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Effectiveness of Virtual Diplomacy in the COVID-19 Context



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In today's COVID-19 stricken world, almost half of humanity under lockdown is viewing the real picture of the world through the digital prism. Emails, video conferences, data bits, smartphones, twitter handles, have increasingly become regular means of interaction, so much so that diplomacy is also becoming 'Wired or Virtual'. The digital age has truly arrived and will be put to test in the pandemic times. This is the only viable alternative perhaps to provide access to instant information and interactive online communication to almost everyone, while maintaining social distancing.

Image 1: Digital Diplomacy Moments



Source: <https://medium.com/digital-diplomacy/2017-in-review-top-10-digital-diplomacy-moments-669909124710>

Key Points

1. Virtual diplomacy will help in shaping the future of diplomatic relations between states, hence emerging as an important tool of foreign policy.
2. It is speedier and a cost-effective means of diplomacy.
3. It is public diplomacy at its best, since there is an instant connect with the country's diaspora within and outside the country, through platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.
4. Cyber threats and risks are to be carefully monitored for virtual diplomacy to be a viable medium of correspondence between the nations.
5. The challenges which traditional diplomacy is facing during the pandemic can be overcome only by online and digital platforms.
6. In the COVID-19 era, Virtual Diplomacy seems to be the only way to advance the foreign policy goals of a nation which further helps in advancing the nation's national interests. Hence, there is a need to institutionalise the mechanism of Virtual Diplomacy.
7. There is an increase in the digital networking footprints in most nations of the world.
8. Virtual diplomacy and traditional diplomacy should coexist and complement each other rather than compete in times to come.

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Effectiveness of Virtual Diplomacy ...

This seems to be the new normal. The contours of diplomacy will certainly change with even more likelihood that, virtual diplomacy will take a firmer and a prominent role in the international discourse.

What is Virtual Diplomacy?

The term 'virtual diplomacy' was first mentioned by E. J. Dionne in the article on the use of virtual terms published in a *Washington Magazine*, 1997.¹

In 1997, Richard H. Solomon (1997), President of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) defined virtual diplomacy as "social, economic and political interactions that are mediated through electronic means rather than face-to-face communication". He further clarifies that although "virtual ... implies a lack of reality ..., Virtual Diplomacy, however, is real diplomacy—in the sense of authoritative interactions between officials of different governments".

At its broadest, the term 'virtual diplomacy' signifies the altered diplomacy associated with the emergence of a networked globe. At its narrowest, the term encompasses the decision-making, coordination, communication and practice of international relations as they are conducted with the aid of information and communications technologies (United States Institute of Peace, 2006).²

What the previous definition does not specify is the notion of public diplomacy realising itself through virtual diplomacy. Gordon S. Smith reflects on this aspect, "Virtual diplomacy can be said to mean the conduct of what in the past has been regarded as classical diplomacy but that is now an activity being practiced in a different way both because of changes in technology and because it is being practiced by a broader range of people, including many who are not professional diplomats" (Smith, 1999).³

The first foreign ministry to establish an e-diplomacy unit was the US State Department which created the task force on e-Diplomacy in 2002. The office of e-Diplomacy has led to a culture change in the information management from a "need-to-know" basis to "need-to-share"⁴ basis. In the current scenario, more and more countries are likely to take the route of

establishing e-diplomacy units in their foreign offices. Digital diplomacy networking will increase sooner than later.

Paradigm Shift

A paradigm shift in the international domain has taken place, wherein the content and context of international relations have changed. The context includes anyone and anywhere connected to and affected by the information and communication media. Change in content can be seen in the expanding notion of national security to include non-traditional security issues like international migration, terrorism, drug trafficking, WMD, cyber harassment, global economics and global health issues like the current Covid-19 pandemic.

This pandemic has led us to rethink what security in the twenty-first century entails. The nations are now engaged in what some analyst legitimately label as the "Third World War"—dramatically different from any war imagined decades ago, but massively lethal and destructive, nonetheless. This is not a confrontation of countries with nuclear and other advanced weapons, but it does involve massive numbers of countries throughout the world in a very different way. They are not fighting one another but instead, this war is against a 'small unseen virus' that threatens all nations—regardless of the nature of their government or their political philosophies and millions of their people.⁵

In a recent statement, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, "We are facing a global health crisis unlike any in the 75-year history of the United Nations—one that is killing people, spreading human suffering and upending people's lives, but this is much more than a health crisis. It is a human crisis. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is attacking societies at their core". He called for a much stronger and more effective global response to the coronavirus pandemic and to the social and economic devastation that COVID-19 is causing.⁶

In such a scenario, how will diplomacy be affected? Well, the new conduct of diplomacy will have to maintain physical or social distancing with heightened

virtual proximity, i.e., increase in virtual diplomacy amongst and between the nations.

