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Virtual Diplomacy in Pandemic Times

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi participates in the online Summit of the NAM Contact Group to discuss the global response to the ongoing pandemic, May 04, 2020, New Delhi. Source: PMIndia

President Trump speaks on the phone with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull from the Oval Office on January 28, 2017. Source: NPR

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe hosting PM Modi at his personal villa near Lake Kawaguchi in Yamanashi during the latter's visit to Japan on October 28-29, 2018. Source: Twitter/@MEAIndia

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Virtual Diplomacy in Pandemic Times

by

Mohit Musaddi and Sanjay Pulipaka

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's participation in the online Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Contact Group on May 4, 2020, is the latest example of the Indian government using technology to advance diplomacy at a time when face-to-face meetings are not possible. On April 23, 2020, External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr S. Jaishankar tweeted "the changing world of corona era diplomacy. Strong friendships thrive even virtually", referring to his slew of virtual conversations with Indian Ambassadors abroad as well as with other Foreign Ministers across the globe.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has directly affected millions of people worldwide, disrupted economies, and challenged global health. Inescapably, traditional face-to-face high-level diplomacy has also been impacted; there has not been a single foreign engagement for Prime Minister Narendra Modi since President Donald Trump visited India in late February this year. In fact, this is perhaps the first global instance since the outbreak of World War II when heads of states have been unable to travel abroad to meet their counterparts. Even at the height of that war, in August 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt held a secret meeting at Placentia Bay off the coast of Newfoundland.

Instead, diplomacy has continued electronically, via telephone and through video conferencing. When PM Modi was slated to travel to Bangladesh in mid-March for the centenary celebrations of the birth of Bangladesh's founding father, he chose to share his thoughts via a video message. Further, to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic, the Prime Minister participated in an Extraordinary Virtual G-20 Summit and initiated a joint video conference with leaders from SAARC countries. He continues to hold telephone conversations with leaders from different parts of the world.² On March 30, 2020, PM Modi also held a first-ever video conference with the Heads of India's Missions worldwide, remarking that "extraordinary times require extraordinary solutions".³

EAM Dr. Jaishankar has used virtual technology in recent weekly discussions on response to the Covid-19 crisis with his counterparts from strategic partner countries.⁴ While the list of participants is broad-based and varies from week to week, it harks back to the G-4 (U.S., India, Australia and Japan) coordination group formed to organize delivery of disaster relief post the devastating Asian tsunami of 2004.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi participates in the online Summit of the NAM Contact Group to discuss the global response to the ongoing pandemic, May 04, 2020, New Delhi. Source: PMIndia

Of course, the shift has not been unique to Delhi alone, as governments across the world are making use of technology to transact their diplomatic business. Meetings of the UN Security Council, the European Union, the G-7 and NATO have all been held virtually since travel was deemed unsafe.⁵

Interestingly, spouses of leaders have also been proactive in making use of virtual diplomacy during the pandemic. The White House has released several readouts of virtual conversations of First Lady Melania Trump with counterparts from France, the UK, Italy, Japan, Spain and Germany, among others.⁶

However, it must be noted that the idea of using virtual means for diplomacy is not unusual. Ever since the telephone found its way into diplomatic conversations, it has remained indispensable. One may recall the "red telephone hotline" which was set up in 1963 between the United States and the Soviet Union to allow direct communications between their leaders during the Cold War. Although it was not strictly a telephone line, it did set a precedent for other countries to make use of such alternative means to conduct diplomacy. Telephone diplomacy picked up momentum, particularly in the post-Cold War era, as leaders found it easier to hold conversations with their counterparts without the Iron Curtain barrier. Today, leaders feel closer to each other than ever before: "This closeness caused by communications technology [has] enabled the establishment of networks amongst leaders in a manner that in previous eras would have been difficult or, at least, taken much longer to establish."⁷ For instance, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, President George H.W.

Bush made 35 calls over ten days immediately following the attack.⁸ Records of conversations indicate that Bush felt close to French president François Mitterrand and Turkish president Turgut Özal, rather than with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher or Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.⁹

In 2013, President Obama's phone call with President Rouhani of Iran laid the foundation for the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran, the United States and others.¹⁰ President Obama held a 90-minute conversation with President Putin in March 2014 to discuss Russia's military operations in Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea. In 2016, President-elect Donald Trump had a telephone conversation with the then Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif. While it is usual for governments to release some details of their leader's comments during such telephone conversations, there was a furore when Pakistan released a verbatim readout of the conversation. The White House press secretary promptly remarked that "it's entirely inappropriate for the Pakistani government to release what an American president-elect says in the course of a phone call".¹¹ It was also reported that the release had "committed the president-elect to more than what he meant".¹²



President Trump speaks on the phone with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull from the Oval Office on January 28, 2017. Source: NPR

