climate change we cannot now avoid. That means aligning national choices, rooted in national politics, to build national economies that are carbon neutral and resilient.

For diplomacy, this is an existential test. What is required is has some features in common with what we have accomplished at existential moments in the past. But the sheer effort it asks of us must match any we have ever summoned – and then some.
How we got here

Shortly before the Earth Summit in 1992 a tense conversation took place. A senior State Department official telephoned Michael Howard, John Major’s Environment Secretary. He tried to reopen an earlier understanding reached with the US by Howard’s predecessor Michael Heseltine. In a forensically argued defence that became legendary with officials, Howard held the line. The understanding stood.

At stake was the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which was duly agreed at Rio. It had many fathers but those involved certainly felt that Michael Howard’s tenacity had kept the US on board.

Under the Convention, industrialised countries aimed to ‘return their emissions ……to 1990 levels’. Despite this non-binding commitment, their actual emissions kept rising. But that possibility had at least been anticipated.

The Convention requires Parties to review from time to time the adequacy of their commitments against the goal of avoiding dangerous climate change. In 1995, the first such review gave rise to the so-called Berlin Mandate, launching negotiations on a new set of commitments. That concluded in 1997 with agreement on the Kyoto Protocol, which put binding caps on emissions from industrialised countries.

But no treaty is stronger than the political foundation it rests on, and Kyoto’s was fragile. All along there had been tensions: over the level of ambition; the division of effort between rich and poor countries; how binding the promises made should be; and whether they should be based on outputs – emission caps across the economy – or inputs, in the form of pledged policy commitments. Ironically it was the US that persuaded Europe to go for binding caps.

The tensions originated in national politics. Indeed in the US, by 1997 the Gingrich revolution had completely altered the political context. A resolution passed by the Senate shortly before the Protocol was concluded made it look unlikely that it would secure the 67 votes in that Chamber needed for ratification. As Kyoto was being born, some, especially in the US, were already rushing to write its obituary.

In 2001 the new Bush Administration announced that it would not ask the Senate to ratify the Protocol. If Russia too defaulted, Kyoto would indeed be dead. Uncertainty over Kyoto’s fate became a diplomatic black hole, sucking the life out of all attempts to move forward, beyond 2012 when the first cycle of Kyoto caps expires.
Russia’s decision in 2004 to ratify, a product of informal diplomacy, pulled us out of the gravitational field, and opened the way for the push to Copenhagen.

There followed a series of moves, many initiated by the UK, to build political momentum.

In 2005, an international conference in Exeter got the growing alarm of scientists onto front pages. The Gleneagles G8 Summit made climate an issue for leaders. The Stern Review in 2006 made it an economic issue. Margaret Beckett’s debate in the UN Security Council in 2007 made it a security issue. Some tried to prevent that debate, but many of the world’s poorest countries were impatient to testify to the insecurity they were by now feeling as a result of climate-related stresses.

The EU’s adoption that year under German Presidency of binding targets for 2020 without waiting for a new agreement challenged others to move from ‘after you’ to ‘follow me’. And climate change clearly mattered to the new US President, elected the following year.

As Copenhagen approached, the limits of the possible really did seem to be stretching. The major economies agreed to try to keep climate change within 2ºC. Many governments made new national pledges.

So what went wrong?

As William Hague has said Copenhagen was a failure of will not of process. Too many saw the risk to growth and jobs of promising too much as more dangerous than an inconclusive Summit. Too few saw climate change as an urgent threat to national interests.

Thanks to outstanding Mexican diplomacy, Cancun got the train back on track. Chris Huhne played a key role in persuading participants to set aside their most intractable differences to be dealt with later. That allowed progress elsewhere, and a cathartic healing of Copenhagen wounds. The global conversation at the heart of the climate project, though still frail, remained alive.

Where we are

Standing on top of our word mountain, what have we got; what has changed on the way up; what have we learned?

We aim to avoid a danger threshold of 2ºC. Our national carbon pledges now have the authority of the UN. But they would in aggregate carry us closer to 4ºC than 2ºC.
And that difference matters. Below 2ºC, there is thought to be a lower risk of passing tipping points that could trigger self-amplifying climate instability. The risk is much greater that the first such tipping points lie somewhere between 2 and 4ºC. So we will need to make full use of the new adequacy review agreed at Cancun.

