Reflections on Innovative Adaptations During the Covid-19 Crisis
Project Team

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The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged everyone, in all walks of life, to adapt how they conduct their business. Diplomacy is no exception.

Many of the typical activities that a diplomat engages in, whether that be attending events, travelling to other countries, or holding meetings, have been either put on hold or transformed.

Yet the need for effective diplomacy has never been more urgent or necessary.

While the pandemic has encouraged some to erect barriers, we have relied on diplomats to hold out the hand of cooperation to defeat the virus.

When the pandemic has forced leaders to focus on the welfare of their own population, humanitarian diplomacy has sought to ensure the more vulnerable countries are not forgotten.

And as the pandemic appears to have deepened divisions between great powers, we need diplomats to reimagine and work towards a more cooperative, sustainable and just world order.

The good news is that as the pandemic has progressed, diplomats have proven themselves to be resilient and innovative professionals who have risen to the challenge and reinvented diplomacy.

The Emirates Diplomatic Academy sought to capture diplomats’ first-hand experiences of how the practice of diplomacy adapted to the crisis.

We asked a number of ambassadors from the United Arab Emirates [as well as some former ambassadors from other countries] to write their personal reflections on how they had found new ways to keep the wheels of diplomacy turning.

What resulted is a fascinating insight into how diplomats have found new ways to pursue the relationships, creativity and engagement that are at the heart of diplomacy.

It remains to be seen whether some of these new practices may stay with us once the pandemic has passed.

What is for sure is that diplomacy has a vital role to play in ensuring that the international community emerges from this pandemic more united and more optimistic than before.

Bernardino Leon
Director General
Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has dramatically altered international diplomacy. Most countries around the world were under lockdown. State visits were limited or cancelled, summits postponed, international events and travel ground to a halt for a short period and remain restricted, with trade supply chains facing disruptions.

The Emirates Diplomatic Academy (EDA) used the pandemic as an opportunity to ascertain how the foreign ministries, diplomats and the craft of diplomacy coped with these new realities. It invited serving and retired diplomats from Asia, Europe, Africa, and America to share their experiences in dealing with this first-of-its-kind crisis.

Their expert views – lessons, forecasts and best practices – is part of this compendium. The EDA hopes that this will serve as a value addition to the pedagogy of diplomacy and enhance the knowledge of young diplomats around the world. The following are some observations gleaned from the contributions.

• A consistent view, unsurprisingly, is the swiftness with which technology enabled the switch to digital diplomacy. Virtual consultations among decision-makers, including the first such G7 Summit and G20 ministerial meeting, became the norm initially – one that is likely to remain an option on the table.

• Equally, again unsurprisingly, diplomats pointed out that tech-based diplomacy is no substitute for traditional human diplomacy in the long term. While stressing that “physical proximity will remain essential for efficient diplomacy,” they also felt that the online format – without “face-to-face interaction between and among interlocutors, side conversations and discussion over a cup of coffee which provides room for manoeuvre and an eventual compromise” – is ill-suited to conduct multilateral diplomacy.

• Yet, most agreed that a hybrid model of diplomacy would evolve in a post-Covid world – an idea that would have been unfathomable at the start of 2020. This calls for “greater investments in infrastructure to support fast and reliable connectivity and renewed attention to cybersecurity,” and rewriting of the otherwise strict diplomatic etiquette and protocol, which is hard to practice while telecommuting.

• Some of the challenges demanded improvisation and there are several examples to suggest that diplomats and diplomacy rose to the occasion:

  ° Innovative changes in the craft of diplomacy were evident in démarches being served over the telephone, an ambassador presenting credentials to a foreign government via video conference and trainee diplomats undertaking virtual tours instead of physical trips abroad.

  ° Even ‘online dinner diplomacy’ was pursued – food was delivered to guests’ homes, with Zoom facilitating the flow of conversation, with “one of the guests dressed in a dinner jacket” and even displaying the host country’s flag. Similarly, cultural diplomacy thrived via ‘iftar from afar’ during the holy month of Ramadan and a virtual ‘Cultural Marathon Symposium’.

  ° The pandemic encouraged diplomats to engage with the private and non-government sectors more than usual, especially while procuring and distributing medical and relief material and repatriating citizens.

  ° Diplomats found time to contemplate and recalibrate their diplomatic skills. For example, consular work gained prominence over political and economic priorities. Humanitarian diplomacy drove one country, in coordination with other governments, to undertake the world’s largest repatriation of civilians – nearly half a million – stranded in over 50 countries across five continents.
On the flip side, the focus on domestic agendas meant less time for diplomacy to deal with the world’s hotspots and troubled issues. The postponement of the United Nations Climate Change Conference was one such casualty.

An important recommendation was the need to host a G20 health ministers’ meeting and to consider the appointment of ‘health attachés’, to foster international medical and scientific collaboration now and in the future, especially when vaccines become available.

Overall, the diplomatic call for collective action was overwhelming – only multilateral fora can “mitigate the imbalance that characterises the global distribution of power”. Further, “working with others” instead of “working over others” would be necessary in the post-Covid reconstruction effort. To fulfil this, “we will see an acceleration of diplomacy adapting, developing and refining into a stronger and more robust form.”

The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly brought great challenges to the practice of diplomacy, like it has to so many other professions. Yet what is clear from the contributions in this compendium is that diplomats have consistently risen to the challenge, and adapted their practice so that they can continue promoting peace and prosperity, and working together to tackle global challenges.

Dr N. Janardhan
Senior Research Fellow
Diplomacy is by definition an interactive profession. It requires an ability to talk and listen, to teach and learn, and to observe and act wisely. As the UAE Ambassador in Washington, DC, I engage with US officials and audiences from morning to night. In a flash, coronavirus upended the status quo and forced a complete recalibration of how diplomacy is conducted in an era of physical isolation. What has emerged is a new form of diplomacy, one that is nimble but dynamic enough to create opportunity in the face of uncertainty.

Diplomats at our Embassy will always hear me say the UAE has a remarkable story to tell. At every opportunity, I cheerlead for the progress we have achieved over the years and for the tolerant Emirati society we are building together. We are a country that embraces modernity, while valuing tradition and religion. At social gatherings, we proudly speak about a nation brimming with creativity and collaboration across cultures and faiths, between men and women, amongst Emiratis and non-Emiratis. Our diplomacy is built on the ethos of these UAE fundamental values, one that builds relations based on common values, such as inclusion and tolerance.

The onset of this global pandemic forced the Embassy to reconsider how we project our priorities, albeit using different means. The UAE still has an important story to tell audiences around the world, even during this period of home confinement and social distancing.

First though, we were faced with a clear crisis that required a response. This emergency superseded all other priorities. International borders were closing down. Airlines were cancelling flights. Emiratis were dispersed throughout the US and the world, and they needed our help. Embassies needed to embark upon a massive repatriation effort of UAE nationals back to the homeland.

Before the outbreak, there were approximately 4,236 UAE nationals in the US. The Embassy, along with various government organizations and our national carriers, Emirates and Etihad Airways, were able to organize special repatriation flights for Emiratis and UAE residents. Today, thousands of Emiratis have successfully returned home. We also worked with the US Mission to the UAE to repatriate 733 American citizens back to the US. In the midst of this effort, I met with Secretary of State Pompeo and made clear that we would assist all US citizens seeking repatriation.

