

# **Redefining Diplomacy in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**Produced and edited by  
The Meridian Center for  
Diplomatic Engagement**

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# Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended every aspect of life. Industries have been disrupted. Businesses, schools, and governments implemented radical new policies in order to resume operations and adapt for the future in a “new normal.”

Diplomats joined the front lines of the crisis, with embassies struggling to maintain their diplomatic footprint, strengthen important bilateral cooperation, and provide consular services in a complex environment to stranded nationals.

The virus has fundamentally changed diplomacy in Washington. Our nation’s capital, until recently the diplomatic crossroads of the world, has now gone into “hibernation.” Instead of flocking to Washington for meetings at the White House, State Department, or World Bank, world leaders and ministers are forced to conduct diplomacy over video conferences and phone calls, while ambassadors carry the load of representation and advocacy. Embassies and diplomatic residences, once the hubs of envoys from the U.S. and around the world gathering for cultural events and receptions, are now eerily quiet.

This report examines how diplomatic norms, embassy operations, and the role of diplomats themselves have changed and will continue to evolve in the wake of the crisis. It synthesizes insights shared by a range of current and former diplomats from across the globe, about trends in the evolution of diplomacy in a post-COVID world where alliances are shifting, polarization is deepening, and skepticism of global engagement had already been growing, particularly here in the United States.

The Meridian Center for Diplomatic Engagement will be researching and analyzing these trends in greater detail over the coming months as part of the Redefining Diplomacy Initiative. The Center serves to strengthen engagement between the diplomatic community and the U.S. public and private sectors, providing members of the foreign diplomatic corps opportunities to connect with American leadership and understand U.S. perspectives. As many traditional diplomatic practices have been upended in the wake of the pandemic, Meridian is seeking to explore how diplomacy might change in the short- and long-term, and the ways that governments, NGOs, and the private sector can support diplomacy’s necessary evolution and continued global engagement.



## Digital diplomacy has presented opportunities and challenges

Following the lockdown, embassies moved swiftly toward virtual operations, forcing them to conduct diplomatic interactions with host governments, their counterparts, and the public over digital platforms. While daunting, the capacity of missions to adapt has been impressive. World leaders and international organizations held important bilateral and multilateral engagements online, including the annual World Bank Spring Meetings, the G-7 summit and G-20 summits, and the high-level meetings of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Former Ambassador of Mexico to the U.S. Arturo Sarukhan eloquently summed up the impact of digital transformation on diplomacy, saying, “Diplomacy’s lingua franca in the 19th century was French; in the 20th, it was English. The lingua franca of diplomacy in the 21st century is the mastery of digital tools and platforms.”

“The lingua franca of diplomacy in the 21st century is the mastery of digital tools and platforms.”

— *His Excellency Arturo Sarukhan Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution; Ambassador of Mexico to the U.S. (2007-2013)*

This transition to digital platforms highlighted the ease, cost-effectiveness, and productivity of working remotely, with the instant linking of multiple countries and continents. Diplomats have demonstrated the ability to gather, present information, and make critical decisions more quickly than ever believed possible, without the need for expensive travel, logistical and scheduling constraints, and carbon emissions.

With the pandemic promising to linger as a phenomenon, rather than fading like a blip in time, other functions of diplomacy can be reimagined and, in some

cases, streamlined. Many in-person services previously requiring travel, such as consular appointments, can be done virtually.

Embassies have also embraced digital diplomacy to expand the reach of their public and cultural events to global audiences and include a wider range of top officials and other participants from their home country.

**“As Foreign Missions, the current increasing openness to virtual settings provides a great path to be innovative in the way we do public diplomacy and it gives us immeasurable reach to new audiences and resourceful speakers that would normally be hard or expensive to invite,” notes Lawrence Manzi, Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Rwanda.**

Large and expensive national day celebrations, a casualty of the pandemic, have presented new opportunities for engagement. This year, U.S. ambassador to Mexico Christopher Landau spent a fraction of his Fourth of July celebration budget to produce a video that has now been viewed more than 800,000 times. In Washington, the annual Europe Day reception was replaced by an online EU-U.S. solidarity event with speakers from Europe, which encouraged viewers to support food banks and racked up thousands of views and millions of social media impressions globally. Many ambassadors have intensified their social media engagement to reach new audiences.

