DiploCircle

MAGAZINE

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DiPLO

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Introduction

Welcome to DiploCircle Magazine #3!

DiploCircle Magazine #3 is dedicated to showcasing some of the best publications by Diplo-related people in 2021. These publications have appeared on Diplo's blog and within the *Diplo Wisdom Circle* initiative, but also on external outlets such as the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), the International Forum on Diplomatic Training (IFDT), and the International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES).

The selection of texts aims to showcase the various topics and issues discussed by Diplo-related people, ranging from online learning, digital diplomacy, and internet governance, to the UN jubilee, deplatforming, and international security, to name but a few.

DiploCircle Magazine #3 is also the last edition of this publication. Starting from 2022, the magazine will be fused with the *Diplo Wisdom Circle* initiative in order to more regularly showcase the best written pieces produced by Diplo-related people in various outlets. The new online format will provide a more dynamic and interactive space for discussions for both readers and authors.

We hope you will enjoy reading this edition, and that the published pieces are both informative and engaging.

In case you wish to contribute to our blog, or have any related queries, please contact Dr Andre Saramago at andres@diplomacy.edu.

Happy reading!

1. Long-reads

Asoke Mukerji

India's former permanent representative to the United Nations;
Faculty member, Diplo

Signing of the UN Charter, 26 June 1945

First published on the ICWA website, 26 June

On 26 June 1945, India became a founder of the United Nations along with 50 other member states. Over 2.5 million Indian soldiers had volunteered to fight on the Allied side during the Second World War, which catalysed the creation of the United Nations. 26 Allied nations fighting together in the Second World War met in Washington in January 1942. These were the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, China, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Costa Rica, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Norway, Panama, Poland, Union of South Africa, and Yugoslavia.

From Asia, only the Republic of China and India were among the original 26 signatories of the *Charter of the United Nations* issued by the Conference, that launched the process to create the UN and its supporting institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank between 1942–45.

The Indian delegation negotiating at Bretton Woods with other participants at the United Nations Financial and Monetary Conference between 1–22 July 1944, included the first Indian to be appointed governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Sir C. D. Deshmukh; the person who would become the first finance minister of independent India, Sir Shanmukham Chetty; and A. D. Shroff from the private sector who was one of the authors of the *Bombay Plan*. The delegation successfully negotiated India's presence in the Executive Board of the IMF and World Bank, with the sixth largest allocation of special drawing rights (SDRs) after the United States, United Kingdom, Soviet Union, China, and France.

The treaty (*UN Charter*) creating the United Nations was signed for British India by Sir Arcot Ramaswami Mudaliar (who had been active in Indian politics as a member of the Justice Party, and subsequently became the first elected president of the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 1946–47), and for India's princely states by Sir V. T. Krishnamachari (who had been the dewan of Baroda during 1927–44, and subsequently became the prime minister of Jaipur State during 1946–49, representing the princely state as one of the two vice presidents of India's Constituent Assembly).

During the negotiations leading to the *UN Charter*, the Indian delegation is credited for having proposed three ideas that became part of the treaty's provision – the promotion of human rights as one of the objectives of the UN (Article 1.3), penalising member states that failed to pay their assessed contributions (Article 19), and criteria for the election of non-permanent member states to the UN Security Council (Article 23).

Making India's statement at the first session of the UN General Assembly on 18 January 1946, Sir Ramaswami Mudaliar had said India had (with several other countries) opposed the provision of the veto power of the five self-selected permanent members of the UN Security Council. However, the clear commitment in the *UN Charter* itself was that 'at the end of the ten years' period when we re-examine the Charter, there will be unanimity again, and that this United Nations Charter will not require all the safeguards which big nations sometimes claim and small nations so unwillingly give'.

This review provision contained in Article 109 of the *UN Charter* was never implemented, leading to the ineffectiveness of the UN Security Council today. India's call for 'reformed multilateralism' addresses this issue squarely.

Many ask what makes the membership of the UN relevant for India? It was Vijayalakshmi Pandit, leading the Indian delegation at the second UN General Assembly session, who pointed to the core interest of India on 17 September 1947, a month after India's independence from British colonial rule. She said: 'We cannot eat an ideology; we cannot brandish an ideology and feel that we are clothed and housed. Food, clothing, shelter, education, medical services – these are the things we need. We know that we can only obtain them by our joint efforts as a people, and with the help and co-operation of those who are in more fortunate circumstances than ourselves.'

This has been vindicated with the global development agenda focused on the sustainable development goals (SDGs) becoming the UN's main agenda today.

Kishan Rana

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Why should diplomatic academies shift to online learning?

First published on the IFDT website, September 2021

A major outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe has been a surge in online distance learning. As they say, necessity is a great mother of both innovation and change. With schools, universities, and other educational institutions closed, online teaching became the only way to keep the learning process going, ensuring that students did not miss out on academic schedules in the difficult, painful months since March 2020. At the same time, in many parts of the world, where online distance learning was long a norm and a method of choice, new ideas have evolved. A disaster thus becomes an opportunity, in its own way.

Let us be candid. Many foreign ministries have long resisted distance learning, be it out of conservatism or resistance to change among the senior leadership at foreign ministries. Perhaps among the diplomatic training institution, faculty have been apprehensive over re-learning new teaching methodologies. However, in reality, neither is the change drastic nor difficult. And it brings a huge amount of value. Let us look at a bit of background before getting into the real, tangible benefits of online learning.

Canada was among the first converts to online distance teaching. So was the United States. It was only in the past ten years that some European diplomatic academies began to experiment in this direction. We may note among them the UK Diplomatic Academy, launched in 2015, which from the outset has treated distance learning as a prime platform of choice. Australia, China, India, and Japan were among the resisting foreign-ministry training institutions, but that may now have changed. In contrast, both Africa and Latin America have been open-minded for quite some time, often in the sense of enlisting their officials in training programmes run by foreign entities.

As an online teacher with DiploFoundation for over 20 years, I have witnessed both successes and failures with convincing foreign ministries to experiment with and adopt online learning. Here is a balance sheet, listing the pros and the cons of online and traditional classroom teaching. Let us look at the shortcomings, some real, and others a bit contrived based on lack of understanding.

First, direct teacher–student communication, where eyes meet and the student– teacher look deeply into one another, cannot be replicated online. True. But has that mythical ancient ashram or cloistered small academy not long been lost in the mists of time? Do the modern bricks-and-mortar teaching institutions replicate the ancient ways? And while Oxford, Cambridge, and a few other elite institutions use the tutorial method, involving intensive personal teaching, that is no longer a norm at undergraduate courses. In today's crowded classrooms, sometimes with hundreds of students, or even at lectures to smaller groups, can face-to-face lectures accommodate more than a few Questions & Answers? Yes, the graduate seminar session or the workshop still carry that flavour of the past, but is it impossible to replicate that online? We manage very well at Diplo with seminar papers written jointly by groups of four or five participants, who work across continents and cultures to produce jointly written essays of 1,600 words.

Second, except in a compressed course, the online teaching pace is slow, usually offered as a part-time option. At Diplo's part-time courses, the commitment for each participant is to spare up to eight hours each week to the course – all at times convenient to each, except for the weekly one-hour online chat that takes place at a fixed time. Each lecture has a week-long cycle, during which it is chewed over by a class of 15 or 20, who examine the lecture text of 4,000 plus words with between 50 to 80 comments, queries, and URLs that they provide. That permits the concepts, toolbox methods, and insights to be absorbed gradually by the class participants. We might even say that a measured pace is almost built into the online method. That makes for deep learning.

Third, with geography not a barrier, class members come from diverse locations, and for Diplo, different countries as well. That can be replicated in a ministry of foreign affairs (MFA) academy in part because diplomats participating in a course will be from many embassy and consulate locations. Further, one can bring in officials from different ministries, representatives of civil society, think tanks, business, and others. And one might even blend into that locally-engaged staff that now increasingly handle quasi-diplomatic tasks. Incidentally, optimal use of local staff is one area in which Global South countries seriously lag behind the West

Finally, some points on how MFAs might shift to online methods.

One: An online option needs investment into a good 'learning management system'. That is not rocket science, and good templates are widely available. One should ensure that the 'hypertext' option is used because that is central to good text-based learning. Not to use hypertext today is like buying a fine car but rejecting the convenience of automatic transmission because one is hung up on a stick shift.

Two: National lockdowns and closed schools and colleges have accustomed all of us to Zoom and other fine videoconferencing platforms. At Diplo, we have moved beyond text-based teaching, but we still find much value in using text. Paradoxically, an online chat based on text is preferred by some class members, as superior to video chats. Why? For one thing, it allows participants to pursue several parallel conversation tracks, unlike what become video monologues, and we still confront video connectivity issues at places. Thus, the text-based chat is alive and kicking vigorously.

Three: It pays to look around, enlist one's officials in courses run by entities such as the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and Diplo, and others as feasible, and absorb their good methods. This is an easy way to gain insights into practical options for online learning, and avoid both omissions and errors. Incidentally, Diplo materials are mostly on a 'global commons' copyright platform, so fair use, with attribution, makes it easy to reuse materials that we have developed.

**What will online teaching involve for the MFAs?**

First, the text should be written out, typically 3,000 to 4,500 words per lecture, with lots of embedded URLs; the latter is vital as the internet is an easy source for supplementary teaching material, besides of course one's own MFA texts that can be supplied as PDF files. The text must be revised and updated each year. The online method is interactive in ways that face-to-face teaching cannot be, in the range of material that can be furnished for immediate access.

Second, the teachers can be drawn from both retired practitioners and academia. It is really the former that make the best teachers for courses run by MFAs, with a range of practical knowledge that is unmatched by anyone from outside the world of practice. One should also bring in people from business, cultural circles, the media, think tanks, and others from public life.

Third, leavening the class with those from other fields, i.e. different entities connected with foreign affairs, produces huge advantage. More than elsewhere, much learning takes place among class participants, and this is intensified when team methods are used to writing seminar papers and other class assignments. And since geography is not an inhibitor, such diversity becomes an asset.

Much of the distance-learning materials are a one-time investment, and while course materials need to be updated continually, the running cost of online learning is modest, besides payments to the faculty and the support staff. And consider the huge savings in not having to bring in both the participants and the faculty and staff to a single location.

To sum up, the pandemic has given a major boost to distance learning. It is now the method of choice for diplomatic systems, thanks to technology, convenience, and practicality..
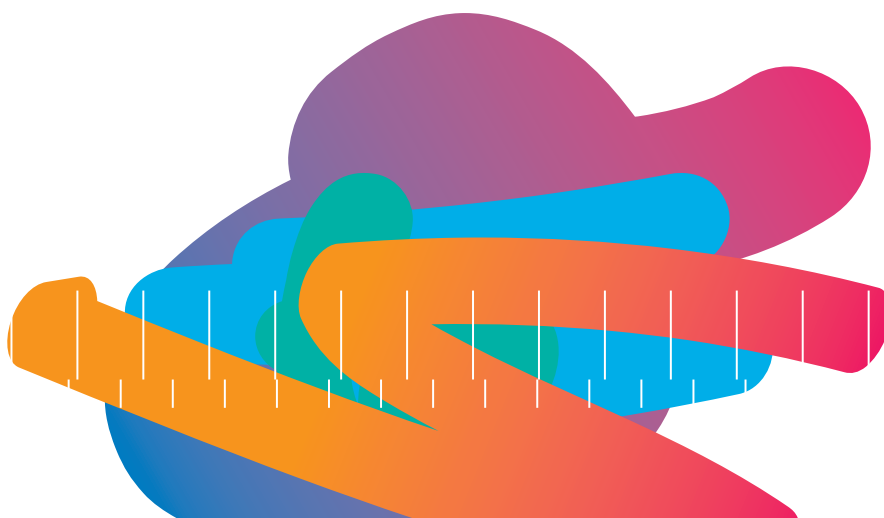
Milan Jazbec

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O.K. Corral 140 years later: Between frontier violence and the emerging rule of law

First published on the IFIMES[1] website, October 2021

It was 140 years ago today that Wyatt Earp took his group to fight the outlaws of the Clanton gang. It was a bright, windy, and chilly day of 26 October 1881 that – without its actors being exactly aware of it – paved the way for the rule of law to become an irreversible fact.