President Trump himself has had controversial phone calls, particularly in the beginning of his Presidency in January 2017 with the leaders of Mexico and Australia. The Washington Post reportedly managed to get transcripts of these phone calls, and they revealed the stark contrast between the actual conversations and the press releases that followed. With Mexican President

Peña Nieto, he discussed his idea of Mexico paying for the wall that Trump had promised to build on the US-Mexican border. When President Nieto responded that his government's "position has been and will continue to be very firm that Mexico cannot pay for that wall", President Trump famously replied: "But you cannot say that to the press...because I cannot negotiate under those circumstances".¹³

Similarly, President Trump's conversation with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was primarily focused on the Obama administration's commitment that the US, after a thorough vetting process, will take in 1,250 to 2,000 immigrants that had illegally entered Australia (by boat). Trump not only misunderstood Turnbull on several occasions during the call and disconnected after 25 minutes despite the call being scheduled for an hour, but he also referred to it as the "worst call by far".¹⁴ Contrary to the reported drift of the conversation, the White House press release stated that the two leaders "emphasised the enduring strength and closeness of the U.S.-Australia relationship".¹⁵

But perhaps President Trump's most infamous telephone conversation will remain the one he had in July 2019 with the newly elected President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. Reportedly, his alleged request that Mr Zelensky open an investigation into former Vice President Joseph R. Biden and his son ultimately led to Trump's impeachment in December 2019 on charges of 'abuse of power' and 'obstruction of Congress'.¹⁶

It would appear that while digital tools may be useful for diplomacy, especially during the time of crisis, the success of this variant is conditional on several fronts. One, a lot may depend on the personalities of the heads of state or government that are involved. Since these are primarily one-on-one telephonic conversations with time constraints, judging the body language and gauging the trajectory of negotiation is problematic. Second, there is perhaps need for even greater prior preparations as recourse to improvisation may end up in misperception or be lost in translation. Finally, the success of virtual diplomacy is contextual. Summit meetings between leaders are usually spread over a series of interactions, which allows for a more nuanced articulation of interests and greater balancing of decisions. Virtual conversations cannot substitute for the quality of more private, face to face encounters that help build trust and understanding. For instance, during PM Modi's visit to Japan in October 2018 he was hosted by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the latter's private villa on Lake Kawaguchi in Yamanashi prefecture for an intimate conversation. President Trump has hosted important bilateral summits, including with Chinese President Xi Jinping, at his Mar-a-Lago resort

in Florida. Prime Minister Modi hosted President and Mrs Trump over two days in Ahmedabad and New Delhi on February 24-25, 2020.



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe hosting PM Modi at his personal villa near Lake Kawaguchi in Yamanashi during the latter's visit to Japan on October 28-29, 2018.

Source: Twitter/@MEAIndia

Recently, there have been reports that the India-Australia Summit, which had to be postponed due to the devastating bushfires in Australia in January 2020, may be held virtually.¹⁷ This Summit may well turn out to be highly successful, given that the signing of a Mutual Logistics Sharing Agreement (LSA) is apparently on the agenda, and the meeting could result in the significant strengthening of bilateral security cooperation.¹⁸ However, to consider such virtual bilateral Summits as the future norm would perhaps be premature. For instance, much of the groundwork for signing the LSA had already taken place through sustained in-person negotiations prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. These have included the meeting of Foreign and Defence Secretaries in December 2019 at the India-Australia 2+2 Dialogue.

For the foreseeable future, though, as nations around the globe struggle with the unprecedented challenge of the coronavirus pandemic and worldwide travel restrictions continue, it may be necessary for high-level diplomacy to be conducted largely through virtual means. The ready availability of modern means of digital telecommunications will facilitate these interactions. Finance Ministries around the world will find the resultant cost-cutting welcome in the midst of the severe economic downturn brought about by shutdowns and closures necessitated by the pandemic. It remains to be seen how much of this will eventually also become the longer-term norm, changing the way diplomatic conversations are conducted and perhaps even streamlining diplomatic representations around the world. The pomp and circumstance of traditional summitry and ceremonies of state which are today in abeyance will, hopefully, stage a comeback once the post Covid-19 “new normal” is restored, but may not be the same again.

