

New Skills Required to Frame Messages

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Pandemic Diplomacy Series



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Answering the question – will the pandemic change diplomacy – this EDA Reflection argues that foreign ministries and individual diplomats will have to learn a new skill set that entails not only framing messages in an appropriate way, but coordinating messaging across at least three dimensions: traditional diplomacy, official virtual diplomacy and unofficial virtual diplomacy.

The midst of a crisis is not the best vantage point from which to make balanced judgements. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated far too much over-excited – often hyperbolic – commentary making sweeping judgements that are driven by the emotions of the day, rather than the calm exercise of reason. It is only when we are done with fire-fighting that we can make clinical assessments.

With that qualification, let me state my view up-front: I do not think that the *direct* impact of the pandemic on diplomacy and geopolitics will be great. It will accentuate trends that existed before the pandemic hit, but not fundamentally change their trajectory. For example, neither the United States nor China will come out of this looking brilliant. Those already inclined to be sympathetic or skeptical towards one or the other will have their inclinations reinforced, but are unlikely to fundamentally change their views. Change if any, will be at the margins.

China's 'mask diplomacy' will elicit gratitude, but that is an ephemeral emotion and international relationships

are based on interests. I doubt any serious country will fundamentally redefine its national interests just because it has received some masks or test-kits. Certainly, Beijing's aggressive 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy has been a failure and has done more to provoke anti-China sentiment than all of President Donald Trump's efforts, but of course China's diplomats are trying to impress their bosses in Beijing rather than their host countries. The US administration too is speaking primarily to a domestic audience for the November election.

The *indirect* impact of the pandemic on diplomacy and geopolitics will be greater. The world economy is already in recession. This could well become a depression. Sequential economic slowdowns in China, the United States, Japan and the European Union, can potentially create a vicious circle of low demand. If the circle develops it could be difficult to break. Given the significant role of international trade in today's world economy, it is unlikely that domestic demand alone can spark a recovery in any major economy.

Since China was among the first to contain infections, it should, in theory, recover faster. But Beijing is finding that it was easier to stop production than restart the economy. Large Chinese enterprises are recovering steadily, but SMEs – which are 98% of enterprises, accounting for 60% of GDP and more than 80% of employment—are still struggling. Unless China recovers, it is difficult to imagine other major economies getting back to speed.

A global depression or a prolonged recession will leave every country with less resources for diplomacy in its traditional sense of dealing primarily with 'high politics' of relationships. For the foreseeable future, the main priority must be mitigating the economic impact on our peoples. This requires diplomacy to take a different emphasis with more focus on economics. Again, this is not new but will require foreign ministries to rethink how they allocate resources.

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progress can be slowed but not stopped. In so far as there is a backlash against globalization it will be largely confined to specific domains. Some trends were already clear before the pandemic and will be accentuated by it: movement of peoples, fair rather than free trade, and technology transfers which will probably become more stringent due to heightened US-China tensions and the backlash in the EU against China's 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy. Commercial air-travel and all its dependent industries will also be seriously affected. Other domains may also come under pressure.

Managing the consequences of these stresses and pressures will require diplomatic efforts in three broad areas, none of which are entirely new:

First, diplomacy is about communication. The chief challenge posed by the pandemic was how to maintain contacts to keep the machinery of bilateral, regional and multilateral relationships and forums running at an at least minimal level to ensure that stresses do not get out of hand and essential supplies keep flowing. The obvious answer was to use new information technologies to maintain contact virtually. Such technologies were already in use by some foreign ministries and regional and international organizations before the pandemic, and its effect will be to routinize, entrench and more widely disseminate their use as diplomatic tools.

Second, it is highly unlikely, however, that virtual modes of communication will entirely replace the traditional means of communication or face-to-face contacts. Much communication is non-verbal. Any experienced diplomat knows it is essential to get a feel for an individual to fully understand the nuances of what is being communicated. The intermediation of technology blurs and distorts such subtleties. Furthermore, any diplomatic contact, be it bilateral or multilateral, occurs at two levels: the ceremonial and the substantive. Virtual communication is more suitable to the former. Cybersecurity concerns will always exist.

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Third, foreign ministries will have to learn what could be termed multi-dimensional diplomacy. Most foreign ministries and many individual diplomats already use social media such as Facebook (FB), Twitter, YouTube and others. But the 'battle of narratives' between the

US and China that has intensified as a result of the pandemic is an emerging medium of diplomatic activity that other international players, including non-state actors, will almost certainly emulate. In my opinion, neither the United States nor China are playing this new game particularly effectively because messages are not well coordinated.

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Foreign ministries and individual diplomats will have to learn a new skill set that entails not only framing messages in an appropriate way, but coordinating messaging across at least three dimensions: traditional diplomacy, official virtual diplomacy (for example the official FB accounts of embassies or foreign ministries), and unofficial virtual diplomacy, which could be conducted through deniable avatars.