Justice, rule of law, and the European integration process

There is a telling, a primary and basic articulation from the Bible, of what we understand today as the rule of law: 'treat others as you want to be treated'. The ancient Roman law puts this more precisely and it is still relevant nowadays, both among lawyers and among societies: let there be justice so that the world will not collapse (as part of habeas corpus). The French Revolution of 1789 defined it with the timeless slogan 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', and with the French *Declaration of the Rights of the Man and the Citizen*. The *Magna Carta Libertatum* from the year 1215[2] (as the legal and political foundation), as well as the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* from 1948 (as a political and policy derivate) confirmed it. One could find numerous, more or less exact principles and anchors to understand, as well as to comprehend justice. People want justice to rule their lives; they want everybody to be just and fair, doing nothing on the account of others.

Generally speaking, this originates from the eternal question of good and bad, and how to provide the former and to prevent the latter. Closely related to this is the issue of honour and duty as well: Doc Holliday, a controversial figure of the Western frontier, 'saw what he did on the street fight and afterwards as a duty', since 'honor mattered to him at a level few realized'; he believed 'that he was doing something right and good'.[3]

Justice could be defined as the result of a process through which formal authorities try to find out or to judge fairly what is right and what is wrong, and to punish those who do not stick to the defined rules or who disrespect and disobey them. Commonly, the popular notions of justice and fairness overlap with the formal expression and the codified legal systems. Therefore, law must be just and fair, doing and enabling to do right.

Referring to this, the principle of the rule of law is a value (and a value system) in itself which stems from justice. It means that only law and nothing else should govern people. There should not be any place for tyranny or arbitrary behaviour, but only for righteousness. The rule of law (the access to law by everyone, free and fair trial, and equality under the law for everyone) is a cornerstone of any contemporary democratic society, meaning it is an internationally accepted doctrine. It is the basic principle of the European Union, but also of the whole web of international governmental and non-governmental movements and groups, including the United Nations' organisation and its system of specialised and other institutions. One could easily claim that the European integration process stands up for its production of values, where rule of law is at the forefront.[4] Around this cornerstone, democracy, independent courts, human rights, market economy, free and fair elections, and the freedom of media, to name the most outstanding ones, form a huge cluster of articulating, expressing and, above all, implementing what is just.

This set of values is directly bound to an individual. Individuality, as an emanation of a human being who is free in its original position, derives directly and clearly from the heritage of the French Revolution. In the 21st century, an individual is characterised by emancipation and protection. Hence, a person is universally free and protected by a set of legal instruments that shall guarantee his or her rights at both national and international levels. An individual has a political right and a legal option to seek protection by international institutions when being oppressed by national institutions of his or her own state. When speaking of the EU, everybody has a legal option to seek protection and justice from one's own state before the European Court of Human Rights when legal venues in one's own state are procedurally exhausted.

Together with the abolition of the death penalty and the right to a clean and healthy environment, this presents the most far-reaching advancement of the European integration process.

Booming Western Frontier and the need for rule of law

In the second part of the 19th century, the American West, meaning west of St Louis, across the Mississippi River, all the way to the Rocky Mountains, Mexico, and Canada, was a huge, borderless territory where no law was known, apart from violence. What was right was defined by a stronger rifle, muscles, and a bigger number of members in a group, gang or similar: 'in those days [when] the pistol instead of law determined issues'.[5] The Wild West was a mixture of everything that people moving to that part of the continent, in a search for a new and better life, were bringing with them. Along moved groups of outlaws, smugglers, killers, and adventurers seeking wealth and power. Formal structures of law, though slowly growing, were thin and weak in number of personnel and executive power (i.e. shooting and fighting skills to face outlaw forms of all possible kinds). On the one side, citizens expected protection from lawmen, on the other, lawmen were under contradicting huge pressure from outlaws of all possible kinds.

It was usually the discovery of gold, silver, or a similar mineral that brought crowds from everywhere to a single place, forming a booming town. Such a town grew practically overnight, with stores, magazines, saloons, hotels, churches, courts, jails and schools. It is not difficult to imagine how dynamic, chaotic, and ruthless those places were. Consequently, law and order were something that came on the agenda later on. Working, drinking, gambling, all that was in the forefront of social behaviour. The end of the American Civil War (1861–65) added to that mess numerous groups of disillusioned soldiers, and jobless adventurers and criminals who spread across the West, and with them violence in various forms. However, it consequently also resulted in a slow but steady rise of law and order.

Tombstone, a small frontier booming silver-mine town in the southwest Arizona Territory, not far from the Mexican border, was a typical example of such a place. It was founded in 1879 with just around 100 citizens, but grew rapidly in two years to more than 7,000, becoming the most booming frontier town of its wider area. Consequently, all kinds of people came there, and all aspects of life were present: 'by 1881 the town boasted fancy restaurants, a bowling alley, four churches, an ice house, a school, an opera house, two banks, three newspapers, and an ice cream parlour, along with 110 saloons, 14 gambling halls, and numerous brothels, all situated among a number of dirty, hardscrabble mines'.[6] A rather picturesque but highly realistic description of what a romantic western scenery was supposed to look like in those pioneer days.

Too many challenges for justice to be cemented, but at the same time also enough opportunities for heading firmly that way.

The gunfight at the O.K. Corral

The shoot-out itself was the result of the tensions and conflicts between local authorities (with Virgil Earp as city marshal) and various outlaw gangs, the Clanton gang being one of the most exposed. The Clanton's smuggled different minerals from Mexico on which the US Government imposed high taxes, stole and resold cattle, and demonstrated violence of all kinds.

A chain of events led to the shoot-out. In the last few days before it, Ike Clanton mostly provoked the Earps, swearing how he was going to kill them. City people were provoked and disturbed by this, not least the Earp brothers, to whom people kept reporting about these threats. Gambling and drinking were just adding to the heated atmosphere. A dialogue between the bartender Clem and Wyatt minutes before the fight sent a clear message: 'Is there gonna be a fight, Wyatt?' – 'I think there must be.'[7] It was not exactly planned, but was primarily produced by a highly unavoidable stream of events that inevitably led to the fight.

It happened on Fremont Street, close to the O.K. Corral, however the latter became a symbol of the shoot-out, and both the truths as well as myths around it. Formally, City Marshall Virgil Earp tried to disarm the group, since it was forbidden by decree to carry guns within city limits. After an unsuccessful effort, the fight erupted. Nine people were involved all together: four lawmen (Wyatt, Morgan, and Virgil Earp, and Doc Holliday) and five outlaws (Ike and Billy Clanton, Tom and Frank McLaury, and Billy Claiborne).

Now let us try to imagine it: Less than a minute of heavy shooting from the closest vicinity, between two to three meters only, took place in an area of approximately 10 x 10 meters. A heavily crowded small place, with two groups of nine people standing and facing each other. Shooting, shouting, and killing filled the place when men with guns fired about 30 shots in a bit more than 30 seconds ('The fight was hardly started before it was over.')[8]. Bullets were flying everywhere and created hell on Earth. Smoke, powder, smell, heavy, hot air, hot blood marked the small lot, full of destiny, past and future. A mess, chaos, and a countdown was how the cradle of the rule of law must have looked like in that brutal reality.

Two shots followed Virgil's demand to hand over the guns, and then the cannonade erupted. The first two shots were almost indistinguishable, but Billy Clanton most probably drew first and Wyatt immediately after. However, since he was so incredibly fast with the gun, it happened practically at the same time. The result of the gunfire was clear: three dead (Tom and Frank McLaury, and Billy Clanton), three wounded (Morgan and Virgil Earp, and Doc Holliday touched by a bullet), and two escaped (Ike Clanton and Billy Claiborne ran away).

In addition, it was the figure of Wyatt Earp standing up, decisive and determined, coldblooded, full of courage, without any scratch. He was never touched by a single bullet in his 80 years of life, even though he was involved in many fights and situations on the very edge. His previous work as a sheriff in Dodge City earned him an image and steeled him. As Bat Masterson claims, the top shooter has to be armed with courage, experience, and deliberation.[9] Only this combination makes him the best. In brief, 'Wyatt Earp was a hard man who lived in troubled times'.[10] All that earned him a status of a legend.

The countdown and its aftermath

There are at least two sorts of groundbreaking consequences of the fight, namely, the immediate and the long-term.

After the initial shock and recovery, things began to clear down. There were instantaneous newspaper reports, both the Tombstone ones and those around the USA. The former covered everything in detail, the latter more generally and in an Aesopian way, but the majority favoured the lawmen. A month-long court hearing let Earp's company off the hook, although disputes about who started the shooting did not settle down for decades. However, a careful and abrupt examination of the dead bodies showed that they could not have their hands up as some witnesses, including Ike Clanton, who sued the file for murder, claimed.
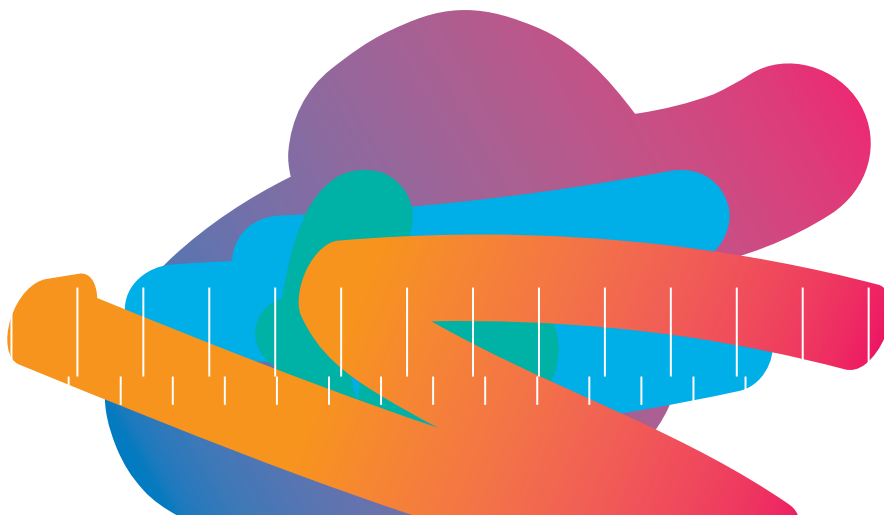
Wyatt Earp became the centre of the O.K. Corral legend ever since. Not only was he quiet and rather introverted, but he also known for the fact that 'he never, at any time in his career, resorted to the pistol excepting in cases where such a course was absolutely necessary', meaning that 'he always arrayed himself on the side of law and order'.[11] Perhaps a brief evening discussion between young Wyatt and his father Nicholas on their way towards the West best explains the gunman's attitude towards the rule of law: 'I got to tell you something, Wyatt. You know I'm a man that believes in the law. After your family, it's about the only thing you got to believe in.'[12] The latter becomes clearly visible in Wyatt's brisk reply to the friend's remark that he has to stick to the law: 'I won't let them use the law to kill me and my family, John.'[13]

A triangular matrix best defines Wyatt Earp from this point of view: family, law and friendship. The three Earp brothers present a unique case in the history of the Wild West. Combined with Wyatt's relation and friendship with Doc Holliday (being all in one: dentist, sporting man, adventurer, and gambler, drunk, and above all a scrupulous, unachievable gunman) shows how difficult is the way towards creating and cementing what are indispensable values.