Nature and Modalities of Virtual Diplomacy

This form of diplomacy works through the concept of what Joseph Nye calls “Soft Power.”⁷ The art of amending or changing the conventional methods of diplomatic relations, practices, negotiations, courtesies and protocols to the new ways and methods which are driven by new, innovative and evolving technologies. Some of the important modalities associated with Virtual diplomacy have been enumerated below:

- **Empowering Civil Society**

The civil diaspora living within the nation as well as settled abroad feels engaged and empowered with an online participatory platform. The public gets to read the key messages, updates and can also participate by giving their inputs on security as well as policymaking issues. This makes the decision-making process holistic, thus helping in achieving the comprehensive national goals and interests. To link up public diplomacy with digital diplomacy, the UK foreign office opened a Snapchat account to keep the public updated with their day-to-day engagements. In 2015, UNICEF and Snapchat together launched an initiative for the public to raise awareness for the hundreds of thousands of children who were the victims of militant group Boko Haram in Nigeria.⁸

- **Consular Services**

Direct one-to-one online interaction helps in engaging with the citizens at a personal level and helps in evolving a communication channel. Especially during such emergencies and crisis like the current pandemic, an effective disaster and crisis response system mechanism should be in place, which speeds up the relief efforts. Many Indian students studying in Italy, UK, USA and China appealed for help using the online platform to highlight their plight and seek help from the consular staff.

- **Multidimensional Channels of Communication**

One of the best modality of virtual diplomacy is the ability to share information with various people. Most of the countries share the information which

can be further utilised as data for future research and development and can also be utilised in policy framework, planning and good governance. The world’s first Virtual Embassy was created by Maldives in 2007 and has become a huge promoter of the Maldivian culture and history, especially among the youth around the world. This has helped in strengthening Public Diplomacy. A unique initiative on Twitter, called #AsktheSpokesperson, serves as a platform to encourage young people to engage with the Ministry of External Affairs regarding queries and questions on Foreign Policy of India.

- **Creation of a Database**

An online database is generated which remains for posterity and can be used as and when required. This promotes research and development in a particular field. The sharing of data with other nations only brings in goodwill and friendliness in relations between nations. United Nations Twitter account has more than 10 million followers and is the most interactive Twitter handle used for information and data sharing. Though, this can be disadvantageous also, as in the case of COVID-19 pandemic, whereby the United States blames China for not sharing appropriate information and data concerning its research on COVID-19.

- **Virtual Security**

Security is of paramount necessity in the virtual world. Online Consulate activities, diplomatic practices, virtual meetings and conferences, etc., if not secured with proper safety measures can be prone to cyber attacks. Hacking, cracking, decrypting messages and monitoring data inflow are all serious cybercrimes which can jeopardise a nation state’s security.⁹ A risk analysis should be done to measure safety regulations by employing strict cyber security measures.

Virtual Diplomacy versus Traditional Diplomacy

Virtual Diplomacy can certainly overcome the problems faced by traditional diplomatic practices. This can be seen in the COVID world wherein social distancing has to be maintained. Most of the diplomatic meetings and summits are taking place, but in the virtual realm; moreover, with the world economy on the decline, it is cost-effective as no travel costs, accommodation, food

and other itineraries are incurred; nation branding, image building can also be promoted by the virtual medium, for instance, Finland emoji diplomacy;¹⁰ furthermore, limited human resource and deficit staff can also be accommodated by the virtual diplomatic practices. Hence, easy accessibility, availability 24/7 and transparency makes it a reliable and trustworthy tool of foreign policy. Twitter, for example, has the least restrictions through its Automated Programming Interface.

Upbeat Scenario for the Virtual Domain

The 'corona world order' or rather 'disorder' is likely to be an opportunity and also a challenge for the virtual domain since all transactions are now moving fast towards the digital world. The narrative of diplomacy will have to reside primarily in this domain, to be in a continuum. Diplomats and the good offices need to reinvigorate their mechanism of functioning to be easily accessible

and transparent. Traditional diplomacy courtesy and mannerism will have to be kept at bay for some time. Diplomacy to survive will have to amend its ways of functioning by shifting in the virtual domain. This seems to be the new norm. An article from the World Economic Forum carried a study conducted by the Harvard scientists that stated that the impact of the pandemic will stay till the year 2022.¹¹ Hence, there is a need to streamline the future course of interaction in international relations, which by and large will be through the virtual medium.

Virtual Diplomacy: The 'New Normal'

For the first time, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank will host their Spring Meetings through virtual media. The world's three most important groupings have already started their interactions using virtual media as a medium of exchange and discussions.

