

DIPLO DIALOGUE: •

Metaphors *for* Diplomats

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Diplo Dialogue – Metaphors for Diplomats

On Diplo's blog, in Diplo's classrooms, and at Diplo's events, dialogues stretch over a series of entries, comments, and exchanges and may even linger. DiploDialogue summarises. It's like in sports events: DiploDialogue aims to bring focus by deleting what, in hindsight, is less relevant.

In this first DiploDialogue, Katharina Höne and Aldo Matteucci discuss the usefulness of analogies and metaphors for understanding international relations and diplomacy. It started when Katharina commented on the usefulness of metaphors to make sense of abstract or complex issues, such as climate change. Aldo, our resident contrarian, promptly replied that analogies and metaphors may be false friends and create a 'cosy feeling' of understanding – when they are actually misleading. Katharina parried by arguing that metaphors are an inevitable part of making sense of the world. Many concepts in the world of diplomats – such as the state, or the idea of balance of power – are indeed metaphorical concepts, sometimes bearing little relation to the physical world. Disagreeing, Aldo provided numerous examples of cases where metaphors were dangerous and misleading and argued that their accuracy should be challenged prior to use. Katharina suggested a three-part user's manual for diplomats to show how metaphors can be used as tools for persuasion, as frames for understanding the world, and as elements that constitute the world of diplomats on a more fundamental level.

