The Dispute Over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands

How Media Narratives Shape Public Opinion and Challenge the Global Order

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ISBN: 9781137443366

DOI: 10.1057/9781137443366

Palgrave Macmillan

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CHAPTER 9

Media Diplomacy: Public Diplomacy in a New Global Media Environment

Patricia Riley

The conduct of diplomacy in the West has changed dramatically over the last few decades. During the Cold War, diplomats negotiated largely in secret and if their strategic goals and objectives were shared with the public at all, they were simply announced by leaders or their representatives. Media outlets reported on these diplomatic discussions and foreign policy controversies in stories that were aligned with the national, political, and cultural values of their home country, and they provided largely sympathetic narratives that supported, rather than questioned, their country’s diplomatic initiatives.

Today, however, foreign diplomacy is increasingly conducted on a global stage and foreign policy is shaped not only by leaders and diplomats but also by think tanks, grassroots movements, academics, multinational corporations, and NGOs, each contributing their own perspectives and arguments to the mix of information and opinions that shape broader public conversations.

In a world pulsing with tightly linked communication networks, where “competing ideas shape the course of events,” foreign policy is now conducted not merely through the face-to-face discussions and negotiations of political officeholders and diplomats, but also through the narratives that evolve in a globally accessible media system. This chapter examines the emergence of the mediated public arguments that are part public diplomacy, part individual commentary and dissentus, and part peace and conflict journalism in the complex global mediascape. The dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is used as a case example of layered narratives that
live in both mediated and material tension with each other as they attempt to capture the attention and allegiance of multiple stakeholders. Over time, the interpenetrating national sovereignty and identity issues can be analyzed through the arguments that gain traction in the larger global media environment.

Changes in Public Diplomacy

The term “public diplomacy” has been in use since 1965 when a former US diplomat and later dean at Tufts, Edmund Gullion, described the process through which governments attempt to influence public opinion in other countries. 2 From his perspective, the process includes all of the communication activities that surround this objective, including more expansive activities such as interacting with foreign reporters and teaching intercultural communication. A major thrust of early public diplomacy was “informational diplomacy”—developing and transferring information from one nation-state to another to achieve certain outcomes.3 Informational public diplomacy uses a broadcast, one-way model of communication and gave birth in the United States to long-running projects such as Voice of America and Radio Marti. This approach is highly controlled and depends on public opinion polls and audience analysis research to profile target audiences in order to design and deliver appropriate information campaigns.4

More recently, however, the distinctions between foreign policy—diplomacy—and public diplomacy have begun to blur, as leaders and communication experts began to understand that a nation’s interactions with foreign publics and the projection of its reputation have become an indispensable part of a nation’s ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives.5 Eytan Gilboa argues that the communication revolution that brought radio, television, and the Internet into people’s homes and gave rise to global news networks like CNN International, BBC World, and Al-Jazeera, also opened the public sphere to millions. This created an environment where a nation’s reputation, image, and credibility may be as valuable as, or more valuable than, its raw materials, land, and waterway access and territory.6

Building reputation and credibility, however, cannot occur through simple messaging and self-promotion—it requires building relationships and forming networks with foreign publics and civil society actors.7 Joseph Nye’s popularization of an instrumental diplomatic strategy he termed “soft power,” as opposed to the hard power of military might, refocused leaders, scholars, and practitioners on the
possibility that national outcomes could be accomplished through “attraction” instead of coercion or payment. Soft power, in this sense, involves a multitude of communication tactics such as influence, persuasion, enticement, and attraction. This new public diplomacy is said to be inherently relationship based, sometimes seductive, but primarily focused on discourse and dialogue that gets “others to want the same outcomes you want.”

Rhonda Zaharna defines current public diplomacy theory as “relational”; it embraces initiatives that “focus on relationship-building and positive maintenance of social structures to solve communication problems to advance political objectives.” Enhancing and maintaining the relationship is critical, according to Nicholas Cull, as high functioning public diplomacy is less about one-way persuasion campaigns than it is about being mutually influential and facilitating the engagement between publics and, where possible, “tunes its own policies to the map of foreign public opinion.”

