

PROJECTING PHILIPPINE FOREIGN POLICY AMID A PANDEMIC: AN INITIAL REVIEW OF DFA'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

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Executive Summary

- **Introduction.** Since March 2020, many countries across the six (6) continents have imposed temporary partial or full lockdowns to halt mass mobility and contain the COVID-19 pandemic. As governments focus their efforts and resources to address the COVID-19 crisis domestically, international cooperation is still crucial to effectively resolve the present global health crisis. Diplomacy plays a vital role in facilitating international cooperation and coordinating dispersed initiatives.
- **COVID-19 as a Catalyst Towards Greater Digitalization.** South Korea and Taiwan have heavily relied on the use of information and communications technology (ICT) to roll out their COVID-19-related strategies. Digital platforms are utilized to instantly communicate government initiatives to the public and solicit information regarding possible cases. The increasing relevance of ICT-oriented solutions amid a less mobile environment, hence, highlights the need for government agencies to rally behind the move towards digitalization.
- **Fortifying Philippine Foreign Policy Through Digital Tools.** With limited operational capacity under the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) accelerated its use of digital platforms to promote foreign policy objectives and minimize disruptions in its services. Aside from dedicating a section on its website for public advisories on the pandemic, DFA has been actively participating in videoconference meetings at the regional and global levels to protect and promote Philippine national interests. The Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs (OUMWA), for instance, has been utilizing its OFW Help Facebook page to receive and confirm COVID-19-related reports involving Filipinos abroad.
- **Diplomacy After COVID-19.** As the world slowly settles into the new normal, initial circumstances reveal that the practice of diplomacy may experience at least three fundamental changes:
 - (1) The enforcement of lockdown measures and physical distancing in many localities will accelerate the shift towards digital diplomacy;
 - (2) "Participatory diplomacy" will have greater relevance than ever, with the accelerated use of digital platforms for interactive communication; and
 - (3) The transnational nature of science and health issues compels foreign ministries to train diplomats and officers in handling these issues.

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) as a pandemic.¹ Since then, many countries across the six (6) continents imposed temporary partial or full lockdowns to halt mass mobility and contain the spread of the virus.

As governments focus their efforts and resources domestically, it is essential to emphasize that cooperation at various levels—bilateral, regional, and international—is crucial to effectively resolve the present global health crisis. Hence, diplomacy plays a vital role in facilitating exchanges among different actors and in coordinating dispersed initiatives towards a collective goal.

For the Philippines's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), realizing the country's foreign policy objectives during a pandemic falls under its three pillars, namely: (i) preserving national security; (ii) promoting economic security; and (iii) ensuring the safety and welfare of Filipinos overseas.

This paper seeks to address the question, "How has the DFA advanced Philippine foreign policy amid the COVID-19 crisis?" It will discuss COVID-19-related developments, key efforts by the DFA, and the ways forward.

COVID-19 as a Catalyst Towards Wider Digitalization

The first cluster of unknown pneumonia cases was detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province and was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) China country office on 31 December 2019.² It was originally referred to as the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV).

The WHO declared 2019-nCoV on 30 January 2020 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and urged governments to enforce measures encompassing early detection, isolation and treatment of cases, contact tracing, and social distancing. The virus was renamed in February 2020 as COVID-19 and was eventually characterized as a pandemic in March 2020.

Governments in 80 countries imposed either national or locality-specific lockdowns.³ China was the first country to lift strict quarantine procedures in all its 17 areas, which were previously closed to non-locals.

As of 21 September 2020, there were over 30.9 million confirmed COVID-19 cases across more than 180 countries. The cumulative number of deaths globally was at almost 960,000.⁴

ICT Use as one of Asia's Best Practices. While the international community has been scrambling to effectively address the global health crisis, South Korea and Taiwan are cited as benchmarks for flattening the curve through transparent crisis management, coupled with capable and proactive health systems. Both have heavily relied on the use of information and communications technology (ICT) to roll out their COVID-19-related strategies. They used digital platforms to instantly communicate government initiatives to the public and solicit information from the public regarding possible cases. The application of big data analytics then facilitated the efficient conduct of contact tracing and artificial intelligence on the development of test kits.

