The missing sense of peace: diplomatic approachment and virtualization during the COVID-19 lockdown

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We have five senses and the sixth sense is behind the scene. You feel it, you cannot know it. Sometimes you smell that there is something that is going to damage the peace process, or you feel that there are some spoilers who are going to finish or raise a conflict at the time where we are heading towards reaching consensus. This kind of ‘sense of peace’ does not appear virtually.

Author interview, 12 June 2020.

What happens when peace diplomacy is conducted digitally? Peace talks are the quintessential form of diplomacy: war and peace are front and centre of what is being negotiated, they are highly sensitive, and much is at risk. As the coronavirus spread across the world in the spring of 2020, peace negotiations, like other elements of the international diplomatic system, either ground to a halt or saw a transition to online platforms. Mediators and conflict parties were faced with the impossibility of meeting physically and had to interact, discuss and even negotiate via screens. The lockdown created a global social experiment, offering researchers the opportunity to investigate the importance of face-to-face interaction in the context of the lack of it, and how this changes the dynamics of interaction.

In diplomacy studies, the effects of technology have received limited attention and in studies of peace diplomacy, examinations of relations between technology and the social sphere are even fewer. Likewise, the practical craft of physical peace negotiations remains under-studied. This article speaks to all three of these gaps in research, unpacking the effects of virtualizing peace diplomacy on the basis of first-hand experiences of conflict parties and mediators. It shows both the positive aspects of particular properties—which we call affordances—of virtual meetings,
such as broadening access, and both equalizing and disrupting interaction, but it also shows what is lost with the many elementary aspects of physical meetings. We develop the sense of peace as a metaphor and concept that captures the visceral and connective element in peace talks, specified in three dimensions: a sense of trust, a sense of understanding and a sense of togetherness. Whereas Thomas Schelling’s classical work on the ‘diplomacy of violence’ highlighted coercion, intimidation and deterrence as the main elements of military strategy, we suggest that fostering these senses of trust, understanding and togetherness constitute key elements of peace diplomacy in particular, but also of diplomatic strategy in general, in a process which we suggest can be called diplomatic approachment. 4

In May 2020, we started noticing a new policy conversation regarding the impact of the virtualization of peace diplomacy. Beginning in 2016, we had been conducting an immersive field study of women mediators’ networks. With the COVID-19 lockdown, these networks of peacebuilders and mediators were being forced to think about the virtualization of the field and began sharing experiences, challenges and lessons learned. However, there was no systematic body of knowledge in this area; so we set out to explore the knowledge already gathered by practitioners, interviewing people involved variously as parties to conflict, mediators and technical support staff, and focusing on two conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa region: those in Yemen and Syria. In examining the transition from physical negotiations to online platforms, it is important to emphasize that interaction at the table is just one small factor among many different issues affecting the likelihood of peace. We do not wish to overemphasize the power of negotiations nor to trivialize the reality of continuing conflict in both Syria and Yemen.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we outline studies of face-to-face diplomacy and peace mediation. Second, we describe our methodology and introduce the Syrian and Yemeni peace processes. Third, we conduct an in-depth analysis of the properties of virtual and physical meetings, including the consequences of virtualization and the missing sense of peace. The final sections discuss and conclude, offering findings related to mediators’ strategies, hybrid solutions and ways forward for peace diplomacy.

Face-to-face diplomacy and mediation

We use the term ‘peace diplomacy’ to refer to mediation efforts as well as broader diplomatic efforts to promote peace such as shuttle diplomacy, 5 civil society dialogues and women’s groups. 6 Peace diplomacy can be conducted between

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1 Thomas Schelling, Arms and influence (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 1–34.
4 We introduce the word approachment. ‘Approach’ here means the act of coming closer and ‘-ment’ is a suffix denoting an action or process towards this. Whereas the term ‘rapprochement’ is accepted language in diplomacy to denote the ‘establishment of or state of having cordial relations’ (Merriam Webster), approachment refers to the much frailer, emerging possibility of beginning a process of rapprochement. We need the word approachment in the language of diplomacy to be able to explain and describe the process of adversarial parties coming nearer to each other, if only momentarily. Our development of the ‘sense of peace’ can be seen as a first step in showing the potential of more specific engagements with the concept.
5 Shuttle diplomacy involves the mediator(s) undertaking bilateral dialogue with each conflict party separately.
6 Marko Lehti, The era of private peacemakers: a new dialogic approach to mediation (Cham: Springer, 2019), pp. 125–44.
leaders of the conflicting parties (track one), but also between actors who possess less (but still significant) influence in a society, such as journalists, civil society leaders, religious leaders or academics (track two) or at the grassroots level (track three). Track one mediation is a method by which actors can resolve their disagreements through dialogue facilitated by a third party, typically a country specialized in mediation, or alternatively an international organization such as the UN or the OSCE. While track two mediation often has trust-building as its main focus, issues of trust and connection between participants are equally important in track one; even so, given the more informal nature of track two diplomacy, the latter may be considered more susceptible to virtualization. The dynamics at the table and in the spaces around it, on which this article focuses, are of course crucial for the outcome of mediation. However, various contextual factors, including battlefield realities, geopolitics, Great Power politics, resources and inequalities, also have profound impacts on mediation and in many cases determine the chances of its success.

Face-to-face interaction has long been considered important in promoting recognition of the humanity of ‘the other’ in peacebuilding efforts and beyond. In recent years, researchers have started to focus increasingly on the importance of face-to-face interaction in diplomatic practices. For example, Wong shows how crucial face-to-face diplomatic meetings are in enabling parties to interpret one another’s emotions and intentions, because ‘tone of speech and hand and body gestures carry emotive information’. Along the same lines, Holmes shows how ‘face-to-face diplomacy can often result in the transformation of relationships, whether it be conveying peaceful intent to adversaries or reassuring nervous allies’. Holmes focuses on the importance of mirror neurons, and how they help diplomats and world leaders interpret each other’s intentions much better than, for example, game theory would predict. Likewise, Wheeler shows that ‘diplomatic transformations’, where opponents develop empathy for each other’s security concerns, can occur in face-to-face interactions. He also analyses how

