
How the Increased Destructive Power of Man-Made Threats and Attendant Consequences Could End the Continuum of the Growing Importance of Diplomacy

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Abstract. The threats mankind faces have grown profoundly since the dawn of diplomacy 600 years ago. Through this period, the importance of diplomacy has grown in lockstep with the complexity of society and the escalation of threats mankind poses to itself. However, the scale and scope of how humanity can damage itself – from nuclear war to climate change – has become so profound that the failure of diplomacy could lead to its future irrelevance. This article explores the factors that led to increased societal complexity through the evolution of modern diplomacy and how that escalation forms a continuum of ongoing increasing importance of diplomacy. Specifically, the dynamic means that diplomacy is never more important than it is at the current day. However, the rapid escalation of threats to mankind’s existence through the ongoing growth of societal complexity could terminate the continuum, or at least set it back for centuries.

Keywords. diplomacy, risk management, future of diplomacy, technology, PEST

Introduction

THE POTENTIAL FOR SELF-INFLICTED HARM BY HUMANITY has become so great as to be existential. Advances in technology, growing populations, and the faster flow of information (from faster travel to the transmission of information faster than people can be carried) have made it possible for humanity to expose itself to truly existential risks. The continued escalation of such man-made threats has, consequently, increased the importance of diplomacy. After all, diplomacy is intended to prevent conflict between states, and given the scale

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and destructive power of today's man-made risks, such conflicts, in some cases, could very well become existential threats to the human race.

Humanity faces natural and man-made threats on an unprecedented scale that requires cross-border and cross-cultural collaboration for remediation. The most pressing challenges faced – among them, climate change, nuclear weapons proliferation, political violence, and data-related threats – cannot be addressed with single-state solutions or even the cooperation of only a small cohort of close allies. A multi-state environment relies on diplomacy for the problems that affect many states, particularly those problems that are existential in nature, and the threats states face today are indeed existential.

The importance of diplomacy today represents the latest iteration of a continuum along which diplomacy has been more important than ever before, with diplomacy in the twenty-first century merely the latest “most important.” The existential threats of the current global environment may be many, varied, and more menacing than those of the past, but the same could be said of those faced in the twentieth century relative to all prior historical ages – and the nineteenth, and so on. The twentieth century, for example, faced the advent of the nuclear age and before it two world wars that came in rapid succession. In the nineteenth century, the interrelated threats of population growth, resource availability, and economic volatility were noted. After all, “history is full of people who sincerely believe that they battled misfortunes the likes of which had ‘never been heard in human history’” (Parker 2008: 1058).

The emergent complexity in society that ultimately impacts the importance of diplomacy evolves along political, economic, social, and technological (PEST) dimensions. Each dimension gains greater complexity from one generation to the next, they build on the prior age's advances. The evolution of society along PEST factors increases complexity, with each factor's advances feeding the others, in the “organic” sense offered by Oswald Spengler (Frye 1974). Diplomats, consequently, face greater and greater challenges, including interacting with more states than they have in the past, doing so, and navigating increasingly nuanced relationships. Complexity itself does not correspond to importance, but complexity and the magnitude of the stakes, together, do. The threats humanity faces today are truly existential. What could have been perceived as world-shaping catastrophe several hundred years ago was generally only regional.

In the earliest days of diplomacy, at the end of the fifteenth century, high-stakes threats were distinctly regional, with regions rather tightly defined. As states found themselves engaging more frequently with other states further away (and possibly historically unreachable, or at least reachable only on an irregular basis), threats and opportunities became larger, trending with increased

PEST complexity, such as deeper trade interdependence fuelled by new tools and methods (i.e., technology). Generally, the stakes rose ever higher.

In the twenty-first century, the high stakes associated with diplomacy show a tangible threat to the continuum of its increasing importance. The only reason why diplomacy could become less important from one age to the next is a breakdown in the global community that isolates regions from each other and reduces the scope of global interaction – among states and people. Political violence, nuclear threats, climate change, and other self-inflicted ills could set humanity back centuries – or even end it completely.

The prevention of such humanity-altering events requires scientific, social, and economic solutions. However, the collaboration to drive such solutions and the steps necessary to attain sufficient worldwide adoption come down to diplomacy. Increased PEST complexity virtually guarantees that what each age's diplomats face will involve larger population bases, greater destructive power, and most of all higher stakes – at least until humanity experiences the sort of natural or self-inflicted global catastrophe that would fundamentally alter its presence on earth.¹ Essentially, the fact that man-made threats could end the human race has led to the great importance of diplomacy today. If such an existential threat were to be realized, though, humanity could lose its importance entirely – either for centuries or, in the case of an extinction event, permanently.

