COVID-19, Digital Diplomacy, and Consensus-Building in International Organizations*

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May 15, 2023

Abstract

Has the adoption of digital diplomacy—necessitated by COVID-19—had a negative effect on multilateral negotiations? Existing literature is indeterminate in its expectations about the effects of digital diplomacy. I posit a theoretical framework based on institutional design features to predict when digital diplomacy should be disruptive to multilateral negotiations. I argue that in institutions with strong consensus norms and diverse membership, digital diplomacy renders consensus-building more difficult, and particularly so when it comes to emerging and controversial issues. I test these expectations in the case of the United Nations General Assembly and the European Union Council, comparing consensus under the digital protocol adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic to consensus under face-to-face negotiations. I also conduct 27 elite interviews with UN diplomats during March and April 2020. I find that, although consensus rates in aggregate were not negatively impacted by digital negotiations utilized during COVID-19, the overall trend belies strategic selection by diplomats, who froze negotiations on controversial and emerging issues, and instead focused on administrative and already agreed upon issue areas. These findings suggest that digital diplomacy can be a useful tool for diplomatic 'maintenance,' but not for addressing many pressing issues that diplomats in international organizations must confront.

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*I kindly thank Sivaram Cheruvu and participants at the Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance Diplomats and Bureaucrats Workshop for helpful comments and advice.

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an enormous change in the business of diplomacy, as professional negotiators were forced to move from informal meetings in the hallways of New York and Brussels to virtual sessions on Zoom and Microsoft Teams. According to Singapore's longtime ambassador Ashok Mirpuri, "[o]perating online is not real diplomacy."[1] Estonian ambassador Sven Jürgenson was similarly critical: "WhatsApp chats can't replace the corridor diplomacy for getting consensus." These critiques are reminiscent of perennial concerns among professional diplomats about the potential of new technologies to undermine face-to-face diplomacy, including from eminent diplomats such as William Burns[2] and Lord Palmerston.[3] The immediate shock created by COVID-19 accelerated existing trends towards digitally mediated 'synthetic situations' (Eggeling & Adler-Nissen, 2021). Against the background of this slow-moving adoption, diplomats were simultaneously and immediately forced to move their day-to-day operations online.

Diplomacy is a fundamentally social endeavor, as individuals engage with their counterparts to negotiate over policy responses. Trust, communication, and empathy are all critical ingredients of successful diplomacy (e.g., Wheeler, 2013; Sending et al., 2015; Holmes, 2018; Keys & Yorke, 2019). Can these types of social interactions take place just as effectively on Zoom as they do in the physical spaces of multilateral organizations? Does digital diplomacy undermine the ability of diplomats to forge consensus— one of their most important functions? There is an ongoing debate in diplomatic studies about the effects of such technologies on negotiations— some argue that they are helpful (e.g., Bjola & Manor, 2022), some claim that they are detrimental (e.g., Naylor, 2020), and some argue that they have no discernible substantive impact on the work of diplomacy (Bjola & Coplen, 2022).

I suggest that this indeterminacy is the result of a failure to adequately account for institutional design features in theorizing the effects of digital technologies on diplo-

[1] Ryan Heath in Politico, April 16, 2020.

[2] William Burns in Foreign Policy, October 23, 2014.

[3] Jeffrey Robertson for the Lowry Institute, October 21, 2020.

matic negotiations. I develop a theoretical framework that predicts that the effects of digital diplomacy are particularly detrimental in international organizations with strong consensus norms and heterogeneous memberships. In organizations that operate based on principals of consensus rather than voting, it becomes more important for diplomats to accurately assess the positions of the *entire* membership, rather than simply a voting majority, increasing the challenges that must be overcome through digital negotiation. Assessing these preferences is made substantially more difficult when the membership of the organization is large and diverse. I further contend that the challenges of virtual negotiation are greater on emerging and controversial issues, because in such cases a new consensus must be forged. In contrast, on administrative or continuing work, existing agreements can simply be translated into a virtual environment, and thus the challenges of digital negotiation are not as great.

I assess these expectations in two empirical cases: the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the European Union (EU) Council. These two institutional contexts are both characterized by diverse memberships and strong norms of consensus, and as such are cases when we should expect to see substantial disruptions to consensus-building caused by the rapid adoption of digital negotiation. To test these theoretical expectations, I employ a multi-method approach. First, I examine consensus rates on resolutions that were adopted under the virtual negotiation procedures that were employed by the UNGA and the EU Council after the COVID-19 crisis hit, and compare these rates to other recent sessions. Second, I conduct elite interviews with 27 diplomatic practitioners during March and April 2020 at the UNGA to illuminate the dynamics of digital diplomacy as they played out. I show that while consensus rates did not decline, this aggregate pattern is the result of strategic decision-making by diplomats. There were new challenges that were created in forging consensus, particularly in communication, social bonding, and informal bargaining. In response to these challenges, diplomats focused on easier, already decided issue areas such as regulatory affairs. These findings suggest that while digital diplomacy can be used as a tool for successfully addressing routine, quotidian work that builds upon already forged consensus, it does not appear to be a useful tool for building new consensus, particularly on emerging and controversial issue areas. Thus, while digital diplomacy may serve a valuable role in the diplomat's toolbox, increasing efficiency for administrative affairs, it clearly cannot supersede the face-to-face meeting.

Hedling & Bremberg (2021, 1597) call for researchers to examine digital diplomacy more deeply, and to specifically draw attention to the practical differences that result in the shift from face-to-face diplomacy to digital diplomacy. While scholars are paying increasing attention to digital diplomacy in international negotiations, this work contributes the first empirical examination of the effects of digital negotiations on policy adoption.[4] I help to adjudicate in the debate about whether the advent of digital diplomacy has overall negative or positive effects on the ability of diplomats in multilateral institutions to effectively conduct their work, contributing a unified framework that can generate predictions about the impact of digital diplomacy across international organizations. Building on the 'practice turn' in diplomacy (e.g., Adler-Nissen & Pouliot, 2014; Sending et al., 2015) I also extend previous work on digital diplomacy with quantitative analyses in two cases—the UNGA and the EU Council—which provides an important test of theoretical expectations in institutions with strong norms of consensus and heterogenous membership.

2 Digital Diplomacy

The dynamics of diplomatic representation take place in deeply social environments. Individual diplomats must interact with their counterparts to develop social relationships (Berridge & Jennings, 1985), cultivate empathy (Wheeler, 2013), and build trust (Holmes, 2018). Diplomacy is based on practice, "socially meaningful patterns of action [that are] being performed more or less competently," (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, 6).[5] How does digital

[4] Maurer & Wright (2020); Eggeling & Adler-Nissen (2021) have conducted valuable analyses of EU Council during COVID, which is complemented by the quantiative analysis conducted here.

