



Wilton Park



Report

The future of international diplomacy in an online world

Monday 7 and Wednesday 9 June 2021 | WP1873

In association with:



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Federal Department of
Foreign Affairs FDFA



Report

The future of international diplomacy in an online world

Monday 7 and Wednesday 9 June | WP1873

In association with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA

Background

A Wilton Park online meeting [‘The future of international diplomacy in the digital sphere’](#) held in September 2020 identified some of the emerging trends and challenges of conducting diplomacy in an online world. Taking into account new developments since the initial discussion, a two-part meeting in June 2021 provided an opportunity to advance practice on two of the key areas identified in the September 2020 discussion: how to conduct effective diplomacy in a digital world and promoting and embedding inclusive engagement.

The first part of the June 2021 meeting explored the skills, approaches and resources needed to conduct effective diplomacy in an online world. The second part considered ways in which online diplomacy can strengthen global cooperation, maximising opportunities to enhance international networks and engage stakeholders in an inclusive way, with a goal of leaving no-one behind.

Both sessions included considerations for fully virtual and different formats of hybrid meetings. Discussion drew on best practice, including the emerging body of work on ‘diplomatic tradecraft’ being conducted by a range of expert practitioners. This report is a summary of the key points and recommendations from the Wilton Park meeting.

There was a strong consensus that diplomacy should not attempt to replicate activities online; rather it should capitalise on the opportunities offered by the digital space. Diplomatic inter-actions incorporate a range of formal and informal elements with multi-lateral meetings governed by agreed protocols and procedures. A strategic approach to both formal and informal meeting and negotiating spaces could draw on a range of appropriate online and face-to-face platforms, deploying effective sequencing of the different formats.

Summary of key recommendations

- Develop protocols and procedures for online inter-actions, which all participating countries can agree and adhere to.
- Protect data with a principle of ‘do no harm’ and have clear agreements about how information is stored and used.
- Share lessons and suggest criteria for what types of meeting processes work best in different contexts (balance of online and face-to-face interactions).
- Conduct technical training and capacity building for online interactions with a range of stakeholders including civil society, industry and academia.
- Prioritise moderation and facilitation skills in diplomatic training.

- Support diplomats to have a greater understanding of technology and digital developments, and how they interact with political processes.
- Build on existing networks and, where possible, conduct face to face meetings prior to online engagements to enhance trust.
- Explore how to develop trusted alternatives to commercial online platforms. This could include mixed models and should take into account compliance with legal standards.
- Pay attention to representative inclusion when planning a meeting and be aware of challenges participants may face such as linguistic and cultural barriers.
- Invest in infrastructure and digital literacy to increase equitable access to online technology.
- Develop and disseminate guidelines to help ensure the security of human rights advocates and activists when reporting on human rights violations.

Key points

Diplomatic meetings and processes

1. Effective statecraft within and between governments requires political experience, diplomacy, and leadership skills, underpinned by a set of workable rules and procedures. This should be extended to online engagement, providing a transparent framework which all states adhere to, including agreement on roles and participation alongside clarity with regard to the nature and purpose of different processes and negotiations.
2. Technological tools must allow for secure online interactions, including certifying who is present. There are concerns about third party intrusions on some calls. Privacy and security issues may also arise with regard to private sector provision of online platforms and communication channels. Legal frameworks could provide protection for such interactions.
3. Data must be protected, and used effectively, with a principle of 'do no harm', including for humanitarian reasons. There should be transparency and a shared understanding about what information is held and how it is being stored and used on a range of digital platforms.
4. Recommendations
 - Develop protocols and procedures for online inter-actions, which all participating countries can agree and adhere to.
 - Protect data with a principle of 'do no harm' and have clear agreements about how information is stored and used.

Training needs and development of diplomats

5. The values of diplomacy remain, with human interaction and the fundamental skills and qualities of inclusion, empathy, patience, agility and flexibility at the core.
6. The online space provides additional tools, which are likely to be deployed beyond the restrictions imposed by the current pandemic. The digital sphere demands a different approach to emotional and collective intelligence; diplomats need to be even better brokers, listen harder, and communicate more effectively through a multiplicity of channels.
7. A hybrid future of online and in-person meetings is likely. Colleagues should share lessons and develop criteria to decide what type of meeting works best (online/face-to-face/hybrid balance) for different contexts such as large multilateral conferences, bilateral meetings, peace mediation, and humanitarian negotiations.