7 Marko Lehti, ed., *Nordic approaches to peace mediation: research, practices and policies*, TAPRI studies in peace and conflict research (Tampere: Tampere Peace Research Institute, 2014), pp. 29–32; Peter Wallensteen, *Understanding conflict resolution*, 5th edn (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), p. 282.
8 Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Trust in a time of conflict: interpersonal relationships in international conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 259–70.
9 Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).
10 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and infinity: an essay on exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Herbert C. Kelman and Stephen Cohen, ‘The problem-solving workshop: a social-psychological contribution to the resolution of international conflicts’, *Journal of Peace Research* 13: 2, 1976, pp. 79–90; John Wallach and Michael Wallach, *The enemy has a face: the seeds of peace experience* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2000).
11 Seanon S. Wong, ‘Emotions and the communication of intentions in face-to-face diplomacy’, *European Journal of International Relations* 22: 1, 2016, pp. 144–67 at p. 145.
12 Marcus Holmes, *Face-to-face diplomacy: social neuroscience and international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 2.
13 Mirror neurons are neurons that are activated both when an animal or human observes another being performing an action and when they perform that very same action themselves. Hence, it potentially enables humans and animals to read others.
14 Marcus Holmes, ‘The force of face-to-face diplomacy: mirror neurons and the problem of intentions’, *International Organization* 67: 4, 2013, pp. 829–61.
15 Nicholas J. Wheeler, ‘Investigating diplomatic transformations’, *International Affairs* 89: 2, March 2013, pp. 477–96.
trust emerging in face-to-face diplomatic meetings, in particular between high-level representatives such as heads of state or ministers of foreign affairs, is of the utmost importance for how signals are received and understood among states. He shows how, when states attempt to approach each other, (costly) signals of good intentions are often misinterpreted if these are not followed up by high-level face-to-face meetings between state leaders. Building on their previous work, Holmes and Wheeler apply a micro-sociological lens to show that it is the interactional dynamics of the diplomatic practices—not the personal characteristics of the diplomats—that shape whether face-to-face diplomacy generates social bonds and energizes individuals, or rather produces or increases tension and conflict. Put simply, it is not ‘who the leaders are that matters, but rather variation in how they interact’.

Our article adds to this literature in several ways. First, we take a micro-orientated approach in trying to answer Wheeler’s call for more research on the types of communicative encounters that can promote trust between policy-makers in adversarial relationships. Whereas previous studies have drawn primarily on historical data to show the importance of face-to-face interaction, this article is based on real-time data. Second, in contrast to most mediation research, we focus not only on mediators and their experiences and strategies, but also on the parties to conflict. Third, while a few studies have focused on virtual interpersonal interaction in conflict contexts, hardly any of these cover track one virtual mediation—not least, of course, because such efforts were relatively rare prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. New research has been emerging in related areas, the most notable examples being Eggeling and Adler-Nissen’s examination of the ‘new normal’ of EU diplomacy during the COVID-19 crisis, Naylor’s study on diplomatic summits of the G20 and new analyses of the consequences of virtual meetings for UN diplomacy. In the realm of diplomacy, however, peace processes and international organizations represent two ends of a scale: peace processes are much more fragile in their constitution and organization than the inner workings of international organizations, where diplomatic practices are characterized by a high degree of institutionalization. For this reason, the ‘new normal’ in the EU is

16 Wheeler, Trusting enemies, p. 271.
17 Marcus Holmes and Nicholas J. Wheeler, ‘Social bonding in diplomacy’, International Theory 12: 1, 2019, pp. 133–61.
18 Wheeler, ‘Investigating diplomatic transformations’, p. 496.
19 Yaacov B. Yablon, ‘Feeling close from a distance: peace encounters via internet technology’, New Directions for Youth Development 116: 12, 2008, pp. 99–107.
20 One exception is the policy document by Florence Mandelik and Ayat Mohamed, Can you hear me? Taking mediation online: reflections from practice (Oslo: Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution, 18 Sept. 2020), https://noref.no/Publications/Themes/Gender-and-inclusivity/Can-you-hear-me-Taking-mediation-online-reflections-from-practice. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 3 Dec. 2020.)
21 Kristin Anabel Eggeling and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, ‘A “new normal”: how EU diplomacy copes with social distancing under Covid-19’, paper presented at the IR Research Seminar, University of Copenhagen, 4 June 2020; Tristan Naylor, ‘All that’s lost: the hollowing of summit diplomacy in a socially distanced world’, Hague Journal of Diplomacy 15: 4, 2020, pp. 83–98; Nicholas Westcott, ‘UN general assembly goes virtual: a former ambassador on what that means for diplomacy’, The Conversation, 21 Sept. 2020, https://theconversation.com/un-general-assembly-goes-virtual-a-former-ambassador-on-what-that-means-for-diplomacy-146499; Marcus Holmes, Mark Saunders and Nicholas Wheeler, ‘UN general assembly: why virtual meetings make it hard to trust each other’, The Conversation, 22 Sept. 2020, https://theconversation.com/un-general-assembly-whyy-virtual-meetings-make-it-hard-for-diplomats-to-trust-each-other-146508.
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different from that in peace diplomacy. Fourth, there has been a growing interest, not least in the policy realm, in social media and online tools for peace work and diplomacy. However, the focus has been on social media broadly understood, not on virtual meetings as a form. Our primary focus is on meetings—before and after the crisis.

Building on existing literature, and bringing in new data, we argue that the sense of peace as a form of diplomatic approachment captures a core potential in peace diplomacy, pointing towards how bodily co-presence and face-to-face interaction can generate—even if only for brief moments—a sense of trust, understanding and togetherness.

Methods

Moving peace diplomacy to a virtual set-up can be considered an extreme case, compared to other forms of diplomacy or virtual communication in general, as the risks, stakes and tensions are particularly high in conflict-affected contexts. To understand the overall negotiation environments before and after the virtualization of peace diplomacy, we spoke to a broad range of people in a number of different roles. The idea was to work inductively to observe general patterns across the cases, in what some have called ‘practice tracing’: that is, to map the socially meaningful and organized patterns of activity that characterize a particular social mechanism. In an ideal research scenario, we would have interviewed informants both before and after the COVID-19 lockdown to trace experiences of face-to-face diplomacy before and after virtualization. Between June and August 2020 we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with participants and mediators involved in track one and two peace negotiations in Yemen and Syria. We spoke to representatives from major parties to each conflict, to peacebuilders and negotiators, to UN officials and to international NGO staff. All interviews except two were conducted virtually. Interviewees were found via snowballing methods through our professional networks. In particular, our membership of the Nordic Women Mediators provided access both to mediators and to Syrian and Yemeni women involved in peace work. A majority of the people we spoke to were Syrian and Yemeni nationals. Although our research design is aimed not at achieving a representative sample but rather at describing patterns existing within a field, we take a methodologically feminist approach in maintaining that approximately half of the voices represented should be women, since women represent half of the population. In the end, a little over half the people we spoke to were women. The lack of representation of women in peace work and research is problematic, and

22 UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Digital technologies and mediation in armed conflict (New York, March 2019), https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/DigitalToolkitReport.pdf; David Lanz and Ahmed Eleiba, The good, the bad and the ugly: social media and peace mediation, swisspeace Policy Brief 12/2018, https://www.swisspeace.ch/publications/policy-briefs/the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-social-media-and-peace-mediation-3.

