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Culture and Action: Cultural Diplomacy and Cooperation

Marco Lombardi[1]

Nota autore

Marco Lombardi, director of the Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies (ITSTIME), is full professor at the Catholic University of Sacred Heart, where he teaches Crisis management and risk communication, Mass Communication theory, Sociology, Intelligence and counter terrorism, Security policies. He is member of the scientific board of the School of Doctorate, the masters in Cultural Diplomacy and the School of Journalism. He managed several EU founded research projects mainly focused on terrorism, security and crisis management. He co-operates with different institutional agencies involved on security both at national and international level. He is member of the Governmental Commission on Counter Radicalization and of the Strategic Policy Committee of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. He is member of the board of "JD – Journal for Deradicalization" (www.journal-derad.com), "Journal of Mediterranean and Balkan Intelligence – JMBI" and "Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società – STS" (www.sicurezzaterrorismosocieta.it)

Keywords

Culture, diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, crisis and conflict reduction.

1. Foreword

The new, uncertain structures of the reticular global world call for innovative strategies. In particular, the new forms of diffuse conflict demand that international diplomacy give effective answers in terms of handling the crisis and reducing conflicts. In this context, cooperation has to regain credibility and competence to prove itself as a system of intervention suited to the new challenges, able to project itself into the new scenarios that are changing significantly and rapidly.

This brief note proposes to highlight some important factors of the change taking place, followed by the description of recent experiences in the field, concluding with the proposal of new kinds of involvement expressed in the

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[1] ITSTIME – Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy and CAARI – Addoun University, Galkayo, Somalia.

Cultural Diplomacy Partnership, an experience of reticular cooperation for-
mulated and promoted by our research centres, ITSTIME in the Università
Cattolica, Milan, and CAARI at the Addoun University in Somalia.

2. The changing pattern: from globalisation
to reticularisation

It may not yet be clear enough that globalisation – which is a daily topic
of discussion – is an incomplete and not fully understood process, that we
attempt to fit into the models of interpretation of the past without making
the conceptual leap involving a change that is radical by its very nature. We
could perhaps add that "we haven't wanted to make" this leap, in the hope of
maintaining the forms of "previous order", corresponding with consolidated
cognitive models. For this reason, globalisation is explained, in general, as
"complexity", due to the intensification of the relationships among a network
that is increasingly thick with nodes, and as "standardisation", a spread of
uniformity guaranteeing linear relationships between the nodes. The result
is the inevitability of an increasingly dense network, made up of nodes that
tend to resemble one another. In either case, globalisation is interpreted as a
paradigm of the "*pre-global*", we dream of restoration, i.e. normalisation and
return, and not of changing the model in order to understand the world. In
this view, globalisation is a positive orientation of the system or, at most, a
future state that is inevitable and should be managed to exploit its advantages.

But this is mistaken. With our fear of novelty, we anchor ourselves to the
customary way of reading the present, as a replica of the past, inebriated with
the easy sense of security produced by habit.

However, the scenarios change before the cultural models are able to adapt
to the new needs for interpreting reality, hence the increase in vulnerability.

In reality globalisation and reticularisation are different phenomena, each
implying the other in certain respects but maintaining their autonomy, al-
though the latter is generally considered to be the product of the former. In
the present state, if globalisation can be contained, and combated success-
fully, reticularisation cannot be avoided without losses, with the degree of
interdependence achieved by the parts in relation between them.

However, we must begin to change the idea of a network that leads to
primacy of the concept of globalisation, and work out an autonomous view of
the network itself. First of all, the nodes are not all equal, nor do they become
so; each node is highly specific (different from the other nodes) and is neces-
sarily in network with the other nodes. In this way the strategic attention for
managing the process of reticularisation is focused on the specific nature of
each node and on the characteristics of their links. Especially the latter, the

links, i.e. the relationships, are the key to access for understanding the reticular system: they must be able to handle the differences between the nodes because the relational forms – the relational processes – are the cultural and political "elastics" that permit the reticular form of the diversities.

The conceptual distance between global and reticular appears even greater if we consider that global is understood mainly as "extensive", while reticular is understood as "intensive". The former expands its frontiers while the latter deepens the relationships between the parts. As a result, the strategies giving preference to one or the other aspect are very different: one insists on the dimension of the control of the boundaries rather than on the definition of the relational protocols, one favours the channel of exchange rather than the object or value exchanged, space is preferred over time, etc. But in reality a radical dichotomy between the two aspects is as false as a univocal cause-effect relationship between them: the world is always more complicated than people would like it to be so they could understand it easily. Thus we are faced with scenarios where globalisation and reticularisation are processes correlated without a causal connection (one is not the cause of the other) but "cohabit" in that dynamic world which is represented as a functional connection between the two. This is expressed in the space-time relationship characterising them, and which we have learnt to consider right from childhood as linked by the expression of velocity (relationship between space and time), measuring transformation and change.