In addition, private firms and consumers alike have been shifting to digital channels for goods delivery, electronic payments, and social media engagement.

The increasing relevance of ICT-oriented solutions amid a less mobile environment, hence, highlights the need for government agencies to rally behind the move towards digitalization.

Fortifying Philippine Foreign Policy Through Digital Tools

In response to the Enhanced Community Quarantine which took effect on 17 March 2020,⁵ the DFA immediately activated its business continuity plan (BCP) covering home offices. The BCP enables the DFA to continuously carry out its operations and advance the country's foreign policy objectives amid the pandemic.

Foreign Service Posts (FSPs) also implemented their respective BCPs to account for the distinct factors and conditions present in the host countries. Despite the different approaches, all FSPs are guided by the three pillars of the Philippine foreign policy: preservation and enhancement of national security, promotion and attainment of economic security, and protection of the rights and promotion of the welfare and interest of Filipinos overseas.⁶

The succeeding paragraphs review the Department's initial response to the COVID-19 crisis, with a focus on the utilization of digital tools to achieve its goals.

Preservation of National Security Amid COVID-19. The Department ensures the preservation of national security by overseeing the repatriation of foreign nationals and coordinating with foreign missions to assist stranded individuals. Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr. confirmed these actions to members of the diplomatic corps via online video conference.⁷ These efforts are in line with the International Health Regulations (IHR) 2005, which mandates countries to “strengthen core surveillance and response capacities at the primary, intermediate, and national level, as well as at designated international ports, airports and ground crossings.”⁸

The DFA also created a *COVID-19 Advisories* tab in its official website (www.dfa.gov.ph), which contains relevant updates on COVID-19 cases among Filipinos abroad, and travel restrictions by both foreign and Philippine governments.⁹ Some updates are also published in the DFA's Facebook account, which has over 960,000 followers as of 15 June 2020.

At the regional level, the Department's Office of ASEAN Affairs has been meeting with counterparts from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) through videoconferencing. During the inaugural meeting of the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on Public Health Emergencies on 31 March 2020, Assistant Secretary Junever Mahilum-West shared the country's COVID-19-related efforts and recommendations on strengthening the regional bloc's response to the current pandemic.¹⁰ The DFA likewise participated in both ASEAN-China and ASEAN-US videoconference meetings.¹¹

The Department also continues its commitment to safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea (SCS). In early April, for example, it issued a “statement of solidarity” on the reported sinking of Vietnamese fishing vessel in the SCS.¹²

Promotion of Economic Security. The DFA continues to promote the country's economic security through its public diplomacy. For instance, Ambassador Evan P. Garcia, Philippine Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva, discussed the government's USD 3.9 billion (PhP200 million) emergency subsidy program for low-income households and affected establishments and workers during a virtual meeting convened by the UN Human Rights Council.¹³ This undertaking projects a Philippine government that is cognizant of and compliant with international human rights laws and standards, therefore instilling confidence among foreign governments and businesses.

In addition, the Department has a critical role in facilitating trade in medical goods and equipment necessary to fight COVID-19. This is exemplified in the support provided by the DFA in the procurement of 1 million Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) sets from China.¹⁴ The DFA is also part of the team negotiating with pharmaceutical companies in Russia, China, and US on the procurement of COVID-19 vaccine.¹⁵

FSPs are similarly tasked to assist the Philippine government in identifying new trade partners and in continuously importing medicines and tools despite export restrictions and licensing requirements enforced by the European Union, India, Switzerland, and the US, among others.¹⁶

Protection of Overseas Filipinos. The Department has been proactively ensuring the safety of overseas Filipinos (OFs) by repatriating over 30,000 individuals as of 31 May 2020.¹⁷ The DFA-Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs (OUMWA), along with FSPs, is mainly responsible in overseeing the repatriation.

OUMWA launched in September 2019 the *OFW Help* Facebook page which “serves as the official Facebook emergency help page for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in distress.”¹⁸ The DFA is currently using this platform to receive and confirm COVID-19-related reports involving Filipinos abroad.

