



Why History Matters in Diplomacy

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SYNOPSIS

How much does history matter in diplomacy? Comparing Indonesia and Poland, this commentary shows that answers to the question vary widely, with implications for diplomatic practice. From high-history environments to lower-salience contexts, diplomats must systematically diagnose and respond to these differences to be effective.

COMMENTARY

Diplomats are trained to master briefing papers, interests, and balances of power. Far less often do they receive systematic training in something that is also consequential: historical *skills*. Yet history is never absent from diplomacy. It shapes how states see themselves, how they interpret others, and how they justify action.

From commemorations to negotiating positions, the past is constantly at work. In the South China Sea, as an example, China has grounded its expansive nine-dash line claim in assertions of historic rights and centuries of maritime usage – a narrative the 2016 Hague arbitral tribunal rejected. Yet, this historical assertion continues to shape Beijing's negotiating posture with its Southeast Asian neighbours.

In some countries, history is ever-present, structuring diplomatic language and political judgement. In others, it sits more in the background, informing foreign affairs and diplomatic culture, but rarely dominating day-to-day interaction. For diplomats, the question before any posting is therefore a diagnostic one: How much does history matter here, and in what way?

A comparison between Indonesia and Poland illustrates why this question matters.

Indonesia: The Past as Background

Indonesia's foreign policy cannot be understood without history. The 1955 Bandung Conference still echoes in Jakarta's reluctance to choose sides between major powers. The experience of colonial domination continues to inform a deep-seated preference for sovereignty and autonomy, and a distrust of foreign powers. But this historical influence is rarely performed in the foreground of diplomacy.

Indonesia's diplomatic style is, in many respects, pragmatic and forward-looking. For example, debates that dominate political and public discourse in the Netherlands, such as formal apologies and restitution of colonial-era objects, often have far less salience in everyday Indonesian politics and public debate.

Concrete examples illustrate this gap. Jan Pieterszoon Coen, Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies (VOC), whose statue in Hoorn has provoked [recurring controversy in the Netherlands](#), is largely absent from everyday Indonesian political discourse. In fact, his name can appear in casual public settings without triggering emotions. Even long-running bilateral processes on restitution can proceed very slowly without becoming politically charged flashpoints. More broadly, there is a tendency to treat the past as settled. The focus is on the future.

This is not to say that history is irrelevant. It shapes instincts. Indonesia's comfort with engaging multiple major powers simultaneously, multi-alignment, maintaining ties with the United States, China, and others, cannot be separated from its postcolonial experience and the Bandung legacy.

The contrast between Indonesia's approach to Japan and China illustrates this further. Japan's wartime occupation (1942–1945) inflicted enormous suffering as millions were conscripted as forced labourers with widespread death from malnutrition and overwork. Yet, it has seldom been a source of diplomatic controversy.

When Japan's [revisionist history textbooks](#) provoked protests across Asia in 2005, Indonesia was a striking outlier: no government representations, no public protests, barely any media coverage. Relations were normalised by 1958, and Japan became Indonesia's largest aid donor and top trading partner for decades. The occupation was absorbed into a nationalist narrative in which Japan's dismantling of Dutch authority inadvertently accelerated independence, leaving little incentive to keep wartime grievances alive.

In contrast, China's historical burden is narrower in scale, yet its consequences were far more severe. Beijing's perceived support for the Indonesian Communist Party and suspected involvement in the 1965 coup attempt led to a complete diplomatic freeze from 1967 to 1990, accompanied by bans on Chinese cultural expression and deep suspicion of the [ethnic Chinese minority](#). The asymmetry is instructive: It is not the severity of a historical wound that determines its diplomatic weight, but how that history has been narrated and embedded in domestic political identity.

For diplomats, the implication is clear. Historical awareness is necessary, but foregrounding history is not always the most effective strategy. In Indonesia, credibility may depend less on demonstrating historical fluency than on signalling pragmatism and emphasis on contemporary, forward-looking priorities.

Poland: Where History Still Feels Like Yesterday

Moving to Poland, and the contrast is immediate. Here, history is not background.

Diplomats quickly learn that references to the past are not optional embellishments but part of the language of their Polish counterparts. Conversations routinely invoke partitions, uprisings, wartime devastation, and Soviet domination. Historical issues surface in many diplomatic exchanges, and getting them wrong carries a cost.

This salience is institutional as well as cultural. Diplomatic training in Poland emphasises history, and political elites frequently frame contemporary policy through a historical lens.

The practice of diplomacy reflects this. Symbolic acts carry real weight. Wreath-laying ceremonies at monuments, references to shared wartime experiences, or visits to important historical sites are not mere protocol. When Dutch diplomats commemorate General Stanisław Maczek, whose forces helped [liberate the Dutch city of Breda](#), they are not just honouring the past; they are signalling recognition of Poland's historical narrative. It is a form of public diplomacy.

Substance and symbolism are tightly intertwined. Knowledge of key historical figures such as Józef Piłsudski, Poland's Chief of State when the country regained its independence in 1918, can serve as an entry point in conversations for Dutch diplomats, as Polish counterparts, including senior civil servants, appreciate it when foreign diplomats demonstrate familiarity with this history. Conversely, historical ignorance or misstatements can erode credibility with Polish counterparts and may lead to a degree of disengagement.

The political weight of history is also very clear in relations with Ukraine. The Volhynia massacres, [killings of some 40,000 to 100,000 Polish civilians](#) by Ukrainian nationalist forces during the Second World War, remain deeply contested. Disputes over unresolved issues, such as exhumations, continue to shape bilateral relations. Polish leaders have, at times, linked progress on these historical issues to broader political questions, including Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO.

This sensitivity has strategic implications. Russian disinformation campaigns have repeatedly sought to exploit Polish-Ukrainian historical tensions, amplifying narratives around Volhynia because they resonate. History here is a factor of influence and contemporary security. Targeting such historical sensitivities would likely be far less effective in a country like Indonesia.

In Poland, then, historical knowledge is not optional. It is a necessity for being taken seriously as a diplomat.

A Simple Question That Is Not Always Asked

The contrast between Indonesia and Poland points to an underappreciated question: How much does history matter here?

In high-history environments like Poland, diplomats must engage with the past actively and carefully. They need to know which events still resonate, which analogies are persuasive, and which sensitivities can derail a conversation. Understanding and using history is crucial to being an effective diplomat.

In lower-salience contexts like Indonesia, history still matters, but differently. It shapes underlying preferences, foreign policy and diplomatic culture, yet it is less often deployed as a day-to-day political and diplomatic instrument. There, emphasising historical narratives may be less effective than focusing on practical cooperation and present interests.

Conclusion

For diplomats, tutelage and preparation should involve more than simply reading briefing notes. It should include a form of historical diagnosis, identifying which pasts matter, to whom, to what extent, and how they are mobilised, not on an ad hoc basis but systematically. Equally important is thinking carefully about how to respond, whether by engaging with history in an instrumental way, for example, through strategic communication and public diplomacy, or by avoiding overemphasis on history, which can risk losing the room. When history is the foundation of the dispute, such as in the South China Sea, misreading or ignoring it is not a diplomatic oversight – it is a strategic liability with lasting consequences for a nation's sovereignty and security.

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