The digital transformation brought on by the pandemic has not erased the need for face-to-face contact, considered the backbone of traditional statecraft. Most diplomats lament suspending in-person meetings. “In the evenings before the pandemic, my residence would be full of friends from all kinds of organizations and walks of life, coming together for receptions and getting to know and understand each other,” recalls Ambassador Shinsuke Sugiyama of Japan, who summed up the disappointment of many of his counterparts in Washington, “I think that is what I miss most.” The personal connection that comes from shaking hands, holding informal interactions, and sharing a meal still make in-person contacts irreplaceable in developing relationships and building trust and confidence.

**“Diplomacy requires candid conversations to properly read your counterpart and negotiate,” adds**

**Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchison, Permanent Representative of the U.S. to NATO. “You simply cannot do complex diplomacy over the phone or Zoom. Living in a COVID-19 world is a reminder that there is no substitute for a bilateral meeting or quick pull-aside on the margins of another event to get important work done.”**

Virtual public diplomacy can also be less organic and insightful. In an election year, diplomats posted in Washington typically visit various areas of the country and meet voters with different perspectives outside the Beltway. This year, they are limited to their existing networks in Washington, or digital engagement through mechanisms like Meridian’s networking session with Denver voters.

Additional challenges center around the technology itself. Sensitive discussions require a level of secure communications that is hard to replicate in a virtual space. Moreover, technology infrastructure is inadequate in many areas, both in the developing world and in underserved and remote communities here in the United States. As the shift to “digital diplomacy” becomes more embedded, efforts should be redoubled to improve access to broadband internet.

“I don’t think it’s going to be first world versus

second as far as development any longer. It’s going to be the digitally connected versus the unconnected worlds,” says Ambassador Reema bint Bandar al-Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. “That’s going to be one of the new definitions of poverty. If you are tech-poor and disconnected, that is what will hold your nation back today, as much as hunger, a weak financial system, or a lack of transparency and strong institutions. **We need to focus on making sure we have a minimum definition of connectivity that will allow for the digital divide to be minimized.**”

**“If you are tech-poor and disconnected, that is what will hold your nation back today, as much as hunger, a weak financial system, or a lack of transparency and strong institutions.”**

*– Ambassador Reema bint Bandar al-Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*



### **Both the practice of diplomacy and the role of diplomats need more flexibility**

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a re-examination of which diplomatic practices have served countries well and those that can be adapted to stay ahead of the curve.

Though the next generation of diplomats will operate in a complex, uncertain world with overlapping tensions, Ambassador Jorge Argüello of Argentina stresses the importance of remembering “foreign policy diagnoses and outlines are devised by humans.” The three skills he deems necessary in the training of future diplomats are “gender perspective, communication abilities, and prospective analytical techniques.”

Important diplomatic skills, like critical thinking, clear writing, and the ability to establish relationships, will remain crucial.

**“The dominance of tele-meetings has pushed us to improve our verbal and written communication skills,”** says Ambassador Roya Rahmani of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, noting the shift has “pushed diplomats to become more factual and substantive since they can no longer rely heavily on nonverbal communications and close contact. The emotional intelligence typically required of a diplomat has subsided compared to verbal communication skills.”

With virtual diplomacy yielding greater efficiency, bureaucratic burden on diplomats could be eased. Most communication can be handled at lightning speed by text, email, and, when needed, off-the-shelf, encrypted, portable, and remote means. This decreased reliance on paper traffic and people management can free up diplomats to think about strategy and engage in the core function of their work: getting to know the people, the leaders, the culture, the language, the ways of thinking, and the risks, opportunities, and outside actors that shape the countries where they are assigned.

“Only diplomats can build personal relationships and trust, smell the winds of change, and be the first ones to identify risks, speak up for our country’s interests, and use good offices to broker solutions to difficult problems,” says Ambassador Kurt Volker, Permanent Representative of the U.S. to NATO (2008-2009). “COVID-19 may change diplomacy dramatically--by helping it re-focus on what is really important.”