Led by our Deputy Chief of Mission Shaima Gargash and her team, we established a war room operation at the Embassy and at our consulates in New York, Massachusetts, Texas, and California. Our diplomats who normally meet with officials at the State Department or US Congress instead worked to arrange accommodations and travel plans for our citizens. We established a dedicated website and hotlines to provide critical information and expedite the repatriation process. Our social media channels included constant updates to provide important information for our travelers and their families.

After weeks of late and near sleepless nights, we fulfilled our mission and successfully repatriated a large percentage of Emiratis who were able to travel home. This crisis, like no other crises we had experienced before, showcased our diplomats’ skillsets, creativity, flexibility and teamwork to overcome unexpected challenges.

As this undertaking was completed, we pivoted back to telling the UAE story but quickly realized we needed to adapt and utilize digital tools to project our message to American audiences. This meant focusing our attention on the Embassy’s social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other channels. The increase in volume of relevant and timely content on the official Embassy social media accounts has led to a significant jump in social media engagement, notably on Twitter. After this undertaking was completed, we pivoted back to telling the UAE story but quickly realized we needed to adapt and utilize digital tools to project our message to American audiences. This meant focusing our attention on the Embassy’s social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other channels. The increase in volume of relevant and timely content on the official Embassy social media accounts has led to a significant jump in social media engagement, notably on Twitter. Since the Embassy turned to relying on virtual activities, the Embassy’s Twitter account gained over 3,000 followers, which is significantly higher than the average monthly increase of 500–1,000 new followers.

The Embassy has worked swiftly to ensure that the content on the Embassy’s online properties is appropriate
and sensitive to the current moment. With regard to COVID-19 in particular, we have posted new material to highlight the UAE’s strong response. In recent weeks, we have launched new webpages that highlight virtual arts and culture experiences in the UAE, as well as opportunities to make virtual connections between Emiratis and Americans in the emerging realm of “esports.”

We have also adopted a virtual approach to programming. Our busy calendar of events and activities with partners has evolved to suit an online environment. While we may be apart, digital channels offer us opportunities to connect more, not less.

Along those lines, I have participated in virtual discussions with partners to discuss how we are working with the international community to address the pandemic, and how we can recover together once the crisis passes. In my job as a diplomat, I have sought to highlight the UAE’s aggressive public health response, our collaboration with international partners and our commitment to ensuring a strong recovery. These are messages I have highlighted in various virtual contexts, including discussions with members of Young Professionals in Foreign Policy, the Emirates Diplomatic Academy (EDA), the US-UAE Business Council, a virtual interfaith gathering, and an interview with the Washington, DC news publication The Hill.

«The UAE still has an important story to tell audiences around the world, even during this period of home confinement and social distancing.»

During the holy month of Ramadan, a targeted programme of content and activities continued to highlight the UAE’s message of inclusion. This included virtual “iftars from afar” – where Emiratis and Americans shared a meal via Zoom and discussed Ramadan practices and other cultural traditions. An interfaith iftar the Embassy hosted along with Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh, the UAE Permanent Representative to the United Nations, and Minister of Culture and Knowledge Development Noura Al Kaabi, was a meaningful event where spiritual leaders from the UAE and US, spanning religions and faiths, gathered to offer words of prayer. During these challenging times, this hour of uplift was both powerful and inspirational for our nearly 400-person audience.

«The increase in volume of relevant and timely content on the official Embassy social media accounts has led to a significant jump in social media engagement, notably on Twitter.»

While the UAE continues to adapt to this new reality, we must also support our friends around the world. As aid shipments totaling over 556 metric tons have gone overseas to more than 49 countries, we have meticulously tracked this information and developed a series of factsheets documenting this humanitarian assistance. In the US, the UAE has donated coronavirus test kits to the American government. We are partnering with the state of Nevada to roll-out high-volume testing. We are supporting the Children’s National Hospital in Washington, DC which launched a drive-up/walk-up clinic test location for young people. Also, we are working with charitable organizations in the US capital region, providing meals to health care workers and groceries to underserved communities. It is our duty to support our neighbors. When this period is over, the UAE will be able to proudly declare that we stepped up to meet this historic challenge.

Conducting diplomacy is as vital now as ever before. The work continues even as the world stops. We must think creatively and test the boundaries of our protocol-focused profession to keep building bridges with our counterparts in the American government and with the wider public. We do so with confidence and pride, knowing that we are doing our part to help write the next chapter in the UAE’s remarkable story.
Reflections on Innovative Adaptations During the Covid-19 Crisis

H.E. Dr Ali Al Dhaheri
Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to China

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-learnt 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-learnt 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.

Hybrid Diplomacy is the Way Forward
June 2020
«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. They need to do so again to counter this pandemic.»

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.
Reflections on Innovative Adaptations During the Covid-19 Crisis

Noting how swiftly Africa’s diplomatic system has adjusted to the new realities of conducting business, this EDA Reflection stresses the flurry of virtual consultations among decision-makers to chart common ways forward. It also wonders how telecommuting, to which African international bureaucracies have resorted for the purpose of business continuity, will evolve going forward.

The coronavirus pandemic has upended the globe and brought it to a near complete halt. In Africa, the dire scenario that many dreaded has not, for now, materialised, even though the number of cases seems presently to be on an upward trajectory. While the available figures remain low compared to other regions, there is awareness that Africa should stay on alert given how quickly the virus has spread in countries with much stronger health systems.

For Africa, the most devastating consequences are likely to be socioeconomic. This is not surprising. African economies are overwhelmingly dominated by the informal sector, which has borne the brunt as a result of the lockdowns and other restrictive measures that have been imposed to fight the pandemic, plunging millions into deeper poverty. Workers in the formal sector have also been adversely affected.

Compounding matters further is the global economic recession, which has led to reduced demand for Africa’s commodities that form the bulk of its exports; grounded tourism and aviation related activities; and decreased remittances from the diaspora. The pandemic has disrupted supply chains, leading to an increase in the price of imported food and other items. The collapse of the oil prices has had a mixed impact, increasing pressure on countries that rely on oil for most of their foreign earnings, without any significant boost for importers, given the global economic downturn.

Only time will provide a clearer picture of the pandemic’s impact on the continent. In the meantime, it is worth noting how swiftly Africa’s diplomatic system has adjusted to the new realities of conducting business. This is visible in the flurry of virtual consultations among decision-makers to chart common ways forward. The Bureau of the African Union (AU) Assembly of Heads of State and Government, comprising five countries with a coordination role in between ordinary sessions, has convened several online meetings since March, including some with the regional economic communities. Similar interactions have taken place in many regional and sub-regional groupings.

Like the rest of the world, the shift to online diplomacy is likely to outlast the pandemic, requiring, in the African context, greater investments in infrastructure to support fast and reliable connectivity and renewed attention to cybersecurity. It remains to be seen how telecommuting, to which African international bureaucracies have resorted for the purpose of business continuity, will evolve going forward.

The high number of consultations organised over the past few months reflects a deep-seated conviction that collective action is the best way to effectively address Africa’s challenges. As part of its Covid-19 strategy, the AU has taken steps to enhance the capacity of its Centres for Disease Control (CDC), including through voluntary financial contributions by member states, to enable it to lead the continental fight against the pandemic. In addition to issuing daily updates on the pandemic’s evolution, the CDC has trained health workers across Africa, facilitated interactions among specialists through regular webinars, dispatched experts on the ground, and launched the Partnership to Accelerate Covid19 Testing (PACT), with the objective of significantly scaling up testing, tracing and treatment. It has lent support to the efforts spearheaded by Ethiopia’s Prime Minister and the Jack Ma Foundation, through which millions of diagnostic test kits and other equipment were distributed to African countries by Ethiopian Airlines.

