Virtual diplomacy: a dominant mode of foreign policy conduct in the covid-19 world

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Abstract

Diplomacy provides an important framework for negotiation and cooperation on pertinent issues of bilateral, regional, and global importance among state and non-state actors in the international community. As machinery to implement foreign policy discourse for realizing the core national interests of a country, its importance in the statecraft and global governance is considerably crucial at all times. Given the global adverse impacts of COVID-19 and consequential stringent measures taken up by countries, seamless movements of people across national frontiers have been largely limited. In the pre-COVID scenario, both state and non-state actors engaged more in direct diplomatic intercourses than in virtual ones whereas virtual diplomacy continues to gain ground even in the present New Normal. This article critically examines whether virtual diplomacy remains a dominant mode of inter-state behavior in the COVID-19 context, and also endeavors to assess the future of virtual diplomacy in post-COVID global politics. For this research analysis purpose, qualitative research methodologies such as content analysis, collection of qualitative data through a survey among professionals involved in diplomatic and non-diplomatic fields, and empirical data on Nepal's virtual and non-virtual diplomatic engagements based on press releases published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal in 2020 are primarily used.

Introduction

The revolution of modern information, communication, and technologies (ICTs) in the 19th and 20th centuries has brought about a paradigm shift in the conduct of diplomacy among state and non-state actors in the global community (Malhotra, 2004, p. 2). The inter-state interactions and engagements have witnessed manifold growth and expansion encompassing a wide range of areas of bilateral, regional, and global significance. Contrary to diplomatic intercourses in the past, access to and development of ICTs have rendered diplomatic contacts and cooperation quite easy, fast, and intensive. Such developments and innovations in this significantly evolving domain of diplomacy have led to increased practices of virtual

diplomacy. Indisputably, virtual meetings and conferences have provided unprecedented opportunities to further consolidate inter-state cooperation and partnerships in a relatively more cost-effective, speedy, and hassle-free manner.

In recent days, the internet has metamorphosed into a powerful tool to make voices heard and enhance interests in the processes of global decision-making that reins states' policy maneuverability. In addition, it helps disseminate information, accurate or fabricated, in no time; and also enables traditional diplomatic services to deliver services more quickly and economically (Westcott, 2008). This is a telling sign that ICTs have shaped the conduct of international relations more sharply than ever. Taking into account the context and circumstances of diplomatic engagements, both virtual and direct physical meetings, and negotiations have taken place alongside. Because of the advantages of manoeuvering in negotiations where diplomats or representatives of the states meet face-to-face in person, virtual diplomacy has more generally become rather less frequent and a secondary option for inter-state engagements in normal situations. It is well acknowledged that informal talks and personal rapprochement play important roles in securing breakthroughs in negotiations. This informal element is conspicuously missing in what we practice as virtual diplomacy. However, the incentives offered by this new form of diplomatic initiative are immensely worth taking advantage of.

For some obvious reasons, virtual diplomacy does not appear to be the first choice for the state and non-state actors in their mutual engagements in normal circumstances, though widespread use of it cannot be turned a blind eye to. However, virtual diplomacy tends to become a preferred mode of diplomatic contact and cooperation in extraordinary situations unleashed by some kinds of conflict, war, and the outbreak of epidemics. Over two and a half years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the likelihood of the complete disappearance of this global pandemic is still a far cry at least in foreseeable future. Unless the vaccines that can be inoculated for COVID treatment are developed, it is very unlikely for the entire humanity to get rid of it anytime soon. Given the resurgence of new variants of COVID-19 with its adverse consequences on people's lives, livelihoods, and the global economy, several states have introduced stringent measures such as suspension of international flights, lockdowns, restrictions on mobility, and tough visa regulations, among others, to prevent further transmissions of this deadly virus in the communities.

Given this scenario surrounding the diplomatic domain, this article critically examines the conduct of diplomatic contacts, communication, and engagements among state as well as non-state actors such as regional and international organizations, multinational corporations, and other private sector institutions through the application of virtual diplomacy. The research questions whether virtual diplomacy assumes a dominant mode of foreign policy conduct in the COVID-19 context is well analyzed based on an empirical assessment of the use of virtual diplomacy initiatives by Nepal in the reference year 2020 which also coincides

with the beginning of the pandemic. The outcomes of a qualitative survey poll conducted among mid-level career diplomats and professionals engaged in other non-diplomatic fields in Nepal are also taken into account for rigorous data analysis and results in determination processes.

