Diplomacy in the time of the coronavirus pandemic

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The impact of the coronavirus pandemic has affected diplomatic operations across the world. More focus has been shifted to the diplomatic management of the Covid-19 crisis. Foreign ministries have been tasked with offering consular assistance to citizens stranded abroad. Modern diplomacy is currently going through fundamental changes at an unprecedented rate. Technical developments, and mainly digitization, affect how the services and work of diplomats is understood; the public is now more sensitive to foreign policy issues and is searching for ways to influence diplomacy through social media and other platforms.

Diplomatic practitioners looked at new forms of technologies as instruments of diplomacy, for example, digitized approaches of regulatory mechanisms, implementation of innovative digital technologies, and mobilising digital tools. The pandemic has accelerated governments to adopt tools such as e-government portals and the developments of specific websites as their country's national COVID-19 platform to disseminate information the development of the crisis. This has helped their analysis on factors such as unprecedented time restraints on decision-making that can hinder or accelerate diplomacy through the progressively rapid transmission of information between embassies abroad and foreign ministries, as well between foreign policy actors, the need to filter and verify a high volume of received information responsibly, and the integration of social media. This resulted to new focus on the digitalisation of diplomacy, firstly through the adaption of a diplomacy able to operate effectively through digital means, and secondly the adaption of new digital instruments towards the specific needs of diplomats.

Consular diplomacy services have shifted to online digital channels, allowing them to engage with citizens abroad. There has also been an increase in reinforcing online training capabilities as consular services have integrated digital technology as a strategy to better provide consular assistance to citizens and manage diplomatic restrictions. The 'Science and Technology Directorate' (S&T) at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) built efforts and funded cutting-edge technologies to help government agencies manage COVID-19 responses. DHS has reported on several S&T-funded information sharing technologies and provided training and deployed support to government employees by developing expertise in the use of new software. State government websites such as the 'Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR)', which provides management of government information and communication technology, released COVID-19 preparedness documents for information technology, such as DIR guidelines for Zoom and other virtual collaboration tools along with cybersecurity hygiene practices for teleworkers when using these virtual tools. The DIR also hosted remote COVID-19 virtual series on presentations regarding teleconferences and videoconference meeting tools, and learning and training services available through DIR contracts. The 'North Carolina Department of Information Technology (NCDIT)' as well released telework guidance under the new 'COVID-19 Resources' subdivision, for all state government employees. In Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Red Crescent Authority (SRCA) launched a distance learning awareness initiative about COVID-19 control and prevention. More than 7,500 trainees have been involved in remote online training sessions on improved understanding of technology organised by the SRCA,

including 2,800 SRCA members, more than 3,000 volunteers, 220 students, and around 1,100 trainees from health and education ministries.

As the coronavirus pandemic evolved and case numbers increased, countries began closing their borders, leaving thousands of nationals stranded, affecting bilateral relations in some cases. COVID-19 outbreak has created medical and economic challenges, but also new diplomatic opportunities. This can be seen apparent in engaging in bilateral humanitarian diplomacy as some Gulf States used this COVID-19 crisis to advance their foreign policy objectives with states with which they have had adversarial relations. All six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), including Qatar agreed to establish a network to protect food supplies. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE began shipping medical supplies to China as early as February, with China repaying the favour. Embassies and consulates soon turned to their digital channels to offer services and assistance on repatriation procedures, but also to establish cohesion with local populations affected by the pandemic. Furthermore, they were enforced to explore areas of joint responses with host nation authorities. The 'Support for British nationals abroad' guide published by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development office, highlights its work alongside local authorities overseas such as travel industry, insurance companies and others to provide rapid and effective support in times of crisis affecting large number of British nationals abroad. Furthermore, the pandemic has severely tested ministries and consular capabilities in their ability to offer timely and most importantly effective consular assistance in order to protect the national image of their countries as the crisis continued to escalate. Diplomatic missions across the world were enforced to adjust to rapid shifts in operational methods in providing appropriate and necessary services to citizens stranded abroad. Ministries in Saudi Arabia developed initiatives, such as E-platforms created in cooperation with several relevant government entities, operating many repatriation flights to bring back Saudi nationals from all around the world through the 'Awdah' application process by visiting the 'Absher' online services platform. The Ministry of Health (MOH) in Saudi Arabia continues to witness diverse emerging trends amid COVID-19, and has made it necessary to dedicate and develop digital resources, such as E-portals and E-Health applications for the provisions of healthcare services to the citizens and residents of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Mobile applications such as 'Tataman', which provided protection and health care for citizens and residents referred to domestic isolation or quarantine upon arrival into the Kingdom. 'Tabaud' application was developed to track COVID-19 spread sending a proactive notification to users, are examples of the technological solutions provided for citizens and residents in the country in terms of online medical consultation services. The EU adopted mobile applications to support contact tracing in the fight against COVID-19. The 'European mHealth Innovation and Knowledge Hub' (mHealth Hub) started the creation of COVID-19 apps repository which is frequently evolving and updated with private, public, and community-based initiatives in using mobile apps to fight the pandemic.