The continuum that makes diplomacy important during any period in history

Diplomacy in its modern form has only existed for around six centuries. During this relatively short period, the practice of diplomacy has clearly gained importance continually. What ultimately makes diplomacy matter (and by extension important) is that (a) diplomacy is how states communicate and interact with each other, short of armed conflict and (b) states are sovereign entities, which means they have no higher authority and no place to appeal except either mutual conversation or armed conflict (Meerts 2015: 57). Diplomacy is important during any period, therefore, because at a minimum, it offers the last alternative to armed conflict. Of course, this comes in addition to the many advantages of lower-stakes and day-to-day diplomacy. Frankly, daily, continual

¹ This is an important caveat. Human progress is not necessarily destined to continue without impediment, and a self-inflicted setback remains possible. Such a setback would potentially represent a decline in the importance of diplomacy, although the humanity would likely have more pressing problems.

diplomacy, as Richelieu envisioned, is easier, more productive, and more efficient than last-ditch efforts to avoid armed conflict ([Richelieu 1688: 94-102](#)).

What makes diplomacy more important in the twenty-first century than ever before is the same as what made it more important in the twentieth century than ever before, and in each previous historical period, as well. The higher stakes resulting from greater complexity – powered by a larger global population and more frequent interaction (e.g., trade) – have led to a condition where the collapse of diplomacy would have profound global consequences. In addition to grim end-of-humanity possible outcomes, even simple failures could have disproportionate ramifications. Diplomatic strain between frequent and unfriendly trading partners could result in shortages of consumer staples, which could influence elections, or in extreme cases, lead to civil unrest. Simply, complexity increases the stakes, which heightens risk, which makes diplomacy more important. Getting it wrong, over time, has more menacing consequences.

A grasp of societal (i.e., PEST) complexity is the key to understanding the increasing importance of diplomacy over time. The diplomat as generalist necessarily lacks the ability to understand, discuss, and resolve the matters involving the most important inter-state issues and threats in the world, requiring access to deep domain expertise, the management of incredible complexity, and the acceptance of severe consequences if negotiations fail. Today, one would have to be an expert on potable water, energy (fossil fuel and renewable), political violence and its causes, climate change, statistics (including various forms of modelling), and the wide array of disciplines ultimately lumped together as “technology.”

Various drivers of complexity have contributed to the higher stakes of diplomacy in each successive age. Social Darwinism, explored in the nineteenth century, most effectively shows how the risks and complexity associated with historical periods drive complexity. The school of thought can be used to trace the concept of “survival of the fittest” through what is effectively PEST volatility, and the thinking can be applied to diplomacy just as easily as to economics or other social science disciplines. An early contributor to what would later be known as Social Darwinism, Thomas Robert Malthus saw societal progress unfolding through a future of severe boom/bust dynamics would be fuelled by:

- Population growth during times of plenty
- Population growth reaching the point where society could not sustain the population
- Subsequent periods of strain, during which “the superior power of population growth cannot be checked without producing misery or vice” ([Peura 2013: 314](#))

The recognition of this perpetual boom/bust dialectic offers a useful focal point for understanding the continuum of the ongoing increasing of importance of diplomacy across historical ages. The pattern can be traced backward and forward through time within the context of the evolution of diplomacy to show the continuum of ongoing “most importance.”²

Diplomacy’s importance continuum relies on the Hegelian concept of historical repetition as the foundation of progress. In repeating itself, history cements the repeated element into the status quo and provides the foundation for the next such iteration (Hegel 1857: 285). The dynamic is not cyclical, even though cyclicity can be inferred from repetition. Rather, repetition provides affirmation of a new condition. “Clearly, Hegel sees repetition in world history as a mark of ratification,” with that ratification becoming a mark of advancement (Mazlish 1972: 335). Repetition solidifies what may have initially been, according to Hegel, “a matter of chance and contingency” and establishes it as the next element in an ongoing continuum, rather than as a fresh starting point.

