Rapporteur Report

Cultural Dialogue in International Security:

Managing Security Risks through Cross-Cultural Dialogue

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Introduction

In a globalised world with a diverse array of security risks, decision-makers have found multilateral collaboration increasingly necessary for successful risk mitigation. Although a number of multilateral forums have been constructed in an attempt to meet this demand, their effectiveness has been limited. While national interests bring actors to the table, these actors bring with them variegated and at times clashing cultural perceptions. While two societies may be exposed to the same risk, their interpretation of it may differ, consequently leading to different responses. Therefore, contrasting expressions of values from different cultures often create a barrier to the efficient management of security risks in the international system. In recognising the critical distinction between values and norms, participants can engage in a cross-cultural dialogue that leads to points of convergence on security cooperation.

The Cultural Dialogue in International Security Project seeks to create a neutral space in which decision-makers and thought leaders from different cultural backgrounds can come together and effectively address the complex security challenges that they all face. Through this interaction, the project seeks to create a framework of cross-cultural dialogue which recognises the inevitability of cultural difference and the divisive nature of competition for scarce resources.

This conference sought to investigate the ability of – and the opportunity for – countries from the Euro-Atlantic area to engage with other global players through cultural dialogue in order to effectively manage security risks. From the outset, it was noted that meaningful dialogue is often inhibited or obfuscated by Western attempts to ‘universalise’ their values, as Euro-Atlantic countries often assume that they ‘know what is best’ for other societies.

Security cooperation is particularly relevant in a time of prolonged financial crisis in the West when states are considering more protectionist stances in response to weaknesses in the international economic system. Conference participants considered that the crisis has undermined much of what the West has achieved in terms of economic integration and the export of its own model of liberal democracy. The projection of its soft power, based upon its previous successes, was therefore said to have been considerably diminished.

The framework and value of a cross-cultural dialogue in international security

The initial session of the conference laid out the inherent value of cross-cultural dialogue within the international system and sought to establish a framework through which it could be pursued. While it was acknowledged that cross-cultural dialogue was not the cure-all solution to mitigating security risks, there was a strong consensus among discussants that it is noticeably absent in contemporary efforts, and this is particularly true of Western states. These themes were discussed in the context of a growing understanding in the Euro-Atlantic area that, ultimately, Western leaders must recognise local ownership as a way of facilitating lasting and sustainable political change.

In order to investigate cultural perceptions within the international system, participants discussed Charles Taylor’s idea of the existence of three diverging ‘social imaginaries’. Taylor used the term ‘social imaginary’ to describe the way people envisage their social existence, how they relate to others and what normative expectations they have of differing parties. As shared perspectives of understanding, social imaginaries are products of culture and shared historical experiences. According to Christopher Coker, there are two social imaginaries competing for ‘the Western soul’. The first, liberal internationalism, conceives Western democratic values to be universal and ready for export internationally. The second, cosmopolitanism, offers a normative, behaviour driven image of social existence rather than one based on moral imperatives. Western values help to

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3 Coker, Christopher. "Cultural Dialogue: the Western Encounter with ‘the Rest’", p. 3
establish norms of behaviour within international institutions and these norms are then transferred to those that subscribe to these institutions, through their compliance with the rules of the game.

A third social imaginary, communitarianism, offers a non-Western understanding of the international system. In contrast to Western liberalism, it prioritises communitarian values, according to which social groups have a fundamental right to organise their own affairs and consequently to exclude others.

These three social imaginaries were presented at the conference as diverging understandings of the global system. It was argued that the first two interpretations do not allow for the formation of representative institutions because they present a bias for the culture of the minority. In contrast, communitarianism allows for a diversity of understandings and theoretically offers greater potential as a basis for cross-cultural dialogue. In light of the Arab Spring, one participant commented that ‘diverging social geometries’ intensify the problem of competing social imaginaries. This, if anything, heightens the need for cross-cultural dialogue.