The conclusion from this first prompt is summed up in the fact that the global network does not homogenise anything, but on the contrary offers the possibility of a governance of the diversities, shifted from the "node" to the "relational link", to the degree that we want and are able to see the emergence of the new pattern: when the world changes more rapidly than our will to develop more adequate interpretative models, we are victims of our vulnerability.

3. The change in the conflict: the Hybrid War

Globalisation is interpreted in a manner that serves to find excuses for "refusing the novelties" that it involves; this can be seen in the refusal to apply the same "globalising" prerogatives to conflicts as to other phenomena: it is accepted that it produces an increase (circularity) of movement of people, goods, capital, information... but not of conflicts and violence; it is accepted that "everything" is in the network and connected, but not conflict and violence. And yet the world is increasingly characterised by that diffuse, pervasive and delocalised form of conflict known as Hybrid War, involving numerous players who "could not stay together" until now, in a context of

war that manifests itself in a non-conventional form. To explain, let us try to imagine a football field where one team comes to play rugby, another to play soccer, a third to play volleyball and then an international referee arrives to regulate this tennis match. All they have in common is the ball, and this in different shapes. It becomes evident that all the players in the field face each other without sharing any rule, or strategy, but each being aware of having to beat the others and be the sole winner. Outside this metaphor is the Hybrid War, where regular armies, terrorists, insurgents, freedom fighters, media, NGOs etc. face each other without rules; International Humanitarian Law, the Geneva Convention is now an outdated embellishment.

We are speaking of the war that provoked this comment from Pope Francis (30 November 2014, during his return trip from Turkey): "*It is an opinion of mine, but I am convinced that we are living through a third world war in pieces, in chapters, everywhere*". And this other comment by President Mattarella (19 August 2015, 36th Meeting at Rimini): "*Terrorism, fuelled also by fanatical distortions of faith in God, is trying to introduce the germs of a third world war into the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa*".

But this is an untenable narrative, both civilly and politically: what citizen or ruler today would willingly and consciously accept finding himself immersed in a third world war? Hence the denial of the evidence of the conflict, which is played out on a multiplicity of concurrent levels (military, economic, media, cultural, technological etc.). This permits each of us to feel safe without actually being safe and, above all, does not allow anyone to initiate appropriate strategies for peace and reduction of conflicts, unless adapted to the new form of "negated scenario".

The dramatic consequences of this situation are the exponential increase in victims among "civilians" (but who are the "formal" combatants?) and the expansion of that grey area that is neither war nor peace (but which of the two is declared now?), making up the new uncertain scenario in which to go and operate.

Thus war without rules arouses even greater fear, because it loses the perceivable limits of political and cognitive control, becoming a monster capable of swallowing up everything; from an "unpleasant" but regulatable event it is transformed into an uncertain and ungovernable event: a crisis.

4. The central role of culture: Cultural Diplomacy

Clearly at this time we are in a turbulent and uncertain global system seeking new forms of stability that must be entrusted to new forms of "diplomacy" as a process that favours functional relations between subjects interested in cooperating. For these general characteristics (crisis, uncertainty, turbulence

etc.) the cultural dimension is the perspective to be adopted: local identities are important cognitive anchoring points, so much so that we can state that a response to turbulence is obtained by strengthening local cultures – that reserve of identity that favours the interpretation of change – on condition that they are connected in a network through a facilitating cooperative system. In fact it is the social identity of the community, expressed in its cultural practices, that generates the resilience necessary to cope with the uncertainty of the conflict. And it is the reticular, i.e. relational, dimension that enables social identities to overcome their own particularisms and deploy their potential in the "network of diversities".

Over recent decades there has been an increased insistence, and weight, of so-called Public Diplomacy in the context of government practices in international relations: "soft power" has come alongside traditional "hard power" especially in areas of conflict, offering new instruments for dealing with the crisis. Even more in recent years, especially with the development of the modern diffuse and pervasive technology of communication, the term Public Diplomacy has been joined by Cultural Diplomacy. In fact, ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) have given a potentially significant role to local cultures, understood as systems of knowledge, belief, arts, behaviour, ethical and moral orientation, or any other object, also immaterial, built by a community.

