

Are Current Challenges Creating Future Opportunities?

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Pandemic Diplomacy Series



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In this EDA Reflection, the author observes that the widespread damage caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has brought out the best humanitarian and innovative instincts in diplomats. He also reflects on the potential for this crisis to become a turning point in how the international community tackles wider challenges such as climate change, economic diversification and poverty.

In years to come, when we look back at 2020, there is no doubt we will reflect on a historic turning point. Exactly how this moment will change our world is hard to say, but we can already see its impact playing out in our day-to-day lives. Policy makers were blind-sided by the speed and scale of this crisis: few had experience in dealing with such an event and never before in history have countries systematically decided to shut down parts of their economies in unison, the full consequences of which we have yet to see.

In a matter of weeks, we saw how Madrid became one of the hardest hit cities in the world, and as an embassy we faced the virus on our doorstep. Despite this, we have also seen humanity at its best, with communities all over the world coming together in solidarity to face a common threat that does not differentiate. It has accelerated our use of technology, changed how we do business, and brought out the best in us. As such it has also changed how we do diplomacy, testing our skills and reminding us that these are the moments that diplomats train for.

For more than one year now, I have had the honour of representing the UAE in Spain as ambassador. Those of you who have visited this wonderful country, know that

it is a buzzing place, whose cities are full of life. Getting used to the silence that has reigned over the streets of Madrid has not been easy. At the same time, I have been impressed by the resilience of the Spanish people, government and institutions in dealing with a crisis on such a scale.

Likewise, our diplomatic mission set an example in how they handled an emergency caused by an invisible danger. Our team has not hesitated to be amongst those frontline heroes, often rushing to help citizens and placing themselves in harm's way to help those in need.

I am also proud of the swift action taken by the UAE's leadership, who never shied away from taking difficult decisions with compassion and humility. Our country is an international hub in which almost 200 different nationalities live together in harmony. As such, the UAE has demonstrated its commitment towards our neighbours and friends in the world, assisting over 1 million medical professionals in more than 70 countries by supplying 1,000 metric tons of sanitization equipment, medical aid and food to fight the pandemic.

This outbreak has only reconfirmed to me how many of today's threats and challenges are transnational and require joint and collaborative action. It might be difficult for us to envision a return to 'normal', but as with all crises this one too shall pass. I believe that we find ourselves at a crossroads that might drastically shape the evolution of the global economy and international relations for the coming years.

Covid-19 has changed so much about how we live and work, and I have had to rethink many aspects of my life, even some that I took for granted, like going to the gym or shopping. During this time at home, I have spent many hours reflecting on the work that our embassy carries out, and I have also tried to assess the challenges and opportunities that may arise.

In spite of the current limitations, diplomacy has been crucial for countries to understand the differing policy approaches and realities on the ground, as well as to

keep stakeholders informed. After playing an important role as crisis managers, we need to rise to the occasion again and contribute to the efforts of our countries to prepare for the future. Just a few months ago, I don't think any of us could have thought social distancing would become the norm. Equally, it would have seemed unlikely to think that global mobility would come to a halt.

As things stand, we still do not know how this virus will behave in the immediate future. I, like all, am anxious to see a vaccine or a treatment developed, but I celebrate that scientists and pharmaceutical companies are coming together in unprecedented ways with dramatic results. This sets an example for future collaboration, because we cannot find ourselves unprepared as we go forward.

The global economy is expected to plunge by around 4.7% in the current year, and best-case scenarios point to economic recovery by the latter part of 2021. We need to find ways to make our economies more resilient to overcome a potential resurgence of the virus and/or any other unforeseen issues that may arise. To do this, we must learn from some of the adaptations and trends that we have seen over the last few months.

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Many of the changes we have seen throughout these months are just an acceleration of already existing trends. In my previous life as a reservoir geologist, I saw first-hand how we went from manual drilling to automated controls. The digitalization of work has grown exponentially as a result of the crisis and mechanisation and automation will likely increase as we seek to find ways to localise supply chains and increase efficiency. This will affect millions of workers, with resulting socio-economic consequences.

Even within our embassy, I have led an effort to update our work, looking to apply and develop new and modern ways of doing diplomacy. I believe every business today must have these discussions if they are going to survive this crisis and thrive in the coming years.

The UAE is in the fortunate position that our leadership set us on a journey to diversify our economy, which has been so successful in transforming the country. Today, almost 70% of our economy is based on non-oil-and-gas sectors, which is an incredible achievement. However,

this is just a step in the journey, and to paraphrase what Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, once said, we want to celebrate the last barrel of oil exported. To achieve this, we have to keep investing to develop future-oriented industries that will create jobs for young people. If traditional industries are likely to be less labour-intensive, then we have to re-train and find new kinds of jobs for our workforce.

In the last few months we have seen the supply chains of food or even basic goods disrupted, but we have also seen how quickly those supply chains adapted to meet the demands of the population. Seeking diversity of supply and production as well as innovative ways of manufacturing locally may open up new opportunities for development. Automation and digitalization should not be seen as a threat to jobs but rather as an opportunity to create new industries and improve standards of living for everyone. If we can match technology with new thoughts on sustainable development, this moment could be one of great possibility for humanity and our planet.

In this sense, it seems undeniable to me that artificial intelligence and other cutting-edge industries will only gain in significance as we reshape our productive processes in the upcoming future. It is important for us to extend that level of creativity and innovation to our efforts in tackling climate change and addressing health and poverty issues. The Covid-19 pandemic has to be taken as a symptom of those over-arching issues and not thought of in isolation. I am excited to see that my country is at the forefront in the elaboration and development of initiatives in these and other fields to increase resilience and preparedness for the world of tomorrow.

As diplomats, we have to step up and help to speed up this process. It is crucial for us to reinvent our craft in order to keep pace with the speed of change. In times of social distancing, we need to remind that it is through personal connections that we have created, developed and strengthened ties. Even though the traditional ways of doing diplomacy remain important, we have become familiar with new tools and we must embrace them to prepare the world of tomorrow and ensure that we can do 'diplomacy as usual' as soon as possible.

I am excited about the coming years and the chance to get back to visiting people in this wonderful country. In the meantime, I will resort to the online world to share with Spanish stakeholders the successful story of the UAE, a country that is setting the standard for what the future can look like.