Seeing in Stereo

Anne-Marie Slaughter

Recommended Citation

Seeing in Stereo

Anne-Marie Slaughter
©2021 Anne-Marie Slaughter

ABSTRACT: Foreign policy experts often rely on familiar dichotomies: great power competition versus global issues, foreign policy versus domestic policy, and a unitary national identity versus multiculturalism. "Seeing in stereo" means superimposing the two halves of each dichotomy on top of one another. Learning to see how great power competition and global issues intertwine, how foreign and domestic policies increasingly merge, and how the United States can be both *plures* and *unum* is essential to navigating the complexity of the twenty-first-century world.

The complexity of the twenty-first century requires all foreign policy and national security scholars and practitioners to see in stereo. We must learn to see two very different groups of actors, sets of issues, and patterns of behavior at the same time and integrate them into one picture. Computers that can monitor and integrate different data streams will make this intellectual multitasking easier, but humans are the ultimate analysts and advisers, and we must train our eyes and brains to push back against the luxury of a single worldview.

I propose three broad areas in which we must shift our gaze from mono to stereo. First is the world itself: we must learn to see behaviors of international and global actors simultaneously and weight them equally. Second, we must erase the intellectual divide that scholars, teachers, and bureaucrats have long imposed between foreign and domestic issues. Third, with regard to Americans but also to other multiracial, multiethnic nations: we must learn to be *pluribus* and *unum* at the same time, or, in proper Latin, *plures et unum*.

Remember that the creation of the nation-state system arising out of the Treaty of Westphalia took centuries, and international relations has existed as a recognized discipline for less than a century. The mental maps we impose on what we think we see are constructed and thus can be reconstructed. In an age in which we understand the ways tiny disturbances can lead to great consequences, and change happens so quickly and continually that we must learn to adapt and respond rather than predict and plan, learning to look through two lenses simultaneously rather than one is not so hard, but it is essential.

International and Global

Imagine the pre-Westphalian world in which "international" did not exist as a concept. Nations of people existed but not as political units that possessed sovereignty and interacted with one another. Thinking

Dr. Anne-Marie Slaughter, CEO of New America, served as director of policy planning for the US Department of State (2009–11) and the dean of the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs (2002–9).

about events or affairs between, or *inter*, nations was thus impossible. Now think about the world today, which is divided into nation-states—the only proper subjects, along with international organizations, of international law. Yet many of those nation-states are far smaller and less powerful than the world's great cities, corporations, or religious and educational institutions. How do we reconcile the two worlds?

In my 2017 book *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World*, I describe the Westphalian world as a chessboard, a board on which strategists typically focus on one opponent at time, imagining how a series of moves by one side will inspire a series of countermoves by the other.[1] It is actually a board on which many games are played as game theory has formalized: chess, Go, poker, chicken, stag hunt, and the prisoner's dilemma. What is common to all these games is that they divide the world into discreet pieces. Players move in *reaction* to the moves of others; they are not directly connected to them, pulled and changed by a web of invisible strings.

The web world, by contrast, is the global world of millions, perhaps billions, of networks—nodes connected to one another by countless electronic and physical links. A network is different from a group. A group can come together and then disperse without remaining connected. A network, by definition, is an entity through which communication and action continue to flow, creating one entity with many parts, each of which affects the other through their connection. In the web world, we need strategies of connection. Those strategies must proceed from maps of what is connected to what and what is not connected or misconnected to what. They also require an understanding of how different patterns of connection can achieve or contribute to specific results, such as defense, resilience, cooperation, coordination, and scale.

So often these different sets of issues are put in the boxes of international and transnational. Transnational, however, still focuses primarily on states: it simply means across state borders rather than between them. Focusing on global issues is much more than semantic; it means we can picture a world of states and a world of global actors superimposed on one another. Russia can be planning an information attack on the United States working through many hidden networks of semiprivate actors, with diplomatic but also potentially criminal consequences. That is seeing in stereo.

