COVID, Deglobalization and The Decline of Diplomacy: Could Tele-diplomacy Revitalize Diplomacy’s Capacity to Promote Consensus?

Juan-Luis Manfredi-Sánchez
University of Castilla-La Mancha

Paul Webster Hare
Boston University

Abstract
The pandemic has shown a diplomatic system that is dysfunctional. No institution or groups of states was willing or able to take the lead in crafting shared actions to shared problems. The crisis coincided with pressures on diplomacy from deglobalization. This has accelerated a fragmentation of norms and increased willingness to use public diplomacy and digital communication as a point-scoring unidirectional method of self-gratification. The private, painstaking discourse of diplomacy is fading fast. The United Nations needs to urge its members to reassert the values and give new attention to how diplomacy is conducted, building on existing conventions. Meanwhile, tele-diplomacy offers a medium where diplomacy could reassert itself as the core activity that will enable collective global issues to be addressed. The paper examines how such tele-diplomacy might be established.

Deglobalization and the decline of diplomacy
Well before globalization was touted as a win-win and a shared interest, diplomacy evolved as an activity that brought mutual benefits. States have never been forced to engage in it but have done so to be part of a global system of communication and negotiations. In past crises, where diplomacy has been impacted collectively, diplomatic actors reconsidered their options. The later diplomacy comes back to the scene, the longer the delay in reconstruction as COVID-19 has confirmed again. However, current deglobalization has harmed institutions, negotiations capacities and political leadership. Diplomacy has assumed a deglobalized mindset.

In the past – post 1945, post 2008 financial, crisis – diplomacy had a convener, at least one country interested in global perspectives. The creation of the United Nations involved close cooperation and compromises between the leading powers post-Second World War. That episode showed an application of diplomatic commitment and procedures to tackle a global issue. Even the Ebola outbreak in 2014 stimulated the creation of a new group – the Global Preparedness Monitoring Group.

But the COVID-19 pandemic has lacked diplomatic direction. As Antonio Guterres said, 'The world was not able to come together to face COVID-19 in an articulated, coordinated way [...] Each country went with its own policy, different countries with different perspectives, different strategies, and this has allowed the virus to spread' (BBC News, 2020). The World Health Organization was not able to lead the global response. Pooling expertise in health to avoid sovereignty and nationalist tendencies has been seriously undermined in the pandemic. The United States targeted the WHO in crafting its own public relations explanations for the consequences of the pandemic, even though many American scientists work for the very organization that was alleged to be damaging US security. One of the great achievements of United Nations agencies is the production of respected, evidenced based statistics. These are not always accurate but more reliable than those issued by individual states who have an obvious motive in manipulation. That service to diplomacy of the United Nations and its specialized agencies is now under threat. Yet in 2020, the UN’s own Security Council was largely invisible in the most global diplomatic crisis since its creation. At the European level, we know now that the EU response against COVID was uncoordinated and based on national priorities. Neither the European Commission nor the European Central Bank were able to lead in a common path against the virus. It seems that coordination was a consequence, but not an engine of European political construction.

Beyond the economic sphere deglobalization means a fragmentation of norms, behavior, and increasingly zones of different technologies promoted by nationalist ambitions. Indeed, deglobalization leaders and governments’ narrative will consider WHO expertise as a problem and not a
solution. This is a sort of neo-populist answer to pandemics that dismiss experts, evidence-based policies. Moreover, national values have been promoted rather than common norms. The list of ‘own values’ that are not-negotiable is growing and making it more difficult to find a common ground. Some cases are relevant. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the veto on Taiwanese perspectives at WHO are examples of nationalist motives driving diplomacy. It is a vision where diplomacy is part of the process of pressing home advantage. Communication between and among states is not seen as a mechanism for constructive problem-solving. Value imposition weakens professional diplomacy.

When the activity and concept of new public diplomacy took hold after the end of the Cold War, it was seen as an important accessory to globalization. States were concerned to send messages and take actions to engage with overseas publics. Yet this form of public diplomacy has also been impacted by deglobalization. The crisis has spawned competitive medical diplomacy as a preferred method of public diplomacy. Practitioners like China, Taiwan, Turkey, Cuba and others have seen diplomatic and commercial opportunities for themselves rather than other forms of collective diplomacy.

The use of culture in traditional public diplomacy has been seen as a good way to open dialogues and share common interest in music and the arts. Now it is used to brand a country rather than building bridges. The suspicion generated by China’s Confucius Institutes is such that it has been labeled by some ‘academic malware’. There is now a danger in the increased temptation to see unidirectional public diplomacy as ‘cultural malware’. Countries use global-museum brands to achieve their cultural goals (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Doha), as well as European professional football (both Italy and Spain celebrate official games in Saudi Arabia).

Public relations and marketing is directing public diplomacy rather than foreign policy strategy. While the COVID pandemic did not cause competitive unidirectional public diplomacy it has exacerbated the problem.

Towards tele-diplomacy paradigm?