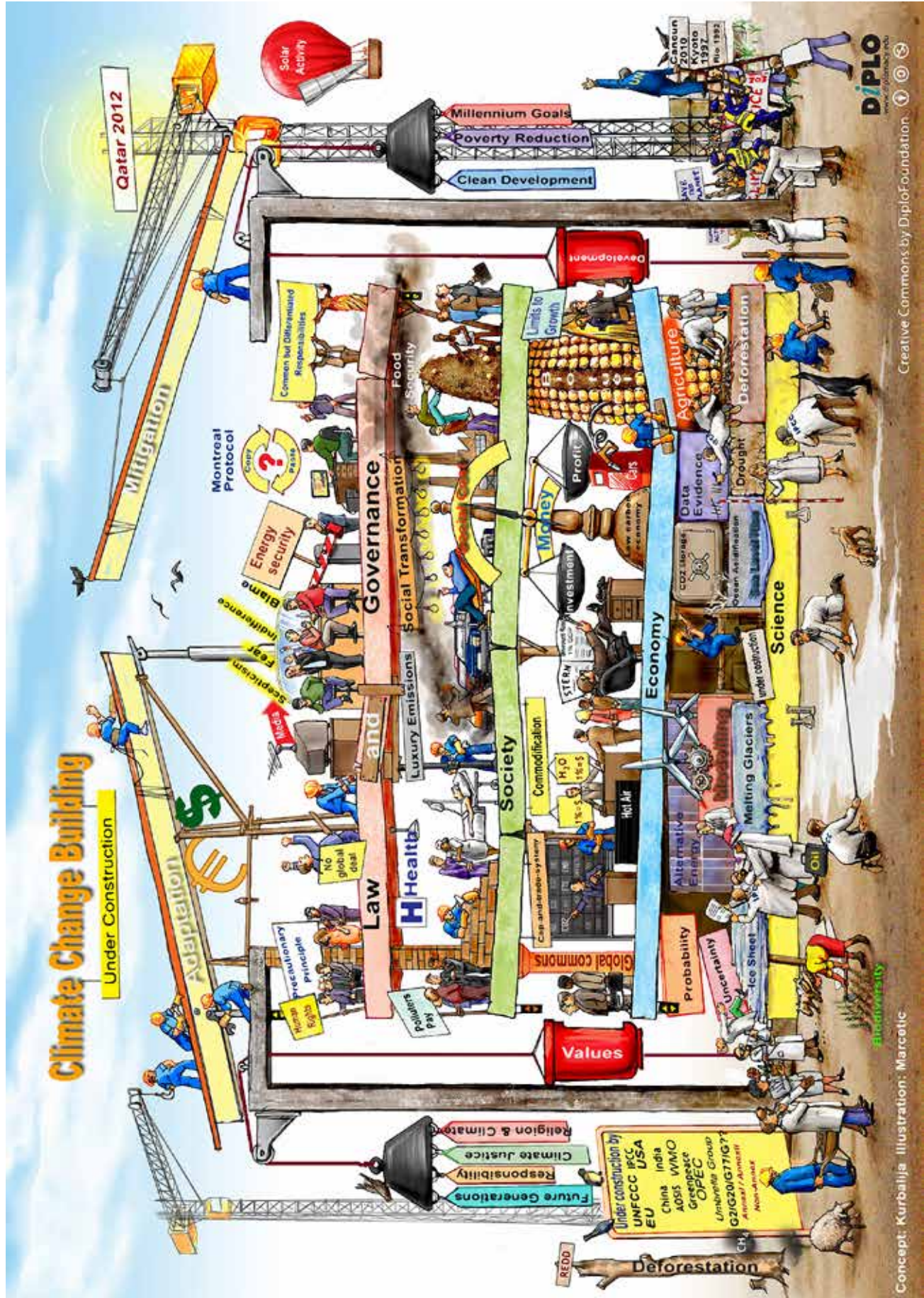


Katharina and Aldo traded examples ranging from the Higgs Boson to stone statues on the Easter Islands, from houses on fire to frogs in boiling pans, from South East Asia to the thirteenth-century Chinese Song Dynasty, and from US President Obama's campaigning success to ambassadorial representation.

Here is the collection, with some final reflections.

Metaphors and images: illustrating climate change and not blaming the Polynesian rat... the house is on fire

Katharina teaches on Diplo's Climate Change Diplomacy course. From experience she knows that those who teach about climate change and are engaged in awareness-raising often find it challenging to illustrate its complexities. She argues that this is where **metaphors and analogies are crucial**.



Climate Change Building

Under Construction

Qatar 2012

Adaptation

Mitigation

Law and Governance

Society

Economy

Science

Deforestation

Solar Activity

Millennium Goals

Poverty Reduction

Clean Development

Common but Differentiated Responsibilities

Food Security

Limits to Growth

Montreal Protocol

Energy security

Blame

Luxury Emissions

Commodification

Investment

Profit

Cap and trade system

H Health

No global deal

Cap and trade system

Global commons

Alternative Energy

Melting Glaciers

REDD

Under construction by

UNFCCC

China

India

WMO

USA

EU

Greenpeace

OPEC

Umbrella Group

G20

Annex 1 / Annex 2

Non-Annex 1

Probability

Uncertainty

Ice Sheet

Oil

Hot Air

Hot Air

Hot Air

CO2 Storage

Data Evidence

Drought

Ocean Acidification

Sea Level Rise

Under construction

Under construction

Agribusiness

Deforestation

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(H)uman thought processes are largely metaphorical. Unsurprisingly, once you start looking for metaphors you will see them almost anywhere. The important point to stress is that these metaphors are not simply figures of speech but the very conceptual tools we use, and indeed have to use, to make sense of the world.

She introduces Diplo's Climate Change Building illustration and explains how using the image of a building under construction can help to make the global climate change regime easier to grasp. The metaphor of the building makes certain aspects more intelligible, while at the same time, hiding others.



Other typical metaphors for climate change are the frog in a boiling pot or the house on fire. Again, each of these highlights certain aspects while hiding others. When teaching and advocating on climate change, this is something we need to be acutely aware of.

Aldo replies with a [stern warning](#) about analogies and metaphors. While they can provide a useful starting point for further investigations, they can also be 'false friends'.



Analogies [and metaphors] are most powerful when they are related to the material world, or are inspired by it – when their truthfulness can be tested empirically. Analogies, however, can be false friends. Most dangerous are analogies based on abstract concepts and mental constructs.

He argues that studies of the long-gone society of the Rapa Nui on the Easter Islands provide ample examples of false analogies. The Rapa Nui are often used as an analogy for human selfishness, environmental degradation, and ultimately destruction. Jared Diamond and others have argued that the Rapa Nui, driven by selfishness, ultimately caused their own extinction by degrading their own environment to the point of no return. The image of felling the last tree is often used as an analogy for our current society and the dangerous direction in which we are said to be heading. Yet, Aldo points out that this is a false analogy because its underlying assumptions are wrong. The environmental degradation wasn't caused by selfish behaviour but by rats that came on ships from the Polynesian islands. The arrival and proliferation of the rats upset the balance of the ecosystem – ultimately contributing to its destruction. While the image of felling the last tree is a powerful one, it is ultimately, factually incorrect.



Analogies relying on mental constructs (rather than material conditions) reflect the horizon of our imagination, hence its limitations. Analogies always keep us within the comfort zone of the known. They invariably give us the warm feeling that we 'know,' or that explanation is 'plausible.' We'll never let truth stand in the way of such cuddly feeling.