[5] See also Adler-Nissen & Pouliot (2014); Sending et al. (2015) for more on the practice turn in diplomacy studies, and Clark & Zucker (2023); Clark & Dolan (2022); Heinzel & Liese (2021); Heinzel (2022); Malis (2021) for more on the influence individuals in IOs.

mediation affect the ability of diplomats to engage in these types of social interactions? While there are certainly some benefits that digital diplomacy affords, scholars have also detailed many ways in which digital diplomacy potentially undermines the ability of diplomats to effectively conduct their work. Previous work has focused on the influence of digital diplomacy on social relations and trust between diplomats, inequality, and legitimacy and policy creation. Across each of these areas, there are indeterminate theoretical expectations and empirical findings about the effects. I contend that one explanation for this indeterminacy is that existing studies have focused on a variety of different types of fora, which vary on key dimensions, and that these dimensions have not been sufficiently theorized with respect to the influence of digital diplomacy. I assess these findings before laying out a unified set of expectations that take institutional features into account in generating expectations about the effects of digital diplomacy on consensus-building.

2.1 Diplomatic Social Relations and Trust

Digital diplomacy may have direct effects on the vitality of the diplomatic corps. It is through face-to-face interactions that diplomats make efforts to persuade and influence their counterparts, the key goals of diplomacy (e.g., Wendt, 1999; Risse, 2000; Johnston, 2001; Gray & Baturo, 2021). The transmission of emotions in face-to-face diplomatic interactions allows negotiators to credibly communicate intentions, which are attenuated or distorted through other channels (Wong, 2020). Though recent work argues that diplomats can use technological developments such as emojis to communicate their emotions online (Cornut, 2022), such technologies are not substitutes for in-person communication (Cornut et al., 2022). Interactions are also necessary to learn the positions and preferences of their counterparts. Permanent, standing representation creates a social environment in which these dynamics can play out (Pouliot, 2016). As Maurer & Wright (2020, 561) argue:

> Diplomats and officials who attend meetings regularly develop a detailed understanding of their peers' positions and needs on a given issue; moreover, repeated interactions over an extended period make it feasible to anticipate

likely demands and problems, itself a core task of Permanent Representations.

Engaging face-to-face on a regular basis maximizes the opportunities to develop social relationships and standing (Pouliot, 2016). Indeed, recent work on digital diplomacy shows that digital meetings diminish the sense of understanding and togetherness between diplomats (e.g., Wheeler, 2013; Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021). As Wheeler & Holmes (2021) argue, bodily copresence is is required for diplomats to form strong social relationships, though the authors do note that mediated interaction—such as digital engagement—can serve to create weak bonds (see also Bjola & Manor, 2022). Informal negotiations, which create opportunities for arguing and persuasion (Risse & Kleine, 2010) are particularly aided by social relations, and digital diplomacy offers limited opportunities for such interactions (Vadrot & Ruiz Rodríguez, 2022). Chasek (2021, 62) suggests:

> It is often these personal interactions that allow delegates to get to know each other, understand their positions and red lines, and build the trust necessary to forge agreements. Virtual meetings do not allow for this to happen organically.

As Chasek (2021) highlights, trust is one specific dimension of these social relations that is posited to be negatively impacted by digital diplomacy (see also Hedling & Bremberg, 2021). These expectations are borne out in the experiences of policymakers. For example, Josep Borrell, Vice President of the European Commission lamented:

> [P]hone calls and even video conferences miss a key ingredient to make diplomacy work: human interaction. To forge deals, you need to look people in the eye, to engage directly and have a quiet word in a corner. Multilateral diplomacy, inside EU and globally, is difficult at the best of times. Now this is especially true as trust—that magic and necessary ingredient for people to compromise—is harder to build over a video line with poor audio.

Other work finds mixed effects of digital diplomacy on trust. For example, Eggeling & Adler-Nissen (2021, 12) argue that digital diplomacy can still allow for trust to be managed in interpersonal relationships between diplomats, transforming their in-person activities to a new domain but not necessarily undermining their traditional role. Eggeling & Versloot (2022) similarly argue that trust can be effectively translated online, but only when it is first established via in-person relations.

2.2 Policy Creation

In addition to these social dynamics, the instrumental task of communication can be more difficult in a digital setting compared to face-to-face, hindering the practical work of policy negotiation. Miscommunication becomes more likely in digital diplomacy, as participants cannot observe the informative signals provided by non-verbal expressive behaviors such as such as gestures, posture, and eye contact (Jervis, 1976; Holmes, 2022). As the activities of diplomacy move into digital spaces, cognitive load induced by 'Zoom fatigue' reduces the quality of interactions (Holmes, 2022). In a limited survey of diplomats, Bjola & Coplen (2022) find that diplomats struggled to 'read the room' in the virtual spaces. This limited their ability to know who was following the discussion, what issues resonated with their counterparts, and which negotiators were engaging with each other (Bjola & Coplen, 2022, 12). Together, these effects make policy creation more difficult.

Adler-Nissen & Drieschova (2019) illustrates that technology creates opacity in the drafting process and makes it more difficult for diplomats to control negotiations. While negotiations can take place more rapidly, the substance of a proposal can become less important in the process. (Chasek, 2021, 62) observes that in digital negotiations, it is harder for the meeting chair to 'read the room' and move the parties forward, to convene informal discussions on brackets, and to engage in common tactics such as horse-trading and brinkmanship, ultimately rendering it more difficult to arrive at a consensus as compared to in-person negotiation. On the other hand, Galin et al. (2007, 794) find that there was no perceived difference in the effectiveness of virtual versus in-person negotiation.

2.3 Legitimacy

In addition to being harder to craft, the proposals adopted through digital negotiations may suffer from diminished legitimacy (Vadrot et al., 2021) and be bereft of the symbolic power that renders high-level meetings effective (Naylor, 2020). By derogating from traditional rules and practices, digital negotiations can have negative effects on perceptions of institutional legitimacy (Hurd, 2008), which is a crucial characteristic of IOs that allows them to exercise authority in international politics. As Tallberg & Zürn (2019, 594) observe, "[w]hen IOs fall short of widely recognized procedural standards, this creates an opportunity for opponents to delegitimize the IO with reference to these limits." As IOs face growing backlash and retrenchment (Walter, 2021), considering the implications of digital diplomacy on IO legitimacy takes on increasing importance.

2.4 Inequality

By increasing the ease with which actors can participate, digital fora can have equalizing, equity-enhancing effects on negotiations. This is particularly important for small states, which tend to have smaller diplomatic missions in multilateral organizations compared to larger states. In traditional face-to-face diplomacy, this can put diplomats from smaller states at a disadvantage as they struggle to cover the many meetings that occur simultaneously (e.g., Panke, 2013, 2010). Digital meetings broaden and equalize access across participants (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021). Participating in digital meetings is less costly than attending international summits, which can further aid small states with limited foreign affairs budgets, and has additional benefits of reducing the carbon footprints of traditional meetings (Chasek, 2021).