Other AU steps include resource mobilisation for countries, with the newly-established Response Fund, established at the end of March and to which the members of the Bureau of the Assembly alone initially contributed US$11 million. This amount and subsequent resources pledged by other African countries may pale in the face of the needs, but the effort made is remarkable when one considers that,

Covid Response Reflects Africa’s New Mindset

July 2020

El Ghassim Wane
Former Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations at the United Nations, and former Chief of Staff and Chief Advisor to the Chairperson of the African Union Commission.
until recently, the AU depended overwhelmingly on external funding for its operations. The emphasis placed by the ongoing institutional reform on self-financing has clearly spurred a new mindset.

Furthermore, the AU has engaged the African private sector – an initiative that was successfully piloted in the fight against the Ebola epidemic in West Africa a few years ago – leading to the establishment of a Forum of African Business Leaders. In this context, an Africa Medical Supplies Platform was recently launched to link countries with healthcare manufacturers to procure critical supplies. This is particularly important, given the scarcity of these supplies and their skyrocketing prices.

Finally, the AU has endeavored to mobilise international support, with a call for debt cancellation and the implementation of a comprehensive relief package for African countries. A team of special envoys was appointed to advocate on behalf of the continent. Equally important is Africa’s strong defence of the World Health Organization’s role and its call for global solidarity, including ensuring that any vaccine against the virus is made available to all.

Africa’s reaction is not only limited to the intergovernmental sphere. Civil society organisations, intellectuals and other concerned citizens are actively engaged. Most notable here are the lively discussions happening on online and other platforms and the open letters to African leaders, all illustrating the strength of the pan-African sentiment on the continent. The key takeaway from these initiatives is the need for Africa to undertake structural reforms to address the vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic and regain its sovereignty.

From the foregoing, it appears that Africa has fared rather well in terms of collective action, in contrast to the nationalistic approaches witnessed elsewhere. Accordingly, the dominant narrative highlighting unilateral responses to the crisis, while overall accurate, needs to be nuanced. This is important to account not only for the African experience but also for that of Europe, which, after the initial failings, stepped up its efforts. The Coronavirus Recovery Fund is notable because it is predicated on the issuance of bonds by the European Commission. If successful, this will constitute a gigantic step forward.

«The high number of consultations organised by the African Union over the past few months reflects a deep-seated conviction that collective action is the best way to effectively address Africa’s challenges.»

While commendable, Africa’s response can still be enhanced and expanded, taking advantage of the fact that, in times of crisis, ideas that would otherwise look unrealistic can gain wide appeal. Two interrelated issues deserve full attention: one, addressing the structural weaknesses that the crisis has made so manifest, from underdeveloped health and other public services to the extreme vulnerabilities of African economies to the continent’s excessive reliance on external support and on imports for much of what it consumes; and two, better harnessing the huge potential further highlighted by the crisis, in terms of creativity and the search for homegrown solutions.

The response here lies not only in renewed efforts to strengthen governance in all its aspects and foster conducive ecosystems, but also in the acceleration of the pace of integration, including the development of regional value chains.

At a time when the multilateral system is facing one of its most challenging moments, the imperative for its rejuvenation cannot be overemphasised. As shown by the pandemic, global challenges call for collective action. For Africa, commitment to multilateralism is not purely a matter of principle, but also an issue of enlightened self-interest. Only in multilateral fora can the continent mitigate the imbalance that characterises the global distribution of power and ensure that its concerns are taken into account. It is therefore vital for Africa to further strategise on how best to pursue its longstanding objective of an effective and inclusive multilateral system.

As with any crisis, the current situation also constitutes an opportunity that the continent must seize to take forward the agenda it has set for itself. While Africa has shown a commitment to act collectively in confronting the pandemic, it is yet to be seen if this will translate into a renewed determination for the continent to confront, head on, its underlying structural problems, expedite integration, and inject enhanced momentum into multilateralism. The period ahead should be closely monitored to get a sense of the direction of travel that will be taken.
In this EDA Reflection, Ambassador Al Ulama recounts the challenges she encountered in taking up her new posting in Berlin during the Covid-19 pandemic. She emphasises how, despite the complications, it provided an opportunity for leadership, solidarity, networking and reinvention.

It was early in 2020. I had my new post assigned and my papers ready with a brand-new diplomatic passport for the new destination: the Federal Republic of Germany. I was very excited and counting the days to the travel to Berlin.

In the meantime, BBC - my favourite news channel - was repeatedly broadcasting the spread of a new virus in China and the beginning of lockdown in Wuhan. Honestly, I didn’t take the news seriously and thought of it as a “far and away” case that will fade with time. We had been through SARS and MERS with minor disruption in the past.

We now know that that was not the case.

I reached Berlin and had my first meeting with the protocol department of the German foreign ministry in preparation for submitting my letter of credence to President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. I remember we discussed the details of the ceremony and the number of diplomats who could accompany me. I was looking forward to it.

In Arabic we have a saying that goes like this: “the winds blow in directions not favoured by ships”. This is exactly what happened. During that time, Germany, as many countries in the world, announced a complete lockdown. That put a stop to all kinds of face-to-face meetings. I got confined to the residence of the UAE in Berlin and my meeting with the president had to wait for more than three months.

Basically, I was stuck and in limbo. I was the “appointed” but not “accredited” ambassador to Germany. This meant I could not directly solicit meetings and communications with ministers and other high officials. This is indeed the worst situation for an ambassador as it means you are there and not there at the same time! Very confusing and unsettling. Add to that the lockdown and you get a recipe for sloth.

Then I realised I am a diplomat and diplomats don’t take no for an answer. Diplomats look for ways to get things done, no matter the conditions.

In the rest of the article I will list lessons learnt from living with constraints in the time of Corona.

1. Leadership and solidarity

Being a diplomat from the UAE has its privileges. As soon as Europe went into lockdown, the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFAIC) went into action. We received communications from MoFAIC that comforted us and inquired about our wellbeing.

The cherry on the cake was of course a call from H.H. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was very gracious in asking us individually about our health and about our families back home. Supreme example of diplomacy!

We were also happily surprised when we had a conference call with H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the UAE Vice-President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai. He emphasised the importance of identifying all UAE citizens in our respective countries and help in repatriating them back home.

These calls were like a shot in the arm, that boosted our morale and put us back on track. The message was clear: we are all in this together.

«Diplomats look for ways to get things done, no matter the conditions.»

2. Networking and expanding the circle

The pandemic opened our eyes to new channels in reaching out and doing our job.

We started using the internet to our advantage and unveiled its potential in networking. From the comfort of my living room I started “zooming” with representatives of major associations in Germany, introducing the UAE and the potential for collaboration. At many points we
had Berlin, Munich, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Dresden linked together. Some of the panel discussions had more than 60 people in the audience.

In a way, I feel I have emerged from the lockdown stronger with a bigger network and longer mailing lists.

3. Time for reinvention

The lockdown has offered an opportunity for contemplation and self-improvement. In the midst of domestic chores such as washing dishes and doing laundry - my domestic help could not come to Berlin because of travel restrictions - I managed to re-read some of my books and finish reading new ones. I also had ample time to connect with the diplomats at the embassy and discuss the future plan for our work in Germany. One element that prominently factors in our plan is “what if” scenarios.