In the long run, the event in Tombstone, close to the Fly's shop, became known as the most famous shoot-out in the history of the American Wild West. Controversies about what was right and what was wrong on a broader scale remained alive for more than a century. It showed that striving for the rule of law is a process and not a one-time achievement. Each generation has to contribute to it with its deeds, and above all with the universal spread of its validity and acceptance, showing that the rule of law shall remain the fundamental criteria for a just and lasting humane society.

The epilogue

The gunfight at O.K. Corral included archetypal images of the West: violence, justice, a gunfight, saloons, drinks, poker and women, cattle, marshals, sheriffs and outlaws, cowboys, local newspapers, court hearings, political backgrounds, jealousy, murder, revenge, just name it. But at the end of the day, it all comes down to the issue of ensuring justice for innocent people and their families. It could be claimed that this awareness was initiated in the town of Tombstone on that very afternoon.

This epitome codified the rule of law as a value, a norm, and a benchmark as we know it today, although it was perhaps less noticeable then. The historical process would have led to this anyway, but much later, being less dramatic, spectacular, and impressive, and much less decisive, too.

The real dimension of the most famous shoot-out of the West is sliding into the past, but it is its symbolic value that is, on the contrary, gaining importance. Not directly, though, but as a cornerstone of the European integration process that has made Europe the most attractive place to live in. This is the result of a long, complicated, and heavy political and diplomatic process that has one of its strong roots in a bright, long-gone early Wednesday afternoon in the frontier town of Tombstone. It would be quite enough if this was remembered for period to come.
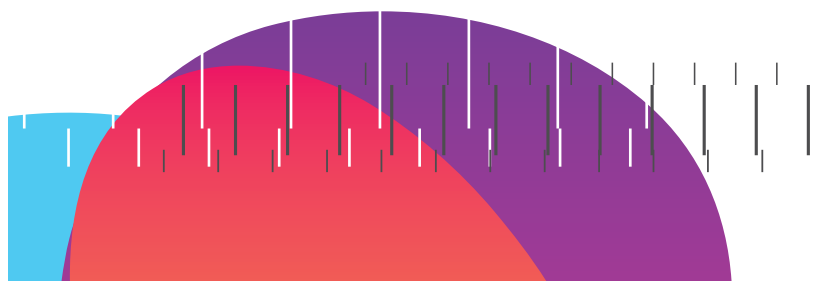
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13 *Wyatt Earp*, 2 h 28 min.

2. Blog posts

Kishan Rana

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The Glasgow environment summit: A new beginning?

First published on *Diplo Blog*, 1 November

Two images capture the global environment talkfest, the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), which dominates the media for some 12 days, commencing 1 November 2021.

A delightfully innovative 150-second video is viral in the social media; a friendly dinosaur barges into the UNGA Assembly Chamber. This dinosaur asks the podium guard: 'You OK?', and when he mumbles a terrified response, this creature from the past adjusts the microphone and says: 'Listen up! I know a thing or two about extinction … Let me tell you … Going extinct is a baadd thing …'. The dinosaur goes on to conclude: We were wiped out by a giant meteor, but you are doing this to yourselves!

The second image in the mind's eye is of Greta Thunberg, who, with a smile, mocks with eloquent simplicity our current actions on climate-change mitigation, as just: 'blah…blah…blah'.

These are simple, powerful messages: Earth's environmental is already in the ICU, and is all set to go on life support. Business as usual is, plainly speaking, baadd. It defies elementary good sense.

The global community's eminent environmental experts will surely lock horns this week in Glasgow, UK, those on official delegations pushing their country narratives. With arcane arguments, in which only they and their ilk might understand, they will sprout jargon, crunch numbers, and produce alternate 'scenarios'. And the diplomats of the national delegations will surely come up with more elegant reasoning, sophisticated arguments. But the real challenge is going to be: who might have the will to bite the bullet, and push their own countries into perhaps the harshest political decision they might ever confront in their lives.

What's this? The universal goal is: NET ZERO – the date by which each country must commit itself to no more additional carbon emissions that will enter the Earth's atmosphere, after deducting the carbon burden that will be somehow absorbed, or mitigated, or neutralised. That will impact our lives and cost in terms of reduced development.

In world totals of carbon emissions, India lies 4th, with China, the USA, the EU, and Russia among the top 5. (China is responsible for more emissions than the next three: the USA, EU, and India). In per capita figures, India is by far the lowest among them. But India's figures will mushroom as the country moves beyond its low middle-income status, which is inevitable. That's why some see India's success in curbing carbon as key. But is the world ready to really help India?

India resisted setting out its net zero year, but at COP26, PM Modi has just set 2070 as India's target date. That is a major development. Against this, a fair number from the West have signed up to the target year goals set by earlier COP summits, 2050. A few have been braver, more ambitious. The simple question for India: is it likely to end up in a 'spoiler' role? That is seen by some foreign observers as a hallmark in the past, on some global issues, notably at the WTO. India was also, in the past, been labelled as an 'outlier'. That makes the net zero date important. Can India squeeze that date down further?

More than 30 years back, India and others of the developing world produced the doctrine of 'common but differentiated responsibility'. That line of argument is entirely logical, and it is now an accepted vital feature of the global environment policy. Those that are responsible for most of environmental degradation, plus massive pollution, over long periods of time when we were all grossly negligent of the environmental impact of the industrial revolution, mining and deforestation activities, must also bear the greatest share of the burden of dealing with the consequences of polluting our shared Earth. That position was naturally supported by the Global South, though with varying degrees of passion. Some were content to speak the minimum, and avoid giving offence to powerful, rich states, on whom they depended for foreign aid or had other obligations.

India resisted setting an overall reduction in carbon emissions. Instead, it had set an 'emissions-intensity' target, promising a 33% to 35% reduction between 2005 and 2030. That is a relative reduction, not an absolute goal, because even if 'intensity' is down, the sheer numbers for a growing, developing country must produce a rise in the absolute figure of carbon emissions. As for renewable energy, at COP26, PM Modi has promised to get 50% of energy from renewables by 2030. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has been the major culprit in setting back targets the world over. Can India set a date to stop building coal-fired power plants?

Let's look at China's goals. China is the world's largest CO_2 emitter, responsible for a quarter of the global total. Its emissions are to peak in 2030, and by then, 25% of energy will be from non-fossils. It has set 2060 as its net zero date. China has promised to stop building coal-fired power stations overseas; but not at home. China has also saddled Pakistan with coal plants, beyond its anticipated needs, and a debt that will be difficult to repay. And China is to construct 47 major new thermal power plants under its current 5-Year Plan. What does that say for its carbon goals?

The notion of equity remains vital for India, even in the face of resistance from the Western countries, led by the USA, that are clearly the principal culprits for historical pollution and environmental degradation. The commitments that all these rich states had made to the global community, in the past 30 and more years, have simply not been translated into action. Nor has the environment technology sharing promised by these states, taken place. We, as Global South countries, plus the environment activists and NGOs, keep singing the same song, but with diminishing impact. Now they simply don't listen.
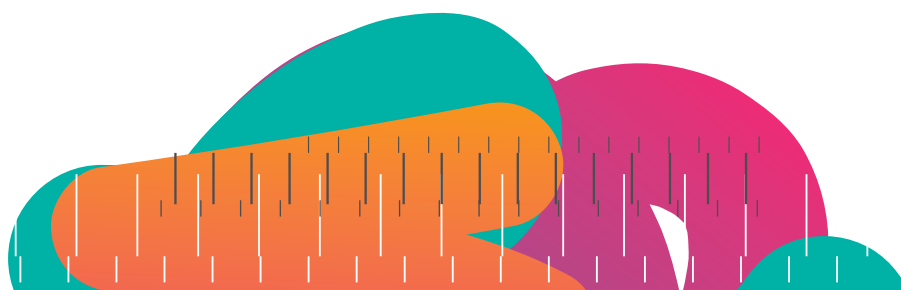
What then does this dire, hopeless situation mean for small, highly vulnerable countries that are on the front-line of this existential environment disaster? Think of the small island developing states (i.e. members of the small island states, the SIDS Forum)? Whether it is the Maldives, the Seychelles, or the small island countries of the South Pacific, the relentless rise in sea levels means that they will have to abandon their home habitat within the next 10 or 15 years, and some even sooner. That is now inevitable, in spite of anything that we might be able to do right now, because of the inexorable process underway. No mitigating actions are possible.

Beyond those island states, many others around the world, including India, will also face devastating coastal inundation, when sea levels rise by 1 and 2 meters or more. That means that the major cities on the coast, starting in India with Chennai, Kolkata, and Mumbai, and a host of other coastal cities, towns and villages, will face devastation, including abandonment of some of their most valuable seafront properties. Similar damage will occur along the entire 5,000 km coastline of India. And what will happen to a low-lying and densely popu-lated country like Bangladesh? These issues boggle the imagination.

What are India's challenges?

First, at the COP26 conference, India cannot afford to be isolated, or even worse, become an outlier. That's mainly tackled in the new goals announced on 1 November at COP26. But it will be hard to build coalitions with fellow developing countries. How does India build on a congruence of interests? It shares some interests in common with China, and has to find a way to handle this at a time when that bilateral relationship with Beijing is so fraught.

Second, arguments about equity and justice, and primary responsibility for the global environmental dam-age, all these will only go so far. Even other developing countries now seem to have diminishing patience with these viewpoints despite the facts and the sound reasoning. How does India tackle this?

Third, as in many other situations, India is 'a world of its own'. For example, on a per capita basis, India's con-tribution to carbon emissions has risen in the past 20 years, and stands at 1.9 tons per person, but that is a great deal less than the per capita responsibility or the Western world. And China is at 8.1 tons per capita; the USA is at 15.5.

As India's incomes rise, this per capita share will inevitably rise; that becomes a global problem because of the country's population size. India cannot stop development and progress, but must find far greater efficien-cies in energy utilisation. And coal lies at the heart of this problem. It must turn to renewable energy, solar and wind especially, with far greater vigour. Can it obtain help for the required innovation and technology shift? How can developing countries make that argument resonate?

Fourth, with fellow developing countries, India has to be agile and work in a constructive fashion. India may now finally get to see how well the actions by its Ministry of External Affairs in creating a 'Development Partnership Administration' in 2013 has worked. It simply must to begin a much larger, more ambitious programme of technical assistance for developing states. That is India's ace card. India cannot match China's deep pockets for financial aid or for infrastructure projects, but it is a world-beater in technical assistance. This is an underutilised asset.

Finally, on the global canvas, it is very possible that at Glasgow, a breakdown or a splintering of the G77 group of developing countries may take place. There are some that feel that 'solidarity' of the Global South has increasingly become hollow, overtaken by differentials in our levels of development. Perhaps the Global South now confronts an entirely new paradigm. This means that the lines of division are now very different, compared with the things taken for granted for so long.

