

COMMENT

The e-diplomacy experiment

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Cyber security and productivity are concerns but e-summits must go on as diplomacy must go on

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The first India-Australia virtual leaders' summit on June 4 had a lot on the menu, ranging from military interoperability to jointly tackling COVID-19. The two countries upgraded their relations to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. The summit was noteworthy for its novel modus operandi.

Adapting to the times

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Indian delegation were on a video conference call with Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the Australian delegation. The dangers posed by COVID-19 have compelled the traditionally glad-handing, backslapping and tourism-promoting art of summit diplomacy to adapt. Just as corporations and educational institutions have migrated to online mediums, nation states are left with no choice but to do the same. E-summits are physically safer for leaders and also time-saving and economising events where costly physical journeys with entourages can be avoided.

Mr. Modi has engaged in a few multilateral 'e-diplomacy' rounds since the COVID-19 outbreak. He convened the SAARC leaders' video conference on March 15, joined the Extraordinary G20 Leaders' Summit via video link on March 26, and made his maiden appearance at the Non-Aligned Movement virtual summit on May 4. These were all single-issue focused and brief affairs. But the bilateral summit with Australia was elaborate and involved the exchange of multiple agreements.

It has been a maxim in diplomacy that face-to-face interactions at the highest level mark the zenith of foreign relations. The British scholar Ernest Satow dubbed "summits a permanent feature of diplomatic topography". The formal negotiations during summits, the closed-door restricted sessions, the fireside chats, the walks in the woods, the photo-ops and the outreach to live audiences in the host and home countries are all part of the package. But now without all the protocols and structured dialogues in cozy settings, it is doubtful if major breakthroughs or deals requiring direct intervention of leaders can happen. There is a danger that 'e-diplomacy' will become less productive in terms of deliverables, especially where crucial sticking points need ironing out. While the backroom legwork and minutiae of agreements can be hashed out by lower-level bureaucrats communicating remotely, online summits will simply not satisfy the broader political goals and bigger objectives that heads of state carry with them.

Threat to cyber security

Another threat to virtual summits comes from cyber insecurity. In pre-COVID-19 times, summit venues used to be thoroughly sanitised and debugged to prevent sensitive foreign policy content from being spied upon or leaked. E-diplomacy is riskier and could be subject to hacking of classified content, making the leaders warier. This could reduce the spontaneity and candour of their conversations. It is arguable whether new ideas or proposals which entail

Yet, having some summit is better than no summit at all. However artificial and unsatisfying the video conferencing medium is, key partners like India and Australia have to get on with it and hold high-level meetings as part of their strategic signaling. With Australia and India trying to forge coalitions of middle powers in sustaining the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, gaps in diplomatic summits can convey weakening of collective resolve.

For those missing the drama and the trappings of a 'real' summit, social media-savvy politicians might generate visuals to cherish in spite of the limits of virtual diplomacy. In a build-up to the India-Australia e-summit, Mr. Morrison offered vegetarian samosas via Twitter and Mr. Modi replied that he wanted to enjoy them together "once we achieve a decisive victory against COVID-19."

In-person summits will restart one day. But the online interlude has to go on because diplomacy has to go on.

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