Unfortunately cooperation itself, understood as a strategy of diplomacy, is trapped in the old way of seeing, with the participation of a system of international relations and outdated political theories, and has not taken up the change. It pursues programmes and actions that do not produce anything because they look to a horizon that can no longer be such, in the light of the premises explained above.

The proposal presented here, concrete in terms of work of research and in the field, is to reposition ourselves towards a reticular world made up of nodes differing between them, in relationship through links able to contain diversity, where:

- cultural resilience is structured in a policy of local government;
- the global world is made up of strong singularities in a network, where the hegemonic model changes;
- cooperation is an instrument for renegotiating the forms of power;
- Cultural Diplomacy is the instrument of navigation for the difficult transition we are going through.

5. Thoughts from the field

The opportunity has arisen for comparing the considerations set out so far with the results obtained in the field over the last few years, engaged in cooperation with the International Solidarity Centre (Centro di Solidarietà Internazionale - CeSI) of the Università Cattolica, together with institutional partners, such as the Italian Armed Forces, or some non-government organizations, such as Perigeo IPC Ngo. These activities have always concerned interventions in crisis or post-conflict contexts, focusing above all on the cultural dimension of the interventions, developing in a period of about twenty years and embracing, among the various countries, Iraq and Kurdistan during the 2003 war, Sri Lanka for the tsunami in 2004 and 2005; Haiti for the 2010 earthquake; Afghanistan from 2009 to 2014. Numerous activities have been involved, which have enabled us to reconsider the activities carried out in those specific contexts, within a model which has then recently become topical in Syria, Oromia and Somalia, the areas referred to below.

5.1 Syria, Maaloula 2019

The experience accrued over the past few years in crisis contexts brought us, with Perigeo IPC Ngo and the Congregation of the Barnabite Fathers, into the Syrian War, at Maaloula in January 2019.

Maaloula is an ancient village about fifty kilometres from Damascus, 1,500 metres above sea level, considered to be the cradle of Syrian Christendom, where the Muslim, Greek-Catholic and Greek Orthodox communities have always lived together and where they still speak the "Syriac dialect of Maaloula". It was the venue of bitter battles with the Al Qaeda terrorists of Al Nusra, who occupied it for two years.

It is the cradle of Aramaic civilisation, it houses the Greek-orthodox monastery of Saint Thecla, where the remains of the saint, a disciple of St. Paul, are kept. Here is also the 6th century Greek-Catholic monastery of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, dedicated to two Roman army officers of Syrian origin, executed in 297 A.D. It is built on the ruins of an ancient temple to Apollo. On the walls, next to the very ancient altar, were 26 icons of the Syriac school, which have disappeared, perhaps destroyed or sold. Among these, that of the Mysterious Supper: a last supper in which Christ does not sit at the centre and the table is semi-circular but, above all, it was the symbol of the entire community, which met spiritually every day at that table. On our mission for Damascus, Homs and Aleppo we delivered a copy of this icon to the community, faithful not only in its form but also in the "methodology of writing", a real piece of local identity culture: the ceremony, which took place in the monastery before the ancient altar, brought back together the pieces of the

battered community, which reconstituted itself then as such, able to share a vision, a project and a future by rediscovering the cultural links that generated it. This initiative confirmed the priority of the process of symbolic-hereditary reconstruction as compared with that of post-emergency material reconstruction: the design of the infrastructures, which is associated with the vision of a future, is useful only where the roots of the community have been rediscovered. The cultural action was confirmed to be both the elective instrument of cooperation in the post-conflict phase, because it responds to the "urgency of peace" weaving a network of strong identifying singularities, and the concrete dimension orienting the action of Cultural Diplomacy.

5.2 Horn of Africa: Tigrai, Oromia and Puntland, 2016 -18

The Horn of Africa, with the violent complexity and cultural heritage that distinguishes it, is the destination of a significant activity; it is an important partner in the new network of the *Cultural Diplomacy Platform* with CAARI – Cultural and Archaeo-Anthropological Research Institute of the Addoun University of Galkayo, Puntland (Somalia). The project, promoted by Perigeo IPC Ngo in collaboration with the Università Cattolica, has set itself the task of promoting culture as a tool of development and empowerment of local ethnic minorities and as a means to support peace, dialogue and solidarity between different communities focusing on:

- Ethiopia in Tigrai, on the border with Eritrea, where centres for the development of the activities have been selected at Shiraro (Cunama ethnic group), at Dawhan (Irob ethnic group) and Alitena (site of the first monastery of Catholic religion), areas of criticality between Ethiopia and Eritrea and between the ethnic groups present;
- Ethiopia, in Oromia, at Kofale and in the border area with Somalia: a territory with a high inter-ethnic tension but with great possibilities for tourist development, crossed as it is by the course of the Webi Scebeli, whose sources were discovered ninety years ago by the Duke of the Abruzzi;
- Somalia, in Puntland at Garowe and Galkayo for the exploitation of a recent archaeological discovery that throws light on the most ancient civilisations of the Horn of Africa, in a country crossed and shaken by the violence of terrorism and tribal clashes;
- Somalia, at Jowhar (about 90 km from Mogadishu) with an intervention in the former "Duke of the Abruzzi" agricultural village, an area dense with history, both exemplary and problematic.

The project arose from an intuition by Perigeo, present in Somalia since 2010, with the "Museums for Peace" where it expresses the belief that recip-

rocal acquaintance represents a necessary condition for favouring peace in areas with a high inter-ethnic conflict. Hence the idea of promoting awareness, protection and use of the material and immaterial heritage belonging to the traditions of the various countries where Perigeo carries on its work.

Starting from this original idea, the activities focus on some specific objectives, namely:

1. To support the reconciliation process through the development and promotion of the cultural heritage;
2. To promote awareness of the value of the culture of their community and of the need to preserve it;
3. To promote positive relationships between generations through the exercise and transmission of cultural skills;
4. To promote tourism and community handicrafts, with particular attention to the possibilities offered by the region (e.g. the sources of the Webi Scebeli in Oromia)

The old idea of the "Museums for Peace" prompted the reflection that led to the development of Cultural Focal Points as a privileged instrument of Cultural Diplomacy and, above all, the cultural intervention demonstrates its undoubted added value in promoting those links that permit subsequent structural interventions for combating drought (wells), favouring medical care (setting up a laboratory for the production of medicines), relaunching the local economy on a sustainable basis (school of fishing and fish market) and setting up a network of sustainable cultural tourism.

The Horn of Africa has been the first laboratory experience in the use of culture as an instrument of cooperation in areas that are difficult due to a complex history of cultural conflicts, which has seen the involvement of all the actors of the project, albeit at different times. In this context, a relationship has been created between Somalian ethnic groups, between Ethiopian groups, between Ethiopian and Somalian ethnic groups, and also between Ethiopians and Somalians and Italians. The dynamics of this process of reciprocal acquaintance were not explained so much as governed in the very perspective of the project, highlighting how that cultural dimension was an asset preparatory to making subsequent structural cooperative activities effective.

6. Cultural Diplomacy and cooperation: the instruments of the intervention

It has been maintained that the recomposition of the local cultural heritage must be a priority for the interventions in crisis or (post-) conflict situations, through the use and dissemination of local knowledge.

An expression "in the field" of the previous perspectives indicates how projects, research-action, interventions whose aim is to achieve a possible reconciliation and socio-political-cultural stability in the medium-long term, and which are activated as a response to long-lasting conflict situations, can be based in the following methodological process:

1. A phase of analysis of the situation and of the cultural interpretative *drivers* typical of the context being considered, through the principles and the theoretical lines of *crisis management* and *risk analysis*;

2. The preparation of elements of cultural resilience, which can overcome the passage leading from the handling of conflicts to a resilient response in terms of *cultural diplomacy*, recalling that Chandler[2] asserts: *'Changing or adapting behaviour and understandings need to come from within; resilience cannot be "given" or "produced" by outside actors, only facilitated or inculcated through understanding the mechanisms through which problematic social practices are reproduced'*. In this specific phase, cultural resilience maintains its characteristic of multidimensionality, recognising a functional and systemic interdependence between the national, political, local and community levels.

This methodological line aims to promote a management and reduction of conflicts, placing at the centre of these interventions the exploitation of the cultural heritage and the historical-social memory of a community or social grouping whose main instrument is its own culture. The positive spinoff of this type of action is to be found in the awareness of knowing one's roots as an instrument of dialogue and peace.

Cultural-interpretative change, the factors of crisis management, the specificity of resilience have been expressed in a new operative model, which we identify in the so-called *Cultural Diplomacy Partnership (CDP)*, which is being constituted in an experimental phase as a network of partners interested in cooperating according to some principles as set out briefly below.

The aim of the CDP is to promote *Cross Cultural Country Development (CCCD)*, understood as a process of cooperative development between partners, requiring from each the ability to interact effectively with the bearers of a different culture and therefore in the respect and use of cultural specificities and diversities.