Amelia Arsenault suggests that the latest change to public diplomacy is Internet-based public diplomacy. These activities have been brought about by the global rise in Internet usage, the low barriers to entry, and by information flows that are multidirectional and produced by a variety of sources rather than just authored by a single government or news source. In this media ecology, the passive audience becomes an active one, both producing and consuming relevant content, and significantly reducing the viability of “one to many” information models. In this era of diplomacy, stakeholders are at times viewed as cocreators and collaborators, and communication is itself one of the goals of diplomacy.

The goal of building relationships and engaging with multiple publics and stakeholders, and creating websites and social media strategies for them all in multiple languages, taking account the constraints of national and cultural differences, is costly, time intensive, and the effects may take many years (e.g., the impact of youth culture exchanges may shape a future leader but that could take decades). And the world stage is getting more complicated and crowded. According to Ian Hall, other countries have been following the lead of the West in public diplomacy. Particularly important to this chapter is his conclusion that “Asian states have become interested in using public diplomacy as a means by which they can try to influence foreign public opinion.”

James Pamment notes that although public diplomacy has become more complicated, traditional communication media approaches remain. Media messaging is, however, not approached as one-way
communication but is now structured through the lens of strategic communication. The messages of foreign policy, often referred to as media diplomacy, must be constructed with the knowledge that they are likely to be seen or heard by many different audiences, each applying their own cultural understandings, worldviews, and objectives. Thus what is said in Washington or Tokyo is heard in Cairo and Shanghai, and it is often heard quite differently.

Strategic communication scholars note that the policymaking process and the media diplomacy processes have to coevolve. It has not always been obvious to leaders that creative communication campaigns and a lot of money will not be able to salvage the poor policy choices that are made by the state. The integrated communication process should be designed in anticipation of the likely responses of multiple stakeholders—alleys, neutral parties, and adversaries—and it must involve analyses that help leaders and their staff sort through the effects of the messages and policies. This might appear to be overly ambitious, as it did to Admiral Michael Mullen, the former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, when he stated that he did not like the sound of “strategic communication,” because “the essence of good communication [was] having the right intent up front and letting our actions speak for themselves.” The challenge, as Marc Lynch noted in response, is that “there is going to be an information war, a struggle over framing and interpretation, no matter what policy is pursued. This is why strategic communications can’t be ignored in the formation and execution of policy in today’s international system.” Effective media diplomacy requires the involvement of communication experts throughout the decision-making process—it cannot be added on at the end of the diplomatic process.

The material of media diplomacy may include traditional communication events such as dinners, forums, journalist interviews, major addresses, news conferences, school, hospital, and memorial visits, a guest spot on a late night television show, and sporting events, along with less typical opportunities such as YouTube town halls, fashion shoots (if you are Michelle Obama), your own musical performances (if you are Bill Clinton), or even leaks. Craig Hayden notes that the United States often creates elaborate international media campaigns to disseminate its new foreign policy objectives and at times has set up major media platforms such as Alhurra to distribute information.

Although some media diplomacy is rather straightforward in that it separates stakeholder focused messages into two camps—those who support the state and those who do not—the concept is more malleable and challenging than this scenario. It also “permits those who
are engaged in complex negotiations to send signals that are multidirectional and can be interpreted and understood differently by different audiences. Add mobile phones, new digital media platforms, and social networking sites, and the means by which publics consume these messages have multiplied. This media system ecology has created huge opportunities as well as difficulties for diplomats and policymakers who were used to maintaining some modicum of control over their stories.

Now diverse and networked publics construct meanings about complicated multidirectional foreign policy arguments and develop different assessments about those narratives to provide empirical materiality to their facts. Stakeholders will value those facts differently because they have led different lives, participated in other cultures, and will rely on their own sense of national identity and its moral foundations. G. Thomas Goodnight notes that these worldviews can be analyzed as institutional logics that are both material and symbolic. They provide both formal and informal rules of action, but they are also historical and evolve over time and thus “render state of the art practice sometimes unstable.” As an example, post-September 11, US media diplomacy gave the world community a choice—other states were either “with us or against us,” in the “war on terrorism”—a coercive “non-choice,” according to Janice Bially Mattern. She argues that by linking the two phrases together, the United States structured its narrative as a form of what is known as “coercive diplomacy.” Americans may hear these messages as asking for moral support in a time of tragedy, but to others who listen and who have experienced radically different historical relationships with the United States, this media diplomacy was not “understood in juxtaposition to hard power but as a continuation of it.”

