Digest of the debate:

‘WikiLeak and the future of diplomacy’

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Annex: Links, resources and drawings
E-diplomacy website: http://edip.diplomacy.edu
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On 11 January 2011, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) and DiploFoundation hosted a Policy Briefing entitled ‘WikiLeaks and the future of diplomacy’. Three panellists led the discussion, each of whom had a different approach: Dr Khalid Koser, Academic Dean at the GCSP – the security perspective; Dr Jovan Kurbalija, Founding Director of DiploFoundation – the diplomacy perspective; and Mr Philippe Mottaz, Director of World Radio Switzerland (WRS) – the media perspective. Mr Marc Finaud, Special Advisor to the Director at the GCSP, moderated the discussion and Professor François Heisbourg, Chairman of the GCSP Foundation Council, made the opening remarks.

Professor François Heisbourg affirmed that WikiLeaks did not only have an impact on diplomacy but also affected other areas, such as cybersecurity and inter-state relations. When looking at the effect on diplomacy, we should distinguish between the generic effect and the specific effects, from country to country. At the generic level, US diplomacy comes out looking rather well: American diplomats produce good reports, with thorough, comprehensive analyses. Nevertheless, following the revelations made by WikiLeaks, and particularly the disclosure of the identities of several interlocutors of the American embassies, some may find it quite hard to trust the USA again and might restrict their transfer of information as a result. The ‘cablegate’ will undoubtedly also affect cybersecurity, which Professor Heisbourg stressed will need to be looked at from a broad spectrum, and not just from the military perspective.

Lastly, he made two points. First, currently no one has much information about WikiLeaks as an organisation: we do not know where its funding comes from, how it operates, or what its governance structure looks like. This lack of transparency is rather disconcerting for an organisation that advocates more transparency at global level. The second point relates to the position which the USA will take on WikiLeaks: calling the crisis ‘the 9/11 of diplomacy’ and labelling WikiLeaks as a terrorist organisation may reflect poorly on the United States as a global actor, and additional caution is therefore advised.

Dr Khalid Koser presented the impact that WikiLeaks has or may have on security. He emphasised the current state of confusion on whether WikiLeaks was an actual security threat or not and furthermore stated that it was also unclear whose security was concerned. On the first question, Dr Koser affirmed that it was not the case either for international security, or for cybersecurity. Indeed, the information leaked was not hacked, but rather badly secured. Successive attempts by governments to close down the website proved ineffective in the short and long term, thus enabling freedom of speech to persist. That said, Dr Koser identified three security risk areas directly affected by WikiLeaks. First, the publication of some
cables damaged relations between certain states, as confidential information and criticism became public. Secondly, it created a mass mobilisation of people and showed the importance of virtual power. Finally, and quite contrary to its original objective, it contributed to reducing information-sharing between states.

Dr Jovan Kurbalija described the WikiLeaks phenomenon as a mirror of modern society: for some it represents a major threat, while for others it is a major improvement in democracy. He then tackled some of the immediate effects and long term consequences for diplomacy. Contrary to recent allegations, the future of diplomacy is guaranteed, as it remains the best means to prevent or solve conflicts peacefully. However, diplomatic practices may have to change, and WikiLeaks has contributed to accelerating such changes.

Dr Kurbalija considered that leaks would likely continue due to the nature of digitised documents (simple to copy and distribute). Diplomatic services (and others) will face the enormous challenge of increasing information security while simultaneously facilitating easy access to information, which is a necessity in the Internet era. In the short term, countries will focus on security by tightening online communication channels. In the medium term, WikiLeaks will also affect diplomatic reporting. Diplomats must acknowledge that their reports might be made public, faster than before. This may increase the quality of documents produced but at the same time decrease their number and level of information as the diplomats turn to other, harder to document, methods of communication, such as phone calls.

Mr Philip Mottaz looked at the symbiotic relationship between the media and diplomacy. He recalled some of the fundamentals of media, such as the public interest and the responsibility of journalism. However, there is no innocent act of communication and an interest always lies behind it. WikiLeaks changed this modus operandus. Mr Mottaz described it as the ‘first industrial accident’ in diplomacy, but he was also confident that diplomacy would live on past WikiLeaks. The bigger question was how to deal with democracy in a digitally connected world? This would open the debate between people and power, but also empowers us to have healthy debate on technology as a tool for more openness in democracy. In conclusion, Mr Mottaz asserted that it was essential to take a risk for the public interest.