While some research points to digital diplomacy as equalizing, others suggest that digital negotiations can actually exacerbate inequality in diplomatic work. For example, Towns et al. (2020) drwas attention to the gender inequality that digital diplomacy creates. Vadrot & Ruiz Rodríguez (2022) argue that digital negotiations reinforce existing inequalities between states and non-state actors, and creates new inequalities between wealthy, Western states and developing, non-Western states. Because of weaker internet connections, Global South delegates have less ability to employ their cameras during negotiations, which hinders their ability to fully communicate with non-verbal cues. Meeting time zones tend to favor delegates in Europe and the Americas, to the disadvantage of Pacific states. Finally, employing English as the only language of negotiation without simultaneous translation was particularly difficult for the work of non-native English speakers, which proved to be particularly salient for African Group negotiators.[6]

3 Digital Diplomacy and International Organizations

Existing work has made important strides in unpacking the potential effects of digital diplomacy on social relations, inequality, policy creation, and effectiveness, taking on particular relevance in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this increasing attention, as I have shown, the literature is generally indeterminate as to whether these effects are positive, negative, or null. I argue that one reason that existing literature has failed to generate consistent insights into the effects of digital diplomacy is contextual variation: these studies have focused on institutions ranging from the EU Committee of Permanent Representatives (Eggeling & Adler-Nissen, 2021) to intergovernmental conferences on marine biodiversity (Vadrot et al., 2021) to the major UN environmental bodies (Chasek, 2021). These institutions vary on a variety of dimensions, from the number of actors involved to the types of issues under consideration, which have been undertheorized with respect to the effects of digital diplomacy.

International organizations take on many different forms. For a start, they vary in their formality (Abbott & Snidal, 1998), their voting rules (Stone, 2011), and their independence (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999). I develop a set of theoretical expectations that consider institutional variation in understanding the likely effects of digital diplomacy on consensus-building. I focus on two specific features that are expected to condition the impact of digital diplomacy: consensus norms and membership composition.

First, I expect that digital diplomacy has particularly negative effects in interna-

[6] Interviews 33, 38.

tional organizations with strong consensus norms. International organizations serve an important role as sites of norm entrepreneurship (e.g., Finnemore, 1993, 2015). The presence of formal and informal consensus norms and procedures varies across international organizations (Lockwood Payton, 2010). Both normative and strategic considerations make consensus adoption preferable to voting (Novak, 2013). When decisions are adopted by consensus, signaling widespread agreement by the member states (or at least a lack of overt dissension), this can contribute to strengthening the normative power of the decision.

In fora where consensus norms are strong, it is more important for diplomats to have a strong sense of their counterparts' preferences and positions on a given issue, to assess their redlines, their flexibility in instructions from capital, and their personal commitment to developing a policy solution. As Blake & Payton (2015, 381) observe, adopting a measure by consensus may not reflect unanimous support, but rather "awareness among member states that under the [intergovernmental organization]'s voting procedures sufficient support for a proposed measure exists to pass it and therefore opponents see little value in forcing a formal vote and/or officially noting their opposition to the measure."[7] In a consensus-based organization such as the UN, the EU Council, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and many others, a diplomat must have a sense of these preferences across the entire diplomatic corps, whereas in an institution that is characterized by voting norms, one must only have a sense of the majority preferences. In institutions with weighted voting—for example, the International Monetary Fund—these demands can be even less if a diplomat knows the preferences of the more powerful member states (Stone, 2011). The move from in-person to virtual is likely to have a less substantial effect on policy development in such institutions.

Second and relatedly, digital diplomacy should have more disruptive effects on negotiations in institutions with many heterogeneous member states. More parties participating in a negotiation increases the difficulty of finding an amenable position to the entirety of the group (Tsebelis, 2000; Mansfield et al., 2007), problems which are ex-

[7] But see Peterson (2006), who argues instead that consensus actions in the are akin to unanimous votes in favor.

acerbated when there are disagreements among the members over what types of policy responses are appropriate. Strong variation in preferences are more likely to be present in institutions with universal membership rather than small, regional institutions—such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations—or club-based institutions—such as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries—into which members select based on shared interests. Multi-purpose organizations with broad-based membership are also sites in which strong inequalities across members based on resources, geographic locale, and internet accessibility are likely to be present, creating the subsequent inequalities in participation in digital diplomacy that are assessed in Section 2.4. For these reasons, large, diverse IOs are more likely to be disrupted by digital diplomacy than more narrowly constrained institutions.

Given these general conditions, I choose two empirical cases—the UNGA and the EU Council—that present a good test for the disruptive effects of digital diplomacy. That is, if digital diplomacy is likely to be disruptive of consensus-building in any IO, the UNGA and EU Council—organizations with broad membership and strong consensus norms—are likely cases. If digital diplomacy does not substantially diminish consensus-building in such contexts, it is less likely that it poses a significant threat to diplomacy and policymaking in other institutions.

4 Empirical Cases: the UNGA and the EU Council

4.1 Case Selection

Why focus on the effects of digital diplomacy on consensus-based decision-making in the UNGA and EU Council? I argue that these represent useful cases for several reasons, including as a hard empirical test of the theory and a substantively important cases to understand. Furthermore, an analysis of these two institutions is likely to provide insights that are generalizable to a broad set of different IOs.

First, the UNGA and EU Council are examples of IOs that are an appropriate test of the theoretical expectations that I laid out. I expect digital diplomacy to be more disruptive of consensus-building in IOs with large, diverse, heterogeneous memberships and strong consensus norms. The UNGA and EU Council meet all of these criteria. The UNGA operates based on a strong consensus norm (Häge & Hug, 2016), which is often overlooked by empirical international relations literature that leverages UNGA voting (e.g., Signorino & Ritter, 1999; Bailey et al., 2017). When possible, diplomats prefer that a resolution is adopted by consensus rather than by voting. Indeed, in nearly 40% of interviews with diplomatic practitioners (10 out of 27 interviews), respondents made a specific point to emphasize the importance and prevalence of consensus norms in the UNGA.[8] Consensus is not only popular in the UNGA; it is substantively important, as it strengthens the normative import of UN resolutions.

Similarly, there is a strong norm of consensus in the EU Council, and votes against legislative proposals are rare (Crombez & Hix, 2015; Høyland & Hansen, 2014; Hagemann et al., 2019). As Høyland & Hansen (2014, 60) describe, "[n]ew Council members are immediately introduced to the norms governing this culture of consensus. Because of the high frequency of meetings and negotiations, the trust among partners is high...the actors engage in repeated interactions that facilitate a stable norm of consensus." While consensus practices are common across EU institutions, the EU Council is known as the principal institution of consensus in the EU (Heisenberg, 2005). Informal negotiations are a central feature of the policymaking process in EU institutions, including the EU Council and the European Parliament, and are an important fora for consensus-building (Hagemann, 2020, 1109).

