

Diplomacy Is the Art of Enhancing Power

Written by Yoav Tenenbaum

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YOAV TENENBAUM, FEB 22 2017

Henry Kissinger has written that “Diplomacy is the art of restraining power.”

However, History has shown that Diplomacy can be the art of *enhancing* power. Kissinger himself was a protagonist in such a diplomatic exercise when US diplomacy with regard to Communist China in 1971-1972 could be said to have enhanced US power in the international arena.

By engaging both in secret and open diplomacy to effect a rapprochement with Communist China, a country with which the United States had not had diplomatic relations since 1949, the year the Communist took power, the administration of President Richard Nixon was to change, in a sense, the principal feature of the bi-polar international system into a tri-polar one, thus enhancing US diplomatic leverage. Diplomacy in this case *enhanced* US power in the international arena.

Diplomacy can be said to be the art of restraining *force*; force being an element of power, but hardly its sole manifestation. If by power one means *influence* and the ability to project it, then the proposition suggested in the preceding clause seems to be more accurate compared to what Kissinger has argued.

In his article, “The Concept of Power,” the late Robert Dahl, of Yale University, one of the foremost experts in political science, defined power as follows: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.” Dahl’s definition became widely quoted in academia and beyond.

Of course, power as *influence* can be manifested by persuasion rather than coercion. In this context, the definition of Soft Power, a term coined by Harvard University political scientist Joseph Nye, might be more appropriate. He defined Soft Power as “the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes”.

The definition of power as *influence* may have a strong element of *force* in the background, either explicitly or implicitly directed at a specific actor or as a further source of power.

In this respect, it could be argued that diplomacy helps to create propitious circumstances to employ *force* and thus becomes a further element of *power*.

Thus, for instance, when in May 1967, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser ordered the United Nations peace-keeping forces out of the Sinai Peninsula, closed the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping and sharpened his rhetoric against Israel, the Israeli political leadership, against the advice of many of its generals, who urged an immediate military attack, undertook a diplomatic campaign aimed at averting war by requesting the international community to exert pressure on Egypt to revert to the *status quo ante*.

Wishing to prevent war, Israel’s prime-minister, Levy Eshkol, realized that if resort to arms became inevitable, diplomacy had to be employed to the fullest possible extent so as to create the propitious international circumstances to avert criticism and elicit support.

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In this case, as far as Israel was concerned, diplomacy became a means to restrain *force*, to begin with, and then to enhance *power* by creating the best possible international conditions to resort to *force*.

A similar argument could be advanced with regard to Britain's reaction to the invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas islands by Argentina on the 2nd of April, 1982.

Realizing that the fleet which had been ordered to sail to the South Atlantic in the wake of the Argentinean invasion would take a few weeks to reach its destination, the British Government, headed by Margaret Thatcher, agreed to engage in diplomacy with a two-fold objective: to avert a military confrontation with Argentina and, if this proved impossible, diplomacy was to become a means not only to *restrain* force, but also to *enhance* power by eliciting international support for the use of military force to revert to the *status quo ante*.

Furthermore, diplomacy could also enhance *power* by creating military alliances aimed at deploying *force* if necessary.

In this context, it may be worth quoting the definition of Smart Power, a term usually associated with Joseph Nye, by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in the United States: "an approach that underscores the necessity of a strong military, but also invests heavily in alliances, partnerships, and institutions of all levels to expand [...] influence and establish legitimacy [...]."

Thus, when NATO was set up in April 1949, diplomacy was used to enhance *power* by forging an alliance the aim of which was to convey willingness to deploy *force* should the need arise. To be sure, it could be argued that a resort to diplomacy in this case was aimed at restraining *force*, for the ultimate objective was to prevent war by conveying a readiness to engage in it.

It should be further noted that diplomacy could unintentionally lead to a perceived reduction of *power* as it is deployed in order to restrain *force*.

The example that comes to mind is of the appeasement policy adopted by Britain and France towards Nazi Germany in 1937-1938. By actively pursuing a diplomacy aimed at averting war, British and French *power* were paradoxically perceived by Germany to have been reduced. Adolf Hitler himself was quoted as having said a year later, prior to Germany's invasion to Poland, that, based on his personal experience, the British and French leaders were little worms. One could hardly think of a clearer image of *reduced power* than this one.

Thus, to summarize, diplomacy is the art of restraining *force* and enhancing *power*, with the unintentional effect on occasion leading to a *reduction of power*. The distinction between *force* and *power* in this context is as important as the clear understanding of the interconnection between the two in a fluid and changing international context.

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