A lively discussion with the participants present at the briefing and those participating online followed the presentations, after which Mr Finaud made the concluding remarks. In particular, he wondered what the greatest scandal was: the publication of confidential documents or the reported facts themselves (such as violations of human rights or international law).
Professor François Heisbourg summarised the main points of his article that will be published shortly in the journal *Survival*.

Although people focus on diplomacy, the impact of WikiLeaks is much broader. There are other significant aspects in terms of cybersecurity, the relationship between ‘state’ and ‘non-state’ actors, and the stress put on democracy’s value systems which are facing this challenge.

When it comes to diplomacy and WikiLeaks, he distinguished between specific and generic effects. It is difficult to judge specific effects, because we are working on the basis of only 0.92% of the cables which have been released so far by WikiLeaks. It is too early to judge, but there are some initial signs. For example, WikiLeaks cast severe tension on German–French cooperation in the satellite industry.

As for generic effects, there is good and there is bad news. The good news is that it has put American diplomacy in a good light. American diplomats write factually, dispassionately, and highly professionally. It also shows that American diplomacy does what it says. The discrepancy between its public and secret communication is minimal. The bad news is that the USA will need to spend a lot of time in order to reestablish its credentials. Who will go to the American embassy tomorrow, except to talk, perhaps, about the weather? There is a potential risk for people mentioned in the cables. In the current sample of 0.92%, 37 people mentioned by name were ‘strictly protected’. Not only are they no longer protected, but they are also now a potential target of attack.

In order to illustrate the low level of US security, Prof. Heisbourg contrasted diplomatic security with the financial security of using credit cards in many developing states. When he uses his credit card in these countries, he is called by the bank to confirm his identity. The bank notification system is a basic service provided to tens of millions of people. But if someone wants to download 251,000 cables from SIPRNet, no one blinks an eye. If Ms Clinton wants to download 251,000 cables, nobody is going to call her to check if she really wants to download so many cables. He therefore describes WikiLeaks as a security breach due to incompetent organisation.

The good news is that it is easy to correct, a no-brainer! One only needs to introduce some very basic protection that is used in e-banking or e-commerce. Heisbourg thinks that cybersecurity has to be addressed in a much broader manner, and not just as a military issue. There is a US cybersecurity command centre, but it did not prevent someone from downloading 251,000 cables. Cybersecurity cannot be dealt with as a military issue only.
Another aspect of the situation is the existence of data exchange agreements which the USA has with many states. One of the requirements for these agreements is that the USA needs to know how other contracting states manage their data, but it does not allow a reciprocal audit. It would be good for the USA to permit full reciprocity and let others review its data-handling procedures. It would help the USA to take advantage of other countries’ best practices.

Prof. Heisbourg expressed concern that we know very little about the governance, funding, and operations of WikiLeaks. He commented on Fratini’s analogy saying that WikiLeaks is the ‘9/11 of diplomacy’. This is not a proper analogy since the WikiLeaks incident was not an act of terrorism. But it would be even more damaging if the USA made an analogous reaction to WikiLeaks. The US reaction to 9/11 was very damaging for the world and itself (Iraq, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, torture). It would be terribly damaging if the USA similarly over-reacted to WikiLeaks and to Mr Assange. There has already been a request to declare WikiLeaks a terrorist organisation. If this happens, it would not improve US cybersecurity, but would seriously damage its standing in the world.

Dr Khalid Koser asked where WikiLeaks poses a security threat. It’s not clear what the nominal threat is. The website, the people posting the information, the newspapers, Julian Assange himself, or the governments who have been trying to gag WikiLeaks? It is also not clear what is being threatened by this menace to security. WikiLeaks is not a threat for national security – at least, not yet. Nothing, however, apart from locating the right source, precludes the publication of more sensitive information in the future. WikiLeaks is not a threat for national security – at least, not yet. Nothing, however, apart from locating the right source, precludes the publication of more sensitive information in the future.

What does WikiLeaks tell us about cybersecurity? The information does not appear to have been hacked, but has apparently been released by someone who had access to the system. What is really striking is the lax protocol surrounding data protection.

Does the response of governments pose a threat to freedom of speech? No; at least, not yet. And closing down WikiLeaks will not solve the problem.

Then what are the security risks associated with WikiLeaks? The first is that diplomatic cables in particular may have damaged relations between states. But is this short-term or long-term? Secondly, people are beginning to realise their virtual power. Thirdly, and of most concern, is the instinctive reaction of states to protect their information. The 9/11 tragedy could probably have been avoided if the right information had reached the right people at the right time. With WikiLeaks, one expects a reduction in information sharing, and that poses a security issue.