Not only did strong consensus norm exist in both the UNGA and EU Council prior to COVID-19, both institutions were in the midst of was of sessions when digital diplomacy procedures were adopted. This creates an opportunity to assess the adoption of digital diplomacy as a discontinuity in standard practice. Unlike many other studies on the adoption of digital technologies by different countries foreign ministries, in this case, there are no concerns about selection effects—in other words, whether certain states were more likely to implement digital technologies than others. Because the shock of COVID-

[8]Interviews 37, 21, 31, 40, 48, 11, 5, 42, 24, 29.

19 affected *all* country missions, all states experience the shock at the same time.

Both the UNGA and the EU Council are also characterized by heterogenous member preferences. The UNGA has universal membership of all states, including those in the Global North and Global South. Thus, there is tremendous diversity in member preferences and resources (Panke, 2013; Voeten, 2000). Resource disparities are not quite as extensive in the case of the EU, yet there is still large heterogeneity across members (e.g., Panke, 2010). Additionally, both institutions are multi-issue forum, which allows for the examination of whether the effects of digital diplomacy vary across issues.

Second, the substantive importance of these institutions makes their policymaking processes important to understand. The regular UN budget for 2020 was more than $3 billion, which financed a variety of programs around the world, and which is allocated by the UNGA. The EU budget for 2022 totalled €170.6 billion. Funds cannot be allocated in the budget unless legislation is passed on an issue. Thus, the potential for digital diplomacy to hinder resolution adoption has substantial financial implications. While resolutions passed by the UNGA are non-binding, previous works (e.g., Waltz, 2001; Simmons et al., 2018) show that UNGA resolutions can translate to policy outputs with substantial legal, economic, normative, and political ramifications. The UN's high status in international media and public opinion arguably renders it the most prominent of any IO, and thus a crucial case to test for validity. The EU Council constitute one of the main decision-making bodies of the EU, engaging in the process of creating binding standards that apply to the member states. At Council meetings EU country ministers amend, adopt, and coordinate laws, committing their governments to comply with the outcomes (Crombez & Hix, 2015).

Third, the effects of digital diplomacy on consensus-building in the UNGA and the EU Council are likely to generate insights that are generalizable to other IOs. The UN, as one of the oldest and largest IOs, and the the EU, as the most successful case of regional integration, are likely to be a sources of diffusion for other IOs through socialization, emulation, and learning (e.g., Simmons & Elkins, 2004; Lenz, 2012; Lenz & Burilkov, 2017; Lenz & Viola, 2017). Because institutional rules and norms in other institutions may be therefore be similar, we may also expect the dynamics of diplomatic capital to translate into other IOs. Further, the UN and EU are highly interconnected with other IOs, through both formal channels (Sommerer & Tallberg, 2019) and networks of bureaucrats (Johnson, 2013), which increases the likelihood that institutional structures in these institutions serve as models for other IOs.

4.2 Expectations

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the adoption of digital diplomacy procedures in the UNGA and the EU Council.[9] Given the indeterminacy present in existing literature, how should we expect this to have affected the work of diplomats in these institutions? Drawing on the theoretical logic I laid out in the previous section, I expect that this development is likely to have had a negative effect on the ability of diplomats to craft consensus in these specific institutional settings. While previous works have illustrated that digital diplomacy can be useful for creating weak bonds (Wheeler & Holmes, 2021) and transmitting existing trust into a virtual forum (Eggeling & Adler-Nissen, 2021; Eggeling & Versloot, 2022), overall, digital communication between diplomats appears to be more difficult, more prone to miscommunication, and less conducive to consensus-building.

Given the large number of negotiating actors with heterogeneous preferences in these IOs, achieving consensus can be difficult compared to institutions with fewer parties. These institutions also confront large agendas every year, and are expected to respond to rapidly developing situations, for example, addressing the global health crisis of COVID-19. There are structural inequalities in the UNGA that are likely to be exacerbated by digital negotiations. Global North actors and Global South actors, subject to differences in time zones, English language facility, and internet connectivity (Vadrot & Ruiz Rodríguez, 2022), are likely to have a harder time achieving convergence around policy language. Structural inequalities also exist in the EU, though to a lesser extent.

H_1: **Digital diplomacy negatively affects consensus-building in the**

[9] I discuss the details of these procedures in Sections 5.1 and 6.1.

UNGA and EU Council.

While, on average, I expect that digital diplomacy hampers the ability of diplomats to achieve consensus, I do not expect these effects to be homogeneous across issue areas. Hedling & Bremberg (2021, 1602) suggest, based on evidence from EU negotiators, that the negative effects of digital diplomacy on consensus-building are particularly salient on sensitive issues, and Maurer & Wright (2020, 561) argue that virtual negotiation can be effective in continuing existing negotiations but not on new questions. Bjola & Manor (2022, 483) similarly finds that because relationships created through virtual negotiations are more superficial than those established in face-to-face settings, virtual meetings can be useful for routine work, but less so for high-level policy issues. I expect similar dynamics to be present in the case of the UNGA and the EU Council, and conduct the first empirical evaluation of these expectations.

H_2: **Digital diplomacy in particular has negative effects on consensus-building on emergent issues in the UNGA and EU Council.**

In the following sections, I test these expectations first in the case of the UNGA, and second in the case of the EU Council. I employ two research strategies to assess these effects. First, I descriptively examine consensus rates in the UNGA and EU Council under normal procedures and the extraordinary measures adopted during COVID-19. Second, I examine the perceptions of these procedures in interviews with diplomats at the UN. There are important advantages and disadvantages to this approach. One key advantage is that the adoption of digital diplomacy came as a largely exogenous shock to existing practices, interrupting the middle of a regular session and affecting all member states at the same time, to the same degree. The agenda for the session had already been established prior to the move to virtual negotiations (with the exception of emergent issues that were added to the agenda later). These features allow us to examine consensus practices immediately prior to the COVID-19 shock and immediately afterwards. We can also compare these rates to the previous and subsequent normal sessions for a broader empirical lens.

One disadvantage to consider are selection problems. Legislative proposals are generally not put forward until diplomats have a strong sense that they will succeed. That is, if a diplomat has a sense that consensus outcome is unlikely, they will not put the resolution on the floor. This results in the rate of consensus appearing artificially high if we only examine outcomes on resolutions that have been put forward at the final stage, and ignore draft resolutions that do not arrive at this final decision point. However, given that this positive bias exists in both the virtual and in person cases—in other words, we have no reason to expect these incentives to vary in digital diplomacy compared to in-person diplomacy—they do not bias the comparison *between* these practices. If differences in consensus rates do exist, we can attribute this to the difficulties in consensus-building under digital diplomacy—not a change in the broader strategic logic.

5 Silence in the UNGA

5.1 Silence Procedure

To assess the effects of digital diplomacy on consensus-building in the UNGA, I leverage the extraordinary adoption of Silence Procedure in March 2020.[10]

Laid out in Resolution 74/544 on March 27, 2020, the process of Silence Procedure operated as follows.[11] The President of the General Assembly (PGA), Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, circulated the draft document to the membership, putting it under Silence for 72 hours. Text was required to be submitted in English, and translations were made available in some (but not all) cases. If a state wished to raise an objection, they would email it to the PGA. If no objections were raised, the text was adopted. If objections were raised, the PGA would notify all member states, and could choose to inform the sponsors of the objections, but did not identify the objecting state.[12] These

[10] Silence procedure has been used in other international organizations, for example, the North Atlantic Council of NATO (Gallis, 2003) and in the WTO (Lockwood Payton, 2010), but had never before been implemented in the UN.