Another participant voiced an institutionalist approach, according to which he attributed the failure to abate risk within the international system as the failure of institutions to create and enforce appropriate norms of behaviour. The commentator pointed to the continued relevance of the work of Theodore J. Lowi, who posited that institutions need to be reformed in order to become more representative. It was argued that international institutions have long biased the interests and values of the West at the expense of non-Western actors. The possibility of reform, however, is problematic because it requires leadership. Leadership would involve the prioritisation of values upon which institutions could be built and it is unclear who has the right to assert such a prioritisation. The work of Charles Kindleberger was also cited as a theoretical understanding of why leadership in the international system may not emerge. The provision of public goods is expensive, and while the economic power of West declines and financial crisis continues, there seems to be little appetite among emerging powers to address this problem. The crisis of confidence in the West – marked by a lack of faith by citizens in their governments to provide and implement solutions to the economic crisis, and which calls into question the Western model of the liberal democratic state - has not only led to a reduced willingness on the part of Western nations to provide global leadership, but it has also led other global actors to sharply question the legitimacy of Euro-Atlantic leadership.

Several commentators also discussed the inherent value of dialogue as a process or mechanism by which to create mutual understanding and build trust between actors. Many participants expressed the importance of style over content in this instance. They felt that Western states too readily engage in a goal-orientated ‘monologue’ of policy recommendations rather than an attempt to empathise with others and engage in a more meaningful dialogue. It was noted that liberal internationalism - and the perceived success of the Western state model - has led to unwillingness on the part of the West for self-criticism. This echoes the caveat of Philip Windsor in which he posited that disagreement in international affairs results from the failure to recognise a distinction between values (which should be respected) and norms (cultural expressions of those values, on which actors may ‘agree to disagree’). The opportunity for the development of common ground breaks down if a criticism of norms is interpreted as an attack on cultural values.

These views were balanced with arguments regarding the practicalities of dialogue. One participant, citing the work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, stated that while parties may be having a conversation, their differing frames of meaning may lead to different lessons learnt. Another commented on the ‘striking lack of civility’ in attempts at dialogue and lack of humility on the part of Western governments in their engagement with other cultures.

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It was noted that one area in which these tensions are playing out is the debate over the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ or ‘R2P’. It could be argued that in 2005 the international community made some progress towards transferring shared values into norms or practice, when members of the UN collectively declared that ‘each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity’. The ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine could therefore be said to have formalised the legality of humanitarian interventionism. With non-Western states still highly suspicious of veiled Western imperialism, the speaker noted that the significance of the doctrine has been widely exaggerated, but also concurred with Edward Luck that such a declaration would have been impossible 20 years ago.

**Value compromise in international negotiation and mediation: cultural dialogue in South Asia**

The current war in Afghanistan and enduring instability in Pakistan are fertile ground for cultural dialogue. One participant noted that during the decade that NATO forces have been in Afghanistan, the narrative of their engagement has changed. The initial use of high-intensity firepower and ‘shock and awe’ tactics in 2001 – and the diversion of resources and attention away from Afghanistan to the war in Iraq - was revealed as short-sighted when the Taliban insurgency took hold in 2006. Western expectations have gradually been downgraded from building a liberal, democratic state, to a focus on establishing the state’s core institutions and attempts to equip the government with a monopoly of violence.

Non-Western perceptions of the intervention have also steadily deteriorated as liberal objectives have been pursued through illiberal means. Participants largely agreed that civilian causalities and the blurred distinction between humanitarian and security objectives have greatly undermined the legitimacy of ISAF troops. Operations which cause civilian casualties while at the same time promoting human rights will obviously be perceived as duplicitous by other global actors.

Participants also discussed whether NATO members have the capacity to create and cement state-building processes. The perceived failures of Western policies in Iraq and Afghanistan thus raise the question of whether a much greater level of local ownership is needed. Participants debated to what extent the practices of state-building, nation-building, conflict resolution and stabilisation impose Western values, and discussed the viability of these policies effecting long-term change in societies resistant to external forces.

