

Global Governance Spotlight

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sef:

Hybrid diplomacy: How COVID-19 changes the way we negotiate

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In March 2020, diplomacy came to an abrupt halt. United Nations (UN) meeting rooms closed. Diplomats went into lockdown. One year later, in March 2021, although the pandemic is still raging, diplomacy is alive and kicking.

Diplomacy adjusted to new circumstances and has proven vital for dealing with crises and conflicts in a highly interdependent world. The pandemic accelerated changes that have been gathering momentum for the last two decades as digitalisation transformed communication and information, the two pillars of diplomacy.

In the interplay between in situ and online dynamics, hybrid diplomacy has emerged requiring adaptation of the ways how diplomacy operates from multilateral organisations to diplomatic services and embassies worldwide. Diplomatic procedures and negotiation techniques have to adjust to new diplomatic modus operandi. Diplomats have to be equipped with new skills and methods, including the use of video conferencing tools, moderation of online meetings, and awareness of cyber and data security issues.

Diplomacy between continuity and change

Current shifts in diplomacy should be placed in the long history of diplomacy, which is characterised by the interplay between continuity and change: continuity in the core function of diplomacy as a way of managing interdependence among societies through negotiations and compromise; change in the way how

diplomacy is performed using advances in communication technology from early smoke signals via telegraph and telephone to the Internet.

The pandemic makes us revisit this interplay. Continuity of negotiations and compromise became even more important as we realise how interdependent our world is. International cooperation in the scientific and health field facilitated remarkable breakthroughs in, understanding the nature of COVID-19, and developing vaccines. Another success of diplomacy, in particular bilateral diplomacy and the work of consular services, was the huge operation of repatriating nationals caught abroad.

In parallel, as the core functions of diplomacy continued after an initial period of shock, the pandemic triggered major changes in the ways in which diplomacy is performed. As meetings and negotiations moved online, a new phrase, 'Zoom diplomacy', made headlines. A lot of the complex human, procedural and emotional interaction of traditional diplomacy was reduced to screen interactions.

Major challenges in diplomacy during the pandemic

What are some of the concrete changes and challenges of diplomatic practice over the last year? How has diplomacy adapted? To answer these questions, it is important to pay attention to shifts in diplomatic practice towards video conferencing and the challenges associated with that. At the same time, changes in

practice also posed challenges and made innovation to diplomatic protocol and procedures necessary.

The end of “corridor diplomacy”? Changes in everyday diplomatic practice

A lack of human contact is often quoted as the main shortcoming of digital interaction. It is a truism that diplomacy depends on human interaction and that real diplomacy happens in corridors and informal settings. It is unsurprising that the lack of informal spaces to meet was cited by diplomats as one of the biggest challenges of the initial months of the pandemic. These informal spaces are often crucial for advancing negotiations and finding solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

Yet, it is important to dive deeper into the question of corridor diplomacy. The key difference in diplomatic communication is between what diplomats can say officially as they speak on behalf of their respective countries (in situ and online) and what they can discuss in informal settings. Corridors are not always physical. They started shifting online before the pandemic forced diplomats to rely on ICT to a much greater extent. WhatsApp groups for informal exchanges have been around for many years. They typically build on trust and social capital developed among diplomats in traditional face-to-face interaction. This is one of the important lessons for the practice of diplomacy: The initial building of trust and overall social capital requires physical presence and face-to-face interaction. Building on this, virtual interactions, coupled with occasional face-to-face meetings can ensure the continuation of diplomatic practice.

“Zoom Diplomacy” - Negotiations by video conference

As mentioned, informal, physical spaces are crucial for diplomatic negotiations. Yet, it is also clear that the lack of those spaces cannot mean that negotiations come to a complete halt. Video conferencing can and has been employed.

Conceptually, video conferencing affects the time and space dimensions of negotiations. First, it challenges the assumption that negotiations have to be conducted simultaneously with all participants being in the same place. Negotiations can be geographically dispersed. Second, if video conferencing is employed with other ICT tools, such as drafting shared documents using track changes, negotiations can be asynchronous. Further, we know that timing matters in diplomacy. Many important breakthroughs in negotiations happened when the clock was stopped at midnight in the conference room and negotiations continued long into the morning hours till a deal was reached. Thus, these conceptual shifts open many questions especially in negotiating politically delicate issues.

On a practical level, the increased use of video conferencing provided a number of challenges. The three biggest concerns that diplomats expressed were:

tackling technical issues, solving security issues, and adapting to changes in communication and negotiation dynamics. Connectivity issues and challenges related to translation services were further practical challenges.

Lastly, we should not forget that negotiating by video conferencing also has implications for inclusion and transparency. While the increased use of ICT is typically associated with greater transparency, initial evidence suggests that these two are not automatically linked. For example, new formats for briefing the media after meetings had to be found and, in some cases, they did not allow for journalists to have the same type of close access.