Undersecretary for Migrant Workers’ Affairs Sarah Lou Arriola and Undersecretary for Strategic Communications and Research Ernesto Abella also host “OFW Help Live!” to provide real-time updates on the DFA’s latest efforts concerning the current health crisis. This program is being streamed via Facebook and can be viewed by users of the platform.

Although the Department’s policy thrust is towards the protection of OFs, the safety of officers and staff in FSPs is likewise of utmost importance, given that two Filipino diplomats have succumbed to COVID-19.¹⁹

Service Unusual: Notes on Diplomacy After COVID-19

As the world slowly settles into the new normal, initial circumstances reveal that the practice of diplomacy may experience at least three fundamental changes:

- **Accelerated shift towards digital diplomacy.** The enforcement of lockdown measures and physical distancing in many localities will accelerate the shift towards digital diplomacy.²⁰ Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has always been a key driver of modern diplomacy, but the current pandemic magnified the tremendous potential of next-generation technologies in realizing foreign policy objectives. Video conference meetings, for instance, have increased in frequency, which may eventually lead to more flexible diplomatic protocols and practices.

Furthermore, foreign ministries may now deploy Fourth Industrial Revolution tools for consular-related concerns. In the Philippines’s case, the DFA may consider adopting big data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), and blockchain for better efficiency and data security. These tools will be essential in managing future crises. Nevertheless, the Department must account for enabling factors such as ICT infrastructure, level of ICT skills of personnel, and data integrity and privacy, among other factors.

- **Emergence of participatory democracy due to a wider use of digital platforms.** “Participatory diplomacy,” also referred to as people diplomacy, will have greater relevance than ever, with the accelerated use of digital platforms for interactive communication.²¹ The Republic of Korea pioneered this initiative in 2017, which sought to foster domestic exchanges between the government and its citizens, and deepen the involvement of the people in diplomacy planning, implementation, and assessment.²²

The present global health crisis has shown that millions of internet users are simultaneously sharing their opinions and comparing governments’ responses. Thus, their buy-in and participation are paramount in ensuring the success of foreign policy-related strategies and activities.

The DFA may capitalize on a well-functioning participatory diplomacy by pursuing three main objectives:

- (i) developing a foreign policy that has a high sense of ownership among Filipinos, which means that they believe and fully commit to the realization of foreign policy objectives;
- (ii) galvanizing citizens to enhance the country’s global image, especially through the use of social media platforms; and
- (iii) disseminating timely and accurate foreign affairs-related information to Filipinos to mitigate public misinformation and disinformation.

These goals may be attained through the following:

- (i) institutionalization of participatory diplomacy;
- (ii) advocacy campaigns; and
- (iii) provision of offline and online platforms for communication and citizen engagement.

- **Need for more science and health diplomats and officers.** The transnational nature of science and health issues compels foreign ministries to train diplomats and officers to handle these issues. Evidently, the current pandemic demonstrates the need for a coordinated response at the global level to effectively combat the spread and flatten the curve of COVID-19 cases.

These responses can be complemented by science diplomacy, which may achieve three main objectives: (1) formulation of foreign policy objectives informed by science; (2) promotion of international science cooperation; and (3) enhancement of relations among countries and organizations through science cooperation.

In the Philippine context, the DFA has reached several milestones in the field of both health and science diplomacy. These include membership in the WHO Executive Board from 2015 to 2018 and the establishment of a Philippine Foreign Service Science Diplomacy Center in Vienna in June 2018.²³

These accomplishments may serve as building blocks in producing and training diplomats on science and health diplomacy to advance global health interests.

Final Thought. The COVID-19 crisis indeed illuminated diplomacy's indispensable role in maintaining open lines of communication despite the lockdowns imposed in many parts of the world.

The DFA's initial response to the pandemic was immediate, innovative, and service-oriented. The existing circumstances surrounding foreign policy advancement may be unusual, but these will likely drive diplomatic practice towards a highly digitalized setting. The DFA is, thus, expected to exercise agility in its strategies and operations while fulfilling its *raison d'être*—that is, projecting and safeguarding the country's national interests amid a dynamic and unpredictable global environment.

Endnotes

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