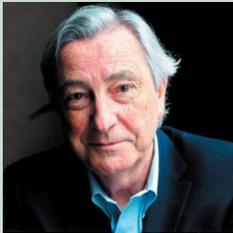


Global Crisis without a Global Solution

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Pandemic Diplomacy Series



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Analysing the pros and cons of digital diplomacy, this EDA Reflection points out that while telecommuting has been the biggest change, online platforms are not well suited to conduct multilateral diplomacy. It stresses that human factor and physical proximity will remain essential for efficient diplomacy.

It is said that a virus is a piece of bad news packed into a protein! Covid-19 has uprooted our lives in many ways and dramatically affected the economy, globalization and geopolitics. And diplomacy too. When Zhou Enlai was serving as the foreign minister of Mao Zedong's China, he was asked about the 1789 French Revolution. He famously answered that in his opinion it was too early to evaluate its impact and consequences. While the same might be said about the current pandemic, some ideas may be cautiously advanced.

This is a global crisis without a global answer, perhaps the first since 1945 without American leadership and without multilateral coordination because the United Nations Security Council was divided due to the rivalry among the great powers. As a result, scared citizens have resorted to the nation-state for protection and states come out of the crisis reinforced, with higher border fences and bans on immigrants.

At the same time, previous global trends have accelerated: the American withdrawal, the crisis in Europe and the 'rise of the rest', headed by China. We live through the final moments of a geopolitical multilateral cycle that began in 1945 – the end of a Western-led world and the dawn of a new multipolar geopolitical arrangement as the economic centre of the planet migrates to the Indo-Pacific basin.

Italian scholar Claudio Magris said the old world is ending and the new is not yet born. It is "the time of monsters," a moment of uncertainty. Covid-19 has impacted diplomacy, which, in the words of British diplomat Sir Ernest Satow, is "the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states ...or, more briefly still, the conduct of business between states by peaceful means." Another British diplomat, Harold Nicolson, narrows the focus more precisely on the management of negotiation, its method, the art of the diplomatist, and his or her skill.

All these different traditional aspects or crafts of diplomacy have been affected by the virus. Face-to-face diplomacy has been reduced, and the role of embassies has been reinforced. But then, adaptation has been a key aspect for diplomats since the dawn of diplomacy.

Adaptation

Covid-19 has taken us all by surprise and demanded improvisation. It is not that we did not know that something of this sort might happen because it had been predicted in the past. But when it happened, we downplayed the threat. Realising the magnitude of the problem later, the first task of embassies was to adopt measures at a local level to protect their personnel and move on with the business-as-usual approach as much as possible. Repatriation of non-essential or vulnerable embassy personnel and rotation of the rest, social distancing and hygiene measures, and reorganization of work since in-person meetings were no longer possible, became the norm.

Some countries fared better than others, especially those with partners to rely on, as was the case with the European Union members. They supported each other when needed, from sharing information to joint repatriation of nationals.

Two initial objectives of Spanish diplomacy were: one, repatriate 25,000 Spaniards stranded abroad; and two, Spain as a fervent promoter of multilateralism has consistently defended the need of a global solution

to the crisis, and Spanish diplomats worked to boost cooperation in both preparedness and research.

Adaptation is one of the main requirements to be an effective diplomat. Since physical contact was restricted, there was accelerated transition to digital diplomacy. The process played out at four different levels: one, 65% of Spain's Ministry of Foreign Affairs personnel worked from home using computers; two, e-mails, which are faster, replaced the traditional diplomatic cables (usually sent twice a day); three, use of social media networks increased, particularly WhatsApp, whenever security is not compromised; and four, widespread use of video-conferencing for larger meetings.

These systems facilitated continued monthly meetings of local European Union ambassadors and even frequent meetings between foreign ministers. For example, in less than a week, an online meeting was set up among a dozen ministers from the Pacific, African and Latin American regions to discuss a Spanish proposal to be tabled at the United Nations. This would have been difficult at short notice if traditional systems were employed. Likewise, online platforms were used by ambassadors to communicate with their ministers and other officials at the headquarters.

Telecommuting to comply with social distancing requirements has been the biggest change in diplomacy. This does not mean that diplomats are redundant. On the contrary, Covid-19 has reiterated the importance of resident diplomats. During this crisis, they have carried out important consular tasks like disseminating information to stranded nationals, repatriation, chartering flights when necessary, etc.

But digital online platforms are not well suited to conduct multilateral diplomacy, where face-to-face interaction between and among interlocutors, side conversations and discussion over a cup of coffee provide room for manoeuvre and an eventual compromise. It is not easy to develop a friendly bond with another diplomat who is thousands of kilometres away.

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The human factor and proximity will remain essential for efficient diplomacy. In certain countries, the physical presence of diplomats was key to obtaining necessary medical supplies amid competition with other countries, all needing the same products to fight the pandemic. This was particularly true for the embassies of Spain in India, involving medicines, and in China, involving masks, respirators, gloves, gowns, glasses, etc. In many cases, the ambassador personally signed the contract.

It is easy to blame civil servants and focus on their inevitable shortcomings during a crisis. But diplomats have played a crucial role in trying to bring together the international community to find a solution, and I believe that the immediate future will demand more investment in diplomacy. Countries have turned inwards during the Covid-19 crisis, globalization has been jolted, disinformation has been rampant, multilateral organizations have suffered, supply chains disrupted, and relations will have to be mended.

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I endorse American scholar Joseph Nye's push for "working with others" rather than the zero-sum result of "working over others". In any case, a robust and flexible diplomatic dimension will be necessary in the post-crisis reconstruction effort.

Diplomats are here to stay and that is good news!