

DIPLOMACY AND TECHNOLOGY

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It is a historical fact that Henry John Temple, better known as Lord Palmerston, British Foreign Minister in the mid 19th century, (he later became Prime Minister) was the recipient of a new invention, an official telegram, sent by an English Legation, presumably the one in Paris. As a reaction, he is known to have uttered the following words: "My God, this is the end of Diplomacy"...

Obviously, telegraph was then a brand new invention and in 1876, eleven years after Lord Palmerston's demise, Alexander Graham Bell patented the telephone. If the British Minister would have been alive then, he would have most likely repeated the same words regarding Bell's invention.

Diplomacy has been able to survive, not only to telegraph, submarine cable, and telephone, but also after radio, telex, photocopiers, fax, cell phones, computers, e-mail, internet, iPhones, iPods, iPads, google, yahoo, "wazapp or what's up", skype, scanners, tele-conferences, video-conferences, facebook, twitter, youtube, blogs, skype, plus movies, television, satellite communication, etc., etc.

And perhaps Lord Palmerston would have questioned the fate of diplomacy when sea navigation changed from sail ships to steamers and with the arrival of the "iron horse", as first trains used to be called.

Naturally, he would have been in awe, witnessing such inventions as automobiles, airplanes, helicopters, bullet trains, super highways, underwater tunnels, such as the European "Chunnel", etc .

Actually, all of these human creations promoted globalization and have contributed to the efficiency, growth and strengthening of diplomacy.

For example, when an Ambassador posted overseas is about to meet with a Minister of Foreign Affairs, or with any other high government official, he/she is now able to receive last minute instructions from headquarters and report the results of the interview via satellite telephone.

Furthermore, his/her supplementary written report can now be prepared on a computer, with automatic text coding, all in a matter of minutes, and sent via electronic mail. Less than twenty years ago this job would have taken several hours of labor, especially, to diplomats from developing countries.

During the telex era it was a must to punch a tape and wait for an available line before sending the message. The wait was even worse before telex, when it was necessary to go in person to the telegraph or international cable office.

When stormy weather prevailed, diplomats that were message carriers would wear raincoats and take waterproof briefcases to protect the message from getting soaked. I know of the case

of a junior diplomat who, being at a short distance from the cable office, was struck by stormy winds and lost the message without hope of recovery. When he returned to the Embassy his boss asked him for the receipt, in order to file it next to the copy of the message. The young diplomat's only candid response was: "Sir, have you seen the movie *Gone with the Wind*? "

Those who have joined the diplomatic service within the last five years of the 20th century have encountered a digital diplomacy, which continues to be more technical as years go by. Evidently, they will not have to go through the ill fated experience of the above mentioned young colleague.

It is not necessarily true to say that modern diplomacy is primarily cybernetic, since its fundamental essence has remained unchanged through the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, and even before.

Ambassador Javier Pérez de Cuéllar stated that diplomacy is the science and art of conducting foreign policies of States and regional and world organizations, in accordance with International Law. This was emphasized in the 1964 edition of his book on Diplomatic Law. It is a concept that was valid in previous decades and centuries.

Modern technology serves as an instrument that allows diplomats to facilitate their functions and to be able to fulfill them with added efficiency and speed. Diplomats must think clearly and calmly, avoiding rushing to decisions. However, actions have to be unfaltering and technology provides the proper mechanisms to accomplish such a task.

This 21st century has almost reached adolescence and colleagues that initiated their career towards the end of the previous century have been able to take advantage of the tools offered by modern technology, both abroad and at home. In fact, technology was available to them while studying at University, prior to entering the Diplomatic Academy or a Foreign Affairs Institute, where they continued to use it. At present, in my native Peru most of them are in their forties, handling diplomacy with the tools of this millennium.

I am older than them but I was fortunate that my Foreign Ministry gave me and other colleagues the opportunity to take classes at a computer center. At the office, we improved our knowledge by the learning-by-doing system. Thus, we were capable in performing demands of modern service.

All the above mentioned data is valid both for diplomats as well as for administrative staff.

All modern tools available now to diplomats have changed our work procedures. Prior to the existence of telex, messages by cable had to be brief and only sent in cases of emergency or extreme necessity.