Consider the larger picture. The harsh reality is that the advanced countries of the world, with their high standards of living, are envied by the Global South. Hundreds of thousands of people each year set out on hazardous journeys, at the cost of destroying the very fabric of their family lives, to somehow smuggle themselves to these imagined Western destinations that are seen as lands of milk and honey. Everyone involved in that process, from the human traffickers to the countries that enforce muscular border controls, evidently discard their sense of humanity. The driver of migration is a sense of hopelessness in one's own environment and future prospects there. Migration is a product of a lack of economic growth. Migration will be accentuated by climate change.

Thus, we really need effective foreign aid to stabilise the economies of poor countries and to better root their populations in their own homelands, to stabilise them in their homelands. But against this, the notion that major investments should be made for effective development in the Global South seems like a pipe-dream. Foreign aid has mostly been such a gross failure. We need new, innovative thinking.

In the decade ahead, likely global challenges will include the environment and climate change, technology, human development, and especially migration. These are interconnected issues. Different segments of the global community see them from self-centred perspectives. And yet, for humanity as a whole, our future, even our existence, is shared journey, interconnected as never before.

These then are the interconnected global challenges, each of which also has links with climate change. The challenge goes beyond the degradation of the environment, to our ways of life and the paradigm of economic growth and societal stability in the Global South.

We are all in Lifeboat Earth, Gaia; the rich are on the deck, holding the high points, and perhaps have better vantage; the poor are huddled in the well of the boat, crowded and shivering. But it's the same lifeboat.

Vladimir Radunovic

Director, Cybersecurity and E-diplomacy, Diplo

How did Facebook go down: An analysis

First published on *Diplo Blog*, 5 October

On 4 October, Facebook and its sister services WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger went down for almost six hours, and reminded us how dependent we are on digital infrastructure. I tried explaining what went down via a video, and a text answering a few questions that can help us users and digital governance experts understand what happened and what we can learn for the future.

To put it in simple terms, Facebook (and its services WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger) re-moved itself from the internet map: our devices were not able to find Facebook. But the reason it was down for six hours was that Facebook was not able to find itself either. It was 'locked out' of its own apartment. That means Facebook employees weren't able to remotely access their own services and servers to solve the problem, so they had to fly people to California to physically access servers and routers and change what is known as the Border Gateway Protocol (BGP) settings that messed up Facebook's connectivity.

The security of the BGP is one of the topical issues among internet experts. Thus, it will be essential to hear from Facebook if it happened due to an attack or a structural weakness.

Until this tech giant makes a statement with further clarifications, here are four possible scenarios that led to Facebook's longest downtime ever.

The first scenario: A simple technical mistake

It happens. Namely, the technical settings of routers are changed on a daily basis. Typically, changes are introduced gradually with safety mechanisms. Although such a major failure is not likely to happen in this way, this scenario should not be ruled out. But this was obviously quite a mistake that locked them down, like being locked out of their own apartment without a key.

The second scenario: Potential disgruntled insider

Insiders are increasingly behind cybercrimes, and can be either unaware of it (being used by others through social engineering), or aware and have a motive. In the second case, motivation for such an act could be found in recent whistle-blower leaks on how much hate speech↗ and violence Facebook has been tolerating because it drives people to share more, increasing profits.

The third scenario: Cyberattack

This would mean that somebody managed to get into Facebook's high-security servers, introduced changes in the BGP protocol, and removed Facebook from the map from within. That would have been quite a breach.

The fourth scenario: Facebook pulled Facebook's plug

Some rumours have it that Facebook went offline on purpose to locate where the major data leaks have been happening – including the suspected leak of personal data of 1.5 billion of its users offered for purchase on the darknet. This option is rather unlikely, though not impossible.

Whatever the reason, the world needs a better explanation from Facebook. It would definitely help to understand risks better and prevent similar developments in the future.

What's the damage?

Apart from the inconvenience and financial losses of businesses that rely on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram to function, there have been financial losses for the tech giant as well. The value of Facebook went down by about 5% which has been the sharpest decline since November 2020. A recent estimation put the total cost of the global shutdown of its services at a bit less than US$1 billion, which is quite significant.

Did Facebook go offline because of the leaks?

This shutdown came at a specific moment: while two incidents were shaking things up at Facebook.

First, researchers discovered a darknet offer for the purchase of personal data of 1.5 billion Facebook users in September. The personal data of 1.5 billion users is quite serious and amounts to almost half of currently active Facebook users. However, the news about the leak could be fake news. To be more specific, criminals may be using some old data, previously scraped from the net.

The second incident includes recent revelations by a whistle-blower (a former Facebook employee) about Facebook's internal research on the impacts of tolerating violent content and hate speech on this social network.

The most serious question in the Facebook saga is the whistle-blower revelation and to what extent Facebook was consciously pushing or allowing hate speech and violent content in order to earn more profits.

What happens now?

Facebook and other tech platforms are becoming 'too big to fail'. They have become a part of the critical infrastructure of modern society. If we depend on them as we depend on water and electricity services, shouldn't we have the same rules for tech platforms? Shouldn't they guarantee users and societies their services instead of their 'best efforts'? Should we pay for these services in order to request their reliability? Could interoperability standards enable us to shift easily from one service to another, not by opening a new account, but by being able to carry our network and our businesses with us when we change platforms? Would a possibility to move between platforms strengthen our right of digital self-determination?

More importantly: Why do we get more upset when services are down compared to learning that our personal data is for sale on the Dark Web, or when our chosen platform allows the incitement of hate and violence for profit?

There are many ethical, governance, legal, and policy questions that we need to address in the months to come.
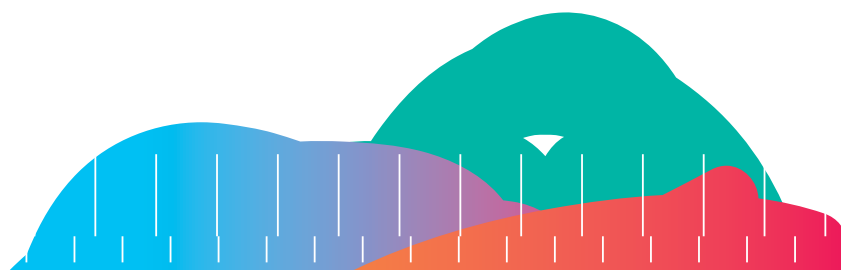
Jovan Kurbalija

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25 years of digital (and) diplomacy: Evolution or revolution?

First published on *Diplo Blog*, 2 September

Recently, I felt nostalgic and nervous as I was about to revisit my paper from 1996 on digital and diplomacy: nostalgic for the time when information and communications technologies (ICTs) were pushing new frontiers and carrying the utopian promise of a better world; nervous about revisiting what I wrote 25 years ago.

Regarding nostalgia, the digital sphere evolved from a space of creativity and innovation to today's realistic reflection of us and our society. In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War and the sense that humanity had gotten another chance to 'get it right', digital technology emerged as a strong supporter and a bearer of hope. It remains to be seen if the utopian vision of the 1990s was misguided and naive.

It certainly fuelled the growth of a digital space from which entire societies benefited and still benefit from. We saw it during the COVID-19 pandemic when digital networks helped keep societies running. Some benefited much more from this utopia, such as Big Tech companies that became more powerful than some countries combined.

The 'costs' of fast digitalisation are well-known: the disintegration of public debate, hate speech, increased cyberattacks, and other. While the cost/benefit debate of digital technologies will continue, I will remain nostalgic for the utopian, digital spirit of the 1990s.

As for my nervousness, I was pleasantly surprised to find that my paper is still relevant today. Apart from the retro ICT terminology, the tripartite conceptual framing of the interplay between digital and diplomacy has remained valid after a quarter century:

- **New ENVIRONMENT for diplomatic activities:** Diplomats have to deal with new tech elites, navigate an altered landscape of economic and political power, and manage the fast-changing concept of state sovereignty. Future generations of diplomats will have to work in a fundamentally different geopolitical, geo-economic, and an overall different environment. Diplomats have moved from having diplomatic representation in, let's say, Detroit (the economic hub of the 1950s) to needing strong representation in the San Francisco Bay Area (the economic hub of our time). Digital technology will increasingly shape the evolution of the political and economic environment for diplomatic activities.
- **New diplomatic TOPICS:** These include cybersecurity, data protection, internet governance, and AI governance. In addition to new, digitally-driven topics, 'old' topics are increasingly influenced by digitalisation. Commerce is becoming e-commerce, health is increasingly digital health, and so on. On the agenda of the UN and its specialised international organisations, there are more and more digital issues. In order to reflect the emergence of new topics, countries such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Australia are developing digital foreign policies. The UN and international organisations are adjusting. Many others will (have to) follow in the coming years.

- **New diplomatic TOOLS:** Here we have a whole toolbox, ranging from databases and the web, as it was back in 1996, via Twitter and Facebook which have gained importance as diplomatic tools in the 2010s, to current discussions on AI and big data. Let us be clear: new tools should help diplomats perform their functions better as outlined in Article 3 of the *Vienna Convention*: to represent their countries, to negotiate, to gather information, and to protect the interests of their citizens and companies. Regarding tools, the academic work and debates were heavily tilted towards public diplomacy and social media, especially after the Arab Spring when Facebook and Twitter 'diplomacies' emerged. Fortunately, recent years brought a recalibration with more focus on using digital tools for core diplomatic functions. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the seriousness of the discussions, in particular with the emergence of online meetings in multilateral diplomacy.

This tripartite methodology (environment–topics–tools) for dealing with the intersection of digital and diplomacy, has influenced Diplo's research and teaching over the years. The past 25 years have taught us one clear lesson: the more you stay with the core functions and purposes of diplomacy, the less likely you are to miss the point of tech-driven changes.

On that note, there is something I clearly missed in my 1996 paper. I did not take developments in AI and machine learning into account. My focus was mainly on rule-based AI systems (or 'expert systems', as they were called at that time) that codify procedures in algorithms.

Geoff Berridge

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Digital (and) diplomacy: Pandemic videoconferencing levels off at low altitude

First published on *Diplo Blog*, 27 August

As everyone knows, videoconferencing took off and seemed to make a major advance into diplomacy following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Close personal encounters were inhibited by the fear of infection and in many cases prevented altogether by the introduction of drastic measures to obstruct travel between different locations. UN meetings – including those of the Security Council in the virus hotspot of New York – began to take place virtually. It became the norm for nearly all major gatherings and executive committee meetings of international organisations, although some adjusted more quickly than others. Notable among bilateral negotiations adopting the technology in 2020, were the highly complex future relationship talks between the UK and the EU, which had barely started face-to-face in March 2020 when they were forced to go virtual, despite having delegations of about 100 on each side. It was also employed in attempts at mediation, including those concerning Syria and Yemen. This week, the G7 met virtually to discuss the crisis prompted by the Taliban victory in Afghanistan.

It was soon evident, however, that the available systems were often plagued by technical problems. Among these were worries over confidentiality, great variations in internet speed and connection reliability across the world, audio quality sometimes so poor that instantaneous translation was significantly impeded, and – if vision was restricted to 'talking heads' – the impossibility of seeing who else might be in the room and exerting influence. But even when a generation of diplomats weaned on digital technology takes over and these obstacles are largely overcome, the fact should be admitted that videoconferencing will still lack the diplomatic advantages of personal encounters. What are they?

It is already routinely acknowledged that participants in a videoconference miss the physical dimension of body language available in face-to-face talks; have no opportunity to relieve any tension between the parties by gracious social ritual and acts of hospitality; and, above all, enjoy no opportunities for genuine 'corridor diplomacy',

where useful information is gleaned and trust between individuals – so vital – is more likely to be fostered and the real breakthroughs in negotiations are often made. In an important book, *Trusting Enemies: Interpersonal relationships in international conflict*, published in 2018, Nick Wheeler calls this 'bonded trust'. The most telling example of the last point is the good relationship between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev that was first stimulated at their private meeting in Geneva in November 1985 and probably contributed significantly to the ending of the Cold War.

