

“WhatsApp Diplomacy”: The future of multilateralism in a Post-COVID 19 world?

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Abstract

The emergence of WhatsApp diplomacy as a crucial tool in the practice of multilateralism has become of relevance to diplomats across the globe, especially in the light of the recent outbreak of the COVID – 19 disease which has greatly disrupted established global processes, not least amongst them being those of the United Nations.

Through the use of primary and secondary sources including expert interviews, articles, academic journals, websites and blogs, this paper examines the extent to which WhatsApp has become integral to the practice of multilateral diplomacy. The paper also assesses the use and integration of WhatsApp in relation to UN elections, where it is employed as a tool and platform for campaigning. This assessment will provide a foundation for an analysis of the psycho-social implications of WhatsApp diplomacy and the eventual challenges and implications it engenders.

Key Words: WhatsApp; WhatsApp diplomacy; multilateralism; digital diplomacy; COVID-19; negotiations; candidatures; elections; lobbying; WhatsApp fatigue; virtual communications technologies.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of “WhatsApp diplomacy” has recently become of relevance, given the increasing use of virtual communications technologies (VTC) to facilitate the practice of multilateral diplomacy. This is in the light of the constraints engendered by the global outbreak of the novel corona virus (COVID – 19) and its variants, which have resulted in devastating economic and social disruptions at the domestic, regional and hemispheric levels.

WhatsApp is an American freeware, cross platform, centralized messaging and voice-over-IP (VoIP) service owned by Facebook. It was introduced in 2009, and engineered by computer programmers Brian Acton and Jan Koum. Facebook acquired WhatsApp in 2014, with a total of

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400 Million active users at that time². By 2017, WhatsApp had more than 1.5 billion users around the world, exchanging nearly 60 billion messages on a single day (Sandrin, 2018). Users may send and receive electronic messages or other forms of media, including but not limited to videos, photographs, audio files and various forms of documentation³.

WhatsApp diplomacy can be defined as the use of the WhatsApp Application to facilitate traditional communications-based diplomatic processes. It is a subset of digital diplomacy, which according to Rashica (2019), is the use of new information and communications technologies (ICTs), the internet and social media as a means of strengthening diplomatic relations between international actors.

The establishment of 'shelter-in-place' protocols due to the outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated the modification of the working methods of the General Assembly and its Main Committees, to ensure continuity of the work of the UN amidst the pandemic.⁴ The realities of alternate working arrangements would provide for an uptake in, and a somewhat reliance on the use of VTCs, especially WhatsApp Messenger (WhatsApp), to facilitate multilateral engagement within the context of the UN. It is to be noted, however, that the use of WhatsApp as a tool for diplomats started to emerge well before the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Records of precursory assessments of the evolution of WhatsApp as a tool for diplomats date back to 2014, where it was originally considered by Dr. Ilan Manor. A scholar of digital diplomacy, Dr. Manor considered the early use of WhatsApp by diplomats as a part of his original research conducted on the practice of Digital Diplomacy⁵. Two years later, in 2016, an article was published in *The Guardian*, entitled: "*The rise and rise of international diplomacy by WhatsApp*"⁶, in which Birger et al (2016) introduced the idea that WhatsApp had begun to transform the conduct of multilateral negotiations. The current changes to certain diplomatic practices including the transmission of information and the efficiency thereof, have engendered a paradigm shift in this regard. To what extent, therefore, is the use of WhatsApp the conduit by which multilateral diplomacy will be conducted in future?

² Metz, C. (2016), Forget Apple vs. the FBI : WhatsApp just Switched on Encryption for a Billion People, *Wired*, ISSN 1059-1028 , Retrieved from : <https://www.wired.com/2016/04/forget-apple-vs-fbi-whatsapp-just-switched-encryption-billion-people/>

³ Information retrieved from : <https://www.whatsapp.com/features/>

⁴ It is noted that during the period March 2020 to July 2020, the doors of the UN were closed to physical meetings.

⁵ This information was later published as a part of Dr. Manor's blog entitled: Exploring Digital Diplomacy, available at : www.digdiplblog.com

⁶ Borger, J; Rankin, J; Lyons, K; (2016) **THE RISE AND RISE OF INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY BY WHATSAPP**, *The Guardian*

2.0 WhatsApp and the practice of multilateral diplomacy

By any measure, the use of WhatsApp as a diplomatic tool has greatly increased since initial considerations on the matter. This is consistent with arguments advanced by Borger et al. (2016), and figure within the greater context of digital diplomacy. Throughout 2020, and even before the current COVID-19 pandemic, WhatsApp was being used to complement and advance core diplomatic functions in the multilateral arena.

2.1 WhatsApp as a tool for multilateral negotiations

One practical way in which WhatsApp is being used by diplomats operating in multilateral settings is as a communications tool during international negotiations. A cross-sectional study of negotiating practices across the United Nations System, as well as other multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) will reveal the extent to which envoys have come to rely on WhatsApp diplomacy during the negotiating processes of engagement, discussion, lobbying, exchanging, compromising, and securing agreement.