As the withdrawal of NATO forces nears, one participant argued that its members have been slow to understand the cultural dimensions of counter-insurgency operations. The establishment of the British Army’s Defence Cultural Specialist Unit – nearly ten years after the initial deployment of British troops to Afghanistan – was used to demonstrate this point. It was also noted that security challenges are just as likely to emerge from economic or military threats as they are from cultural differences. As a case in point, one participant cited the Taliban’s use of the Pashtun code of hospitality as justification for their harbouring of Osama Bin Laden. The participant argued that if cultural dialogue had been valued from the outset, a political solution and more constructive dialogue with regional powers would have been much more likely – perhaps a lesson policymakers tasked with political reconciliation with the Taliban would do well to heed.

**A new framework for cross-cultural dialogue in Africa**

The discussion on cross-cultural dialogue in Africa centred on the increasing relevance of the continent within the international system and the contrasting failure of Western nations to engage with African countries in a productive manner. Three factors were cited as the driving forces behind

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Africa’s rising prominence. First, the continent’s resource wealth has led to higher levels of foreign investment and attention from ‘resource hungry’ developing nations such as China – which makes clear that Africa has other options for engagement rather than developed Western nations. Second, gains in African economic and political governance over the last decade have increased the viability of such investments. Third, the continent forms a considerable regional bloc at the UN, and is increasingly capable of exerting influence on the world stage.

Despite these changes, one participant noted that Western perceptions of Africa as a ‘humanitarian space’ – and thus detached from the international system - have persisted well beyond the post-colonial era. Traditionally, Euro-Atlantic countries have treated their African partners as recipients of aid rather than as players in their own right. Speakers argued that Western engagement continues to be based upon the principle of conditionality based on an attempt to guide African states to mimic those in the West, often through an insistence on elections, human rights, rule of law, and anti-corruption measures. African leaders have responded to increasing levels of international attention by attempting to broaden relations within the international system rather than take sides. Thus, while they have welcomed investment from emerging powers, they have also sought to preserve links with the Euro-Atlantic area.

Participants examined Western engagement in Africa through an analysis of the recent implementation of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine in Libya and Côte d’Ivoire. NATO’s intervention in Libya was used to demonstrate the differing interpretations of the doctrine with Western emphasis on human security, and an African preference for focusing on state (rather than individual) capacities. Participants expressed the desire of the African Union (AU) to fulfil its role as a regional organisation and its frustration at being marginalised at the UN. However, as with the Côte d’Ivoire case, the meaning of a predominantly humanitarian UN mandate (Resolution 1973) was stretched to regime change by NATO allies at the expense of AU involvement. An examination of the perspectives of African leaders revealed how the doctrine has become ‘contaminated’ with its use to implement regime change. One participant responded to this by expressing the moral dilemma experienced by Western nations on intervention: they would be ‘damned if they did’ [intervene] and ‘damned if they didn’t’. Perhaps the international intervention in Somalia – in which the AU, Ethiopia and Kenya provide troops to combat al-Shabab on the ground supported by US and EU member state drones from the air – provides a better model of multilateral engagement to confront a shared threat.

Finally, the African continent was discussed in the context of private sector engagement. One participant asserted that multi-national private sector organisations were well-equipped for cross-cultural dialogue due to the daily challenges of running global operations. Genuinely equitable business engagement was put forward as a platform to create win-win relationships with local communities. While there was a consensus amongst participants over this point, the question remained over how to translate commercial successes to the inter-state level and whether through varying degrees of local engagement, certain initiatives in the private sector might help to lay the groundwork for effective security dialogue.

**Cultural Dialogue and the Arab Spring**

The Arab world produces some of the most contrasting cultural perspectives relative to those of the West. This session therefore began with a discussion of previously successful inter-state attempts to bridge cultural divides. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 and the Anglo-Russian Alliance during the Second World War were cited as examples of where shared strategic interests have generated the necessary political will to engage in a meaningful cross-cultural dialogue. One speaker noted that the current absence of political will for such collaboration may be the result of limited awareness of common security interests.

