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The looming age of US aggression

By Stephen Kinzer
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PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES ALWAYS promise to win wars. When asked how, they say they will do it by using “the world’s greatest military.” Throughout history, though, most wars have ended with negotiated peace, not absolute victory. That requires diplomacy. Yet neither of our presidential candidates has shown any true appreciation for diplomacy. One scorns the very idea of compromise. The other was secretary of state for four years without carrying out a single major negotiation. Whoever wins next week’s election, the United States is likely to become more aggressive in the world. The era of Obama was hardly a golden age for diplomacy, but in comparison with what lies ahead, it will seem so.

Americans are not in the habit of compromising with other countries. Our vast power has accustomed us to command. We dominate every alliance of which we are a member. Because we can fight wars so well, we have allowed our diplomatic skills to atrophy. That is dangerous. Today’s conflicts are maddeningly difficult to resolve by military means. They cry out for creative diplomacy, but diplomacy is a hard sell in the United States.

The greatest diplomatic opportunity we missed in recent years came in 2012, when Kofi Annan, named by the United Nations and the Arab League to mediate the Syria crisis, invited all warring parties to negotiate. The United States refused. Any negotiated accord would necessarily have accommodated the interests of the Syrian government and other forces we oppose. We found that

unacceptable. Rather than negotiate, we stuck to our traditional policy: Talk to your friends, bomb your enemies. That policy does not fit the modern world's turbulent geopolitics. Now, with American power less overwhelming than it once was, we best protect our interests by calming crises through diplomacy, even at some geopolitical cost, rather than by trying to bluster or bomb our way to total victory.

In the decades ahead, American security will depend largely on our success in dealing with Russia and China. Plotting our relationship with those two giant nations is a daunting conceptual challenge. It is precisely the kind of challenge for which diplomacy was invented. Yet in both cases, diplomats have been pushed aside. The task of dealing with Russia and China has been given mainly to the Pentagon, not the State Department. This has led to a policy based on threats, confrontation, provocative military adventures, and tit-for-tat escalation.

Those who promote this policy believe the United States must show insolent challengers the face of American power. They see Russia and China not as protecting their own interests in their neighborhoods, but as bullies who must be disciplined. The world will only remain moderately stable, they believe, if the United States continues to slap down Russia and China whenever they try to assert themselves. Diplomats also recognize the value of an occasional slap-down, but only as an adjunct to negotiation — not the other way around.

In recent years, although the United States has not pursued diplomacy as intently as today's world demands, we have enjoyed some notable successes at the conference table. Breakthrough accords with Iran and Cuba were products of classic diplomacy — and both are intensely criticized by those who believe there should be no compromise with "hostile" states. In other places, such as Libya and Sudan, we abandoned diplomacy too soon, with tragic results. Today the thought of a negotiated solution in Afghanistan fills Washington with horror because it would entail compromise with groups we detest. We consider it preferable to keep fighting there, even if it means indefinite war, than to negotiate an unpleasant compromise and withdraw.

The job of professional diplomats is to advance national interest by means other than force. Today, however, diplomats do not shape American security policy. That is the job of generals and admirals, along with hundreds of anonymous memo-writers at the National Security Council. Frustrated diplomats are often reduced to the role of handmaidens. They are expected to prepare the way for confrontation, issue threats, cheer for escalation, and then, when conflict ends, clean up the mess. Many Americans still consider diplomacy to be little more than a sideshow, what Richard Nixon called a "nicey-nice little powder-puff duel" that unfolds without meaning while our military does the real work of world-shaping. This view has echoed through the 2016 presidential campaign.

Ronald Reagan trenchantly observed that "diplomacy, the most honorable of professions, can bring the most blessed of gifts, the gift of peace." Yet this year's presidential candidates seem to consider the idea of sitting around a table with other countries as vaguely un-American. It implies not getting everything we want. That feels like a step back from power. If we have the strength to impose our will on others, both presidential candidates argue, there is no reason to compromise — which means no need for diplomacy. Empires that approach the world this way never thrive for long.