



POINTS OF VIEW

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Recent Developments in International Relations:

Implications for Diplomatic Training and International Studies

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Recent developments in international relations such as the impacts from COVID pandemic and vaccine acquisition, the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, and rising geopolitical tension have shone spotlight on the role of diplomacy in the age of disruptive forces and high uncertainties. It is therefore interesting to examine how recent events and new trends are reshaping the role of diplomats and the foreign service as executing agents of foreign policy decisions made by leaders. In addition, observations can be made as to how diplomatic training and international studies should adapt to the changing context of modern times to ensure that diplomatic agents and functionaries are equipped with the necessary qualifications and understanding.

Traditionally, the training of diplomats usually focuses on knowledge about their own countries and bureaucratic systems, along with the basic theories of international relations. But in

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addition to the teaching of the arts, crafts, and toolkits of diplomacy, diplomatic academies may also seek to familiarise their students with the latest concepts, trends, and events in international affairs facing today's conduct of diplomacy that may influence current and future diplomatic training and studies.

In recent times, watchers of international relations have witnessed numerous new trends and developments in geo-politics that potentially affect the nature and future of regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific in general, and Southeast Asia in particular, and give rise to several new themes dominating international diplomacy and occupying diplomatic resources. Topics like the green and digital transitions and their regulatory implications, climate change and energy security, public health and management of pandemics, and supply chain resilience have become integral parts of the geo-political considerations along with the conventional focus on national security, economic cooperation, and trade and investment relations. These new phenomena and concepts offer many observations that can enrich diplomatic training on international studies in many ways.

First, the emergence of these topics in diplomatic talks, brought on by the spread of COVID-19, energy security imperatives, technological breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, and the conflicts in Ukraine, signals a new focus on thematic or issue-based rather than the sectoral approach to international relations. The concept of security has expanded to include new challenges such as transboundary diseases, energy inter-dependency, digital governance, high inflation affecting economic stability, and the quest for reshoring, onshoring, and ally-shoring as countries are faced with a new level of uncertainty and disruptive forces. The global shift towards the twin transition of green and digital economy has blurred the lines between security, economic, and technological dimensions. The combined effects of inflation, pandemics, and protracted

conflicts are dynamically reshaping the strategic calculations of most countries, as well as the ensuing efforts at rules-making and the creation of ‘order’ via new sets of guidelines and rulebooks. Several countries have already announced a shift towards greater strategic autonomy or the securitization of their economies against uncertainties associated with super power competition, raw material scarcity, technological weaponisation, and environmental and public health issues. Accordingly, diplomatic training may need to include discussion on the delicate interplay between interdependencies and decoupling efforts, both economically and technologically. The rush and the race to establish norms and rules in environmental and digital standards, and to form alliances around these issues, must be carefully analysed for their risks and rewards rather than be accepted at face value. It is therefore important that diplomatic training catches up with these analyses.

Second, geo-political maps are being redrawn according to strategic thinking of powerful nations and new groupings are cropping up according to strategic calculations in relation to specific issues. For examples, geo-political analyses are now replete with the mention of “Indo-Pacific” as a new region/theatre, of new mini-alliances or the so-called “mini-laterals” like QUAD and AUKUS that are meant to address new risk perceptions, of new foreign policy initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), Indo-Pacific Economic Partnership (IPEF), and the EU Global Gateway to address the gaps in and demands for development funding and infrastructure financing, and of a flurry of “strategic partnerships” or their further elevation to more “comprehensive” ones, or specific-purpose partnerships on things like critical technologies, raw materials or digital issues, often between countries from different regions, either as part of the ongoing rapprochement or attempts to further stabilise relations, or to refresh the otherwise long-existing ties and give them new purposes. Hence, the past decade or so

has seen a growing, crisscrossing pattern of arrangements or agreements between countries from different regions, pointing to the impulse to secure partnerships outside and beyond one's own region, and the tendency of like-minded countries to form a more nimble and tactical assembly in response to a certain set of strategic perceptions. The emergence of new groupings or arrangements of convenience signals a perception that traditional or existing institutional arrangements are not adequate as platforms for certain objectives that may require swift actions or conclusion. The tendency has hence been a closer consultation among countries with similar aims or discernment towards specific issues. However, the gradual or eventual institutionalization of these ad-hoc groupings may have deep and lasting implications for regional architecture and its "centrality" in the region, as the existing bodies may or may not be engaged or consulted before these new groups are formed, and these new pacts may be interpreted differently by regional countries. Such a trend of new platforms also offers lessons that multilateral institutions need to evolve and reform to address 'collective action' problems, or risk losing relevance as countries search for greater flexibility and agility in addressing their collective concerns.