Dr Jovan Kurbalija used the drawing of the ‘blind men and the elephant’ to illustrate how the one issue – the WikiLeaks crisis – is perceived differently by different people. On one hand there are some, especially in the USA, who see WikiLeaks as an act of terrorism requiring capital punishment for its main instigator, Mr Assange. On the other hand, there are many who argue that WikiLeaks is one of the best things that has happened to the world recently, presaging a more just and transparent world. In between lie many different views, focusing on the questions of freedom of expression, the future of diplomacy, and Internet governance, to name a few.

Dr Kurbalija said it was difficult to navigate through this avalanche of articles, blogs, and texts. He suggested that we should zoom out and see what the under-
lying changes are. We should try to imagine what the WikiLeaks crisis will look like over a five-year perspective. The first question is if diplomacy will survive this major shock. The answer is simple. Yes; diplomacy will survive. It won’t just survive, it will thrive. Diplomacy, through negotiations and compromise, has always been the main conduit for handling relations among humans, enabling them to live together.

**Diplomacy will thrive in the forthcoming period because the more interdependent the world becomes, the more there is a need for solving problems through negotiation and compromise.** He noted that we see from Iraq and Afghanistan that the potential of using military force for solving conflicts is limited. With the growing social and economic integration of modern society, it will become even more limited. So diplomacy is not just an ethical choice, superior to war and use of force, but a practical necessity. This is good news. Diplomacy will survive.

On the other hand, some will consider it bad news that diplomacy will have to change, to adapt to the new post-WikiLeaks world. If we review carefully, diplomacy has not changed substantially since Richelieu established the first Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the 17th century, or Metternich and Talleyrand established the basis of a modern diplomatic system at the Vienna Congress in 1814. In the meantime, the world has changed profoundly. Dr Kurbalija said diplomacy has to ‘sync’ with these changes. In this context, WikiLeaks can be seen as an accelerator of these changes; changes that have been waiting to take place. Dr Kurbalija then outlined the main challenges to diplomacy triggered by WikiLeaks.

He started with the word ‘WikiLeaks’ which contains two parts – ‘wiki’ (technology for collaborative online text editing) and ‘leaks’. A leak is the way liquid moves or escapes. It is inherent to water and other liquids to try to move. Leaks can be temporarily contained in pools, dams, glasses, and bottles. But ultimately, they tend to leak. He proposed that it is difficult, if not impossible, to prevent leaks. Water leaks are a good analogy for digitalised documents. Once a document is digitalised it ‘waits’ to be moved in many possible ways via e-mail, a website, a lost notebook or memory stick. In principle, it is next to impossible to stop digital data from moving in the long run. The very nature of digital data has enormous consequences for the way diplomatic services should manage their data and protect their confidentiality. If they want to preserve the security of their data,
they should not digitalise it. Data should be sent in paper format or exchanged via secure telephone, or, we may experience return of messenger pigeons. Is this a viable option?

Dr Kurbalija said that, paradoxically, the reaction of many governments will be opposite to the realisation that we cannot stop digital documents leaking. The diplomat’s first reaction will be instinctive. They will try to guard their ‘digital fortress’. We can expect more confidentiality, more security, and more restrictions. Governments will try to increase their control of data flow. The security business will flourish. ICT security is one of the fastest growing businesses, based on a rather naïve view that cybersecurity can be achieved through a technical solution. He said many overlook the fact that recent leaks were made primarily by insiders, rarely as a consequence of a breach in technical security. This includes not only WikiLeaks but also bank leaks (Societe Generale, UBS). It is very likely that many institutions will try to seek solutions in the wrong direction – by involving expensive consultants and trying to bring solutions to internal problems from outside, using ready-made security procedures and systems.

According to Dr Kurbalija, more security is likely to lead to greater isolation of diplomatic services. This may endanger communication with the public and other interlocutors, affecting one of the main channels of diplomacy. Communication is to diplomacy what blood is to the human body. Once the flow slows, the organisation weakens. If you read one of Mr Assange’s manifestos, this is what he wants. He wants to shake the whole system, not to attack just one country and its institutions (in this case, the US State Department).