Foreign and Domestic

Foreign policy expert Heather Hurlburt tells an anecdote about being asked to help a senator up for reelection in 2018 prepare for a debate. When she arrived, the staff commented on the relative lack of foreign policy topics in the news that year. As Hurlburt recounts the story:

1.   Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

And for half an hour I tested and prodded: on immigration, refugees and security; trade and China; defense spending and jobs; anti-Semitism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Eventually, we turned to the more traditional items: Iran, North Korea, Russia. But I couldn't resist: "Senator, I hope you agree that all these topics are foreign policy, too. They're what foreign policy is now."[2]

Hurlburt argues that for much of the twentieth century the United States had the wealth and size to conduct its foreign affairs quite separately from its domestic life, aided by the position of the dollar as the international reserve currency. Today, however, issues like climate change, disinformation, global health, anticorruption, political violence, cybersecurity, democracy, and human rights are not only issues that are as important to Americans at home as to countries abroad, they are also comprised of an inextricable mix of foreign and domestic policies.

Trade is a prime example. Reduction of tariffs has always required national legislation, with the attendant minefield of powerful domestic commercial and manufacturing interests. Over the last few decades, however, the focus has shifted almost entirely to nonmarket barriers: environmental and labor regulations, government subsidies for infant industries, and tax and competition policy—all domestic policies made through domestic legislation or regulation.

In the 1950s, the desire to compete with the Soviet Union and undercut their propaganda about the plight of workers and African-Americans in the United States contributed to an upsurge of labor protections and the beginnings of the civil rights movement. In coming years, issues like gun violence and voter suppression are likely to tarnish the US global reputation in ways that undermine American influence abroad and the prestige of some American institutions, such as universities. On the flip side, the ability to embrace our status as a plurality nation going forward and to nurture connections and networks forged by the many Americans who are first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants to their home countries can be an enormous commercial and diplomatic advantage.

Seeing in stereo on these issues means learning to work with domestic policy experts in a different way. Ultimately, it means moving to a task-force approach to problem solving, putting the right people together depending on the job at hand, much as a commander would select the right mixture of specialists and regular troops for a mission. Without a broad mix of domestic and foreign policy experts at the table for any given problem, however, the decisionmaker literally will not be able to see what is at stake nor the full range of options before her.

2.   Heather Hurlburt, "Should We Take the 'Foreign' Out of Foreign Policy?," New America, July 2, 2019, https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/new-politics-beyond-2020/should-we-take-the-foreign-out-of-foreign-policy.

Plures et Unum

The motto of the United States is "*E Pluribus Unum*," or "out of many, one." The Constitution commits us to "a more perfect union," a coming together as one polity. When I was growing up, civics teachers espoused the melting pot theory: people came to the United States from all over the world and were fused in the crucible of citizenship to emerge as Americans, with one language, one culture, and one history.

No longer. The idea of multiculturalism emerged as students, both men and women, from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds began to challenge the curriculum of college courses traditionally described as Western Civilization or Great Books, featuring works almost entirely written by white men. Over the last several decades, the vibrant clash of cultures that makes up so much of American urban life, a phenomenon that has spread to many smaller towns and cities all over the country, is reshaping curricula, holidays, food, arts, and media.

Many American conservatives and classical liberals are deeply worried about multiculturalism, an ideology that in their view "seeks to divide and conquer Americans, making many groups out of one citizenry."[3] This same fear powers broader debates over identity politics—the worry, as Francis Fukuyama expresses it, that democracies are fracturing into segments based on ever-narrower identities, threatening the possibility of deliberation and collective action by society as a whole.[4]

But why must it be either/or? Why cannot we be *plures* and *unum* at the same time? Why cannot that very duality be our greatest strength? As Yale psychology professor Jennifer A. Richeson writes in response to Fukuyama: "Identifying as American does not require the relinquishing of other identities. In fact, it is possible to leverage those identities to cultivate and deepen one's Americanness."[5]