The pledges are also non-binding. They are held in limbo by a triple lock. The US will not make more contractual promises than China, which will not be internationally bound at least without greater domestic ambition from the US. Meanwhile, many of the most vulnerable countries, as well as Europe, insist on a binding regime.

We are building frameworks to help developing countries deal with climate risk, deploy low carbon technologies and keep forests standing. Developed countries have promised to mobilise $100 bn annually by 2020 for these frameworks.

This whole architecture will operate in the open, with transparency rules to ensure that commitments are seen to be met.

Real progress, yes. But between the transformational promise and its fulfilment like Augustine the world still hesitates – we still hesitate. We have started to will the ends but not yet the means. Yes, but not now. Yes, but not us.

And times have changed.

True, science now tells us climate change is a more dangerous and urgent threat than we first thought. Experience supports this. Countries on the edge, from Australia to Bolivia, Cuba to Pakistan are being hit by the kind of damage the climate models warned about. New studies, like the one published last week on the floods in the UK of the year 2000, are detecting ever more clearly the human fingerprint in extreme weather events.

But 20 years ago, the future seemed ours to shape. The iron curtain had opened reuniting a continent in freedom. Globalisation promised a new wave of affluence.

Now, at least in the OECD, we are anxious, as we try to convalesce from the worst economic crisis in 80 years. Cheap energy is gone and rising oil prices threaten the recovery. Jobs, pensions, savings and living standards feel less secure. Terrorism casts a shadow. Politics is less trusted.
True, the emerging economies quickly regained momentum, pulling us all forward. But that momentum also locks in carbon emissions and drives up resource prices.

So two decades on there is more reason to act. But decisive action requires confidence and there is less of that around. Expanding the limits of the possible is a tougher ask than it was when the barriers at so many checkpoints in the landscape of possibility had just been swept away.

There are lessons to learn.

First, science is no longer enough. The science-driven climate project achieved a lot. But Copenhagen was its apogee. Science alone cannot take us further. As Tom Burke tells us, we now need a politics-driven climate project. Of course informed by science, but driven by politics.

Second, climate security is imperative for prosperity, security and equity; for food, water, and energy security; for the open global economy, cooperation and the international rule of law. This is not just another environmental issue. We were wrong to treat it as one and must stop doing so.

Third, systemic risks must be neutralised before they trigger systemic crises. The economic theory that guides our decisions undervalues resilience. The compass it gives us is not fit for purpose.

Tunisians first came onto the streets in protest at high food prices, driven up by climatically-intensified supply shocks. Climate change is a stress multiplier. It is hard to imagine a more effective engine than our interconnected insecurities over climate, food, water and energy for driving angry young people onto the streets of crowded cities. That engine cannot be switched off in a high carbon economy.

So the fourth lesson is that this is a today problem not a tomorrow problem. Politically it is about us not our grandchildren. We need to begin the heavy lifting now: not only because we have to if we want to avoid those tipping points, but also because climate change seems increasingly to be biting hard already.

The Choice

Our efforts so far have made little impression in the one place that really matters, in the real economy. Low carbon capital flows remain small compared with the investment flowing into the high carbon economy, locking in emissions for the lifetime of each new car, building or power station.
There can only be one test of the choice we now face. Will it divert the river of capital quickly enough to keep us within 2°C?

We need to send a signal so strong, so convincing, that it aligns countless individual choices. It has to be a global signal, made through the UN, to give us the common purpose we need, and to make our response feel unstoppable.

There are only two approaches.

There is bottom up. National commitments come together in a package, updated from time to time in a process of ‘pledge and review’. The commitments can be reflected in national legislation. But laws drive action more predictably in some countries than others. The regime is not internationally binding.

A politically binding promise is easier to make than a legally binding one. That is because it is easier to break if keeping it becomes politically difficult.

People can see through the phrase ‘politically binding’. It conveys no inevitability. It is a weak signal. It says: ‘we will make the easy choices, but will probably shy away from the difficult ones.

The other model also includes bottom up pledges. But there is in addition a top down action-forcing mechanism.

Parties hold themselves accountable under international law for keeping their promises, and for tightening them in accordance with the 2°C goal. This says: ‘we accept we cannot control the clock; but we know we need to move at the pace it sets and shall do so’.

Neither model is currently capable of securing consensus. In any case, we should address the question of what is necessary before asking what is more likely to be negotiable in current circumstances.