Media diplomacy is thus informed by the rule-governed activity of strategic messaging, and yet also needs to demonstrate concern with the process of deliberative construction of policies and relationships as material controversies are worked out in private, public, and political spheres. In this sense, political argument in the world of international relations and media diplomacy has become what Joseph Nye calls “a contest of competitive credibility.” Further research is going to be necessary to understand this multidimensional model of media diplomacy as concepts can slip and shift in the online world, for example, a nation-state that attempts to engage in online conversations may engender greater levels of suspicion, not less, and could hurt its credibility, depending on the context. For the case of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, the question may be how each country’s
story—its credibility—is related to perceived future actions. As the media narrative evolves, does it have a diplomatic resolution?

**Territorial Conflicts**

Territorial disputes are given special consideration in the world of diplomacy. Narratives about territory carry particular “historical and diplomatic burdens,” in part because territorial disputes are among the most enduring and also because over the long-term they are the most likely of all interstate disagreements to lead to armed conflict. A number of ongoing conflicts in East Asia alone are worrisome to the global community, but Stephen Nagy claims that “most significant, though, is the ongoing territorial row over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.” And the key word in this statement is “ongoing,” for within the genre of research about territorial conflicts, the disputes that are called out for special scrutiny are the cases of long-enduring conflicts.

Numerous theories have been offered to help analyze examples of enduring territorial disputes—the path toward intractability has been widely studied, as the potential for tragedy is high. For example, “Paul Huth has argued that territorial disputes were the primary cause in fourteen out of twenty-one interstate wars after World War II; ... Paul Hensel documented the increased likelihood with which these particular disputes escalated and resulted in a larger number of fatalities.” Through a statistical analysis of the effects of time on the likelihood of dispute resolution, Ron Hassner and Ann Hironaka showed that a pattern of entrenchment developed the longer the disputes languished:

Entrenchment is the process by which disputes become increasingly resistant to resolution over time, marked by an enhanced reluctance to offer, accept, or implement compromises or even negotiate over territory. This entrenchment is often accompanied by an escalation of hostile rhetoric regarding the territory and even armed clashes. Of the 160 disputes in our data set, nearly 50% were resolved within twenty years of onset, but only another 6 percent were resolved in the twenty years after that, and only another 6 percent ended within seventy-five years of initiation.

Previously, much of the literature on disputes suggested that conflicts became easier to resolve over time, but as recent data have indicated otherwise, the search for theories to explain this phenomenon has expanded.
A growing body of literature recognizes that conflicts are socially constructed and require a focus on “the social construction of state identities, alliances, military doctrines, and even particular weapons.”40 Except for sailors and people in the local fishing industry, few people around the globe have heard of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands or will ever actually visit or even see a picture of the outcropping of rocks. Thus the conflict is almost completely a previously regional, but now global, media construction, instigated by political elites and fomented by activist groups. The media diplomacy examples described in previous chapters enlarge the conflict and reproduce the nationalist identities inscribed in textbook descriptions of historical truths and values, recorded in regional maritime laws and policies, and reinforced through social media conversations for each of the countries involved. Viewing the conflict as progressing along a path of entrenchment highlights the growing difficulty that any party to the dispute or external actor would have intervening in the conflict, and thus increasing the possibility of unintended consequences such as a military miscalculation, or that the dispute spirals out of control of any of the parties.