As a result, Malthusian boom/bust cycles manifest as an uncanny manifestation of Hegel’s repetition and affirmation in the continuum of human history. Applied to understanding the importance of diplomacy, the Hegelian model underlying Malthusian observations demonstrates the continued increase of societal complexity from one age to the next, which brings a corresponding increase in the importance of diplomacy, because complexity with scale raises the stakes of diplomatic activity. More people, more communication, and more interaction lead to more population, more demand for resources, more conflict, and more scale for damage. Taking a view strictly on the trajectory of the stakes involved in diplomacy, and the consequences of getting it wrong, the latest age would always be the one in which diplomacy is most important – until an existential threat to humanity is realized.

Understanding complexity and its impact on the relative importance of diplomacy

The continuum that establishes and reinforces the ongoing escalating importance of diplomacy relative to all prior historical ages derives from increases in social complexity that correspondingly raise the stakes of diplomacy, as

² The use of the expression “boom/bust dialectic” offers a nod to the philosophy of history advanced by Georg W.F. Hegel, which has roots in the thinking of Immanuel Kant, which was formulated at around the same time Malthus wrote.

humanity edges closer and closer to the threats that could set back or profoundly and negatively alter its existence. Tightly intertwined with each other, the four fundamental components of society –political, economic, social, and technological (PEST) – reveal the organic nature of society as it evolves (Frye 1974: 5).

Many definitions of diplomacy characterize it as negotiation among states, but any practical attempt to understand diplomacy requires context. To that end, one can construe diplomacy in its earliest ages – from inception in the late fifteenth century through the precedent-setting tenure of Richelieu – as having the objective of anticipating and executing the will of the monarch in representing that monarch to other states (usually to other monarchies).³ Richelieu and Chavigny, for example, went to great lengths to demonstrate their loyalty and service to Louis XIII, particularly by working to protect each other from the “*mauvaises humeurs*” of the monarch (Ranum 1963: 80).

The transition from monarchical leadership to representative democracies, coinciding with the Enlightenment, did test whether each successive era rightly sees diplomacy as more important than ever before, perhaps counterintuitively. The utopian ideals among the *philosophes*, in particular, held that the “future of diplomacy would be the reverse of the diplomacy of the past” (Gilbert 1951: 14). Essentially, Enlightenment thinkers did not see the importance of diplomacy and thus saw a world without diplomats, because states would not need them. They would be able to work together somewhat harmoniously. Had it been realized, the *philosophes*’ triumph over diplomacy would have constituted diplomacy in itself and would have been possible only as a result of diplomacy prior to reaching their desired end state, which in itself would take diplomacy to maintain. Of course, the contradiction embedded in the thinking of the time never required a serious challenge, since their utopian dream was never realized.

The formation of new states through the end of the Enlightenment and across the nineteenth century and the rapid increase through the end of World War I required both broader and deeper diplomatic engagement (Harris 1993: 301). For states still ruled by monarchs or other authoritarians, negotiations would necessarily involve counterparties with democratically elected leadership, which would increase volatility through the peaceful handoff of power after elections, a pace of power change far more frequent than generally seen in monarchies. Even for the authoritarian rulers of the twentieth century, diplomacy remained a commitment and ongoing effort, made more challenging by

³ It is difficult to give monarchs absolute characteristics, given that they faced threats or influence from religious bodies (such as the Catholic Church) and faced the threat of insurrection or other forms of rebellion, as demonstrated in France in 1789.

having to negotiate with representatives for whom the end will of the people was a moving target.

In addition to increases in the pace of change in diplomatic partners and practitioners through the broader adoption of representative democracy, economic and technological change increased the scope of potential diplomatic engagement and the speed at which it could progress. Improved and faster maritime travel shrank the globe for diplomats from the sixteenth century for the next three hundred years. Long distances became easier to traverse, which in turn expanded the scope of diplomacy. States far from each other began to have more frequent encounters, particularly through trade.

Maritime commerce raised the stakes for diplomats even faster than the increased speed of communication resulting from improved maritime transportation. The transfer of money can be far more compelling than the transfer of the written word. “The first and most extensive compilation of quantitative material was made during a balance of trade scare of the early 1560’s,” According to Lawrence Stone, “when a serious attempt was made to discover the precise nature of English commerce” (1949: 34). This early tabulation represents an early effort to understand and prepare for trade diplomacy, an activity which today is crucial to the interaction and negotiation of states. Stone adds, “For a statesman whose country is on the brink of open war, it was absolutely essential to assess the economic dislocation liable to be caused by a complete commercial rupture with the enemy” (1949: 34).

