Virtual Diasporas and Global Problem-Solving Workshop Berkeley and San Francisco April 25-26, 2002

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Virtual Diasporas and International Conflict and Cooperation

This workshop addressed an urgent question: how does contemporary globalization, especially the Internet, affect how diasporas are constituted and in turn, their impact on peace and security? How have so many diasporians made the transition from border-crossing refugees to cosmopolitan citizens (hereafter referred to as *cosmos*)? Are transnational diasporic networks the leading edge of a globally networked and post-national community in social, economic and political dimensions? And, how do virtual diasporas in such conditions affect nation-states, themselves reeling under the impact of globalization?

In less than two decades, globalization and the information revolution have created conditions that lead to border-crossings in ways that differ fundamentally from those experienced by immigrants a century ago. Today, information communication technologies (including but not limited to the Internet) bind global diasporic communities with their real or imagined homelands, facilitate new and efficient economic networks in both the host and countries-of-origin, and enable globally dispersed transnational communities to solidify and assert their diasporic identities. In the conventional wisdom—especially in security circles—these transmission belts for people, ideas, money, and goods are viewed as the source of security threats to be controlled, especially since September 11th. Others suggest that *cosmos*, due to their global orientations, socialization and experience, represent an emerging and largely untapped resource for global problem-solving, especially when facilitated by virtual diasporic networks.

Cosmos happen to staff many of the world's leading global problem-solving organizations. In leading global non-governmental organizations, the World Bank, UN agencies as well as in the globally dispersed civil society organizations that address burning issues from bottom-up, invisible networks of diasporians are tied by a shared history, language, and identity that cut across geography and organizational hierarchies. Some suggest that these networks operate (or should operate) primarily with respect to the country-of-origin—a "corruption" of Weberian organizational rationality that

some international agencies attempt to avoid by never posting a diasporian in their "home" country. Others suggest that *cosmos* accumulate substantial experience in negotiation, multi-cultural perspectives, circumventing barriers and borders of all kinds, and knowledge that transcends that of *parochials*—or people who have never had to confront and overcome the multiple barriers to mobility that are now maintained by nation-states.

In this view, *cosmos* draw on their diasporic experience and even their specific networks-of-origin to solve problems, but they are extro-spective rather than than intro-spective with respect to issues of concern to their specific country-of-origin. Networks of *cosmos* cosmopolitans arguably represent a growing form of social capital that is an essential ingredient of successful global problem-solving, but also is largely unrecognized and even neglected by their institutional hosts.

The Nautilus Institute has begun to investigate these processes that are integral to global problem-solving through the Virtual Diasporas and Global Problem-Solving Project. In this first workshop, the project assessed the interrelationships of virtual diasporic communities, the information revolution, and international conflict and cooperation. By drawing on the knowledge of leading authorities on diasporas, the project charted ways that diasporas may evolve in terms of contribution to global problems and to global problem-solving. Finally, the project compiled, edited, and distributed the findings on the Internet.[1] At time of reporting, opeds from the writers are also being distributed over the Internet and to major newspapers.

At the outset, papers were commissioned from leading academics and practitioners in the field of diasporas. We sought analysis that would throw light on three key issues:

1. a) emerging relationships between virtual diasporic communities and global problem-solving; b) driving forces behind the apparent increase in importance of virtual diasporas in global problem-solving; and c) areas of future research.

After September 11, the project paused to account for this eruption of violence linked to global networks of diasporic players. In response, we re-focused the commissioned work on South Asia while keeping the global approach intact. We also initiated specific outreach to the local Afghan, Indian, and Pakistani diasporic communities in the Bay Area, holding seminars, ensuring that Afghan experts were represented in post-September 11 policy meetings (raising these issues at two Global Philanthropy Forum meetings) and were published in the local media (two opeds by Faruq Achikzad in *San Francisco Chronicle.)*

A list of authors, affiliation and paper titles is provided below.

Commissioned Papers

Name	Affiliation	Paper Title
Phineas Baxandall	Harvard University	"Good Capital, Bad Capital: Dangers and Development in Digital Diasporas"
Karim H. Karim	Carleton University	"Diasporic Communication in the Contexts of International Conflict and Cooperation."
Michel Laguerre	MIT/UC Berkeley	"Virtual Diasporas and National Security"

Vinay Lal	UCLA	"Terrorism, Virtual Diasporas, and the Internet"
Hala Nassar	UC Berkeley	"Palestinian Diaspora narrating the lost *Home"*
Robert Smith	Barnard College	"Migration, Assimilation and Diaspora: Positive Sum Solutions are Possible."
Shyam Tekwani	Nanyang Technological University	"The Tamil Virtual Diasproa"
Guobin Yang	University of Hawaii at Manoa	"Information Technology, Virtual Chinese Diaspora, And Transnational Public Sphere"
1. Pascal Zachary	UC Berkeley	"Globalization from Below: diasporic capitalism"

The Workshop

On April 25-26 2002 the project convened an international assembly of key academic, government, diasporic organizations, and NGO representatives to initiate a focused dialogue integrating the results of this research.

