

Diplomacy in Times of Pandemic and Beyond

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There is no single definition for diplomacy. Sir Henry Wotton, the envoy of King James VI of England to Venice, confessed in 1604: *“An ambassador is an honest gentleman sent to lie abroad for the good of his country”*. For Lord Palmerston in 1848, the mission of diplomacy was reflected by the axiom: *“We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow”*. At Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, David Lloyd George remarked that: *“Diplomats were invented simple to waste time”*. Sir Winston Churchill reportedly said: *“Diplomacy is the Art of telling people to go to hell in such a way that they ask for directions”*, whereas for Henry Kissinger *“Diplomacy is the art of restraining power”*.

After 28 years in the Romanian diplomatic service, I reached to the conclusion that diplomats are made, not born. No one is born with the ability to practice international diplomacy, which requires to understand foreign societies, influence governments, conduct negotiations, anticipate threats and take advantage of opportunities. These skills have to be acquired. Diplomacy is learned both from books and practice. Professional diplomatic services require proper training, career development, tools, resources and authority necessary to get the job done.



Good diplomats have more to do with sacrifice and refrain, than with champagne and caviar. They must show strong commitment to their country’s interests, ability to remain calm and composed in stressful situations, capacity to absorb and process large amounts of information from different sources, communication skills, impeccable reputation and high integrity. Good diplomats do not confuse

information with analyses, and analyses with judgements which come from knowledge and experience.

Good diplomats must be able to convince other people to embrace their ideas, because more powerful than the blood and money is the power of ideas. As President John F. Kennedy once said: “*A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on*”. Therefore, diplomats’ training and professional development is not a luxury, but a necessity.

The arrival of COVID-19 suddenly ended the diplomatic lifestyle that has existed for decades. Diplomacy at the United Nations and elsewhere has moved to phones, emails and virtual meetings. Teleconferences and secure video have become the norm, making more difficult to engage in delicate negotiations. A global pandemic is not the best time for diplomacy and some fear that the virus crisis could fuel diplomatic atrophy, as the quarantine measures have prompted questions about the very nature of this profession.

If there is a global centre of diplomacy, it is the UN headquarters in New York. Every year it hosts thousands of meetings, not to speak about the informal diplomacy which takes place over coffee, working lunches, dinners and receptions. As Secretary General Antonio Guterres remarked in an interview in 2017: “*The UN must, first of all, be an instrument for a surge in diplomacy for peace*”. But this year important summits and international conferences have been cancelled or postponed. In September, the High Level Week of the General Assembly annual session, the celebration of the UN 75th anniversary or the Biodiversity Summit will most probably take place in virtual formats.

While the current transition to digital diplomacy may bring a sense of modernity to our profession, the intimacy in diplomatic negotiations risks to be lost. Personal chemistry between diplomats is not to be underestimated and anyone who has spent time in negotiations can confirm the added value a discreet chat may have for their outcome. Even more important, because international affairs are influenced by leaders’ personalities and their relationships, changes that reduce the scope of their personal interaction can have consequences.

No one knows yet when the crisis will end, but there is no doubt that it will affect all of us. The future will rely more and more on connectivity, fluid networks and collaboration. Understanding how best to use networking is increasingly important for countries and international organizations. As diplomats adapt to a world of virtual meetings, there is little doubt that the struggle between traditional and modern diplomacy will end with the victory of the latter. Four months of pandemic have advanced the digitalisation as during four years in normal times, and thanks to the internet we live in the age where the audience is always in the same room with us.

Information technology is already part of diplomacy and the ability to use social networks, along with having a strong market approach, will be mandatory attributes

of diplomats who, in the clash between a growing international interdependence and tendencies of isolationism, may become promoters of a new concept of globalization. Despite technological advance and the Tweeter and Facebook revolutions, diplomacy will remain a center piece in listening and understanding the position of various parties.

Speaking on 24 April about the virtues of multilateralism and diplomacy in this hectic time, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres remarked: *“This is the biggest international challenge since the Second World War... But multilateralism is not only a matter of confronting shared threats, it is about seizing common opportunities. We now have the opportunity to build back better than in the past, aiming at inclusive and sustainable societies”*

Indeed, as every cloud has a silver lining, changes in response to global crisis can breed new norms. At the UN, complex working methods have been created over time and, once established, they are virtually impossible to change. The Coronavirus crisis may be the catalyst to update rules in multilateral diplomacy. Quoting again JFK, whose imaginative diplomacy once saved the world: *“Change is the Law of life, and those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future”*.

Note: Opinions expressed in this article do not bind the official position of the author.