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# Diplomacy in the time of Covid-19 - three aspects

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As the UK begins to gradually move out of lockdown, we can begin to take stock of some developments. The first half of 2020 has of course been marked most visibly by the Global Pandemic of Covid-19. Diplomacy has seen some of the quickest changes the Anglo-sphere has undergone in recent memory. These changes can be categorised in three broad areas: changes to the immediate content of diplomatic activity, changes to the methods of diplomatic interactions and changes to the tone and substance of foreign policy making.



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### Content

The collapse of easy international travel has forced foreign ministries across Europe and North America to organise large scale repatriation endeavours for their citizens abroad. This [mammoth effort](#) has been eating up unprecedented resources, physically and in terms of attention and capacity of [consular officials](#). Travel bans, quarantines and lockdowns have transformed the challenges posed to visa sections of embassies and outsourced service providers alike. The immediate priorities of embassies around the world have shifted. In a new normal, consular activities that once ran almost automatically in the background have rapidly taken

## *Diplomacy has seen some of the quickest changes in the Anglo-sphere in recent memory.*

over day to day operations in the form of repatriation, evacuation and other support for citizens abroad. Embassies are of course well prepared to react swiftly to natural disasters, man-made disasters and other events which put the evacuation and support of citizens into the foreground. However, this is the first time in

living memory for most diplomats around the world that this is not a local or regional occurrence but a global phenomenon. This entails a much more far reaching and long term transformation of the order of business and a near freeze on the previous priorities. As in many cases both the diplomat abroad, the ministry at home and their foreign counterparts have all been caught up in emergency trouble shooting simultaneously. This is certainly the least impactful of the three perspectives but it influences and underpins the other two.

### Methods

The second transformation that we have seen accelerate over the last six [months](#) has been in the methods of interaction. Of course technological revolutions in [diplomacy](#) reach back into the furthest annals of history, but not in living history has face to face diplomatic activity been suddenly frozen for several weeks and in some cases months. Important negotiations had to be conducted remotely or put on ice during this pandemic affecting the possibility to make progress, find common ground and generally practice the soft skills characteristic of diplomacy. The personal relationships between diplomats are a key aspect in building trust, compromise and engaging in the creative process of joint problem solving that often produces the most lasting solutions between countries. Currently this cannot be replicated via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. These challenges are not only outward-facing but also strain the internal dynamics of a suddenly socially distanced negotiation team tasked with pursuing a joint strategy in real time while sequestered in physical space.

### Tone and substance

Finally, this strange half year period has brought to the fore the acceleration of populist diplomacy. Not only is there an increasing turn to international relations being

cast as immediate responses to populist demands, but diplomatic transactions are also becoming more unabashed about it. No politician, democratic or otherwise, makes decisions without having in the back of their mind their constituency, stake holders, patronage networks and (electoral) obligations. Yet through mechanisms of socialisation of public servants, policy advisers and staffers to the language, theories and histories of the national interest the pursuit of individual success has traditionally had to be translated into the language of the broader interest. This translation, of ad hoc policy into the terminology of the national interest, has an effect. It creates an obligation to be internally coherent, to at least claim that one's path is guided by the national interest and that practicalities and principles underlie the making of policy. This curtails and sometimes forces the plausible choices. The way in which Covid-19 has caught the US and UK government off guard has meant that there has not been time to successfully translate the struggle into the language of the national interest, [highlighting the](#)



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## ... changes to the content ... methods of diplomatic interactions & the tone and substance of foreign policy making.

[short-termist and populist tendencies shaping policy making](#). Whether it is the US defunding a whole series of international organisations they helped set up in the [first place](#); The UK consciously opting out of successful European programmes such as the [joint procurement](#) of PPE; Or the [scrambling](#) of western governments to find a common policy reaction to China increasing its control over [Hong Kong](#). The national interest becomes defined as a more and more short term concept that is often apparently synonymous with the immediate interest of those in power. Diplomacy and foreign policy is increasingly used for domestic signalling. Ditching the national interest in favour of the re-election interest means that a far flung crisis only matters in so far as it plays into the domestic electoral calculus. Diplomacy is forced to become fully solipsistic.



Photo: *Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken / Ministry of Foreign Affairs: The Hague Digital Diplomacy*

In conclusion the question remains, are these changes here to last? Will we ever go back to the pre-Covid-19 'normal'? In this field, just as in any other, there is a good chance that the chaos of the present will give rise to both a new history of the past and many new considerations, for those seeking to assemble a specific future.

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