8. Diplomats need more preparation time and process design skills in order to plan and run meetings effectively in the online space. Moderation and facilitation skills should be prioritised in diplomatic training.
9. The global changes triggered by the COVID19 pandemic combined with increasing technological advances have prompted diplomats to adapt and develop new skills and techniques. In the future, how much technical expertise and what digital tools will diplomats need to be effective? How far should diplomatic training encompass new technologies and to what level?
10. Diplomats will need to develop their understanding of the impact of changing technology including issues which can be politicised or used to influence policy. This may apply, for example, when engaging companies and governments in international negotiations relating to trade and technologies.
11. Digital diplomacy has opened up spaces to foster engaging communication and dialogue between diplomats, elected officials and communities. Governments are communicating through social media more widely, and diplomats have extended their relationships through platforms. Diplomats need further training in how to use these online tools most effectively.
12. Technical training and capacity building sessions organised together with civil society, industry and academia can be mutually beneficial for all sides to learn and enhance their skills. Lessons can be drawn from online learning and educational communities, especially how they can decentralise power and positions.
13. Recommendations
 - Share lessons and suggest criteria for what types of meeting processes work best in different contexts (balance of online and face-to-face interactions).
 - Conduct technical training and capacity building for online interactions with a range of stakeholders including civil society, industry and academia.
 - Prioritise moderation and facilitation skills in diplomatic training
 - Support diplomats to have a greater understanding of technology and digital developments and how they interact with political processes.

Trust

14. Confidence is the currency of diplomacy and it is harder to build and maintain trust online, especially with new diplomats coming into post who do not have established personal relationships.
15. Credibility, reliability and rapport shape trust. Building on existing networks and holding virtual 'one to one' exchanges or, if possible, physical meetings prior to online engagements support greater levels of trust.
16. It is more difficult to conduct delicate negotiations and diplomacy online than in person. Experienced diplomats are skilled in observing body language, picking up non-verbal signals and observing how others engage and talk to each other. Augmented realities, where the real world is enhanced through digital visual, auditory or other sensory elements, is a growing trend which could be explored.
17. Trust in technology is also important; currently there is no secure platform for confidential meetings. In delicate negotiations, diplomats need to be able to trust the privacy and security of the platform and cannot take for granted the integrity of all commercial enterprises. Many do not share the same technological standards and safety features, and interoperability is unsatisfactory. Is it possible to develop trusted alternatives?

18. Recommendations

- Build on existing networks and, where possible, hold physical meetings prior to online meetings to enhance trust.
- Explore how to develop trusted alternatives to commercial online platforms. This could include mixed models and should take into account compliance with legal standards.

Promoting inclusive engagement and access

19. There is an opportunity to increase equitable engagement and inclusive representation by embedding these principles when planning for meetings. Online interactions provide possibilities to engage with people who may not be able to attend a physical meeting, such as youth, women or other experts in remote geographical locations. There is scope to facilitate greater inclusion of the global south.
20. Some good practice already exists. For example, civil society organisations in Kenya have participated in Internet governance capacity building programmes. In Rwanda, online spaces are being created where diplomats and mayors can have open conversations with the communities they serve.
21. Current problems that affect meaningful inclusion include issues with the translation and interpretation of discussions and negotiations into different languages. Cultural differences in ways of communicating and holding an online presence have also impacted virtual meetings.
22. Access to the Internet, technology and skills and information security remain a challenge for some groups and countries and may lead to exclusion. To address this structural problem and limit the digital divide, there needs to be investment in infrastructure, bandwidth, computers, software and digital literacy.
23. The growing size and power of companies is increasing the concentration of expertise in a few places around the world, with the risk that access to technologies is restricted. Diplomats have an important role to play to ensure that access to critical technologies is equitable.
24. Some stakeholders may face specific challenges for engagement in the digital space. People giving testimonies on human rights violations and atrocities are particularly at risk; there should be agreed good practice guidelines that can help ensure their security both during and after the meeting.
25. Recommendations
 - Pay attention to representative inclusion when planning a meeting and be aware of the challenges some participants face such as linguistic and cultural barriers.
 - Invest in infrastructure and digital literacy to increase equitable access to online technology.
 - Develop and disseminate guidelines to help ensure the security of human rights advocates and activists when reporting on human rights violations.

Resources highlighted during the meeting

The Reith Lecture [Onora O'Neill: A question of Trust \(2002\)](#)

Australia has published a [cyber engagement and critical technology strategy](#)

[Digital Diplomacy | E-diplomacy | Cyber Diplomacy](#)

[Handbook on data protection in humanitarian action - ICRC](#)

Alison Dunn

Wilton Park | August 2021

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. To receive our monthly bulletin and latest updates, please subscribe to <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter/>

Annex: What skills do diplomats need to be effective online?