[11] See here for the resolution text, and here for detailed explanations of the steps.

[12] For example, see the case of the resolution entitled "Declaration of Solidarity of the United Nations in the Face of the Challenges Posed by the Coronavirus Disease."

procedures remained in effect until August 2020.[13]

Publicly, assessments of the effects of Silence Procedure by UN leadership were mixed. Official reports claimed that Silence had not hampered the work of UN diplomats, and that "[s]ince silence procedure came into effect, the General Assembly has adopted several resolutions, including on the financing of the UN-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), and on COVID-19." The UN Secretary-General António Guterres claimed that "our critical work is continuing largely uninterrupted," and Ambassador Mari Skåre, Chef de Cabinet to the PGA asserted that there had not been any slowdown.[14] On the other hand, the PGA of the seventy-fifth session—the session that began in September 2020, after the Silence Procedure was no longer in use—was more critical of the effects of the Silence Procedure, observing that:

> We have an advantage now that, until the end of August, we only had the possibility of having decisions with the silence procedure. And the silent process was really becoming something which didn't help in making decisions. But a few countries, or even one country, could have stopped the whole process. So, we now have the advantage of dealing with things in the General Assembly, and the voting is back. When we have voting, we will understand whether the majority of the General Assembly, the majority of the member countries, are in favor of something or they oppose something.[15]

5.2 UN Resolutions

How does that empirical record bear out these assessments? To test my theoretical expectation that digital negotiations should have negative effects on consensus-building in the UNGA, I examine changes in the rates of consensus in the adoption of resolutions under the Silence procedure compared to normal operations.

I obtain the resolutions adopted by the General Assembly from the 71-75 sessions,

[13] See here.

[14] UN News, April 7, 2020

[15] PGA 75, Volkan Bozkir 15 September 2020

scraping these data from the UN website, which I summarize in Table 1. Between March 30 and August 31, 2020, 37 resolutions were adopted via the Silence Procedure, as well as 35 decisions (see Table 2 for the full list of resolutions adopted by Silence, including the relevant adopting committee and the topic of the resolution). There were 5 resolutions on which the Silence Procedure was broken, representing a 12% failure rate of resolution adoption.[16] Of these, two resolutions specifically focused on UN COVID responses.

Table 1: Resolution Consensus Rates

Session	Num. Resolutions	Consensus Rate	Voting Rate
71	334	—	0.853
72	321	0.735	0.296
73	354	0.721	0.333
74: Pre-COVID	272	0.695	0.335
74: During Silence	42	0.88	—
74: Post-Silence	8	0.5	0.625
74: Total	315	0.687	0.305
75	338	0.751	0.296

Notes: Segments of the 74th session shaded in gray. Consensus rate data is currently unavailable for the 71st session.

Does this 12% failure rate represent an increase compared to normal operations? It is hard to assess, given the lack of records of resolutions that come to a vote and fail. Nevertheless, we can construct a "consensus failure rate" as the proportion of adopted resolutions that are adopted by a non-unanimous vote, compared to the resolutions that are either adopted without a vote, or adopted with a vote and without any 'no' votes. Table 1 illustrates consensus rates in adjacent sessions of the UNGA that we can use for illustrative comparisons. On resolutions negotiated virtually via Silence Procedures, there is an 88% consensus rate. In this same session of the UNGA, 31% of 315 resolutions were voted on (in the 73rd session, 33% of 354 resolutions were voted on, and in the 75th session, 30% of 338 were voted on).

[16] (1) "Review process of the implementation of General Assembly resolution 67/290 and 70/299 on the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level and resolution 72/305 on the strengthening of the Economic and Social Council," (2) "Declaration for the Commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations," (3) "Declaration of solidarity of the United Nations in the face of the challenges posed by the coronavirus disease 2019," (4) "Procedure for taking decisions of the General Assembly, excluding elections, by a vote while a plenary meeting of the Assembly is not practicable owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic," and (5) 'United response against global health threats: combating COVID-19."

With the exception of the latter segment of session 74 (which contained only 8 resolutions), in general, consensus rates remain consistently between 69 and 75%. Excluding the resolutions adopted through the Silence Procedure (i.e., including the other resolutions that were adopted without a vote or were voted upon), the rate of consensus in the 74th session is 69%, in the 73rd session, the consensus rate is 72%, and in the 75th session, the consensus rate is 75%. We can also examine the consensus rates for the 74th session in the periods before and after silence: prior to March 30, 33% of 272 resolutions were voted on with a consensus rate of 69%. The consensus rate during the period of virtual negotiation is significantly different from the rate in the early part of the 74th session ($p = 0.002$), from the previous session ($p = 0.006$), and from the subsequent session ($p = 0.02$).

Though the amount of evidence based on the resolution voting rates is limited, based on these descriptive comparisons, it seems that digital negotiation *did not* have an overall negative impact on consensus-building. This finding appears to cut against the expectations of Hypothesis 1, under which we would have expected consensus rates to suffer during the period of digital negotiation. In fact, under Silence, the consensus rate *increased* to a statistically significant degree. What explains this puzzling trend? Even if digital diplomacy was not detrimental to consensus-building, it seems counter-intuitive for it to enhance the ability of diplomats to forge agreement. To probe these patterns, I examine the substantive content of the resolutions adopted under Consensus. I show that because diplomats scaled down their workload to focus on administrative and continuing issues, avoiding controversial matters that would be harder to negotiate over, they were able to maintain a high rate of consensus.

Of the 37 resolutions that were adopted by Silence, a substantial majority continued existing actions or dealt were limited to administrative matters. Just 9 (24%) addressed issues that had not been previously addressed in the 73rd, 72nd, or 71st session. These new resolutions (Table 2, rows shaded in gray) addressed issues such as sustainable development, program delivery, closed peacekeeping missions, COVID-19, education, and genocide commemoration. 28 of the resolutions (76%) addressed administrative questions, including financing ongoing peacekeeping missions and operations. This is much lower than the typical ratio of new versus continuing work: in the period immediately before COVID, 118 of 272 resolutions (43%) were new, i.e., did not repeat topics addressed in the 73rd, 72nd, or 71st sessions.

This suggests that while digital diplomacy was an effective tool for continuing ongoing, routine negotiations, it may not have proven effective at crafting new policymaking. This evidence is in line with the theoretical predictions laid out in Hypothesis 2, which suggests that digital diplomacy is particularly detrimental to consensus-building on emergent issues. It also explains the counter-intuitive aggregate finding that consensus rates increased under digital diplomacy: by focusing on easier negotiations, or in other words, selecting out of scenarios in which it would be difficult to forge agreements, diplomats employed Silence effectively but narrowly.

