

# **Diplomatic Culture or Cultural Diplomacy: The role for culture in international negotiation?**

By Aman Garcha

*“Culture is what remains, when one has forgotten everything.”*  
- Edouard Herriot.

The instruments of diplomacy and the process of negotiation are perhaps more important than ever, especially, in an era where global warfare is considered by many states to be less accepted as a means of settling conflict. It goes without saying that culture often has an impact on negotiation, as do countless other variables. The question then becomes what the distinctive effect of culture on negotiation may be, both in creating unexpected opportunities for dispute settlement and imposing obstacles to agreement.

By understanding the affects of culture on the process of negotiation, we may be able to better understand the negotiation process itself. This essay will, therefore, present a number of variables to assess the various effects that cultural differences can have on negotiation. The US model of negotiation will be used as the main comparative model to various other national models. This approach will call upon numerous models of national negotiation behaviour and hopefully make it apparent to the reader the various cultural differences in the negotiation process. Moreover, specific variables will be touched upon in the clash between culture and negotiation. On the other side of the spectrum it can be argued that the presence of global elites, living cosmopolitan lifestyles and sharing a common basis of expertise and language override their varied backgrounds. What will be argued is that, although professional ties and the presence of a ‘diplomatic culture’ can ease negotiation they cannot eliminate cross cultural dissonances grounded in profoundly contrasting views of the world, modes of communication and styles of negotiation. Ultimately ‘diplomatic culture’ is not a sufficient replacement for cultural diplomacy.

However, before engaging in a full discussion on this topic, it is imperative to define culture and negotiation.

## **Culture and Negotiation**

Culture is a quality not of individuals, but of the society of which individuals are a part of. “Culture is acquired through the acculturation or socialization by individuals from their respective societies” (Cohen, 11). Therefore, each culture is a unique complex of attributes encompassing every area of social life.

Culture specifies “what behaviors are desirable or proscribed for members of the culture (norms), for individuals in the social structure (roles), as well as the important goals and principles in one’s life (values)” (Carnevale et al, 160). Culture also specifies

how things are to be evaluated. This implies that people of different cultures will have greater difficulty in interaction, understanding and ultimately in negotiation.

Culture is a broad concept describing the basic things in human mentality and behaviour such as language, tradition, ideology, approaches and style. Negotiation, in turn, is a part of the human activity connected with problem solving which is oriented towards peaceful means of dispute resolution (Kremenyuk, 47). Negotiation in this context may be regarded as manifestation of culture because it embodies a certain code of conduct that is oriented towards civilized ways of solving disputes.

Moreover, negotiation is a process of communication between actors (states) seeking to arrive at a mutually acceptable outcome on some issue of concern (Cohen, 10). Usually, “diplomatic negotiation is made up of a rather structured exchange of proposal between accredited representatives” (Cohen, 10). This exchange may be conducted formally or informally, verbally or non-verbally, tacitly or explicitly (Cohen, 10).

### **Behavior, mentality and psychology: understanding the reasoning behind the actions**

As mentioned previously, culture describes the basic tenets of human mentality and behavior. This mentality is transferred to the negotiating table and is revealed by the positions and actions each representative takes. The importance of recognizing the power of culture in constructing our realities is imperative because of the reluctance human beings have in tolerating challenges to these realities because they introduce unacceptable levels of uncertainty and doubt.

By its nature the negotiation process is a study in psychology.

*It proceeds as interplay of perception, information processing, and reaction, all of which turn on images of reality, on implicit assumptions regarding issues being negotiated, and on an underlying matrix of conventional wisdom, beliefs, and social expectations (Fisher, 13).*

Human minds are information processors and can be understood by the way they receive, store, organize and use information. While people are born with this capacity, just how the human mind does this depends on how it turns out to be programmed (Cohen, advocates, 23). To better understand this process it is necessary to draw upon a key example set forth by Raymond Cohen. Cohen compares the human mind to a computer, and states that the human mind comes in a variety of shapes, sizes and shades displaying a rich selection of physical hardware. However, the potentiality and capacity of human kind is astonishingly similar (Cohen, advocate, 23).

*It is the programming of the human system – the software – that translates potential to actuality. Here the diversity is enormous. Human cultural software is made up of ideas, meanings, conventions, and assumptions. It moulds our perceptions, it shapes our actions, defining the rules for interaction, meeting,*

*parting, and bestowing hospitality, trading, begging, giving, and negotiating*  
(Cohen advocates view, 24).