Participants noted that the Arab Spring has significantly changed the political structure of the region and the security challenges faced by the West. Consequently, significant questions arise over how Western governments should engage with Arab states, who they should engage with (e.g. the policy elites or the Twitter generation), and what should they advocate? Methods of engagement
are complicated by the fact that previous support for governments in the region strengthened authoritarian regimes. Speakers suggested that it is for this reason that Western governments have been constantly playing ‘catch-up’ with events on the ground, seeking opportunistic moments for engagement. However, as one participant noted, for dialogue to yield any significant returns, it must be built upon more consistent and sustainable conduits.

The high level of civic participation in the Arab Spring raises questions over who Western governments should engage with. While engagement with civil society groups may target the driving forces of change, it may also be criticised as veiled interventionism. The strength of Islamist parties in reformed polities also provides a significant challenge but - more than ever - necessitates political dialogue in order to develop mutual understanding.

The broad consensus on the necessity for local ownership of political reform to ensure sustainability also raises questions over what should be advocated by Western governments. In their engagement with other countries, Western governments often place preconditions – such as human rights or free elections - on security cooperation or government-led investment. However, as one participant pointed out, political systems must broadly reflect local cultures and priorities to endure the pressures of political transition. The ascendency of the Muslim Brotherhood in post-Mubarak Egypt demonstrates this compromise.

Cultural Dialogue in International Security: through the conduit of gender, civil society, diplomacy and education

The value and potential for cross-cultural dialogue between non-state actors was a reoccurring theme of previous discussions. In this session, participants explored the role of civil society and non-state actors in fostering cross-cultural understanding, while also questioning the ability of such interactions to ultimately affect state-level decisions.

Participants reasserted the inherent value of dialogue as a learning process but questioned whether dialogue between non-state actors was productively directed. This may reflect Western emphasis on ‘results-driven’ processes, rather than opportunities to develop mutual understanding which can lead toward sustainable, long-term engagement. One participant commented that we too readily accept dialogue as an elite activity and stated that it could be better described as ‘the great swathe below the sea.’ Thus, state-level decisions are built upon a foundation of mutual understandings forged at numerous levels and between different cultures. Another participant questioned the validity of this analogy by referring to the ‘Seeds of Change’ programme in Israel, in which Palestinian and Jewish students forge friendships in their formative years. As the participant highlighted, these ties are then considerably undermined by the political environments in which both sides grow up and by mandatory service for many Jewish students in the Israeli Defence Forces.

One speaker presented three considerable challenges for ‘state to civil society’ dialogue from the Western perspective. First, in response to accusations of veiled imperialism, it is difficult to deliver the impression of ‘government-free engagement’ and the BBC World Service was presented as a successful example of this. Second, given the predominance of the norm of sovereignty, states face a difficult decision of how to choose the moment at which to switch their support away from governments and toward opposition activists. The leadership required in protecting international human rights law provides an inherent tension in this decision. Third, Western states face the challenge of how to build a sense amongst emerging nations that their values and cultures are respected and that they are free to design their own futures.

Cultural Dialogue in East Asian Security: clashing values and interests?

The clash between values and cooperation on common security interests is rife within discussions on Western engagement in East Asia, and formed a rich panel for debate. While the region has experienced a persistent nuclear threat from North Korea and the growing power of China,
European engagement has been characterised by a lack of consistency, goal-driven diplomacy and over-reliance on the US to provide a regional security blanket.

European nations have failed to realise or value the importance of cross-cultural dialogue in the region, with many dismissing the regional multilateral forum, ASEAN, as nothing more than a ‘talking-shop’. It is also not clear to East Asian nations with whom they should initiate dialogue in the West. Although the EU has increasingly appeared as a political union, its embryonic External Action Service has failed to create a platform for common European diplomacy. With the exception of EU-China relations, European engagement with East Asian nations often occurs at the bilateral level.

While US engagement has been primarily driven by the perception of a growing security threat in the form of China, China itself has expressed disdain for what it views as a policy of containment. Although tensions in the Taiwan Strait pose a very real threat to regional stability as a result of continued sovereign claims of Beijing and Taipei, China has expressed that it does not seek to transmit its values and ‘polity model’ internationally. Therefore, it could be argued that a policy of containment, blinded by the considerations of realpolitik, does little to develop common perceptions of - or cooperation on - managing security risks.