Table 2: Resolutions Adopted by Silence in the UNGA

Resolution Num.	Committee	Topic
A/RES/74/299	Plen.	Improving global road safety
A/RES/74/298	Plen.	Review process of the implementation of General Assembly resolutions 67/290 and 70/299 on the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level and resolution 72/305 on the strengthening of the Economic and Social Council
A/RES/74/297	Plen.	Progress in the implementation of General Assembly resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system
A/RES/74/296	C.5	Global service delivery model
A/RES/74/295	C.5	Financing of the activities arising from Security Council resolution 1863 (2009)
A/RES/74/294	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara
A/RES/74/293	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan
A/RES/74/292	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
A/RES/74/291	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force
A/RES/74/290	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
A/RES/74/289	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Mission in Liberia
A/RES/74/288	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
A/RES/74/287	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti
A/RES/74/286	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
A/RES/74/285	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus
A/RES/74/284	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
A/RES/74/283	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei
A/RES/74/282	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Logistics Base at Brindisi, Italy
A/RES/74/281	C.5	Financing of the Regional Service Centre in Entebbe, Uganda
A/RES/74/280	C.5	Support account for peacekeeping operations
A/RES/74/279	C.5	Triennial review of the rates and standards for reimbursement to Member States for contingent-owned equipment
A/RES/74/278	C.5	Closed peacekeeping missions
A/RES/74/277	C.4	Comprehensive review of the whole question of peacekeeping operations in all their aspects
A/RES/74/276	Plen.	Special session of the General Assembly against corruption
A/RES/74/275	Plen.	International Day to Protect Education from Attack
A/RES/74/274	Plen.	International cooperation to ensure global access to medicines, vaccines and medical equipment to face COVID-19
A/RES/74/273	Plen.	International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda
A/RES/74/272	Plen.	Construction of a new facility for the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, Arusha branch
A/RES/74/271	Plen.	Progress towards an accountability system in the United Nations Secretariat
A/RES/74/270	Plen.	Global solidarity to fight the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)
A/RES/74/269	Plen.	Scope, modalities, format and organization of the summit on biodiversity
A/RES/74/261C	C.5	Financing of the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur
A/RES/74/261B	Plen.	Financing of the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur
A/RES/74/260B	C.5	Financing of the United Nations Mission for Justice Support in Haiti
A/RES/74/254 B	C.5	Seconded active-duty military and police personnel
A/RES/74/249B	C.5	Financial reports and audited financial statements, and reports of the Board of Auditors
A/RES/74/232 B	Plen.	Follow-up to the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries

Notes: New resolutions (that is, resolutions not adopted in the 73rd, 72nd, or 71st sessions) shaded in gray.

Were these dynamics unique to the UNGA? In the following section, I assess the effects of digital diplomacy in the EU Council.

6 Videoconferencing in the EU

6.1 The EU Covid Procedures

As in the case of the UNGA, meeting in person was the dominant mechanism for diplomatic neogtiation in the EU Council, and social distancing requirements brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated rapid changes in procedures. Compared to the UNGA, however, the procedures adopted by the EU Council were much more straightforward than the Silence Procedure implemented in the UNGA. On March 10, 2020, the Council began to hold its meetings by videoconference (Maurer & Wright, 2020). The Council formally adopted this derogration from normal procedure on March 23, and continued to hold meetings via videoconference until June 16. Acts would be adopted through "ordinary written procedure," which had previously been codified but rarely used due to its "cumbersome and time-consuming" processes. Indeed, European diplomats were critical about the limitations that these procedures imposed on them and their ability to "engage in corridor diplomacy in order to reach consensus on sensitive issues."[17]

6.2 Evidence

To assess the effects of digital diplomacy on consensus in the EU Council, I utilize the VoteWatch Europe data (Hix et al., 2022), which records a variety of metadata on each legislative decision by the EU Council and European Parliament. We should not expect to observe cases of legislative proposals that are not adopted—the Council President will not bring a measure for a vote without resolving conflicts in advance (Høyland & Hansen, 2014). However, we may observe that digital negotiations reduce the ability of members to achieve unanimity compared to in-person negotiations, and thus, as in the

[17] Jacopo Barigazzi, Maïa de la Baume, and David M. Herszenhorn in Politico, March 18, 2020.

case of the UNGA, we can examine changes in the rate of consensus adoption. This data is summarized in Table 3. Between March 3 and June 16, 2020, 34 pieces of legislation were adopted via videoconference, representing a similar rate of legislative productivity as in the UNGA, which adopted 37 resolutions during roughly the same period.

Table 3: Legislation Consensus Rates

Year	Num. Legislation	Consensus Rate	QMV Rate
2011	113	0.655	0.947
2012	90	0.656	0.933
2013	136	0.632	0.912
2014	165	0.655	0.885
2015	82	0.646	0.927
2016	79	0.658	0.911
2017	91	0.659	0.912
2018	99	0.596	0.899
2019	137	0.518	0.912
2020: Pre-COVID	5	0.8	0.4
2020: Videoconferencing	34	0.706	0.971
2020: Post-COVID	44	0.659	0.977
2020: Total	83	0.687	0.940
2021	109	0.771	0.963

Notes: Segments of the 2020 shaded in gray. Videoonferencing took place between March 3 and June 16.

As in the case of the UNGA, we can examine a "consensus failure rate" as the proportion of pieces of legislation that are adopted by a non-unanimous vote, compared to the resolutions that are without any 'no' votes. Table 3 shows that during COVID videoconferencing, the consensus rate was 71%, compared to 66% in the later part of 2022 and 52% in 2019.[18] Between 2011 and 2021, consensus rates range between 52% and 77% with an overall average of 64%, so the patterns during COVID are not markedly lower than normal. The consensus rate during videoconferencing is significantly different from the rate in 2019 ($p = 0.04$), but is not significantly different from the portion of 2020 after videoconferencing was phased out ($p = 0.66$) or from the subsequent year ($p = 0.47$). This suggests that consensus rates were *not* adversely affected, in aggregate, by digital diplomacy—the same pattern that we observe in the UNGA, and, as in that case, the rate of consensus actually increases compared to the immediately prior period.

[18] Given the small amount of legislation adopted in 2020 before COVID—only 5 pieces—figures based on this period are likely not a reliable indicator of consensus rates.

Once again, to further interrogate these results that contradict the expectations of Hypothesis 1, we can probe the substantive content of the legislation under negotiation. As we observed previously, these high rates of consensus are driven by strategic selection by diplomats, who restricted their legislative agenda to focus on regulatory and administrative issues, as well as continuing prior work. Table 4 illustrates the content of the legislation in more detail. Compared to the legislative work in 2019, during videoconferencing, the Council adopted a much smaller share of directives as part of its workload (from 27% in 2019 and 11% in 2021 to 6% under videoconferencing), while the relative share of budgets, decisions, and regulations was roughly consistent.[19] Nearly two-thirds of the legislation that was adopted under videoconferencing consisted of amendments to previously adopted rules. The subjects of the legislation were primarily transport and tourism (35%), budgetary matters (29%), and regional development (2%). These are relatively lower salience issue areas compared to the 2019 and 2021 legislative agendas, which were led by economic and monetary affairs (18% in 2019 and 15% in 2021) and civil liberties and justice (9% in 2019 and 14% in 2021).

