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Public Diplomacy in Post Pandemic World Challenges and Perspectives

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I ntroduction

If necessity is the mother of invention, certainly the present crisis mandates to re-conceptualise and re-envision the practice of Public Diplomacy (PD). Though not precisely defined, the prevailing mandate of PD is to convey and leverage explanation of policies, showcase their interests and ascertain their priorities to both domestic and International communities through various means of communication. The practice of PD is essentially a set of communication-centric activities and initiatives that drive the objectives of a policy, enhance its outcomes and foster its understanding through outreach. A much-advanced mandate of PD is to put the pursuit of Foreign policy in the landscape of people. In the age of the 21st century, diplomacy is no more just a government-to-government engagement. The idea of PD advocates engagement of people into a participatory Foreign Policy and reform process. This involves the advocacy of various stakeholders like NGOs, institutions, think-tanks, civil societies, academicians and the general public.

Challenges and Perspectives for PD

The basic contours of the pandemic are now familiar enough but, if one could look at the present international political and economic dynamics, co-operation to defeat the virus is sporadic, and the consensus is elusive. Every nation wages its own battle while the dynamics of an uncertain and changing world demands a multilateral approach. An ability to respond to various aspects of changing dynamics is part of any nation's policy, but most agents of change confront the accumulated wisdom of the entrenched or the fiery argumentation of the polarised. A broad spectrum of the public seems to surrender to the siren calls of resurgent nationalism. The questions of free trade vs fair trade, stringent vs flexible borders, naturalisation and citizenship etc., have demarcated the demographics and have set challenges to policy priorities. Many of these tensions are not new, but the current crisis will certainly exacerbate them. Since PD advocates wider transparency and building trust, it becomes decidedly more critical in times of crisis or post-crisis than in ordinary times, to deliver it (Wang, 2020b). Trust is often calculated as a function of risk, and risk perception is intensified in the face of uncertainties. As a result, PD as a policy priority

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has become more and not less significant in every nation's International Relations as PD is a critical linkage between policy and people., domestic and international (Simon (2020)). As the world is watching, the stature and credibility of every nation through its deeds are put into test. We see several reformative and interwoven tendencies along every aspect of the changing policy priorities getting influenced by the public.

With the rise of advanced technology and new ways of digital communication, the wider public have tangibly simplified their ways of conversation and reaching an agreement. Nevertheless, if one could scrutinise the wider picture, reaching a consensus for any progress in the world diplomacy and conflict resolution in the last few years was an enduring task. Mandarins and masses, Streets and the emissaries, notably moved diplomacy to the digital platforms aiming to impress the audience and not emphasising to have direct negotiations with the other parties. Twitter accounts of Foreign offices now compete with wit and sharp words. The problem is such practice attracts the presence of third parties who immediately express their support or resistance. This alters foreign policy priorities by creating dependency on likes and dislikes of non-professional audience. The normal logic of the informational society is that to attract attention; you need to be provocative and assertive. Often, this creates viral international scandals and disruptions to policy implementation. Further, it is very unfortunate that the digital audience is often more interested in negative or shocking developments in International Relations and generally, the audience are indifferent to neutral news of diplomatic negotiations, meetings and summits conducted by the officials.

The audience for PD are changing, and these changes are evidenced in the tides of global demographics. Population ageing in developed countries and the youth bulge in the developing ones are pertinent. Many nations are undergoing ethnic remapping due to migration patterns, and the diaspora of developing nations abroad are increasing. Further, many people are living transnational lives facilitated by wider access to transportation and communication. In general, the audience is now more urban who turn to digital platforms for information, news and social interactions. The dynamics of the urban world concurrently succumb to impassioned and polarised public opinion. We face a polarised world both at home and abroad as nations tend to experience an identity crisis in increasingly cultural and ethnically diverse societies. This rising populist fervour now is a demonstration of new challenges between two fundamental human forces of interest and identity in the social decision and human action.

