

## **Strongmen and Networks: The Rise of Informal Diplomats**

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### **CALL FOR PAPERS | SUBMISSION DEADLINE: 26 OCTOBER 2018**

#### **Strongmen and Networks: The Rise of Informal Diplomats**

**11-12 December 2018**

**This event is jointly organized by the Muhammad Alagil Chair in Arabia Asia Studies at Asia Research Institute; and the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore.**

An extraordinarily large number of US diplomatic posts are currently empty, and the administration seems uninterested in filling them in the near future. Trump's disinterest in manning US diplomatic posts though is hardly unique. Other strongman leaders around the world, for example Putin, Erdogan, and Modi are also challenging the conventional use of formal diplomacy in building and sustaining alliances. Populists at home and maverick deal-makers abroad, strongman leaders are sidelining official career diplomats by using informal diplomats, drawn from transnational networks of diasporas, sectarian communities, paramilitary groups and merchants. While diplomats do tap into such networks in the normal course of business, we think they are being leveraged to a striking degree by the clutch of unorthodox leaders running important countries today. This emergent phenomenon of strongmen partnering with informal diplomats echoes earlier histories of states drawing on individuals from non-state transnational networks as emissaries.

We invite scholars and practitioners to present historical and contemporary examples of transnational networks serving as diplomatic channels. Through in-depth discussions of these case studies, past and present, we hope to build analytical models and a conceptual vocabulary for understanding the possible contours of relationships between strongmen, informal diplomats, and the numerous transnational networks that empower them.

#### **CONCEPTUAL FRAME**

Transnational networks offer different channels of conducting foreign policy from official diplomatic missions. Formal diplomats have careers based within internal bureaucratic structures of the state. Throughout their professional life, they rotate from one place to another under central direction. The trajectory is different for actors who are involved in cross-border exchanges of goods such as gold

and gems, specialized services, monies, arms, family visits, favours, information, blessings etc. Unlike career diplomats, their lives and successes depend on maintaining deep bases in multiple locales, and strong social bonds across them. The perspectives and entry points they offer are critical resources that a closed department of diplomats does not necessarily possess. Successful partnerships with such networks enable political leaders to cut new channels for short-term, promiscuous, even contradictory alliances in the international arena. The key to such collaborations is identifying resourceful individuals embedded within these networks and working with them as informal diplomats or emissaries with a mission.

This increasing visibility of unconventional actors in diplomacy reflects changing dynamics in international relations since the end of the Cold War: a more diverse range of states and non-state actors has entered the stage. The unraveling of long-term, Cold War friendships and rivalries in the closing decades of the 20th century has expanded the possibilities of making inter-state alliances outside established supranational bodies such as the UN, EU, WTO and NATO. The entry of Russia and China onto the strategic playground of the 21st century has transformed negotiation options between states. Globalization has revitalized and expanded the mass and reach of transnational networks of all kinds. Their newfound power, as cultural, commercial, technological and political players and brokers in multiple geographies, comes to resemble that of states, but without the institutional foundations or constraints of the latter. By piggybacking foreign policy on the widespread networks of these brokers, strongmen can explore and exploit economic, political, military and even personal possibilities in a range of countries without formally committing to any one state or bloc.

The questions this conference seeks to address include but are not limited to:

- When and why do informal diplomats become more important than formal diplomatic channels?
- Are strongman leaders better-equipped at using informal diplomacy? How do they draw strength from trucking in the spaces of cultural, commercial, technological and religious exchange opened up by transnational networks, despite their rise to leadership within national configurations of power that bind them to domestic constituencies?
- What unusual advantages do these networks, whose historical and contemporary footprints span multiple states, offer political leaders? Do they provide them unusual clout, indeed making some of them look like strongmen?
- Do the open-ended, flexible, and opportunistic dealings of informal diplomats present a very different face of the strongman to the authoritarian one their citizens at home are used to seeing?

## SUBMISSION OF PROPOSAL

Submissions should include a title, an abstract (200-300 words) and a brief biography (150 words) including name, institutional affiliation, and email contact. The organizers will provide hotel accommodation for three nights and a contribution towards airfare for accepted paper participants. Please submit your abstract, using the provided paper proposal form on the website to Ms Valerie Yeo at [valerie.yeo@nus.edu.sg](mailto:valerie.yeo@nus.edu.sg) by **26 October 2018**. Notifications of acceptance will be sent out by **1**

November 2018.

**CONFERENCE CONVENORS**

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