

30 September 2021

DIPLOMACY IN THE AGE OF ZOOM



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SO, THE UK IS DOWN TO HOST THE NEXT BIG UN CLIMATE CONFERENCE, COP26, IN GLASGOW IN NOVEMBER. HURRAH.

But wait! Doesn't that mean lots of people actually sitting together in large airconditioned rooms, inhaling and exhaling particles and germs and COVID-flavoured molecules? Isn't that REALLY DANGEROUS? And doesn't it also mean delegates flying to Scotland from all around the world, pumping out vast CO2 emissions in their multitudinous vapour-trails, thereby rather discrediting the whole point of the exercise?

Reckless madness. Can't we do the whole thing by Zoom instead? Save the Planet, by both words and deeds!

It's interesting to ponder how diplomacy and technology complement each other, or not. Diplomatic protocol dates back to ancient norms of hospitality and reciprocity. Kings and emperors and popes had no choice but to communicate with each other by messenger. They duly created elaborate rules to agree how to treat messengers and their messages. Had King Leonidas of Sparta and King Xerxes of Persia both had WhatsApp, world history might well have been different.

Diplomacy-at-a-distance continued nicely for some 2,000 years. But then along came technology. Telegrams. Telephones. Aeroplanes. Distances shrivel up. What does distance even mean these days?

Leaders and their diplomatic services have installed hotlines, dedicated telephone-lines for direct confidential communication. Using these telephones used to be like chatting underwater, with constant strangled gargling sounds on the line. The Cold War movie *Dr Strangelove* famously showed us the US and Soviet Presidents using such a hotline, in a moment of high emergency:

Now then Dimitri. You know how we've always talked about the possibility of something going wrong with the bomb. The bomb, Dimitri. The hydrogen bomb.

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Well now what happened is, one of our base commanders, he had a sort of, well he went a little funny in the head. You know. Just a little... funny. And uh, he went and did a silly thing. Well, I'll tell you what he did, he ordered his planes... to attack your country.

Well, let me finish, Dimitri. Let me finish, Dimitri. Well, listen, how do you think I feel about it? Can you imagine how I feel about it, Dimitri?

Of course, Number Ten had these phones too. But they tended not to be used by the Prime Minister in person very often: such international telephone-calls typically through interpreters were necessarily rather stilted.

Legend has it that in a room in Number Ten one such special telephone sat unused, to the point where no-one could remember why it was there. One day to the shared consternation of both Prime Minister and Private Secretary who happened to be there – it rang!

The Private Secretary picked it up:

Hullo?

Just testing!

Sound of phone-call being terminated

And they were none the wiser.

The internet has changed all this. How does the internet work? Roughly like this, according to what I learned in my sabbatical year at Harvard in 1998/99 just as the internet was getting going.

What we think of as 'the internet' rests on simple software protocols that allow computers to link to each other. The core requirement was that US missile defence bases stay in contact via a network of computer links even if one part of that network was obliterated: messages would automatically be redirected through the surviving communication lines.

To make that work, messages would not be sent in a linear way as in an old-fashioned phone-call where one caller was linked directly to another caller along metal wires by a 'switchboard'. Instead, the data on computer A was broken down into tiny digital 'packets' that would each find their best route around the network and reassemble on computers B and C far away.

This is more or less straightforward for 'simple' data such as a text message. It's far more difficult for a data-rich colour photograph, let alone a video when gazillions of data-packets have to disassemble, then each swim around the world's data lines then reassemble almost instantaneously to make the viewing experience tolerable. Which is why not that long ago videos on the internet were jerky and unreliable.

Nonetheless, diplomatic services spent lots of money on fancy video-conferencing facilities so that embassies and HQ could talk directly. But they too were clunky. Calls had to be booked, and

all concerned would troop into dedicated rooms to see the one screen capable of using the then technology.

Today, the astonishing results of Moore's Law (the prediction that the cost of repeated doubling of computer-chip power would tumble) have compounded up over some 30 years. Videos now work smoothly, to the point where family WhatsApp chats across the planet are in effect free. Far-flung diplomats typically talk easily with each other or with the Ministry by video link from secure mobile phones.

This, of course, reopens the questions that keep popping up in the cynical minds of hard-pressed finance ministry officials:

What is diplomacy anyway? We agree, it's all about direct serious government-to-government talking. But do we really still need old-fashioned diplomats and all those expensive overseas buildings and cars and entertaining and other useless flimflam?

We now have awesome communication kit unavailable in times past. Why can't governments just talk to each other directly, whenever they like?

Of course, you pampered diplomats insist that talking is far better to do face-to-face. Guess what? That's what Zoom and Teams let us do, almost for free!

The problem with Zoomy-type online discussions is that the format is weirdly ultra-democratic. There's no sense of occasion. There is no 'occasion'. No buzz in the room as everyone waits for a famous keynote speaker. No sense of shared surprise when a speaker says something provocative. No sense of shared energy and amusement.

Instead, everything is down to you and your screen that itself might be just a few square inches on a mobile phone. Authority and any sense of commanding presence drain away. You don't need even to pretend to listen to anyone. You can turn off your camera and stroll away for a cup of coffee, pleading a bad connection or a knock at the door. The most powerful leaders on earth shrink down, just another postage-stamp sized face droning away on one part of your screen. It's all so *flat*. No-one *cares*.

So many people during the COVID-19 lockdowns have failed to grasp the obvious fact that video meetings have to be done differently. Your PowerPoint slides were pretty bad even for live events: now they are just unreadable on a small screen. To capture and maintain attention when your audience is with you on all sorts of platforms and screens, you need a quite different style and quite different content. Everything needs to be simplified and subtly exaggerated. Far better to say a few big things and then stop than your usual longer list of clever smaller things.

This is why to be useful any significant international event such as COP26 will continue to need to be done 'live', with actual humans breathing in their myriad shared germs and viruses and bacteria.

You just can't generate any sense of urgency or importance via online events. A leader committing to expensive and maybe unpopular climate programmes needs to be there in the room with

colleagues. To look directly at those colleagues in their eyes, to get that irreplaceable visceral sense of how far (if at all) those other leaders are likely to be trustworthy as they too sign up. And then to have that all-important quiet word in the corridor with a key ally afterwards, to agree how issues will be handled going forward.

How all that is to work on the day needs actual diplomats there at the conference centre beforehand, working out how to help their leaders meet the right people at the right time and avoid the wrong people all the time.

Sure, lots of this can be done in advance remotely. And sure, lots of useless expensive process drawn from ages long gone might be dropped.

But in dropping useless expensive old process, let's not replace it with useless expensive new process. The more so if the very nature of the new format means that no-one takes the discussions seriously. That no-one is really committed to what's agreed.

*First published on 7 July 2021 by **Diplomat Magazine** [Home - Diplomat Magazine](#)*

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