23 Bent Flyvbjerg, ‘Five misunderstandings about case-study research’, Qualitative Inquiry 12: 2, 2006, pp. 219–45.

24 Vincent Pouliot, ‘Practice tracing’, in Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, eds, Process tracing: from metaphor to analytic tool (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 237–59.
in fact ensuring 50 per cent female participation is less difficult than much research and policy work claims.

We also drew on a number of public and semi-public online discussions on the virtualization of peace work and mediation during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, we received consolidated input from a group of Yemeni peacebuilders at track two level. We also interviewed several experts involved in a long-running project which conducts online dialogue among Palestinian groups. These interviews informed our thinking about the ways forward for online mediation, and are referred to below in the sections devoted to this theme. We have anonymized all informants and their affiliations to protect confidentiality.

In our interviews with participants and facilitators, the last face-to-face meetings before the lockdown became a key reference point and a standard for evaluating the online dialogues that followed. Before lockdown, it was difficult to get parties and mediators to explain the importance and dynamics of face-to-face interaction, as this was taken for granted and difficult to put into words. With the COVID-19 crisis, the absence of otherwise subtle dynamics made them more obvious. We also found that our new focus on format rather than substance gave us access to parties and mediators who would otherwise likely have been reluctant to speak to us.

The Syrian and Yemeni peace processes

Despite the many unique traits that distinguish every conflict, those in Syria and Yemen are similar in several ways. Both have deep roots in social and economic inequalities; both took form in 2011 with civil resistance as part of the Arab uprisings; and both have spiralled into internationalized civil wars. The UN has been involved in peace initiatives in Syria since 2012, and in Yemen since 2014. Except for limited periods of ceasefire and, in the case of Syria, the milestone establishment of a constitutional committee, neither peace process has yet led to any signed agreement.

In Syria, the UN has so far not managed to conduct direct negotiations on power-sharing between the parties in the civil war. In the area of peace diplomacy in general and virtual diplomacy specifically, the two peace processes can be considered extreme cases in terms of the challenges they pose. In both cases, animosity between the warring sides is high, and before the COVID-19 crisis peace talks per se were not on track in either case. Both conflicts have entailed
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great human cost and their resolution is of great urgency; in both cases, mediation efforts have been under way for some time; and in both cases there is a fairly institutionalized, UN-led process. In short, both are extremely difficult processes in medias res, with no immediate solution to either in sight.

In the case of Yemen, the only physical official meeting that has taken place in recent years was the Stockholm summit of 2018. In the Syrian case, in the years-long absence of actual peace negotiations, the Constitutional Committee has been the only forum in which the UN has managed to convene government and opposition. The Constitutional Committee is regarded by observers as an opportunity to start a political dialogue, and is made up of 150 members (50 from the Syrian government, 50 from the opposition and 50 from Syrian civil society) within which a smaller group of 45 members is charged with drafting a new constitution. The larger group met for the first time over two days on 30–31 October 2019. The first meeting of the smaller drafting body was held on 4 November 2019 and lasted for four hours, during which it decided to hold subsequent four-hour sessions daily for two weeks. A second round of talks in the Constitutional Committee was held from 25 to 29 November. The committee has not met virtually; rather, the three different groups have been working out strategies among themselves.\(^2\) The government representatives, in particular, have argued that talks cannot be convened virtually, but critics say they are simply seizing the opportunity to stall the process.

In the case of Yemen, the COVID-19 crisis, on top of the UN special envoy’s call for an across-the-board ceasefire in March 2020, generated renewed momentum for the peace talks,\(^2\) with increased virtual shuttle diplomacy and one unofficial meeting between political representatives of the Ansar Allah (representing the Houthis) and the government of Yemen.\(^3\) In both Yemen and Syria, multiple track two diplomatic efforts, including women’s groups and UN-led civil society initiatives, have continued virtually.

Virtualizing peace diplomacy

Technology enables certain pivotal elements of peace diplomacy and disables others. Our analysis reflects this paradox, showing how the virtualization of peace diplomacy both obscures dynamics of interaction crucial for building relationships and brings several advantages in terms of levelling the playing field, increasing access and enabling more continuous and systematic interaction. We use the concept of affordances to denote how a material infrastructure—in our case, virtual meeting

\(^2\) After a nine-month hiatus, the Constitutional Committee met on 21 August, but the meeting was cut short when several members of the drafting committee tested positive for COVID-19. At the time of finalizing this article, a fourth session of the drafting body of the Constitutional Committee had just been held, 30 November to 4 December 2020. After this meeting, the UN Special Envoy to Syria expressed cautious optimism, stating that they had reached both agreement on a date for the next meeting (25 January 2021) and an agenda (discussion of basic constitutional principles).

\(^3\) At the time of writing, it seems this momentum has stalled somewhat.

\(^3\) “Significant progress” made towards lasting ceasefire in Yemen, UN special envoy tells Security Council’, UN News, 14 May 2020, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1064102.
technology and physical meeting infrastructure respectively—conditions the actions of those who use it. First, we discuss how virtual technology shapes interaction in peace diplomacy in respect of its frequency, participation, confidentiality and dynamics. Second, we discuss everything that is not there, or is very difficult to establish, in virtual communication: bodily presence, informal space, rituals of reconciliation and time spent together. Third, we discuss the consequences of the lack of physicality and conceptualize ‘the sense of peace’ as the potential for generating understanding, togetherness and trust. Table 1 provides an overview of these three dimensions.