2.1.1 Evolution of traditional negotiating practices

Traditional procedures and working methods for engagement towards building consensus have evolved to integrate WhatsApp as a popular negotiations platform. It has become the practice of diplomats to use this application to informally communicate their countries' positions on issues during negotiations, and to coordinate policy positions before decisions are formalized. Diplomats also frequently use WhatsApp during negotiation processes to lobby for support for their countries' positions.

2.2 WhatsApp for lobbying

WhatsApp is increasingly used as a tool for lobbying amongst multilateral diplomats. There are multiple examples within the multilateral system, where diplomats employ this application to seek support at the global level for Resolutions to be presented or for initiatives of a more general nature.

3.0 Candidatures in the digital era: WhatsApp for Campaigning

The art of diplomacy has, in recent times, grown to reflect changes in global communications trends. This holds particularly true within the multilateral system, where countries have to campaign for a chance to be elected to high offices within the UN system. Within the context of a constantly evolving "elections world", elections officers have had to adjust to ensure that they can mount effective campaigns.

Traditionally, a standard campaign would include the announcement of a candidature by Note Verbale, which may later feature a reception to formally launch the campaign. Elections Officers would then mount a lobbying strategy, which could include the candidate visiting New York at least twice before the elections to have meetings with Elections Officers, Permanent Representatives or other officials in order to seek the support of their countries. Depending on the profile of the contested post, the campaign could also include the staging of events designed to promote the visibility of the candidature, up until Election Day. The outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent implementation of social distancing policies, however, greatly affected the elections world, and caused Elections Officers to revisit the aforementioned traditional campaign process.

WhatsApp campaigning

WhatsApp has become a popular means of campaigning for Elections Officers, partly in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has prevented traditional means of outreach. UN Elections Officers have had to master a new range of skills to allow them to effectively lead digital campaigns, especially using WhatsApp as one of these delivery and communications platforms. Some of the most common practices include the transmission of campaign messages, which include vital information on the candidature. There is often the transmission of campaign paraphernalia such as posters, videos or brochures, invitations and registration links to virtual events and even the informal transmission of Notes Verbales.

Campaigning on WhatsApp in New York unfolds on three (3) levels: the Elections Officers (EO) Group Chat, Sub-regional or specialized group chats or individual chats. This, interestingly, mimics the principle of diplomatic engagement at the multilateral, hemispheric/regional and bilateral levels. The outreach at all levels, however, is tailored to fit the audience. That is to say, the messaging and outreach approach taken by an elections official in the EO WhatsApp group or a regional/specialized group chat will usually differ from the approach and message conveyed bilaterally.

WhatsApp campaigning has proven to be very advantageous and efficient, given one's ability to control the flow of communication on their country's candidature. Elections Officers also use WhatsApp to convey regional candidatures charts on a monthly basis. These charts are the lifeline of the elections community, as they collate in one place all the candidatures of the various geographic groups,⁷ which allow for ease of reference and cross referencing. At the bilateral level, Elections Officers use WhatsApp to discuss, propose and conclude reciprocal or cross-support arrangements with other countries.

⁷ It is not the standard practice of the African Group to produce an elections chart

4.0 The Psychology of WhatsApp Diplomacy

As the practice of diplomacy requires interpersonal relations at varying degrees, it is possible to apply a psycho-social perspective in analyzing the use of WhatsApp diplomacy in the multilateral sphere. In so doing, we deepen our fundamental understanding of just how far the practice of diplomacy has evolved.

4.1 WhatsApp Group Dynamics and the perception of influence

International relations theory speaks to the rational actor and realist theories, which arguably guide the conduct of international relations amongst states. At the heart of these fundamental theories is self-interest, and the importance of exerting influence, which may be achieved through the use of hard or soft power. This influence guides interstate relations between diplomats in the multilateral setting. Yet, traditional demonstrations of power which engender influence, have evolved. The use of WhatsApp diplomacy in the UN system has provided an environment for the perpetuation of the perception of influence, based on which WhatsApp groups one belongs to. This perception of power emanates from the Member States of these WhatsApp groups. Association with these countries through an invitation to join can be perceived as amassing power, which allows for the development of influence.

There are cases where the WhatsApp groups are not exclusive, but involve the sum total of the membership of a larger group. For instance, each geographic or negotiating group of the Main Committees of the UN General Assembly has their own WhatsApp group.⁸ In this case, it is the visibility and interactions of the named representative which allow for the development of real or perceived influence, which redounds in favour of that country. The ability of the envoy to use this effectively to secure influence is, however, dependent on the human, material and mental resources at the diplomat's disposal.

