F2F vs Online Negotiations: Different Venues, Same Principles

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Blog 1 of the series 'Possible impacts of the current pandemic on international negotiation processes'.

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The Covid pandemic has highlighted our evergrowing need to reassess how we interact with each another, from both a personal and a professional standpoint. Working from home was once a choice bestowed to the chosen few. Now it is a reality for the majority of the global workforce. Countless newspaper articles have already been published on the topic, advising us on everything from hosting virtual after-work drinks, to choosing the perfect zoom background. While we are arguably becoming more comfortable with this transition to the world of teleworking, for negotiators one pressing question remains: in a profession that relies so heavily on relationships forged across the negotiation table, how can we effectively negotiate online? How do you negotiate when the physical negotiation table no longer exists? In our new series of blog posts, we hope to answer these questions, by taking a closer look at what online negotiations mean for practitioners.

Diving in head first

Interestingly, the question of e-diplomacy is something American researchers have been pondering since the start of the millennium. Their work however mostly emphasised how public 'innovative' diplomacy could become more influential via the internet, as opposed to the logistics of conducting negotiations online. As a result, by the time Covid-19 was first confining us to our homes, there was little literature available on actually conducting diplomatic talks online. Surprisingly, this had little impact on the sudden transition to the virtual negotiating table. It has been noted by several EU civil servants that only 10% of meetings at EU level were held in the traditional face-to-face format during the first peak of the pandemic. This signifies the speed at which we transitioned and adapted to a virtual negotiation arena.

It is striking how little we knew about the impact of the virtual medium on how we negotiate before this transition took place. It is equally interesting to note that almost a year later, these effects are still relatively unknown. In the coming months the question of how to efficiently negotiate online may become even more pertinent, particularly as many have voiced their support for the online realm for environmental reasons. The discussion surrounding this ongoing transition becomes even more interesting when you consider practices involves working parties and committees. What will be the impact of the pandemic on the diplomatic profession? What can be done to find a new balance between the online and physical negotiating arenas? To answer these questions, we must first consider how negotiations are approached on the most basic level.

Is the issue the main pattern?

Regardless of how the discussions are conducted, every negotiator must decide what aspects of the negotiations they will focus on. Instinctively they might focus solely on solving the issue at hand, which is the topic of the negotiations. Here we suggest a different approach.

Multilateral talks should be regarded as multidimensional settings in which multiple lines and prisms have to be taken into account.

Picture a 'Rubik's cube', for instance. The only way to solve the puzzle is to successfully manoeuvre the three dimensions until all the pieces of the same colour match. Multilateral talks should be managed in the same way.

Authors Lewicki, Barry & Saunders follow the same path of reasoning. In their book Essentials of Negotiations they describe the complexities that must be taken into account in multiparty negotiations. They identify three main complexities: the **social**, **procedural** and **computational** complexities. In concrete terms, this means that although the negotiator's mandate is an extremely important factor of any negotiation, so too is the way in which the discussions are held and with whom. It is not just the 'what', but also the 'who' and the 'how' that make up a successful negotiation.

Figure 1: Rubik's axes from Understanding the Rubik's Cube · James Watkins

But how does this tie in with the humble Rubik's cube? In order to solve the puzzle, the different pieces must be moved so that each side is one colour. Moving a piece has repercussions for those connected pieces on the other side. This is because the pieces on the Rubik's cube move by rotating along three axes: x, y and z. The pieces of a Rubik's cube are not firmly attached to the axes. They can be moved up, down, left or right, locking into each another. The structural integrity of the puzzle requires that all the pieces are hooked into each another; if one piece is pried out, the whole puzzle can collapse. Just like in a negotiation, in order to succeed you cannot focus on just one goal (or axis). This will, quite literally, lead to a one-sided outcome. What we want, is a result that represents all three axes, similarly to the three dimensions in negotiation.

We will use the Rubik's cube analogy as the basis our discussion as we delve into the arena of online diplomacy. Though this series of posts we will discuss how online diplomacy differs from face-to-face negotiations and how to overcome the potential difficulties created by this new way of doing things.

Does online negotiation still offer three axes for negotiations?

This triple axes perspective is still relevant in the world of online diplomacy with a few notable differences in each dimension (procedural, social and computational). We will need to understand the differences created within each complexity to understand the true significance of the transition online.

1. Procedural Complexity – the 'What'

Traditional face-to-face negotiations are subject to strict guidelines and formalities. These guidelines form a rigid framework for how to conduct negotiations. One of the most obvious differences since the shift to online negotiations is the absence of this rigid framework.

This is visible in numerous ways, but particularly around the need for better confidentiality management, communication and transparency during the meeting. This is particularly significant as these areas help us to trust our counterparts and subsequently facilitate more effective and open communication.

Confidentiality has always been an important feature of the face-to-face meetings. However, the intermediary represented by the online platform used adds to the usual concerns. How can you be certain that the chosen platform is

100% safe? How do you ensure that none of the other stakeholders attending are not recording the session or that they are not accompanied by an uninvited guest?