In addition to Cohen's evaluation, the Szalay Model of idea transference illustrates the differences culture can play in interpretation and message conveyance ultimately affecting negotiating behavior. When a message has been physically received, its toll has to be psychologically comprehended. Szalay points out that the idea itself does not really travel, only the code, the words, the patterns of sound. The meaning the person attaches to the words received will come from their own mind. Their interpretation is determined by their own frame of reference. Just as much as the meaning of the original message is fundamentally determined by the sender's frame of reference (Cohen, 26). However, for there to be a real understanding the parties must draw upon matching semantic assumptions. This ability occurs within boundaries of common culture and language (Cohen, 27). For example, to Koreans, corruption is not considered morally wrong whereas, in the US, civil servants are to be impartial and serve the whole community. Therefore, when the US talks about corruption with the Koreans, they are unlikely to attach the same meaning to the word (Cohen, 28).

### **Cultural implications on international negotiation**

Different cultures affect how individuals will behave in international negotiations. One's own assumptions appear to be normal and realistic, because they are familiar and unquestioned when negotiating domestically (Kimmel, 180). Therefore, to some extent the negotiators are prisoners of their culture, which in turn act as a regulator of social interaction (Faure 2). This can lead to a sense of naivety that 'people are pretty much the same everywhere'.

The cultural differences that must be taken into account may turn out to be as important as that found in certain contrasting sets of values that determine the hierarchy of negotiating objectives themselves, or as trivial as behavior mannerisms or non-verbal cues that subtly block confidence and trust. Even gestures and other non-verbal behavior may contribute to a psychological unease that makes communication more difficult (Fisher, 7). To understand these variables further illustration is required.

Even at the most basic levels of negotiation, history confirms the differences in national perception of the negotiation process. The actors in the negotiation process can be viewed, as witnessed during the Cold War, as something evil which can lead to coercive measures being applied. The dimensions in which the negotiations unfold, for example, the actors involved, the level of transparency, the process of communication and the forum in which they take place can differ substantially due to culture. Furthermore, the strategy a nation employs on how an agreement should be reached, deductive can cause roadblocks in the process (Faure, 12). Here, many theorist argue, cultural diplomacy can play a role in bridging many gaps

According to Glen Fisher, culture impinges on negotiation in four crucial ways: by conditioning one's perception of reality; by blocking out information inconsistent with

culturally grounded assumptions; by projecting meaning onto the other party's words and actions; and by possibly impelling the ethnocentric observer to an incorrect attribution of motive (Cohen advocates view, 27). From this observation, a deeper analysis can be executed on specific nation's negotiation behavior.

### **National characters and negotiation differences: France, Japan, and Mexico**

A 'negotiator's art' must include an ability to anticipate the others side's decision making process, and hopefully to influence it. In international negotiation this means taking into account contrasts in the culture of decision making, in the way officials and executives reach their decisions and instruct their negotiators. National institutional culture produces a unique pattern on decision making and protocol.

In France, negotiation is an established art with a long tradition in international diplomatic relations, with French negotiators and French language at the centre stage. Thus they reflect a sense of self-assurance as they present the logic of their position. They do not see the negotiating table as a place for bargaining or searching for a solution to which they have so carefully prepared (Fisher, 39). To them, the negotiation setting becomes more of a debating forum, with flexibility and accommodation simply for the sake of agreements. The French tend to perceive themselves as holding a special position in the international arena. "France is not simply another European country – it is France. The country has a mystique that is part of the French soul" (Fisher, 41). Its policy makers do not need to apologize for taking actions that they see to be strictly in France's self interest (Fisher, 39). In regards to the French decision making process, they start with a long-range view of their purposes and place low priority on accommodation in short-range decisions to reach objectives which seem of little consequence. As Americans tend to focus on short-term, it is harder for them to see that there might be a design in French decisions. (Fisher, 31)

The Japanese on the other hand work in negotiation through a patient consensus-generating process. They tend to shy from ceremonial occasions because to disagree at a formal stage would be distasteful and embarrassing (Fisher, 18). Harmony is important to the Japanese, they ensure that social relations are smooth and that consensus is overarching. In comparison, Americans see negotiating sessions as problem solving exercises, and problems are precisely the dragons what Americans take pride in slaying. This is hardly a Japanese outlook (Fisher, 20).