Table 1: The effects of virtualizing peace diplomacy

| Affordances of virtual meetings | Affordances of physical meetings | The missing sense of peace |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Broader accessibility         | Bodily presence                 | Sense of understanding      |
| Shorter and more frequent meetings | Informal space                  | Sense of togetherness       |
| Confidentiality at risk       | Rituals of reconciliation       | Sense of trust              |
| Disrupted interaction         | Time spent together             |                             |
| Equalized interaction         |                                 |                             |

Technology shapes the interaction, length, frequency and format of virtual meetings in peace diplomacy. Of course, the influence is not one-sided. In accordance with theorizations of co-production and affordances, technology is also shaped by social and contextual factors, and importantly may be used in different ways. This section outlines the key affordances of the technology and their effects on peace diplomacy.

**Broader accessibility**

Almost every interviewee spoke of the obvious advantage of virtual diplomacy: namely, that the entry costs for participating in a meeting are drastically reduced, as it is much easier to join a virtual meeting than to travel to a physical meeting place. This makes it possible to include more voices. In contexts such as Syria and Yemen, where movement both inside the country and across borders is restricted, the virtualization of peace diplomacy has in some cases offered increased access for minority groups, including the disabled, women and people in refugee camps. However, as access to technology in both Yemen and Syria remains limited, many...
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groups continue to be marginalized by barriers impeding access to technology. Having said that, our interviews reflected a sense of increased inclusion for groups that would typically have been on the margins but without access to meetings. For example, one interviewee described how ‘I feel that we [women] and minorities are more able to impact the discussion and set the agenda’. Another interviewee described how the outbreak of COVID-19 had suddenly made it possible for refugees to contribute to a UN Security Council meeting virtually, saying that the global pandemic ‘has erased the issue of borders’.

Increased participation applies not only to hitherto marginalized groups but also to political elites with busy schedules. Several interviewees described how their meetings had been given unprecedented priority by ambassadors, special envoys, high-level politicians or others who would normally be difficult to reach. This was particularly the case at track two level. One Yemeni representative told us: ‘You can get to prominent people more easily, such as the UN Special Envoy, which was difficult before, many ministers, many diplomats,’ and another described how: ‘I’ve met many ministers for the past months […] I think the ministers feel safer and you don’t have to go through so many protocols.’ Another element of broader accessibility concerned the access of mediators to heads of conflict parties or affiliated political groups. We were told that setting up meetings in both Yemen and Syria previously required that one showed up in person. The impossibility of this during the lockdown enabled mediators to contact individuals in the respective peace processes more informally and frequently, over the phone or online.

Shorter and more frequent meetings

Virtual communication is often more emotionally and physically draining than face-to-face interaction, and this applies in diplomacy just as much as in other settings. Whereas direct interaction can energize people, virtual interaction rarely has the same effect. One interviewee told us: ‘It’s extremely exhausting to sit in front of a screen for a whole day […] now I’m just—I can’t take any more meetings!’ Another elaborated, saying that ‘it is actually physically very draining as well as emotionally when you don’t have direct feedback about how people feel.’ Before the lockdown most physical meetings, whether at higher or lower levels, would typically have entailed people flying to meet each other and would have involved programmes of meetings over several days. Once it was impossible to meet physically, with a general consensus prevailing that the time limit for a virtual meeting was something around one-and-a-half or two hours,
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meetings were spread out over longer periods. However, virtual technology enables meetings to be held more frequently; indeed, many interviewees emphasized that the virtualization of communication not only enabled but in many cases required more frequent meetings. Accelerated collaboration was reported at tracks two and three, in particular within like-minded groups. For example, with the crisis and the lockdown intensifying existing priorities for women’s groups in both Yemen and Syria, meeting frequencies for some groups increased: the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board, for instance, ‘is meeting more now than they ever did before—every week’.40

Confidentiality at risk

The virtualization of peace diplomacy poses major security challenges for sensitive dialogue processes. Interviewees reported how conversations on politically sensitive issues became harder, because participants’ ability to check whether or not something was being recorded was very limited. Some interviewees found this to be a bigger problem than others. Several Syrians noted that Syria had for decades been a society of surveillance, keeping everyone on their toes. One interviewee reflected on this: ‘I don’t know if this is really different from the physical world. We in Syria are very afraid, like this is just a Syrian trait, people don’t trust anybody.’41 Many people commented that sensitivities depended greatly on whether people were inside or outside Syria when they were engaging in conversations. In the case of Yemen, mediators’ virtual access to the top leadership of the Houthi movement during the COVID-19 crisis was extremely limited, apparently owing to the leaders’ fear of revealing their locations on security grounds. Many interviewees, regardless of their location, described a more general feeling that virtual meetings significantly challenged their ability to trust other participants. One interviewee, for example, described her feeling in a meeting where someone turned off their camera:

It made me have some kind of restriction about what I can say and to whom and why. You know in conflict, the social fabric is completely destroyed, so you mistrust people. I was thinking during my speech: Is he recording, where is he standing, who is listening with him, you know? So you feel that you cannot predict what happens on the other end.42 Hence confidentiality is a significant challenge when trying to build trust virtually.

Disrupted interaction

Virtual meetings have also, in more subtle ways, transformed the nature of communication itself. Many interviews centred on the change involved in communicating through a technological medium rather than face to face. One of the most

40 Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen in the webinar Connected or muted? New opportunities for women’s participation in peace processes during the Covid-19 pandemic, conducted by the government of Norway, 6 May 2020.
41 Author interview (virtual), 15 June 2020.
42 Author interview (virtual), 15 June 2020.
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acute elements of this is the way in which micro-level rhythmic interactions are obscured by the medium. Researchers in micro-sociology have documented the importance of naturally rhythmic dynamics of interaction. In successful face-to-face interaction, people fall into a common rhythm, responding to each other’s utterances by, for example, nodding, saying ‘mmm’, smiling, laughing at jokes, or in other ways responding in a socially appropriate fashion and showing that they are listening. This creates a joint rhythmic pattern. Pauses between what people say are often small, because parties can respond immediately to each other while respecting the norm that it is inappropriate to interrupt. In virtual communication, these dynamics of interaction are challenged by small delays due to the connection, which makes it highly difficult—often impossible—to respond naturally to the utterings of the other without interrupting. If, for example, one says ‘mmm’, or ‘sure’, or makes an addition to what is being said, the small delay caused by the medium will make this seem like an interruption and hence obscure the interaction. Therefore, people often take longer pauses and rarely respond directly with affirmative sounds. Instead, when the video connection allows it, people can smile and nod to show that they are listening and interacting. One interviewee reflected on the crucial part played by this nodding and smiling in virtual peace diplomacy. Conversely, when the internet connection was bad and participants therefore had to turn off their cameras, the interaction could not generate empathy:

When people don’t see each other it is very, very difficult to build empathy, it’s very hard to see if people are listening or not, it’s very hard to feel whether what you are saying is getting approved by people nodding their heads or people you know shaking their heads kind of with disapproval.