Changes in diplomatic representation, protocol, and procedures

Countries attach a lot of importance to symbolic values of representation ranging from flags and insignia to the buildings of embassies. Representation is a highly ritualised diplomatic activity which is not likely to be digitalised. However, some new practices of online representation are likely to be developed. During the opening of the 75th UN General Assembly (UN GA) in September 2020, the representation function of diplomacy was highlighted by two elements: video messages delivered by heads of state and government which made use of visual elements and symbolism and the physical presence of a very limited number of representatives in the UN GA hall in New York. As to be expected, the pre-recorded video messages made use of flags and other insignia. Some countries also recognised this as an opportunity to use symbols and visual story-telling elements through the choice of backgrounds and careful placement of speakers.

Diplomatic protocol contains rules that signal hierarchy and officiality. It is often thought of as seating arrangements or the order in which delegates arrive to a high-level meeting. Virtual and hybrid meetings raise additional protocol issues. In fact, commercial video conferencing platforms add further tension given that by their very nature they are designed with flat hierarchies between attendees in mind. In simple terms, current video conferencing platforms do not allow for re-creating seating arrangements or keeping special attention on VIPs.

International organisations, such as the UN, rely on detailed procedures to guide their work and in particular to set rules for presenting proposals and amendments, governing the order of speakers and sequences of interventions, raising points of order and making decisions. However, they lack specific procedural provisions for online meetings. Initially, this created an ambiguous situation for most organisations and led to meetings not taking place or being postponed.

While some rules of procedure translated easily into online and hybrid meetings, others presented formidable challenges. In particular, decision-making and voting proved to be a point of contention. The UN General Assembly resorted to the so-called silence procedure,

which allowed for resolutions to be passed by consensus as long as no formal objection was raised with the chair. The UN Security Council, which was criticised for an initial moment of paralysis at the beginning of the pandemic, relied on written voting procedures in order to carry on with its work. The Human Rights Council, to name a third example, initially met virtually and then developed the modalities for a specific form of hybrid meeting with social distancing in place. Overall, international organisations were able to adapt through the creative interpretation of existing rules.

Changing role of embassies and diplomatic hubs

The shift of diplomatic interaction from embassies towards ministers and heads of states started happening with ‘telephone diplomacy’ decades ago. It accelerated in the digital era and even further during the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries started asking if they do need a person on ‘the ground’ if they sit in their flat instead of socialising locally. However, a clear case for the resident embassy and diplomatic hubs such as New York, Geneva, Vienna, and Addis Ababa can be made. First, the shift towards hybrid interactions will only increase the relevance and exclusivity of physical interaction as, for example, crisis situations are usually better dealt with on the ground. Second, many capitals do not have the capacity to follow the complex multilateral agenda remotely. Third, there are vast time differences between many capitals and the key multilateral hubs. Thus, the suggestion is for diplomatic missions to hold their breath and weather the storm of those calling for cuts in the name of cost reduction.

Participation of developing countries

The shift towards online meetings opened up, at least theoretically, a possibility for more inclusion since participation does not require travelling and send-

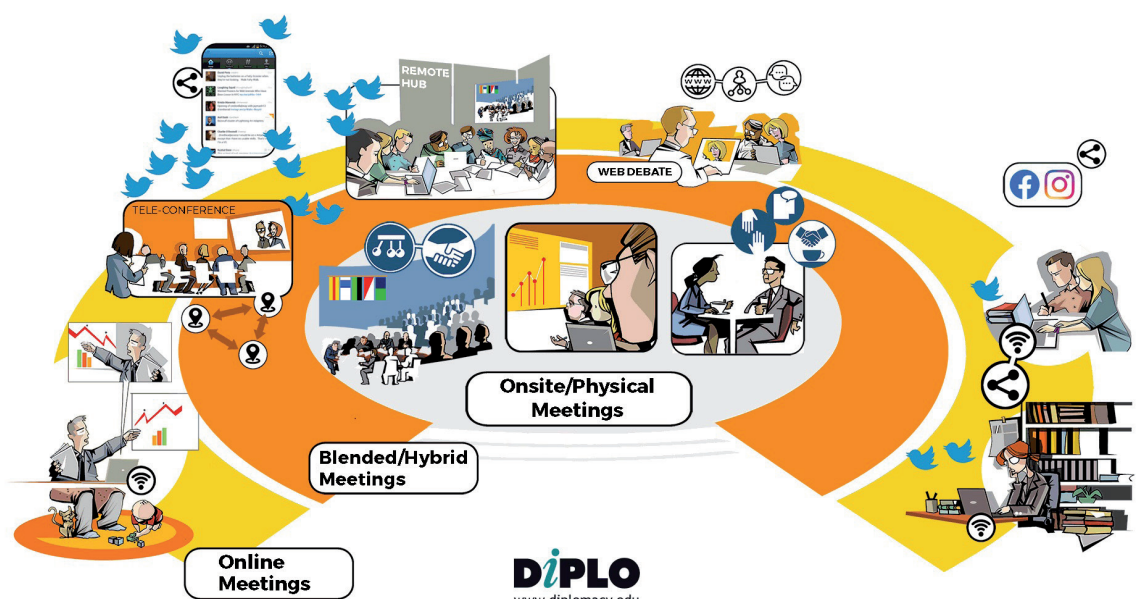
ing big delegations to negotiations abroad. Now, it is possible to mobilise expertise from ‘home’ and to draw on a wider network of experts. So far, however, the overall impression is that online interaction has not substantially increased inclusion and that developing countries face greater challenges in online than in situ meetings. There are many reasons including weak telecommunication infrastructure. For example, in many developing countries, lockdown forced officials to move from ministries of foreign affairs where they had stable access to the internet to their homes where they faced a problem with fragile energy supply and weak internet connection. This can be exacerbated by the lack of in-house cybersecurity expertise; developing countries are often not able to extend the provisions enjoyed at their embassy to the homes of their diplomats posted abroad. Further, there is great concern that budget cuts, coupled with delays in filling vacant posts, and the postponement of agenda issues from 2020 to 2021, leads to a situation in which diplomats from developing countries find it increasingly harder to ensure their voices are heard and interests taken into account.