Some negotiations differ depending on the relationship between the parties. An interesting case is that of Mexico and its relations with the US. When dealing with the US, Mexican negotiators are engulfed by the shadow casted upon their northern neighbor and are forced into negotiation on US norms. However, when negotiating with other nations, the sense of formal social occasion and protocol is stronger. This is reflective of Mexico's strong Spanish heritage (Fisher, 20). In Mexico, one will find a centralized decision making process from the top-down. It is normal for Mexicans to negotiate in terms of trade offs, which can be frustrating when dealing with nations that are based on

bureaucratic compartmentalization of issues, with bureaucrats in charge to only negotiate in specific areas (Fisher, 28). Regarding innovation, the Mexicans tend to make no proposals and wait on the American delegation to come up with an appropriate solution. For example in 1982, when trading with US dollars was suspended, Mexican finance minister Rabasa flew straight away to Washington with no specific plan. (Cohen, 91)

In contrast, the Japanese disallow flexibility at the negotiating table and require long periods of time to consider new proposals. It appears unapproachable to the outsider who hopes to influence the decision making process or at least direct the path in which decisions are moving (Fisher, 32). The Japanese tend to hold their fire in the first round of talks and prefer to form contacts aimed at constructing a prior understanding. Moreover, instead of giving yes or no answers, the Japanese prefer grey areas (Cohen, 84).

*When America states its position, the Japanese tend to listen quite carefully, to ask additional details and say nothing at all about committal. This lack of response frustrates the American side, which wants counter-proposals put on the table. To the Japanese this approach is aggressive, embarrassing and impolite. (Cohen 85)*

Unlike Japan, the US is not racially and culturally homogenous. Therefore differences in negotiating behavior are bound to exist. The task-oriented approach, displayed by the US, in negotiation has ramifications for the processes that take place during the negotiations themselves. The lack of a cultural emphasis and treatment of negotiation as a business definitely set US negotiators back a step.

Some conclusions that can be drawn upon these various negotiating behavior are outlined by E.T. Hall's description of high and low context cultures. He describes high context (interdependent cultures) as those "where individual autonomy is subordinated to the requirement of collective solidarity, where group harmony is the highest good and decisions are made through a long process"(Hall, 101). A classic example of this approach is Japanese culture. Low contexts (individualist cultures) see, "individuals as autonomous beings free to shift their affections as they see fit" (Hall, 102). They have the type of 'don't beat around the bush' mentality. In this context the US is the prime example.

However, not all states can be classified as high-low cultures. There are some cultures which are fuelled by ideology and various unorthodox methods of negotiation. This can become increasingly difficult to deal with, especially when the two negotiating bodies are superpowers, as in the case of the USSR and the US. Throughout its history, the Soviet Union has shown that its negotiation tactics are unparallel to those of any other nation.

### **The Soviet Union: a whole new dimension to negotiation**

A conflict of values occurs in situations where parties hold different or incompatible values, ideologies, and principles and in which each party tries to make its own prevail

(Dupont et al, 50). These values can rarely be negotiable. The United States is a system based upon elections, bureaucratic and institutional politics (Dunn, 79). While the Soviet Union was a system spearheaded by Marxist-Leninist ideology coupled with military security due to the inevitable clash between communism and capitalism (Dunn, 82). After 1939, power and politics radically altered European diplomacy. The powers of old were but mere shadows of their past glory. However there is one style of diplomacy which resisted the changes of time – the Soviet. It was the product not of national characteristics but of traditional Byzantine principles coupled with a long service in a police state. The prototype was Vyacheslav Molotov, “generally considered the most withdrawn, ill-mannered, humorless diplomat alive” (Thayer, 84).

According to Raymond Smith, Soviet negotiating behavior is highlighted by three dominant features: “A preoccupation with authority, avoidance of risk; and an imperative need to assert control” (Cohen, 16). These features provide the context within which specific issues are negotiated, whether the negotiators are two Soviets or Soviet and US diplomats.

In the West, diplomats negotiate over the table. The real bargaining and concessions are made by people who have the authority to make them on behalf of their governments. In Moscow, “there is little delegation of authority and virtually no bargaining over the table; the pace is much slower and negotiating methods are circuitous” (Trevelyan, 49). A simple comparison between the superpowers can be made, for example: Japan in dealing with the US during the San Francisco peace treaty (1951) compared to fisheries talks with the USSR in 1977. The US was much more sympathizing to the downtrodden, while the USSR was preoccupied with rank, power relationships, and the establishment of their own superiority. Soviet negotiators were inclined to hammer home their advantage and conducted, in the eyes of the Japanese, diplomacy by intimidation. (Cohen, advocate, 29)

When dealing with the Soviets, a nation must be willing to go to the same distance as the Soviets. This may mean acquiring the same aggressive stance deployed by the Soviets. Soviets view diplomacy as war by other means, part of an effort to wear down the enemy. Therefore, negotiations can be dragged out endlessly (Thayer, 95). Kurt Schumacher states, “You (Americans) will stop losing the Cold War the day you are as patient as the Russians. And the day you learn to out-sit them by a single minute you will start winning it” (Thayer, 96). An ideal example of this was the American stance taken during the 1946 Korean independence. The first question the Soviets asked was how long were the Americans prepared to negotiate? The American delegation replied, “Till hell freezes over.” The Soviets delegates exchanged glances that were not particularly happy (Thayer, 97). It is largely because of these differences in diplomatic methods that negotiations between Soviets and Western diplomats were often so fruitless (Thayer, 243).

