



# *ISSUES IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY*

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## **The Importance of the Every Day Routine**

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Each of our daily routines is largely beyond our own making. We have some choice, but it is the choice of circumstance. Events of the past year have brought this notion home to me.

I usually don't think very much about my routine each day. I get up, wash and shave, get dressed, have breakfast, generally eat three meals a day, listen to uncensored local, national, and world news on the radio as I prepare for the day, read a newspaper whose content is not dictated by the government as I have my breakfast, read other uncensored newspapers with other points of view during the day, log onto the Internet to scan the stories in a number of foreign newspapers without wondering if the authorities will block my access, and then do a job which reflects my interests and was determined by the education available to me. Each action seems no big deal. It is part of my routine based on where I live and the kind of work I do. Yet, carrying out most of these actions would be a big deal for people in many other parts of the world.

I don't want to belabor the obvious. Women cannot drive in Saudi Arabia. Young girls could not go to school under the Taliban, and grown women could not practice their professions. Eating three meals a day is a luxury in much of Africa south of the Sahara. Reading an uncensored newspaper is impossible in most of the Middle East. It can be an adventure, rather than routine, to log on to the Internet in China. Open disagreement with the government is a prosecutable offense in many parts of the world. Higher education is a luxury reserved for the few in many countries. I can practice my religion, or no religion, as I please and not be subjected to theocratic despotism. I take my civil liberties for granted, and this is why I am concerned about their curtailment in the name of fighting terrorism. Important freedoms manifest themselves in a routine of unspectacular activities that are by no means routine when these freedoms are lacking.

In somewhat similar fashion, productive relations between countries generally manifest themselves in small actions that reflect larger understandings between them.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was a major accomplishment, probably the most important agreement concluded by Mexico since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 1848 that forced Mexico to cede half its territory to the United States. Yet NAFTA works as it should only if goods and people can cross the border with relative ease. Most of the one million legal daily border crossings into the United States from Mexico and Canada are routine, but the ability to do this in such large numbers is spectacular. Indeed, it is probably unique in its dimension in the world.

The amount in remittances that people of Mexican origin living in the United States send to families back home is approaching \$10 billion this year. Due to competition among intermediaries introduced only over the past year or so, the cost of doing this has gone down. Each remittance is a routine undertaking, but the more money the recipients get without excessive skimming by intermediate institutions is obviously a matter of great significance.

Examples of the importance of small actions can be multiplied endlessly. Countries seek tourists to develop their economies but then hassle the visitors when they seek to enter. The motor vehicle bureau of Washington, D.C., can be a nightmare because of the long delays, whereas the experience would hardly be noticed if it were routine. This kind of frustrating delay is the norm to obtain almost any kind of service from bureaucracies in developing

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countries. We can normally get governmental services without bribing officials, which is not the case in much of the world. Many products are produced jointly in the United States and other countries, but this works well only if there are understandings to make the parts produced in each place compatible. If the small things are not in place, the big programs are easily destroyed.

The thrust of the comments here thus far is that we are able to enjoy a simple, satisfying routine as individuals only if the big things are in place first, like democracy. We can interact routinely with people of other countries only after the larger framework is established. North and South Koreans cannot cross the border except as the two countries allow, as established by complex agreements. East Germans could not move easily into West Germany until the country was reunified. Americans, Canadians, and Mexicans can travel throughout all of North America because that is the nature of the three systems, and this movement was abetted by NAFTA.

The issue I wish to raise here is whether the direction can be changed, that is, to start with the routine small things and see if that can lead to accomplishing the bigger things. Ping-pong matches facilitated the movement toward mutual recognition between the United States and China. The documentary on the Buenavista Social Club brought Cuban music to a large audience, and this altered the attitude of many Americans toward the Cuban people. If Americans were able to travel to Cuba at will, as they can to Mexico, would this help to undermine the closed nature of the Cuban polity? A majority of the U.S. House of Representatives believes that it would, as evidenced by the approval of a bill to this effect.

The question I am raising can be put another way: Can people-to-people diplomacy play havoc with the positions of rigid governments? This diplomacy can take the form of cultural events, sporting activities, visits back and forth, e-mail chat rooms, academic conferences, and many other actions in which people interact with each other. It is clear that rewarding routine activities can be made possible by important agreements between countries, but the opportunities for these agreements are infrequent. My instinct is that the reverse is also true, that simple gestures can lead to important changes in relations between countries.

One question that is now much debated in op-ed columns is whether the majority of people who live in closed societies would welcome having the simple freedoms that people in democratic societies enjoy. I have to believe they would, but this is by no means certain. This belief was reinforced by the way the majority of Afghans welcomed the overthrow of the Taliban. High officials in the U.S. government talk about the great service we would render to the Iraqi people if Saddam Hussein were removed from power; pundits often even argue that Saddam could be replaced by a democratic regime, after a modest lapse. Maybe, but this is most uncertain. In this view of the world, the animosity toward the United States in the Middle East would dissipate once they begin to enjoy freedoms they do not now have. This is thinking that starts with big things—a regime change leading to freer societies—in the hope that these great transformations might give people the ability to follow a daily routine that is similar to the one described in the opening paragraph.

Another policy path is also possible, namely, to start with the little things in our relations with Arab nations, other Muslim countries, and politically closed regimes in general. This path is not possible in the regime change aspect of U.S. policy toward Iraq, but that is probably a unique situation. The kinds of things that could be done include more cultural interchange: beaming music to the people of these countries rather than outright propaganda, exhibits both in the United States of the work of their artists and of U.S. artists there, sponsoring visits of cultural and intellectual figures to and from the countries, putting together conferences on nonpolitical subjects, organizing sports competition with athletes from these countries, and other activities of this nature.

Doing these small things would not be costly. They are worth a try.