

'Health Attachés' – A Future Innovation?

July 2020

Pandemic Diplomacy Series



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Converting the crisis into an opportunity, this EDA Reflection highlights three main tasks that the embassy focused on and excelled in – offering consular assistance to stranded Emiratis; acquiring and channelling much-needed medical relief; and fostering international collaboration, especially in the health sector.

As I gather my thoughts on the impact of Covid-19 on diplomacy, Albert Einstein's famous line comes to mind: "In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity."

The spread of the novel coronavirus has not only impacted economic activities but also altered global diplomacy. This is perhaps the first crisis after World War II that brought most activities in the world to a standstill. As the horrors of wars bring people closer, this pandemic has also shaped a desire amongst nations to promote international cooperation to cope with the menace.

Challenges are an ineradicable part of our life. They also give us a reason to fight and achieve our goals. Challenges can be easily overcome provided the available manpower and resources are utilised optimally under the guidance of dedicated leaders. The UAE embassy and the government worked to exploit and convert this crisis into an opportunity.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MOFAIC) identified three main tasks during this testing period. One, offering consular assistance to UAE nationals stranded abroad. Two, acquiring much-needed relief from other countries, including medicines and protective kits for doctors.

Three, fostering international collaboration, especially in the medical domain and facilitating scientists to work together to produce a vaccine to counter the virus.

On all three fronts, the mission achieved remarkable success.

One, as the crisis spread, most countries closed their borders, leaving hundreds of thousands of people stranded all over the world. To help Emiratis stranded in India to fly back home, the mission arranged special repatriation flights from four cities in India. Conversely, the mission also faced the herculean challenge of coordinating the massive repatriation of Indians stranded in the UAE.

Two, the mission, in coordination with the Indian government, ensured that hundreds of medics, both doctors and nurses, were flown in from India to the UAE to further strengthen the country's battle against the pandemic. The mission also worked towards procuring and delivering medicines and medical equipment from India to the UAE. Equally important was the coordination to ensure that supplies of essential items, especially food products, continued unabated with the help of specially arranged cargo flights.

Three, while the above also required international collaboration, in line with the UAE's commitment to extend critical support to other countries seeking to bolster their fight against the pandemic, the UAE arranged the delivery of massive quantities of medical supplies to India, which was widely appreciated. Further, the two governments committed to the exchange of expertise between the two countries, including their application of state-of-the-art technology in the detection and cure of the novel virus.

Fulfilling these tasks, however, was made extremely difficult because of the lockdown. The diplomats at the embassy in New Delhi and consulates in other Indian cities adapted swiftly by tapping into the opportunities available through digital or virtual channels. Working from home, the diplomats offered advice on return

flights and repatriation procedures to Emiratis stranded in India. The same platforms were also used for coordination with Indian government departments in New Delhi, as well as several state governments.

Even high-level diplomatic engagements were facilitated by videoconferencing. One such session was between the UAE and Indian foreign ministers. To demonstrate solidarity with the local population affected by pandemic and to explore opportunities with the Indian authorities for joint responses to the crisis, I participated in several debates through video conferencing. In fact, all my interaction with the colleagues at MOFAIC on ways to deal with the extraordinary situation was done virtually, something unimaginable only a few months ago.

Another major task for the mission was public diplomacy using social media platforms, especially to convey health information and updates about the pandemic. As public anxiety escalated, MOFAIC and the diplomatic missions were under increasing pressure to generate and disseminate news about the nature of the threat and the responses that the authorities were undertaking to assist the people. The mission worked tirelessly and did a remarkable job to meet the expectations of the public.

A particularly unique experience of digital diplomacy was my interactive Zoom session with the diplomats-in-training at the Emirates Diplomatic Academy (EDA). Instead of the routine country visits during their training, the mission and the EDA facilitated a virtual tour of India, along with a brief on UAE-India ties. While it was a poor substitute at one level, it was at another level an innovative move that filled the gap to some degree, including cultural activities that were showcased via YouTube videos.

With regard to the changes in the craft of diplomacy, three examples stand out -- démarches were served over the telephone; an ambassador presented his credentials to the foreign government via video conference; and a virtual tour was organised for the EDA's trainee diplomats.

With regard to the changes in the craft of diplomacy, virtual meetings became the new normal, as illustrated above. Two other examples, which I became aware of from media reports, denote significant change in diplomatic traditions. One, démarches were served over the telephone rather than the usual practice of being summoned to the ministry to be formally given the note. Two, in an interesting twist, an ambassador presented his credentials to the foreign government via video conference, which marked a major departure from the usual colourful ceremony involving the head of state.

It is ironic that little attention was paid in the past to the role of digital diplomacy, but the crisis brought its utility to the fore. And the mission used the opportunities provided by modern technologies to the fullest to achieve the expected goals. While we were experiencing the increasing role of technology in all aspects of life, the experiences of the last few months are likely to encourage science diplomacy among nations. Since the UAE is already in an advanced stage of experimenting with tech-based solutions, its diplomats are sure to explore and be receptive to emerging innovations.

Like diplomacy successfully underwent recalibration, there is likely to be recalibration in the way the public goes about its day-to-day business. This process would be easier if it is approached in a constructive and positive manner, without narrow partisan considerations. This is particularly important since the World Health Organization has indicated that we may have to endure the crisis for a fairly long period.

Though questions have been raised about the future of globalisation, Covid-19-like challenges cannot be mitigated by one country or government. It must be a global effort. Recognising this, some experts are debating if a new diplomatic paradigm might emerge from this crisis – ‘health attachés’, who could coordinate medical and scientific collaboration in this and other future global health crises.

Finally, it is unlikely that all the changes we have experienced in our lives, including digital diplomatic practices, will continue when normalcy returns. But not all of them will disappear either. A healthy mix awaits us. Hence this crisis is an opportunity too!