As revealed by the various national models of negotiating behavior, there are countless variables which can be attributable to cultural differences. However, a full analysis of these variables would detract from the depth of the essay. Therefore, the role

of status, sovereignty, and gender will be analyzed within the context of culture and negotiation.

### **Status, culture and negotiation**

A negotiator's status refers to a position in the social structure to which the negotiator belongs to. This concept strongly relates to prestige and power as it influences the negotiation process. Delegations display considerable deference toward other parties with high status. This is expressed in various ways, such as compliance with their threats or adoption of a submissive behavior. When the other negotiator has a lower status, the other party tends to behave in an exploitive way (Dupont et al, 52).

According to Paul Kreisberg, "negotiation with Indians is intensely frustrating because it is like negotiating with yourself" (Cohen 95). Indian preoccupation with status makes it imperative for the Indian diplomat to establish his superiority in the negotiation at the earliest possible moment. This practice grates against the instinctive American desire to establish equality in negotiation (Cohen, 95).

As a result, ties with the West have always hobbled along throughout the years. Time and again Indian officials have taken umbrage at real or imagined insults to their national dignity. "India suffer from a melancholia derived from the thought that the world is look down on them" (Cohen, 48). For example, in 1993, US assistant secretary for South Asia, Robyn Lynn Raphel, accurately noted that the United States did not recognize the 1947 document by which the local prince ceded Kashmir to India. What resulted was a hysterical Indian reaction. Obviously, Raphel's remark was tactless, and she should have known how paranoid India tends to be about anything related to Pakistan, Kashmir, or the integrity of the Indian union (Cohen, 48).

### **Sovereignty, culture and negotiation**

In 1979, the United States wanted to establish a military presence in Egypt after growing instability in the Middle East. However, to the Egyptians a base would be unacceptable because it would evoke memories of the British and Soviet presence (Cohen, 54). A facility would be viewed an intrusion of Egyptian sovereignty. Although, this was part of the long standing plan by the West to bring Egypt into its alliance system Prime Minister Nasser spelled out why assistance tied to a foreign military presence was unacceptable:

*Because our history was have complexes in this country about some words – especially those that imply that we are being tied to another country. Words like 'joint command', 'joint pact', and 'training missions' are not beloved in our country because we have suffered from them...I think your men who deal with this area should understand the psychology of the area. You can send military aid, but if u send ten officers along with it, nobody will thank you for your aid but instead will turn it against you. (Cohen, 55)*

Regrettably, the pentagon failed to understand the Egyptian psyche and have not established a base on Egyptian soil to this day.

## **Gender, culture, and negotiation**

It is important to remember that associations with gender vary greatly across cultures. Elements considered masculine in one culture might be considered feminine in another. Negotiators may find it useful to consider the way gender roles play out in the cultural contexts of their negotiating partners. For example, prior to the First Gulf War, the US appointed a woman as ambassador to Baghdad. In many Middle Eastern cultures the value of gender equality is not well accepted. The ambassador's gender and her status as a "Westerner" made her a very weak representative in Iraq (Kimmel, 179). Even if she had delivered a clear message, it would not have been treated as seriously as if it had come from a male. The ambiguity of the message, of course, complicated the issue and signaled to Hussein that the U.S. was not concerned with his attack of Kuwait. To him, "what was not said by the U.S. was more important than what was said" (Kimmel, 179). Although demands were made that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait, the lack of US sensitivity to Iraqi negotiating behavior (slow paced, creating personal ties, group oriented) resulted in the Iraqis deciding that the US was not serious about negotiating and was insulting them. Had the US taken into consideration these cross-cultural differences, maybe this result could have been avoided.

