

Negotiating Across Cultures

Prelude

The Astoria Affair

A study of the impact of cultural differences on international negotiation requires some explanation in an era said to herald the emergence of a global culture. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism, Western culture appears everywhere on the ascendant. American popular tastes are ubiquitous: fast-food chains such as Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's ply their wares from Bombay to Tokyo; Hollywood movies are as popular in Shanghai as in Cherbourg; T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers have become the universal uniform of the young; satellite television brings the same sitcoms, sports events, and news items into homes across the world. Nor is the phenomenon of globalization restricted to popular culture: the Internet, ease of international travel, an enormous proliferation of trade and professional ties across borders, and the adoption of English as a universal lingua franca facilitate the movement of people and the exchange of ideas and commodities as never before.

Yet the spread of mass artifacts and images, and the frequency of cross-cultural encounters, should not be confused with cultural homogenization at a deeper level. To speak in English is not always to think in English; to wear a three-piece suit rather than a *jalabiyya* is not the same as abandoning cherished Moslem values; to know the ways of the West is not necessarily to wish to emulate them. One of the characteristics of any vibrant society is its ability to assimilate foreign influences while remaining true to its

essential beliefs and motifs. One need look no further than the United States to see how exotic imports—such as pizza, bagels, and chow mein—are subtly transformed into American food staples. The Tokyo landscape is a scene of striking cultural syncretism, yet it remains uniquely Japanese. Nor do even prolonged communication and contact across cultures obviate profound differences of outlook, as the English and French, Arabs and Persians, or Japanese and Koreans can readily testify. Culture is more than skin deep.

What, the reader may counter, of the increasing salience of transnational subcultures of professionals in areas such as business, engineering, and science? Do not such global elites, living a cosmopolitan lifestyle and sharing a common basis of technical expertise, “speak a common language” overriding their varied backgrounds? The argument to be developed in this book is that professional ties can ease, but in many cases—particularly when value-laden issues are being contested—not eliminate, cross-cultural dissonances grounded in profoundly contrasting views of the world, modes of communication, and styles of negotiation.

My own initial assumption, derived from an interest in diplomacy, was that shared expertise can indeed overcome obstacles to communication and negotiation grounded in cultural diversity. Such classic texts as Sir Harold Nicolson’s famous study, *Diplomacy*, reinforced this view. According to Nicolson, there is a universal diplomatic language of specialized words and phrases used by diplomats when they communicate with one another.¹ Nowhere does he suggest that the polished and expert diplomat may ever be sucked into the whirlpools of miscommunication. Technical competence in conveying a message does not, however, ensure understanding of its content. But writing at a time when European diplomacy was still dominant, Nicolson could afford to pass over in silence the problem of East-West misunderstanding.

If mutual comprehension among diplomats can be assumed, an important conclusion inevitably follows: disagreement is invariably based on an objective conflict of interests; wherever else one may seek the sources of international dissension and misunderstanding, they are not to be found in any recurrent breakdown or failure of the communication process. Such a conclusion is reassuring; although the timber of international relations may be warped, at least the carpenter’s tools are true and sure.

The first seeds of doubt about the completeness of this authorized version were sown in my mind by an account I came across of the *Astoria* affair. In October 1938, Hiroshi Saito, a former Japanese ambassador to the United

States, died in Washington. As a mark of respect, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the U.S. Navy to convey the late ambassador's ashes home to Japan. The cruiser *Astoria* was chosen for the mission. Roosevelt, whose enthusiasm for the Navy was famous, made the decision without consulting State Department experts and despite the grave state of U.S.-Japanese relations. Japanese aggression against China and infringement of American interests continued unabated. The president certainly did not intend to downplay these very real causes of friction, let alone hint at any new course in American foreign policy—which would have been quite unacceptable to public opinion, outraged as it was by Japanese atrocities against Chinese civilians and such incidents as the sinking of the USS *Panay*.

But Roosevelt had not reckoned on how the gesture would be viewed through Japanese eyes. Extraordinary importance is attached in Japanese culture to paying respect to the dead. Elaborate rituals are associated with the practice, and Japanese homes often contain a small shrine to family ancestors. Reverence for the deceased goes far beyond anything found in American culture. Against this background Roosevelt's act of courtesy acquired a resonance in Tokyo never intended in Washington. Joseph Grew, ambassador to Japan, wrote in his diary at the time:

The reaction here was immediately and inevitably political. The Japanese interpreted the gesture as of deep political significance, and a tremendous reaction, both emotional and political, immediately took place. Not only did the Government and people of Japan assume that a new leaf had been turned in Japanese-American relations and a wave of friendliness for the United States [sweep] over the country, but there promptly developed a determination to express Japan's gratitude in a concrete way.²

The State Department and the Tokyo embassy were horrified and embarrassed by the whole affair. One cross-cultural complication followed another. A jeweler from Osaka gave twenty pearl necklaces for the wives of the officers of the *Astoria*. If they were accepted, American public opinion would be outraged; in American public life such a lavish gift has the connotation of a bribe. If the necklaces were rejected, Japanese opinion would be deeply hurt; gift giving is naturally accepted in Japan as part of that complex lattice of moral indebtedness, mutual obligation, and social duty that underpins the Japanese way of life; the direct refusal of a present may cause, as Ambassador Grew ruefully observed, "serious offense."³

As the *Astoria* approached Yokohama, Japanese excitement intensified. Plans went ahead for a mass rally of the kind beloved in Japan, replete with

national anthems, waving flags, regimented students, speeches, a demonstration of martial arts, and a baseball game between a local team and the American crew. All this fanfare could only give an utterly distorted impression of the true state of diplomatic ties. Participation by representatives of the United States in such effusive ceremonial would hardly accord with the firmness that U.S. diplomacy sought to convey in the face of the ruthless expansion of Japanese power and influence on the Chinese mainland. The reaction of the American people to all the ballyhoo, Grew noted, would be, "Show us your appreciation in acts, not words."⁴