Scientific metaphors and mental maps ... and is the house on fire?

As an answer to Aldo's point that analogies keep us in the comfort zone if they rely on mental constructs rather than material conditions, Katharina uses a very 'material' example to illustrate the usefulness and inevitability of metaphors to comprehend the world.

She points out that the **model of the atom** used at the beginning of the twentieth century resembled the solar system. The atomic nucleus was situated in the middle and the electrons were seen as circling the nucleus on elliptical trajectories - much like the planets circle the Sun. This resemblance was not an accident. At the time, knowledge about the solar system was much greater than knowledge about sub-atomic particles: The field that was much better known served to make sense of the lesser known field. The process was a metaphorical one and at its core is something called structural mapping. 'Structures, relations between objects, found in one context are transferred to a new a context. Any metaphor used in a scientific, explorative context, will have this process at its core.'



What is scientific discovery then? Science is never simply looking at the 'reality' and discovering 'the truth'. It is also never a direct comparison between our theories and 'the reality out there' to refute all those 'silly' metaphors. It's a process of working with the best possible explanation and maintaining it for as long as there is no better possible explanation around. This is how you move from the atom as a solar system, to electron clouds and quantum waves, all the way to the Higgs Boson, the god particle.

Inspired by the idea of metaphors **as a mental map** (a 'metaphor for metaphors'), Aldo focuses on geographic maps in his reply. He points out that the map and reality never match one on one and that about 99% of reality is necessarily left out of a map. Moreover, maps not only convey what is on the ground, they also include the mental concepts we have about reality. There is the myth of the 'continent' but geographically Europe is not a continent, it's a peninsula; Morocco, being west of Europe, was for a while the beginning of the Orient; the standard Mercator projection overstates the size of certain areas. Maps are organised in accordance with our political intent and what they show depends on their intended usage.



All maps are ideological statements – this is inevitable, given the structure of brains. The question is, how much ideology do we tolerate? This requires that we turn a metaphor inside out and ask ourselves: what does it say, and what does it hide? Worse, what does it suggest silently? And what are the likely (and unexpected) consequences?

Looking at the metaphor for climate change, the house on fire, Aldo remarks 'the metaphor (a) conveys urgency which may be exaggerated; (b) suggests knowledge of the evolving event we do not have; (c) intimates solutions which, on closer inspection, may prove to be less than appropriate and (d) evokes the precautionary principle that we should act, rather than think,

or adapt hoping for the best'. All in all, the image of the house on fire creates a bias – and one that might be more of a hindrance than a tool useful in addressing climate change. The metaphor is simply rhetoric appealing to our emotions. Aldo argues that metaphors are acceptable if they accelerate the thinking process but that they are dangerous when they distort. He calls for verification.

Baudrillard ... Creating maps and creating reality ... 'mental maps' versus 'maps of reality'

The discussion on maps inspires Katharina to mention the [fable of the cartographers](#) that is re-told at the beginning of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*. In the story, the cartographers of an empire are asked to create the perfect map. They create a map that is so perfect it matches the empire in every point. As time goes by, both the empire and the map decay. But who can tell what is real and what is the map? There is no longer any certainty about what is real. Baudrillard goes on to argue that we have arrived at a condition where reality no longer matters and where the map takes precedent for us. The map is a simulated reality and it is this simulation that matters more.

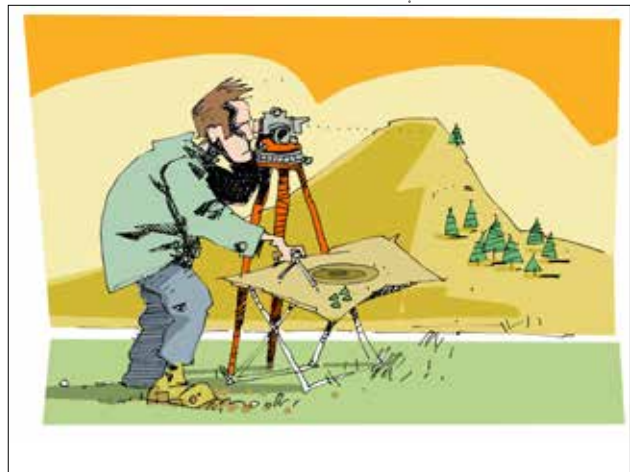


More critically, maps [one form of metaphor or analogy] are ideological statements, which organize reality in accordance to our political intents... If an analogy accelerates the thinking process – it is acceptable. If it distorts it – it is unacceptable. We need to verify – and not just rely on our cuddly feeling.