Understanding Diplomacy

Diplomacy is an important tool and technique to implement foreign policy discourse. It provides an indispensable framework for developing trust, understanding, and cooperation among various state and non-state actors in areas of mutual interests and concerns. As machinery to implement foreign policy discourse for realizing the core national interests of a country, its importance in the statecraft and global governance is considerably crucial at all times, be it peacetime or wartime. Diplomacy and its wise application thus constitute a part and parcel of international relations (Malhotra, 2004, p. 391).

The history of diplomacy dates back to the days even before the emergence of the modern state system. It was practiced in the ancient time in rather rudimentary forms and ways that were not as sophisticated as it is today. It provides a means of communication between and among state and non-state actors for reaching an agreement or understanding in a win-win approach. Its rationale emanates primarily from its focus on finding a mutually acceptable ground and striking a balance in ensuring benefits to the parties involved. (Frechette, 2015, p. xxxiii). Diplomacy- not free from ambiguities and paradoxes- does not operate sustainably if the actors pursue a complete zero-sum game in their mutual interactions. In other words, it is another means for exploring avenues among parties for mutually beneficial cooperation and partnership.

The institution of diplomacy is as old as the history of human civilization. Across different historical epochs, it has evolved embracing both the elements of continuity and change. The modus operandi of diplomacy---use of persuasion and peaceful means for resolving differences---has its timeless value and thus continues to guide diplomatic engagements today. The use of foul means, quite much in use in old diplomacy, is no longer considered appropriate, both from moral and pragmatic perspectives. The nature of diplomacy is such that it does not bear fruits on a short-term basis. The former British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury once said that diplomatic victories result from a meticulous, wise, and careful assessment of prevailing situations and enduring calmness, patience, and far-sighted persistence. (as cited in Clinton, 2014, p. 192). Therefore, the path of diplomacy is a long-term journey, in doing away with conflicts and finding consensus out of differences for the good of the parties involved.

Virtual Diplomacy: How It Evolved?

The tradition of diplomacy is considered to have begun in ancient Greece. However, its historical roots are attributable to the earliest phases of human civilization before Greek civilization. Roberts (2009) maintains that the first instance of a diplomatic document is but a copy of a letter on a cuneiform tablet which was sent around 2500 BC from the kingdom of Ebla to the Kingdom of Amazi (p. 6). The emergence of Greek City-States in the fourth and fifth century BC marked another important milestone towards increased interactions among various entities in their relations. The basic rules and conduct of diplomacy were adopted in the Congress of Sparta in 432 (Acharya, 2019). The salient features of the diplomatic tradition of the time include oral negotiation, ratification of a treaty by a public exchange of solemn oath, the practice of sending emissaries on an ad hoc basis for negotiations, and contribution to developing some diplomatic vocabularies such as truce, neutrality, conference, treaty, alliance, etc., among others.

Further, Romans contributed to developing international law and established relations with neighbors based on treaties which were concluded with the active involvement of diplomats. Having developed elaborate protocol procedures, they introduced the practice of ambassadorial appointments in diplomatic missions abroad. The Romans received envoys with magnificence and granted them immunities; appointed envoys called nuncius (messenger) with written instructions; instituted ligation or legal equivalent to modern embassy-for greater responsibilities; and deputed ambassadors with letters of credence (Acharya, 2019).

The genesis of modern diplomacy was conceived in Renaissance Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when diplomacy was used as a tool to resolve disputes. For the first time in diplomatic history, the practice of instituting diplomatic missions, diplomatic reporting, and diplomatic privileges was established. The Duke of Milan established the first diplomatic mission in 1455 in Genoa. Accordingly, the role and influence of the Church over diplomacy declined considerably. The development of diplomacy in Europe was largely influenced by the diplomatic system in Renaissance Italy and the modern state system that gained prominence following the conclusion of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This treaty introduced the important concepts of peaceful coexistence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, and balance of power. The old diplomacy characterized by secrecy, use of foul means, European affairs, covert pacts, the greater role of diplomats in absence of modern means of transport and ICTs, weak transparency and accountability, among others, remained in vogue from the 16th century to WWI (Malhotra, 2004). As an alternative diplomatic approach, the new diplomacy representing, inter alia, openness, international coverage, specialization, greater roles of political leadership than diplomats, and focus on democratic norms and values appeared on the global scene, overshadowing old diplomatic practices in the 20th century.