**“COVID-19 may change diplomacy dramatically — by helping it re-focus on what is really important.”**

*— Ambassador Kurt Volker,  
Permanent Representative of the U.S.  
to NATO (2008-2009)*

Princess Reema bint Bandar al-Saud, Saudi Arabia’s Ambassador to the U.S., notes that technology allows leaders to connect directly without using their



envoys as conduits. But she cautions that countries must increase their efforts to ensure their people are as engaged as their leaders.

“If people-to-people engagements are lost because of COVID, I think we are all going to go into a very dark phase over the next couple of years,” she warns. “A critical part of my personal mandate has been to spend as much time out of Washington, DC as I do here--meeting governors and business communities to understand the dynamics of each of those states. If the diplomats stay only in the capital, they are losing out on so many opportunities for their country to engage in a healthy way with their host country.”

In this evolving global diplomatic agenda, more flexibility and agility will be needed by envoys to support trade, investment, and health research. **“Ten years ahead, embassies will look quite different from now,” predicts Ambassador Argüello. “Based on my experience, I deem diplomatic ductility as essential in the ‘new normal.’”**

Still, Ambassador Thomas Pickering warns that boosting the diplomatic ranks with health professionals to combat the pandemic misses the mark. “Diplomats are trained to be masters of many subjects, and



this includes instruction to have science know-how and similar understanding,” Ambassador Pickering says. He notes that “critical thinking and the ability to work on one’s feet remain virtually important.”

**“The emphasis will remain on in-person diplomacy, especially when building all-important interpersonal relations or conducting sensitive negotiations.”**

*— His Excellency Stavros Lambrinidis, Ambassador of the European Union to the U.S.*

Ambassador Stavros Lambrinidis of the European Delegation to the U.S. has credited the halting of the frantic pace of in-person diplomacy with an opportunity to think of the bigger picture. “COVID has allowed us to take a step back and to think more ‘strategically’ instead of ‘transactionally,’” he says.

But the times have also required intense attention to pressing and immediate demands of the pandemic. In the post-COVID era, Ambassador Lambrinidis says, flexibility will be the key. “The emphasis will remain on in-person diplomacy, especially when building all-important interpersonal relations or conducting sensitive negotiations,” he predicts.

This streamlining of diplomatic function also enables embassies to focus on the core functions of diplomacy. During the early months of 2020, consular services overtook most other issues at embassies around the world. Consulates played a key role in assisting citizens to navigate an uncertain and complicated world full of restrictions and border closures.

“Consular work gives an opportunity to interact with citizens and it is essential that they receive good services,” says Ambassador Bergdís Ellertsdóttir of Iceland, whose country is building on the lessons learned from its response to the pandemic in order to prepare

for a possible second wave of COVID-19 and other potential global shocks. **“The Foreign Service is, after all, a service organization, aiming to protect citizens, their interest abroad, and promote common values in international fora,”** she says.

Former Undersecretary for Political Affairs and Ambassador to Brazil Tom Shannon predicts diplomacy will likely continue to endure this panic-induced hibernation until a vaccine for COVID-19 is developed.

“Washington had a convening and convoking authority,” Ambassador Shannon notes of the pre-COVID era, where high-level delegations would travel to Washington for multilateral meetings accompanied by their own staff. Less large-scale in-person convenings, he says, could enable a return to “a more traditional form of diplomacy with ambassadors and embassies carrying the load of representation and advocacy,” raising their profile as the frontline representatives of their countries.

Embassies currently boasting a massive physical presence can be leaner, thereby decreasing their security footprint. This discussion will become more frequent as technology advances.

**The world order must be reshaped and strengthened to reflect today’s global landscape**

The spread of COVID-19 has exposed weaknesses across all sectors worldwide that both were compounded by the pandemic and exacerbated its effect. This highlighted the vulnerabilities associated with global interdependence, particularly those faced by developing countries.

**“A new 21st century, globalized diplomacy, is already in the making.”**

*— Ambassador Jorge Argüello of Argentina*



**“I strongly believe that the standards set for diplomacy after the Cold War over the past three decades ought to be reexamined for years to come,” notes Ambassador Argüello. “A new 21st century, globalized diplomacy, is already in the making.”**

While issues like testing and creation of therapies can be dealt with nationally, pandemics do not respect borders. With COVID-19 creating global health, economic, and supply chain crises, traditional paradigms that center on relations between sovereign states and the balance of power will not be sufficient to accurately grasp emerging challenges and threats.