What can be done?

Develop ‘meeting toolkit’ for hybrid diplomacy

One year experience provides sufficient basis to prepare a ‘meeting toolkit’ that would help in selecting the most appropriate type of meeting for specific negotiations or other diplomatic activities. This ‘meeting toolkit’ would include, among others, the criteria: political relevance, legal and procedural requirements, level of inclusion and trust, and behavioural and emotional aspects. Based on these criteria, meeting organisers can decide when and how to employ online, hybrid, and in situ meetings.

Hybrid diplomacy tools: Diverse methods, effective procedures



For example, delicate peace talks are most likely to be held face-to-face as it has been the case with peace talks on Syria, Libya, and Yemen conducted in Geneva even during the pandemic. However, complex peace talks in some cases require ‘proximity talks’ without direct interaction among the sides in conflict as it happened during the Dayton peace talks on the Bosnia war when warring parties were kept at the same site in Dayton while not interacting with each other directly.

Online meetings without physical presence would be much more suitable for an exchange of information and, for example, bringing diaspora and expat expertise into national delegations for such meetings. An effective sequencing of online and in situ meetings could be used as a way of building momentum in negotiations. Hybrid meetings could allow for wider participation of experts and civil society.

As in these and other cases, the ‘meeting toolkit’ would help diplomatic services and international organisations to, at least, reduce the confusion around different meeting modalities and, at best, find the optimal method for negotiations and other diplomatic processes.

Online meeting platform: A virtual home for the UN and global diplomacy

The shift in the UN’s work and other diplomatic activities to online spaces raises the question whether official meetings should be hosted on proprietary online platforms such as Zoom, Voov, Teams or Webex.

Analogous to physical UN venues in New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, and other centres, diplomatic online meeting platforms should have a similar status. They should be spaces where all member states can meet on equal footing in a secure, inclusive and legitimate setting as stipulated by international law. In addition to symbolic and legal aspects, existing online meeting platforms are not adjusted to specific diplomatic protocol and the UN procedures.

One solution is to develop a UN online meeting platform which should be accessible to all member states and other actors such as civil society, business and local communities. The data and recordings of online meetings should be stored and protected beyond the reach of any national jurisdiction. Similar to physical UN venues, online meeting platforms should be protected by diplomatic privileges and immunities.

Ideally, this online meeting platform should be developed as an open source project that would provide the UN, international organisations, and member states with technical and functional oversight of the online

space where they meet and deliberate. As countries contributed building materials, furniture and artistic objects to the UN buildings, the online meeting platform can and should be developed with the contribution of countries, companies, and citizens. Such a platform can become a virtual home for the UN and global diplomacy.

Capacity building and training

Hybrid diplomacy requires comprehensive adjustments of international organisations and diplomatic services. Organisational structures should be adjusted in order to facilitate new forms of engagement and interaction. Training activities of diplomatic academies and other training organisations should provide a new set of skills and understandings including moderation, negotiations, and reporting from this new type of meetings. In addition, diplomats, now more than ever, need to be familiar with video conferencing tools to make informed choices and need a heightened awareness of cyber and data security issues.

Initially, many diplomats wanted to get back to ‘normal’ as soon as possible. However, a number of new approaches and techniques in diplomacy, which were at first conceived as “emergency solutions”, are here to stay. On the whole, diplomatic practice may turn out the better for it.

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For further references and readings on the digitalisation of diplomacy and hybrid meetings, please also consult <https://www.diplomacy.edu/e-diplomacy>.

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