Despite the lockdown, I felt we had to somehow engage with the society in Germany. We reached out to some humanitarian organisations and offered help and solidarity. We ended up providing over 8,000 masks for needy children during the difficult times. Also, we provided food deliveries to more than two hundred children and their families in areas assigned to migrants in Berlin. Another donation was to support a start-up that provides emergency information in multiple languages, including Arabic, to migrants who need medical support.

«I feel I have emerged from the lockdown stronger with a bigger network and longer mailing lists.»

Personally, I took many comforts of modern life for granted prior to the lockdown and the spread of coronavirus. I now know better that the job of a diplomat is to be ready for uncertainty at all times. Diverse conditions should always factor in our work plan.

Eventually, I had the face-to-face meeting with the president. However, the ceremony was low-key and, sadly, no diplomat could accompany me. I had to maintain social distancing and, of course, no shaking hands. Welcome New Normal!

«The job of a diplomat is to be ready for uncertainty at all times.»
Reflections on Innovative Adaptations During the Covid–19 Crisis

H.E. Dr Ahmed Al Banna
Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to India

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 videoconferencing. 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.

‘Health Attachés’ – A Future Innovation?

July 2020
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.
New Skills Required to Frame Messages

June 2020

Answering the question – will the pandemic change diplomacy – this EDA Reflection argues that foreign ministries and individual diplomats will have to learn a new skill set that entails not only framing messages in an appropriate way, but coordinating messaging across at least three dimensions: traditional diplomacy, official virtual diplomacy and unofficial virtual diplomacy.

The midst of a crisis is not the best vantage point from which to make balanced judgements. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated far too much over-excited – often hyperbolic – commentary making sweeping judgements that are driven by the emotions of the day, rather than the calm exercise of reason. It is only when we are done with fire-fighting that we can make clinical assessments.

With that qualification, let me state my view up-front: I do not think that the direct impact of the pandemic on diplomacy and geopolitics will be great. It will accentuate trends that existed before the pandemic hit, but not fundamentally change their trajectory. For example, neither the United States nor China will come out of this looking brilliant. Those already inclined to be sympathetic or skeptical towards one or the other will have their inclinations reinforced, but are unlikely to fundamentally change their views. Change if any, will be at the margins.

China’s ‘mask diplomacy’ will elicit gratitude, but that is an ephemeral emotion and international relationships are based on interests. I doubt any serious country will fundamentally redefine its national interests just because it has received some masks or test-kits.

The indirect impact of the pandemic on diplomacy and geopolitics will be greater. The world economy is already in recession. This could well become a depression. Sequential economic slowdowns in China, the United States, Japan and the European Union, can potentially create a vicious circle of low demand. If the circle develops it could be difficult to break. Given the significant role of international trade in today’s world economy, it is unlikely that domestic demand alone can spark a recovery in any major economy.

Since China was among the first to contain infections, it should, in theory, recover faster. But Beijing is finding that it was easier to stop production than restart the economy. Large Chinese enterprises are recovering steadily, but SMEs – which are 98% of enterprises, accounting for 60% of GDP and more than 80% of employment—are still struggling. Unless China recovers, it is difficult to imagine other major economies getting back to speed.

A global depression or a prolonged recession will leave every country with less resources for diplomacy in its traditional sense of dealing primarily with ‘high politics’ of relationships. For the foreseeable future, the main priority must be mitigating the economic impact on our peoples. This requires diplomacy to take a different emphasis with more focus on economics. Again, this is not new but will require foreign ministries to rethink how they allocate resources.

Total de-globalization is improbable. The technologies that drive globalization cannot be unlearnt; technological progress can be slowed but not stopped. In so far as there is a backlash against globalization it will be largely confined to specific domains. Some trends were already clear before the pandemic and will be accentuated by it: movement of peoples, fair rather than free trade, and technology transfers which will probably become more stringent due to heightened US-China tensions. Commercial air-travel and all its dependent industries will also be seriously affected. Other domains may also come under pressure.

Managing the consequences of these stresses and pressures will require diplomatic efforts in three broad areas, none of which are entirely new:

First, diplomacy is about communication. The chief challenge posed by the pandemic was how to maintain contacts to keep the machinery of bilateral, regional and multilateral relationships and forums running at an at least minimal level to ensure that stresses do not get out of hand and essential supplies keep flowing. The obvious answer was to use new information technologies to maintain contact virtually. Such technologies were
already in use by some foreign ministries and regional and international organizations before the pandemic, and its effect will be to routinize, entrench and more widely disseminate their use as diplomatic tools.

Second, it is highly unlikely, however, that virtual modes of communication will entirely replace the traditional means of communication or face-to-face contacts. Much communication is non-verbal. Any experienced diplomat knows it is essential to get a feel for an individual to fully understand the nuances of what is being communicated. The intermediation of technology blurs and distorts such subtleties. Furthermore, any diplomatic contact, be it bilateral or multilateral, occurs at two levels: the ceremonial and the substantive. Virtual communication is more suitable to the former. Cybersecurity concerns will always exist.

“Any experienced diplomat knows it is essential to get a feel for an individual to fully understand the nuances of what is being communicated. The intermediation of technology blurs and distorts such subtleties.”

Third, foreign ministries will have to learn what could be termed multi-dimensional diplomacy. Most foreign ministries and many individual diplomats already use social media such as Facebook (FB), Twitter, YouTube and others. But the ‘battle of narratives’ between the US and China that has intensified as a result of the pandemic is an emerging medium of diplomatic activity that other international players, including non-state actors, will almost certainly emulate. In my opinion, neither the United States nor China are playing this new game particularly effectively because messages are not well coordinated.

“Total de-globalization is improbable. The technologies that drive globalization cannot be unlearnt; technological progress can be slowed but not stopped. In so far as there is a backlash against globalization it will be largely confined to specific domains.”

Foreign ministries and individual diplomats will have to learn a new skill set that entails not only framing messages in an appropriate way, but coordinating messaging across at least three dimensions: traditional diplomacy, official virtual diplomacy (for example the official FB accounts of embassies or foreign ministries), and unofficial virtual diplomacy, which could be conducted through deniable avatars.
Meetings: the lifeblood of diplomacy

August 2020

In this EDA Reflection, Ambassador Abushahab observes that the Covid-19 crisis has revealed the advantages of conducting diplomatic meetings online but at the same time it has reinforced the value of in-person meetings. He notes that one consequence of the crisis may be that diplomats will be better placed to harness the complementarity between both types of meetings.

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing widespread global disruptions across many fields, big and small. From international trade flows to global transport; from the way we socialize to the way we conduct business. No profession has been spared. The craft of diplomacy has not been an exception.

On the one hand, the global remit and unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that diplomacy and diplomats have played a central role in the response. From informing and repatriating our citizens and residents abroad, to coordinating measures with our allies and partners, to conducting humanitarian and health diplomacy, and aligning on steps to safely restart our economies. UAE diplomats had to adjust quickly to meet these new challenges, jointly with our international partners.

On the other hand, diplomats have been deprived of the prime tool of our craft: the meeting. From international summitry to public diplomacy events, from delegation visits to the chance encounter at a reception, meetings are the lifeblood of diplomacy. Meetings allow diplomats to deliver messages, gather valuable intelligence and information, create familiarity and comfort, build long-term relations, and defend the UAE's foreign policy priorities. Nothing has been quite the same without “the meeting”.