The stakes involved in the practice of diplomacy soon went higher, fuelled by the rapid increase in transatlantic maritime traffic. According to the National Humanities Center, the “number of ships crossing [the Atlantic Ocean] each year from Britain tripled from 500 in the 1670s to 1500 by the late 1730s” (National Humanities Center [no date]). Further, the voyages quickly became faster. It took the Mayflower 66 days to traverse the Atlantic Ocean in 1620 (Ridley 2020). Within two centuries, the average crossing time fell to only 21 to 29 days (Royal Museums Greenwich [no date]). By the twentieth century, the introduction of air travel closed the gap even further; an average of 1,736 transatlantic flights entered or left Europe daily in 2018 (Eurocontrol 2021).

Faster maritime vessels may have increased the scope of diplomacy – and even accelerated it – but the speed of communication remained a problem, even if diplomats eventually resisted improvements (Standage 2007: 158). The Crimean War according to Standage, was “the first in which the telegraph played a strategic role,” but the Battle of New Orleans, coming shortly after the end of the U.S. War of 1812, remains the classic example of how slow communication could do so to negative effect (Standage 2007: 155). Because news of the Treaty of Ghent, signed December 24, 1814, failed to reach New Orleans in time, one last battle was

fought January 8, 2015. The battle itself did not change the outcome of the war or even result in the need for further negotiation. However, the fact that the speed of the message was limited certainly offered the potential for the resumption of hostilities. The commercial adoption of the telegraph around 1845 provided a foundation for the movement of diplomacy at a faster pace than human-carried messages, ultimately enabling diplomats to represent their states more effectively, invest more time in strategy and collaboration, and take advantage of pooled or centralized expertise, which became increasingly important because of the escalation of threats across borders and to humanity as a whole.

Despite the benefits of improved and accelerated communications, particularly over the past 200 years, diplomats have shown considerable resistance to technological advances, even with cases like the Battle of New Orleans to illustrate the salient value in moving the message along faster. The latest incarnation of communications advancement, social media, remains an area of scepticism (Berridge 2015: 201). This is certainly consistent with early diplomats' views on the telegraph, which involved "officials in distant countries who found their independence from central government was undermined by the telegraph," leading them to see the new technology, according to Standage, as "a curse" (2007: 159). Nonetheless, their use in diplomacy eventually came, due in large part to its adoption in commercial matters, showing the same pattern of influence seen in the impact of increased maritime commerce on diplomacy.

The direct impact of interrelated economic and technological advancements on the importance of diplomacy has been significant but has paled in comparison to those that have been indirect. Recently, the development, approval, manufacturing, transportation, and sharing of COVID-19 vaccines has shown itself to be a triumph of diplomacy. The speed with which vaccines were developed and manufactured required considerable cross-border diplomacy-enabled commercial collaboration. Further, the success of the diplomatic, scientific, and commercial work on COVID-19 spawned a new wave of diplomatic concerns. San Marino's eschewing the European Union, for example, made the country a destination for travellers seeking vaccines not accepted by the EU (Washington Post 2021). By remaining independent, the country was able to secure and distribute to its citizens doses of Russia's Sputnik vaccine, while diplomats from across the European Union negotiated for access to approved resources.

Whether it is technology used by diplomats or other officials in the states they represent or its indirect impact on the practice of negotiation among sovereign entities, perhaps its most subtle impact on the importance of diplomacy is the unknown. Oswald Spengler observes, "The effect of a 'technical achievement of mankind' is never foreseen," and as an example, he offers, "[T]he electrical transmission of power and the discovery of the possibilities of energy from water have depreciated the old coal areas of Europe *and their populations*

[emphasis in the original]” (1931: 67). Technology has consequences, and few can forecast their full extent accurately. The Wright brothers never expected to see more than 1,700 flights a day between Europe and the United States. The technology behind increased longevity, could not have foreseen the world’s population swelling from a mere 900 million in 1800 to 7 billion today (Peura 2013: 311).

Larger populations with longer lifespans, greater mobility among the world’s people (and its representatives of sovereign entities), and improved manufacturing and distribution provide a natural foundation for the continued exponential growth of commercial activity, deepening connects among states, some of which may have uneasy diplomatic relationships with each other.⁴ Improved transportation through the twentieth century made this dynamic more common, and in the twenty-first century, the PEST interdependencies of such relationships have led to the careful application of diplomacy in the face of trading relationships.