The islands dispute can thus be best understood as an escalating entrenchment, reproduced and spread by competing, mediated systems of political action. Hassner notes, “The entrenchment path that territorial disputes follow constitutes a process of institutionalization in which disputes take on a life and a causal power of their own.”41 Hassner uses an analytical rubric to demonstrate that the entrenchment process is recursive and that intractability grows through the interaction of three processes: material, functional, and symbolic retrenchment.42 Hassner explains:

Material entrenchment increases the difficulty of dividing the disputed area or separating it from the homeland…Through functional entrenchment, the boundaries that define the disputed area become less flexible and more precise. The process consolidates the issue at the heart of the dispute and reduces the range of possible compromises. Symbolic entrenchment adds ideational layers to the dispute that make it more difficult for leaders to find substitutes for the disputed territory. Potential side payments fall away as the territory is invested with nationalist, religious, ethnic, and otherwise emotional value. Even disputes that began over strategically or materially valuable territory evolve into disputes over history, identity, honor and values.43

In the case of the islands dispute, numerous examples in the previous chapters can be used as examples of material entrenchment: rebuilding
the lighthouse, drawing new maps, or reshaping the history of the islands in Chinese and Japanese textbooks. Changing policies that create new military patrols and flyover zones would exemplify the ways functional entrenchment can occur, and symbolic entrenchment is evidenced through appeals to nationalism and the ever increasing public attacks on the other country(ies). Examples of the escalation of such attacks would include Xi Jinping’s declaration that Japan should “‘rein in its behavior’ and stop undermining Chinese sovereignty,”44 and Shinzo Abe’s speech at the 2014 Davos conference in which he was clearly referring to China when he asserted, “We must restrain military expansion in Asia…which otherwise could go unchecked…If peace and stability were shaken in Asia, the knock-on effect for the entire world would be enormous…The dividend of growth in Asia must not be wasted on military expansion.”45

Anthony Giddens’s theory of structuration suggests that institutionalized processes like entrenchment can be further analyzed by looking at the depth and breadth of the processes as they are inscribed in systems of interaction, such as media diplomacy, across time and space, and focusing on the key modalities of structuration: domination, legitimation, and signification.47 The deep structure, or generative mechanisms of entrenchment would look at the underlying rules and resources that are reproduced on the path toward intractability. One example would be a legitimation strategy identified by Krista Wiegand (although not in structurationist terms), who uses the concept “Issue-Linkage” to explain why some disputes endure, defying territorial settlement. “The central element of an issue-based approach is that policymakers are concerned with achieving their goals over specific issues, rather than simply pursuing such vague notions as power or security.”48 Her study identifies numerous examples where states allow an ongoing dispute to continue long into the future without ever seriously attempting a settlement because maintaining or escalating the conflict, and not resolving it, is valuable as leverage in other disputes.49 Wiegand states that there is a long-standing pattern of China complaining about Japan’s actions and Japan giving concessions in order to avoid friction—a tactic referred to as coercive diplomacy.50 Thus institutionalizing long-term conflicts becomes a skill set and increases a state’s power in the larger system of regional and global disputes.

As the underlying power dynamics shift to the growing might of China, and the United States appears stuck in a status quo scenario, Japan is using a new media diplomacy strategy that, while rooted in its past legal history of administrative control of the islands, is
now about the future, and not just Japan’s future but the world’s. Although not a claimant in China’s South China Sea disputes, Japan’s future economic stability is directly related to access to their trade routes in the South China Sea. In January of 2013, Prime Minister Abe released a statement pledging to ensure that the maritime domain remained “governed by laws and rules, not might.” The “not might” clause is a veiled criticism of China, and Ian Storey concludes that Japan is using the structure of issue-linking to respond to China’s conflicts in the South China Sea. By refusing to negotiate on the Senkaku islands, Japan attempts to preserve the existing maritime order and block China’s demands for increasing control of the seas. In February of 2013, Japan also positioned itself as the key to regional stability, thus suggesting that China was attempting to dominate and destabilize through its territorial disputes. Its media diplomacy story is that the conflicts will have impact beyond the region and will become an international concern. In Washington DC, Prime Minister Abe claimed that Japan must “continue to be a guardian of the global commons, like the maritime commons, open enough to benefit everyone.”