The pandemic is the first global crisis in the digital era. Diplomacy needs a digital response option to such crises. It needs new options in a digital age to conduct discussion away from the glare of trolls and memes. The current ‘tweet and see strategy’ cannot govern foreign policy making. Professional diplomacy must recover the value in discretion, privacy and confidentiality to build up trust. COVID-19 has extended the use of international political communication at the expense of the ‘misuse’ of public diplomacy. The ethos of public diplomacy is based on listening to and dialoguing with international audiences. Propaganda, nation-branding and other managerial approaches to public diplomacy miss the crucial elements of engagement. The temptations of the digital medium are proving too much for public diplomacy practitioners to resist. And the COVID-19 pandemic has propelled competition, rivalry and a different type of distancing – a scenario where diplomacy works worst.

The UN Secretary-General sees an absence of leadership and communication between states. Antonio Guterres said the world faced with the pandemic and the most serious crisis since the Second World War the world was divided when it was ‘more important than ever’ to be united. Guterres has called for a re-examination of why diplomacy at collective levels is failing. Trust needs to be rebuilt to revitalize diplomatic activity. In the same vein, social media have enhanced the personification public diplomacy, for it allows for the dissemination of messages among global audiences without intermediaries. The impact of deglobalization on public diplomacy means it is becoming more and more detached from wider diplomacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic erupted just when diplomacy needed smart public diplomacy. Smart public diplomacy does not promote self-gratification. Rather it is directed to finding shared solutions to shared problems developing evidence-based policies. And such global crises cannot be solved solely by states and institutions. Cooperation is needed from non-state actors – scientists, businesses, all digital platform owners, vaccine developers and individual social-distancing – to bring the world back to work. A hankering for deglobalization by some national leaders has been jolted back to the reality of a globally interdependent world.

What is a way forward for diplomacy? If institutions and digital activity on social media show little capacity currently to build consensus what other options could be created for diplomacy? If tele-medicine and tele-education has multiplied in the pandemic, why not tele-diplomacy? This tele-diplomacy would be very different from the often unidirectional, uncooperative and misleading messaging that is practiced as contemporary public diplomacy. Tele-diplomacy is different from pure digital diplomacy because the latter merely deals with the medium not the content of the diplomacy. Tele-diplomacy is where technology enables continuous collective diplomatic activity specifically designed to build consensus and solve problems. A forum could be built where shared problems could be brainstormed with the prime objective of crafting a collective response. This is not just about being nice to others. There is real national interest for all states in having such a diplomatic option for problems which no state can solve on its own. As a forum it would also be an opportunity to integrate non-state actors such as business, science, global city states and the technology platforms. Diplomacy is a global issue which should be everyone’s business. Tele-diplomacy is a recognition of interdependence which we all see but where diplomacy has not acted.

How might an initial Tele-diplomacy forum be structured? It could perhaps start at the G20 level. A central feature of the group could be the creation of a new digital forum. Each representative in participating countries G20 countries might be assigned a leadership role on specific issues to edge towards some consensus through collective consideration. And the forum would be ready for rapid response for the next global crisis. If it works, others beyond the G20 might be interested in being involved.
This group would issue no communiqués but be aimed at reasserting the value of collective diplomacy. Such a forum would involve minimal disruption the other activities of the G20. It could be chaired by the revolving presidency of the G20 and invite on an ad hoc confidential basis the participation of non-state actors such as global technology companies. The forum would not interfere with contentious bilateral issues. These would remain the province of the existing stakeholders. But the collective issues where a new forum is badly needed include climate security, migration, cyber security, privacy of data, diplomatic immunities in the digital ages, and future pandemics. No current diplomatic forum would perform this tele-diplomacy role.

Peer pressure matters in the digital age. Once launched, major states would not want to be left out of this new idea in diplomatic engineering. The United Nations should recognize that this activity would help their own. Diplomacy will not evolve accidentally. Just as in 1945, with the new creation of the United Nations, deliberate efforts must be made.

A deinstitutionalized deglobalized diplomatic world

In addressing the health crisis diplomacy has shown little appetite for using any existing institution. The UN, the EU and the G20, inter alia, have all been shown to be inadequate and not directing effective diplomacy. The WHO has itself become a forum for division and splintering narratives. Diplomacy needs to communicate through fact-based arguments shorn of emotionalism.

The next global diplomatic crisis will probably not be a pandemic. But it could be. The diplomatic response options need to be capable of handling either. That is the type of tele-diplomacy that is needed in a deglobalizing, deinstitutionalizing era. Collective tele-diplomacy would be digital and has the same advantages and disadvantages of using the medium in other activities. But it needs its own forum to nurture real diplomacy – quiet, cumulative, resilient and seeking consensus. It should reassert the way diplomats need to communicate continuously. And it recognizes one truth that major leaders have accepted. No state can solve global problems on its own and diplomacy still needs to lead in this process.

Reference

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Author Information

Juan-Luis Manfredi-Sánchez Sánchez is Associate Professor at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, where he teaches Journalism and International Studies. As principal researcher, he leads the project ‘Public diplomacy of Latin-American mega-cities: communication strategies and soft power to influence global environmental legislation’ (RTI2018-096733-B-I00).

Paul Webster Hare was a British diplomat for 30 years and the British ambassador to Cuba from 2001-04. He is currently a Senior Lecturer at the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies (Boston University). His book Making Diplomacy Work: Intelligent Innovation for the Modern World was published in 2015.