

McManus studies, teaches international conflicts

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

Sometimes people in academia get their inspiration from unsuspected sources. That is the case with political scientists such as Dr. Roseanne McManus. “While in middle school I started reading novels by Tom Clancy and Clive Cussler. Reading about the strategic interaction of countries in these books made me interested to learn more both about the former Soviet Union and about how countries interact with each other and how they choose their strategies to get what they want,” she says.

This native of Towson, Maryland, went on to obtain a master’s degree in government and politics at the University of Maryland and later a doctorate in political science at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. “After I finished college, I worked for a few years at the Pentagon and the Defense Intelligence Agency, so that further strengthened my interest in international security.”

Today she is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York.

When asked about how much of international relations is conducted in the open, she is very clear. “We know that there is a lot of backchannel diplomacy. For example, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was really resolved with back channels. There was some public communication, but the key negotiations were done through back channels.”

And many times, public statements can do more harm than good. “In my forthcoming book, I argue that one of the key factors that determines whether the statements that leaders, and especially U.S. presidents, make are effective in actually influencing other countries’ behavior is the ability to follow through on them. That includes the military ability to follow through, which the U.S. usually has a pretty good amount of,” says McManus.

“In terms of effective threat making, the Cuban Missile Crisis showed that back channel diplomacy combined with public threat works. That strategy was not without risk, but I think it was effective in



Dr. McManus at work.

making the threats credible,” she continues.

On the theory that leaders who are perceived as crazy can be effective, McManus has something to say. “Based on our content analysis of newspaper articles, it seems that leaders who are perceived as crazier are less likely to achieve conflict outcomes that shift the status quo positively in their favor, although they are more likely to become involved in international conflict.”

This brings us back to the old theory that having nuclear weapons is necessary to keep peace. “Given that we have them, I think it would be hard to get rid of them, but I’m not necessarily someone who believes that having a deterrent balance is entirely stable. The Cold War is held up as the example of perfect deterrence, perfect balance, but the Cold War is full of close calls,” she says.

side is going to have this first-strike advantage, and also again the transparency comes in with arms control because arms control treaties tend to lead to inspections; but we haven’t yet reduced the arsenal size to what we might consider safe for the world,” says McManus.

And that brings us to North Korea. “There are a number of people who think that Kim Jong-un is just totally off his rocker, and then there are other people who think he is crazy like a fox. He’s doing this to get concessions from the international community, which has been a semi-effective strategy for them. Under his father, Kim Jong-il, North Korea was pretty effective at winning concessions. Not quite so much under Kim Jung-un, just because people have sort of noticed this pattern and are less willing to give the concessions. A third theory is that he’s doing it for domestic reasons to rally the population against a domestic enemy and to make the government look powerful.”

Has the national security establishment in the U.S. improved since 9/11?

“I became a little bit of a skeptical consumer of intelligence because after having seen the process, I know that there are so many different sources of intelligence, and that some of them are reliable and some of them are not reliable, and it can be very difficult to tell what is a reliable source and what is not,” says McManus.

Case in point: the Iraq War. “Perhaps the Bush administration had an idea already in mind of what they wanted to do, and instead of starting from scratch and looking at all the intelligence and deciding the truth, they were just sort of looking for information to verify their existing opinions, which I think is actually a common problem, not just in the Bush administration, not just for Iraq, but for other issues and for other administrations as well,” she explains.

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Photo by Yulia Rock

Given that the total elimination of nuclear weapons seems to be an unlikely possibility, one wonders what the best way to avoid a nuclear conflict is. “One can argue that increased openness is one of the best ways to ensure deterrence, and I think that’s probably correct. I think that with Russia we’ve moved a fair amount in that direction. We have regular mutual inspections; we have mutual satellite surveillance. We even have occasional airplane flights under open skies, so we do have a fair amount of transparency at least with Russia, though not so much with some of the other nuclear powers.”

That does not mean that there are no other strategies to keep the peace, such as the reduction of the nuclear arsenal. “When we mutually agree to reduce our arms and keep them at the same level, that’s showing that we’ve made an agreement that neither