It is simply not credible to argue that bottom up alone offers what we need. Only a binding regime can create a force field strong enough to align those countless choices. Only a binding regime can convince those whose capital allocation decisions shape the economy that a high carbon business model will expose them to greater risk and hit their returns harder than betting now on low carbon; that governments in other words are serious; that these promises will be kept even if the going gets rough.

A leading investor in British infrastructure recently told me that his company would not invest in our low carbon transition. He admired our ambition, but
the politics would get too difficult and we wouldn’t stay the course. We will. But our policies will fail if investors don’t believe us.

All commitments need not be equally binding immediately. It just needs to be clear that the regime will revolve around an expanding set of binding emission caps across the whole economy, compatible with the 2°C threshold, with more countries coming in as they become more prosperous and emit more.

Kyoto embodies this. The essence of Kyoto is its binding caps not its distinction between developed and developing countries. Abandoning Kyoto now would be seen as giving up on top down. Many would see it as giving up altogether. But there is plenty of scope over successive cycles for newly prosperous economies to take caps.

**Only Diplomacy**

To bind or not to bind. Right now we seem trapped between the necessary and the merely impossible.

But there is a way out. Law is an output from politics not an input. We must establish the political conditions necessary to support the climate treaty we need.

That is a job for foreign policy. It is not about the negotiations themselves and cannot be done inside the negotiations. It is not primarily about international climate policy. It is about national debates on security, prosperity and equity, and how climate change speaks into those debates.

Most foreign policy elites have yet to embrace and act on this. It would not be harsh to call that a failure of diplomacy.

Diplomats have focussed more on what can be accomplished within the negotiations themselves, as if a global negotiation could drive national politics. But as we found at Copenhagen and accepted at Cancun, if there is no alignment of purpose no negotiated text can bridge the gap. The diplomacy we now need must build that alignment.

**Diplomats have done this kind of thing before**

In the Cold War, diplomats on either side helped build a shared imperative that operated across frontiers like a political force field, organising entire societies and, yes, legitimising countless individual choices. That is what we need to do now.
In the Cold War, diplomats like George Kennan forged doctrines that made sense of those choices. The climate project will fail without a doctrine of climate security, which we do not yet have.

In the Cold War, because failure was unthinkable, the effort was served not limited by economics. The climate project too needs that overriding clarity of purpose. But this time there is only one side and we are all on it, and the effort will actually support the economy by getting us off the oil hook and easing the resource stresses that now threaten us.

Now as then, technology is the key. Then it was missiles we hoped never to fire, to avoid Mutually Assured Destruction. Now we need Mutually Assured Construction of the infrastructure for a low carbon world.

Again we must summon shared will between nations, through a collective reappraisal of national interests to take account of an existential threat and to drive a challenging but available response.

Diplomats engaged existentially with the Cold War, and we now need to do so on climate change.

We need to make the low carbon economy feel more like an opportunity; climate risk feel more threatening; a binding treaty feel more necessary and achievable.

There is more debate around the world now about where future growth will come from than there has been for a generation. That is a consequence of the economic crisis and the realisation that we are moving from abundance to scarcity.

So the first task for diplomats is to ensure that the answer to the growth question, in all the major economies – as it now is in Korea, is low carbon growth.

That’s why David Miliband got us working with China on low carbon growth and why we welcomed China’s decision last year to establish low carbon economic zones encompassing 350 million people.

Without climate security, we will lose control of food, water and energy security.

So the second task for diplomats is to build a shared doctrine of climate risk. This needs to animate those in all countries to whom leaders turn for advice on what is necessary to ensure national security. This must establish 2ºC as an imperative.
That’s why my colleague Rear Admiral Neil Morisetti is working with security elites in many countries to build a shared approach to climate security, and why with partners we now want to bring this issue back to the UN Security Council.

As in any political landscape there is a tension between those who want to go faster, and those who do not: the forces of high and low ambition. Out of this tension come the mandates that officials take to the climate negotiations.

The third task for diplomats is to strengthen the forces of high ambition everywhere so that negotiators will have mandates that allow them to make promises that are more ambitious, more binding.

There is only one way to do that. It is not to lecture others on their interests, but to do ourselves what we want others to do: to say again, ‘follow me’. Diplomats need to make the foreign policy case for higher ambition at home.

Renewal

This calls for a renewal not just of climate diplomacy but of diplomacy itself.

I claimed earlier that climate change was an existential challenge for diplomats. In fact the true challenge comes from the underlying condition of which climate change is a manifestation.