Many nations lack the capacity to adapt to the evolution of technology, development, economics, and population growth. This illustrates that current multilateral mechanisms are not as responsive as they should be in addressing the disparities that exist. “This focus on the survival and well-being of human lives everywhere brings with it a hope that in the coming years diplomacy will turn towards directing our collective will towards that goal,” says Ambassador Dina Kawar of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

The pandemic has called for nations to coalesce around ideas that maximize their capacity to stop the spread. As countries look toward localizing supply chains and rely more on technology, diplomacy will also become increasingly important to counteract the

negative impact of COVID-19 on security, democracy, human rights, and the digital divide.

The current crisis also creates opportunities to reimagine multilateral institutions that reflect today’s world—one that appreciates the regional importance

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*— Ambassador Dina Kawar of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*

of developing countries, as well as the growth of non-state actors. While the nation-state remains the central player in international relations, it has lost its monopoly on power as the sole entity that dictates how countries and society relate to one another. The growing

international activism of state and local governments, corporations, and civil society as a whole has contributed to the dispersion of power, creating a more horizontal, but also more fragmented, playing field. The impact of digital platforms and social media on public policy and diplomacy, accelerated by COVID-19, has exacerbated these trends.

We found many responses from U.S. diplomats to be America-centric. They focused on how American diplomacy is changing and how our alliances are evolving, as opposed to a broader consideration of global diplomacy and alliances. Another common theme was the need for nations to fortify themselves against Russia and China—both of which were cited as trying to exploit the pandemic to their own advantage, fragment U.S. alliances, and undermine American influence abroad.

This may reflect a more insular American administration and public whose confidence has been shaken by the triple crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, accompanying economic woes and civil unrest in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. This insecurity about America’s future is likely to strengthen sentiment across the political spectrum about the need to prioritize solutions to domestic problems, such as health security, economic recovery, and equal opportunity, over diplomatic engagement. Still others fear American intervention abroad is a primary cause of the world’s problems.

Ambassador Thomas Pickering believes the notion that the U.S. should take care of its own people first during times of global crisis overlooks the power of multilateral diplomacy.

**“The best way to deal with our own problems at home is to be an active leader on the global sphere.”**

*— Ambassador Thomas Pickering, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (1997-2000); U.S. Ambassador to the UN in New York (1989-1992)*

“When issues are global, it is important to work together on the shared responsibilities and challenges,” he writes. “The best way to deal with our own problems at home is to be an active leader on the global sphere. This is how we can most capably and responsibly deal with the domestic crisis.”

There is no binary choice between being unreservedly globalist or completely in favor of withdrawal. Even before these current problems, Americans have called for reforming international organizations. In the past,





America was counted on to push those reforms, even if countries disagreed with our ideas or approach. A withdrawal of American diplomatic leadership has left Washington unable to lead the reform of international bodies, and Russia and China are filling that vacuum.

**Former National Security Adviser General H.R. McMaster argues, convincingly, that the savings realized by Washington’s withdrawal from active diplomatic engagement would be paltry and “dwarfed by the cost of responding to unchecked and under-terred threats to American security, prosperity, and influence abroad.”**

## Conclusion

American diplomats have continually struggled to sell the American public on the importance of diplomacy. In post-COVID era, when U.S. leadership is more needed than ever, the onus is on embassies and envoys posted in Washington and across the U.S. to reach out to the American public, tell their story, and advocate for more active U.S. diplomatic engagement.

Until vaccines are available to make in-person convenings safe, foreign embassies will struggle to carry

that message to the American public and report back to their capitals. But even after the vaccine, the impact on the pandemic will shape diplomacy and embassies for years to come. The pandemic has brought to light the challenges that exist in our current system of diplomacy: lack of sufficient technology, the need to improve digital communication skills, a heavy reliance on face-to-face interactions to conduct business, centralized and inflexible administrative systems, and bureaucratic decision-making processes.

Now is the time to engage in bold thinking and strategize how the United States and our partners around the world can adapt to some of these changes that the pandemic has accelerated, whether through investment in technology resources, breaking down centralized and bureaucratic systems, reskilling diplomats, and reimagining ways to build relationships and trust virtually.

