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DIPLOMACY IN A WORLD TO COME

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Radical transformations both in the geopolitical landscape and in the way countries conduct diplomacy are obvious. It is more apparent than ever before that the liberal world order of the post-Second World War era is coming to an end. A new incarnation of realpolitik based on a pragmatic and sometimes rough approach to international affairs demands new diplomacy. It is to be based on understanding the struggle among three competing powers – the US, China, and Russia – for regional and global dominance, deep knowledge of new technologies, analytical and critical thinking, among other crucial skills. And yet the world is not ready for this new reality, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown.

In March 1936, an influential British statesman, Sir Austen Chamberlain, addressing the annual meeting of Birmingham Unionist Association, spoke of the “grave injury” to collective security by Germany’s violation of the Treaty of Locarno. Sir Austen, who referred to himself as “a very old Parliamentarian”, said: “It is not so long ago that a member of the Diplomatic Body in London, who had spent some years of his service in China, told me that there was a Chinese curse, which took the form of saying, ‘May you live in interesting times’. There is no doubt that the curse has fallen on us”.¹

It appears Sir Austen Chamberlain was a real visionary. The Chinese curse has been upon us during all those years and never left this world, apparently. We do live in interesting times. These times include military conflicts, aggression, trade wars – and all that right in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, unseen in the history of humankind in

terms of both scale and influence on international affairs and economy. There had been severe infectious diseases before. Some of them were even more deadly and many of them had originated in China. But now, the pandemic is happening in a tightly interconnected world stitched together by transportation routes, logistical chains, communications, and social media as never before. Governments were caught absolutely unprepared either politically or economically, even in the most developed countries. As it turned out, we live in a world globalised beyond expectations. And diplomacy is a mirror to this globalisation.

There are different approaches to evaluate the role and place of diplomacy in a world of international politics. Among them, there are data on diplomatic presence in the world released by the Lowy Institute in Australia at the end of 2019. Those data are very useful. Now it is officially confirmed that China has overtaken the US as the biggest

¹ A. Chamberlain, *Lesson of the Crisis: Sir A. Chamberlain’s Review of Events*, “The Yorkshire Post” (British Newspaper Archive), 21 March 1936, p. 11, column 7.

diplomatic power in the world². As of this year, China maintains 276 diplomatic posts, compared to the 273 of the US, which consist of embassies, high commissions, consulates and consulates general, permanent missions, and other representations in countries where there is no diplomatic relationship.


The Lowy Institute's ranking is based on the number of diplomatic networks of 61 countries belonging to the G20 and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. First of all, it indicates geographic coverage and geopolitical reach, but also a level of globalisation and interconnectivity. There is an easily seen correlation between the number of people infected with COVID-19 in different countries and the list of 10 countries-leaders in the world in diplomacy by the number of diplomatic posts. So, diplomacy and globalisation go hand-in-hand: China – 276, United States – 273, France – 267, Japan – 247, Russia – 242, Turkey – 234, Germany – 224, Brazil – 222, Spain – 215, Italy – 209. There is no surprise that seven out of 10 on this list are former empires maintaining intensive relations with former colonies, and three others – the US, China, and Brazil – are playing crucial roles in politics and economy both regionally and globally.

Changes in Diplomatic Presence

Those recent data show the rapid rise of China over the past decade. In 2011, Beijing lagged 23 posts behind the United States. But six years later it had 271 diplomatic posts around the world – just three fewer than the US. And when it comes to China, those figures are not occasional, since Beijing attaches special attention to the formal diplomatic channels of communication in addition to unofficial ones, but not vice

versa. Xi Jinping is not known for his Twitter or Facebook use.

Those data mean that global Chinese presence is growing following the path of the “One Belt One Road” initiative, bringing more political influence, soft (and hard) power even to the smallest countries on Earth. And this is for a reason. For example, in 2018–2019, Beijing opened five new embassies: in El Salvador, Gambia, Burkina Faso, Sao Tome and Principe, and the Dominican Republic.



