



Wilton Park



Report

## **The future of international diplomacy in the digital sphere**

Wednesday 16 September 2020 | WP1812V

**In association with**



Norwegian Ministry  
of Foreign Affairs

## Report

# The future of international diplomacy in the digital sphere

Wednesday 16 September 2020 | WP1812V

### Virtual meeting

### Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic, with its severe effect on all aspects of everyday life, has had an extraordinary impact on the way in which foreign affairs are conducted. Institutions and diplomatic practitioners have stepped up their technological capabilities to overcome restrictions on in-person meetings and travel. World leaders took part in the Group of Seven teleconferences, in mid-April 2020, over the resumption of economic activities in the post-coronavirus world and there have been virtual convenings of the Group of 20 ministerial meetings, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Whilst some 'in-person' gatherings are being trialled in the short and medium term, it is assumed that international gatherings will develop as a hybrid of face to face and virtual. These hybrid measures are likely to grow in popularity given that different regions and countries are at different stages of infection.

At a time when the COVID19 crisis has highlighted the pressing need for multilateralism and international cooperation, multilateral fora and diplomacy have adapted rapidly, moving online with a high degree of success. The global pandemic has effectively accelerated discussion about traditional statecraft. As the world re-adjusts, there needs to be a better understanding of the risks and opportunities for a new type of diplomacy, balancing digital and in-person international engagement and building on the principles of effectiveness, security, and leaving no-one behind.

### Purpose of meeting

This online discussion brought together a selected group including diplomats, representatives from multi-lateral bodies and other leading experts in public diplomacy, from a range of countries, for a preliminary discussion to scope out key issues and challenges and discuss the purpose, objectives and potential participation for a 2021 residential conference at Wilton Park.

Through an exploration of lessons learned and current experience of international engagement on shared interests and concerns, it aimed to:

- provide thought leadership on new forms of diplomacy in a complex and fast-moving environment
- consider practical ways in which to build on existing assets, and the skills and resources needed to support their development
- explore the mitigation of risks and barriers to engagement in an increasingly online world with an emphasis on "leaving no-one behind"
- identify opportunities for innovative ways forward

### Key points

- The digitalisation of diplomacy has been increasing in recent years. COVID19 has accelerated this trend but it was not the instigator.
- Virtual diplomacy, exacerbated by the pandemic, will generate inequalities for certain stakeholder groups. Whilst technological barriers exist for some actors, most notably some in civil society, the main risk to conducting effective diplomacy in the virtual

*“the main risk to conducting effective diplomacy in the virtual environment is the reduction of opportunities to build trust and rapport”*

environment is the reduction of opportunities to build trust and rapport.

- While COVID19 is still prevalent, ‘hybrid’ meetings will likely become the most common medium for diplomacy. In addition to the technical considerations, there is a pressing need to agree conduct based on best practice for effective hybrid meetings. This should include: ways in which to ensure equity between in-person and virtual attendees; an understanding of how hybrid meetings might disadvantage ‘at-risk’ groups; and skills for moderation and facilitation.
- Beyond the pandemic, the goal should not be to replicate previous diplomatic activities in the online space, but to recognise and capitalise on the new opportunities that technology has to offer to diplomatic practitioners.

## **Diplomacy online**

1. Digital diplomacy is not a new phenomenon. Prior to the pandemic the digital sphere was used to supplement in-person diplomacy, however COVID19 has necessitated the speedy transition online of almost all diplomatic activity.
2. The initial challenge was to ensure the smooth running of essential diplomatic fora such as the UN; a key achievement was the first UN resolution adopted without physical presence. However, new issues are continuing to emerge.
3. Aside from a few minor technical glitches and barriers, diplomacy has continued at pace and with little interruption to process. However, a lack of trust and opportunities to build rapport are proving problematic, with the absence of in-person engagement limiting progress in some areas.

## **Emerging models of multi-lateral diplomacy**

*“New practices and processes introduced to ‘bridge the gap’ will need to adapt further as the diplomatic environment evolves”*

4. COVID19 has necessitated significant change in work practices with a steep learning curve for all diplomats operating in this ‘new normal’. New practices and processes introduced to ‘bridge the gap’ will need to adapt further as the diplomatic environment evolves.
5. The transition to digital during the pandemic can be viewed from three interconnected perspectives:
  - You and me: how have individual diplomats adapted to new ways of working?
  - The collective working culture: how have organisations dealt with this change?
  - Staying ahead: how to continue to adapt to technology and stay ahead of changes?
6. Some meeting types can be adapted more readily to the virtual environment. Informal meetings and summits have been conducted effectively and with creativity. The UAE, for example, has invested in virtual tours and high-quality online production to ‘set the scene’ and provide context and a sense of ceremony. Negotiations and inter-active dialogues are more difficult to replicate and have been plagued by posturing and long monologues.
7. Digital diplomacy is adding to the portfolio of options for diplomatic practitioners. However, further thought is needed about available formats and options to maximise meaningful engagement:
  - Can meetings be asynchronous to accommodate different working patterns or time zones?
  - Can they be held over several days instead of in a single session with the ability to connect and reflect in between?
  - How can technology be used to build rapport between diplomatic actors and with

*“The goal should not be to replace in-person diplomacy*

*but to explore how technology can complement and enhance activity”*

the public?