Once again, we see suggestive evidence that digital tools allowed diplomats to continue to conduct ongoing, lower salience negotiations, but that they were less able to use such tools to begin new negotiations on novel topics, as expected in Hypothesis 2.

In both the case of the UNGA and the EU Council, the aggregate finding that consensus rates did not decline in fact obscures the difficulties created by digital negotiations. We can imagine the counterfactual in which diplomats during the COVID-19 addressed the full diversity of the normal IO agenda—in such a case, we can expect that the consensus rate indeed would have declined. However, these types of dynamics are not possible to illuminate with an empirical analysis of adoption rates. To illustrate that consensus-building was in fact more difficult, I turn to elite interviews with UN diplomats conducted during the period of digital diplomacy enforced after COVID-19. This interview analysis illuminates the challenges that these procedures presented to the diplomatic corps, and how UN diplomats navigated these challenges to continue with their program

[19] A directive is a legal act of the EU that requires member states to achieve particular goals without dictating how the member states achieve those goals.

Table 4: Resolutions Adopted by Teleconference in the EU Council

Legislation Num.	Type	Policy Area
2018/0154 (COD)	Regulation	Civil Liberties, Justice & Home Affairs
2018/0330/B (COD)	Regulation	Civil Liberties, Justice & Home Affairs
2020/0044 (COD)	Regulation	Regional Development
2020/0043 (COD)	Regulation	Regional Development
2020/0043 (COD)	Regulation	Regional Development
2020/0042 (COD)	Regulation	Transport & Tourism
2018/0140 (COD)	Regulation	Transport & Tourism
2018/0169 (COD)	Regulation	Environment & public health
2017/0123 (COD)	Regulation	Transport & Tourism
2017/0122 (COD)	Regulation	Transport & Tourism
2017/0121 (COD)	Directive	Transport & Tourism
2020/2057(BUD)	Decision	Budget
2020/2055(BUD)	Budget	Budget
2020/2055(BUD)	Budget	Budget
2020/2056 (BUD)	Decision	Budget
2020/2053 (BUD)	Decision	Budget
2020/2052(BUD)	Budget	Budget
2020/2052(BUD)	Budget	Budget
2018/0178 (COD)	Regulation	Economic & Monetary Affairs
2020/0055 (APP)	Regulation	Budget
2020/0060 (COD)	Regulation	Environment & public health
2020/0059 (COD)	Regulation	Fisheries
2020/0054 (COD)	Regulation	Regional Development
2020/0058 (COD)	Regulation	Employment & Social Affairs
2020/0068 (COD)	Regulation	Transport & Tourism
2020/0067 (COD)	Regulation	Transport & Tourism
2020/0067 (COD)	Regulation	Transport & Tourism
2020/0065 (COD)	Decision	International Trade
2020/0071 (COD)	Directive	Transport & Tourism
2020/0069 (COD)	Regulation	Transport & Tourism
2020/2069(BUD)	Decision	Budget
2020/2069(BUD)	Budget	Budget
2019/0108 (COD)	Decision	Transport & Tourism
2019/0107 (COD)	Decision	Transport & Tourism

Notes: New resolutions (that is, resolutions not are not amendments to earlier decisions) shaded in gray.

of work.

7 Interviews with UN Diplomats

To complement these descriptive results based on resolution adoption rates, I turn to interviews conducted with high-level diplomats at the UN. Elite interviews provide insight into events and contexts that one cannot otherwise observe. Interviews can illuminate causal mechanisms in unique ways compared to other research strategies (Mosley, 2013, 5). Elite interviews, in particular, can illuminate the beliefs and perceptions of key actors participating in the phenomena of interest. Particularly in combination with quantitative evidence, elite interviews can help to interpret how patterns in this evidence arise.

I obtained the contact information for each country Mission from the most current Blue Book, maintained by the Protocol and Liaison Office, as of November 2021.[20] I followed a stratified sampling procedure to avoid selection bias and ensure that the sample was representative of full population of member states. For each country, I made up to three contact attempts at least one week apart to secure an interview, including two email contacts and one phone contact.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom or phone based on the preference of the respondent, and one interview was conducted in person in New York. All interviews were conducted in English. Respondents were informed that the interview would be conducted on background, and specifically, that I would not identify them as individuals or country representatives unless they explicitly gave permission to do so. The interviews followed a semi-structured format. I focus on process-related questions centered around the daily conduct of diplomacy in an attempt to avoid sensitive issues. Indeed, respondents were generally excited to participate in research about the behind-the scenes, day-to-day work that they engage in as a change from most interviews, which focus on salient political

[20]The interview protocol described in this section was reviewed by the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board, which determined that it met eligibility criteria for review exemption (Protocol Number 844833).

issues. When respondents requested, I provided the questionnaire in advance. Ultimately, 27 interviews were conducted between March and April 2022. 7 states declined to be interviewed. Interviews ranged from 28 minutes to 135 minutes, with an average length of 46 minutes and a median length of 41 minutes. Respondents represented a wide variety of different state types across levels of size (proxied with GDP) and region. The respondents were also generally high-level officials, with more than half of respondents at the Permanent Representative or Deputy Permanent Representative level.

Diplomats noted several ways in which the adoption of digital diplomacy made it harder for them to advance policy initiatives. First, they expressed that it was harder to form social relationships with their counterparts, especially for diplomats who were recently arrived.[21]. Without the ability to personally visit and get to know colleagues, the social relationships between diplomats were harder to leverage for moving policies forward. As one European diplomat noted, "COVID has really disrupted our work, I have to say, but you know, by and large, you get a very good feeling very early on about your colleagues who are."[22] However, for diplomats who had been in post for a long time before COVID-19 struck, these effects did not appear pronounced, mirroring the findings of Eggeling & Versloot (2022); Eggeling & Adler-Nissen (2021).

Second, diplomats observed difficulties presented by communication challenges that resulted from the rapid adoption of digital diplomacy. Several diplomats from non-Western states noted increased difficulty in negotiations that resulted from language barriers.[23] According to respondents, online negotiations were conducted 90% in English, which made it more difficult to follow along. There was an increased likelihood of miscommunication under virtual negotiations, without the benefit of in-person informals to discuss agreed language. In describing a negotiation with another state's diplomat who was threatening to break Silence on a proposed resolution, an African diplomat described the challenge, and the added imperative to communicate clearly:

[21] Interviews 18, 46, 47, 33, 2.

[22] Interview 10.

[23] Interviews 33, 38.