What is more, the new invention and innovations in the ICTs brought a dramatic change in the forms and modus operandi of diplomatic engagements and interactions. Since the 1960s, direct hotlines were set up for communications between the Heads of Governments of States, particularly American and former USSR Presidents to deal with crises. As virtual diplomacy is cost-effective, easy, and convenient, the political and diplomatic leaderships have thickened their diplomatic initiatives in a virtual format. For virtual diplomacy to become a reality, the contribution of the scientific community cannot be emphasized strongly enough as their hard toil, day in and day out, has resulted in miraculous innovations in ICTs. Shreds of evidence show that virtual diplomacy has now become an important channel of diplomatic communications and engagements among state and non-state actors. It has been widely used not only in the conduct of bilateral diplomacy but also in practicing multilateral diplomacy that gained ground after WWI, particularly so since WWII.

COVID-19 Outbreak: Resort to Virtual Diplomacy

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, Hubei Province of China in December 2019, indeed, upended the normal course of everyday life. The pandemic has hit almost all spheres of human activity hardest, causing unprecedented impacts on people's life, livelihoods, and the global economy. Entire humanity has come to a critical crossroads, from where the future course of human civilization squarely depends on how the global community tackles this virus in unity, solidarity, and cooperation. According to World Health Organization, the deadly virus has infected more than 601 million people and claimed the lives of over 6.5 million people worldwide (as of August 2022). The pandemic has taught humanity a serious lesson that no individual, country, or region is safe until every individual, country, or region is safe from this deadly virus. The whole world is in the same boat now. This precarious situation has thus called for global cooperation, support, and solidarity in dealing with the pandemic for building back better, stronger, and healthier.

The imposition of lockdowns, suspension of international flights, travel restrictions within and between countries, and disruptions in global supply chains, among other measures, have brought physical interactions and engagements of states and their officials virtually to a standstill. As a consequence, virtual diplomacy has become a viable, pragmatic, and expedient alternative to conducting foreign relations in the COVID-19 context. Since the onset of the pandemic, the global community has resorted more to virtual diplomacy such as video conferences, telephone calls, virtual summitry, etc. than physical diplomatic engagements.

Methodology and Data Analysis: Is Diplomacy Going Virtual?

A qualitative research design with a focus on content analysis, collection of qualitative data through a google survey, and empirical data analysis is employed to analyze varied aspects of the research question related to the relevance of virtual diplomacy in a COVID-19 context

and its future in the post-pandemic situation. In this regard, the data about virtual and non-virtual diplomatic engagements of Nepal with foreign states in 2020 have been collected based on the press releases issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Nepal. In addition, a google survey has been conducted online to collect first-hand primary qualitative data about the relevance of virtual diplomacy in the COVID-19 world from the professionals engaged in diplomatic fields as well as others involved in academics and private sectors. Through this set of questionnaires, the respondents' knowledge about diplomacy, foreign policy, and their acquaintance with increasing trends of virtual diplomacy in global governance was also tested for reaching authentic results outcome.

Similarly, the existing literature on virtual diplomacy and the impacts of COVID-19 on foreign policy approaches of states as a methodological paradigm for content analysis was considered based on secondary sources of data to examine the worldview of a wide range of scholars on the subject. The inductive reasoning method is used to test the validity of the research question of whether virtual diplomacy remains a dominant mode of diplomatic engagements in the COVID-19 world. The following is a brief analysis of the data collected and the feedback received from the research participants.