Third, the current geo-political and technological competition has given rise to a plethora of new sets of foreign policy with various shades of ambiguity and clarity. This may include, quite worryingly, a revision of stance towards nuclear weapons, non-proliferation, and disarmament in some countries. Diplomatic training may benefit by including analyses of how different countries seek to 'pivot,' balance, or hedge themselves in an increasingly multipolar environment. Discussions may touch upon how Southeast Asia in particular, and the Asia-Pacific region in general, should seek assurances from friends and partners in the context of recent security and geo-political developments: the European Union and the United States' strategies for the Indo-Pacific, the AUKUS trilateral pact and the implications on existing international legal frameworks. New

studies may also focus on the tension and conflicts that can be observed around the release of new, major legislations like the United States' Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the European Union's Net Zero Industry Act and Critical Raw Materials Act, the different nuances in the Western camp's approaches and strategies on these issues, and these laws' impacts on developing countries, especially their trade partners. Also, students of diplomacy should be encouraged to study how the ramifications from these major laws, control regimes, defense procurement and capability plans, and the use of sanctions, could be part of the political and strategic dialogues, or brought up at platforms set up by partnership agreements between regional countries and their external partners. From the viewpoint of diplomatic training, there is therefore ample room to explore new concepts and tools, such as the use of 'subnational diplomacy' in engaging with state, local, and also 'non-state actors' like normal citizens and netizens in addressing new challenges that may turn into diplomatic incidents, including how to integrate diplomatic agenda into the functioning and work plan of the overall bureaucracy; namely, other agencies or departments outside the foreign service.

Fourth, classic issues like transboundary resource management, joint management of humanitarian aid, free trade negotiations, and cooperation or communication within existing sub-regional and regional institutions will continue to occupy the limited and increasingly strained diplomatic resources, especially for developing countries in Southeast Asia. Increasingly, geopolitical thinking and political-bureaucratic constraints are complicating the resumption of traditional trade deal negotiation, resulting in new economic and trade initiatives that side-step key trade components like market access, but which nevertheless offer space and opportunities for useful discussion on harmonizing regulatory expectations. Indeed, there remain considerable gaps and discrepancies, often due to the lack or underdevelopment of regulatory frameworks, among Southeast Asian countries in areas like cross-border data flows, environmental management, and

technological regulation, where new or updated mechanisms of regional and sub-regional governance may be needed. These transnational issues present real and complex political and administrative challenges, especially in intra-regional regulatory aspects. As such, diplomatic training may be enriched by seeking to understand how foreign policy is translated into engagement approaches on multinational platforms, or how to add diplomatic elements into communication relating to mechanisms and channels of major infrastructure projects and developmental aid, for example. While there may be no shortage of instruments or structured dialogues to discuss these issues, there may be limited substantive discussion due to reasons such as differences in strategic or political cultures and lack of sufficient communication among implementing agencies, shortage of harmonised rules, or intra-regional mistrust.

Finally, it is important for diplomatic training to include the observation and analyses of emerging narratives, norms, and visions for the future in international affairs. The combined effects of green and digital transition, the impacts from the war in Ukraine and the lingering impacts from the COVID pandemic, are shining the spotlight on the fast evolution of international standards and regulatory aspects of highly technical matters, and the power of diplomatic persuasion based on rules-setting capability. In this vein, it may be useful to revive or refocus debates on how hard power, soft power, and ‘normative’ power affect how countries negotiate on practical international rules and cooperation. In other words, apart from protocol and administrative issues, diplomatic training can also include how diplomatic tools and tradecrafts are used in the substantive context, such as how the use of soft power interplays with norm-setting in international affairs, how national interests intersect with international laws and norms, or how political systems, electoral cycles, and political culture influence the capacity to shape foreign policy agenda and international legitimacy. In the age of high uncertainty, tension, and increased

pressure for alignment, the Southeast Asian region may benefit from improving upon their individual and collective diplomatic capacity as a way to secure and sustain regional peace and prosperity, for which there is no easy or permanent guarantee. It will be interesting to see how diplomatic training can catch up with these dynamic changes in international relations.

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