There is, however, another reason why videoconferencing falls down in comparison with face-to-face talks. It is one that has always seemed very obvious to me and I have drawn attention to it before; but it clearly needs more emphasis. The reason is this: by leaving delegations at home, the new technology not only makes it more difficult to establish trust, but also leaves negotiators under the intimate influence of their domestic constituencies, and thus in the position in which they are least likely to show a willingness to compromise. To this extent, therefore, videoconferencing is anti-diplomatic.

It is true that – depending on their status and the nature of the regime they represent – negotiators returning home from face-to-face talks might be forced by domestic pressures to backtrack on certain concessions they have made, as Israeli leader Menachem Begin did when, following the success of the Camp David talks in 1978, he had to face members of his own Herut Party within the Likud bloc. But it is unlikely that negotiators finding themselves in this position will be required to jettison their concessions completely, not least because they should be able to present the gains they have achieved alongside the concessions they have been required to supply. It seems to me to be self-evident that, had the Camp David talks in 1978 been conducted via a videoconference, there would have been no Egypt-Israel peace treaty in the following year.

In light of these considerations, therefore, it should be no surprise that, on the evidence readily available, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, diplomatic videoconferencing seems to have been abandoned as a negotiating format at the first opportunity, notably in:

1. The UN Security Council: This itched to get back to 'in-person' meetings as soon as virus transmission in New York showed signs of easing. Two such meetings were held in July 2020, and over the following three months their proportion of all council sessions increased. It was only a new spike in the virus in New York towards the end of the year that forced the reluctant conclusion that a good number of sessions would still need to be virtual. In-person meetings resumed again at the beginning of June 2021.⤴

2. The UK–EU new relationship talks: These switched back to face-to-face mode at the end of June 2020 when it became clear that compromises of great political sensitivity had become urgent, and it was in this format that they were successfully wrapped up at the end of December.

3. The USA–UK talks on a trade deal: These were conducted by videoconference from the beginning, in early May 2020, and had reportedly made good progress before serious sticking points caused hope to be abandoned of concluding them before the US presidential election in November 2020. However, this is hardly conclusive proof of the worth of videoconferencing because of the less visible, supplementary contributions of other forms of teleconferencing. Interventions by the British Embassy in Washington and the US Embassy in London would also need to be carefully weighed. The same could no doubt be said of many other bilateral negotiations in which delegation leaders and a few key advisers take starring roles on screen – though it is important that they visibly stamp their imprimatur on the proceedings.

4. The Joint Commission of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the Iran nuclear deal of 2015: Encouraged by the prospect that, following Joe Biden's victory over Donald Trump, the USA would rejoin the JCPOA, the joint commission met virtually at the level of deputy foreign ministers/ political directors on 16 December 2020 and 'informally' by the same means at ministerial level on 21 December in order to promote this possibility. (It had last met face-to-face in Vienna on 1 September and before that in early December 2019.) But urgency was injected by fear of a hard-liners' victory in June elections in Iran and face-to-face talks followed: first in proximity talks between Iran and the USA, and then in the joint commission in Vienna beginning on 9 April 2021, although these have since stalled.

Diplomacy, of course, is not only about negotiating agreements, and it is in support of its second-order functions – as well as in providing various forms of back-up to face-to-face negotiations and the settlement of uncontentious issues – that videoconferencing plays valuable roles. In relations between allies and friends, at the highest political level these include giving a more personal touch to messages of solidarity, and confirming the coordination of actions already agreed. At lower levels of government, it includes facilitating exchanges of information and sorting out technical and procedural issues. A perfect example of the value of videoconference calls in routine matters is their use by Britain to sign or agree in principle trade deals with Japan, Canada, and Turkey in late 2020, that simply rolled over existing agreements between those states and the EU to which Britain was party until it formally left the EU on 1 January 2021. Videoconferencing certainly took off following the outbreak of the pandemic but the appearance it gave of some sort of diplomatic revolution was deceptive; in reality it levelled off at a low altitude.

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Diplomatic immunity: The reality of the sources of law

**First published on *Diplo Blog*, 28 July**

It is generally understood that the source of the law on diplomatic immunity (DI) is the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Immunity (VCDR), and the immunities of consular officers is the Vienna Convention on Consular Immunity (VCCR). While these conventions are an excellent starting point, they do not tell the whole story.

Conventions bind states internationally

Conventions or treaties are agreements signed between the states and bind the states who are parties. However, the law in most states is that such treaties have no legal effect within the state.

In countries that use the common law system (UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), the VCDR has no legal effect within the country. Thus, a diplomat who is arrested in Canada has no protection directly from the VCDR in the courts of Canada.

Common law states will often pass laws to implement the VCDR into the domestic law of the state. When that is done, the diplomat is entitled to such protections as provided under the law that implemented the treaty, not under the convention directly. If a state does pass implementing legislation, that law will often omit certain protections contained in the VCDR. People rarely pay attention to the implementing law, and thus do not notice that many rights under the conventions may have been omitted. Particularly, common omissions are the right to fly the flag of the SS, freedom of movement by diplomats within the state, as well as restricting the immunities set out in the conventions.
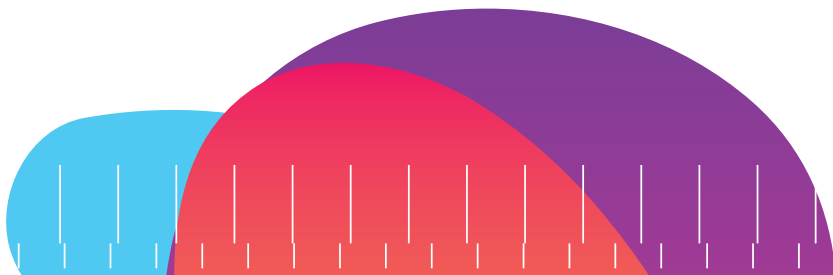
Treaties and conventions in civil law states

Most states of the world use a civil law legal system, based upon a civil code. This includes most of Europe, Asia, Latin America, and parts of Africa.

The civil law systems differ from each other, unlike the common law systems which have many features in common. The position of a convention in a civil law system depends upon the constitution of the country. Some states may give conventions priority in the law over domestic laws of that state, or give the convention equal status to the other laws of the state. The state may have the right to pass laws contrary to the convention which will supersede the convention rules.

Many civil law states have passed laws related to the VCCR or the VCDR, but have omitted certain provisions in the conventions, similar to common law states, as mentioned above. They are generally permitted to do this unless the constitution of the country provides that conventions are the supreme law of the law. Thus, the rights of a diplomat arrested in a civil law state depend upon the constitution of the country and whether laws have been passed regarding the matter.

Rights of diplomats

As we can see from the foregoing, the rights and immunities of diplomats are not as set out in the VCDR and VCCR, but derive largely from the domestic law that relates to that convention. If a diplomat feels that their rights under the convention have been breached, there is no international agency that they can complain to about this. They can take a case to the domestic courts of the receiving state, make a complaint to the ministry of foreign affairs of the receiving state, or make a complaint to their sending state who then may take it up with the receiving state.

In addition, the existence of laws does not necessarily mean that those laws are followed in the receiving state. For example, police may not be aware of the rules regarding the DI, and will arrest a diplomat. This is generally more common for police forces outside of the capital city, who have no exposure to diplomats and are not trained in the DI.

Rationale for the law on diplomatic immunity

As set out in both the VCDR and the VCCR, the fundamental basis for the immunities is functionalism. The traditional view is that without these immunities, diplomats could not function in their jobs. We need to deconstruct this concept of functionalism.

At the heart of the matter, it means that if diplomats do not have the immunities, they will not be able to do their jobs properly. Why? Simply put, the diplomat needs protection for state wrongful acts or acts that are primarily politically motivated – the diplomat, being the representative of the sending state, may be caught in the middle of a dispute between the receiving and sending states and used as a pawn. Without the DI, they would live and work in fear that they will be arrested for political reasons.
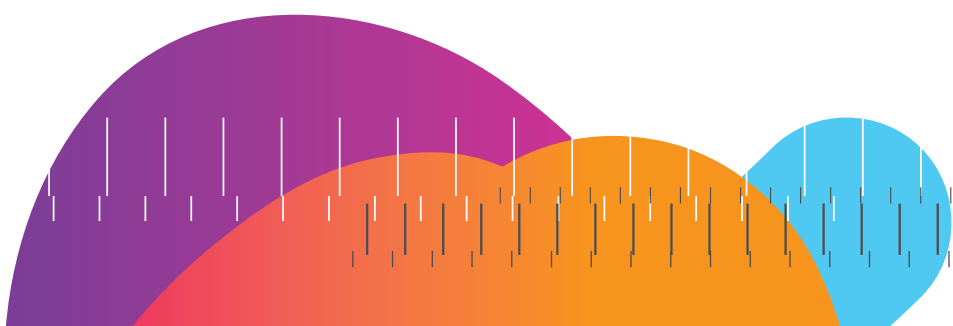
The purpose of the DI is not to give licence to diplomats to commit crimes with impunity (and immunity), but to protect them from being charged with crimes for purely political reasons. Thus, it is important to view them in this manner, and then consider whether countries that are high on the 'Rule of Law' list, such as Scandinavian countries, would actually engage in such political actions against diplomats. If the answer is no, then do diplomats in those countries require the DI in order to do their jobs? Perhaps not.

The second basis for the DI is representation. The diplomat represents the host state and since host states have immunity based on concepts of sovereignty, as do their heads of state and other high ranking ministers of that government, their representatives are entitled to a similar immunity. However, this immunity is being diminished substantially by actions of many Western states that have passed legislation targeting government officials who engage in bribery demands or human rights abuses. The legislation does not exempt heads of state or senior government officials. For more on this topic, please see my article 'Are international immunities of heads of state and government officials undergoing a major change?'.

With these changes in immunities of heads of state, is a wholesale revision of the DI likely in the near future?

Samar Verma

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Small enterprises, large roles: Digital adoption critical to post-COVID-19 business revival

First published on *Diplo Blog*, 23 June

'Locked units, dead stock, no sales, demanding vendors, uncollected payments and mounting expenses – COVID-19 has been the last nail in the coffin⬀ for a host of MSMEs.'

111 million people in India are employed in 63 million micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs)⬀ which account for 48% of India's exports and 29% of India's gross domestic product (GDP). In India, MSMEs are defined on the basis of the fixed investment in a plant, machinery, or equipment. Over 99% of these are micro enterprises (which include investments of up to ₹2.5 million in the manufacturing sector, and ₹1 million in the services sector).

Nearly half of MSME jobs are generated in rural areas, and two-thirds of all MSMEs are owned by marginalised communities⬀ of the Scheduled Caste,⬀ Scheduled Tribes⬀ and Other Backward Castes.⬀ 47% of the workforce is younger than 30, and 87% is under 40 years of age, as stated in Intellecap's report *Future of Workers, Voices from the Ground*. Decent work generated in MSMEs is therefore critical for the livelihoods of millions, especially those from young, vulnerable, and marginalised groups living in rural areas. Adversity, on the other hand, in MSME sector spells disaster for largest segment of India's population, most of who are from the poorest and most marginalised communities.