Counterintuitively, it is possible to share experiences of being marginalized, or struggling to find your place in society, in ways that could actually increase social cohesion across very different groups. Tea Party Republicans and Bernie Democrats have experiences in common, as do rural whites and inner-city Blacks. Richeson believes America can have a "unifying national creed that would allow Americans to embrace their own identities, encourage them to respect the identities embraced by others, and affirm shared principles of equality and justice."[6]

Stacey Abrams, the first African-American woman to be nominated for governor by a major political party who came within 55,000 votes

3. Ryan P. Williams, "Defend America—Defeat Multiculturalism," American Mind, April 23, 2019, https://americanmind.org/memo/defend-america-defeat-multiculturalism/.
4. Francis Fukuyama, "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2018-08-14/against-identity-politics-tribalism-francis-fukuyama.
5. Jennifer A. Richeson, "A Creedal Identity Is Not Enough," in "E Pluribus Unum? The Fight over Identity Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-02-01/stacey-abrams-response-to-francis-fukuyama-identity-politics-article.
6. Richeson, "A Creedal Identity."

of being elected as governor of Georgia, put this view into practice.[7] She "intentionally and vigorously highlighted communities of color and other marginalized groups" during her campaign, "*not to the exclusion of others but as a recognition of their specific policy needs* [emphasis added]."[8] After all, she writes, "the marginalized did not create identity politics: their identities have been forced on them by dominant groups . . . ."

Like Richeson, Abrams insists it is possible to embrace "the distinct histories and identities of groups in a democracy" in ways that enhance "the complexity and capacity of the whole." This multiplicity, this pluralism, can be who we are as Americans in all our glorious intersections. "By embracing identity and its prickly, uncomfortable contours," Abrams writes, "Americans will become more likely to grow as one."[9]

Et Tu, Military?

What does seeing in stereo mean for the US military? The Pentagon has had plenty of experience thinking about global threats in addition to international ones; indeed, military planners were focused on the security implications of climate change back in the mid-aughts, well ahead of most people in the foreign policy community. Networks are also familiar challenges. Retired Army General Stanley McChrystal wrote a book about how he reshaped the structure of the Joint Special Operations Task Force in Iraq to be able to fight al-Qaeda's ever-morphing networks.[10] But do these threats live in different bureaus and boxes? Do strategists and commanders all know how to integrate the perspectives of the chessboard and the web?

On the question of the dissolution of the foreign/domestic boundary, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11 would seem to insist the military is strictly for foreign wars. Yet if the United States homeland were to be attacked by a foreign enemy on the ground, in or from the air, on or from the water, or from space, the military would mount the primary defense. Where are the lines between defense and security? And this ambiguity is further complicated by the other domestic governments with jurisdiction over issues that can create rising tensions with traditional adversaries or catalyze action by new ones such as cyberattacks or perceived blasphemy against a foreign religion. The Pentagon has always been part of the many interagency processes the National Security Council oversees but can civilian and military defense officials develop a "spidey-sense" of which domestic agencies to call, looking at issues always in the round?

7. Mark Niesse, "Georgia Certifies Election Results after Nearly Two Weeks of Drama," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 30, 2018, https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/georgia-certifies-election-results-after-nearly-two-weeks-drama/VOUIvFPmmzxad39XQFuoPP/.

8. Stacey Y. Abrams, "Identity Politics Strengthens Democracy," in "E Pluribus Unum? The Fight over Identity Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-02-01/stacey-abrams-response-to-francis-fukuyama-identity-politics-article.

9. Abrams, "Identity Politics."

10. General Stanley McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2015).

The military has long been proficient at forging many disparate individuals into one unit, one platoon, one brigade, one fighting force. War movies specialize in showing the soldier, sailor, or airman risking her or his life to save a buddy, leaving no one behind. Yet as the military becomes far more diverse—adding women, transgender, and LGBTQ individuals and increasingly reflecting the plurality nation the United States is becoming—the training and socialization of students in the military academies and new recruits in the armed services will have to change accordingly. Equally important, however, will be inculcating an understanding of how a spectrum of differences can exist alongside the unity of the force. In fact, unity will require treating all differences equally, rather than singling out some individuals for special treatment, positive or negative.

That is seeing in stereo.