Published in the "Compendium of Digital Government Initiatives in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic" prepared by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), government officials around the world shared more than 500 COVID-19 relation digital applications that have been used during the pandemic. 'Shlonik' is an interactive application used to assist the Ministry of Health (MoH) in Kuwait to engage with people and ensure their safety using a self-check-in mechanism for quarantine patients and communication tools with MoH medical teams. 'Diia Mobile App' by the Ministry of Digital Transformation in Ukraine was launched to inform people about the pandemic and send push notifications to inform users about government decisions, quarantine conditions, and the updates situations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Center for PTSD under the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs created the 'COVID Coach' application to provide

support for self-care and overall mental health during the pandemic. Features in the app include tools for emotional well-being and education about coping during the pandemic.

The pandemic re-engaged with diplomacy in a new way. Diplomatic priority shifted to assisting thousands of travellers who need and want to return home and develop international strategies, considering border restriction imposed by countries globally. Where commercial options were limited or prevented by domestic restrictions, this affected diplomatic operation methods as diplomats and consular services started to work together with airlines and local authorities in those countries to overcome barriers to facilitate people to return home. Diplomatic networks started to engage with numerous governments to ensure commercial routes open such as vital trade routes and supply chains for food and medicine. Regarding transit hubs, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office have contacted foreign ministries to particular countries on critical cases, such as Singapore, to work collectively to enable UK nationals to transit via Singapore given its role as a transit hub. These processes have changed diplomatic practice, because of the developing restrictions being placed by countries around the world and at the rate at which this is being done with limited or no notice. Correspondingly important, diplomats continue to be active in exchanging information between governments on border closures, new entry guidelines, and quarantine guidelines. Missions abroad were tasked with tracking and reporting the COVID-19 outbreak, the development of vaccines, and shortages of medical equipment abroad. The scale of the pandemic required shifts in the international system to support countries in their responses. WHO led the international community in supporting these efforts as countries needed updated information, convenient access to essential medical supplies and equipment, the latest technical guidance, and equitable access to newly industrialised vaccines. This global support system has translated into operational and technical support on the ground, engaging communities and reaching out to government authorities to monitor and guide the effectiveness of public health measures. The suddenness with which some countries closed their borders and suspended international flights intensified an unprecedented challenge for consular and diplomatic services to provide citizens with essential information, funds, and documentation.

Diplomats have made it necessary to dedicate digital resources. The COVID-19 pandemic and thus the digitalisation of diplomacy has increasingly put diplomacy at the forefront. Governmental departments continuously developed means and operational methods to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and assess the necessities for long-term strategies to cope with diplomatic restrictions. The shift to digital tools and digital diplomacy was crucial, as online videoconferences became an essential part of the everyday work of diplomatic missions and foreign ministries, between foreign diplomats and representatives of local authorities, and the public. At the same time, the pandemic has proven the need for ministries and diplomatic services to provide necessary and important online training capabilities to think digitally and start upgrading their strategies and digital tools to be better prepared to face the next global pandemic. There is a requirement for countries to introduce further integration of digitalization and transformative action to ensure safe day-to-day operations in the future. Digitalisation is migrating from a luxury to a necessity in order to adapt to the new normal, integrating new technological opportunities in health care and business operations that would initiate collaborations to ensure solutions for greater economic continuity.

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