As a result, the working method gives a central place to the cultural dimension in which local identities are expressed, a reason for stability, able to relate with other specificities in a network (singularities in a network): this is

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[2] David Chandler, *'International Statebuilding and the Ideology of Resilience'*, Politics, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2013).

a strategy realised by *Identity Based Actions (IBAs)*. IBAs use, promote, conserve and reproduce the signs of the material culture (objects) and immaterial culture (song, dance, rites, narrations, cuisine and traditional medicines, ways of thinking etc.) of a specific community.

Networking, understood as a necessary and autonomous prospect with respect to globalisation, underlines the specificity of the CDP model, defining itself as "inclusive" and making the "extreme areas" the target of the actions. The method and, together, the target of the action is therefore *Inclusive Networking of Extreme Areas (INEA)*. The definition of an Extreme Area departs from the customary one of a crisis or post-conflict area: they resemble each other for their characteristics of uncertainty and diffuse and latent conflict, but differentiate themselves for the marginality and singularity typical of the Extreme Area. This is a marginality understood only as the periphery by the infrastructural channels which favour exchanges/relationships, but not by the interests that motivate exchanges/relations; a singularity understood as a high specificity of the network node whose relational protocols must however be defined in order for its networking capacity to be effective. In this perspective we can talk of Geopolitics of the Extreme Areas, which become an object of penetration especially when they are peripheries of a number of centralities, characterised by a marginal economy of their own, with local market resources and possibilities. An example is the Nepalese region of Mustang, in the Himalayas, where a new road has connected it effectively with Tibet and the Chinese economy, rapidly decreeing its dependence. The present road connection, in fact, is effectively operative in the eastern area Mustang (Nepal) - Tibet (China), (about 50 km) and completely ineffective in the West Nepalese route (about 150 km) which ought to constitute the new way of Chinese penetration of India along the Kali Gandaki Corridor. The result is that this extreme area is being incorporated into the process of extension of the Chinese neighbour, losing its singularity, assimilated by the neighbouring nodes (Chinese region) to become an offshoot of penetration by the nearby giant. On the contrary, the form of cooperation founded on the *Cultural Diplomacy Partnership (CDP)*, aims to guarantee that all the peculiarities that make Mustang marginal and singular remain in the network, favouring the maintenance of the "potential" difference between the nodes.

The cardinal instrument, the most operative dimension of the CDP, is the so-called Cultural Focal Points (CFPs): a series of representative collections of the material and immaterial culture of a specific local community and of activities reproducing local culture, which are the prime movers of cultural exchange initiatives, promotion of dialogue and reciprocal acquaintance between the various ethnic areas involved.

The Cultural Focal Point is:
- static: it can be compared to a museum, insofar as it represents cultural processes and displays artefacts;
- dynamic: it is a place of encounter where what is preserved is reproduced, favouring the dialogue and vertical transmission of the memory together with the learning of "how to do";
- singular: it highlights the cultural peculiarities of a single community, which by reinforcing their own identities acquire awareness and resilience that are expressed as a "competent node" of the global network;
- plural: because each culture finds itself in a necessary relationship with the other nodes (cultures) of the network, maintaining functional reciprocal relations.

We are aware that the model put forward is complex and composite, in the phase of elaboration and experimentation, but we are also convinced both as to its sustainability and as to its "preventive" effectiveness. The latter is defined by the necessity of guaranteeing the survival of local culture as an increase in value of the reticular world and, precisely, an instrument for prevention of conflicts and a prerequisite, on the basis of mutual understanding of the different cultural codes, to the reciprocal satisfaction of material needs, favouring economic relations.

We therefore need to reposition ourselves in this reticular world, made up of nodes differing between them that are identified in strong singularities in the network, which relate through links able to contain the diversity, where cultural resilience is structured in a policy of local government and cooperation as an instrument of reorganisation of power, where Cultural Diplomacy is proposed as an instrument of negotiation in the difficult period of transition we are going through.

It is urgent on the other hand that we find new forms of collaboration between institutional actors and communities in this new, highly unpredictable scenario, because a delay is not ethically or functionally sustainable. And the local dimension, in its expression of cultural identity, is functional to local development and well-being founded on those specific skills, fed into the network.

Thus, cultural strategy, organised in the perspective of Cultural Diplomacy and made operative in the *Cultural Diplomacy Partnership*, with its different instruments, is adequate to the new reticular and complex scenario, orphan of *governance*, where precisely *Peace is Urgent*.

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