Despite these challenges, UAE diplomacy was able to rise swiftly and efficiently to the new occasion. Our diplomats switched seamlessly from human interactions to digital exchanges and refocused their engagement on new issues, such as health diplomacy. We also adjusted our working procedures and methods, to ensure the safety and security of all embassy staff. I think that we surprised many of our counterparts in Europe with the speed in which we adapted to this “new normal”.

In my view, we are unlikely to return quickly to the status quo ante. While we may defeat the coronavirus in the coming six to twelve months, some of the changes it has brought about are here to stay; not all of them bad. While it is early days, ‘corona diplomacy’ has had some distinct advantages.

Online meetings do not require as much time, as meetings in person. In my case, not having to relocate to go to a meeting easily saves me 45 minutes around each appointment. In principle, this can be an advantage, as it allows for more meetings in a day.

Similarly, counterparts have been more available during this time. In Brussels, officials always have one-thousand-and-one things on their plate. With the reduction in meetings during this pandemic, even these notoriously difficult to reach officials are less occupied than before, enabling me to more frequently exchange views with some of my key counterparts.

The online format is also well suited for technical meetings, of which there are plenty in the European Union, for instance in the fields of finance, the environment, or visas. Conducting these meetings on a video platform has many practical and logistical advantages.

Still, if the corona-crisis has shown anything to me, it is the value of traditional diplomacy. Nothing compares to a face-to-face meeting in order to build relationships, obtain information, or deliver messages. Online diplomacy allows us to carry on our job under these exceptional circumstances; but it leaves us half blind. What we see is the screen in front of us, but not the complex world around it.

In my mind, this has resulted in a few disadvantages when it comes to the craft of diplomacy.
Meetings allow diplomats to deliver messages, gather valuable intelligence and information, create familiarity and comfort, build long term relations, and defend the UAE’s foreign policy priorities. Nothing has been quite the same without ‘the meeting’.

Firstly, virtual interactions sometimes lack the spontaneity and authenticity of meetings in person. Pre-COVID, meetings would always offer the opportunity to obtain additional intelligence, stumble upon non-related information, build familiarity not only with principals but also support staff, and discreetly raise side-issues even in the most formal circumstances. Not being able to look a person in the eye, or use body language to emphasize a point, impacts the effectiveness of a personal exchange, and as such, reduces the natural efficacy of diplomacy.

Secondly, limitations on social interactions also make it more difficult for us to speak directly to a wider audience and renew relations with our local partners. Events such as thematic receptions and cultural events are opportunities to showcase the spirit and character of the UAE to a wider audience, renew relations, and forge new bonds. Online events are an interesting addition, as they allow us to reach a different type of audience and are not limited by physical presence in a certain venue. But they are no replacement for these.

Thirdly, being unable to attend official events in person also means that much contextual understanding is getting lost. For example, in my role as ambassador to the EU, I have found that I extract some value from attending key sessions of the European Parliament, to observe the dynamics between the speakers, catch the nuance of body language and read the room. Impersonal video-meetings do not provide for this nuance and contextual knowledge.

Fourth, the current circumstances also limit our ability to network. Currently, my diplomats and I are having many online meetings, e-mail exchanges, WhatsApp conversations and phone calls with our counterparts and other partners. These are mostly with people who we already know, who we have met, and who we built a relationship with. On the basis of this relationship, it is easier to engage these contacts and, for instance, have them agree to a video call. While we do interact with officials who we have not met before, these meetings are rarer, and they are less likely to allow us to build rapport or expand our network.

Finally, I find that online exchanges tend to be more formal and more scripted. There is universal awareness that not everything that is being said online, may stay online. This is making it more difficult to get the “real story” behind the talking points, or the privileged information that interlocutors are more at ease sharing when in a private, secure and informal setting.

In diplomacy, familiarity breeds comfort. Building this comfort online and from a distance is harder. This is especially the case without prior knowledge of the lay of the land and the situation on the ground. The task of diplomats has therefore become more difficult; mine included. Not having half of my team on the ground is another handicap, especially as things are starting to return to normal.

Being at an embassy as a team of diplomats is a unique pressure cooker of undergoing shared experiences, facing shared challenges, and jumping at shared opportunities. It allows us to gain better knowledge of the jurisdiction we are accredited to. But, most importantly, these experiences and enhanced on-the-ground knowledge make us better representatives for the UAE and its interests.

We are unlikely to return quickly to the status quo ante. While we may defeat the coronavirus in the coming six to twelve months, some of the changes it has brought about are here to stay; not all of them bad.

There is no question that the practice of diplomacy under COVID-19 is changing. Some of these changes are beneficial and will enhance and enrich the way we conduct diplomacy, but we also need to keep an eye on the value of traditional diplomatic interaction. In my view, the current crisis highlights the complementarity of classic diplomacy on the ground and online diplomacy. Being able to play on both fields effectively, will be key to winning the diplomatic game in the future.
Reflections on Innovative Adaptations During the Covid-19 Crisis

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.

«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.»

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.
Reflections on Innovative Adaptations During the Covid-19 Crisis

Amb. Shyam Saran
Former foreign secretary and chairman, National Security Advisory Board, India

Though the pandemic is a classic transnational crisis, necessitating a global and collaborative response, this EDA Reflection argues that there has not been much evidence of a willingness to engage in international cooperation. Equally, however, it highlights India’s international outreach efforts and success in dealing with the crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made a significant impact on ways of living and work at the individual, societal, national and international levels. The craft of diplomacy, as an instrument to manage a state’s external relations, has had to adapt to a new and still evolving situation. There is a stalling and, in some respects, even a reversal of globalisation spawning a deeply inter-connected real world of expanding exchange of goods, services and people.

However, in the virtual world anchored in digital technologies, the pandemic has accelerated globalisation, with cross-border exchanges reaching unprecedented volume. This deepening contradiction is a challenge for diplomacy. Personal face-to-face encounters, intimate and confidential conversations and the atmospheres created by social events and warm hospitality, all these indispensable tools of diplomatic trade have mostly had to be dispensed with, even though the demands on diplomacy have been enhanced, not diminished, during the pandemic.

There has been, of necessity, a greater reliance on the digital domain to maintain diplomatic exchanges and communication and the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is no exception.

The MEA has had the advantage of adopting social media such as Facebook and Twitter at an early stage. In fact, it was the first ministry in India to do so. The norms for using these tools have been put in place, enabling rapid and efficient communications, not only among government agencies but also with Indian communities and citizens both in India and abroad. Having had to deal with similar crises though not on the same scale as the current one, the MEA has a crisis management mechanism which kicks in whenever required. This includes control centres and designated officials both at headquarters and at missions abroad whose contact details are widely communicated using social media, audio-visual media and print media.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the priority has been to ensure the welfare of Indian citizens in foreign countries. For example, many Indian students were stranded in Wuhan, China, the epicentre of the Covid-19 outbreak. Special aircraft were arranged to ferry back those who wished to return to India and the Indian embassy in China opened a temporary office in Wuhan to process the evacuees but to also render assistance and psychological support to students staying back in the city.

The same pattern of support has been extended to Indian citizens in several other parts of the world. In fact, the government undertook independent India’s and the world’s largest repatriation of civilians stranded abroad. Over seven weeks in May and June, about 365,000 Indians were brought back home, mostly by air but also by sea, from over 50 countries across five continents. The repatriation process will continue for a few more weeks.

This exercise required obtaining the support and cooperation of foreign governments and this has been made easier by earlier drills carried out to be prepared for such crises. Such diplomatic démarches have often been conducted through videoconferencing, telephone conversations and, when possible, through personal meetings, while observing social distancing norms.