That condition is the unprecedented degree of interdependence that has come with globalisation. This is not a marginal adjustment to the context within which diplomacy is practiced – a kind of diplomatic externality. It forces us into a frame of reference that differs fundamentally from anything diplomats have experienced before.

Interdependence confronts us with new problems, and makes familiar problems more acute. We need climate security, yes, but also resource security, financial and macroeconomic stability, and an open global economy. We need to neutralise the risks arising from global pandemics, state failure, mass displacement of people, international organised crime, and nuclear proliferation.

These interconnected problems threaten the system conditions for security, prosperity, and equity in an interdependent world. They can only be resolved by creating the political conditions for convergent responses across national and sectoral boundaries at a sufficient level of ambition.

There are no hard power solutions to the problems of interdependence. But unless we can deploy soft power effectively against them, they will certainly
give us hard power headaches. We must learn to use soft power as a precision instrument: not just as an attractor but to achieve specific predetermined political outcomes.

**Welcome to a world with no abroad**

In such a world, the question for diplomats is no longer who has the most power. It does not matter how much power you have if you cannot use it to secure what you need. We need to ask how we can harness and direct the forces unleashed by interdependence. How can we bend into alignment the way nations see their interests when the system conditions we all need depend on it.

That truly is our existential question. If we diplomats do not answer it, nobody else will: not our colleagues in Ministries for climate, energy, agriculture, development, trade, or even finance. Yes they can design policy regimes in the areas for which they have responsibility and expertise. But only we can push up the level of shared ambition that animates those regimes by connecting them to the political impulses and narratives of others. And if we do not do this, foreign policy itself will become ever less effective as the crises of unmanaged interdependence increasingly overwhelm our ability to cope.

Through a renewal of diplomacy we can shape the destiny of the societies we serve. Through business as usual diplomacy we can allow events to shape it for us in a way that pleases noone (to borrow from Carlyle). It is our choice.

Climate change is at the fulcrum of that choice. A successful response to climate change will ease many of the other stresses and make interdependence easier to deal with. But if we fail, climate change will multiply those stresses to the point where the system conditions will not hold.

The British Foreign Office has invested more than any other Foreign Ministry in the kind of climate diplomacy I have described, working alongside and in complementarity with our colleagues in the Department of Energy and Climate Change. Our experience is not only helping to establish more favourable political conditions for success on climate. It is also telling us a lot about how to renew our profession. As a senior colleague recently put it, what we are doing on climate is a model for 21st century diplomatic excellence.

It is teaching us that if we want others to act we must do so ourselves. William Hague has urged that foreign policy flow through the veins of domestic departments. That means domestic policy must flow through our veins too. It
becomes our responsibility to shape policy in areas previously regarded as exclusively domestic.

We must get better at dealing in language and narrative as well as policy. Narrative gives meaning to policy. It binds coalitions. The forces of low ambition on climate have used it skilfully. You cannot deal with climate change if you cannot talk about it.

We must get better at engaging beyond governments. That means using network diplomacy to understand the perspectives of businesses, the media, NGO’s, academics, faith communities, and to build alliances with them.

We must distinguish more clearly between process and outcomes. We diplomats revel in process. But we must use it rigorously to change conditions in the real world. There are too many communiqués that nobody reads except those who negotiated them.

Never ask ‘what can we agree?’ before asking ‘what needs to be agreed?’ If there is a gap, focus on the political conditions not just the text. Get ahead of the event horizon. Ask where the politics need to be not at the end of the current crisis or the next conference, but over a political cycle. Invest now in new impulses that might change the game in five years.

My profession is full of outstanding people: talented, brave, dedicated to public service, even - though nobody wants to be accused of it - visionary. But seen from the outside, we can appear a somewhat tired elite, closed and set in our ways, complacent even, at risk of being overtaken by the complexities of interdependence.

I am sometimes asked why the British Foreign Office puts so much effort into climate change, consistently under 3 consecutive Foreign Secretaries.

The security and prosperity of over 60 million British people depend on a successful global response to climate change. The taxpayer pays for the Foreign Office in order to maintain the external conditions for Britain’s security and prosperity. That makes it our core business to deploy to the fullest extent possible the assets of foreign policy in support of the shared effort on climate across a government that David Cameron is determined to make our greenest government ever.

We do this, in other words, because it is our job. But we will only succeed in our job if you make it yours as well.