- How best to engage with the digital industry to ensure actors have the necessary tools? How can industry ensure inclusivity is in-built into the platforms and tools they provide?

8. The goal should not be to replace in-person diplomacy but to explore how technology can complement and enhance activity.
9. Practitioners are learning from the experience of the online world, but there needs to be a more concerted effort to understand the insights and perspectives of all stakeholders.

### **Inclusion by design: risks and opportunities from online diplomacy**

10. The transition to online diplomacy is not a new phenomenon and the risks and opportunities have long been the focus of both academics and practitioners. It is increasingly apparent that the speed and scope of the transition precipitated by the pandemic will not affect all stakeholders in the same way. In short, the adoption of new technologies to cope with COVID19 will benefit some whilst risking the exclusion of others.

11. Smaller countries- drawbacks:

- It is more difficult to make an impact in the virtual space with the loss of side events and ‘corridor diplomacy’ which have traditionally been a significant opportunity to raise profile and increase influence.
- Some countries also have fewer resources to overcome technical and cybersecurity issues.

12. Amongst the perceived benefits for smaller countries:

- It is more feasible to convene larger meetings with senior representation, without the need to host costly delegations.
- Larger countries are often the hosts of in-person meetings and forums and thus are highly influential over the terms of the event. The virtual world changes this dynamic; the shift to digital can ‘democratise the agenda’ for small countries.

13. Civil society is arguably most at risk of exclusion and, in addition to the limitations outlined above, there may be a reduction of opportunities to influence proceedings, either because they are not included in the design of the online event or because they are not perceived as the intended audience of diplomatic practitioners and their input is overlooked. Thoughtful design could promote more inclusive and transparent meetings.

14. Civil society organisations and human rights defenders who join an online event from their own countries may risk reprisals from states and other actors. Participant security in the virtual world is a major consideration, including risks regarding personal data and the confidentiality of views expressed online. Multi-lateral and regional bodies should recognise they have an enhanced duty of care when engaging with individuals on sensitive issues in the online space and should consider what protection measures could be put in place to reduce risk.

15. Less developed countries and/or those stakeholders without the necessary technologies to fully engage with digital diplomacy are considerably disadvantaged. There are significant populations without access to the internet. The limitations of domestic technology infrastructure need to be assessed and more developed countries should consider ways in which to address this digital deficit.

16. Other general points which were identified as impacting on the willingness or ability of an individual to engage in the virtual space included:

*“the shift to digital can ‘democratise the agenda’ for small countries”*

*“Civil society is arguably most at risk of exclusion”*

*“more developed countries should consider ways in which to address this digital deficit.”*

*“Technology, when responsibly managed and supported, can enable a more democratic, less hierarchical structure”*

- The ‘remoteness’ of participants in the virtual environment can create opportunities to evade proper engagement on issues and can stall dialogue.
- Participants engaged virtually could be excluded from in-person portions of dialogue.
- Virtual meetings do not carry per diems - seen by some as an enticement to attend a meeting.

17. Technology, when responsibly managed and supported, can enable a more democratic, less hierarchical structure that allows greater engagement between people. For example, some ‘hard to reach’ actors may previously have been excluded from ‘in person’ discussions due to cost or complex or prohibitive visa requirements.
18. Organisers of diplomatic fora online will need to identify the barriers for specific groups or individuals and consider what arrangements can be made to overcome some of these obstacles, ensuring that this developing form of diplomacy aligns with the overriding objective of the Sustainable Development Goals to ‘Leave No-one Behind’.