Since diplomats were already familiar with the use of social media, they have been able to adapt to the new situation quite well. The pandemic has and will make the reliance on digital tools gain greater momentum. However, there is no substitute in diplomacy to the person-to-person engagement and discourse, the building up of relationships which can be drawn upon in times of crises. Therefore, there is hope that as the pandemic recedes, some of that familiar terrain of diplomacy will return.

It must be stressed that diplomacy has become less ritualistic and less formal in practice. There is less observance of strict diplomatic etiquette and protocol than in the past and this trend is likely to continue. The shift towards the use of digital tools for diplomatic engagements may accelerate this trend. An example...
of diplomatic flexibility and innovation was evident in India and Australia signing a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement in a virtual summit in June. However, elements such as observance of polite forms of address, the use of dignified phraseology and appropriate salutations, will and must remain obligatory.

Did Indian diplomats and diplomacy cope with the unprecedented crisis? The answer is yes. In reaching out to Indians in foreign countries, in maintaining regular communications with their foreign counterparts, in supporting the public health efforts at home and in friendly countries through accessing critical supplies and equipment and through sharing what India has with people in other countries, diplomats have rendered valuable service. In this endeavour they have had to break down silos through which most governments operate, enabling a whole-of-government approach.

While the priority for the MEA has been the welfare of Indian citizens abroad, it has not neglected international outreach in dealing with the crisis. This has been difficult because though the pandemic is a classic global and transnational crisis, necessitating a global and collaborative response, there has not been much evidence of a willingness to engage in international cooperation.

This is not surprising because, over the past decade or more, we have witnessed a surge in nationalism and even parochial sentiments across the world. There is diminishing faith in the United Nations and its specialised agencies and growing tensions in relations among major powers. However, India has, within its own modest resources, reached out to offer assistance to its neighbours and other developing countries. Since India is a major producer of pharmaceuticals and some medical devices, it has arranged supplies to other countries and this has been managed by the MEA, which has a well-established Development Administration Partnership division to handle such assistance.

India has also received support for its own efforts from friendly countries. The World Bank sanctioned a sum of US$1 billion to India for Covid-related expenditure. India is also working with several partner countries in research and development of an effective Covid-19 vaccine and since it has a thriving pharmaceutical industry, it has the capacity to arrange large scale production and distribution of the vaccine once it is ready and tested. Indian missions abroad are playing an important role in facilitating such international cooperation.

India is a key partner in the World Health Organization’s (WHO) ‘Solidarity Project’ for developing effective treatment and vaccines for Covid-19. As Chairman of the WHO Executive Committee for the next two years, India will play an important leadership role in meeting the challenge of the pandemic. Indian diplomats have considerable experience in multilateral diplomacy and will make an important contribution in re-energising multilateral institutions and processes to deal with a challenge with global dimensions.

The pandemic is not only a public health challenge but also an economic challenge. The pandemic has disrupted economic activities and being both a demand and supply shock, it poses a complex and unprecedented challenge. In this case too, we need an internationally coordinated policy response but that has been missing so far.

Indian diplomacy has been marshalled to encourage such coordination both on a regional and global platform. For example, the Indian prime minister convened a virtual summit of leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in March to promote cooperation to deal with the pandemic. He took active part in the G20 virtual summit to urge a coordinated economic response to the crisis on the lines of what the grouping had achieved during the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-08. The MEA was very active in preparing the leadership for these summits and in coordinating the follow-up on decisions taken.

However, it must be acknowledged that the international political environment is not conducive to such cooperation. This puts even greater responsibility on (Indian) diplomats and demands on the craft of diplomacy.

«It must be stressed that diplomacy has become less ritualistic and less formal in practice. There is less observance of strict diplomatic etiquette and protocol than in the past and this trend is likely to continue.»
Online Dinner Diplomacy!

June 2020

While online tools facilitated diplomatic engagement under lockdown, this EDA Reflection stresses that it is no substitute for face-to-face interaction. It points out that the real-world is where we have chance encounters with important new contacts. Spontaneous conversation, rather than scheduled video calls, is where we might pick up interesting ideas and important information.

I have hosted many dinners in my time in London. But the one I organised for a group of British politicians last month was a new kind of challenge. Normally I need to think about whether the group around the table will fit together well: can they find a common theme of discussion, will I be helping people make new relationships, are there any rivalries or personal clashes that I need to avoid? The menu, the placement – all these things matter. In the era of COVID, they don’t, or not in the same way.

Because of Covid19, it had to be virtual. My team and I were in uncharted territory. How do you cater when guests are scattered across the country? How would the conversation flow, given Zoom does not allow for the side-chats and parallel discussions that are the normal part of any group meal. Would the whole thing feel like just another video conference call that we all spend our time on these days?

I shouldn’t have worried. If anything the novelty factor of a virtual dinner added to the occasion.

We got round the catering problem by offering to send food to the homes of the Members of Parliament. Most preferred to cook their own, so we donated the amount saved to a brilliant charity that sends meals to health workers dealing with Covid19.

I detected a degree of awkwardness from some at eating in front of an iPad screen. I was also conscious that, for some guests at home with their families, we were cutting into their important evening meal time. Nonetheless, the conversation flowed freely and a good time was had by all. One of the MPs even put up a UAE flag as his background and dressed up in a dinner jacket for the occasion! This certainly helped break the ice.

It also highlighted how people think about what to wear, and which books to have on their shelves, in this new age of Zoom. After some experimentation, I generally go for a suit with no tie. It’s a small thing, but it can feel strange to be too formally attired whilst sitting at home, particularly when most of my interlocutors forgo the traditional neckwear.

Another lesson I took from this was that labelling our video call as a dinner party – despite the slight awkwardness of eating in front of a camera – had the benefit of making it more informal. Virtual meetings tend in my experience to be shorter and more focussed than face-to-face meetings, with less opportunity to get to know people at a personal level. An informal event, over a meal, gives more time for social engagement.

The dinner was just one example of how the Covid19 crisis has forced everyone to change the way they work. Meetings with government officials, politicians and business figures are out. So too is fact-finding travel outside the capital. No longer can my team and I meet in person. That has been particularly tough given how busy the embassy in London has been helping to repatriate our citizens and coordinating the return of British citizens with the UK government.

So all embassies are exploring how technology can help us, and coming up with some interesting solutions. I attended a “virtual iftar” hosted by the US ambassador to London. Very tactfully, Ambassador Johnson made this very brief, so that everyone could go and eat with their families rather than in front of their laptops. But again the symbolism of having a virtual meal made it a more informal occasion, with no need for an agenda or specific objective.

I do however also welcome the focussed, time-efficient nature of virtual meetings of the more formal kind, too. Travel time is eliminated, which in a crowded city like London means I can fit in many more meetings to a day. And on the whole, it is easier getting a virtual meeting with parliamentarians and Ministers than it was getting the old-fashioned, physical kind. But I come at these meetings with a clear agenda and without expecting much chit-chat.
Besides the events that I have organised, I’ve learned from others in which I’ve been a participant.

Our own Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been running a programme called the Online Cultural Marathon Symposium. I was honoured to have participated in the first one of these. It involved having a fascinating live conversation with Roxane Zand, a senior figure at Sotheby’s. Combined with other virtual encounters across the world during a 24-hour period, it formed a day-long expression of UAE empathy and outreach to the cultural institutions that have suffered, much more than diplomacy, from the current crisis.

