

FEATURE

Lex Hoogduin & Jochem Wiers

FOREIGN POLICY IN A VUCA WORLD

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY WILL NOT MAKE DIPLOMACY
OBSOLETE: IT WILL TRANSFORM IT

Recent interviews with leaders from both the public and private sectors paint a picture of a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world (Gowing and Langdon, 2015). In such a world, leadership is mainly about how to deal with uncertainties: the keywords in the interviews were coping and adapting. It is quite a challenge to show leadership in that kind of world, while at the same time convincing the electorate. A similar challenge confronts the Dutch Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. They are tasked with no less than nine objectives between them, including the promotion of the international rule of law and human rights, security, European collaboration, fair trade and development. These are not just ambitious objectives; they are also difficult to make tangible. The only clearly defined

ministerial responsibilities are those concerning consular representation¹. The rest are all goals the Netherlands could possibly contribute to, but actually achieving them greatly depends on others, and on developments beyond their control.

Foreign policymakers face uncertainty, complexity, a host of ambitious objectives, an abundance of information and opinion, and little time. You can add to this list a variety of political interests and political games that are played. As diplomats and policymakers at the MFA, we are well aware that the world is uncertain and complex, and we incorporate this into our advice as best we can. We filter the wealth of information, judge it, put it into political perspective (what is feasible considering the political landscape at home, in Europe and beyond?).

Sources: Gowing, N. and Langdon, C. (2015). Thinking the Unthinkable: A New Imperative for Leadership in the Digital Age. Churchill Central. [online] Available at: <https://www.churchillcentral.com/dms/cms-content/Panel-reports/Thinking-the-Unthinkable--A-New-Imperative-for-Leadership-in-the-Digital-Age-/> De Spiegeleire, S. (2014). What the official websites say. HCSS.nl [online] Available at: http://www.hcss.nl/report/what_the_official_websites_say_1 Tetlock, P. and Gardner, D. (2015). Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction, London: Random House.

¹ See the general objective in the national Dutch budget's Chapter V, Article 4: 'Providing excellent consular services to Dutch citizens in emergency situations abroad, as well as providing travel documents to Dutch citizens abroad.'

² For more information on FAUC, see www.glocomnet.com.



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And yet we could arguably do a better job if we dealt with all that uncertainty and complexity in a more explicit way. By making better and more systematic use of available data. By laying bare our assumptions, actively countering groupthink and tunnel vision, and seeking different opinions even if these may appear 'unpalatable'. Science provides us with possibilities we are not yet using to their maximum effect, but these possibilities will only be useful when the gap to policy makers' reality is bridged. The Netherlands MFA, in particular its Strategy Advisory Unit (ESA is its Dutch acronym), is experimenting with some of these possibilities.

It commissioned an experimental study by the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) on the use of big(gish) data to learn from the language used on official websites of emerging powers (De Spiegeleire, 2014). Big data analysis is now being used by the Ministry in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance. This year, the MFA will start a 'Superforecasting' experiment based on the groundbreaking work of Phil Tetlock (Tetlock and Gardner, 2015). Colleagues from the MFA and ten other Dutch organisations will receive training in recognising and overcoming cognitive biases and participate in a tournament in which they make and update

probability assessments of events in international relations in the near future. ESA also invited an external expert in uncertainty and complexity, prof Lex Hoogduin, to the MFA. Together with him, we explore how his approach, the Framework for Action under Uncertainty and Complexity, can be applied to foreign policy issues². This framework (FAUC) facilitates agents, policymakers to act effectively in this complex world and facing an uncertain future. FAUC emphasises the importance of dealing with inevitable potential surprises, mistakes, limited controllability and predictability of future developments. It underlines that it is crucial for an agent to be resilient, alert, adaptive and creative and offers methods and techniques to that effect. Agents should follow a constant feedback process to detect and cope with potential surprises and mistakes. Finally, a colleague is exploring to what extent insights from behavioural sciences can be applied to foreign policy, such as consular work.

These experiments are small scale and it will be quite a challenge to mainstream their results into day-to-day policy making in the fast-moving international environment and the frantic and fragmented political and media landscape in which we are making foreign policy. Nevertheless, they are very exciting because they illustrate that new developments in various sciences and technologies offer not only new ways of pursuing diplomacy, but also a glimpse of a world in which international relations and ministries of foreign affairs will look decidedly different from what they are now. Science and technology will not make diplomacy obsolete, but will transform it.

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