> [M]aybe they need just you to clarify. They just need you to to go and try to explain to them, to explain to them that no do not be like misled, because this is what is really the meaning of the language. That way also, when you are drafting the language to be very clear and very simple. Do not go, you know, using you know extra extra words, no. Be simple. Be clear. Use the word that anyone can understand. And then you try to explain to them, maybe they will be okay to say, "Okay, so we are okay," and then no one will break the Silence.[24]

Third, diplomats observed that the inability to convene informal meetings hindered their ability to craft consensus. Hosting side events is an important part of the policymaking process in the UNGA. These informal events are opportunities to gauge preferences, establish issue coalitions, and try out different issue frames. Some diplomats lamented the inability to host effective side events online.[25] Others suggested that virtual side events were even more effective, as they obtain participation bring higher level speakers including at the Ministerial level, and have more participation from civil society groups.[26] Virtual side events were also less expensive, which was a particular advantage for small states, for whom traditional side events can be prohibitively expensive.[27] One diplomat pointed out that under virtual negotiation, it was harder to arrive at agreed-upon texts if diplomats were not able to convene informal meetings, and that these types of disagreements would cause Silence to be broken:

> Somebody will break silence and say that you haven't fully addressed our concerns, and then you do a couple more rounds and then a mix of plenary meetings and bilateral outreach to try to tweak the text, so you can put it under silence again and hopefully have it passed.[28]

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[24] Interview 33.

[25] Interviews 33, 32, 21, 12, 37, 43, 5, 42.

[26] Interview 15.

[27] Interviews 40, 14.

[28] Interview 34.

Corroborating the patterns uncovered in the empirical analysis, the same diplomat discussed the selection processes that the UN diplomat corps engaged in under silence, focusing on resolutions that could be more easily passed without the need for re-negotiating over previously agreed upon texts. These types of resolutions were easier than others to adopt under Silence because:

> [T]he solution lies, then, in going back to agreed language or reducing the volume of text....And do a few rounds of negotiations and input, and then it usually comes to a silence procedure whereby you say that this is our proposal after listening carefully to all of you. We'll put it on a Silence and we hope that it will pass, and then it doesn't. Somebody will break Silence and say that you haven't fully addressed our concerns, and then you do a couple more rounds....[T]his is an example of a process whereby maybe the text is not already there. I mean for some of the mandate renewal, for example, there is just a technical rollover. You don't have these lengthy processes, but you basically have an agreement to change the date to one year, prolong it with one year, and then continue with the sign and say, a mandate for a peace operation, for example. [29]

As the diplomat describes, in cases when a new resolution text is being crafted, the outcomes under virtual negotiations are much more uncertain, and there is a chance that disagreements over the language could lead to Silence being broken, a sentiment that was echoed by other diplomats as well.[30] On renewals and administrative matters—which I showed were the majority of the work that diplomats were able to move forward during the Silence period—these concerns are largely mitigated.

Bringing this evidence together begins to illuminate the overall effects of digital diplomacy on consensus-building in the UNGA during the Silence period, and is expected to generally describe dynamics in teh EU Council as well. While an aggregate analysis of the resolutions adopted during consensus compared to other recent time periods suggests

[29]Interview 34.

[30]Interviews 32, 33.

that there was not a negative impact on the everyday negotiating work of diplomats, a deeper examination reveals that this pattern obscures the actual dynamics. Diplomats, understanding the challenges presented by digital diplomacy—specifically, an inability to form social bonds, communication barriers, and an inability to meet informally—chose to limit their work to easy administrative issues and topics on which consensus had already been forged. More difficult, emerging, and contentious issues were sidelined until diplomats were able to return to in-person work. The cases of failed Silence, which highlighted contentious debates over institutional priorities, visions, and programmatic responses (see fn. 16) illustrate that these expectations were correct: as the degree of existing consensus and the stakes of the issue were higher, Silence was less likely to be successful in forging consensus.

8 Conclusion

Building on previous studies of digital diplomacy, which have yielded indeterminate expectations about whether the adoption of these tools should have positive, negative, or null effects on the work of diplomats, I attempt to develop a unified theoretical logic that takes into account institutional design features in predicting the effects of digital diplomacy on consensus-building. I argue that digital diplomacy is predicted to have negative effects on negotiation success specifically in IOs that have strong consensus norms and heterogeneous memberships. I also expect that these effects should be particularly salient when it comes to negotiations over emergent or particularly controversial issues. I test these expectations in the cases of the UNGA and the EU Council, which meet both criteria. If digital diplomacy does not have negative effects on consensus-building in these institutions, it is unlikely that these effects should exist elsewhere.

Using data on consensus rates during the interruption to in-person meeting caused COVID-19 combined with elite interviews with 27 UN diplomats, I provide an illustration in support of these expectations. I show that although the consensus rates were not negatively impacted by the adoption of digital diplomacy, this overall trend is driven by strategic choices that diplomats made. Virtual negotiations created new challenges in communications, social relations, and informal bargaining, which pushed diplomats to sideline work on new, controversial issues and instead focus their efforts on administrative and continuing matters. In these issue agendas, diplomats were able to successfully use digital tools to continue the day-to-day operations of the IOs. These findings imply that while digital diplomacy can be useful for dealing with routine tasks that build on existing agreements, it may not be effective for creating new agreements, especially in contentious or emerging areas. Therefore, while digital diplomacy can improve administrative efficiency and be a valuable tool for diplomats, it cannot replace the importance of face-to-face meetings.

This suggests that the global regulatory order is not in danger of collapse when faced with emergent challenges that require digital meetings, and in order to address such emergency demands, diplomats can continue to conduct routine work. However, it also suggests that multilateral negotiations are unlikely to thrive in a fully digital environment, as when new issues and highly salient questions arise, digital tools appear to be insufficient for forging consensus in these challenging situations.

Adler-Nissen & Eggeling (2022) correctly point out that, as analog and digital practices become more deeply intertwined, examining these strategies in a dichotomy can be limiting. With digital negotiations as part of their toolkits, diplomats must consider in which situations the application of such tools is most appropriate. Despite a return to in-person meetings for most work, as well as the adoption of e-voting procedures, Silence is still in use in some UN operations, for example, by the negotiators on strengthening the Economic and Social Council and the review of Global Counter Terrorism Strategy in 2021. This work suggests, however, diplomats working on negotiating over these types of high-salience matters should strive to—as best as possible—adopt or replicate in-person negotiation.

While I have used the UNGA and EU Council to illustrate these dynamics, further testing could corroborate these results by examining digital diplomacy that simultaneously took place in other IOs. Within the UN system, for example, both the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Security Council also adopted virtual negotiation strategies. ECOSOC, with a similar institutional structure, could serve as a robustness test, and the Security Council could allow for a comparison case that varies on the key dimensions of institutional design—membership and consensus norms. By applying a unified theoretical framework and taking institutional design features seriously, scholarship on digital diplomacy can point towards a clearer picture of the future landscape of diplomatic negotiations.

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