Image 2: South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Virtual Meet



On April 20, South Asia, which comprises 23.4 per cent of the world population, accounted for 1.25 per cent of infections and 0.5 per cent of COVID-19 deaths in the world.¹² Rising to the occasion, the Indian Prime Minister invited leaders of SAARC member states to hold a video conference for chalking out a common strategy against Coronavirus. The first Virtual SAARC meeting took place on Sunday, March 15, 2020, almost six years after the last SAARC Summit hosted by Nepal in November 2014.

A few positive decisions were taken—the setting up of a COVID-19 emergency fund for SAARC countries voluntarily, to be utilised during emergency times,

with India contributing \$10 million for the same. A Rapid Response Team of doctors, specialists, testing equipments and attendant infrastructure has also been proposed which will be put at the disposal of the SAARC nations. A common framework for tele-medicine was also discussed; setting up SAARC ministerial-level group for discussing Coronavirus related issues; online training modules to be established; website with information in each of the SAARC languages.¹³ Another Video conference of the senior trade officials on the impact of COVID-19 on intra-regional trade was held on April 8, 2020.¹⁴ It is likely that the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) summit too will take place in the Virtual domain this year.

Image 3: G20 Virtual Summit Meet



Source: AFP-Yonhap, The Korean Herald

Another important world grouping, the G20 which constitutes 80 per cent of world's GDP and 60 per cent of world's population, met virtually for the first time on March 26, 2020, to discuss the pandemic. Though the meeting was in the reel set-up, a few significant policy decisions were taken to be implemented in the real world. The leaders pledged to inject US\$ 5 trillion

into the global economy to reduce the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, to minimise the economic and social cost of the outbreak and restore global growth, strengthen market resilience and stability; provide financial support to deal with the economic aspects of the crisis; deploy a 'robust' financial package to support developing

nations; deploy a 'robust' financial package to support developing nations; The G20 members were also joined by leaders from other affected

countries including Spain, Jordan, Singapore and Switzerland as well as international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank.¹⁵

Image 4: G7 Virtual Summit Meet



Source: AlvinLlum/Twitter

US President Donald Trump convened the special meeting of the world's most powerful leading economies, the G7 on March 16, 2020 through video conference, as some member nations like Italy, Germany had closed their borders and countries like Canada and the US had tightened their travel restrictions.

A few takeaways from the meet are listed here—the meeting turned out to be an arena of claims and counter-claims, as the US blamed Beijing for circulating conspiracy theories about the origin of the Virus. The G7 leaders refused to accept previously US-drafted communiqué of the meeting to pin China with responsibility for the 'evident' global economic recession; countries like—Japan, Italy, France, UK, Germany and Canada—refused;¹⁶ Leaders like

Angela Merkel, Justin Trudeau, voiced a strong and coordinated international response; a thorough review and reform process and the lack of transparency and chronic mismanagement of the pandemic by WHO was deliberated upon.

After the summit, the EU Council President, Charles Michel, stressed on Multilateralism to be at the core of the action and called on world leaders to contribute to an international online pledging conference on May 4, 2020 to "enhance general preparedness and ensure adequate funding to develop and deploy a vaccine against coronavirus".¹⁷

Benefits and Risks of Virtual Diplomacy

The challenges faced by traditional diplomacy in the pandemic times are being addressed by virtual diplomatic manoeuvres. Not only is it cost-effective but

also is the fastest means of diplomatic correspondence with a wider reach. Such digital connect will lead to increasing the digital footprints in International Relations and help to connect with the diaspora, especially the youth, through online platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Hangout, Skype, etc. This strengthens public diplomacy, wherein common people get a chance to influence policy decisions by giving credible inputs and information to the government which in turn can be beneficial to policymakers.

Some of the risks involved are security-related like cyber-attacks, cyber crimes, hacking, information leakage, the anonymity of users and public sparring on certain issues which create an unhealthy atmosphere. Moreover, world leaders are becoming completely dependent on the use of social media platforms revealing state diplomacy in open domain. Sometimes even mundane thoughts and policy suggestions become part of the data collection and a wasteful resource. "Can you hear me," "Unmute the microphone" are repetitive phrases used during online meetings which break the thought process as well as the momentum of the meetings.

Conclusion

Diplomacy in COVID-19 context will increasingly move towards the virtual domain. Major events and meetings will be conducted online, be it the most powerful groupings and organisations like the G7 or G20, to the grassroots level of organisations and governance like the virtual interaction between the Panchayat leaders with Prime Minister of India. While this medium allows a two-way face-to-face communication, it also maintains social distancing norms.

The foreign policy discourse will have to shape up, keeping in mind the policies, organisational structures and new guidelines for making e-diplomacy work. The security issues will, however, have to be checked thoroughly. The nations will have to come together to mutually accept the nature and modalities of virtual diplomacy. Shifting of the diplomatic mission work online and creating e-diplomacy units in the diplomatic mission will have to be done by almost all nations affected by the pandemic. The need of the hour is to institutionalise the mechanism of virtual diplomacy in the COVID-19 era.

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