All available anecdotal evidence suggests that MSMEs have been the worst casualty of COVID-19-induced lockdowns.⬀ Survey reports have shown that disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted MSME earnings by 20–50%,⬀ with up to 78% jobs lost compared to 2017. During COVID-19, many enterprises halted their production, laid off their workers because of the inability to pay salaries, and have vacated their offices to save rental expenses. In view of their critical role in Indian economy and employment, many stimulus measures⬀ have been undertaken by the government to support MSMEs, but they all included financial support, with very little focus and emphasis on building resilience through strategic capacity enhancement, technology infusion, and an improved connection to value chains. This data was published in Intellecap's survey (conducted in December 2020 with both workers and employers) on the impact of technology on small businesses.
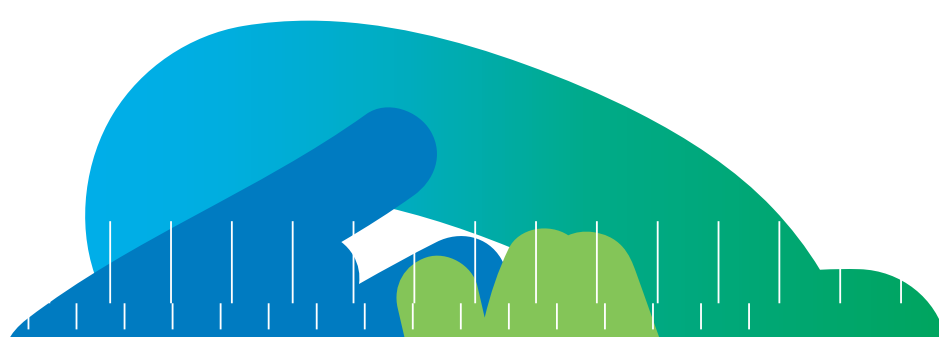
91% of workers believe in the power of technology to improve efficiency and reduce errors at work, while 58% of the workforce felt it needed capacity building in areas such as new technology, communication skills, and technical skills. Additionally, nearly four-fifths of them have never invested in tech-skill development. Among employers, the survey showed that 85% of them believed technology would impact their businesses significantly. Digital payments, AutoCAD applications, and digital platforms were what primarily excited small businesses, motivated mostly by an expansion into new markets and scaling up production.

Investment capital and trained workforce were reported as two chief barriers to the adoption of technology in the food processing, garment and textile, and retail sectors – the three largest MSME employers. Another survey reported that over 75% of Indian small and medium businesses (SMBs) have expressed a desire for a digital shift for confronting the COVID-19 crises.

As labour productivity is intimately tied to wages, the adoption of technology in MSMEs is critical for their survival, and hence for the job-enhancing, economic growth in the post-pandemic period. The acceleration of digital adoption in various MSME sectors cannot be understated. Cisco 2020 APAC SMB Digital Maturity Study revealed that the digitisation of MSMEs could add up to US$158-216 billion to India's GDP by 2024

Policies for encouraging and facilitating large-scale technology adoption in market development, production processes, and business operations must, therefore, be a high priority for the government for reviving economic growth that benefits labour in a sustainable manner. A dedicated programme for training the workforce in new technology skills is a key ingredient in policy, requiring the upgrade of skills on a scale that would require the extensive use of digital tools and tech platforms for a more resilient and sustainable business revival. At least one philanthropic initiative (an evolving partnership between the Wadhwani Foundation and Ford Foundation in India) is seeking to deploy AI-enabled, demand-driven, self-help business advisory and learning platforms to empower small businesses to tide over the pandemic and, in the long run, maximise their business potential with skilled staff. However, the scale of challenges requires government policy on a national scale to catalyse and facilitate the digital shift of the MSME sector.

Albeit small in size, in India, MSMEs play a critical role in the creation of jobs, especially for young and marginalised communities. Their survival and resilience depend on the adoption of digital technology by enterprises, and a workforce trained in new technology. As Kothari of Kay Jay Forgings stated, 'Whoever survives these dark times will have a bright future.'
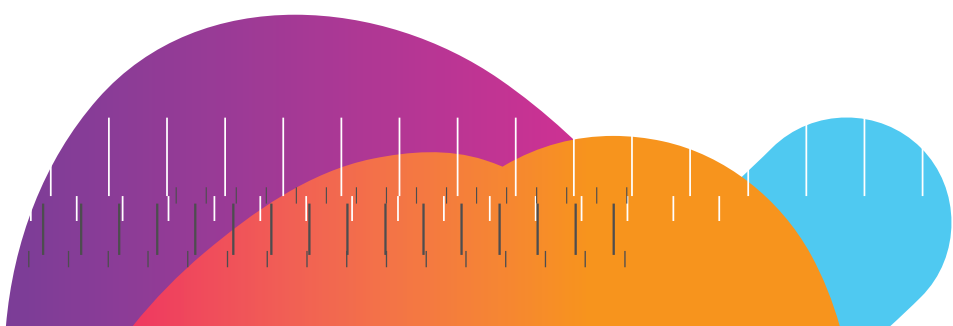
Sébastien Monnet

Science diplomat; Member, swissnex; Diplo alumnus

'Deplatforming' Donald Trump was a necessary quick fix. What now?

First published on *Diplo Blog*, 10 May

In the twilight of a presidency characterised by 30,573 lies and constant misinformation, most social media platforms have permanently suspended Donald Trump's accounts – a move also known as 'the Great Deplatforming'. In doing so, platforms have taken away the megaphone Donald Trump had been using relentlessly and without accountability for years. Adopting a practice of preferentially lying over telling the truth to achieve his goals, Donald Trump promoted falsehoods on everything from the mundane to the 'big lie' of rigged elections for months to excuse, by anticipation and then justify, what would have been otherwise a humiliating defeat. Beyond their beneficial impact in the short term, I consider the measures taken by social platforms not only ineffective and lacking in consistency, but also counterproductive.

But first, was it legal? As much as the pro-Trump camp (but not only …) cried censorship and denounced a violation of his constitutional rights, Donald Trump was treated like any other user and subject to the same terms of references, a private law contract. Moreover, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act protects platforms by granting them the right to take actions to restrict access to content that they consider obscene, excessively violent, or otherwise objectionable. So, by suspending Donald Trump's accounts, no rules were broken. Now, is it normal that the president of the USA be treated like any other user? A relevant question but a different topic altogether, yet it serves to put in perspective the immense power of social media platforms.

Countless individual social media users, be they simple citizens or politicians, are infringing on the platforms' rules literally all the time. The logic behind the suspension is inapplicable on a global scale: Twitter users send out over 500 million tweets per day and over 500 hours of video content is uploaded to YouTube every minute! Not a single company in the world can afford the manpower necessary to moderate efficiently and consistently such a volume of activities across borders, languages, and cultures. Suspending Donald Trump has taken some pressure off the platforms' shoulders, but abuses across social media remain rampant. According to a report by Amnesty International, '1.1 million abusive tweets were sent to a sample of 778 women journalists and politicians in 2017 alone, one every 30 seconds on average'.

Donald Trump is not the only prominent world leader who incited hate or violence through social media[↗] Think of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei[↗] who called for the destruction of Israel and denied the Holocaust, and President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines[↗] who encouraged extrajudicial executions of drug dealers – their social media accounts remain active and nothing suggests an impending suspension. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro is even drawing directly from Donald Trump's playbook: questioning the voting system and warning that he will reject the results of the next election should he lose. The 'deplatforming' of Donald Trump appears thus as an inconsistent decision given the treatment of other populist leaders in the world.

The 'value' derived from the presence of politicians on social media to inform the electorate is also the reason long given by platforms for their light approach to moderation of political content. This radical 'deplatforming' thus prompted observers, such as Harvard's Evelyn Douek, to question the reasons behind the suspension,[↗] 'including whether they stem from political bias or commercial self-interest rather than any kind of principle'. At best, platforms have offered Donald Trump a new opportunity to pose as a 'victim' in the long term. The 'deplatforming' sets a dangerous precedent as various governments have, in recent years, introduced laws giving them vast powers to censor public discourse online – think of Singapore[↗] for instance. The risk, indeed, is that the actual enemies of freedom of speech will exploit the 'deplatforming' to justify a crackdown on the platforms on which their political opponents rely to reach the public.

Donald Trump is merely a symptom of a phenomenon that threatens most democratic norms and principles, not the cause. The very functioning of social media is the problem. Algorithms that recommend content, be it political, sensationalist, hateful or falsehoods, to keep users engaged, and maximise revenues, should be regulated if not forbidden. This would effectively slow down the spread of misinformation without impeding on the users' right to freedom of speech. Although widely hailed in light of the role Donald Trump played in inciting violence on January 6 2021, the decision to muzzle him reignites indeed a more fundamental debate to have over freedom of speech and the 'freedom to reach',[↗] both dimensions at the heart of the empires social media platforms have built along with mostly self-regulated business models. Limiting freedom of speech is not the solution. Regulating the 'freedom to reach' on the other hand appears indispensable moving forward.

Rowena Farrugia

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## Our TikTokable lives: Can 15-second 'lifebites' pose a threat to national security?

First published on *Diplo Blog*, 20 April

When the pandemic was declared last year, and lockdown measures were put in place, stress and anxiety levels were not the only things to spike. By April 2020, TikTok generated a staggering 2 billion downloads across the globe, just 5 months after having surpassed 1.5 billion downloads, making it the most downloaded app in the first quarter of 2020, or in any quarter until then.

As the increasingly popular app drew in teens by the millions, with its flurry of bite-sized videos showcasing lockdown-inspired creativity, its ties with China made alarm bells ring in Western ears, especially since international organisations and world leaders also launched their own TikTok accounts as a means for effective engagement with future voters and decision-makers.

In June 2020, India banned TikTok, citing cybersecurity concerns. The ban, however, coincided with the Himalayan border dispute in which 20 Indian soldiers perished. One cannot help but wonder whether this retaliation stems from genuine national security concerns over the possibility that TikTok's Chinese parent company, ByteDance, may be forced to share data with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), or whether it is a symptom of India's geopolitical tensions with China.

However, experts have insisted that the security charges put forward by the international community vis-à-vis TikTok can be dismissed. First, TikTok's hunger for user data is by no means superior to that of other social media apps. This offers no consolation, since the amount of user data gathered is still shocking. Among the data gathered is the phone model and operating system used, and which videos are watched and commented on by users. However, these user-data collection practices are not exclusive to TikTok, seeing as Facebook itself seems to have lost track of all the ways it surveils its users. Therefore, if we were to follow this argument, the charge of rapacity for user data aimed at generating revenue does not hold up. So, why deny millions of teenagers the fun outlet TikTok provides?
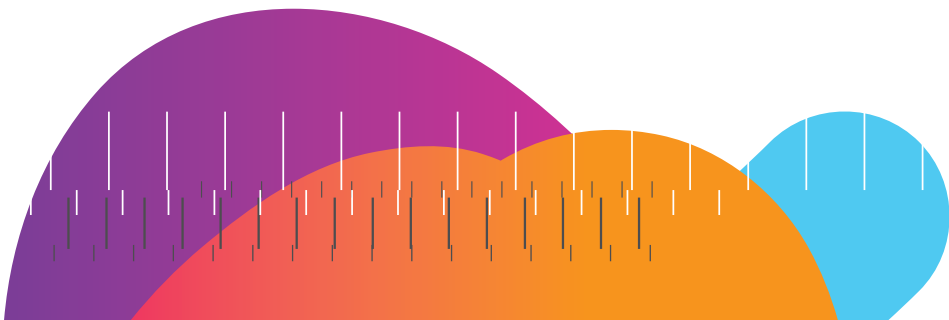
One persisting argument is that China is harvesting personal information on rival populations, including online viewing habits, location, and keystroke patterns, creating extensive digital profiles. But while the West is busy debating whether or not TikTok poses a security threat, China's patriotic hackers, who offer their services to the CCP for far more sinister acts, such as intellectual property theft, are probably snickering away at their keyboards; the CCP does not need TikTok to have this kind of access to personal information, as the 2015 United States Office of Personnel Management data breach clearly showed. Compromised data included fingerprints, detailed health records and financial information of employees and their families.

