

## **Diplomacy By Videoconference: Challenges And Potential Solutions**

Philippe Evoy  
Doctoral student in political science  
Université Laval

Number of words: 1,420

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Global Affairs Canada, as well as elected officials and other related departments, to conduct many diplomatic activities virtually. Yet, there is abundant evidence from diplomats concerning the negative effects of videoconferencing on multilateral summits and bilateral meetings (Crawford 2021; Haski 2020; Heath 2020; Rakov and Shapiro 2020). Nevertheless, many experts and practitioners believe that the use of videoconferencing is likely to remain much more common than before, even after the pandemic (Maurer and Wright 2020). It is therefore imperative to explore solutions to optimize the use of this medium in Canadian diplomacy, which is in line with the 2021–2022 Departmental Plan of Global Affairs Canada, whose digital strategy includes initiatives aimed at “enabling a digital culture through tools, skills and behavioural change” (Canada 2021). Some foundation on which to build is already present, with Canada being considered one of the pioneers of digital diplomacy<sup>1</sup> (Clarke 2015; Pilegaard 2017), although some experts have noted the lag in this area of Canadian diplomacy over other developed countries (Paris 2013). This essay begins with a theoretical discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of diplomacy by videoconference and then turns to potential solutions for situations where face-to-face meetings are impossible.

## **The problem**

Videoconferencing has some undeniable advantages, including the ease of organizing events quickly and efficiently, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions related to travel, and the removal of certain barriers to participation, such as geographic distance, financial constraints, and limited time (Standard 2020). The European Union, for example, has been able to maintain a certain level of efficiency without national officials having to travel to Brussels, but in the words of a British senior official involved in the Common Foreign and Security Policy, interviewed by Maurer and Wright (2020), there was a certain lack of substance to the discussions: “Brussels runs on meals, not Council meetings; you see an issue and then decide who you’re going to invite to dinner to discuss it.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Also referred to as *e-diplomacy*.

<sup>2</sup> Free translation.

This is the first problem of virtual diplomacy: most of the negotiations and concrete progress at a summit take place not in formal sessions, but rather over meals, during off-the-record conversations (Rakov and Shapiro 2020), or during “incidental” meetings between leaders prearranged by diplomats (Maurer and Wright 2020), which Naylor (2020) refers to as “inter-moments.” Such moments are very likely to occur after a formal in-person session. At the end of the same session held virtually, the cameras turn off, and participants find themselves alone at home without the opportunity for casual conversation. The importance of these informal moments in advancing negotiations can be explained in part by the resulting development of a bond of trust between the parties. The emotions expressed and body language are crucial elements of these exchanges, subconsciously allowing for a better understanding of the other person’s intentions and interests, and thus increased trust (Wong, 2018).

An emerging field of research in international relations has incorporated recent advances in neuroscience to understand what makes face-to-face diplomacy so essential according to leaders and diplomats, highlighting the role of mirror neurons in building empathy and detecting lies,<sup>3</sup> a process that can occur only in face-to-face scenarios (Holmes 2013). Based on this research and contributions from psychology and sociology, Holmes and Wheeler (2020) created a model of the development of the diplomatic social bond based on four criteria: bodily co-presence, barriers to outsiders, mutual focus of attention, and shared mood. According to their theory, the absence of just one of these criteria is sufficient to prevent a social bond from developing. Bodily co-presence is obviously the missing factor in videoconference diplomacy, and this can affect the relationship among parties (Holmes and Wheeler 2020).

A second significant problem of virtual diplomacy is the loss of the ceremonial and formal aspect. While this may seem like a secondary factor, an entire body of literature emphasizes the importance of the performative aspect of diplomacy (e.g., Adler and Pouliot 2011; Neumann 2006), which confers political legitimacy, helps to overcome cultural differences, and transforms participants into “State officials” (Naylor 2020). According to Holmes and Wheeler, this ritual helps to determine who participates and who is excluded, to reinforce mutual focus of attention,

---

<sup>3</sup> Mirror neurons in the brain serve the function of replicating the intentional actions of others during an interaction and are therefore thought to assist in understanding the intentions of others. Their role appears to apply not only to anticipating simple actions, but also to engaging in abstract, complex and emotional thought. For a more detailed summary of the research on mirror neurons, see Holmes (2013 and 2018).

and to foster a shared mood among participants, thus contributing to developing a positive social bond. However, videoconferencing lacks this ceremonial component.