As it has for more than 60 years, Meridian will continue to bring leaders and visionaries together, whether at its historic campus or virtually, to address these shared challenges, accelerate collaboration, and improve communication across borders.

# Key Excerpts from Contributors



## **Princess Reema bint Bandar al-Saud**

### **Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the U.S.**

Leaders don't need to wait for ambassadors to be conduits, they are connecting directly now. Technology has changed that...If people-to-people engagements are lost because of COVID, I think we are all going to go into a very dark phase over the next couple of years.

A critical part of my personal mandate has been to spend as much time out of Washington, DC as I do here--meeting governors and business communities understand the dynamics of each of those states. If the diplomats stay only in the capital, they are losing out on so many opportunities for their country to engage in a healthy way with their host country.

My biggest fear is the digital divide. I do not think it is going to be first world versus second in the developing world anymore. I think it is going to be the digitally connected and the unconnected worlds and that is going to be one of the new definitions of poverty. If you are tech poor and disconnected, that is what is going to hold your nation back today, as much as hunger, a weak financial system, or a lack of transparency and strong institutions. We need to focus on making sure we have a minimum definition of connectivity that will allow for the digital divide to be minimized.



## **His Excellency Jorge Argüello**

### **Ambassador of Argentina to the U.S.**

I strongly believe that the standards set for diplomacy after the Cold War over the past three decades ought to be reexamined for years to come. A new 21st century, globalized diplomacy, is already in the making.

It has become evident that an agile and versatile diplomacy is an unavoidable condition for exercising foreign policy and protecting our citizens, both by scouting potential threats and building bridges of mutual understanding and cooperation.

I reckon three new skills as necessary in the training of future diplomats: gender perspective, communication abilities, and prospective analytical techniques. The next generation of envoys will carry out functions in a complex, uncertain world with multiple boards and overlapping tensions.



## **The Honorable Paula J. Dobriansky**

### **Senior Fellow, Harvard University Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs; Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs (2001-2009)**

Both Moscow and Beijing have tried to exploit the pandemic to their own advantage, seeking to fragment our alliances and to undermine our influence abroad. They maintain that the U.S. response to COVID has not only been ineffective but that it manifests the systemic failure of Western democracies, in general, and the U.S., in particular. Their efforts have not been successful. Most U.S. allies have rejected the false premises, reflected in Russian and Chinese propaganda.

Diplomatic opportunities abound for countering the political, economic, and military challenges posed by Russia and China. We should seize upon them.



**Her Excellency Bergdís Ellertsdóttir**  
Ambassador of Iceland to the U.S.

During the winter and spring of 2020, consular services overtook most other issues at our embassies around the world. Consular services played a key role in assisting our citizens in navigating an uncertain and complicated world full of restrictions and border closures.

The Icelandic Foreign Service will continue to promote and protect democratic values, human rights, and multilateralism. This will be increasingly important to counteract the negative impact of COVID-19 on security, democracy, and human rights. Diplomacy will play a key role in maintaining the multilateral system and the values it was built on.



**The Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchison**  
Permanent Representative of the U.S. to NATO

Potential adversaries have sought to exploit the situation creating damaging disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining our unity. While we are actively countering false narratives with facts, exposing disinformation will unfortunately only become a bigger part of our work post-COVID as the world shifts online.

You simply cannot do complex diplomacy over the phone or zoom. Living in a COVID-19 world is a reminder that there is no substitute for a bilateral meeting or quick pull aside in the margins of another event to get important work done. Diplomacy requires candid conversations to properly read your counterpart and negotiate.



**Her Excellency Dina Kawar**  
Ambassador of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the United States

In a post-COVID-19 world, an obvious trend will be the over-reliance on digital communication and teleconferences over in-person meetings. The downside is that this would limit our ability as diplomats to spontaneously create new relationships and to have informal interactions with colleagues within the diplomatic community. Such informal spaces are typically critical for building trust and genuine personal connections which sit at the core of our work.

Responding to COVID-19 made the gradual and incremental steps we take toward enhancing the efficiency and productivity of our diplomatic work simply not enough, and more effective and innovative steps are needed to stay ahead of the curve.