The “McDonald’s Peace Theory” tried to capture explain the careful balancing act involved when trading partners have difficult diplomatic relationships with the rosy claim that mutual economic success would be deemed not worth jeopardizing by going to war (Musgrave 2020). Essentially, two countries with McDonald’s restaurants would not risk armed conflict with each other. Whether because of the fast-food chain’s ability to expand globally or because of deficiencies in the theory itself, there have been cases to prove the contrary; Musgrave notes visiting one in Belgrade in 1988 (2020). The theory does hint at the influence that deep trading relationships can have on diplomacy, and there is perhaps no better example of diplomatic challenges among trading partners than the United States and China. The United States is China’s largest export market (World Bank 2021). And, the China is the United States’ third-largest export market, following Canada and Mexico, with which it shares borders (U.S. Census 2021).

A tweet of support in 2019 for anti-government protesters in Hong Kong from Daryl Morey, general manager of the Houston Rockets, a National Basketball Association (NBA) team, upset China and led to diplomatic engagement, including a statement from the Chinese consulate in Houston (Perper 2019).⁵ NBA commissioner Adam Silver even characterized the issue as diplomatic in nature, stating, “I’m still a believer in soft power” (Helin 2021). The efforts of a state actor to limit the rights of a citizen and an organization in another sovereign territory is just the latest example of the greater role for diplomats in the current age. The NBA, China,

⁴ Increased manufacturing output through improved efficiency began with Samuel Slater in the late nineteenth century and set what would become the Industrial Revolution in motion (Tucker 1981: 297).

⁵ The *Business Insider* article is useful for a broad narrative of the disagreement between the NBA and China.

and the United States continue to work through the episode two years later. While the slow progress may indicate the lack of trust involved among some of the parties, it also demonstrates the commitment to work through the event, which comes as no surprise given the economic stakes involved.

Human nature may not change, but the scale on which it can act certainly evolves. Increased PEST complexity throughout the six-century existence of diplomacy has generally raised the stakes in inter-state interaction and negotiation in ways likely never imagined by the likes of Machiavelli, Guicciardini, or Richelieu. The invention of the telegraph offered an end to battles unnecessarily fought after the declaration of peace. Trade has gained such importance that an entertainment body (the NBA) has been forced to engage with a state actor on a matter of multi-billion-dollar importance. There are countless examples showing how higher stakes through increased societal complexity make diplomacy in each age more important than in any age before it. The only threat to the continuum of the ongoing increasing importance of diplomacy would be a high-stakes failure of diplomacy on a scale that constitutes an existential threat – or at least a profound setback – to humanity.

Threats to the continuum, threats to society

Albert Einstein reportedly lamented, “I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones” (Carr 2015: 120). The implied end of civilization shows a possible outer boundary for the continuum of the increasing importance of diplomacy from one period to the next. If something bad enough happens, the whole thing goes backward. The continuum is not assured to be infinite, and its duration is ultimately up to the human race. Diplomats stand to play a disproportionate role. A continuum of this sort would of necessity be agnostic to its underlying characteristics, and thus a cataclysmic development affirmed in the Hegelian view, would just be another outcome, and an existential setback would of course be affirmed through repetition and provide a new foundation for what would be characterized as a rebuilding, although again, the dialectic would be agnostic to that concept, as rebuilding requires a human perceptual reference.

Speed, scale, and complexity are more prevalent in the twenty-first century than they were in the past, and the consequences of diplomatic action are thus greater than at any point in history. In looking at past catastrophes and crises, it becomes evident that the lack of speed, scale, and complexity prevented them from becoming truly global. Take the “General Crisis” of the middle of the seventeenth century (Parker 2008). It can only be described as awful; the

world had “more cases of simultaneous state breakdown around the globe than any previous age” (Parker 2008: 1053). Specifically:

- From 1635 to 1666, Europe experienced 27 revolts, with seven in the Americas and 15 in Asia and Africa – 45 percent involved regime change.
- Increases in armed conflict only exacerbated the General Crisis: “War had become the norm for resolving both domestic and international problem.”
- Increased population density of “unprecedented and sometimes unsustainable levels” only served to exacerbate the problem.⁶

The breakdown of diplomacy during this period shows its salient importance – and what happens without its competent practice. Further, it allows for the speculation of what such simultaneous civil unrest – particularly when paired with natural/weather disasters and pandemic, noted by Parker as well) – could entail in the twenty-first century. While there have been similar events in the same absolute period (approximately 30 years), mitigating factors have helped, along with the contributions of diplomacy. Thirty-one years is a wider gap now than it was in the seventeenth century, which is why the fact that so much disaster in the same period may not mean as much now as it did 500 years ago. However, the fact that the present day shows similar characteristics to the General Crisis should certainly give one pause. Civil unrest, the breakup of nations and formation of new ones, and natural disasters have been common over the past three decades.

