VIRTUAL DIPLOMACY DURING THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19 AND IN TIMES OF OTHER CRISIS

DR.ZAINAB WAHEED DAHHAM

School of Law -American University In The Emirates–The United Arab Emirates.
Email: zainab.dahham@aue.ae

Abstract

In December 2019, Chinese authorities reported a new pandemic to the World Health Organization (WHO) under the name Coronavirus disease or COVID-19. The pandemic has affected many sectors of life; the diplomatic field is no exception. Many offices and places have been closed. The gathering of people and face-to-face contact also prevented to avoid the spread of the Virus. Therefore, this research investigates how the pandemic of Covid-19 affected the international relationships between states. The research questions whether e-diplomacy can play a role in continuing international relationships between states during Covid-19 and other circumstances similar to it.

This research finds that e-diplomacy has its advantage and drawbacks; however, due to the emergency situation of the pandemic, the use of e-diplomacy is necessary as a way of communication to keep international relations between states.

Keywords: COVID-19, diplomacy, communication-diplomacy, digital diplomacy, international relationships

1.   INTRODUCTION

During COVID-19, the conduct of relationships with states has become difficult, and the meeting, discussion, and even availability of diplomatic persons on their premises have become complicated and not possible due to social distancing. Dealing with this problem of social–distancing was a big issue for diplomatic persons. Many technology skills are required, and in some countries such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), access to internet facilities such as Wi-Fi was not easily adequate or guaranteed. Virtual communication to can negotiate with other people needs many skills on the part of diplomats. Therefore, this research examines the significance of employing e-diplomacy as an alternative method of diplomatic intercourse or engagement in times of COVID-19 and other similar public health emergencies Researchers find that e- diplomacy might be a good guarantee for conducting the diplomatic relationships between states during pandemic COVID- 19 and any other similar situations.

II.REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholars have paid attention to the effect of communication technology, social media, and internet platforms such as Twitter, Face book and Instagram on diplomatic relationships. For example, Archetti, (Archetti, 2012) shows the importance of technology and the Internet in a diplomatic relationship. Archetti conducts an interview with foreign diplomats in the UK.

In the same way, Davison (Davison, 1974) stated the role of media in the relationships between states. This scholar examines the importance of technology in the diplomatic field in the 20th century in the US and Western Europe by interviewing different diplomats and journalists.

However, other scholars examine the role of diplomacy in the 21st century, especially in the time of the pandemic of COVID-19. For instance, Triwibowo (Triwibowo, 2020) in his research entitled "Diplomacy and Covid-19: A Reflection" shows the importance of diplomacy in everyday life, such as in business and exchange of goods and services, and facing worldwide daily issues. Triwibowo examines the possibility of using e-diplomacy diplomacy from the end of December 2019, till the middle of April 2020 by studying the response of states to this crisis of the pandemic of coronavirus. Triwibowo finds that "diplomacy does not happen in a constructive manner". While Sharma (Sisodia, 2022) stated that although; digital diplomacy was used widely in the time of the pandemic

COVID-19 through different platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Twitter has been used for diplomatic relationships before this time. In the 21st century, many states depend on Twitter and hashtag to reflect and show important issues. E-diplomacy used along with face- to-face communication by many states since 2006. The Twitter becomes as twi-diplomacy because it is the most platform used by diplomatic personnel and political persons. However, China involved twittering in 2018.

Similarly, Artur and Mikolaj (Association, 2015) explain the relationships between foreign diplomacy and technology.The scholars confirmed that 21st-century technology obviously affected the international relationships between states. Artur and Mikolaj also examined the difficulty that might be faced by states in a time of using e-diplomacy. In addition, Adesina (Adesina, 2017) proves the importance of using e-diplomacy for communication between states. The article confirmed the employment of internet platforms by several countries to conduct international relationships between them. Adesina discussed the concept of digital diplomacy as a tool of the foreign policy of states. This Article stated the importance of media and digital diplomacy for foreign diplomacy. Moreover, the advantage and disadvantages of media have been examined in this article.