Another recurrent charge against TikTok is that the app is infused with malware and spyware. Again, it is un-proven that TikTok does things differently when compared to US-owned Facebook, in that it is no more invasive as far as private data is concerned. To further dismantle the malware claim, experts have recently observed that the app has not carried out 'any overtly malicious activity'. So, what is really behind this eruption against TikTok?

In the digital era, data is a key factor in the conflict between global powerhouses, and it is also shaping states' domestic and foreign policies. As China continues – steadfast as ever – in its determination to handle data like it would sovereign assets, its status as a surveillance state is being bolstered by novel technologies. Up until a couple of years ago, thousands of Chinese surveillance cameras were still being used in the US government system, and a report had identified potential security threats posed by Chinese-made smart light bulbs which, among other things, enable real-time location sharing.

China's policy choice revolves around a regime of 'local [data] storage and outbound assessment', which in turn points towards its resoluteness at reaching its strategic goals of power in cyberspace and self-dependent tech-nological innovation. At the core of China's approach is, of course, internet sovereignty. As China continues to pad-dle its own canoe, the international discourse on internet governance becomes increasingly more fragmented.

Data localisation, a by-product of internet sovereignty, dramatically alters the internet's architecture. China's stringent policy is likely contributing towards the creation of an environment in which protectionist sentiments become reciprocal, which may explain why TikTok's rise was met with such hostility from Western govern-ments. Another manifestation of this protectionism can also be observed with respect to Huawei, whose own-ership structure is too intertwined with the CCP for the West not to react uncomfortably to its assertion on the global scene.

When the USA took its gloves off with TikTok in mid-2020, it not only set the stage for other countries to follow suit, but it also intensified the assault on Chinese-made technology, highlighting its dubious links with the CCP, and China's widespread use of surveillance and fervour for data collection. What transpires here is that it is be-coming increasingly difficult to separate technology from politics, especially since technology is now a deciding factor in the contestation of power.

In the face of China's growth, it is easier to cite concerns over national security than to expose one's own posi-tion and highlight the geopolitics at play. China's actions mean that its insight into rivals' capabilities may one day become matchless. As it is, while data extracted from TikTok alone may not provide enough material to exploit, when combined with other forms of data sets that China may have already gotten its hands on, things may in future not be as light-hearted as they appear on TikTok.
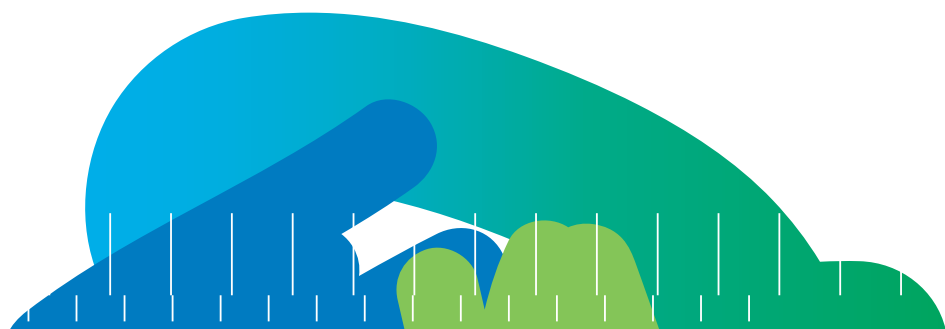
Arvin Kamberi

Head of Online Meetings, Diplo;
Vice-President, Bitcoin Association of Serbia

One year of the 'new normal'

First published on *Diplo Blog*, 24 March

Looking back on 2020 is a bit different from our usual annual perspectives. Communication and work over the internet have taken a completely new meaning in the past 12 months. Prior to the global pandemic, we would have had a hard time explaining what MS Teams or Zoom are used for, and now these two companies combine for 25% of all things done online.

We would send emails and reminders about the possibility to ask questions online or be involved in the discussion. Today, almost half of the employees already have a home corner with the best light and the most stable internet as part of the home-office layout. This is why we at Conf Tech consider March as the starting point for a new online meeting paradigm, and mark it as the completion of a full circle.

I will try to avoid listing all of the online events we had during this period, since it will not do much to describe the type of help we were asked for, or the importance of things we noticed to be the primary concern for the future. (In retrospective, Diplo's Conf Tech⤤ held more than 60 online events and conferences in an 11-month period, from February to December 2020, with more than 6200 participants inside our online conferencing rooms!

Instead, I will try to focus on new things we have learned and share the project focus and developments.

What did online event organisers need help with?

When we look at the type of requests we received and processed, the most common one was the help in organising online events and conferences from scratch. This can be considered a normal first step when asking for help. Many organisations and companies did not have any procedure or basic knowledge on how to conduct online meetings – starting from announcing/promoting the event on the website to the follow-up email after the event. This was particularly noticeable for diplomatic missions with the limited personnel and smaller NGOs battling to stay updated with Geneva's vivid international scene.

In the beginning, we helped conceptualise, set in place, and deliver several events moved online due to the pandemic, which needed to quickly adapt to an online format. We noticed one thing that stood out: everyone was convinced this was a short break in 'business as usual'. Not many organisations were interested in building capacity around this part of online work. Anyhow, we realised that even when the global pandemic is over, the new way of meetings will become the standard norm of modern business communication. Therefore, our particular effort was placed on doing what Diplo does best: tailor an online course for practitioners and help build a new organisational capacity within the missions and NGOs.

Our course participants learn how to plan, manage, and run successful online events: selecting and using the appropriate video-conferencing platform, planning the entire process from the initial draft to follow up, and effectively moderating interaction and an event flow in an online environment.

Online platforms

Furthermore, most requested was the issue of choosing a suitable online platform for online events. In order to help in making the choice, we created a comprehensive survey of online platforms⬈ that is available on our website and constantly updated by our colleagues. This includes hands-on testing and the use of particular platforms, (dominant players in the arena) and the discovery of new and creative platforms that can enhance the meeting experience. As we all stayed at home and started working from home, things like the 'virtual background' to hide your room full of scattered books and face masks, became an important feature of the online meeting platform. Services with low bandwidth utilisation have become more important, as we witness major problems in broadband's 'last-mile' stability. Some of the world areas still lack basic infrastructure, including electricity. In developed countries, people are starting to move out of wired high tech offices and work in their homes, often at the far end of the 'last mile' connection. Which services respect your privacy? Can they be suitable for use on office computers, which have now become home computers? How are audio quality and noise reduction good for hiding loud home noises or sounds of your pets? How secure is a service to be used for confidential and delicate documents you would use on your office computers? Can we take notes during online meetings? And can there be a translation into my language? All of these features, and much more, are depicted and marked in our survey.

Online working spaces

Most of all, we learn to share empathy for all emerging changes and issues that people were facing during the shift to online working spaces. From bad internet connections to the ability to actually participate on an equal footing. We shared their fears, hopes, and efforts to transform events that were already planned as in situ events. We worked on innovative ways to capture and include all global time zones. We tried to help missions and organisations that lack capacity and personnel. Being in the centre of international cooperation helped us reach those who needed this help and those who understand how vivid and fast-changing the landscape of International Geneva is.

We realised that the future of meetings will be in an integrated hybrid approach where the line between participation via online tools will not be so visible, but prior to that, we need massive efforts in three areas. First, capacity building within organisations, by creating new sets of skills and procedures. Second, working on strong competing internet standards to deliver what we want as users: easy access, multicultural inclusion, and clear data policies. And third, thinking about limiting factors for many worldwide users – from gender unequal access to tech to poor last-mile broadband.

We will do our best to continue supporting people, by understanding technology and social circumstances that surround working and meeting places.
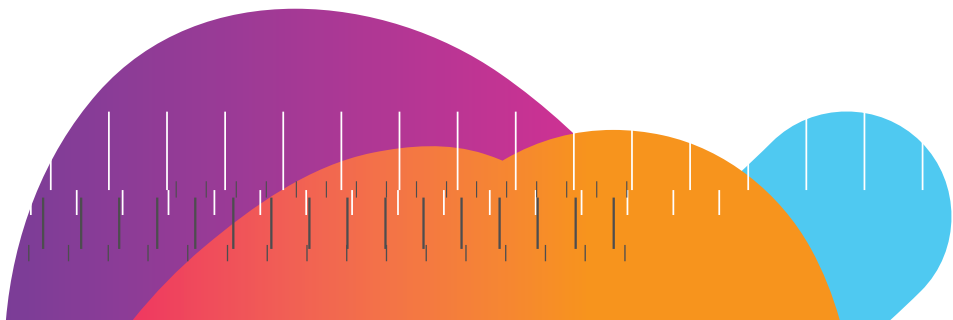
Maricela Muñoz

Minister Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Costa Rica to the United Nations in Geneva

## Connecting the dots and (finally) understanding international security

First published on *Diplo Blog*, 26 February

Amidst the current environmental, socioeconomic, and health crises, a lot has been said in regard to humanity's existential threats. COVID-19 has exposed us. The pandemic has revealed the fragility of our societies, and how inevitable and indispensable the interdependency among one another is. As it has been said: 'No one is safe until everyone is safe!'.

As a multilateral practitioner, I have extensively dealt with environmental and climate change issues. More recently, I have worked in the disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation agenda, and in matters of digital governance. That multidisciplinary exercise has allowed me to identify clear connections between these different realms.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) recently published an index of the greatest threats the world faces in 2021. The analysis shows that environmental threats such as biodiversity loss, natural resources crisis, and extreme weather events are some of the most pressing matters of our time. Notwithstanding, there are other risks with greater potential impact, such as infectious diseases, climate action failure, and weapons of mass destruction. This panorama reinforces the concerns expressed by many, and the reflection around society's values and priorities, in particular the need to focus our energy and investments on ensuring a more sustainable and peaceful path forward.

Against this background, I remain optimistic that countries will find a way to effectively address their national and global challenges. I imagine a world where states will accelerate the implementation of science-based and nature-inspired solutions, promote low-carbon economies, and depart from the illusion that their security is directly correlated with the level of sophistication of their armaments.
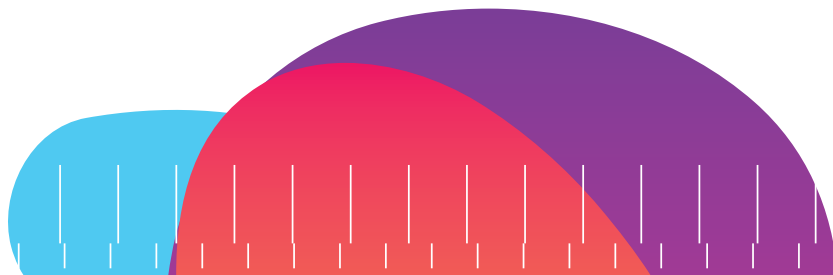
Scientists have alerted that human beings are rapidly reaching certain tipping points, and that there is no going back to the world as we knew it. This conjunction in human history may create real opportunities for transformative change and the strengthening of international cooperation.