### **Hybrid meetings**

19. It is assumed that ‘hybrid’ meetings, with a mix of in person and online participation, will become a common platform for diplomacy. Experience to date indicates that this format, whilst of value, will have its own distinct set of challenges.
20. The same issues around access and inclusion for certain groups persist, as do the technical and cybersecurity challenges. However, properly structured engagement with in-person and virtual participants can help to reduce some of these concerns.
21. Hybrid meetings give participants and convenors a range of options. For example, participation could be broadened in a more cost-effective way, allowing more people to engage in dialogue by reducing the time commitment and the burden of travel. This can also address equality issues for some stakeholder groups who may be prevented from attending in person due to parenting and other care commitments.
22. Hybrid meetings work best when participants know each other well- for example, the EU working groups. The choice to join virtually or in person benefits participants by saving time, money and CO2 emissions.
23. There are also opportunities to enhance diplomatic engagement with a ‘hub and spoke’ effect. For example, linking up a number of smaller themed meetings, hosted by the Heads of Mission (HoM) in different countries and feeding into, or leading, a wider regional or international discussion. This could bring greater diversity to discussions as well as provide an opportunity for the HoM to broker relationships through more traditional diplomatic hospitality. These would require careful choreography and a consideration of different time zones.
24. The structure and format of hybrid meetings needs careful planning and handling, recognising the inherent imbalance of power between participants present ‘in the room’ and those ‘on the zoom’. Virtual participants will also be excluded from the opportunities to influence discussion through the informal engagement that takes place between formal sessions.
25. The development of hybrid events should ensure that engagement with virtual participants is a central consideration and not a ‘bolt on’ extension of the in-person meeting. Proposals included: ‘reverse designing’ the meeting around online participants, with ‘in person’ as the adjunct; ‘zoom facilitators’ working alongside the in-person moderator to ensure a more equitable input.
26. The psychological and physical impact of time spent on screen should also be factored into the conduct of hybrid meetings. ‘Zoom Fatigue’ is already a recognised symptom of the current online world: on screen engagement is inevitably affected by reduced

*“The development of hybrid events should ensure that engagement with virtual participants is a central consideration and not a ‘bolt on’”*



attention span, the difficulties of reading and interpreting visual cues and clues, and the frustrations of faltering bandwidth. These inhibitors could be further magnified and become extremely problematic when combined with the perceived advantages of those who are 'present'.

27. Effective online meetings can be very resource intensive and organisers of hybrid meetings should not under-estimate costs. Alongside the investment in technical equipment, facilitators will need training in new skills and techniques.

### **What needs to be tackled?**

- a. A systematic effort to identify and capitalise on the impact of technology on diplomacy. This could be explored, for example, through the framework of McLuhan's four key pillars of technological transitions: enhancement; obsolescence; retrieval; and reversal.
- b. A lessons learned exercise identifying best practice and areas for improvement from this initial period of change.
- c. Quality facilitation to ensure well managed and fruitful engagement in the online space.
- d. A broader grouping of stakeholders for future discussions on this subject could include:
  - A wider geographic spread:
    - South Korea and the US as countries with highly developed technological industries.
    - Smaller or remote countries which are advanced in digital diplomacy eg. New Zealand
    - Developing countries for further insights into the impact on their engagement.
  - Younger people and traditionally hard to reach groups.
  - The technology and games industries: how they can work with diplomatic practitioners to develop additional tools.
  - Experts in communication and storytelling.
  - The conferencing and entertainments industry.
- e. More understanding of hybrid meetings is needed, including how to:
  - Reduce disparities between in-person participants and those joining virtually.
  - Use technology to enhance in-person meetings, building on the learning from current online activity.
  - Facilitate and moderate hybrid meetings in a way that encourages productive debate for both online and in-person participants.
  - Balance the reduced attention span for virtual participants with the presence of in-person attendees.

### **Conclusion**

Practitioners should ensure that lessons are learned from the rapid acceleration of online diplomacy. This would include an evaluation of ways in which the technologies adopted during the pandemic have enhanced meetings, as well as addressing the shortfalls. The goal should not be to replicate existing models of diplomacy, nor to expect a return to traditional diplomatic tools, but to fully embrace the flexible responses, creative opportunities and innovative practice that have emerged to sustain international diplomacy.

**Julia Purcell and Patrick Allen**  
Wilton Park | October 2020

Wilton Park reports are intended to be brief summaries of the main points and conclusions of an event. Reports reflect rapporteurs' accounts of the proceedings and do not necessarily reflect the views of the rapporteur. Wilton Park reports and any recommendations contained therein are for participants and are not a statement of policy for Wilton Park, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) or Her Majesty's Government.

Should you wish to read other Wilton Park reports, or participate in upcoming Wilton Park events, please consult our website [www.wiltonpark.org.uk](http://www.wiltonpark.org.uk). To receive our monthly bulletin and latest updates, please subscribe to <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter/>

## Annexe

Results from the online poll conducted during the meeting.

What three topics or themes would you like to see included in the Wilton Park residential in 2021?