One participant highlighted that the challenges faced by the East Asian regional community are similar to those experienced in the EU. Challenges such as the underdevelopment of a common regional identity, the ability of historical legacies to shape contemporary politics, and the perseverance of security threats could provide common ground for valuable dialogue. However, the economic and political crises within the EU lead to questions over the desirability of regional integration and undermines the idea that East Asian nations would want to pursue the European model.

Cultural Dialogue in Action: Creating and sustaining a flexible framework for relations between Russia, Central Asia, and the Euro-Atlantic area

The discussion on Euro-Atlantic engagement with Russia and Central Asia reflected many of the themes that had previously emerged throughout the conference, such as the need for integrity, mutual respect and the inherent value of dialogue. In the context of post-Soviet Russia, stylistic concerns over Western diplomacy were raised. Echoing Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s recent request for ‘mutual respect’ between Russia and the West, one participant expressed that Russia felt trodden on and humiliated by the West in the years following the fall of communism. Declarations of the ‘End of History’ by Western academics and Western triumphalism about the victory of their values and economic system undermined Russian pride and did little to foster trust between parties.10

One participant posited that in the current context of large scale protests and the prospect of political upheaval in Russia any political reform in the country is unlikely to be liberal in nature but rather shaped by nationalism. The participant indicated that the prospect of positive Western engagement with Russia may be dependent upon the ability of respective governments to be flexible to this reality.

The discussion of Western dialogue with Central Asian states raised four concerns about previous Western engagement in the region. First, the importance of linguistic culture was emphasised: for example, the concept of sincerity is expressed differently in contrasting cultures, and in order for Western leaders to convince others of their willingness to engage in dialogue, they must realise this. Second, the importance of understanding different cognitive frameworks was raised. Central to this point is that effective collaboration is impossible without common understanding. The third point raised was the importance of understanding regional cultural contexts and their subsequent differing prioritisation of values, poles of culture and knowledge of environments. Finally, another way of approaching the subject matter – namely, that of understanding of ‘partnership’ rather than

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‘mentorship’ - was highlighted by several participants. Questions were raised about the nature of Western intentions for engagement; whether they are pragmatic, materialistic, targeting regime change or whether they reflect a willingness to engage in genuine dialogue to learn and reflect. There was a broad consensus that this last motivation was persistently quite far down the list of Western policymakers’ priorities.

Concluding thoughts

The concluding address summed up many of the reoccurring themes and issues that had resonated throughout previous discussions. The speaker states that policymakers must acknowledge that cultural difference inevitably leads to variation in the prioritisation of values by different actors within the international arena, and that the promotion of a particular set of values as universal or superior undermines security rather than enriching it. Western actors in particular must realise the inherent value of cross-cultural dialogue as a method of developing mutual understandings in order to effectively cooperate on managing risk. In order for such dialogue to be successful, policy makers must demonstrate respect, humility and empathy towards other actors. The concluding speaker emphasised the importance of developing a deeper understanding of other cultural perspectives on the part of Western states, in order to mitigate security risks. This stands in stark contrast to what could be perceived as a habitual Western practice of communicating a monologue of policy recommendations, based on a monopoly of Western interests or perceived universal values.

NATO’s recent intervention in Libya provided a case in which universalistic values have eclipsed the need for greater cultural empathy. Blinded by triumphalism, NATO members scarcely noticed the damage done to their integrity and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine through their management of the conflict. Their willingness to pursue the path of conflict, when in previous years they had invested so much in building relations with Gaddafi, expresses perfidiousness to the wider international community and gives the impression that the West uses military conflict to attempt to implement lasting political solutions.

While participants expressed differing views on current Euro-Atlantic efforts to engage in cross-cultural dialogue, a broad consensus on its importance was realised. In order to mitigate the growing number of security challenges in the globalised world, a genuine desire for respectful dialogue needs to be developed. However, it remains the responsibility of practitioners to transform this largely academic consensus into active policy.
References


Luck, Edward C. “The Responsibility to Protect: Growing Pains or Early Promise?”, Ethics & International Affairs, Volume 24.4 (Winter 2010)