### **Potential solutions**

In light of the above discussion, it seems preferable to continue to hold certain summits and important bilateral meetings between leaders in person to the extent possible. Nevertheless, some of the more clerical aspects of diplomacy can be facilitated by videoconferencing. In a low-pressure context and once the social bond and trust have been established between the parties, there should be no reason that the work begun in person cannot be continued virtually (Maurer and Wright 2020). However, it is important to improve the current use of the communication tool to avoid its pitfalls as much as possible.

Although little research has been done to date on diplomacy by videoconference, the broader field of negotiation has looked at ways to overcome the obstacles of the medium that appear to be directly transferable to diplomacy. In keeping with the works discussed above, Ebner and Thompson (2014) developed a model to help detect the non-verbal aspects of communication for online negotiation and mediation. Emphasizing the importance of non-verbal language in building trust, Ebner (2017) recommends strategies to address the shortcomings of videoconferencing, listed in Table 1.

*Table 1. Aspects of non-verbal communication specific to videoconferencing<sup>4</sup>*

Motion	Keep in mind the importance of eye contact perception. Intentionally keep hand gestures within the camera frame.
Environment	Use the entire camera frame to complement non-verbal body cues with non-verbal cues related to your environment. Ensure that there is nothing distracting or inappropriate in the camera frame.
Touch	Do not fidget with off-camera objects. Use verbal substitutes for the customary physical contact, such as saying “nice to meet you; I wish we could shake hands.”
Tone	Be sure to articulate well and speak audibly. Be attentive to the speaker’s pauses and avoid speaking over others.
Appearance	Dress appropriately for the context, taking into account the nature of the interaction as well as congruence with your environment. Compliment or ask to see an object more closely to reduce social distance.

These strategies are not perfect, but they can help emulate “bodily co-presence” (Holmes and Wheeler 2020). More generally, Ebner recommends making the most of the medium, which involves knowing its features. It therefore seems appropriate for Global Affairs to train diplomats on the optimal use of videoconferencing. The majority of the techniques presented in Table 1 are most relevant to bilateral meetings. A multilateral summit is often more likely to include a more elaborate ceremonial component that clearly cannot be reproduced virtually. However, it is possible to adapt the ritual to the context to some extent by verbalizing what is usually physical, such as a handshake (Ebner, 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic appears to have catalyzed developments in remote communication, and more innovations in diplomacy can be expected soon. Recent research even highlights the potential of virtual reality (VR) as a conflict resolution tool (Hasson et al. 2019), and there is reason to believe that some of these properties could be extended to diplomacy in a broad sense. In this regard, it is impossible to overlook the recent announcement by Facebook (now Meta) of its massive investments in developing its Metaverse (AFP 2021), which is very likely to initiate

---

<sup>4</sup>From Ebner (2017), page 160. Free translation.

an exponential development of this technology, and the Canadian government will have to study the potential applications of this technology in diplomacy.

### **Conclusion**

This essay presented the challenges faced by diplomats in the forced transition to videoconference meetings that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic. The difficulty of building trust at a distance, attributable in part to the lack of informal discussions and the human neural architecture, as well as the loss of the ceremonial and formal aspect of diplomatic events, contribute to diplomats' perception that it is more difficult to conduct their work remotely. Solutions that Global Affairs should consider include training diplomats to make optimal use of videoconferencing by adapting their non-verbal language and trying to bring some "ceremony" to the interface, and paying more attention to the potential applications of emerging VR technologies. The cybersecurity risks of these technologies were beyond the scope of this essay, but this is another compelling issue that the Canadian government will need to continue to monitor closely (Canadian Centre for Cyber Security 2018).