**Annexure A: Prime Minister's virtual conversations with his counterparts since March 1
(As on May 11)**

S. No.	Country/ Multilateral Organisation	Date
1.	Israel	March 12
2.	United Kingdom	March 12
3.	SAARC (Video Conference)	March 15
4.	Bangladesh (Video Message)	March 17
5.	Saudi Arabia	March 17
6.	Afghanistan	March 24
7.	European Commission	March 24
8.	Russia	March 25
9.	Abu Dhabi	March 26
10.	Qatar	March 26
11.	G20 Leaders (Video Conference)	March 26
12.	France	March 31
13.	Israel	April 3
14.	Brazil	April 4
15.	Spain	April 4
16.	United States	April 4
17.	Australia	April 6
18.	Bahrain	April 6
19.	Oman	April 7
20.	South Korea	April 9
21.	Uganda	April 9
22.	Nepal	April 10
23.	Japan	April 10
24.	Vietnam	April 13
25.	Palestine	April 14
26.	Bhutan	April 16
27.	Jordan	April 16
28.	Egypt	April 17
29.	South Africa	April 17
30.	Maldives	April 20
31.	Ireland	April 22
32.	Singapore	April 23
33.	Indonesia	April 28
34.	Canada	April 29
35.	Bangladesh	April 29
36.	Myanmar	April 30
37.	Thailand	May 2
38.	NAM Summit (Video Conference)	May 4
39.	Portugal	May 5
40.	Ethiopia	May 6
41.	European Council	May 7
42.	Italy	May 8

All conversations are telephonic unless mentioned otherwise. Source: Ministry of External Affairs and Twitter.

**Annexure B: External Affairs Minister's virtual conversations (Telephone/video)
with his counterparts since March 1 (As on May 11)**

S. No.	Country/ Multilateral Organisation	Date
1.	Nepal	March 20
2.	Sri Lanka	March 23
3.	China	March 24
4.	European Union	March 24
5.	Australia	April 8
6.	Spain	April 8
7.	Iran	April 13
8.	Malaysia	April 13
9.	US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation	April 17
10.	United Kingdom	April 20
11.	Armenia	April 21
12.	Kenya	April 21
13.	Oman	April 23
14.	Saudi Arabia	April 23
15.	United States of America	April 23
16.	Brazil	April 23
17.	Russia	April 23
18.	Czech Republic	April 24
19.	Nigeria	April 24
20.	Qatar	April 24
21.	Niger	April 24
22.	UAE	April 24
23.	Palestine	April 24
24.	Comoros	April 25
25.	Burkina Faso	April 25
26.	Uganda	April 25
27.	Mali	April 25
28.	Afghanistan	April 27
29.	Estonia	April 27
30.	BRICS Foreign Ministers (Video Conference)	April 28
31.	Panama	April 28
32.	Peru	April 28
33.	Lebanon	April 29
34.	Grenada	April 29
35.	Trinidad and Tobago	April 29
36.	Colombia	April 29
37.	Jamaica	April 29
38.	Uruguay	April 29
39.	Angola	April 30
40.	Djibouti	April 30
41.	Paraguay	April 30
42.	Dominica	April 30
43.	Guatemala	April 30
44.	St. Vincent and the Grenadines	April 30
45.	St. Lucia	May 1
46.	Mexico	May 1
47.	Argentina	May 5
48.	Tajikistan	May 6
49.	Japan	May 7
50.	Uzbekistan	May 9
51.	Austria	May 11
52.	U.S., Australia, Israel, Japan, Brazil and South Korea (Joint Video Conference)	May 11

Source: Ministry of External Affairs and Twitter

Endnotes

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- ¹ Dr. S. Jaishankar, *Twitter Post*, April 23, 2020, 9:08 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DrSJJaishankar/status/1253347543745875968>
- ² See Annexure A for a list of the Prime Minister's virtual conversations since March 1.
- ³ "[Extraordinary times require extraordinary solutions: PM to Indian missions on COVID-19](#)", *The New Indian Express*, March 30, 2020.
- ⁴ See Annexure B for a list of the External Affairs Minister's virtual conversations since March 1.
- ⁵ See C. Raja Mohan, "[South Block is turning the Covid crisis into an opportunity to conduct diplomatic engagement online](#)", *Indian Express*, May 5, 2020.
- ⁶ Kate Bennett, "[Melania Trump picks up telephone diplomacy during coronavirus crisis](#)", *CNN*, April 18, 2020.
- ⁷ Crean Jeffrey, "War on the Line: Telephone Diplomacy in the Making and Maintenance of the Desert Storm Coalition", *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 2015, Vol. 26, Issue 1, Pg. 136
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Robin Wright, "[Trump's close-call diplomacy with Iran's President](#)", *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2019.
- ¹¹ Anwar Iqbal, "[Trump team takes issue with Pakistani version of phone talk](#)", *The Dawn*, December 02, 2016.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ [Greg Miller, Julie Vitkovskaya and Reuben Fischer-Baum, "Full transcripts of Trump's calls with Mexico and Australia"](#), *Washington Post*, August 3, 2017
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ "[Readout of the President's Call with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull](#)", *White House*, January 28, 2017.
- ¹⁶ "[Full Document: Trump's Call With the Ukrainian President](#)", *The New York Times*, October 30, 2019.
- ¹⁷ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "[India plans first ever virtual bilateral summit as Modi-Morrison hopes to deepen Indo-Pacific partnership](#)", *Economic Times*, May 6, 2020.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*



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