



Wilton Park

Concept

The future of international diplomacy in an online world

WP1873v| Monday 7 and Wednesday 9 June

Virtual meeting

Time tbc- 2-2.5 hours/meeting

In partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland

Summary

The rapid shift to the online world, precipitated by the global COVID19 pandemic, has accelerated discussion about ways of conducting traditional statecraft. As the world adjusts to a 'new normal', there needs to be a better understanding of the trends, risks and opportunities for international diplomacy, balancing digital and in-person engagement, taking into account effectiveness, security and the principle to 'leave no-one behind'.

A Wilton Park online discussion [The future of international diplomacy in the digital sphere](#) held in September 2020 identified some of the emerging trends and challenges. Taking into account new developments and building on the emerging body of work being conducted by a range of expert practitioners, these meetings will provide an opportunity to advance practice on 2 of the key areas identified in the September discussion:

- How to conduct effective diplomacy in a digital world
- Promoting inclusive engagement

Background

The global spread of the COVID19 pandemic, and the public health measures put in place to control the virus, have challenged traditional modes of diplomacy. The practice of meeting face to face, shaking hands and carrying out in-person diplomatic functions has been replaced by virtual video conferences, without the close personal inter-action traditionally deployed.

Many functions have transitioned successfully into the virtual environment, accelerating an existing trend towards online diplomacy. Digital diplomacy has the potential to enable greater transparency, wider engagement with non-traditional actors, and reduce the environmental impact. In some areas it has enhanced work practices and reduced costs, notably on travel budgets. On the other hand, the production of professional digital events can be expensive and overall efficiency may not have increased when measured in terms of diplomatic outcomes. A key challenge to effective diplomacy in the virtual environment is the reduction in opportunities to build trust and rapport and supplement formal negotiations through informal 'corridor diplomacy'.

There are risks that the increasing digitalisation of international affairs could exacerbate existing inequalities. Some stakeholders may be disadvantaged by the lack of technology, resources and/or the digital literacy and skills. Civil society organisations engaging online may be at particular risk of reprisals from states and other actors. Overall, there are concerns about the confidentiality and security of online discussions.

In the future, it is generally assumed that 'hybrid' meetings will become a common medium for diplomacy. These hybrid meetings could take many forms, providing greater flexibility to broaden engagement with a range of international actors. In addition to the technical considerations, meetings will need to be designed and facilitated to take into account the inherent inequality between in person and on-line attendees. This includes different time zones, on-line attention spans and the sense of missing out on the informal exchanges that take place in the margins of in person meetings.

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.

Overview of meetings

The meetings will bring together selected groupings of up to 25 thought leaders, academics and diplomatic practitioners in a mix of plenary and break out discussions. Participation in the two meetings will differ to reflect the focus of the 2 main themes under discussion, with the assumption that a core group of 10-15 people will be involved in both.

Wilton Park Portal: In between the 2 themed meetings the Wilton Park portal will provide an online platform to enable participants to sustain discussion, post resources and exchange ideas and proposals.

Part One- Monday 7 June

The art of diplomacy in a digital world

Part Two-Wednesday 9 June

Promoting inclusive engagement: diplomacy in a digital world

The meetings will be in English and will be non-attributable under the [Wilton Park Protocol](#), conducted in a neutral manner in order to encourage an open and constructive exchange.

Participation

Up to 25 people from a cross-section of senior diplomatic practitioners and 'next generation' innovators – including 'Tech Ambassadors', leads on diplomatic training, academics, civil society and technical experts with insights into the fast-moving world of online diplomacy and digital inter-action. Participation will be drawn from a range of selected countries eg Canada, Estonia, India, Kenya, Malawi, Mexico, Norway, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Korea, Switzerland, UK, US and multi-lateral and regional institutions -eg African Union, Council of Europe, UN.

Participation in the two meetings will differ to reflect the focus of the 2 main themes under discussion, with the assumption that a core group of 10-15 people will be involved in both.

Part One- The art of diplomacy in a digital world

Purpose of meeting

The meeting will explore the skills, approaches and resources needed to conduct effective diplomacy in an online world, including fully virtual and different formats of hybrid events. Through a mix of plenary and break out groups, the meeting will draw on best practice, including the emerging body of work on 'diplomatic tradecraft' being conducted by a range of expert practitioners.

Topics for discussion to include:

- How to build on the gains and the new opportunities presented by online working (broader outreach to experts, global reach, time gained through reduced travel)
- What skills and competencies are needed to enable effective online diplomacy (online presence, behaviours)
- Constructing and influencing negotiations- meeting formats/shaping the agenda
- How to manage, moderate and design effective online discussions in the digital environment and how can these be incorporated within the frame of diplomatic training?
- Trust and influence- Creating space for 'corridor diplomacy'- what opportunities for informal inter-action?
- What resources will be needed- eg tech support/producers?

The outcomes of the meeting will include recommendations for innovative ways forward and the sharing of best practice. Discussion will also be used to inform Part Two of the series.

Part Two- Promoting inclusive engagement: diplomacy in a digital world

Purpose of meeting

The meeting will consider ways in which online diplomacy can strengthen global co-operation, maximising opportunities to enhance international networks and engage stakeholders in an inclusive way, with a goal of leaving no-one behind. This will include considerations for fully virtual and different formats of hybrid meetings. Through a mix of plenary and break out groups, discussion will draw on best practice, including the emerging body of work on 'diplomatic tradecraft' being conducted by a range of expert practitioners. It will also be informed by the preceding discussion on diplomatic skills and resources.

Topics for discussion to include:

- How to promote and embed inclusive practice to ensure equitable engagement with all stakeholders, across and between Ministries, overseas missions, multi-laterals, civil society organisations, and other experts in different geographical locations

- In what ways can practitioners create and sustain a sense of trust when operating online, taking into account security considerations and the principle of ‘do no harm’?
- What is the scope to build skills and resource capacity to enable more inclusive engagement (eg technological resources and access, skills training, digital literacy)

The outcomes of the meeting will include recommendations for innovative ways forward and the sharing of best practice.

ODA Eligibility

A key aim of this event is to better understand the challenges and opportunities posed by the digitalisation of diplomacy, exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic, exploring how this change will impact accessibility to official and unofficial diplomatic processes, especially for traditionally hard to reach audiences and developing countries. This activity contributes to DAC Code: 151 Government and Civil Society and CRS Code: 15121 Foreign Affairs. It aims to include stakeholders from a number of ODA eligible countries.

Intended outcomes

Meeting outcomes will be captured in a brief note summarising recommendations and best practice, which will be widely circulated to interested parties and posted on Wilton Park and other websites.

Monitoring and evaluation

Wilton Park’s Monitoring and Evaluation process includes follow-up with all participants, speakers and partners on planned actions. An electronic questionnaire will be completed by all participants following the meetings.

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