

# Getting the Risk-Diplomacy Balance Right

BY SUSAN R. JOHNSON

Today's security requirements constrict effective, active diplomacy, which requires mobility, access to local contacts, and informed reporting and policy input—all of which by their very nature entail exposure to risks. Balancing those competing demands is a daunting challenge, especially in places like Libya, where Ambassador Chris Stevens and three members of our diplomatic staff gave their lives in the line of duty. What can we learn from their supreme sacrifice and dedication?

The post-9/11 era has seen an increasing militarization of American foreign policy and stretching of the concept of diplomacy, exposing Foreign Service personnel to threats that vary dramatically from station to station. Each requires carefully calibrated procedures and approaches to protect personnel while maximizing the mobility needed to carry out our professional responsibilities.

Under the Vienna Conventions, host states are responsible for the protection of accredited diplomatic personnel on their territories, but this commitment cannot be taken for granted everywhere. In Benghazi our personnel came under attack by al-Qaida affiliates or militants opposed to the Libyan transition, which is still in flux. Similar elements

stalk many countries in the Middle East, some of whom have experienced the convulsions of the

Arab Spring and its aftermath.

Many in these countries nurse a deep antipathy toward the United States and the West, so the dangers to our diplomatic personnel and citizens there will persist. Nonetheless, most nations in the region continue to uphold their Vienna Convention obligations.

During the recent wave of violent protests over an offensively anti-Muslim film, these governments acted to protect diplomatic compounds. In such situations, where the host government exercises sufficient control, we only need supplementary measures to augment its protection. But in several other countries where we are heavily engaged, such as Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq, it would be naive to expect authorities to act in a similarly effective manner. Where the host government lacks the capacity, for whatever reason, we need different approaches, so long as they regularly review our goals, the nature of our engagement and the quality of protection available.

In particular, we must assess the value of a large presence in conflict zones and the feasibility of relying on an army of contractors for security and large-scale engagement in development projects. Interventions in conflict zones may not necessarily contain the turmoil. Indeed, the opposite often appears to be the case. In such situations, we need a more focused articulation of objectives and

a correspondingly more circumspect engagement and presence.

Safety and effective risk management for diplomats demand not just our own assessment of the ground situation. We need to listen carefully to the views of the host governments, especially when it comes to the extent of our presence and diplomatic norms for immunity. To expect hundreds of contractors and other personnel employed on projects to enjoy the privileges of diplomatic immunity goes well beyond the terms of the Vienna Convention. This can provoke local sensitivities, place inordinate burdens on host governments and cause unintended incidents that are counterproductive to policy objectives.

This does not mean quitting the front, however. Rather, we must be judicious in setting goals in complex situations that put our people at risk.

We cannot ensure reasonable security without making sufficient resources available to the State Department and our missions. Cutting corners puts our diplomats at risk, something Congress should keep in mind when setting budgetary allocations.

Members of the United States Foreign Service, the cadre of professional diplomats and development officers committed to worldwide availability, accept the risks involved in doing their jobs. They serve willingly and unreservedly in difficult places and situations around the world. They deserve recognition and support. ■



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