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Following a persistent campaign of what is commonly referred to as “chequebook diplomacy”, Beijing has succeeded in picking off a handful of Taiwan’s last remaining diplomatic partners as well. Most recently, two countries in the Pacific Islands region – Kiribati and the Solomon Islands – broke diplomatic ties with Taiwan and made the switch to China, reducing the number of countries recognising Taiwan from 22 in 2016 to just 15 today.³ For Beijing, this strategy has both tightened Taiwan’s growing political isolation and increased China’s ability to advance its own economic and strategic interests promoting the “One China” policy even further.

2 A. Ma, *The US Is Losing Its Crown to China as the World’s Biggest Diplomatic Power*, Think Tank Says, “Business Insider US”, 27 November 2019.

3 B. Bley, *The New Geography of Global Diplomacy*, “Foreign Affairs”, 27 November 2019.

All that is happening while the US diplomacy has been frozen, understaffed, and insufficiently funded since the election of President Trump. Although the United States still holds its position of the most popular place for countries to maintain embassies and consulates, it is clearly losing its global outreach to China when it comes to international presence.



Will there be no more alliances and coalitions of the willing, universal human rights, trusted agreements, and institutions?

There are changes in other governments' diplomatic activities too. For example, Japan moved into the fourth place in 2019, finally overtaking Russia. Faced with a shifting power balance in its neighbourhood, including an increasingly assertive China, Tokyo has been quietly investing in its diplomatic presence for nearly a decade now. The addition of seven new posts in strategically pivotal countries such as Cambodia, the Philippines, Seychelles, and Vanuatu brings Tokyo's total posts to 247.

Brexit resulted in Ireland's boosting its network by eight posts. The Netherlands, too, has linked its recent diplomatic push to Brexit considerations, with seven new posts in two years and more openings expected by 2021. The United Kingdom, by contrast, has closed or downgraded 11 consulates and diplomatic offices since 2016, dropping from the ninth place three years ago to the 11th today. This runs counter to the commitments to open three new posts in the Pacific and additional 12 posts globally by the end of 2020.

New Challenges for Diplomacy

The pandemic of COVID-19 is a serious challenge. But there are other equally deadly issues diplomacy will be facing in the world to come. "Liberal world order, as we know it, discredited itself and is coming to an end" – that was the message President Putin sent to the world in his now famous 24-page interview with Financial Times on the eve of G20 summit in Osaka⁴ last year. No surprise, when it comes to Putin. But prior to him, dozens of publications by well-established Western scholars had appeared with similar conclusions. This is a strange example of unanimity between the East and the West, especially taking into account that President Putin himself did a lot to destroy the good old world order while Western scholars have done a tremendous job promoting liberal values, freedoms, and democracy.

But what does all that mean? Will there be no more alliances and coalitions of the willing, universal human rights, trusted agreements, and institutions? Will profit becoming first and principles second? Are we moving back to the times when brutal use of force rather than the rule of law was predominant in international affairs?

There is a broad consensus that a unipolar liberal world order ended in 2007, more visibly after Putin's now famous Munich speech. The war in Georgia, annexation of Crimea, invasion of eastern Ukraine, use of military force and covert operations in Syria and Venezuela, constant provocations against ships and planes of NATO countries, intrusion via computer networks and electronic systems around the globe, powerful disinformation campaigns, and direct support to right-wing and populist parties constitute just a short list of the new reality's features. We can add violation

⁴ L. Barber, H. Foy, A. Barker, *Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has 'Become Obsolete'*, "Financial Times", 28 June 2019.

of human rights, suppression of media, and brutal killings of critics of the Russian government both at home and abroad. And yet, as it is not enough, we have to recognise that there is a crisis of leadership in the West and there is an unprecedented rise of China. What reality are we going to face in a couple of years? What can we call this new emerging reality?


Some foreign policy experts say we live in times of chaos; others insist we have succumbed to anarchy. But chaos has its own rules, while anarchy means that nobody follows an order. In our reality, there are no rules and major powers are following their own orders. The Russians are fighting tooth and nail for a multipolar model with defined spheres of influence as it was two centuries ago. China is promoting its “One Belt One Road” concept, trying to secure trade routes from its inner provinces to the EU, extending its “neighbourhood” as far as to Italy. The United States is clearly reconsidering its role in world affairs under the slogan “America First”. All three major powers are involved in the construction of the new world.

