

## **AN ENDURING DIPLOMATIC DILEMMA: TO BE FEARED OR TO BE LOVED?**

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“If one of them has to be lacking, it is much safer to be feared than loved” Machiavelli once famously contended after talking note of the presumed fickleness of promises of friendship as opposed to the allegedly enduring magnetism of fear: “for love is sustained by a bond of gratitude which, because men are exclusively self-interested, is broken whenever they see a chance to benefit themselves; but fear is sustained by a dread of punishment that is always effective” (Machiavelli et al. 1988: 59). Setting aside the stringency of Machiavelli’s dichotomy (binary oppositions are, after all, co-constitutive of each other’s meaning), one cannot stop wondering about its enduring relevance in international politics, in general, and in diplomatic relations, more specifically. This brings up an interesting question: does fear always prevail over love as Machiavelli adamantly suggests and if so, what can be done about it when diplomatic relations are at stake?

For sceptics, fear is a powerful motivator in international politics and therefore it will always win foreign policy makers on its side. To be sure, there is plenty of evidence around to support this view. The complex “hybrid” operations of off-line aggression and online intimidation launched by Russia against its European neighbours in the recent years (Pynnöniemi and Rácz 2016), the recurring demonstrations of Chinese military power in the South China Sea (Clover and Mallet 2015), or the calls for military toughness as a corrective for the alleged decline of the United States’ (U.S.) standing in the world (Dittmar 2015) firmly convey a sense of renewed validity to Machiavelli’s five century old insight. Part of the enduring fascination of this predicament arguably comes from the over-determination of its root causes. Realists would likely rush to point out that international politics intrinsically relies on the “diplomacy of fear” as only in this way states can effectively preserve their position in the system and/or deter rivals from threatening their interests. Liberals would also be keen to call attention to the longstanding appeal of foreign policy adventurism as a compensation strategy for strenuous domestic conditions. Status seeking policies, hard-nosed geopolitical calculations, political legitimacy crises, domestic economic or social transformations, or even old-fashioned foreign policy blunders are the most common drivers for such fear-based projections of diplomatic strength.

For optimists, the influence of fear in shaping relations between states is rather overstated. The ability to be liked or even loved cannot be that easily dismissed. Yes, strategic or domestic reasons may drive states to intimidate and bully each other, but the results of their actions are often times awfully inadequate. The Russian geopolitical gamble in Eastern Europe has achieved exactly the opposite of what it has hoped to accomplish in the first place. It has not only convinced NATO to strengthen its presence in the region, but it has also pushed previously neutral countries like Sweden and Finland to seek closer relationships with NATO. Similarly, the Chinese military expansion in the South China Sea has ironically galvanized the “encirclement policy” it has much tried to avoid. It is hard to fail notice, for instance, that even Vietnam is now seeking closer military and political collaboration with the

United States. One could also expect that heavy-handed foreign policies of a possible Trump Administration would likely prompt an abrupt breakdown of the U.S. relations with its closer allies in Europe and Asia, an outcome that is exactly the opposite the Republican nominee claims to be interested in. In sum, making yourself feared may be good politics but not necessarily good policy and for sensible reasons: strong diplomatic relations require trust between parties, which can be hardly nurtured and maintained if parties bully and intimidate one another. On the other hand, making yourself liked may not be necessarily good politics but it may lead to a better foreign policy.

That being said, the context in which fear and love are pursued as strategies of diplomatic engagement matters as well. Extending friendship to a bully is unlikely to work and by same token making yourself feared by your friends might backfire. In other words, when is fear justified as a diplomatic strategy and when is more suitable to make yourself liked? The short answer is that one should selectively alternate between love and fear when either option fails to deliver results. A bully has to be firmly confronted not cuddled. Similarly, cordial relations must have to be revisited if the other party keeps taking advantage of them. The longer and more interesting answer is offered again by Machiavelli: a ruler, he declares, ‘must make himself feared in such a way that, even if he does not become loved, he does not become hated’ (Machiavelli et al. 1988: 59). One might also add that one should seek to make oneself liked but without becoming idolized. The main lesson from this is that one should strive to carefully calibrate her/his diplomatic responses so that sufficient room is left for changing diplomatic course, if the circumstances demand it, but with reasonable costs. NATO’s reaction to Russia’s intimidation policies in Eastern Europe need to be firm but without unnecessarily antagonizing it, an argument that holds true for the US response to China’s policy in the South China Sea as well.

To conclude, Machiavelli’s fear/love dilemma may bear no definitive solution in diplomacy, but it can be possibly managed by making yourself liked rather than feared and leaving yourself sufficient space for changing course if the strategy fails.

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