The surge in the use of online platforms has also been linked to a similar growth in communication via social platforms by senior figures. When attending a face-to-face meeting, a minister or a senior diplomat knows they does not have to take a picture of the negotiations room for public purposes. The sanctuary of the negotiating room is respected.

The frontier is more blurred when it comes to online talks. One might be more temped to take a picture of the meeting's participants and post it on their public or private social media. Without the correct precautions, this can have disastrous consequences.

Think, for instance, of the Dutch defence minister who posted a photo of her Council meeting to her Facebook page, without blurring the ID and password in the URL of the meeting. A Dutch journalist took this as an invitation to join the meeting, surprising all the defence ministers in the EU.

2. Social Complexity – The "Who?"

Setting aside procedural questions, we then need to consider how the online realm has disrupted our methods of interaction. We learn to communicate using verbal and non-verbal cues. Certain multicultural aspects and signs of appreciation seem to no longer hold true once behind a camera. These signals which we subconsciously rely on to fully communicate with someone become harder to understand in the virtual realm. Think about body language.

As Mehrabian notes, words account for 7% of our general impact when we try to convey a message. For the rest we rely on visual communication (55%) and the vocal aspects (38%). While we could hold a separate discussion on interpreting those percentages, the bottom line of the argument is: words are important, but if we want to truly know what our interlocutor is really saying, we cannot rely on words alone.

But this is not always easy in the online world. Poor internet connection, a broken web cam, a curious/bored/hungry child, the doorbell, the dog greeting whoever rang the doorbell. These are common aspects of working from home that impact how we communicate. While they do not threaten the negotiation process, they have influenced our interpretative framework to the extent that we are constructing a new one specifically for online exchanges. For example, think about video backgrounds, camera angles, as well as the way the speaker asserts themselves during the pitch. Have any of these factors impacted how you received a message during an online meeting? Do you find you can still listen clearly when the speaker's camera is off? Have you struggled to follow your colleague's point when their camera is pointed squarely at their forehead?

Talking behind a computer is a completely different exercise. As a result, our way of conveying messages will naturally change as we try to adapt. A higher tone does not necessarily mean your interlocutor wants to emphasise a point – it could be due to the intuitive tendency to talk louder when you're alone behind a screen. It could equally be a result of an unstable internet connection, which again leads to a tendency to try to compensate for the connection by talking louder. Moreover, around the virtual table attention and patience are scarce resources.

On the other hand, this change of venue may benefit those who usually struggle to make their voices heard. The change of pace and parameters that come with virtual negotiations can allow the traditionally quieter stakeholders to be put on an equal footing with larger or stronger players, as De Keulenaar and Melissen note.

3. Computational Complexity – the "How ?"

Last but not least, the question of how matters are discussed during negotiations also evolves in the online world. For instance, some diplomats have confessed that they have not been able to reach any legally binding agreement since the transition to online talks. Many have noted that their interlocutors were quite wary of taking decisions online due to the dependence on secured internet connections. This resulted in a continuous stalling of the decisions.

Furthermore, losing the face-to-face connection also means losing a significant amount of what scholars call 'the socialisation process'. In the so-called European bubble, diplomats based in Brussels are used to interacting with the same people over and over again. This goes further than just knowing their official position. They learn where their interlocutors are likely to draw a red line and where there may be room for manoeuvre.

This familiarity is a key component in how many decisions are made. Losing this factor represents a loss of trust between interlocutors which could be detrimental to the negotiation process. Finding another way to compensate for the lack of real interaction in e-diplomacy will be an important question for practitioners over the coming few months.

Playing with three dimensions at the same time

The different questions raised by this first post are complex and hard to navigate. This is especially true as the full extent of the many differences created by the new form of diplomacy are not yet known. Just like the Rubik's cube, this can feel unsolvable. But we believe that if each question is investigated separately, if each axis inside the cube is mastered anew, it can and will lead to a renewal of diplomatic practices and to a shift in the negotiation paradigm.

As Maurer & Wright (2020) argue: 'videoconferences are just a tool. It can magnify existing structural imbalance but also bring new opportunities for innovative forms of interactions between skilled diplomats' (p. 564). That is really what this series of short briefings is about. We will assess what to watch out for in online negotiations, and also highlight the opportunities created by this completely new setting. The following papers will develop the points raised here to provide you with a clear understanding of how to capitalise on the new normal while identifying potential ways of resolving the issues identified.

The next post will take a closer look at the 'old normal' before March 2020, asking what was it really like? In addition, we will also provide you with further developments on our Rubik's cube approach to negotiating. Each month after this, we will proceed to investigate the differences and new cleavages created by the pandemic on the international/EU negotiations processes.

Interested in more from this series? Read blog two, three (part 1), and three (part 2) of the series 'Possible impacts of the current pandemic on international negotiation processes' by the Negotiation Team.

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