The pandemic and the subsequent social distancing measures led to the situation where diplomats had to agree to hold their meetings online. Online conferences diminish the usual chemistry that arises between the parties in personal interactions. Lack of body language and gestures develop a dilemma where it would be inconvenient to ascertain the intentions and objectives of the parties. As a result, many negotiations and meetings are postponed to uncertain post-COVID-19 times (Ivanchenko, 2020). Technical glitches, digital illiteracy of few countries and lack of

capacity building add more difficulty to the issue in hand. Governments are also thinking about the credibility of online negotiations. Personal Data protection, privacy, the chances of negotiations being transmitted to other parties and situations where Zoom accounts were put on sale by hackers (Harwell, 2020) or leaked private conversations, demonstrate the vulnerability of technology and the limitations of digital diplomacy. Though the practice of digital diplomacy aids PD by enhancing transparency, such democratic practices may spawn dead ends in case of tense issues because of existing compulsion of the networked society. Further, online meetings do not grant space and opportunity for the conventional 'backstage diplomacy'. This reduces the chances of availing new information, an opportunity to express your position, opportunities for new projects and networking, insights and understanding of the ongoing International dynamics etc.

One of the key realisations we have confronted in the light of pandemic is the inability to transcend the politics of negativity and expand co-operation (Wang, 2020b). These dynamics point to the underlying reality of increasing diplomatic fluidity and a constantly changing communication landscape for PD, which gives us a chance to re-conceptualise and reinvent the pursuit of Public Diplomacy. Though it may be hard for the diplomats to digest, the general public has developed the capability of ascertaining risks and opportunities abroad. Their geopolitical understanding may not be formal, but, they know where to travel and with whom to trade. This is not to suggest that the calculated measures of the diplomats and deliberations of statecraft are less important, but, the era of information technology will drive the contemporary nationalism. Hence, the anatomy of policy, the accumulated experience of the statesmen will struggle to meet the demands of the public. The challenge shall hence remain striking a balance between public opinion and statesmanship. An inability to reconcile both can only come at a great cost of political credibility.

In a multipolar world, introducing one's own diplomatic terms into the discourse of international relations becomes an integral part of statecraft (Jaishankar, 2020). In a polarised world where societies are built with different principles and values, it is laborious to reconcile contestation with collaboration. Hence, every nation makes the virtue of aligning its national interest with the global good. PD acts as an effective tool to develop collective linkages with one's own national interests and common global good. It's the consistent pursuit of engaging the world through cross-cultural exchanges of people; information and communication remain to be one of the modest avenues for developing understanding and fostering co-operative behaviour. It is a reflection of a nation's enlightened self-interest over 'entrenched predatory self-interest' (Wang, 2020a).

Possible Solutions

In the wake of all these challenges, it is not only important to bring initiatives to orient public opinion with the accumulated experience of the

statesmen, but also, these initiatives must create wider engagement between the public and foreign offices. For example, the NATO's narrative of #StrongerTogether and #WeareNATO emphasising on NATO's military capabilities and its capacity to act as a deterrent to other international communities offers a great example of communication strategies to reflect policy transitions (Bjola and Manor, 2020). The European example of applauding workers and doctors from the windows who endeavoured for public health (Hinnant, 2020), the Indian example of lighting a 'Diya' or candle as a solidarity to the deceased and 'COVID-19 warriors' (Nandkeolyar, 2020), are also some of the examples of creating engagement, developing narratives and making the public informed. The state can develop narratives and involve the public for enhancing its policy objectives. Further, the policy pipeline must include suggestions and recommendations of various stakeholders. It is important that the public at large decide how their nation must engage and develop connections with the rest of the world. Communicating a policy would be easier if the practice of policy is put in the landscape of people and at the same time, it is mandatory to overlook that any such policy is practised and implemented from the lens of wise of the emissaries. Additionally, integrating digital with physical and building a distinct digital voice and digital identity will be the key factors for bringing new developments in PD. It is also the time for international communities to start negotiations and conventions on Digital and Public Diplomacy, which can curb misinformation, tackle hacking and fight data leaks. Nations must also emphasise on PD upskilling and reskilling through capacity building initiatives that involve communication strategies, audience analysis, integrating communication management, visual and storytelling and Weekly briefs by the foreign office.

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