But if we take [the point that maps are ideological statements] seriously, the final consequence is to let go of any notion of verification. We need to engage the idea of simulation and not hide behind the idea that we are talking about 'reality' or can somehow 'verify' our most important concepts.

Despite labelling a reference to Baudrillard as 'forbidden by the [UN Convention Against Mental Anguish](#)', Aldo uses this point to introduce a distinction. According to him, there is a sharp divide between 'maps of mental maps' on the one hand and 'maps of reality' on the other. The latter refer to an unmovable reality that, although we might see slightly different versions of it, is ultimately always the same and accessible to all of us in the same way. Mental maps on the other hand are based on culture. They rely on conventions and are socially constructed. The fact that in Britain people drive on the left-hand side of the road whereas in most other parts of Europe people drive on the right side is a convention. It is arbitrary because it could be the other way round, and it works because everyone involved accepts it.



Danger to diplomacy: spurious metaphors and analogies

Sticking with the theme of maps, Aldo highlights the **regional concept of South East Asia**. Its boundaries are arbitrary: inclusion and exclusion do not follow cultural lines and some



smaller societies are divided in the middle by the 'boundary'. He argues that creating regions is a way of structuring human activity and ordering a chaotic world. Once accepted, these concepts are hard to change but ultimately they are myths creating yet further myths.

Further highlighting the potential dangers of metaphors and analogies left unchecked, Aldo points out some of the dangerous analogies used in diplomacy:



The 'domino theory', which underlay much of the West reaction to Communism, is [a dangerous analogy]: Laos, and then Vietnam come to mind. It was 'the lazy man's analogy' replacing analysis of complex social and political dynamics as third world countries integrated into the global scene. Over 50'000 Americans gave their lives to atone this intellectual laziness.

Here the metaphor was deadly wrong, for it asserted mechanical inevitabilities which never in fact eventuated nor existed. Had the US not been hostage to this metaphor, it may have understood that Vietnam's struggle was one for independence, both from the French and from their mentor to the North. Vietnam had freed itself of China's over-lordship thousand years ago, and was unlikely to forego history for ideology.

Another example is 'containment'. In George Kennan's original concept it was meant to be preliminary to negotiation. The metaphor hardened into a laager mentality. On both sides of the Iron Curtain change was perceived as threat. In particular the West mistook the legitimate aspiration to de-colonisation and nation-building by the third world for a threat to worldwide stability.

The greatest danger of analogy, to me, is taking the image for the real thing. An ambassador 'represents' his country – fine. An offence to an ambassador is then equated to offending the country – even though the 'slight' to the diplomat may have been deserved in the specific circumstances. This is already a dubious extension of the analogy. By slow expansion of the analogy ambassadors' spouses are taken in chauffeur driven cars to shop downtown and the privilege of not paying parking fines is affirmed. Analogy has degenerated into unassailable, unthinking ritual. Diplomacy is awash with rituals – etiquette.

Aldo gives three further examples of false analogies in diplomacy. In each of these cases, one situation is deemed to be a blueprint for another. Yet, they result in failure:

- Using the Montreal Protocol as a blueprint for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
- Assuming on the basis of Obama's success in winning hearts and minds through social networks that e-diplomacy will also be a success
- The Chinese Song assuming that the Mongol attack would not be different from previous foreign invasions

To draw an analogy means to assume that if two cases are similar in some respects, they must also be similar in other respects. Hence, what we have learned in one case is applicable to the other case. And as Aldo argues, this can be dangerously misleading: 'What's wrong is to be found in the assumptions. If your assumptions are wrong, your conclusions are wrong too.'

Metaphors for diplomats – a user's manual

Metaphors matter in the world of diplomats; on this much, Aldo and Katharina agree. While one is highlighting the dangers of metaphors, the other is arguing for their [inevitability in making sense of the world](#).

Katharina suggests a three-part typology that serves as [a user's manual of metaphors for diplomats](#).



Metaphors as tools for persuasion

Metaphors of movement can be used to preserve or create momentum of negotiations. Being 'on track', 'racing against time', and 'step-by-step' diplomacy are just a few examples. If the aim is to highlight the danger of failure of negotiations expressions such as 'being derailed' or being on 'a slippery slope' can be helpful in invoking the desired emotional response and consequently the desired action. Metaphors that allude to a common journey or a common goal can create a sense of belonging or connection.

