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Diplomacy at a distance: COVID-19's impact on global statecraft

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Dr Tristen Naylor is an LSE Fellow in the Department of International Relations. An expert in international diplomacy, he previously served as a foreign policy advisor to the Government of Canada. He was awarded the Canadian Public Service Award of Excellence by the Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet in recognition of his work.

The 2020 summit of the G20 was planned to take place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. But with the COVID-19 crisis in full swing, world leaders stayed home and the summit moved online. **Tristen Naylor** reflects on the impact this had, and the future of digital diplomacy and international summits.

The G20 (Group of 20) was founded in 1999 to promote international financial stability in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis. It has at times been a highly effective forum to coordinate international responses to global problems. Its annual summit usually brings world leaders together in a show of power and global connectedness, providing a forum to discuss and try to address issues that go beyond the responsibilities of any one country. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, necessitated a change in venue. This time leaders stayed home, only connecting digitally.

With the world facing dual health and economic crises as a result of the pandemic, the summit was expected to be a key moment for the G20 – to both demonstrate its value and coordinate an effective response. But according to Dr Naylor, this year's G20 achieved relatively little, which he ascribes in part to the limitations of digital diplomacy.

He says: "Holding this summit online showed that when you take away physical interaction and a grand stage, you lose two vital ingredients for successful summit diplomacy."



The most effective diplomacy doesn't take place in the formal meeting itself. It's what's happening on the margins. It's what happens in the corridors. ”

Less pomp and ceremony and reduced networking opportunities

In his latest paper, "All That's Lost", Dr Naylor calls these two elements "interpersonal moments" and "sublime governance". Interpersonal moments are "the private conversations, behind-the-scenes bilateral meetings, side events and chance encounters." The lack of physical interaction of online meetings means that participants are less likely to build and capitalise on the connections inherent to successful diplomatic relations.

"Sublime governance" is the creation of an environment that elevates the summit beyond normal politics. There is a performative and theatrical aspect to international summits, Dr Naylor explains, that cannot be easily replicated online: "The motorcades, the flags, the welcoming ceremonies, which may seem self-indulgent to outsiders, play an important role in constituting a summit as being special and extraordinary.

"These rituals signify that something rare is happening and set the stage for diplomacy to be conducted at its highest levels. They also reflect the fact that international summits like the G20 are big, expensive undertakings that require millions of dollars to prepare and host."

This environment makes failure more significant and galvanises political will to achieve something by the summit's conclusion. Dr Naylor says: "The spectacle and its cost incentivise leaders to come up with something big that justifies the whole undertaking."



Environmental concerns mean that saving in airfares and carbon emissions will make remote summitry an increasingly attractive option. ”

When the special becomes mundane: all G20 countries felt the downsides to remote working

The problem with video conferencing, Dr Naylor adds, is that even world leaders speaking in front of flags at their desks becomes "everyday and mundane", a feeling that office workers who have spent their days speaking to square videos while working from home will identify with.

Digital diplomacy might appear to have some benefits, such as the meetings becoming more orderly, with all the participants having more equivalent status and opportunity to speak. However when questioned on whether these were in evidence at the 2020 summit, Dr Naylor says that all countries were disadvantaged by the remote format.

"It's true that less powerful countries within the G20, like Canada, Australia, Italy, had just as much right to speak as any global great power, but the most effective diplomacy doesn't take place in the formal meeting itself. It's what happens on the

margins; in the corridors. This is where all countries, large and small, really advance towards their foreign policy goals. Moreover, even in the meeting itself there was very little meaningful interaction – it mostly consisted of leaders just reading pre-prepared statements to one another.”

Dr Naylor adds that while smaller countries may find their status elevated, the fact is that not all countries in the G20 are equal. For international accords to be agreed, the larger powers often have to come to an agreement with the remaining members falling in line behind them.

What does the future hold for summit diplomacy?

After the 2020 G20, what does the future hold for remote summitry? Environmental concerns mean that saving in airfares and carbon emissions will make it an increasingly attractive option. In many ways, the pandemic has consolidated a process that was already underway, with over 100 advance meetings taking place before the G20 summit. And like many organisations, the G20 had to rapidly introduce remote working. This new way of doing business is still evolving and will improve as it matures.

Dr Naylor says: “I think what we’ll see in the future is much more of a hybrid model, with even more of the preparation taking place online. Summits will represent the endgame of online negotiations, with leaders coming together in person to overcome the final, most difficult obstacles to agreement.”

While it may not yet be clear how future summits will play out, with many countries still experiencing the full force of the pandemic, we can be sure that there will be future opportunities for leaders to refine how diplomacy will work in a post-COVID world. ■

Dr Naylor was speaking to Peter Carrol, Media Relations Officer at LSE.

All That’s Lost: the hollowing of summit diplomacy in a socially distanced world by Dr Tristen Naylor was published in The Hague Journal of Diplomacy.

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