Research also indicates that international institutions have little power to motivate states to agree to settlements unless the state agrees. Wiegand’s data indicate that for a state to accept settlement, it typically has to acquiesce without outside intervention, because forced settlements, even those that are militarily imposed, do not end disputes—they tend to reappear in the future when the state recovers from whatever position required it to accept the settlement. Examples might be a state’s increased economic or military might. In some situations, like the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute, other structuring rules might be implicated in maintaining conflicts. For instance, Wiegand and others have shown that certain states are unwilling to lose territory because it is too intertwined with the state’s reputation, which would be consistent with Wiegand’s assessment of China’s insistence on drawing on historical documents in the islands dispute when “Japan bases its claim on the principle of discovery and effective control and occupation, which is generally recognized in international law as determining ownership rather than historic claims.” But in other cases, the research indicates that leaders often use territorial disputes to mobilize their people and that ending the dispute “could be costly to that leader as he or she raised the stakes.” Wiegand’s research suggests that neither of these last two theories alone have much empirical support, but other scholars have suggested that they might be additive to the more robust Issue-Linkage theory.
The concept of media diplomacy suggests that there are important strategies and tactics utilized by different actors but also stresses that the mediascape can evolve in unexpected ways. This analysis can give insights to both academics and practitioners in public diplomacy and international relations. The islands dispute is about territory, yet the globalization of media diplomacy is essentially about the deterritorialization of arguments and stories. Deterritorialization refers to the growth of “supraterриториal” or “transborder” connections common in globalization processes that are in part fueled by communication and information technology and by international finance. In this sense, there is a tension between territories or the “space of places” as it is replaced by the “space of flows” in the globalized “network society.” Even as the process of globalization continues to speed up the integration of people around the world, the exigencies of many locales continue to focus attention on the connectivity between regions and nation states (e.g., recent reductions of US forces in Afghanistan, the current turmoil in Syria, or Ebola outbreaks in Uganda). The shift to global concerns is thus about more than simply discussing multiple regional issues but about the cosmopolitan interrelationships between all stakeholders enmeshed in interconnected issues.

Conclusions

Public diplomacy in this global mediascape is inherently polyvocal. A key tension in these neocosmopolitan media diplomacy strategies emerges from the roles of history and identity in the assessment of their effectiveness at home as well as abroad but it is arguments about global risk that are more likely to capture attention outside a region. Ulrich Beck introduced the concept of a “world risk society” by claiming that “threats create society, and global threats create global society.” If one of the goals of cosmopolitan argument is the formation of a “global generational consciousness,” then members of a generation are socially tied together with the same experience of historical events, especially those that are traumatic. Yet global public diplomacy arguments are often intensely dialectical, as they are in this case; they draw upon historical stocks of knowledge to produce and reproduce discourse about national identity and values. These arguments often ask the international publics to set aside their emotional reactions to the actors, for example, for unacknowledged histories or crimes, in order to create an “operational consensus” around global goals that could achieve a plausible successful future. Such public diplomacy arguments display a presumption for a global institutional
logic over the embedded patterns of national identity and mediated claims to territory. These narratives are additionally challenging as they privilege future time over historical time as government leaders, activist groups, and nongovernmental organizations attempt to engage and persuade the global other.

A more cosmopolitan sense of mediated global public diplomacy around entrenched disputes will perhaps be best understood retrospectively as an assemblage of narrative frames that coexist until either a global risk scenario prevails or military action ensues. Scholars of public argument and of media thus have an important role to play in this process and should be explicitly looking at how the interaction of media sources and coverage may contribute to the framing and resolution of the conflict. Deeply entrenched conflicts are only likely to take another path through the confluence of political will, organizational will, and social will, all of which are constituted in interaction and mediatized. It is imperative for diplomats, scholars, strategic marketers, scenario planners, and other interested parties to begin collaboratively analyzing scenarios that focus on all three structures to locate levers for the will to change, focusing first on China and Japan, then the region, and ultimately the globe.

Notes

4. Ibid., 13.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 96, 103.
11. Zaharna, 146.
22. Lynch.
23. Riley and Hollihan.
27. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Klumpp et al.
33. Nye, 100.
41. Hassner, 113.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
46. Riley and Hollihan.
48. Hensel et al., 118.
50. Ibid., 124.
53. Storey, 150.
55. Wiegand, 124.
56. Ibid., 100–101.
58. Ibid.
61. Riley and Hollihan.