III. DIPLOMATS

Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) defined diplomatic personnel. According to Article 1(e) diplomatic agent "is the head of the mission or a member of the diplomatic staff of the mission" (VCDR, 1961)

The duties of diplomats stated by the Vienna Convention (1961) are; to represent their state in the hosting state, put the interest of his or her state in advance, negotiation is one of the important tasks of the diplomats, strengthen the relationships between the receiving and sending states, find information about the receiving states and report it to send states. (Article 3, VCDR)

Diplomats who represent their country abroad enjoy diplomatic immunity. Diplomats have enjoyed special protection from host States since antiquity (Barker, 2006, p. 15) and this has been confirmed by all recent laws in the modern international legislative environment from the 20th century. The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations 1969 (VCDR) states that "'… He [the diplomat] shall not be liable for any form of arrest or detention'. Such protection is the responsibility of receiving states". (Article 22/2, VCDR)The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations stated several privileges for diplomats, their families, and staff. The Convention of 1961 stated many duties of hosting states toward the diplomats. This is to enable the diplomats to do their mission without any obstruction. For example, hosting states have a duty to protect them and their property. (Article 22(2), VCDR) This protection extended to their family. Furthermore, prosecution of diplomats is not allowed. Iraq participated in the United Nations Diplomatic Conference held in Vienna from March 2 until April 14, 1961, and ratified the decisions taken by the Conference, including the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. Therefore, Iraq must make the necessary legislative amendments to ensure the provision of legal protection to diplomats in the time of armed conflicts, including in its domestic legislation. Special provisions impose severe penalties against those who violate the inviolability of diplomatic missions or compromise the security and safety of diplomats during military operations.

VI. THE IMPORTANT OF DIPLOMACY

Diplomacy is not a new system. It is an old mechanism to conduct relationships between states. Diplomacy has a significant role in managing the relationships between states through negotiation. (Albrecht-Carrie, 1958, p. 20) The aim of diplomacy is not limited to the negotiations between states, (Melissen, 2005, p. 5) but also the trade, business, economic and other kinds of relationships (Robertson, 2011, p. 190)Although, ancient states know diplomacy, researchers claimed that the term of diplomacy and the exchange of diplomats first existed in the late of the 18th century. (Jenning& Watts, 2008, p1905)

In recent and modern diplomacy diplomatic relationships can be conducted not only by the diplomats but also by the head of the state and other political persons. (Brantlinger, 1985, p1) International relationships between states have been regulated by international law. International law draws the frame of these relationships as well as clarifies the function of diplomats. (Vinopal, 2013, p. 5) The two international conventions were responsible for providing the full frame of the working of the diplomatic relationships between states (G. R. Berridge, 2012, p. 99) These are Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) (VCDR) which includes 53 articles and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relationships (1963) (VCCR) which includes 79 articles. The aim of these conventions is to guarantee peace around the world. The states exchange the diplomats consensual between them. Article 2 of VCDR stated that "The establishment of diplomatic relations between States, and of permanent diplomatic missions, takes place by mutual consent"

IV. DEVELOPMENT OF E-DIPLOMACY

E-diplomacy has its importance before, during, and after the Coronavirus. In this section, the research is going to examine how e-diplomacy has improved.

Diplomacy plays a significant role in the stability and security of a state over history. Diplomats solve conflict between states in most cases. (VCDR, 1961)Therefore, states cannot quit diplomacy, regardless of the circumstances.

People need communication between them for daily life. Technology and IT systems facilitate the way people can communicate whether as an individual or in groups. The internet and social network platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and others have played a significant role in the life of people in general and the life of diplomats in particular.