The workshop had four objectives:

1) explore the growing impact of global diasporas and their use of information technologies on international conflict and cooperation;

2) develop a network of key academic, government, Bay Area Diaspora organization, and NGO representatives to begin examining this challenging issue;

3) educate global problem-solving groups on the importance of this issue to their work; and

4) identify and develop 3-5 "applications" in which to learn more about the work of diasporas.

The workshop began with an introductory public event, held in partnership with the World Affairs Council. The public session, held April 25, 2002 from 6:00-9:00pm at the World Affairs Council's San Francisco venue, consisted of two panels moderated by journalist and UC Berkeley visiting professor Gregg Zachary, and Andrew Lam, Pacific News Service and Knight Scholar at Stanford University. The event was designed to introduce the general public to the issue of diasporas and global problem-solving, share findings of the project with the foreign policymaking community in the bay area.

On April 26, 2002, an all-day workshop was held at the Nautilus Institute with Rockefeller Foundation's Ram Manikkalingam participating via VideoTeleconference from New York. The goal was to give participants a chance to learn more about one another's' work; to complement the academic/research participants with members of local diasporic communities, to build upon these perspectives in a facilitated brainstorming discussion; and to develop a research agenda forward.

The full-day workshop was organized around two sessions focused on case studies. The first session, *Diasporas Today*, explored various case studies prepared by our commissioned authors.

The second session, *Diasporas in the Information Age*, focused on the emerging relationship between trans-national ethnic communities and their current (and future) impact on global problems

and global solutions.

Session One: Diasporas Today

The session began with a sweeping overview of virtual diasporas by Nautilus Institute Executive Director, Peter Hayes. In his comments Hayes noted how the international global problem-solving organizations (governmental and nongovernmental) make no mention of the importance of diasporas, yet their staff are largely made up of diasporians often of the most cosmopolitan variety. He tasked the group to think about the following questions throughout the day:

If these diasporic spaces overlap and are intertwined with so many other forms of transnational networks, why is there such a disconnect?

Is there an invisible lever of influence that these cosmopolitan activists or their host organizations are underutilizing?

How can we interconnect *cosmos* equipped with diasporic networks with the vast networks of NGOs who are often both interested in the same issues, but do not cooperate with diasporic communities who are motivated by the same problem?

Do *cosmos* actually draw on their diasporic skills and/or networks to solve global-problems; and do they exhibit common skills of border-crossing, post-ethnic identity, negotiation, and cross-cultural knowledge that might be codified, improved, communicated and by virtue of being explicit, become available to the organization as a core competence?

The discussion began with a short presentation by Robert Smith (Barnard College) on the North American Mexican Diaspora and the emerging North American political sphere. Smith argued that the migration has both local and transnational dimensions which require that we think both transnationally and locally about solutions to the problems and opportunities related to it. Specifically, in the case of the Mexican Diaspora, Smith outlined how both the Mexican and US governments are beginning to think beyond borders, but there is much more that needs to be done in relation to remittances, accuracy in the media, and political involvement in both countries. Lastly, he noted that although the Internet was increasingly a tool of the transnational Mexican population, radio was still central.

Next, Guobin Yang (University of Hawaii at Manoa) analyzed the Chinese transnational virtual community by describing websites, bulletin boards, and online magazines. He argued that the online Chinese community is a highly heterogeneous and dynamic community that plays an increasingly important role in shaping state and inter-state behavior. This analysis led to an inspired discussion around the anemic official attempts to curtail the processes of problem identification, open debate, and online activism through filters, moderation, and other technical means. In conclusion, Yang argued, that it is up to citizens and citizen groups to keep these “virtual policy spaces” democratic, free from domination by any one group, and to help channel the issues articulated online to the broader public.

Particularly interesting was Yang’s suggestion that the Internet allows very concrete learning about policy alternatives and civility to be transmitted from “outside” to “inside.” He cited the example of a Chinese student in the United States suggesting that a Chinese campus have security guards—a common American practice—in a context of intense debates over a covered-up campus murder. The slow, osmotic transmission of outside knowledge to China’s vast civil society via the Internet rather than the oft-noted lightning speed and disjuncture associated with the Internet elsewhere in the world was an important difference emphasized in Yang’s paper.

The next paper turned to South Asia, with a presentation by Shyam Tekwani (Nanyang University) on the Tamil Tigers and their use of the Internet as an integral tool in their cause. Tekwani, a former photojournalist in Sri Lanka and one of the few journalists to have consistent access to the Tiger leadership, illustrated how the Tigers used the Internet a networking, fundraising, information dissemination, and propaganda tool within the global Tamil community—to the point where they sold recordings of Tamil forces in battles via their web sites! However, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States and the global "war on terror," Tekwani points out, have forced the Tamil Tigers to change their online strategy as well as pushed them to a ceasefire with the Sri Lankan government.

The session ended with a presentation and discussion by Hala Nassar on how the displaced Palestinian community remembers, narrates, and articulates their yearning for the right to return home through films and photography. Nassar specifically explored the role of women filmmakers and artists in preserving the Palestinian sense of home within the Palestinian Diaspora. Her analytic construct of "gendered yearning" for the homeland and its representation on the Internet is an important contribution that deserves follow-up.