**His Excellency Stavros Lambrinidis**  
Delegation of the European Union to the United States

Since the pandemic struck, the in-person components of traditional diplomacy--meetings, handshakes, receptions--have all been parked, while ambassadors and diplomats like myself have had to make a swift transition to digital platforms to keep running our embassies, reaching out to interlocutors and doing whatever it takes to strengthen important bilateral relationships in a time of crisis.

While I continue to believe there is no substitute for in person face-to-face meetings, thanks to technology, diplomacy has become a little more accessible outside of major cities while also allowing us to engage broader audiences on a host of critical issues.



**The Honorable Christopher Landau**  
**U.S. Ambassador to Mexico**

In the first-ever episode of *The Twilight Zone*, from 1959, a man finds himself in a small town where everything looks normal, but all the people have vanished ... That's what the world feels like now: on the surface, everything looks the same, yet everything has changed... While the protagonist of the first *Twilight Zone* episode ultimately went beserk, I'm confident that diplomats--just like everyone else--can and will adjust to the new normal.

It's been a challenge to practice the diplomatic arts without meeting people...Now that it's clear that the pandemic isn't just a blip but an ongoing phenomenon, we must reimagine everything. That's not necessarily a bad thing: sometimes we do things a certain way just because they've always been done that way, not because it's necessarily the best.



**Lawrence Manzi**  
**Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of the Republic of Rwanda**

While we may be focused on disruptions of the core aspects of diplomacy, like one-on-one or other physical meetings, there are other shifts that may not be as visible, but are essential in diplomacy, like “the norms and protocols,” shaking hands, exchanging business cards...the importance of all these practices to advance diplomacy cannot be overlooked.

As Foreign Missions, the current increasing openness to virtual settings provides a great path to be innovative in the way we do public diplomacy, and it gives us immeasurable reach to new audiences and resourceful speakers that would normally be hard or expensive to invite.



**Lieutenant General Herbert Raymond McMaster**  
**U.S. National Security Advisor (2017-2018); Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution**

Th[e] withdrawal from active diplomatic engagement in competitions overseas would increase dangers to American security and the paltry savings realized would be dwarfed by the cost of responding to unchecked and undeterred threats to American security, prosperity, and influence abroad.

In the post-COVID world, American diplomats will have to explain to leaders in Washington that disengagement from complex competitions overseas can create great dangers to American security and impose great costs on the American people.



**Her Excellency Nomaindia Mfeketo**  
**Ambassador of the Republic of South Africa to the U.S.**

Virtual diplomacy platforms offer opportunities for reskilling, creativity, connectivity and flexibility. Bilateral meetings are now being organized with less scheduling constraints, allowing for broader participation of experts in discussions. However, it requires revision in communication protocols to manage on-line dynamics and foster improvements that offer the stability and security crucial in diplomacy.

The Embassies will continue to anticipate the unanticipated beyond the pandemic with more crucial role towards “vaccine diplomacy.” The latter would be catalyst in forging deeper strategic ties especially between U.S. and Africa with mutual benefits, including enhanced international cooperation.



**Sirpa Nyberg**

**Minister Counsellor, Head of Political Section, Embassy of Finland**

In my experience, the workload of the diplomats has remained same, but, due to pandemic, we have been forced to find new ways to work and speak with people and also to build the relations between capitals.

The pandemic has also brought colleagues from different embassies closer together. We have established new discussion groups using platforms like WhatsApp and Signal; we share more information and organize virtual meetings jointly. I do hope these relations and groups will continue to exist even when we go back to normal.



**The Honorable Thomas R. Pickering**

**Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (1997-2000); U.S. Ambassador to the UN in New York (1989-1992)**

The notion that we should take care of our own people first during times like these overlooks the problem. When issues are global, it is important to work together on the shared responsibilities and challenges. The best way to deal with our own problems at home is to be an active leader on the global sphere. This is how we can most capably and responsibly deal with the domestic crisis.

We need to modernize our global institutions if they are not working, but we still need alliances. Furthermore, we should not try to recreate the wheel with new institutions. We need to refine what we have, not build new ones as that is not possible in this day and age. It took decades for those to coalesce. That would be like climbing Mount Everest in a single bound; it can't be done.

Diplomats are trained to be masters of many subjects, and this includes instruction to have science know-how and similar understanding. The fundamental role of a foreign service officer is to move into many subjects, to understand them and work effectively within them.