Metaphors as tools for accessing the world

Metaphors help access as well as structure the world around us. For the 'game' of diplomacy, sports metaphors and war metaphors are common examples. For example, while most people have a good enough idea of what a game of chess entails, the structure and elements of diplomatic negotiations are less easily accessible. Being conscious of this role of metaphors allows the diplomat to be aware of her or his own point of view but also of the world view of the other side. This can be crucial, especially, when both parties operate on the basis of different root metaphors.



Metaphors as tools for making the world

Metaphors also create the world in the first place. The world that diplomats operate in is made by metaphors. The rise of a mechanistic world-view from the 15th century onwards brought about mechanistic metaphors for international relations. The 17th century saw the rise of machine metaphors and the view of international relations a self-regulating system. 19th century thinking about states and nations utilized metaphors based in biology. The fashionable concept of 'levels' of international relations that implies a clear dividing line between the domestic and the international is another case in point.

Metaphors for diplomats – the jury is still out

Deep down, Katharina and Aldo are in agreement. Metaphors are the way we understand reality, and share our insights within the group. Humans are excessively (if not exclusively) attuned to pattern recognition, and we use this skill to navigate social realities. Metaphors allow us to understand the unknown in terms of the known. Reflection beats reflective behaviour any time (even though the margin may be small).

The difference between Katharina and Aldo's opinions is one of emphasis. Katharina celebrates the glorious moment of recognition when we express the unknown in terms of the known. Suddenly we feel confident as we stride a known path. From her point of view, all concepts in international politics are created via metaphor. She calls for a hunt. But this should not be a hunt for the 'correct' metaphors, the ones that best reflect reality – for that is impossible. It is a hunt for the most appropriate, most effective, or most liberating metaphors to make sense of a given situation.

Aldo stresses caution in the choice of metaphor, and vigilance: similarities may hide differences. Using a metaphor, he teases Katharina with the Arab tale about a drunkard. He'd lost his keys in front of the house, yet looked for them under the lamppost some distance away, 'for that's where he could see'. Aldo also warns against our tendency to mistake what is clever for what is right as well as our penchant for 'cosy comfort' over 'unpalatable truths'.

Discussants



Katharina Höne is currently finishing her PhD at the Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University (UK). Her research focuses on the metaphor of the state as a person in international relations. She holds a Master's in Diplomatic Studies with distinction from the University of Leicester in the UK. Her research interests include international organisations, the UN Secretary-General, international mediation, theories of international relations, international environmental politics, climate change diplomacy, and metaphors and diplomacy.



Aldo Matteucci graduated from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETHZ) in Agriculture, and from Berkeley in Agricultural Economics. He spent three years in East Africa doing research on land use, then in Maryland, working on rural development. In 1977, he joined the Swiss Federal Office of Economic Affairs. He was deputy director of the EUREKA Secretariat in Brussels, and from 1994 to 2000, deputy secretary-general of EFTA (the European Free Trade Association). Since retiring early from EFTA, he has been DiploFoundation's 'resident contrarian'.

Blog posts

In the following, we provide a list of the relevant blog posts, some of which also include references to further reading.

Katharina Höne: [Metaphors and Images: Illustrating Climate Change](#) (5 Jul 2012)

Aldo Matteucci: [Don't blame man, blame the Polynesian rat](#) (15 Jul 2012)

Katharina Höne: [The solar system, the atom, the Higgs Boson ... the truth ... 'Nahhh, I'll stay under my warm cuddly blanket for a bit longer!'](#) (18 Jul 2012)

Aldo Matteucci: [Analogies \(and metaphors\) as mental maps](#) (19 Jul 2012)

Katharina Höne: [Metaphors: creating maps, creating reality ... draw your country and colour it in ...](#) (26 Jul 2012)

Aldo Matteucci: [BAUDRILLARD? I'll admit to anything, Katharina!](#) (27 Jul 2012)

Aldo Matteucci: [Analogies and other 'alignments'](#) (30 Jul 2012)

Katharina Höne: [Metaphors for diplomats - the philosophy of science](#) (20 Aug 2012)

Katharina Höne: [Metaphors for Diplomats – a 'user manual'](#) (23 Aug 2012)

Aldo Matteucci: [De-discoursation and metaphors](#) (24 Aug 2012)

Aldo Matteucci: [I may be wrong ...](#) (26 Aug 2012)

Aldo Matteucci: [The emergence of the regional concept: South East Asia](#) (28 Aug 2012)

