

Wilton Park Conference „Atlantic Youth Forum 2010“

Why Networks Matter in Public Diplomacy – Conference Report by Pablo Padrutt¹

Every year, Wilton Park, a world-renowned platform for dialogue on international policy and global challenges, invites around 30 committed young people to attend the “Atlantic Youth Forum”. The list of participants of what may sound to some like a Cold War concept clearly defies its nominal geographic restrictions. The young leaders at the conference are not exclusively from Europe and North America, but also represent countries as diverse as Brazil, China, Iran, Nigeria, Russia and Uganda, not least thanks to the double nationality of some of the participants.

What brings people from all four corners of the world together in, of all places, Shoreham-by-Sea in Southern England? The great appeal of Wilton Park is threefold. Firstly, it provides conference participants with an opportunity to receive first-hand information from renowned specialists on some of the most pressing issues facing the wider international community today. Secondly and perhaps most importantly, it allows for frank, off the record debates and fruitful discussions with inspiring people from different backgrounds and with a different outlook. Last but not least, the conference venue of picturesque Wiston House with its incredibly hospitable staff alone is worth a visit.



Magnificent Wiston House in West Sussex

The issues discussed in the Atlantic Youth Forum 2010 ranged from global governance to food security. In intense panel discussions and break-out sessions, we debated whether nuclear deterrence can actually work in practice and how nuclear weapons can be delegitimized² in order to achieve a nuclear-free world in the long run. With Columbia Law School Professor Philip Bobbitt, participants discussed Obama’s national security strategy and whether its new focus on the rule of law as a means of increasing legitimacy of US policy was mirrored in its application. Together with BBC correspondent Caroline Wyatt and Jamie Shea, Director of Policy Planning in the Private Office of the NATO Secretary General, we discussed the strategy and prospects of the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) in Afghanistan. What would we define as an acceptable outcome to the UN-mandated peace-enforcement mission? How can corruption be addressed in a state as fragile as Afghanistan? Does the myriad of “search and destroy” operations against Taliban leaders yield results, or will it prove as counterproductive as the targeted killings of Vietcong officers in the Vietnam War, the so-called Phoenix Program?

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² Berry, K. et al. 2010, *Delegitimizing Nuclear Weapons. Examining the Validity of Nuclear Deterrence*, Monterey Institute of International Studies, online available at: http://cns.miis.edu/opapers/pdfs/delegitimizing_nuclear_weapons_may_2010.pdf

But the focus of the Atlantic Youth Forum 2010 went well beyond the area of peace and security. In a session on change and social innovation, a business executive challenged the notion that young people are more prone to change. A young researcher elaborated on the positive societal and developmental impact of social entrepreneurship. In a presentation on food security, a science professor explained how inequality and oligopolistic land distribution rather than resource scarcity are what keeps 1.02 billion people undernourished.



The main conference room

During a visit to London, the excellent programme director Julia Purcell and her staff led the participants to some of Great Britain's key political institutions. In the history-charged Palace of Westminster, we were introduced to the ceremonious dealings of the Houses of Parliament. At the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), we received a warm reception by senior diplomats who stressed the importance of public diplomacy in a world where relations between countries have become increasingly multi-layer and complex.

Public diplomacy is certainly an *idée directrice* of Wilton Park, which is now an academically independent Executive Agency of the FCO. Established after the Second World War on the premises of a prisoner of war (POW) camp west of London, Wilton Park initially brought together German POW with British politicians and intellectuals in an effort to help build trust and sustainable peace in Europe. It soon opened to civilians from all over Europe and later the entire world to discuss "the awkward and vital issues" in a "brief, trenchant, and if possible, witty"³ manner, as it was put by Sir Heinz Koepler, the German Jewish founder of Wilton Park.

Reminiscent of Kant's cosmopolitan ideal, Wilton Park is all about cross-border networks of decision-makers and decision-shapers. While networks are a basic trait of human society and have always determined our information horizon, modern technology has changed communication patterns and empowered an informed citizenry. Hence the increasing interest in public diplomacy: the development of lasting relationships between better-connected individuals is in the best interest of the state. By promoting and participating in transnational networks, governments are able not only to "harness the power of dialogue", as Wilton Park puts it, but also, from a constructivist perspective, to shape decisions by co-creating meaning and identity.

How would participants put to use the mutual understanding and personal links that they had established during the conference? In the final session of the Atlantic Youth Forum 2010, we discussed how each one of us could contribute to positive change in some of the issues addressed during the conference. We all agreed that complaining is not an option: we have to assume responsibility with regard to the challenges of our age by participating in political processes and civil society efforts to try and tackle them. As a proud founding member of a young, bottom-up civil society organisation that works as a think tank on Swiss foreign policy, I tried to emphasise how much could be achieved by a network of committed people with limited resources but a lot of enthusiasm for a common cause.

It was a great privilege for me to exchange experiences and opinions with such bright and inspiring minds in the Atlantic Youth Forum 2010. I would like to thank Wilton Park and, most importantly, the Swiss Foreign Policy Association (SGA-ASPE), whose generous grant made it possible for me to participate in this excellent conference.

³ Wilton Park, *Wilton Park History*, online available at: <http://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/en/about-wilton-park/wilton-park-history/>