**Number of words:** 1,420

## Bibliography

- Adler, E. and Pouliot, V. (2011). International practices. *International Theory*, 3(1), 1-36.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297191000031X>
- AFP. (2021, November 8). *La ruée vers le métavers*. Radio-Canada.ca.  
<https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1838291/ruee-metavers-facebook-meta-reseaux-sociaux>
- Canada, Global Affairs. (2021, February 19). *Departmental Plan 2021-2022*.  
<https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/departamental-plan-ministeriel/2021-2022.aspx?lang=eng>
- Canadian Centre for Cyber Security. (2018, August 15). *Considerations when using video-teleconference products and services*. <https://cyber.gc.ca/en/alerts/considerations-when-using-video-teleconference-products-and-services>
- Clarke, A. (2015). Business as usual? An evaluation of British and Canadian digital diplomacy as policy change 16. In *Digital Diplomacy* (Bjola, C. and Holmes, M.). Routledge.
- Crawford, C. (2021, July 7). DIPLOMACY IN THE AGE OF ZOOM. *Diplomat Magazine*.  
<https://diplomatomagazine.com/diplomacy-in-the-age-of-zoom/>
- Ebner, N. (2017). Negotiation via Videoconferencing. In *The Negotiator's Desk Reference* (Honeyman, C. and Schneider, A. K.). DRI Press.
- Ebner, N. (2020, June 1). *Videodiplomacy in the Brexit talks and beyond*. UK in a changing Europe. <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/videodiplomacy-in-the-brexit-talks-and-beyond/>
- Ebner, N. and Thompson, J. (2014). Face Value - Non-Verbal Communication and Trust Development in Online Video-Based Mediation. *International Journal of Online Dispute Resolution*, 1(2), 103-124.
- Haski, P. (2020). *La diplomatie en panne à l'heure du coronavirus*.  
<https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/geopolitique/geopolitique-10-juin-2020>
- Hasson, Y., Schori-Eyal, N., Landau, D., Hasler, B. S., Levy, J., Friedman, D. and Halperin, E. (2019). The enemy's gaze: Immersive virtual environments enhance peace promoting attitudes and emotions in violent intergroup conflicts. *PLOS ONE*, 14(9).
- Heath, R. (2020, April 16). *For global diplomats, Zoom is not like being in the room*. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/16/zoom-diplomacy-coronavirus-188811>
- Holmes, M. (2013). The Force of Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Mirror Neurons and the Problem of Intentions. *International Organization*, 67(4), 829-861.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000234>
- Holmes, M. (2018). *Face-to-face diplomacy: social neuroscience and international relations*. Cambridge University Press.

- Holmes, M. and Wheeler, N. J. (2020). Social bonding in diplomacy. *International Theory*, 12(1), 133-161. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971919000162>
- Maurer, H. and Wright, N. (2020). A New Paradigm for EU Diplomacy? EU Council Negotiations in a Time of Physical Restrictions. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 15(4), 556-568. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-BJA10039>
- Naylor, T. (2020). All That's Lost: The Hollowing of Summit Diplomacy in a Socially Distanced World. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 15(4), 583-598. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-BJA10041>
- Neumann, I. B. (2006). Sublime Diplomacy: Byzantine, Early Modern, Contemporary. *Millennium*, 34(3), 865-888. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298060340030201>
- Paris, R. (2013). *The Digital Diplomacy Revolution: Why is Canada Lagging Behind?* Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute. [https://www.cgai.ca/digital\\_diplomacy\\_revolution](https://www.cgai.ca/digital_diplomacy_revolution)
- Pilegaard, J. (2017). Virtually Virtual? The New Frontiers of Diplomacy. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 12(4), 316-336. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-12341356>
- Rakov, D. and Shapiro, D. (2020). Will Zoomplomacy Last? *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/18/will-zoomplomacy-last/>
- Standard, G. (2020). Multilateral Diplomacy in the Age of Covid-19. *International Journal on World Peace*, 37(4), 59-67.
- Wong, S. S. (2018). Mapping the Repertoire of Emotions and Their Communicative Functions in Face-to-face Diplomacy. *International Studies Review*, 22, 77-97. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viy079>