 Diplomacy is important to maintain contact between states and to stable the settlement of these states. Hillary Clinton is an American politician, on her speech when she served as the 67th United States Secretary of State expected the revolution of diplomacy media in 21stcentury stated that "Just as the Internet has changed virtually every aspect of how people worldwide live, learn, consume and communicate, connection technologies are changing the strategic context for diplomacy in the 21st century" (Association, 2015). Furthermore, Ambassador Nigel Baker British Ambassador in Bolivia confirms the importance of social media to international communication and especially for diplomats to view their opinion and thoughts to the audience. Baker stated that "I realized that for an embassy with limited resources, social media was an excellent way of getting our messages out to a wider audience, as well as hearing what that interested audience had to say, and responding to it." (British Embassy Holly See, 2014).

Technology development led to the emergence of media diplomacy. Social media have played an important role in developing of communication with worldwide people. The media contribute to diplomacy. International and internal issues facing the world can be shown throw the media including the ones under negotiation. (Davison, 1974, pp. 174-191). Therefore, several states used broadcast service as the eyes and ears of diplomacy. The states delivered information that could reach the world comes by wire services, Radio, TV, newspaper, and … etc. (Vincent, 2016) In the main times, the media of states played an important role in providing the diplomats and officials person with the required information about this state. Furthermore, diplomats their selves used social media to provide clear idea of their missions.

The first US media diplomacy emerged in 20th century. For example, in 1942 Voice of America was the first broadcast used to provide the policy of America. However, this broadcast failed to reach large number of audience therefore, in March 2002Radio Sawa replaced Voice of America's Arabic service (Kessler, 2004).

Similarly, Europe countries used media diplomacy to deliver its policy to the wider public, Such as Britain's BBC, France's France 24, and Deutsche Welle in German.

Furthermore, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) media diplomacy played a significant role to express their political thinking whether in times of conflict or peace, such as Iran's Press TV, Qatar's Al-Jazeera, and MBC.

In 2010, the disrupt air travel universal because of Icelandic volcano Eyjafjalla jökull led to use of e-diplomacy.

Similarly, on February 24, 2022, during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, both Ukraine and Russia used media to explain their policy regarding the recent war between them. The press and social media platforms reported not only the news of what is going on in Ukraine but also shows the material and mental damage to civilians and their properties, the use of internationally prohibited means during the conflict, and evidence of human rights abuses in conflicts.

The resort to and e- diplomacy was not a result of the moment and was not due to Corona. Rather, they were previous attempts to shift towards e- diplomacy. In 2006, there was a trend towards mixed of face to face and e- diplomacy.

V .DISADVANTAGE OF E-DIPLOMACY

The prevailing belief among states is that online relationships and discussions have been seen as a not efficient alternative to face-to-face ones. Changing this belief was the biggest obstacle to electronic diplomacy.

The fast spread of coronavirus led to end of lives of many people as well as bringing relationships between states to an end. States believed that there is a real need to adapt fast to new ways of communication. States have no other options but rather deal with the situation of COVID-19 and shift to e-diplomacy. An online meeting between states is now a necessity to keep the strength of relationships between these states.

The fast shift in the way to conduct meetings and diplomacy was accompanied by several difficulties. For example, the WIFI especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is not this strong to support online meetings and conferences. Moreover, even though the development of technology tools, social networks, and social platforms are not safe to conduct communication between states. While, many countries restored to e-diplomacy, the weakness of the network during the spread of (Covid-19) is a major concern for these countries. There are five main reasons behind the congestion of the Internet:

First, the widespread use of the network during the day in residential areas (for which the networks are not designed to serve at peak times), resulting in congestion of networks that provide access to the user causes the weakness of Wi-Fi. Second, increasing demand for video and other high-bandwidth entertainment services led to loudness on the internet. Third, increasing demand for video conferencing applications and cloud services. Fourth, distance learning by students of all age groups. Finally, the lack of sufficient capacity for the consumer through the international access network, which is the point at which the Internet enters the country, was one of the reasons for having terrible Wi-Fi. (Guermazi, 2020)

Furthermore, the diplomats and audience are not familiar with many tools of technology. Also, the increase in cyber-attacks, fake news, and cases of digital fraud that are capitalizing on the public panic and confusion surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic is a big challenge faced by e-diplomacy.