“One of the members of parliament even put up a UAE flag as his background and dressed up in a dinner jacket for the virtual dinner! This certainly helped break the ice.”

In London the mission was fortunate to have a very active UK-UAE friendship organisation called the Emirates Society, with which the embassy works closely. Under its dynamic new chairman, former Middle East minister the Right Honourable Alistair Burt, the society has already run several very successful online events.

One of these was a fascinating conversation between Alistair and HE Omar Ghobash about faith, tolerance and a whole lot besides. It obviously helped to have literary star like Omar. The technology worked seamlessly. Sitting in his study in Bedfordshire, Alistair was able to moderate the Q&A session, calling on members of the society from all over the world, including famous writers and Members of Parliament.

The success of this webinar highlighted one of the few silver linings of the current emergency. There is a large audience of people stuck at home who are hungry for stimulating online events and content. All the more so if it gives them some escape from the relentless churn of Covid-19 news. And, getting speakers from the UAE (or anywhere else in the world) is easier than ever.

Speaking of content, we are doing a lot more on social media. Every day we aim to have interesting and engaging material on the Twitter accounts of both the embassy and my own personal account. With our usual activities curtailed, we need to make the best possible use of the digital tools available to us.

For all the wonders of technology, it’s a poor substitute to the face-to-face work of traditional diplomacy.

We can gather people for Zoom calls. But I would rather have the chance to properly break bread with politicians. Or to mingle with members of the Emirates Society, before and after one of their events. We are social creatures. The real-world is where we have chance encounters with important new contacts. Spontaneous conversation, rather than scheduled video calls, is where we might pick up interesting ideas and important information.

So, I am hoping for the world to get back to normal as soon as possible. I am itching to complete the next leg of my plan to cycle the length of the British Isles, which is all about expanding our knowledge of the UK outside London, and telling the story of the UAE to as wide a cross-section of the population as possible.

It won’t be a simple return to the status quo, however.

We will continue with many of our new ways of working. We will hold traditional diplomatic events, but will no doubt also stream them for the benefit of those who can’t be present. Our social media work will only increase. And, who knows, perhaps I’ll tune in to a Zoom call live from my bicycle saddle in the Scottish Highlands!

Dinners, however, will be best kept to the dining room.
COVID-19: Diplomacy and the New Normal

August 2020

In this EDA Reflection, the UAE ambassador to Nigeria highlights the vital role that ‘humanitarian diplomacy’ has played during the COVID-19 crisis and how the UAE and Nigeria have maintained their cooperation during the pandemic. He also posits that there will be an increased use of ‘digital diplomacy’ even after the virus has been defeated.

The impact of COVID-19 in our world has been widely felt. There is hardly any aspect of everyday life not disrupted by this ravaging virus. Without much notice, we were ushered into a new, strange order. Individuals, organizations and countries had to sharply adjust to what many believe to be a paradigm shift. The typically predictable routines in our homes and workplaces were replaced by lockdowns, anxiety and uncertainty. But even worse, death tolls were mounting in different parts of the world from a truly devastating virus.

Diplomacy’s age-long role in defining global politics and development is widely known, and yet it is also recognized for being a complex process. Diplomacy as we know and practice it isn’t limited to formal engagements. If anything, diplomacy naturally thrives best when it also involves shaking of hands, exchange of informal remarks over tea breaks and the affective face-to-face conversations on sidewalks and lobbies. Sometimes, that is when the real decisions are made. Regrettably, COVID-19 has put an abrupt stop to such engagements. However, the place of diplomacy, even in a pandemic, remains paramount. Borders may be shut, but we cannot turn our gaze away from those who suffer or need help the most. The abiding principles of our diplomatic relations with other countries are to be trusted friends and supportive allies in times of wars, famine, natural disasters, migration crisis, and definitely in times of viral outbreaks. The diplomatic network we have laboriously forged over the years remains an opportunity to better our conditions.

As health workers put their lives at risk to care for the infected and scientists’ battle against time to find a cure, diplomats also have to seek innovative ways to extend aid, advice and all kinds of support to a truly needy world.

The pandemic has become a true test for human resolve, and how much we can adapt innovatively to problems. More than ever – especially in recent times – there seems to be a unanimity of purpose; one world against one enemy. With over 200 countries affected by the virus, there is a need for world leaders to show courage, resilience, and foster cooperation towards medical and humanitarian assistance as well as to find a vaccine or cure.

COVID-19 has thrust us into an era of ‘humanitarian diplomacy.’ We are charged to seek ways of spreading awareness about this peculiar pandemic, not only to ordinary citizens of the world, but also to policy stakeholders who need to make informed decisions that will save lives.

As a very important strategy for working together in this crucial time, diplomacy is adopting novel measures. Physical borders may be closed, but the world has developed efficient technologies with which we can communicate and assist one another. Thanks to digital platforms, high-level meetings like the G20 ministerial summit, G7 meeting, and other meetings organized by the United Nations, UN Security Council, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Health Organization (WHO) to name a few are all taking place, virtually.

In Nigeria, we have to keep our engagement with local and international partners as well as with the Federal Government agencies going. We have and continue to hold virtual meetings and participate in virtual conferences as well, to collectively seek solutions to common problems.

We have been able to have virtual interactions with various UN agencies and the International Organization for Migration; with discussions focused around strategies for response plans and relief efforts to address safety concerns of vulnerable people, especially Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in the northeast of Nigeria, as COVID-19 continues to spread across the country.

This informed our partnership with UNICEF during this period to donate 2,500 cartons of therapeutic food for malnourished children in northeast Nigeria to help them recover. As acknowledged by UNICEF, ‘during a health
crisis like this, nutrition is even more important than ever, helping to build immunity to disease.

Participating in webinars and virtual meetings has become an integral part of our duties at the embassy. Recently, I was the keynote speaker at the 1st Forbes Nigeria Summit-Demo Day Finale, where I highlighted the continued efforts of the UAE to support and promote entrepreneurship in Nigeria. This initiative was sponsored by Forbes Magazine and the Global Startup Ecosystem, which enables top companies from Nigeria to help build and scale their respective businesses, giving Nigeria an even greater competitive advantage in the global arena.

In my virtual media interviews, I have highlighted the tremendous efforts the UAE has taken to support various countries affected by the Covid-19, and the need to do more. Although the platform for delivering the message has changed, the message remains the same.

Nigeria currently has over 40,000 cases since its first case was recorded on February 27, 2020. This has not stopped diplomatic engagement between both countries as we have continued to work or devise various means to boost our cooperation even more. Through a successful joint diplomatic engagement between various officials of both countries, we have so far repatriated up to 1,280 Nigerians from the UAE via several flights operated by Emirates Airlines.

In collaboration with the Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation and the Zayed Foundation, we were able to distribute Iftar meals to underprivileged communities during Ramadan, and also provided various COVID-19 safety kits to over 5,000 vulnerable households in Nigeria to help prevent the spread of the virus. These included UAE-branded reusable facemasks and hand sanitizers. We also commissioned 6 borehole projects to provide clean and portable drinking water across five states in the country with over 25,000 beneficiaries, while strictly adhering to various COVID-19 prevention and safety guidelines.

The UAE, through its actions, has given credence to the notion that this is the time diplomatic relations are needed the most. The UAE has obviously proven itself a leader in this light. By the end of June, it had provided over 1,000 tons of medical supplies to 70 countries worldwide, reaching 60 million direct beneficiaries from UAE aid.

