Global Health Security:
COVID-19 and Its Impacts

Small States and Pandemic: The UAE Approach

By Deep K Datta Ray

SYNOPSIS

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has capitalised on the COVID-19 situation to reorganise its performance delivery and reinvigorate existing strategies. The key goal is to secure the country's future in the post-globalisation world where new technologies, China-US rivalry, and regional conflicts pose considerable uncertainties and threats to small states.

COMMENTARY

THE FIRST COVID-19 case in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was a visitor from China's Wuhan City in late January 2020. As infections spiked, the government responded with more intensive testing, contact-tracing, and lockdown. Preparations are now underway for the post-COVID-19 normal. The avowed aim of the UAE government is "to facilitate recovery faster than any other country".

Testifying to this determination, the UAE successfully launched the Arab world's first Mars mission on 19 July 2020. The space project is led by a woman and demonstrated the UAE ambition to craft a more equal society spearheading technological innovation. Challenges, however, remain as the UAE has recorded over 340 fatalities from COVID-19. Infections are rising despite one of the best testing regimes in the world. Many foreign workers have left or are leaving. Still, the pandemic has also created opportunities for the leadership to do things differently.

Reorganising for the New Normal

The UAE's ministerial [consultations](#) resolved the new normal requires a rejig of organisation. That led to a bold restructure of ministerial responsibility, announced on 5 July 2020. For example, the new Ministry of Economy has three ministerial appointees handling economy, business and SMEs, and foreign trade respectively.

Sharing of ministerial portfolios is also evident in the other ministries. The new Ministry of Community Development has absorbed the innovative Ministry of Happiness, first established in 2016. Food security has become the responsibility of both the Minister of Food and Water Security as well as the Minister of Environment.

There are two [new ministries](#), for Industry and Advanced Technology, and Energy and Infrastructure, but they continue the longstanding aim of digitalising manufacturing and services. A cyber security chief was also named. The sovereign wealth fund of the UAE will now also manage utilities, public transport, and property development.

Half of all government service centres will eventually close down as digital services are coming on-line in the next two years. Overall, the ministers are given one year to deliver as their performance will be reviewed by the top rulers of the UAE after 12 months.

New Threats, Established Plans

New policies to offset COVID-19's costs have been implemented but a raft of earlier strategies persist, all of which is being implemented by the newly reorganised ministries. It is to be seen if this innovative mix of old and new will be successful in managing the pandemic's multifarious threats and bolster preparations across diverse sectors, for the new normal. The new policies include [US$70](#) billion for loan relief to curb rising inequality and indebtedness. The high cost of utilities and tourism projects has been curtailed or reduced.

Nevertheless, the mainstay of pandemic management are strategies dating back to at least 2015 on [Innovation](#), [Blockchain](#), and Artificial [Intelligence](#). Intending to digitalise the UAE, these strategies have [engendered](#) an anti-fraud [campaign](#) and the National Computer Emergency Response Team to counter post-pandemic [cyber criminality](#).

Pre-pandemic policies also account for the Dubai [Paperless](#) Strategy which drove some digitalisation prior to the onslaught of COVID-19. [Oyoon](#), the existing surveillance system was, however, redeployed for contact tracing. Existing, and long delayed, plans for an energy-diverse future continue.

From Nuclear Power to Food Security

The Barakah nuclear power plant enjoys IAEA [approvals](#) and having been successfully fuelled during the pandemic has now been started up. However, [calls](#) for a regional nuclear framework have fallen flat.

Divergences between supply chains and technology are being negotiated to an extent. An aircraft parts [manufacturer](#) switched to making masks. Various UAE manufacturers intend to continue as before but they expect serious labour constraints going forward.

The wide-body long-range aircraft of the Emirates fleet has been rendered obsolete by the pandemic and there is competition from neighbouring airlines ready for lower passenger loads flying shorter distances.

Existing environmental policies have been enhanced by the pandemic, which has led to the speeding up of land restoration and clean architecture projects. COVID-19 has also renewed food security policies which have had some notable successes. The sustainability of persisting with growing rice in a desert with "extremely high water stress" however remains to be seen.

New Friendships, Rising Tensions, Old Conflicts

COVID-19 has been innovatively harnessed to renewing friendships, but these may be swamped by what the UAE's foreign minister calls a "hostile confrontation" between the US and China. Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines responded warmly to medical aid from the UAE, which also assisted European, African and South American nations.

Aid diplomacy is already realising returns. China received aid but now supports the UAE materially, with research, and is collaborating on a vaccine with considerable commercial potential.

Participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) valued at over US$3.4 billion, should not be politicised, said a top UAE official in May 2020. Weeks later a senior US official "highlight(ed) the costs" of America's partners engaging China. The UAE foreign minister has reiterated that his country's most significant partnership remains with the US.

Yet, China is the UAE's second largest importer, and business-to-business transactions, including technology companies are expanding. China's strengthening relations with Iran will also present complications as the UAE, especially Dubai, has extensive trade and social links with neighbouring Iran which is under the "maximum pressure" sanctions regime imposed by the US.

Astute Diplomacy and Savvy Leadership

Despite militarily withdrawing from Yemen, the UAE remains influential while the conflict lingers. Yemeni retaliation against UAE assets with drone and missile strikes continue to pose a significant challenge.

The conflict in Libya between forces backed by, amongst others, the UAE, seems to be escalating. The blockade of Qatar is set to become a much greater distraction, as the protagonists are taking the case to the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).

Complicating plans for the new normal is the apparent differences in approach among the seven member emirates comprising the UAE to tackle the pandemic. Abu Dhabi, for instance, sealed itself off, but Dubai remained relatively ready to re-engage the world. For the new cabinet and policies to succeed, leadership will be critical.

As a small state in an unstable region, the UAE has managed its vulnerabilities well through its astute diplomacy and savvy worldly leaders. The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted the status quo severely and has thrown up new uncertainties which undermine the UAE economy and society.

In response, leadership guile is navigating the long road back to the familiar on the one hand, and through the transforming order on the other. The key to success is unity of purpose and cohesion of citizenry in the UAE.

Deep K Datta-Ray is a Visiting Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of an RSIS Series.