

Impact on the Craft of Diplomacy – An Indian Experience

Pandemic Diplomacy Series

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Though the pandemic is a classic transnational crisis, necessitating a global and collaborative response, this EDA Reflection argues that there has not been much evidence of a willingness to engage in international cooperation. Equally, however, it highlights India's international outreach efforts and success in dealing with the crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made a significant impact on ways of living and work at the individual, societal, national and international levels. The craft of diplomacy, as an instrument to manage a state's external relations, has had to adapt to a new and still evolving situation. There is a stalling and, in some respects, even a reversal of globalisation spawning a deeply inter-connected real world of expanding exchange of goods, services and people.

However, in the virtual world anchored in digital technologies, the pandemic has accelerated globalisation, with cross-border exchanges reaching unprecedented volume. This deepening contradiction is a challenge for diplomacy. Personal face-to-face encounters, intimate and confidential conversations and the atmospherics created by social events and warm hospitality, all these indispensable tools of diplomatic trade have mostly had to be dispensed with, even though the demands on diplomacy have been enhanced, not diminished, during the pandemic.

There has been, of necessity, a greater reliance on the digital domain to maintain diplomatic exchanges and communication and the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is no exception.

The MEA has had the advantage of adopting social media such as Facebook and Twitter at an early stage. In fact, it was the first ministry in India to do so. The norms for using these tools have been put in place, enabling rapid and efficient communications, not only among government agencies but also with Indian communities and citizens both in India and abroad. Having had to deal with similar crises though not on the same scale as the current one, the MEA has a crisis management mechanism which kicks in whenever required. This includes control centres and designated officials both at headquarters and at missions abroad whose contact details are widely communicated using social media, audio-visual media and print media.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the priority has been to ensure the welfare of Indian citizens in foreign countries. For example, many Indian students were stranded in Wuhan, China, the epicentre of the Covid-19 outbreak. Special aircraft were arranged to ferry back those who wished to return to India and the Indian embassy in China opened a temporary office in Wuhan to process the evacuees but to also render assistance and psychological support to students staying back in the city.

The same pattern of support has been extended to Indian citizens in several other parts of the world. In fact, the government undertook independent India's and the world's largest repatriation of civilians stranded abroad. Over seven weeks in May and June, about 365,000 Indians were brought back home, mostly by air but also by sea, from over 50 countries across five continents. The repatriation process will continue for a few more weeks.

This exercise required obtaining the support and cooperation of foreign governments and this has been made easier by earlier drills carried out to be prepared for such crises. Such diplomatic démarches have often been conducted through videoconferencing, telephone conversations and, when possible, through personal meetings, while observing social distancing norms.

Since diplomats were already familiar with the use of social media, they have been able to adapt to the new

situation quite well. The pandemic has and will make the reliance on digital tools gain greater momentum. However, there is no substitute in diplomacy to the person-to-person engagement and discourse, the building up of relationships which can be drawn upon in times of crises. Therefore, there is hope that as the pandemic recedes, some of that familiar terrain of diplomacy will return.

It must be stressed that diplomacy has become less ritualistic and less formal in practice. There is less observance of strict diplomatic etiquette and protocol than in the past and this trend is likely to continue. The shift towards the use of digital tools for diplomatic engagements may accelerate this trend. An example of diplomatic flexibility and innovation was evident in India and Australia signing a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement in a virtual summit in June. However, elements such as observance of polite forms of address, the use of dignified phraseology and appropriate salutations, will and must remain obligatory.

Did Indian diplomats and diplomacy cope with the unprecedented crisis? The answer is yes. In reaching out to Indians in foreign countries, in maintaining regular communications with their foreign counterparts, in supporting the public health efforts at home and in friendly countries through accessing critical supplies and equipment and through sharing what India has with people in other countries, diplomats have rendered valuable service. In this endeavour they have had to break down silos through which most governments operate, enabling a whole-of-government approach.

While the priority for the MEA has been the welfare of Indian citizens abroad, it has not neglected international outreach in dealing with the crisis. This has been difficult because though the pandemic is a classic global and transnational crisis, necessitating a global and collaborative response, there has not been much evidence of a willingness to engage in international cooperation.

This is not surprising because, over the past decade or more, we have witnessed a surge in nationalist and even parochial sentiments across the world. There is diminishing faith in the United Nations and its specialised agencies and growing tensions in relations among major powers. However, India has, within its own modest resources, reached out to offer assistance to its neighbours and other developing countries. Since India is a major producer of pharmaceuticals and some medical devices, it has arranged supplies to other countries and this has been managed by the MEA, which has a well-established Development Administration Partnership division to handle such assistance.

India has also received support for its own efforts from friendly countries. The World Bank sanctioned a sum of US\$1 billion to India for Covid-related expenditure. India is also working with several partner countries in research and development of an effective Covid-19 vaccine and since it has a thriving pharmaceutical industry, it has the capacity to arrange large scale production and distribution of the vaccine once it is ready and tested. Indian missions abroad are playing an important role in facilitating such international cooperation.

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India is a key partner in the World Health Organization's (WHO) 'Solidarity Project' for developing effective treatment and vaccines for Covid-19. As Chairman of the WHO Executive Committee for the next two years, India will play an important leadership role in meeting the challenge of the pandemic. Indian diplomats have considerable experience in multilateral diplomacy and will make an important contribution in re-energising multilateral institutions and processes to deal with a challenge with global dimensions.

The pandemic is not only a public health challenge but also an economic challenge. The pandemic has disrupted economic activities and being both a demand and supply shock, it poses a complex and unprecedented challenge. In this case too, we need an internationally coordinated policy response but that has been missing so far.

Indian diplomacy has been marshalled to encourage such coordination both on a regional and global platform. For example, the Indian prime minister convened a virtual summit of leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in March to promote cooperation to deal with the pandemic. He took active part in the G20 virtual summit to urge a coordinated economic response to the crisis on the lines of what the grouping had achieved during the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-08. The MEA was very active in preparing the leadership for these summits and in coordinating the follow-up on decisions taken.

However, it must be acknowledged that the international political environment is not conducive to such cooperation. This puts even greater responsibility on (Indian) diplomats and demands on the craft of diplomacy.