Since 1990:

- Fourteen European states came from the fall of the Soviet Union alone, including the breakup of Yugoslavia (Harris 1993: 318).
- More came along Russia’s Asian border (Kuzio 2000:83).
- Severe natural disasters have become fairly frequent, such as: Typhoon Mireille (1991), Hurricane Andrew (United States 1992), Northridge Earthquake (United States, 1994), Aceh tsunami (Indonesia 2004), Hurricane Katrina (United States 2005), the Tohoku earthquake (Japan 2011), and Hurricane Dorian (Caribbean 2019).⁷

⁶ For all examples above, see Parker 2008: 1055-1059.

⁷ This author is an established expert on worldwide natural and manmade catastrophe events. The information referenced here comes from having engaged in the development of industry-wide insured loss estimates for the events noted as the head of PCS, a Verisk business (<http://www.verisk.com/pcs>).

The worst pandemic in a century continues to evolve, after 18 months of impact (as of this writing).

Just as society did not collapse during the General Crisis, it is unlikely to do so today. Post-crisis event remediation, inter-state aid, and other positive uses of the speed and scale of societal complexity may serve as neutralizing forces against widespread unrest and natural threat. While scale works to humanity's advantage in this regard, though, a change in fortune remains possible.

There are more ways to deal humanity an existential setback in the twenty-first century than there were just 50 years ago, let alone several centuries ago. While Rudin's ruminations on the nuclear threat in 1956, for example, certainly had merit, today, his perception of the major global risk would be joined by greater and less salient forces that could nonetheless fundamentally alter humanity. Examples include climate change, the relativization of truth (colloquially, "fake news"), climate change, and the wide range of issues related to "big data" and artificial intelligence." Moreover, they come in addition to the existential threats of the twentieth century that continue to linger.

The challenge remaining is profound. The continuum of societal complexity and increased importance of diplomacy promises higher stakes in the face of larger risks, leaving diplomats with heavier responsibility that compounds frequently. Relief from that burden, of course, comes at an even greater price. If we face, as Bonciu suggests, "realities that we thought to be unthinkable," then humanity can only hope for the continuum to hold (2019: 53).

Final Remarks

Diplomacy could forever be more important than it has ever been before, which means that diplomacy is at its historical peak importance in the twenty-first century, but only for now. As time passes, the historical peak of the importance of diplomacy will progress alongside it. The importance of diplomacy follows a continuum that is driven by the underlying complexity of society, a mix of organic, self-feeding PEST factors that ultimately makes diplomacy more difficult, relevant, and indeed important.

The PEST characteristics of society show, over more than six centuries, that a range of technological, cultural, and economic innovations have mixed with advancing political and philosophical thought to make the world a smaller place consisting of ever larger populations. Diplomacy, once focused on a smaller number of states with which one shared land borders or could be reached via fairly short journeys by land or sea, now has to contemplate a much larger set of nations. Even smaller states, as evidenced by San Marino, can quickly find themselves intertwined in global power struggles. Diplomacy has become a truly global affair, from microstates to the largest and most populated.

Routine diplomatic engagement itself would not be sufficient to drive ever upward (for now, at least) the continuum of diplomacy's increasing importance. Instead, the volume of diplomatic engagement has come with higher stakes. The diplomacy associated with occasional trading with distant lands for goods largely destined for upper classes requires much less effort than decades-old commercial ties between states with vastly different government systems and long-simmering mutual distrust. Further, the risk of rapid escalation to armed conflict could entail such consequences that diplomatic solutions remain far preferable, given the recognition that winning at all costs eventually turns into losing for everyone.

Ultimately, the continuum may bring the importance of diplomacy ever closer to its own irrelevance. If societal complexity and stakes can continue to increase *ad infinitum*, then the human race may see massive change over long periods of time but also develop the mechanisms by which to manage the higher stakes. In fairness, humanity's recent track record with climate change and the responsible use of big data leave little room for optimism. Alternatively, human life could be destined to trigger a cataclysmic change to humanity, fulfilling Einstein's lament and rendering not just diplomacy but the concept of the state meaningless for years (maybe even centuries) to come. If diplomacy fails – if the human race just gets it wrong – at least there is the possibility that nobody will be left to bear the burden of blame.

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