We must recognise that this fight is quickly moving from the territory of economy and security to the sphere of ideology and social values. Russia is the world champion in creating parallel realities that undermine initial beliefs about the existence of truth. If there is no truth, then there are no values but a brutal force of a regime in power. China is trying to control how information spreads and influence it with soft power. Of course, it denies all wrongdoings, insisting that the Chinese social model best suits complex modern societies.

The World of New Realpolitik

So, what is it? It appears the answer is pretty clear – the current order brought upon us by three “majors” can be best described as the reincarnation of the world of new realpolitik. This term, coined by

the Germans long ago, can be considered nowadays in a much wider sense and scope. The modern version of *realpolitik* can be defined as a pragmatic, to the point of absurdity, attitude toward world affairs, combined with information control and distortion without any remorse toward weaker and poorer nations. There are a lot of examples to support this definition.



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The world of new *realpolitik* means you can have two (or even more) independent and contradictory tracks existing in parallel without intertwining. Yes, Russia is an aggressor, but France, Germany, and Italy will trade with it extensively. Yes, Germany supports Ukraine, but Nord Stream 2 will be built. Turkey is a strategic partner of Ukraine, and yet the TurkStream pipeline is built. Turkey is a strategic partner of the United States, and yet it has bought S-400 surface-to-air missile system from Russia. It is a NATO member refusing to allow NATO fleet bases in the Black Sea even despite being threatened by Russia and the militarisation of Crimea.

The modern *realpolitik* can be characterised through several distinctive features. First of all, there is a growing mistrust among people, between people and governments, between governments and states, states and international institutions, and between institutions themselves. A signature under agreements means much less compared to that in the good old times. The leadership crisis is immense and widely spread around

the globe (and the pandemic has proved this again). Populism, nationalism, insufficiency of strategic vision and understanding, personal interests, and unaccountability have become so common that there is no need to specify the country or the region where they persist.

Recent reports presented at the World Economic Forum's Davos Summits of 2019 and 2020 screamed about unprecedented income and social inequality as a result of last decade's developments, whether we talk about a particular country or at the global level. Finally, we have to deal with virtualisation of literally everything. Augmented reality and artificial intelligence will soon rule our lives in both positive and negative manner. They are already here. That is why the Realpolitik invented by Ludwig von Rochau in the nineteenth century is a very simplified version of the current *realpolitik* we live in.

In this new reality, even such a conservative tool as diplomacy has to change. Formal and official negotiations are now substituted with one-on-one talks with fewer details available to the public. Twitter has already become an instrument to evaporate notes and formal proclamations. Social media tell diplomats more about events and tendencies than traditional news outlets do. Technologies similar to DeepFake are entering the real world while distorting it.

That means we will be living in interesting times in the world to come.

Diplomats should be smarter, better equipped with modern knowledge and technologies, think more critically and analyse more deeply than ever before. Diplomacy must be better represented and much more active in promoting dialogue and cooperation. Critical thinking should become a normal way of thinking, and situation analysis must be included in the list of crucial skills for training diplomats. This is the only way to preserve the culture of diplomacy and our common future.

Ambassador, Dr Sergiy Korsunsky serves as the Director of the Hennadii Udovenko Diplomatic Academy of Ukraine since October 2017. His diplomatic postings include: Ambassador of Ukraine to Turkey in 2008–2016, Director-General of the Economic Department at the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2006–2008, Minister-Counsellor and Acting Ambassador at the Embassy of Ukraine in the USA in 2000–2005. Ambassador Korsunsky has extensive experience in foreign policy, strategic planning, and analysis, including energy, trade, and investment issues. He is a well-known expert on geopolitics and energy security, and a prolific speaker and lecturer both in Ukraine and abroad. Dr Korsunsky has authored more than 300 publications in the Ukrainian and international media.

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