It required all of Grew's skills to disentangle the knot without causing an equally undesirable backlash in Japanese opinion. The episode posed "one of the most difficult problems" to face the ambassador since his arrival in Japan in 1932.⁵ A tone of restrained dignity was tactfully insisted upon. Extraneous festivities were quietly canceled or toned down; the necklaces were held in safe keeping for a while, then returned. Even so, to the Japanese, the visit spoke for itself. Moving and elaborate funeral rites went ahead. A shrine had been erected at the harbor to first receive the casket; the funeral procession marched through the densely lined streets of Yokohama; a special train conveyed the ambassador's remains to Tokyo, where yet more intricate and ornate pageantry awaited. What had been intended as a simple mark of courtesy escalated into a major demonstration of international esteem. The Japanese foreign minister commended it as a "graceful act . . . an opportunity for the restoration of good relations." Emperor Hirohito himself received the bemused captain of the American vessel, informing him with emotion that he "had performed a great service which was deeply appreciated by himself and the nation."⁶

If, as will surely be agreed, interstate communication depends on governments conveying no more and no less than they intend, the dispatch of the *Astoria*, however well meaning, was a diplomatic blunder. Because of the quite different weight and significance attached in Japanese and American cultures to such seemingly universal human concerns as showing respect for the dead and giving gifts, a gesture that was intended to transmit one message inadvertently transmitted another one entirely. By innocently and unconsciously failing to take cross-cultural differences into account, the president, an international statesman with long experience of international affairs, sent a misleading diplomatic signal.

Was the *Astoria* episode perhaps an exception to the general rule of unhindered international discourse? The sad tale of persistent incomprehension marking U.S.-Japanese relations on the eve of Pearl Harbor

suggests not. Nor do more recent disasters in American foreign policy, such as the Vietnam imbroglio and the Iran debacle, indicate that it was merely a curio from an age, happily long outgrown, of diplomatic inexperience. Robert McNamara, who was secretary of defense during the Vietnam War, bemoans, among other things, the cultural ignorance underpinning the miscalculations of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.⁷ The 1979 Iran policy failure was doubtless the result of various familiar pathologies, such as selective attention and wishful thinking in Washington. At the same time the American embassy in Teheran employed few officers who understood Farsi and the local culture. This not only inhibited the embassy's capacity to gather intelligence, but also meant that officials from Iran and the United States often unwittingly talked past one another.⁸

Have we now put this kind of conundrum behind us? Do modern business and other technical elites perform better across cultures than their diplomatic counterparts? The evidence presented in this book suggests a mixed picture: on occasion, an undoubted improvement; often, continuing cross-cultural discordance. The battle is far from won. Indeed, as the circle of international actors widens to include individuals from all walks of life, the possibility of misunderstanding may actually increase. Thus, unprecedented cooperation proceeds in tandem with important cases of confusion in the negotiation, not only of classic political issues, but also of matters touching on business, trade, air transport, aid, and so forth.

In a recent episode, neglect of local cultural factors and the subsequent forced renegotiation of a contract to build a power station in the Indian state of Maharashtra cost the American company Enron \$400 million. U.S.-Japanese relations continue to be dogged by incompatibilities. Time and again stylized and damaging cycles of dissonance repeat themselves as U.S. trade representatives attempt to prize open Japanese markets. Similarly, U.S.-Chinese talks in the 1990s on subjects such as intellectual property rights have been marked by a revealing pattern of agreement and infringement. Even the United States and Mexico, despite the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement and a web of entangling ties, continue to puzzle over features of each other's societies that hinder unencumbered cooperation in areas such as the prevention of narcotics trafficking, the protection of intellectual property, and the extradition of criminals.

Not that cultural dissonance explains everything; far from it. It should be emphasized from the outset that in most cases negotiation failure is more likely to be the result of divergent interests than of subjective misunderstanding. After all, for negotiators to have any prospect of success

they must first and foremost identify shared interests. If these are absent, then even with the best intentions in the world the success of negotiations is in doubt. To claim otherwise would be naive and misleading. The thesis expounded in this book is more modest: it is that cultural factors may hinder relations in general, and on occasion complicate, prolong, and even frustrate particular negotiations where there otherwise exists an identifiable basis for cooperation. These cases of cross-cultural misunderstanding are certainly exceptional. The skill and experience of professional negotiators—diplomats and business people—will often prevent incipient misunderstanding from getting out of hand. Every so often, though, important talks are disrupted by cross-cultural disharmony. Appropriate examples, to be presented below, indicate that this is neither a trivial nor a negligible phenomenon. It is worthy of attention. Still, it should not be thought that all international negotiation is a distressing saga of stumbling incoherence.

For a fitting conclusion to this segment we may return to the hero of the *Astoria* affair, Ambassador Grew, whose memoir of his time in Tokyo contains many examples of the difficulties of communication, both verbal and nonverbal. In an address to the America-Japan Society, Grew reflected on the role of the ambassador. It was, he argued, to act first and foremost as an interpreter of the two countries to each other in a situation in which the written word was quite inadequate. "What really counts is the interpretation of the written word and of the spirit that lies behind it," he wrote. With an extraordinarily modern insight Grew then submitted the following radical proposition: "International friction," he suggested, "is often based not so much on radical disagreement as on nebulous misunderstanding and doubt."⁹ It is in this spirit that we shall turn to consideration of the effects of cross-cultural differences on international negotiation.