This lack of rhythmic momentum also hampers the ability of participants to relate to one another and impedes a crucial purpose of any dialogue, which is to break down mistrust.

Several interviewees made the related point that the lack of rhythmic interaction in the virtual sphere also reduced the potential for intense conflictual engagement. A Syrian interviewee, for example described how, online, ‘I can’t have the same, eh … what is it, like the same viciousness maybe if I am getting into a fight with somebody as when they are right there in front of you in your face.’ Likewise, a mediator argued that ‘you have fewer opportunities to escalate’. While this may seem to be an advantage in virtual communication in conflict-affected settings, it can also be problematic, as some level of confrontation and contestation can be part of a necessary process of transforming a conflict and breaking down enmity.

Virtual communication might be preferable in cases where increased formality is warranted—or, as one informant suggested, when parties refuse to be in the same room but might accept virtual co-presence.

43 Collins, Interaction ritual chains, pp. 63–5.
44 Author interview (virtual), 1 Aug. 2020.
45 Author interview (virtual), 17 June 2020.
46 Author interview (virtual), 26 June 2020.
47 Author interview, 29 June 2020.
Equalized interaction

Since deliberations cannot flow freely because interruptions and discussions are not possible in virtual meetings, they often tend to become more formal. Almost all interviewees reflected on the need for greater control over the substance of meetings and the maintenance of formal order in order to have a meaningful discussion in virtual meetings. Agendas have to be planned and agreed upon in detail ahead of time, and formality plays a greater role in all facets of online meetings.

A key consequence of this increased formality, which was highlighted by surprisingly many of our interviewees, was the effect it had on equalizing interaction, particularly for women. As one participant put it: ‘When you’re in a virtual world everybody is equalized … not being in a physical realm makes women’s presence so much stronger’. In face-to-face meetings, people can exercise and reinforce power with their presence and physical movements, body posture, positions in the room and interaction with others. In the virtual world, such power rituals are highly limited. Everyone is reduced to a screen of equal size and random position in the ‘room’. As one interviewee put it:

Online, people tend to speak longer, but they are more disciplined in terms of interactions, it is more restricted in the terms that ‘I am given the floor and then I make a statement,’ … the facilitator has more control, right: ‘I nominate you to speak,’ and you can level the playing field in that way … think about whom you call on first in the sense of who will dominate the discussion … That can help to level the playing field … these aspects raise the potential for a more inclusive, more civil process.

One concrete example came from internal meetings in one of the Syrian organizations involved in the peace process, where a conversation among women had been taking place around how much speaking time men and women were respectively allotted.

Men dominate and sometimes we don’t even notice because the way they talk is with such a sense of entitlement and the sense that they deserve this space and this is their space that even that listeners feel it is theirs … So [in the virtual meetings] it became easier for us to look at the seconds count to see how long men talked.

Another interviewee reflected on the effects of this equalization in terms of women being able to make substantive contributions:

The way they sit, who’s sitting next to who is a big problem, who is taking the front seat, you know? There are all of these elements that get eliminated when you are in a virtual world that makes it easier for the marginalized or for women specifically, who keep getting pushed aside, to come forward and say, to have the access and the space to give their ideas and opinions and whatever they want to say much more easily than if they were in the physical world.

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48 Author interview (virtual), 15 June 2020.
49 Author interview (virtual), 26 June 2020.
50 Author interview (virtual), 15 June 2020.
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As for the effects on power dynamics in actual negotiations, expectations were limited: ‘When push comes to shove and they get back into actual negotiations, the patriarchal, militarized world is so much more powerful.’

Affordances of physical meetings

Having unpacked the affordances of virtual meetings, we now move to unfold the many affordances of physical meetings that are difficult to establish virtually. In a strange way, the absence of something can shine a light on its qualities by virtue of the fact that it is missing. In a manner not unlike the classic plot in a romantic movie, ‘You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone’, a main theme of the interviews was all the key aspects of mediation, dialogue and diplomacy that are missing in virtual communication. In this section, we unpack these dimensions, focusing on bodily presence, informal space, rituals of reconciliation and time spent together.

Bodily presence

Usually, diplomats and dialogue participants alike take for granted that they are together, physically in the same room, shoulder to shoulder, face to face and even, for a brief handshake, hand in hand. In the COVID-19 lockdown the centrality of this co-presence in peace diplomacy became evident, and its loss damages the potential to create micro-moments of connection. For example, one interviewee explained why she supported the decision not to continue the Syrian negotiations in the Constitutional Committee virtually during the coronavirus crisis:

Peace talks is not talking, peace talks is so much else. It’s the side talks that happen when you’re having coffee bumping into people who you may not have wanted to bump into. It’s the cigarette breaks that a lot of Syrians take and it’s being physically in the same place. The dynamics are very, very different.

Here, the importance of simply being physically in the same place is highlighted with the image of bodies bumping into those of their opponents. In contrast to this accidental solid contact, lack of physical co-presence makes it more difficult to connect, not least when tensions rise. This is clear from the description by one interviewee of the dynamics in her women’s group: ‘There are a lot of heightened emotions; when they come up in a physical meeting we deal with that at the end of the meeting, we pat each other’s shoulders and we go and have coffee together and we smile.’ These physical elements—patting each other on the shoulder, smiling, sharing coffee—all contribute to the reconciliatory potential of a meeting. In this sense, you negotiate not just with your face but with your whole body. This finding supports calls for International Relations to pay more

51 Author interview (virtual), 15 June 2020.
52 Author interview (virtual), 17 June 2020.
53 Author interview (virtual), 17 June 2020.
serious attention to the importance of the body. Strictly speaking, virtual interaction enables you to sit facing others, screen to screen, if the connection allows it. However, screen to screen is not face to face. People do not actually look at each other directly in the eyes, as they are looking not into the camera but rather at the screens displaying the faces of the other participants; the bodily effects of ‘being together’ in the same space are absent.