The next aspect which Dr Kurbalija mentioned was the impact WikiLeaks has had on diplomatic reporting. He said that diplomatic reporting is the basis of internal communication in diplomatic services. Diplomats are judged by their reports, and reports influence career progress. In the aftermath of the WikiLeaks crisis, diplomats will start writing their reports with the subconscious perception that one day their reports may be read by outsiders. This has both positive and negative aspects. It may force them to write better reports. But it could also lead towards self-censorship and possibly fewer, or less-detailed reports. Diplomats may prefer to use a telephone instead of written reports. Some future historians may view the post-WikiLeaks era as the dark age of archiving and storing institutional memory.

The latest temblor in the tectonic changes triggered by WikiLeaks is the altered relationship between diplomats and politicians. Diplomats tend to be the scapegoats for politicians. It is part of their “terms of reference” to take the blame for the mistakes in foreign policy. However, in the case of WikiLeaks, the diplomats (US diplomats) came across rather as highly professional, unlike some politicians who are seen with all of their vices.

Dr Kurbalija posited that the conclusion drawn from the WikiLeaks incident might be that the more diplomacy changes, the more it remains the same. Ideally, it will change in its modalities, but it will remain the same in its function of solving conflict in society through negotiation and compromise.

Mr Philip Mottaz said there was a symbiotic relationship between diplomacy and the media. But he said that we first have to go back to the fundamentals, to what the press and media are all about.
He said that we (the media) believe – this is our DNA – that there is no innocent act of communication. **No act of communication is ever conducted without a vested interest.** We probe with healthy scepticism to try to shed light on the workings of institutions. We do it in the public interest, and we do it in a responsible manner.

So what are the guiding principles behind WikiLeaks? Global transparency? But at what cost? Self-advertising? We don't know. WikiLeaks has changed the *modus operandi*, but why did they do it? They changed from being a dumpster to being a supplier.

On the other hand, WikiLeaks has acted quite responsibly as to the timing in which the information was released.

For diplomats, WikiLeaks is the first industrial accident of the digital age. However, diplomacy will survive. It is the scale and the new regime that we operate under which has to be considered. We live in a connected world. We won't be able to unplug; we won't be able to go back. Yet, we still need to express ideas.

So how do we deal with democracy in a digital world? Fundamentally, this is the security question which needs to be raised. Digital technology offers us a way to exchange, trade, and discuss. It's a work-in-progress, which is undergoing a very disruptive moment, but is still very promising.

Mr Marc Finaud summarised by saying that the risk of having confidential documents published will probably change the ways which diplomats communicate. Due to new technology and interest from the media to reveal information, the media will continue to publish leaked information. The question is therefore how to protect media sources.

Another central question is: **What is WikiLeaks’ greatest scandal: the publishing of confidential information, or the facts contained in the published diplomatic cables?**

Mr Mottaz intervened by saying: first, a lot of information that is released is not published by the media but comes from other sources. Second, who is, in the end, the beneficiary? It’s an obscure chapter. **And what do we know about Bradley Manning? Nothing!**

**Questions from the in situ and online audiences**

*Name inaudible:* ‘If the voters are not clear about democracy, what does democracy mean? What is all of the secrecy that’s being held, and to what extent are our lives and the misuse of media to project stories that aren’t true, poisoning the concept [ability] of democracy to be able to know what’s really going on? What role should secrecy play in our lives? Do we have meaningful democracy?’

*Name inaudible:* ‘Who decides what gets released? I would prefer to live in a world where each organisation sets its own rules. Who gave Julian Assange the right to release this information? Do we live in a society of anarchy? There is a responsibility on each individual to police him or herself: Julian Assange has displayed a weakness or inability to do that.’

Dr Koser agreed that we have a culture of secrecy that is being exposed by the WikiLeaks issue. Does WikiLeaks strengthen this culture or narrow it? It strengthens it! As for self-censorship, we can say it doesn’t exist with regard to WikiLeaks.'
Mr Mottaz commented that Assange and the WikiLeaks people needed to clarify where they’re coming from. It’s a very collective cyber process. We have to bring time into the equation. Can we think without time? Democracy in a connected world will have to grasp this: what do we do with our time management?

Dr Kurbalija took comments from the online audience. One participant commented that the paradox was that the main victim was the US government, the same government which promoted open access to data. In fact, the first Act that the Obama administration signed when it came to office was the Open Access Act.

Marilia Maciel from Getulio Vargas Foundation noted that the released top secret intelligence data contained rather trivial information. She asked: ‘Is somebody re-considering the need for intelligence, especially since this involves huge funding and large human resources?’

