

Celebrity efforts will redefine diplomacy

December 03, 2007

Summary:

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Diplomacy and international relations are often thought to be the domain of an exclusive club of elites -- seasoned veterans of the foreign service establishment, with pinstripe suits as their uniform and communiqués as their artillery.

Today, however, this classic image (as personified by Lester B. Pearson or John Foster Dulles) faces a sustained challenge from a new type of non-state actor more adept at public relations. Ironically, world leaders seem to scramble for access to celebrities like Bono, Angelina Jolie and Bill Gates to bolster their own standing on global issues.

A self-selected cast of celebrities has begun to have a significant impact on public policy through their activism on the world stage, shaping the global agenda on a range of humanitarian issues. This phenomenon of "celebrity diplomacy" has been well commented upon (often in the checkout lane tabloids) but little is understood in terms of the scope and focus of this activity. Having written extensively on the foundations and practices of diplomacy, this area piqued my interest. How seriously should celebrities be taken in world affairs? Who do they represent and to whom are they accountable? Can celebrities really be considered diplomats?

Traditional institutions of state-centric diplomacy can be seen as facing a dual challenge of legitimacy and efficiency, as new economic powers rise and as the forces of globalization make information and modes of activism accessible to a variety of stakeholders. The G8, for instance, is constrained both by its absence of powers such as China and India as members and by its poor policy compliance records. Renewed focus on the G8 process has come largely from the presence of rockers Bono and Bob Geldof at recent summits and their aggressive yet reasoned push for attention to African debt relief.

The influence of celebrities on issues central to global governance must be appreciated on a deeper level. On issues ranging from poverty to climate change, or from access to fresh water to human rights, movie stars, musicians, athletes and chief executives have become ascendant diplomatic actors in a global system that is open to their inclusion in ways that very few would have anticipated even 15 years ago. Celebrity diplomacy brings awareness of a complex set of global issues to wider audiences not versed in world affairs, and serves to increase some measure of transparency in the processes of diplomacy.

Actress Mia Farrow, for example, has used the media as a very public vehicle to apply pressure on the international community to intervene in Darfur. Her compelling March 2007 op-ed in the Wall Street Journal is credited with inciting a firestorm of activity from Hollywood to Beijing to Khartoum, leading to Sudan's formal acceptance of UN peacekeepers in the conflict-driven province. On the other end of this activity, outspoken billionaire George Soros has used his vast material wealth to sponsor democratization through the Open Society Institute. Two years in advance of the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Soros began funding a series of initiatives to establish the mechanisms of free and fair elections for a peaceful transfer of authority to a democratic regime.

Substance and quality of activities are important dimensions when dissecting this phenomenon. I have found that a great deal of celebrities fall into the "glamorous enthusiast" category, where interest is primarily self-serving. Ginger Spice's trek to the Philippines promoting birth control, or Paris Hilton's recently planned philanthropic trip to Rwanda cannot be considered on the same scale as the results-oriented, networked approach developed by Bono in his campaign to reduce the financial burden on African states. The flaws of celebrity diplomacy should not be glossed over -- there is a considerable amount of superficiality attached to its practice. There is the danger that the proponents will overshadow their issues, as well as the risk that celebrities may "dumb down" the issues too far.

International relations, however, needs to be looked at through a variety of lenses -- celebrity diplomacy offers one alternative to the traditional state-based perspectives. As an area of study, it coincides with important research on the democratization of global governance by promoting non-aligned voices and bringing attention to under publicized issues. The power of celebrities to encourage discourse, with an eye to persuade and shape debate among elite decision-makers and mass audiences, intersects with a marked capacity to mobilize vast material resources.

Celebrity diplomats certainly do not provide all the answers to the array of global problems on their agenda, and their influence continues to depend on buy-in from traditional diplomats. Yet, their combination of buzz and bite on global issues provides them with enormous capacity to redefine both the priorities and mechanisms of diplomacy.

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