In Peru there were two companies for international communications. They were All America Cables, subsidiary of ITT, and West Coast, a branch of Western Union.

The use of telex brought costs down since charges were no longer per word but per time employed during the transmission. The equipment was so heavy that when in use, it shook the entire room.

The introduction of e-mail caused ITT and West Coast to look for greener pastures. ITT became involved in hotel business, insurance groups and other ventures, and Western Union is now a world leader in long distance money transfers.. The use of telex and fax has totally declined.

Diplomatic *modus operandi* has changed, in view of the fact that it is now possible to send messages via electronic mail, without eliminating words or limiting time. It is also possible to send attachments, pictures and videos. We can now perform normal writing, without mutilations. This is a bonus for the use of proper language.

Technology has also managed to decrease frequent dispatch of diplomatic pouches, which are now limited to pamphlets and certain documents containing non-essential material. All other correspondence is now sent by e-mail.

In the past, when serving abroad, diplomats awaited anxiously for the arrival of diplomatic pouches, since they contained newspapers, magazines, letters, etc. Now, they find news in the internet and correspondence with family, friends and colleagues is done by e-mail.

Internet is complemented by intranet. The latter allows access to information through closed circuit within and between headquarters and its agencies abroad. .

Until the end of the 20th century, embassies, consulates and missions accredited to international organizations were like a series of islands around a central Foreign Ministry. Thanks to technology the paradigms have changed. Now, all agencies are connected with each other through their websites, placing them within general reach and allowing them to share information and necessary coordination.

Likewise, as an example, the Peruvian Embassy here in Bogota, thanks to internet, can follow the actions of its counterpart in Lima, the Colombian Embassy to Peru, and viceversa. Both Missions can connect directly in an instant as well as communicate through regular procedural channels.

All sectors, including business, academia, general public, civil society, etc., have direct access to diplomatic missions, consulates and representations to international organizations through its portals in the internet, thus by-passing the central organ, the Foreign Ministry. Of course, the latter one responds to requests and continues having connections with its missions, but in a more decentralized manner.

Current technology allows Ministries and their missions to fully execute public diplomacy by constantly spreading information inherent to its work. It also allows to divulge news bulletins, announcements to communities of fellow citizens, without having to use third party messengers. Therefore, modern technology helps our countries to comply with legislation in force regarding transparency and access to public information.

Thanks to electronic systems of the modern world, diplomats are up to date concerning events in their country of origin and in the country where they are serving. Access to the press (written, radio and TV) of the respective countries is available through a simple click. Access even expands to planetary level.

Furthermore, it is possible to read about world politics, economy, law, history, international relations, etc., in personal computers and tablets.

Through the respective portals, diplomats also have at our disposal information from United Nations, OAS, European Union, WTO, Arab League, Unasur, Andean Community, Mercosur, etc.

Thus, we are well informed about activities of these and other international organizations. In fact, all resolutions, proposals, elections, speeches, agendas, etc. are within our reach by entering into the websites of any organization. There is no need to request information.

Likewise, diplomats can now have access to thousands of books by entering into digital libraries of Unesco, U.S.A Library of Congress, etc. The same goes for general publications.

Professional continued education is important for diplomats and we now can pursue academic post graduate studies and participate in seminars, specialized training, etc., through virtual platforms. The Peruvian Diplomatic Academy offers those opportunities free of charge. Diplomats can start courses in Peru and are able to continue them abroad if they are assigned to foreign missions. Academic degrees obtained in this manner are legally recognized by Peru's higher education system.

Technology can also help diplomats working outside their countries. They can now instantly communicate with their loved ones through their smart phones, e-mail and tablets. Not only can they hear their voices, but also view the faces and gestures of family members and friends. This more personal contact helps defeat depression, which sometimes might affect diplomats living away from home, especially single ones.

Let's go back to Lord Palmerston and his reaction of almost 170 years ago, after receiving at the Foreign Office the first official telegram. At that time, he felt as if that was the beginning of diplomacy's end. If he were now alive, or if he could be in touch with his office from his present location, he would be amazed to observe how work is carried on at the brand new Digital Diplomacy Department of the Foreign Office.

Needless to say, if by some reason beyond our control, electrical circuits would fail and systems would shut down, causing total stand-still, then, Lord Palmerston would rightly be able to state that diplomacy is gone.