## **Lessons to be learned**

US diplomats become frustrated when it comes to breaking deadlocks in negotiation. This is an unproductive strategy when dealing with different nations. As illustrated, using global pressure and moral suasion on countries such as India can severely backfire. Here a tactic is needed, as proposed by Former Ambassador to Mexico John Jova, "there is a need to avoid confrontation and get the message across softer more indirectly, not posing an authoritative role on the other nation due to the pride and social behaviors of the nation involved" (Cohen, 165). Culture is a key structure of negotiation. It influences who the active negotiators are, their behaviour, their strategies, and ultimately the very negotiation process itself. Even the outcomes may be affected directly by cultural factors. However, there are those that believe that no understanding is needed due to the common language of diplomatic negotiation. These arguments will now be discussed.

## **Culture-free negotiation**

Many skeptics recognize that negotiating internationally does pose a task in coping with a wider range of styles of decision making. However, the term 'cultural factor' is a vague and fuzzy concept not easily translated into practical application (Fisher, 7). This is especially true in the internationalized world where national differences have been dispersed into a homogeneous cosmopolitan culture of international negotiation fostered by the UN and other multilateral forums (Zartman, 19). Because multilateral negotiations are becoming more frequent and important than bilateral negotiations, they contribute to this broad, emerging 'negotiation culture' (Zartman, 20). Although Zartman's argument can be convincing, it revolves around the business aspect of cultural negotiation, whereas political dimensions in negotiating processes are subject to much more volatility. Moreover, there still exist homogenous cultures from the likes of Japan, China, and India,



where cultural differences are profound. The creation of multilateral forms has in no way melted various world cultures into one, had the creation of a homogeneous cosmopolitan culture been created, conflicts such as those in the former Yugoslavia, Gulf Wars, and various African conflicts, just to name a few, would not be present (Lang, 45).

The modern intensity of international interaction, especially in business, technology and communication, has produced an internationalized culture which reduces the clash of cultural backgrounds. This is largely based on western practices and even on the English language (Fisher, 8). Scholars such as Zartman and Berman point out that, “protocol, diplomatic courtesy, international law, and other Western diplomatic inventions have enabled international negotiators to deal with each other in a variety of situations over the last century” (Kimmel, 179). Moreover, with the political and ideological separation of East and West slowly disappearing, and the assimilation of government structures (parliamentary democracy) taking place, one may expect a trend towards a more unified negotiation culture cutting across the old divide between capitalism and communism (Lang, 40). Although Western principles are overarching in international relations, the opponents to this ‘hegemony’ are still profound. States from the Middle East, Former Soviet Union and Asia do not share the same goals and outlooks as those perceived by the West.

Furthermore, with the inclusion of technical experts from both sides of the negotiating table over matters of contention a sense of belonging develops between the experts due to their common expertise (Cohen, 20). However, although the evidence of the emergence of elite subcultures is clear enough, it would be premature to conclude that this therefore eliminates the effects of cross cultural differences.

As a result William and Zartman argue that, “cultural aspects of communication are peripheral to the understanding of the basic negotiation process” (Cohen, 20). This is because negotiation is a universal process where cultural differences are simply differences in style and language. And the establishment of an international diplomatic culture negates the need for distinct negotiation behaviours (Cohen, 20). Stating the cultural differences are simply differences in style and language is a premature conclusion taking into consideration these ‘simple’ differences have had on negotiations in the past.

## **Conclusion**

Though we live in a globalized world where culture seems irrelevant as international ties increase, the battle for cross-cultural negotiation consensus is far from over. Indeed, as the circle of international actors widens to include individuals from all walks of life, the possibility of misunderstanding and miscommunication may actually increase (Cohen, 7). Discourse among national cultures vary and reveal that a large body of opinion exists within nations. Here national ideology and tradition are linked with the tone of the governing body, determines the role of culture in international negotiations (Lang, 41).

While there are certain differences in negotiation style that are attributable to culture, much of what we explain in terms of culture can probably be traced more accurately to an amalgam of culture, situation, personality, and interaction. But because we want to believe in the overwhelming importance of culture, negotiators tend to view behaviors selectively, through the prism of their stereotypical perceptions and biases (Rubin, 98).

Therefore, cultural factors may hinder relations in general, and even complicate, prolong, and even frustrate particular negotiations where there otherwise exists an identifiable basis for cooperation. However, the skill and experience of diplomats will often prevent incipient misunderstandings from getting out of hand. To use cross-cultural approaches effectively requires training, education and experience to discover how to get beyond one's own cultural stereotypes and misconceptions (Kimmel, 191). By providing training in cultural diplomacy, many of the significant challenges revealed thus far could be prevented. Without such training, international negotiators are likely to rely on their own subjective cultural assumptions. They will minimize rather than take account of cultural differences, attribute motivations typical in their common culture rather than empathizing with other cultures, ignore rather than explore values and assumptions, and essentially negotiate with themselves.

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