Informal space

Another crucial aspect of physical meetings is all that happens away from the negotiation table: conversations in corridors and bathrooms, and while sharing meals, drinks and breaks. As one mediator put it: ‘You just cannot recreate that essential space for the mediator: the margin.’ In traditional state diplomacy, the importance of the interplay between the informal and the formal is recognized as a key feature of building relationships. In our research, all interviewees, without exception, brought up the importance of informal space at the core of relating to counterparts, building relationships and establishing trust in negotiations. For example, one track two mediator we spoke to concluded that ‘food and wine is so important, you really cannot understated [overstate] the importance of it … you can make people relax, talk about something else, find common reference points.’

Supporting this assertion, a member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee gave a detailed description of how meetings in Geneva had softened up some of the strained relations between the parties: ‘The smoking outside … or the late-night chats outside, you know … these kinds of interactions can also evolve in informal ways, taming even people who don’t want things to proceed forward.’ Rituals of eating, smoking or chewing khat together humanize the adversary and nurture a different type of interaction that cultivates moments of togetherness rather than unmitigated conflict and tension. They also serve a symbolic purpose, which is the focus of the following section.

Rituals of reconciliation

The meeting as a form is of crucial importance in diplomacy, not just in its substance or its potential for transforming relationships and striking deals, but symbolically. To meet can in itself be a signal of a wish to improve relations. This is also why long periods of shuttle diplomacy are often necessary before actual peace negotiations begin: parties need to know that a meeting will yield some outcome on which they can agree. If the meeting is perceived to be unpro-
ducte or even unsuccessful, it will be symbolically devastating for the diplomatic process. While the status of virtual meetings was transformed during the first coronavirus lockdown in the spring of 2020, with virtual meetings being increasingly accepted as ‘real meetings’, their symbolic weight still did not correspond to that of physical meetings. In Arab cultures there is an added dimension to this symbolism: for many years, local and/or tribal conflicts have been settled by the parties joining in reconciliatory rituals of drinking tea and/or eating together. The absence of such symbolic rituals was highlighted by several informants as a central disadvantage of virtual peace diplomacy. One informant described how just meeting an opponent face to face had a de-escalating effect in Yemen: ‘In Arabic culture, the traditional way of settling disputes has always depended on gestures … you break the ice in very traditional ways.’ Another commented: ‘In our culture … you can be really upset with somebody or there might even be a real battle between you, but as soon as you reach someone’s doorstep, and plan to enter their home, that has to stop.’ The very impossibility of physically meeting thus removes a gateway to the path away from conflict that is built into the cultural system.

**Time spent together**

The duration of time spent together was also highlighted as adding to the potential impact of face-to-face meetings. In both the Syrian and the Yemeni processes, the protocol is for talks to go on for a number of consecutive days. This gives opportunity for relationships to develop slowly. Two members of the Syrian Constitutional Committee described how merely encountering an adversary face to face over days of shared meetings and breaks somehow slowly transformed their interaction. The sheer amount of time spent together made a difference. As one person described it, during the first days people were split into their separate groups and stayed within them. But over time, this pattern slowly began to shift: ‘The first days there was a lot of tension, there were accusations being thrown, but in the end, at one point I was thinking, look at us, we are all Syrians, sitting here, you know.’ Participants noted that some people began to join another group in a smoking break, while other small conversations would happen in the bathroom. Several mediators explained the importance of pulling parties to conflict out of their normal settings to create enough space and time for conversations to take place on topics other than contentious issues and find some common ground; and, as one interviewee emphasized, ‘You need enough time together to get to that point.’

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60 Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, p. 191.  
61 Author interview (virtual), 18 Aug. 2020.  
62 Author interview (virtual), 12 Aug. 2020.  
63 Author interview (virtual), 24 June 2020.  
64 Author interview, 29 June 2020.
The missing sense of peace

Having established which elements are missing from, or difficult to recreate in, virtual meetings, this section unpacks the consequences of these losses. One of the most vivid descriptions of that which is missing in virtual diplomacy came from a Syrian interviewee:

I couldn’t hear in my heart and I could not see the passion in the peace. I didn’t feel there is a passion in moderating for the peace, which I felt while I was physically [in a particular meeting], so there is something, the sense of peace is missing. Whether we like it or not. 65

Inspired by this interview and reinforced by the data we collected, we refer to that which is lost in virtual diplomacy as a sense of peace. ‘Sense’ here is to be understood broadly as a cognitive, physical and emotional process: the quotation presented as an epigraph to this article includes strategic elements of negotiation, whereas the concept we are addressing here is about sensibilities of peace, including elements of moderation, ‘passion’ and ‘feeling’. This mix came through in many of the interviews. From the data, we identify three distinct elements of the sense of peace: a sense of understanding, a sense of togetherness and a sense of trust. The sense of understanding is related to the individual or the party and the ability to sense, judge and feel both the situation and the opponent. The sense of togetherness refers to the potential emergence of intersubjective connection. The sense of trust is related to belief in the commitment of the other and in the persistence of the relationship over time. 66 The three dimensions denote distinct features, but are mutually reinforcing and closely related. While this is a case-study of peace processes, the analysis of the different types of micro-communicative encounters and their effects is potentially applicable in diplomacy studies as a study of diplomatic approachment, which we may describe as a phenomenon entailing the micro-level shifts or softenings that may indicate adversarial parties coming nearer to each other, even if only momentarily.

Sense of understanding

Sense of understanding is related to the abilities of the individual or party to judge and feel both the adversary and the situation. This involves a cognitive dimension that in game-theoretical terms would include information revealed about adversaries’ preferences, pay-offs and red lines, and an understanding of the strategic game being played. One interviewee spoke of ‘the hand of cards’ one was dealt and how this hand was much worse in the virtual world. 67 Sense of understanding also involves a broader concept of understanding in a communicative sense: the ability to develop an understanding of the other’s lifeworld. According to our data, sense of understanding is especially strongly related to physical presence.

