

News from under the Southern Cross – Edition 29. Diplomatic activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

2 September

I've been asked “what do you do in Canberra while under lockdown?” So I want to use this issue of my newsletter to explain about my activities while under lockdown.

1. A sudden increase in teleconferencing (webinars)

While under lockdown, in principle staff at the Embassy are not permitted to directly meet with anyone outside of the Embassy.

As I am not able to visit Australia's senior-level public servants and federal politicians for discussions as before, my level of phone calls and vigorous to-and-fro of emails has increased. The other day, after receiving a request from the Australia-Japan Business Co-operation Committee, I gave a presentation on current Japan-Australia economic ties and future developments to close to 200 participants from the Japanese and Australian business communities on-line (via a so-called webinar, or web-based seminar) (my speech to the webinar can be read [here](#)).



The webinar hosted by the Australia-Japan Business Co-operation Committee

This week I was invited by the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee of Federal Parliament to appear before them, where I explained about Japan's position in relation to the Quad (Japan Australia US India Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue). This also took place on-line (please click the following links for my [opening statement](#), [video](#) and [minutes](#) of my appearance before the Committee).

2. “Diplomacy is the last 2 feet”

This sort of large-scale permeation by the internet has certainly enabled communication to occur where previously it had been impossible. But it’s also true to say that there’s still a feeling of “not really getting to the root of a matter”.

Obviously there are limits to the type of delicate diplomatic dialogue that you can have over the telephone or via email. In a teleconference, you can tell a joke but can’t see how the audience has reacted. You could say that it is like talking to a wall or maybe the same feeling tennis players get hitting a ball against a wall?

While it’s better than no discussion at all, it’s different to conversations that happen ‘at the coalface’.



Teleconferences are like hitting a ball against a wall

A former US diplomat who served as the US ambassador to Japan once exclaimed in his memoirs that “diplomacy is the last 2 feet”. 1 foot is the length of a forearm. So 2 feet is the distance between you when speaking to someone at a reception and so forth. Which is to say that through direct conversation, you can first convince someone of your ideas and can strike a deal. Of course, in this age of the COVID-19 pandemic, “2 feet” doesn’t meet the criteria for ‘social distancing’, so it’s probably out.

Even with teleconferencing for international conferences, it is difficult to see the reaction of anybody other than the person speaking. Are they nodding in agreement? Are they shaking their heads? Are they pretending not to listen? Have they left their seat and are standing up? It’s difficult to read their all-important body language, which is crucial in the world of diplomacy.

3. Fostering Trust

One of the directors at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan said it best. “You can’t build trust using teleconferences”

There's no doubt about it - you can't create a 'relationship of trust' by merely introducing yourself to your counterpart and then holding a series of teleconferences with him or her. In the real world of diplomacy, direct conversations and lunches/dinners are the norm for deepening your knowledge of the personalities of your counterparts and what positions they hold.

However in the case of old acquaintances, teleconferences can be an important means of maintaining relations amid the COVID-19 pandemic. At the webinar hosted by the Australia-Japan Business Cooperation Committee that I mentioned earlier, I was able to enjoy exchanging opinions with former Australian ambassador to Japan Peter Grey and AJBCC CEO Richard Andrews (the former Australian ambassador to Ireland).

4. A dramatic drop in visitor numbers

Another of the peculiar characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the dramatic decrease in visitors coming from Tokyo. 8 months have already passed since I took up this post, yet the total number of government representatives and politicians who have visited Australia is zero. Given that a visit requires two-weeks of quarantine in a designated hotel, the only visitors I have had have been Professor Dr. TAKAHARA Akio of the Graduate School of the University of Tokyo and singer and actor Mr. SAIGO Teruhiko.



Waiting for the day when we can welcome many guests coming from Japan,
just like the old days

For a diplomat working abroad, meeting guests at the airport and seeing them off is par for the course. Yet from the time of my arrival up until now, I haven't gone to the airport apart from when I've travelled on official business within Australia. It's an exceedingly odd life for a diplomat.

5. The role of embassies and consulates abroad

This might sound counter-intuitive, but in the midst of this situation, the various roles that the Embassy plays have actually increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, the

opportunities for diplomats residing in partner countries abroad to serve as the eyes, ears, and voice of Japan in those partner countries have increased relatively because there are no regular high-level visits or related business trips taking place as they used to.

In the case of Australia in particular, up until now it had been better able to suppress the effects of COVID-19 compared with other countries. And as one of the countries where Japanese diplomats are able to gain a broad range of access, there's been plenty of territory around which to work.

6. Making use of the home page and social networking services (SNS)

It seems that some critical voices have returned, remarking "having said all that, as Canberra's in lockdown at the moment, aren't you slacking off?" Not at all, there's still a lot that we can do.

The current situation has meant the Embassy's home page and its social media accounts on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) have become an important part in distributing our diplomatic messages and advertising abroad. Some of the more observant may have noticed that the regularity of these newsletters has increased.

The truth is that because of the increase in remote-work (or working from home) while under lockdown, people's access to these platforms have also increased. By the way, following on from [my speech at the National Press Club](#), I received a kind-hearted letter from an Australian, who wrote "I don't ordinarily watch speeches delivered at midday during the week because I am working. However when I happened to glance at the TV while working from home, I found your speech to be so interesting that I listened all the way to the end".

As mentioned above, as a conduit for diplomatic conversations nothing beats meeting face to face, but in the midst of the current situation and restrictions, we're doing the best we can.

And finally, once the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, by all means pay a visit to Canberra.

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The Embassy Facebook page can be found [here](#)

The Embassy Twitter account can be found [here](#)