

## Hybrid Diplomacy is the Way Forward

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### Pandemic Diplomacy Series



***Emphasising that diplomacy of the future will neither be traditional as it was nor just digital as it is, this EDA Reflection by Amb. Ali Al Dhaheri suggests that the dynamics of sitting together in meetings need to be recreated in online forums. It also points out that the diplomatic protocols which are long-learned and rooted in centuries of understanding need to be reconsidered now.***

The art of diplomacy has never been as important as it is now. In a complex and multipolar world that has faced some degree of fragmentation, we are faced with a new pandemic crisis. The diplomatic sector has had to step up to the plate during this ever-more challenging period when the usual channels of diplomacy face new trials due to the lockdown.

When I look at diplomacy around the world in general, diplomats and leaders included, I would say that there has been a great deal of quality engagement motivated by a real need. While representatives of various countries convened in the past at events for general meetings with pre-decided agenda, meetings amid the COVID-19 lockdown assumed a greater sense of urgency and participants pushed for specific measures even if the interaction was virtual.

The G7 virtual conference in mid-April discussed the urgent need for resuming economic activities and dealing with the uncertainties of the post-COVID world. The G20 ministerial meetings, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank web conferences served as alternatives to in-person meetings. For the G20, in particular, this was momentous because it was the first virtual high-level leadership summit.

Driven by necessity, other examples of web-based diplomacy include the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund hosting their Spring Meetings online, for the first time. The United Nations, the European Union and other organisations also moved from physical meetings to online spaces, triggering a profound change in the way diplomacy is conducted.

From a personal and practical perspective, I believe that many professions have had to adapt their practices and ours is no exception. This has included working from home and exercising caution with personal protection, face masks, enhanced sanitisation and the like. Coping with the changes in life, like many around the world, underlined the need for flexibility.

There are specific challenges with diplomacy as it is a distinctly human profession that involves meeting and dealing with people face to face to understand the requirements. For example, our diplomatic team would normally meet with ministers and businesspeople, and attend events with hundreds of guests. Additionally, much of this involved extensive domestic and international travel. All of this had to change and we were forced to adapt to the new reality.

We naturally increased our reliance on modern communication techniques – web cameras, telephones and emails. This was useful in keeping contact with the leadership and ministry officials in the UAE and maintaining uninterrupted communication and initiatives in China. Gradually, we have found an even greater evolution in communication, as events and conferences migrated online.

This new style is bringing innovation to meetings and diplomacy. Online platforms now need to be improved in a way that offers the stability and security which are so important in diplomacy. The dynamics of sitting together in meetings need to be recreated in online forums and the protocols which are long-learned and rooted in centuries of understanding need to be reconsidered. A new 'hybrid diplomacy' which fuses traditional face-to-face meetings with organised online participation and ad hoc online meetings, is rapidly emerging.

It is also important here to record in brief the performance of the diplomatic service of the United Arab Emirates. All around the world, it has activated its principles and workings, with a strong and effective application to this crisis. What has also come through strongly is the UAE's support and approach to aiding and supporting people in need from various nations. In the early stages of the outbreak, the UAE was one of the first donors of medical aid to China, providing shipments of face masks and gloves.

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The UAE's strength lies in being at the crossroads of the world between Europe, Asia and Africa, as an aviation hub, which it uses to its advantage. The UAE Embassy in China played a vital role in the Emirates Humanitarian City initiative, where 215 individuals from neighbouring and friendly countries of the UAE who were evacuated from China were provided shelter.

The evacuees were also provided with the necessary monitoring and preventative medical care especially since they were evacuated from the sensitive epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak – Hubei Province. It is important to note that the emergency measures were established in just 48 hours, highlighting the country's humanitarian aid and medical care capabilities during times of crises.

Among the lessons learnt from the goings-on, it is worth highlighting Chinese President Xi Jinping's brief at the virtual G20 summit. It represented excellent diplomacy and a simple step-by-step approach that offered a fair and reasonable plan for all stakeholders. Some of these measures include:

1. To fight an all-out global war against the COVID-19 outbreak, a G20 health ministers' meeting should be convened as quickly as possible to improve information sharing, strengthen cooperation on drugs, vaccines and epidemic control, and cut off cross-border infections.
2. There is a need to have the strongest global network of control and treatment. Countries should pool their strengths and speed up research and development of drugs, vaccines and testing capabilities in the hope of achieving early breakthroughs to the benefit of all.

3. All countries need to support international organisations, such as the World Health Organization, which play important roles during times of crises. The G20 platform for communication and coordination must be used to increase policy dialogue and exchange, and a high-level meeting on international public health security must be convened.
4. International macro-economic policy coordination should be enhanced between nations, to counteract the negative impact of production and demand across the globe and prevent the world economy from falling into recession. Strong fiscal and monetary policies should be implemented to keep exchange rates stable, with improved coordination of financial regulation to keep global financial markets stable. The global industrial and supply chains need to be jointly kept stable.

Such clear and practical solutions that are amenable to countries all around the world are precisely what is needed at this time.

Finally, I believe we need to consider the value of 'science diplomacy' in a new light. Scientists have long formed relationships with colleagues across the globe, even when their governments did not get along. Countries are increasingly recognising the diplomatic value of such cross-border scientific projects and networks, which can re-establish trust and diffuse tensions even when political relations are strained. Some of the measures prescribed above serve as effective tools to promote science diplomacy and double up as an avenue for countering the pandemic.

One thing is clear. The way people think and interact will be different, not only during the COVID-19 crisis but also in a post-COVID world. Each one of us needs to adapt across all job spheres including diplomacy. We are already adapting centuries-old conventions to deal with this challenge and we will see an acceleration of diplomacy adapting, developing and refining into a stronger and more robust form.