Table 1. Virtual and Non-Virtual Diplomatic Engagements of Nepal in 2020

S. No.	Months	Virtual Meeting	Physical Meeting	Grand Total
1	January	0	3	3
2	February	0	6	6
3	March	3	0	3
4	April	8	0	8
5	May	1	0	1
6	June	6	0	6
7	July	3	0	3
8	August	4	0	4
9	September	14	0	14
10	October	6	1	7
11	November	2	3	5
12	December	5	1	6
	Total	52	14	66
	In %	78.79	21.21	100

(Source: Press Releases Issued by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal in 2020)

Summary of Respondents' Responses on the Use of Virtual Diplomacy in COVID-19 World

S.N.	Virtual Diplomacy as a dominant mode of diplomatic Engagement in the COVID-19 World		Virtual Diplomacy as an Effective Alternative to Physical Diplomacy in COVID-19 World		Irrelevance of Virtual Diplomacy in the post-COVID context		Virtual Diplomacy Outpacing Physical Diplomacy in Pandemic Context	
	Ratings of Responses	Responses	In %	Responses	In %	Response	In %	Responses	In %
1	Strongly disagree	1	3.23	1	3.23	9	29.03	5	16.13
2	Disagree	1	3.23	0		14	45.16	9	29.03
3	Neutral	2	6.45	5	16.13	5	16.13	10	32.26
4	Agree	20	64.52	16	51.61	2	6.45	7	22.58
5	Strongly Agree	7	22.58	9	29.03	1	3.23	0	0
	Total Responses	31	100	31	100	31		31	100

The above data shows that Nepal engaged in a total of 52 virtual conferences with foreign countries which account for 78.79 percent, and in 14 direct physical meetings representing 21.21 percent in 2020: the year that marks the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. With this result, we can conclude in support of the research question that Nepal adopted virtual diplomacy as a primary mode of diplomatic engagements with other countries during the pandemic situation. This may further be generalized to predict that other countries in the world have given much more importance to virtual diplomacy for their diplomatic intercourses in the context of COVID-19.

Table 2. Responses of Diplomatic and Non-Diplomatic Professionals on the Use of Virtual Diplomacy in COVID-19 Scenario

A google survey questionnaire was sent to over 300 professionals involved in different walks of life. Of them, civil servants including those in the diplomatic field accounted for 58.1 percent while teachers/lecturers, private sector employees, and others represent 25.9 percent, 9.6 percent, and 6.4 percent respectively. Likewise, 74.2 percent of them were males, and 25.8 percent, were females. The respondents hold a minimum bachelor's degree.

The outcome of the google survey demonstrates that virtual diplomacy will remain a major modus operandi of diplomatic engagements among countries during the pandemic situation. 64.52 percent and 22.58 percent of respondents have agreed and strongly agreed respectively that virtual diplomacy will dominate diplomatic intercourses in the COVID-19 context. On the flip side, a meager 3.23 percent of respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed in this regard. Still, the feedback of the respondents shows that physical diplomatic meetings and other intercourses are followed in the present pandemic and future post-pandemic context. In this respect, 29.03 percent and 16.13 percent of respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively that virtual diplomacy will outpace physical diplomatic initiatives in a pandemic situation, against 22.58 percent of feedback in favor of virtual diplomacy. Likewise, 51.61 percent and 29.03 percent of respondents have agreed and strongly agreed respectively that virtual diplomacy can be an effective alternative to physical diplomacy during the pandemic situation.

Conclusion

As an important variant of new diplomacy, virtual diplomacy has gained currency with the revolution in scientific and technological fields in the 19th and 20th centuries. The remarkable breakthroughs in Information, Communications, and Technologies (ICTs) have dramatically changed the nature, mode, and methods of diplomatic engagements in the course of implementation of foreign policy by state and non-state actors in the international community. The data about virtual and physical diplomatic meetings done by Nepal in 2020 and the feedback of the respondents elucidate and support the research question that virtual diplomacy is certainly going to be an important modus operandi of diplomatic engagements in the COVID-19 context. In this respect, it is noteworthy that 78.79 percent of Nepal's diplomatic engagements in 2020 were virtual, and 64.52 percent and 22.58 percent of respondents in a google survey have agreed and strongly agreed respectively that virtual diplomacy will dominate diplomatic intercourses in the COVID-19 context. Meanwhile, it should be well acknowledged that physical diplomatic initiatives will also be used alongside virtual ones.

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