Dr Kurbalija commented that the underlying tension was caused by an increasing reluctance to tolerate secrecy in governments’ operations. Secrecy is not just conspiracy, but one of the basic principles of the organisation of Weberian-style bureaucracy. This will take some time before it changes. Even language is revealing. Secrecy is in the root of ‘secretariat’ and ‘secretary’ (used in describing diplomatic hierarchy – first, second, third secretary). While secrecy needs to be reduced, it is difficult to envisage diplomacy conducted in public. A certain level of discretion needs to be preserved. It remains to be seen if Julian Assange’s hypothesis is valid: the more transparent a government is, the more just it is.

Mr Finaud quoted Julian Assange, saying that mass leaking leaves unjust systems vulnerable to those who seek to replace them with more open forms of governance. He said the purpose of WikiLeaks was clearly to put pressure on governments to operate more transparently. The paradox is that the greatest pressure is being put on one of the most open societies. What will happen when this kind of incident affects less open governments?

Another online participant, Klaas van der Tempel, from the Clingendael Institute, the Netherlands, asked: ‘How transparent can diplomacy become without hindering its work? Unhindered communication is central to diplomacy. For example, the Vienna Conventions have exactly that purpose. This is not about transparency only, but also efficiency. There will always be friction between transparency and diplomacy. As Abba Eban wrote: peace with secrecy may sometimes be preferable to secrecy without peace.’

Name inaudible: ‘What could the US government do to control damage? What is the US doing in advance of receiving this avalanche of leaked information?’

Mr Mottaz replied that the USA was indeed establishing damage control. The USA has come out pretty unscathed. What else can be done? Will people continue talking to American diplomats? Yes, because we need to. Not much is going to change. People will want to continue telling their stories. Secondly, countries have interests, and need to pursue those interests. That’s not going to change. Thirdly, communication is about human behaviour. Six months or one year from now, things will continue to come out, little by little, but nothing will change, at the end of the day.

Professor Fred Tanner, GSCP Director, asked about the legal status of WikiLeaks: ‘A secret, under American law, even if it’s being leaked, is still a secret. What does
the USA do about this? What about newspapers publishing it? People referring to the leaks? Also, who decides on what is being released?’

Philippe Petit, former French Ambassador, said that one could sum up WikiLeaks’ objectives in two: to expose, and to contribute to peace through more transparency. ‘With regard to the first, most of the cables which have been published are considered trivial, even if in reality they portray good communication. Therefore the first object has failed. As for the second objective, diplomacy is a contribution to peace. What will happen after cablegate: will diplomats remain open to express judgements? They will not dare to express judgements as they have done! And who will dare to speak to diplomats, knowing that it may become public? So WikiLeaks has failed there, too.’

Journalist, name inaudible: ‘Diplomacy does not preclude wars, and leaks do not preclude wars, so how does all what we said today apply to this situation?

It is a dream of each and every journalist to create something like WikiLeaks. There has been a French version, which for a long time has fed on leaks. But how did WikiLeaks establish itself as the ultimate source, which every leaker is now referring to?’

Summarising his intervention, Dr Koser said that much of what we’ve seen in the cables is fairly trivial. However, some cables are not trivial at all. What has the State Department done in relation to this? There’s a feeling that the idea of WikiLeaks has been addressed more than the issues the cables themselves have raised.

In his summary, Mr Philippe Mottaz stated that leaking has always been a tradition. The economy of scale has changed and the actors have changed. This is what technology does. He stressed the conviction that democracy was a risk, and that it needed to be tested every day. This is not a conspiracy, but an openness that benefits, by definition, a larger number.

Dr Jovan Kubalija summarised his intervention by saying that leaks have always existed, will always exist, and have always had some impact. Most previous leaks had a specific policy purpose (Ems Telegram, Zimmerman Telegram, Pentagon Files). WikiLeaks is different because it does not have specific political purpose but rather a general objective of challenging the way in which the world is governed.

Immediate changes will be minor. However, in the longer term, three to five years from now, there will be earth-shaking changes. This is good news for diplomacy, and essentially diplomacy must adjust, not only for its own survival but to fill the enormous need that society has for diplomacy. We need compromise, negotiations, and understanding of others in the Internet era more than ever before.
Next E-diplomacy Panel

Diplomatic Reporting in the Internet Era
9 February 2011 (13.00 – 14.30 CET)

Venue:
GCSP – 2nd Floor, WMO/OMM Building
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