4.2 WhatsApp fatigue

For multilateralists, the experience of WhatsApp fatigue and social exclusion is very real. It is felt, however, more so by diplomats from smaller states whose diplomatic missions have less human and financial resource capacities than those of their counterparts from larger states. The fact remains that, whereas some larger representations have multiple diplomats working on a singular issue or area, some delegations have only one diplomat who covers multiple areas, each of which may have its own set of WhatsApp groups. This means that the officer will need to engage via multiple WhatsApp groups, in which intense conversations are being led,

⁸ The membership of the United Nations can be broken down into geographic groups, of which there are five (5): the Western European and Others Group (WEOG), the Asia Pacific Group (APG), the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States (GRULAC), the Eastern European Group (EEG) and the African Group (AG). The negotiating groups include the Group of 77 and China, the European Union, CANZ. Countries such as the United States, the Russian Federation, Japan and Mexico negotiate in their own right.

most times concurrently. This can easily lead to the mental exhaustion of the diplomat by way of information overload. This eventually has implications for how the envoy will monitor and respond to information, which may ultimately affect their visibility in the various groups.

5.0 Challenges of WhatsApp Diplomacy

Though there are many benefits of using WhatsApp as a tool to conduct multilateral diplomacy, arguments have been raised concerning the growing security concerns of the digital era. For diplomats, the safe transmission of communication is of extreme importance, given the sensitive nature of the information they access and convey. Lessons of espionage from World War II and the Cold War Era, and indeed, current high-profile cases of hacking and data leakage of sensitive information remind us of this fact, and prove the validity of these security concerns.

In 2020, the question of the safety of the use of WhatsApp for diplomats was addressed in its name-sake article published by Alexander Fanta, a Brussels based correspondent of netpolitiz.org, and former foreign policy journalist for the Austrian news agency (APA). He assesses this question from the perspective of the European Union, and asserts that recent events, including BREXIT, have 'forced a digital clean-up on diplomats in Brussels'.

Despite the improved advanced end-to-end encryption protocols of WhatsApp, consideration is being given by diplomats throughout the multilateral system to alternative instant messaging applications that are deemed to be 'safer'. This includes, most notably, the application "Signal". According to Fanta (2020), experts from the European Commission's Information Technology and Cybersecurity Board recently issued a note on this issue to its officials. The Note recommends the use of Signal as a safer alternative for instant messaging for various reasons, including the fact that Signal's encryption protocol is available under an open-source license, which means that it is publicly available for cyber security experts to test it, examine for potential holes, and can be independently audited⁹.

5.1 Revised Data Policy

Another consideration regarding the security of using WhatsApp takes into consideration the updated terms of service, which will allow the application to share users' data with its parent company, Facebook. These terms include facilitating e-commerce through WhatsApp, as Facebook attempts to monetize the messaging service¹⁰. Many privacy advocates have strongly criticized these updates and have questioned their legality. These updates further warrant concern for diplomats, given the privacy concerns they engender.

5.2 Communication Challenges

⁹ Note published in full, retrieved from : <https://cdn.netzpolitik.org/wp-upload/2020/02/eu-signal.pdf>

¹⁰ Information regarding WhatsApp update retrieved from : <https://www.dw.com/en/whatsapp-update-to-expand-data-sharing-sparks-criticism/a-56164619>

Effective communication is often nuanced, taking into consideration both verbal and non-verbal components. It is important to note this, as in sending messages on WhatsApp there is always the risk of miscommunication, whether it be through an auto-correct error or a failure to accurately reflect the mood and the tone of the message. As diplomacy is first and foremost dependent on interpersonal relations, a discussion over WhatsApp of a sensitive issue may lead to the information being received incorrectly, which may cause serious misunderstanding or engender a perception of ill-will or offense. The question of how information is shared and even how diplomats treat with sensitive discussions, such as during negotiations over WhatsApp, must therefore be seriously assessed.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The development of WhatsApp diplomacy has rendered certain bureaucratic processes and procedures previously attached to the practice of multilateral diplomacy inefficient. This is because at the heart of multilateralism is the ability to communicate effectively and expeditiously. The engagement of WhatsApp by diplomats in multilateral settings has allowed for the effective and efficient transmission of crucial information. The arguments advanced in this paper support the claim that WhatsApp has become an essential tool for multilateral negotiations, where several players must work in concert towards building and maintaining consensus on key issues of shared interest.

The advancements proffered by WhatsApp diplomacy, however, can never replace traditional diplomatic practices and procedures. The responsibility of the envoy remains, *inter alia*, as dictated by article two (2) of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, to promote friendly relations between States. Diplomacy in all its forms will always require human interaction and engagement.

Notwithstanding, the relevance of WhatsApp in respect of the transmission of information cannot be understated. Diplomats at all levels send and receive important information via this medium. This begs the question, should Foreign Ministries recognize WhatsApp discussions as official correspondence? **In this regard, it may be worth recommending that Ministries of Foreign Affairs consider and advance forward-looking protocols to support the standardization of the use of WhatsApp in their practice of diplomacy, and within the larger context of their policies concerning digital diplomacy.** After all, established means of diplomatic communication such as the telegraph evolved into telephone conversations and emails. What is to say, therefore, that WhatsApp messages and other such correspondence are not the next step in the evolution of acknowledged diplomatic communication?

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