65 Author interview (virtual), 12 June 2020.
66 Our emphasis here is on the sense of understanding, togetherness and trust; that is, not on whether or not these elements actually are present, but whether the parties feel they are present. All three concepts are emic in the sense that they reflect the use by interviewees.
67 Author interview (virtual), 18 Aug. 2020.
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and face-to-face interaction. Wong and Wheeler have previously emphasized the importance of face-to-face encounters for understanding an opponent’s intentions and emotions. 68  This link was reflected in many of our interviews. For example, a member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee described how face-to-face encounters enabled greater understanding: ‘We could see, you know, we looked at their faces … and their interaction, after that it softened, there was a visible change in the reaction of some of them.’ 69  Many interviewees described how virtual interaction challenged their ability to read other participants, the atmosphere in the room and the general direction of the peace process. They highlighted in particular the inability to read body postures, facial expressions and subtle signs of emotions and intentions.

The sense of understanding also relates to the importance of listening, often highlighted in conflict resolution. The importance of listening in a process of approach was alluded to by the UN Special Envoy to the Syria process in December 2020, when he stated:

In the room [of the Constitutional Committee] there are tense moments, this is to be expected. But more importantly what we experienced through this week was, I think, more and more that people were listening attentively to each other, they were listening with respect, and there was also an exchange, that they were addressing each other.

Sense of togetherness

The second dimension of the sense of peace is the intersubjective sense of togetherness that can arise over time or even just in brief micro-moments during peace talks. This dimension seems to be particularly linked to facing the opponent. One member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee described how the parties were seated facing in the same direction in the first few days of a meeting. On the third day, the seating was changed so that the two parties sat opposite, facing one another. She described how the very act of facing each other made a significant difference: ‘When we were facing each other we were talking to each other and at some point in that specific day, more people were smiling at each other, more jokes were made; like somebody from our side said something and then they actually laughed.’ 70  Another member of the committee shared this experience and described how it felt: ‘To me, a human sitting across from me if they are not holding a weapon in my face, there is always an opportunity to touch their human side.’ 71 Importantly, this relates to the very nature of changing dynamics of mistrust or transforming conflict. As one member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee expressed it:

When you have a disagreement you need to relate to people or connect with people on more than just the intellectual [level], you do need the emotional connection, the human connection … I mean these are constitutional issues, which raise the deepest beliefs of people. 72

68  Wong, ‘Emotions and the communication of intentions’, p. 144; Wheeler, Trusting enemies, pp. 1–2.
69  Author interview (virtual), 26 June 2020.
70  Author interview (virtual), 22 June 2020.
71  Author interview (virtual), 17 June 2020.
72  Author interview (virtual), 22 June 2020.
Without this connection, resolving contradictory positions is very difficult. As the same interviewee put it, 'disagreement remains disagreement'. These descriptions show how being face to face with someone, even an adversary, can facilitate some form of connection. This corresponds with theorizations of how being face to face, falling into the same rhythm of interaction and responding to each other’s friendly gestures, little by little creates social bonds. The challenge in peace negotiations, of course, is that such connections are often brief and difficult to maintain in between meetings; and they do not easily translate into realities on the ground. Nonetheless, what came out of our conversations was that these moments of togetherness were central to changing dynamics in negotiation.

**Sense of trust**

A central aim of diplomacy generally and peace mediation in particular is building trust or breaking down mistrust. This does not necessarily entail deep trust in the overall good intentions of the adversary, but more often small steps towards breaking down mistrust or building confidence in the potential promises of the opponent. Because many mediation efforts consist of shuttle diplomacy, where parties rarely meet face to face but mediators travel back and forth between them, trust between third parties and conflicting parties is crucial. As one interviewee pointed out: ‘Many of our first meetings were not about initiating a de-escalation or ceasefire process. The real purpose was to build a relationship and build trust.’ The lack of face-to-face connection and informal space in virtual peace diplomacy has grave consequences for the ability of the meetings to generate trust among participants. Several informants told us that virtual meetings were not suitable for building trust. Most interviewees took the view that while relationships established previously could be maintained virtually, in cases where some level of trust had not been established beforehand, this was impossible to build through online contact only. One interviewee was particularly sceptical of the potential of virtual dialogue for trust-building:

The meetings where you need to build trust are just not really productive, because it is really the physical contact, the eye contact, the informal discussions around lunch, dinner, corridor, and so on that make a difference in those meetings, but when it is virtual it is only their voice and our voice and I find these meetings quite disappointing … the trust building doesn’t happen virtually, OK? You can’t create an atmosphere that creates the safe space that you usually need for a sensitive discussion.

Trust is, of course, closely connected to understanding and moments of togetherness. Thus, lack of trust is damaging not only for the relationship

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73 Author interview (virtual), 22 June 2020.
74 Holmes and Wheeler, ‘Social bonding in diplomacy’, pp. 133–5; Collins, *Interaction ritual chains*, pp. 47–101.
75 Author interview (virtual), 18 Aug. 2020.
76 Wheeler, ‘Investigating diplomatic transformations’, p. 495; Holmes and Wheeler, ‘Social bonding in diplomacy’, pp. 133–5.
77 Author interview (virtual), 26 June 2020.
78 Author interview (virtual), 22 June 2020.
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between participants in the dialogue, but also for the efficiency of negotiations in producing results:

I think difficult discussion is limited in terms of results when it is virtual, we bring up the issues again and again and we try to be more, let’s say, specific and more operational and I am finding it slow, it’s very slow I can say at this stage, very slow, it’s so limited in time, you can’t have a whole day meeting, you can’t have side discussions.\(^{79}\)

However, trust is also related to the belief in the commitment of the other over time. As the UN Special Envoy to Syria put it: ‘When I and my team follow the discussions we see very clearly there is some common ground, there are some positions that hopefully when we meet again it would be possible to build upon, that could create something important for the future.’\(^{80}\)

Recreating the margins: hybrid strategies for mediation

Several participants mentioned that the spring of 2020 had entailed a steep learning curve. As one interviewee reflected: ‘We are already doing things we did not think were possible … we are improving.’\(^{81}\) Another interviewee noted: ‘We have already gotten better at assessing the conditions for what is possible and what is not.’\(^{82}\) In this section, we begin to gather together these experiences and emerging strategies.\(^{83}\) The core task of ‘cultivating intimacy’ is still the heart of diplomatic work. And one mediator formulated succinctly what most people expressed in various ways: ‘Let’s be honest. Peace processes are suffering.’\(^{84}\) While certain crucial dimensions of physical meetings cannot be recreated virtually, there are ways to work around some of these missing elements. As a mediator from Palestine with ten years’ experience in virtual dialogue emphasized: ‘It’s not a matter of technology. The main component is the facilitation skills, how we present it, how we arrange the dialogue.’\(^{85}\) This section of the article, taking a more practical viewpoint and, we hope, offering a possible starting point for more discussions with practitioners in the field, outlines three strategies which mediators described as being of increasing importance in virtualized settings.