Session Two: Diasporas in the Information Age

Session 2 opened with Karim H. Karim's (Carleton University) sweeping overview of the technological, social, and historical context in which diasporic communities communicate with members and the outside world, and how in turn this relationship shapes that between diasporas and nation states.

The discussion then turned to how diasporic groups use information communication technologies (from satellite television to the Internet) to circumvent the traditional, often state-controlled communication channels to appeal directly to citizens within and outside of their diaspora. Karim, concluded the discussion with an overview of how the forces of globalization empower and impel "deterritorialized diasporians" to become a cosmopolitan global citizenry. Karim suggested that the Aga Khan Foundation is an excellent global study of this phenomenon begging for empirical examination and reflection. He suggested that the Foundation has struck a delicate balance between engagement and cooptation with powerful elites and states in all countries where members reside in significant numbers, thereby maintaining autonomy but also exercising countervailing power to protect members when vulnerable.

Next, G. Pascal Zachary, presented his work on "diasporian capitalism." Zachary, argued that diasporic communities offer an untapped engine for development in their home countries. Unfortunately, Zachary suggests, there are a number of national and transnationally derived impediments to "diasporian development from below." He suggests that to foster such development dramatic reforms from creating new modes of foreign assistance and investment, new approaches to "brain drain," and the creation of multilateral investment funds for diasporians.

He also suggested that "cosmos" in inter-governmental and international non-governmental organizations are an under-used resource in solving problems in their countries-of-origin, or in countries in which their diaspora-of-origin is a significant social force, citing the case of Niger and the Lebanese diaspora. (This thesis is not exclusive to the earlier suggestion that "cosmos" accumulate skills derived from and refined by the diasporic experience for global problem-solving in general and not in relation to their own diaspora. Arguably, the latter is a global under-utilization of their social capital while the former is a narrower foregone benefit that may flow from a given "cosmo" given resources and mandate).

Phineas Baxandall led a discussion on how separatist and terrorist groups such as the Tamil Tigers,

The Real IRA, al Qaeda and others rely on foreign remittances to fund international terrorist operations, and how these largely unregulated financial inflows represent a potent source of political instability. Baxandall argued that although these flows of unregulated capital appear to be difficult to control, analysts have over-emphasized the freewheeling nature of global finance. He suggests that we have made a natural, yet mistaken, assumption that speech and financial flows are the same "untamable" entities being driven by the spread of the Internet. In fact, he suggested that the global financial system is embedded in a formal banking infrastructure that is technically amenable to far greater transparency and control.

The session closed with Vinay Lal's fascinating overview of Hindu nationalists' use of the Internet to organize, fundraise, recruit, and distribute propaganda across the Indian diaspora. Lal argues that Hindu nationalists, much like the al-Qaeda network, are an unanticipated yet direct manifestation of globalization. Ironically, according to Lal, the most virulent Hindu nationalism on the web is orchestrated by diasporians outside the "homeland" (in the United States in fact). This thesis is parallel to a point made in the discussion that the web and email tends to polarize positions both in terms of the iconically stark or highly condensed communication employed on the Internet; and because both "producers" and users tend to be highly motivated to overcome technical and cost barriers to Internet participation in the first place. Lal suggested (tongue-in-cheek?) that the Indian urban middle class which dreams and tries to live like it is physically in an American city is already part of the Indian diaspora (or part of the American global diaspora by virtue of its cultural membership of commodity consumption on a large scale?).[2]

The workshop ended by identifying outstanding questions about Virtual Diasporas and Global Problem-Solving.

1) How do countries with a large diasporic populations catalyze their diasporic populations to take an active interest in promoting the development of their country-of-origin; or in related conflict avoidance or conflict resolution involving their country-of-origin.

2) How do we legitimate and expand the meanings of the right of not multiple citizenships and identities?

3) What lessons are available for codification with regard to maintenance of deterritorialized and far-flung cultures that maintain strong cultural ties and relations with the "homeland" but also are compatible with and supportive of political stability in the country-of-residence? In particular, what does the Chinese diaspora suggest in this regard, and are these lessons transposable to other diasporas?

Then the group identified as on-going research priorities.

1. a) Electronic (digital architecture) and sociological mapping of virtual diaspora networks and organizations as they relate to global public policy networks.
2. b) Collaborative research on leading "deterritorialized transnational diasporians" or cosmos.
3. c) Case studies of 1, 2, 3.
4. d) The issue of internal diasporas/displacement in very large countries such as China.

[1] See http://www.nautilus.org/gps/virtual-diasporas/index.html

[2] Nautilus note: no sociological analysis of "a-political" diasporic use of the Internet either for cultural re-constitution and identity re-formation—as in the case of Trinidad's websites, for

example—or of the use of email between diasporic kin to sustain familial ties—was made at the workshop. However, many of the Internet-based or affected diasporic practices—such as virtual labor migration described in La Guerre's paper to the workshop—are enmeshed in this larger Internet sociology of diasporas.

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/global-problem-solving/virtual-diasporas-and-global-problem-solving-workshop-berkeley-and-san-francisco-april-25-26-2002/

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