**Her Excellency Roya Rahmani**

**Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the U.S.**

We need to reexamine the world order that has been created because it is clear that many multilateral mechanisms are not as responsive as they should be.

Nonverbal communication has always been a key aspect of diplomacy. However, the dominance of tele-meetings has pushed us to improve our verbal and written communication skills. I believe that relying exclusively on these nonverbal skills has actually pushed diplomats to become more factual and substantive since they can no longer rely heavily on non-verbal communications and close contact. The emotional intelligence typically required of a diplomat has subsided compared to verbal communication skills.



**His Excellency Arturo Sarukhan**

Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution; Ambassador of Mexico to the U.S. (2007-2013)

Diplomacy's lingua franca in the 19th century was French; in the 20th it was English. The lingua franca of diplomacy in the 21st century is the mastery of digital tools and platforms.

We have witnessed an exponential rise in the multiplicity of non-state actors that today play a major role in domestic and international politics. The growing international activism of subnational authorities--whether state or local--and of civil society as a whole...has marked the global interaction of our times. While the nation state remains the central player of international relations...it has also lost its monopoly on international power and information and is no longer the sole entity that determines how countries and societies relate to one another on the world stage.



**The Honorable Thomas Shannon**

Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (2016-2018)

Diplomacy in Washington will most likely stay in this pandemic-induced hibernation until a vaccine of effective treatment for COVID-19 is developed. In other words, the Washington of today and tomorrow will more closely resemble the Washington of Theodore Roosevelt than the Washington of Barrack Obama. This will call for a restructuring of Embassies in Washington and raise the profile of Ambassadors as frontline representatives of their countries.

Before the pandemic, Washington had a convening and convoking authority. Heads of governments and states, ministers, and other high-ranking officials traveled to Washington to meet their counterparts, or to participate in multilateral meetings at the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. Embassies were platforms that managed these visits, and they were organized and staffed to direct the flow of official visitors through Washington. Today, much of that work has devolved to virtual encounters through video conferences and phone calls, or to a more traditional form of diplomacy with Embassies and Ambassadors carrying the load of representation and advocacy.



**His Excellency Shinsuke Sugiyama**

Ambassador of Japan to the U.S.

In the evenings before the pandemic, my residence would be full of friends from all kinds of organizations and walks of life, coming together for receptions and getting to know and understand each other. I think that is what I miss most. I also miss traveling and meeting Americans face-to-face.

The real question for diplomats is "What will the new international order look like in the post-COVID world?" Traditional diplomatic dynamics and international relations theories, which are centered on sovereign states, will not be sufficient for us to accurately grasp or explain the world. Neither will the argument about the unipolar and multipolar balance of power, nor even the non-polar theory, which is now heading nowhere, be sufficient. We need a new theory to evaluate the new reality.



**His Excellency Elin Suleymanov**  
**Ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the U.S.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that much in diplomatic practice can and should be streamlined...Many cases...which previously required travel to specific destinations, can now be done virtually with more people engaged from various locations...Generally, during the pandemic, there seems to be a greater emphasis on substantive meetings and efficient use of time, including saving time lost in traffic. Such practices are likely to stay on in a post-COVID world.

Diplomacy lost a bit of its personal contact. This may not matter in discussions with clearly defined subject matters, but when the discourse is more subtle and nuanced, person to person contacts are still irreplaceable. Equally, a meeting with masks on has a very different personal dynamic.

Another lesson from history, for instance 1918-20, is that world becomes less formal post-pandemic. Perhaps, moving away from mandatory neckties could be a welcome change.



**His Excellency Kurt Volker**  
**U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations (2017-2019); U.S. Ambassador to NATO (2008-2009)**

COVID-19 has shown us the limits of remote work: it is more difficult to build new relationships, foster collaboration among colleagues, pick up on unscheduled and informal communication, learn cultural information, and most of all, build trust.

Only diplomats can build personal relationships and trust, smell the winds of change, and be the first ones to identify risks, speak up for our country's interests, and use good offices to broker solutions to difficult problems. COVID-19 may change diplomacy dramatically--by helping it re-focus on what is really important.

*Contributor remarks have been edited for length and clarity.*

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