However, these problems are not a big issue. Every state can go through those difficulties by strengthening the WIFI for such important events. Furthermore, states can depend on more effective tools of technology to arrange any international meetings and events.

VII. TWITDIPLOMACY

In the 21st century, a new concept of diplomacy media appeared under the name "twit-diplomacy". This platform of social media was used mostly by officials such as presidents of states, diplomatic personnel, prime ministries, policymakers, as well as citizens. (Artur & aFirlej , 2015)

One of the essential roles of diplomats is to build networks with officials and the public. Twitter played an important role in the facilities of this duty. Most leaders and diplomats read and collect and edit information to share it with the public on social media, especially on Twitter. Therefore, people like to connect on Twitter not only to connect with each other but to find the leaders and diplomats there who engaged with important political information. (Artur & aFirlej, 2015)

Ambassadors around the world use Twitter to interact with their audience. There was a positive response from the audience to those official people. Ambassador Tom Fletcher, British ambassador to Beirut explain his experience of communicating with the audience. Fletcher stated that "Since 2011, we have worked to make our Twitter account live, dynamic, and interesting, and have used it to run a number of events from Q&A sessions to competitions – more than 6,300 followers suggest that it is working." (Artur & aFirlej, 2015) The British embassy in Holy See was the first embassy to apply this new revolution in the life of diplomacy; later on, many embassies to the Holy See copied this experience.

The high-rank person and the public find that "Twit-diplomacy" is the best platform to exchange their thought freely and in a quick way. Millions of people connect to twitter, therefore, it would be an excellent opportunity for a diplomatic person to use it in order to gather information about what is going on around the world, exchange their thoughts in this regard and easily analyze and enhance these events.

GiulioTerz the former Italian Foreign Minister proves the effect of Twitter on the way of communication between officials and changed their way of political dealing with the events. Furthermore, Trumb the previous president of U.S was the most user of the Twitter. It was for him the platform to connect the public. (Artur & aFirlej, 2015)

Furthermore, in times of conflict, most embassies use Twitter to keep their nationals informed. In crisis situations, embassies use their entire platform network including Twitter to give them advice or warn them. (British Embassy Holly See, 2014) For example, in 2011 India warned its citizens via Twitter to evacuate them from Libya during internal conflict there (British Embassy Holly See, 2014)

The challenges facing the states during the time of the Pandemic of Covid-19

According to scientific COVID-19 is an evolved virus from the Coronavirus family. (Andersen, 2020). Andersen, Rambaut, Lipkin, Holmes& Garry confirmed that Corona Virus has a natural origin. Therefore, Media conspiracy theories have been refuted stating that COVID-19 is a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus. (Andersen, 2020). COVID-19 brought the world to its knees. It affects all aspects of life. On an internal level, the poverty and unemployment rate increased and the standard of living of the population declined.

On the other hand, internationally, everything was not allowed. For example, travel between several states was a ban, and trade, business, meeting face to face, and holding conferences is not permitted. Therefore, the relationships between states became almost non-existent. There was mistrust between countries in light of and because of the Corona pandemic. Countries accused each other, the U.S. accused China of a biological virus manufactured in Chinese laboratories to target the US military, while China accused the U.S. that it is of American origin and has been deployed in China to limit the growth of its economic power competing. Furthermore, States accused each other of neither responding to the disease Corona Virus nor containing efficiently this pandemic of COVID-19. (Myers, 2020)

During times of pandemic COVID-19, international cooperation is more than essential. Coronavirus brought the connection between people as well as the connection between states to the end. Therefore, a new mechanism needs to be found to bring life back. The countries believed that technology plays an important role in this aspect. Many countries have resorted to technology to relieve this stalemate in life. The diplomatic field was at the forefront of the fields that state that relying on technology is the best way to communicate between states and share their opinion and ideas, especially regarding how to get out of the Corona crisis and control this disease.