In this line of thought, there are concrete areas in which governments, industry, civil society, and academic institutions, could collaborate to enhance our collective security. They are as follows:

1. **Climate adaptation and resilience:** There is a bursting need to act with a greater sense of urgency to green our production models and to lower our consumerism. Our definition of well-being can no longer rely on the same consumption patterns that brought us to where we are today. Global companies, as well as small and medium enterprises, must embrace their social responsibility practices, notably in regard to the traceability of their supply chains. Governments must provide the incentives and the appropriate policy framework to encourage this transformation. The roots of climate change and global warming should be addressed at all levels, while implementing holistic approaches.

2. **Biodiversity loss:** Natural resources are not inexhaustible. Moreover, the delicate balance of ecosystems and the services they provide us with, have been dramatically altered by decades of aggressive industrialisation. The equilibrium of terrestrial and maritime environments – or lack thereof – is intrinsically linked to the health and survival of all living organisms on Earth. People must realise their connection to nature and apply this knowledge to their daily choices.

3. **The arms race:** Major military powers continue to increase their 'investments' in the modernisation of their armed forces and capabilities. Their reasoning is based on the false premise that by developing more sophisticated means and methods of war, their fellow citizens will be 'safe'. The humanitarian impact of the use of small and light weapons, or weapons of mass destruction alike, is enormous. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global military expenditures reached US$1,917 billion in 2019, which is equivalent to 2.2% of the global gross domestic product (GDP). Personally, I find it hard to believe that by allocating this amount of financial resources to the development of all sorts of weapons, including autonomous killer systems and nuclear weapons, people will be better off. Furthermore, we have witnessed with COVID-19 that evidently this is not the case. We can only imagine what a fraction of those resources could do to the betterment of public health-care systems. Conflicts elsewhere also trigger environmental, social, and economic loss, and increase inequalities, particularly in the poorest countries.

4. **Digital divide:** Twenty-one years into the twenty-first century, only over half of households worldwide have access to the internet, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Women are even more negatively impacted by the lack of infrastructure, connectivity, and digital skills. There is still a long way to go before we reach global connectivity, despite internet advancements brought about by 5G networks. Against the backdrop of a global pandemic, and with confinement measures still in place in many parts of the world, the affectation to the livelihoods of billions of people across the globe is exponential. From economic hardship and lack of access to health-care online services, to the exclusion of millions of children and youth from the possibility of participating in virtual classrooms, and securing a better future for themselves. There is a huge space for post-pandemic recovery to make use of frontier technologies and to decisively create opportunities so that we leave no one behind.
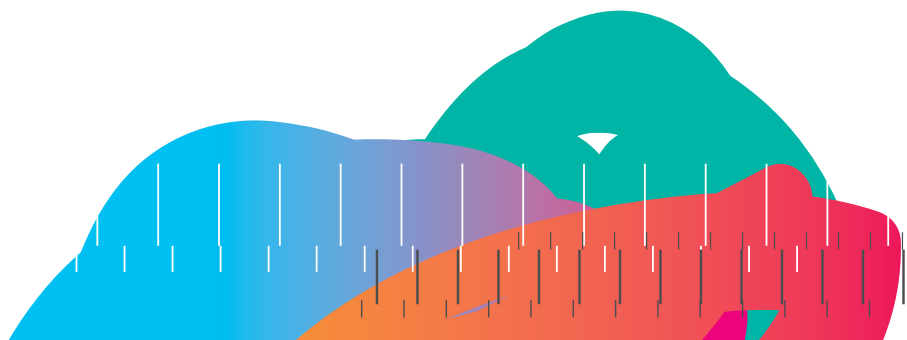
The aforementioned aspects do not constitute an exhaustive list, but may contribute to us re-evaluating our appreciation of risk, from economic devastation to threats posed by climate change and weapons of mass destruction. We cannot afford not to take action – we need to adapt and address the current crises on a systemic basis. The Paris Agreement and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) remain a critical route for the green transformation of our industrialised society. The decarbonisation of our economies will create green jobs and accelerate our transition out of our current predicament. The allocation of capital and financial investments into sustainable markets and inclusive development models, will produce the necessary returns to support a virtuous circular economy. Our common aspiration shall always be a prosperous, resilient, safe, and peaceful world – a place in which our natural capital is safeguarded, and kept for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations, and where the concept of international security is formulated on the basis of human well-being and dignity.

We will do our best to continue supporting people, by understanding technology and social circumstances that surround working and meeting places.

Amr Aljowaily

Ambassador of Egypt to Serbia; Faculty member, Diplo

A platinum jubilee for the UN: A brighter future for multilateralism

First published on *Diplo Blog*, 20 January

Last year, the United Nations General Assembly met mostly virtually throughout the High-Level Segment for the first time in its history. This exploration of a new spatial dimension for the United Nations is a reflection of the potential and challenges of our time today. It is also further proof of how interlinked the modern world has become. No country is immune from the effect of cross-border infectious diseases, and no country is out of reach of the powerful information and communication technologies. In every crisis is an opportunity, and this global challenge facing the pandemic is also a catalyst for adopting solutions that were long put on the backburner. What we should not forget is that we are at a historic crossroad, and that the path we choose is one that will determine our direction for years to come. The choice at this juncture is either to further pave the road of multilateralism despite bumps on the way, or to take the seemingly easy unilateralism lane, yet face the future alone. Making the choice of which road to take at this traffic crossing is not enough. Investing efforts and resources to chart the way forward is required to ease the journey through.

This pandemic is not only further proof of the interlinkage among all units of the international system, it was also a further reminder that the three main pillars of work of the United Nations, the world's only universal organisation with a comprehensive mandate, remain organically interlinked for the preservation of prosperity and well-being of states and peoples globally. Multilateralism is much needed in each of the three pillars through a mutually reinforcing mandate. This is not necessarily an expansion of the concept of security, but a realisation of the interdependence between the three pillars, as much as between all states. It is also a recognition of the interlinkage among the needs and challenges among states. Further empowering developing countries, thus enabling them to confront the daunting challenges that they face, adds a reassurance to the well-being and stability of the whole international system. COVID-19 has proven that the vulnerability of any unit of the system is as much a vulnerability of the system as a whole. 'Collective development' appears as a corollary of collective security. A developmental threat to any one of its units, including through a pandemic, should thus be met with a collective response by all the rest for the benefit of all. The only way to realise such a collective response is through the well-established tradition of multilateralism, albeit admittedly with sufficient innovation necessary for adapting to the new challenges.

Commemorating the 75th anniversary of the United Nations in a world plagued by COVID-19 may not be an unintentional coincidence. Well, even if it is, a 'coincidence may be better than a thousand appointment (or plan)'. It is a reminder of the common destiny of humankind. It is an invitation to reflect on the value of multilateralism. It is an opportunity to explore the potential of working together. It is also a moment of truth that exposes the selfish drive by some blinded by the narrow perspectives of self-interest, which would only serve them for a limited time. The anniversary, in the pandemic context, should offer a corrective lens for the short-sighted unilateralists. It is the United Nations System, with the necessary adaptations, that can offer joint solutions to common challenges.

The platinum jubilee of the United Nations System should be a time of reflection for a brighter future of multilateralism. One that comprehends that diseases recognise no frontiers, and hence their cure should also not stop at any borders!

Judith Okite

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Faculty member, Kenya School of Internet Governance

Digital accessibility in Kenya after COVID-19

**First published on *Diplo Blog*, 16 December**

When the COVID-19 outbreak was first announced in Kenya in March 2020, panic began as people saw the effects of curfews and the closing of offices, businesses, and schools. Three days after the initial information regarding the first COVID-19 case, the Kenyan president announced measures to curb the spreading of the virus. Among them was the adoption of cashless transaction and remote work. The adoption of these measures emphasised the problem of digital accessibility in Kenya.

Digital accessibility is commonly defined as the ability of a website, mobile application, or electronic document to be easily navigated and understood by a wide range of users, including people who have visual, auditory, motor, or cognitive disabilities.

In the above-mentioned presidential briefing, sign-language interpreting was not available. Following an outcry from the affected community, TV stations were ordered to provide sign-language interpreting in their COVID-19-related broadcasts. However, when one watched these types of broadcasts via YouTube, it was necessary to turn on the captions.

This example only highlights a broader problem. Despite Kenya being recognised as a global tech-savvy country, persons with disabilities still struggle with accessing basic information online or via local apps, since these platforms were not developed with accessibility in mind.

There are exceptions to this trend. The Kenyan mobile company Safaricom, for example, has been putting efforts into improving accessibility. In 2018, it developed a braille wearable computing device known as the Dot Braille Watch, which displays SMS notifications in braille, enabling visually impaired persons to read their M-PESA (mobile banking service) messages and conduct financial transactions via their mobile phones. Innovations
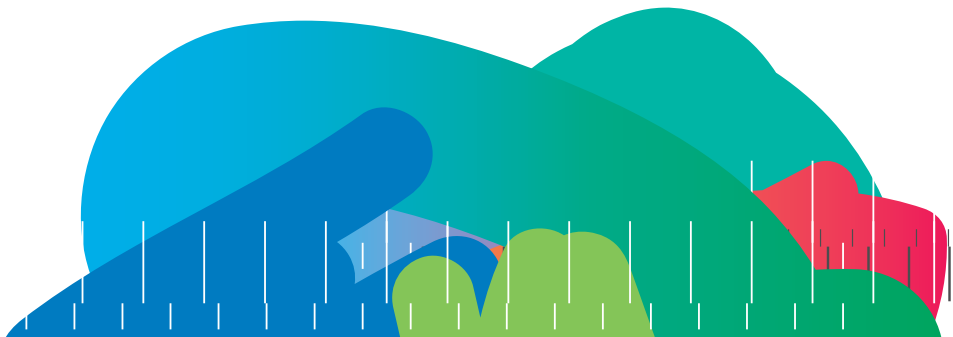
such as these, however, while an important tool in improving digital accessibility, are insufficient in a country where over two million people have one or more types of disability, according to the 2019 national census.

With COVID-19, it has become apparent that more persons with disabilities will have to, not only learn, but be able to engage digitally. Hence, there is an increasing and pressing need for lasting solutions instead of quick fixes.

In its 'Accessibility' section, the 2019 *Kenyan National ICT Policy* ⤢ clearly states:

The Government will provide an ICT environment fully accessible to persons with disabilities. The Government of Kenya is fully committed to providing equal treatment to people with disabilities with respect to the use and benefit of ICT services, programs, goods and facilities in a manner that respects their dignity and that is equitable in relation to the broader public.

In the past two years, there have been more discussions around digital accessibility and inclusion by different stakeholders. However, the time has come for a wider national multistakeholder debate process, which would include knowledgeable and experienced persons with disabilities in order to tackle accessibility as it affects every sector of the Kenyan digital ecosystem.

This wide debate process should consider questions such as:

- Are persons with disabilities in Kenya digitally literate?
- Is digital accessibility part of (or should be part of) the curriculum. At which level and in which subject?
- Does Kenya have enough digital accessibility experts and, if not, what measures can be put into place to increase this number?
- What are the policies and standards focusing on accessibility, and how can different stakeholders promote their implementation within their stakeholder groups?
- How can Kenya prioritise and institutionalise digital accessibility?
- Can a multistakeholder, monitoring, and evaluation group be set up to oversee this process?

Despite ongoing efforts, there is still much work to be done to ensure digital accessibility, and the above-mentioned questions are just a starting point. Digital accessibility is not just the right thing to do, it is what must be done to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all spheres.

If Kenya as a nation can realise the importance of digital accessibility and give it the priority it deserves, then not only will it set a benchmark for other nations, but inclusion will become a practice both online and offline.