

Conference Report

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Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum
14 June 2021

Innovation by disruption? How COVID-19 is changing diplomacy

Ingo Nordmann

More than 1.5 years after the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 has fundamentally changed international diplomacy. In their *Global Governance Spotlight*, published in April 2021, Jovan Kurbalija and Katharina Höne from the DiploFoundation take a closer look at these changes and analyse how a global shift to online negotiations affects the time and space dimensions of diplomatic interaction. In a partner session at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum on 14 June 2021, the two authors discussed the main insights from their policy paper with moderator and diplomatic correspondent Stephanie Liechtenstein.

Jovan Kurbalija, Executive Director of DiploFoundation, highlighted that despite the recent global disruption of diplomacy, its historic core functions remain the same: serving the needs of opposite sides to discuss and hear each other's messages, and to find a compromise. Yet the means to address these needs have changed several times in the past, from smoke and sound signals to telephone calls, emails and online messaging services, to online conferences. Diplomacy has always been adaptive and innovative, as Katharina Höne, Director of Research at DiploFoundation added.

Expanding the “toolbox” for diplomatic practice

The coronavirus pandemic has now accelerated one of these profound changes in technology: the advent of virtual and hybrid diplomacy. Video meetings have been technically possible for decades but were often underused or disregarded. COVID-19 and global travel restrictions have forced diplomats around the world to embrace the use of online communication tools and integrate them into their day-to-day lives. That does not mean that personal meetings are fully replaced, but that they are taking place in parallel with virtual ones. Diplomats must learn how to deal with the combination of the two. Emerging forms of hybrid diplomacy are particularly challenging and need new moderation skills, as two different types of audiences (in situ and virtual) need to be managed in parallel.



Empty conference hall due to COVID-19 (© Unsplash/Jeremy Bishop)

Katharina Höne stated that the arrival of virtual meetings has “expanded the toolbox” which diplomats have at their disposal to conduct negotiations. She argued that in some cases, this can lead to greater inclusivity. An example would be negotiations by the UN Human Rights Council, where it has been possible to bring witnesses into the discussion more



DW Global Media Forum: Stephanie Liechtenstein (Chair), Jovan Kurbalija and Katharina Höne (clockwise)

easily. Jovan Kurbalija added that while he would always prefer physical meetings, financial and time constraints will make online meetings indispensable. He highlighted the potential benefits of hybrid diplomacy, in which the two forms are combined. Physical meetings could be used to establish trust, while more technical negotiations and report drafting could take place online, before returning to in situ meetings to wrap things up.

Challenges of virtual and hybrid meetings

However, there are also considerable challenges related to the combined use of in situ and virtual meetings, as both speakers emphasised. It is by no means a given that the digitalisation of diplomacy will contribute to a higher level of inclusivity and a level playing field between different actors. There are still serious structural discrepancies between developed and emerging countries, for example in internet access and connectivity. Many diplomats in developing countries have unstable or slow internet connections, especially if they have to work outside the main offices in capital cities.

Another risk lies in the ownership of technical platforms used for virtual meetings. They are often owned by private businesses, e.g. American Big Tech companies. This poses a “built-in challenge”, as Höne put it, since diplomacy deals with matters of public concern. It is therefore problematic if diplomatic information is stored on privately owned, insecure online servers. The speakers therefore argued for an independent, open-source platform, to be developed and owned by the UN and used for diplomatic purposes only. The meeting data could then be handled and stored according to the rules of the international community and diplomatic conventions.

Lastly, the authors addressed the question whether the current experiences will permanently change international diplomacy. Höne argued that human interaction and personal contacts will remain essential. However, the means to achieve the core functions of diplomacy are changing constantly. This is not caused exclusively by the pandemic, but certainly accelerated by it. Diplomats will have to adapt to new working conditions even more frequently, and diplomatic academies must include new technologies in their curricula. As moderator Stephanie Liechtenstein said in her concluding remarks, this would hopefully mean that when heads of states come together for online meetings in the future, their first sentence will no longer be “Hello, can you hear me?”

Further information

A recording of the session is available here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gi_yBbsjY&t=7s

The Global Governance Spotlight “Hybrid Diplomacy: How COVID-19 changes the way we negotiate” is available for download on the sef: website:
<https://www.sef-bonn.org/en/publications/global-governance-spotlight/12021/>

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