Consequently, many changes in the field of diplomatic function occurred. For example, diplomats need to adapt to the fast new skills because of emerging of a new kind of diplomacy.

In the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak, diplomatic relationships between states have moved from conference rooms to online spaces. Online meetings were emerging speedily. That required adopting new rules of the protocol and canceling the old version. Moreover, diplomats need to learn about the new work environment how could the technology responds effectively to diplomatic

relationships, how to share their opinion online, and what is the best and safe tool to have safe connections with each other states.

Iraq similar to other countries resorted to online connection with its citizens around the world and with other states. For example, Iraqi embassy in Ukraine communicated its citizens in Ukraine to follow the instructions regarding quarantine to safe their life. (Mr. Bakr Al-Jaf, 2020) The instructions of the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs were consistent with the medical instructions of the Ukrainian Ministry of Health to fight the spread of the Corona virus. This clearly indicates the cooperation of Iraq and Ukraine to bring this disease to the end.

The Iraqi embassy in Ukraine resorted to online services to serve its citizens. For example, it turns 50% of its work to be online. During the time of Corona virus and because of quarantine Iraqi consular section could not sometimes be communicated with its citizens face to face that's why they resorted to e-mail and telephone to meet their duty professionally. The communication was 24 hours a week. (Mr. Bakr Al-Jaf, 2020). There was clear cooperation between the two governments of Iraq and Ukraine with aim of returning Iraqis who want to return to Iraq. Iraqis were evacuated through the exceptional flight of Iraqi Airways, which left Ukrainian airspace for Iraq on May 7, 2020, with 186 passengers on board. This could not be happened without this cooperation and without the professional online work of the Iraqi embassy.

Similarly, Egypt used technology to show the world its strong relationships with other states. For example, Egypt tried to strengthen its relationships with other states by supplying Medical support to the US, China, Italy, Sudan, and the UK. Egypt wrote on these boxes of support in English and Arabic with the words "From the Egyptian people to the American people" - being shipped aboard a military plane. El-Sisi resorted to technology to show these strong relationships with other states by making a video and publishing it online. (BBC News, 2020)

Morocco's Government, also, finds the media platform is the best way to contact its citizens and warn them from gathering or going outside. Twitter was the best platform for the Moroccan government to announce its policy during Corona Virus. For instance, the hashtag #restecheztoi" which means "stay at home" was popular among Moroccans. (Chtatou, 2020)

Furthermore, Kuwait practiced its relationships with other states online. For instance, Marzouq Al-Ghanem National Assembly Speaker and representative of the Arab countries in the Inter-Parliamentary Union practice discussed online different issues during the meeting of the fourth preparatory committee for the Fifth World Conference including the position of the Arab region group on issues like Coronavirus, climate change, refugees, and demographic. In this meeting in addition to Kuwait, around 15 other states participated and Gabriela Cuevas Baron the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and Chung Gong the Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Martin. (Time, 2020)

VIII. CONCLUSION

Technology is usually accused of its bad effect on direct communication between people, but it was somehow able to prove its advantages in times of Coronavirus and quarantine, because of the activities and "meetings" it provides, and even remote work and study.

The coronavirus grants a chance to examine the e-diplomacy and the possibility to shift from face-to-face meetings to online diplomacy. The Coronavirus was a bad time to face the entire world. However, most of the states did great international and internal relationships through different platforms including first-line Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram. Therefore, this research advice states to resort to e-diplomacy for several reasons, for example, e- diplomacy is economic as states do not have to spend a lot of money on their diplomatic mission and get rid of the cost of diplomatic buildings and rent homes for their staff in the host state and other expenditures. It also saves time through direct contact with countries and entering into important discussions without the need to take appointments for interviews and others long procedures. Furthermore, it citizens will be able to monitor the state's diplomacy

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