First, mediators explained that they spend even more time now on shuttle diplomacy to feel out positions, red lines and sentiments. In both the Syrian and Yemeni processes, multiple tracks of shuttle diplomacy were a reality even before the COVID-19 crisis, but both the level of detail involved and the frequency of bilateral contacts have since increased, according to the mediation teams.

\(^{79}\) Author interview (virtual), 22 June 2020.
\(^{80}\) ‘UN Syria envoy places hope in new talks, works towards lasting ceasefire’, UN News, 27 Oct. 2020, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1076322.
\(^{81}\) Author interview (virtual), 3 July 2020.
\(^{82}\) Author interview (virtual), 30 June 2020.
\(^{83}\) These are early findings. Work in this area is progressing on a massive scale, and the coming years will require much more in terms of development of tools and capacity-building to enable mediators to adapt to these hybrid realities.
\(^{84}\) Author interview (virtual), 29 June 2020.
\(^{85}\) Author interview (virtual), 13 June 2020.
Second—and this point is related to the increase in shuttle diplomacy—the preparation time and effort entailed in setting up meetings in general have also increased. Any virtual meeting involves much more elaborate legwork to make sure details of an agenda are agreed upon and that the meeting will proceed in a way that makes some sort of progress: ‘We spend much more time on preparation.’ In some cases, virtual meetings between parties have not been held. In the Syria case, as noted above, the UN envoy did not gather sufficient support to convene a virtual meeting of the Constitutional Committee. While this could be seen as a delaying tactic by the government, which resisted a virtual meeting, ironically it made possible for the mediation team to insist on scheduling of a physical meeting once societies opened up again.

Third, we heard from people involved in both processes that it has become common practice to make use of several mediators in the virtual mediation situation. This allows mediators to pursue a strategy where one person is chairing the meeting and others are simultaneously in contact with a number of the participants via text, or on other online platforms. In this hybridized way, mediators are using both infrastructures to keep open multiple communication channels. A Syrian track two facilitator described how, even before the virtualization of the dialogues, they found that there is another parallel universe going on where people do the coffee break on WhatsApp, so there was a switch to a certain extent where people were doing parallel conversations and that enabled us as facilitators to often measure how heated the discussions are and if people are still comfortable.

In face-to-face as well in virtual meetings, therefore, mediators work with at least two facilitators, one who facilitates the dialogue more directly and one or more who take stock of facial expressions and follow chats on WhatsApp—or engage in them directly by writing calming or explanatory messages to the participants, such as ‘I see you are not very comfortable with what has been said—do you want a clarification? Or—wait a minute, don’t misunderstand what is being said, she is probably referring to this.’ The same interviewee added

Actually facilitation can be a lot more difficult and a lot more exhausting and that’s why the secondary facilitator becomes a lot more important in this situation, they have to actively contact everybody throughout the discussion to feel them out, whereas normally the secondary facilitator is kind of looking at the dynamics and during the breaks come and saying hey—watch so and so, they didn’t participate enough during the discussion maybe … we have to be more on the spot and without too many clues working.

This strategy has been tested and refined by mediators working with track two actors in the different Palestinian territories. They have constructed a system with multiple channels for communication in addition to the meeting itself, including

86 Author interview (virtual), 12 Aug. 2020.
87 Author interview (virtual), 1 Aug. 2020.
88 Author interview (virtual), 1 July 2020.
89 Author interview (virtual), 1 July 2020.
The missing sense of peace

a chat thread with participants in the wider meeting forum as well as others in smaller groups and other specific bilateral threads. In addition, the mediators have their own separate thread, where they constantly update each other on developments and guide the meeting facilitator.

In general, our impression is that in the cases where virtualization has not stopped the process, (track two) mediators have had to take on a more active and involved role, using hybrid solutions where possible. Because agendas and meeting content have to be much more tightly controlled than before, the mediators are playing a greater role in setting agendas and formulating possible solutions; thus virtualization potentially confers greater power but also greater responsibility on mediation teams, with the related responsibility to work harder to ensure ownership of the process among the parties.

Conclusion

Drawing on interviews with conflict parties and mediators, we have analysed the ways in which virtual meetings constrain and enable peace diplomacy. We found that virtualization can increase accessibility, equalize interaction and enable more frequent meetings, while also disrupting interaction and challenging confidentiality. Most importantly, the multiplicity of sensibilities at work in face-to-face meetings cannot be recreated in virtual space. The visceral encounter in a physical room, formally, informally and over time, holds the potential of generating a sense of peace; an ability to judge each other’s positions and red lines, to relate emotionally to each other and connect, even if only for brief moments. This opens up the possibility, at best, of transforming disagreements into increased understanding or even resolution. In the absence of these dimensions, the transformative potential of virtual diplomacy remains limited. Yet mediators are beginning to develop hybrid strategies to take advantage of the potentials of virtual technology while attempting to work around this missing sense of peace.

Virtual meetings cannot replace physical meetings in peace diplomacy. However, they may very well, and in some cases already do, supplement face-to-face diplomacy. Virtual meetings can be a useful complement as they have qualities different from those of physical meetings. They are typically shorter, more formal and more carefully orchestrated; they can include a wider range of actors; and they can level the playing field between actors. Most importantly, the frequency and location of meetings is much less constrained, enabling the process (if the necessary resources are forthcoming) to be kept alive in between physical meetings because the interaction does not have to cease with physical separation. For these reasons hybrid solutions, where online meetings complement physical meetings, offer a way forward, taking advantage of the benefits of both formats.

The sense of peace does not necessarily equate to a breakthrough in negotiations, and may well be ephemeral and fleeting. Nevertheless, it describes the emergence of a slight softening of the relationship, a moment where the parties come closer, even briefly. Since this is relevant not only in peace talks, but in principle for all
diplomatic encounters, we suggest it be described using the broader term diplomatic approachment, entailing the very first frail sense of adversarial parties coming nearer to each other, if only momentarily. Our case study of peace processes highlights some of the micro-elements of this approachment. Future research in diplomatic studies could potentially benefit from developing this concept further in other contexts.