As aptly stated by His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the UAE, speaking at a virtual meeting hosted by the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Youth Council: “We live in a humanitarian dilemma which has verified the vital importance of scientists, scholars, researchers, doctors, nurses and medical personnel, whom we must wholeheartedly salute on account of the sacrifices they and their families are providing in order to perform their duty in the best way.”

The UAE aid reaches a million medical workers worldwide, affirming the UAE’s commitment to extending a hand of co-operation to the world, regardless of religion, race or ideology. This consolidates the fact that our diplomacy is built on desirable values like inclusion and tolerance. The role the UAE has played in all of this has been very commendable. Of course there is still more to be done, but we can be proud of how we have stuck with our friends, irrespective of the seas and oceans between us. We have employed the strength of diplomacy to reach out, even when it is difficult to do so. This signals the level of our diplomatic culture and leadership.

These and many more actions prove that diplomacy remains a veritable tool for not only enabling global friendship but for fighting a pandemic like COVID-19. In Nigeria, we have put on our thinking caps to enable diplomatic activity to continue as much as possible. As the lockdown eased, we gradually began to have some physical meetings, only where it is the best option, and we make sure to abide by all safety measures including wearing protective gear, engaging in proper social distancing and frequent personal sanitation, among others.

Sometimes, the significance of a crisis are the lessons we can take away from them. While COVID-19 makes physical meetings almost impossible, we have realized that it is necessary to adopt and even retain some of the virtual communication technologies and strategies in a post pandemic world. Virtual meetings may not be most appropriate for negotiations, especially on sensitive issues, but they are very important for discussing routine issues in a way that will save time and costs.

The lesson from this pandemic borders on the need to constantly preempt what may happen without necessarily slipping into pessimism, but with a positive mindset of adapting, improvising and overcoming. Everything, including diplomacy is evolving, and we must have the right tools, as well as mindset for these changes. By the time we announce the last case of this virus, it will also be registered that diplomacy played no small role in that victory.
Reflections on Innovative Adaptations During the Covid–19 Crisis

Global Crisis without a Global Solution

October 2020

Amb. Jorge Dezcallar
Spain’s former ambassador to Morocco, the Vatican and the United States of America

Analysing the pros and cons of digital diplomacy, this EDA Reflection points out that while telecommuting has been the biggest change, online platforms are not well suited to conduct multilateral diplomacy. It stresses that human factor and physical proximity will remain essential for efficient diplomacy.

It is said that a virus is a piece of bad news packed into a protein! Covid–19 has uprooted our lives in many ways and dramatically affected the economy, globalization and geopolitics. And diplomacy too. When Zhou Enlai was serving as the foreign minister of Mao Zedong’s China, he was asked about the 1789 French Revolution. He famously answered that in his opinion it was too early to evaluate its impact and consequences. While the same might be said about the current pandemic, some ideas may be cautiously advanced.

This is a global crisis without a global answer, perhaps the first since 1945 without American leadership and without multilateral coordination because the United Nations Security Council was divided due to the rivalry among the great powers. As a result, scared citizens have resorted to the nation-state for protection and states come out of the crisis reinforced, with higher border fences and bans on immigrants.

At the same time, previous global trends have accelerated: the American withdrawal, the crisis in Europe and the ‘rise of the rest’, headed by China. We live through the final moments of a geopolitical multilateral cycle that began in 1945 – the end of a Western-led world and the dawn of a new multipolar geopolitical arrangement as the economic centre of the planet migrates to the Indo-Pacific basin.

Italian scholar Claudio Magris said the old world is ending and the new is not yet born. It is “the time of monsters,” a moment of uncertainty. Covid–19 has impacted diplomacy, which, in the words of British diplomat Sir Ernest Satow, is “the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states ...or, more briefly still, the conduct of business between states by peaceful means.” Another British diplomat, Harold Nicolson, narrows the focus more precisely on the management of negotiation, its method, the art of the diplomatist, and his or her skill.

All these different traditional aspects or crafts of diplomacy have been affected by the virus. Face–to–face diplomacy has been reduced, and the role of embassies has been reinforced. But then, adaptation has been a key aspect for diplomats since the dawn of diplomacy.

Adaptation

Covid–19 has taken us all by surprise and demanded improvisation. It is not that we did not know that something of this sort might happen because it had been predicted in the past. But when it happened, we downplayed the threat. Realising the magnitude of the problem later, the first task of embassies was to adopt measures at a local level to protect their personnel and move on with the business–as–usual approach as much as possible. Repatriation of non–essential or vulnerable embassy personnel and rotation of the rest, social distancing and hygiene measures, and reorganization of work since in–person meetings were no longer possible, became the norm.

Some countries fared better than others, especially those with partners to rely on, as was the case with the European Union members. They supported each other when needed, from sharing information to joint repatriation of nationals.

Two initial objectives of Spanish diplomacy were: one, repatriate 25,000 Spaniards stranded abroad; and two, Spain as a fervent promoter of multilateralism has consistently defended the need of a global solution to the crisis, and Spanish diplomats worked to boost cooperation in both preparedness and research.

Adaptation is one of the main requirements to be an effective diplomat. Since physical contact was restricted, there was accelerated transition to digital diplomacy. The process played out at four different levels: one, 65% of Spain’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs personnel worked from home using computers; two, e-mails, which are faster, replaced the traditional diplomatic cables (usually sent twice a day); three, use of social media networks increased, particularly WhatsApp, whenever security is not compromised; and four, widespread use of video-conferencing for larger meetings.
These systems facilitated continued monthly meetings of local European Union ambassadors and even frequent meetings between foreign ministers. For example, in less than a week, an online meeting was set up among a dozen ministers from the Pacific, African and Latin American regions to discuss a Spanish proposal to be tabled at the United Nations. This would have been difficult at short notice if traditional systems were employed. Likewise, online platforms were used by ambassadors to communicate with their ministers and other officials at the headquarters.

Telecommuting to comply with social distancing requirements has been the biggest change in diplomacy. This does not mean that diplomats are redundant. On the contrary, Covid-19 has reiterated the importance of resident diplomats. During this crisis, they have carried out important consular tasks like disseminating information to stranded nationals, repatriation, chartering flights when necessary, etc.

But digital online platforms are not well suited to conduct multilateral diplomacy, where face-to-face interaction between and among interlocutors, side conversations and discussion over a cup of coffee provide room for manoeuvre and an eventual compromise. It is not easy to develop a friendly bond with another diplomat who is thousands of kilometres away.

I endorse American scholar Joseph Nye’s push for “working with others” rather than the zero-sum result of “working over others”. In any case, a robust and flexible diplomatic dimension will be necessary in the post-crisis reconstruction effort.

Diplomats are here to stay and that is good news!

The human factor and proximity will remain essential for efficient diplomacy. In certain countries, the physical presence of diplomats was key to obtaining necessary medical supplies amid competition with other countries, all needing the same products to fight the pandemic. This was particularly true for the embassies of Spain in India, involving medicines, and in China, involving masks, respirators, gloves, gowns, glasses, etc. In many cases, the ambassador personally signed the contract.

It is easy to blame civil servants and focus on their inevitable shortcomings during a crisis. But diplomats have played a crucial role in trying to bring together the international community to find a solution, and I believe that the immediate future will demand more investment in diplomacy. Countries have turned inwards during the Covid-19 crisis, globalization has been jolted, disinformation has been rampant, multilateral organizations have suffered, supply chains disrupted, and relations will have to be mended.