

CHANGE IS INEVITABLE**Technology transforming the world of diplomacy**

TECHNOLOGY is a wonderful thing. I know, I know — everyone has been saying so, and it's nothing new.

But, sometimes things happen that just reinforce what we seem to take for granted most of the time, like last Friday, for instance.

It had rained throughout the night, so by the time morning dawned, there was a cool, crisp feel to the air. Half an hour after *subuh* prayers, it began to rain again, eventually slowing down to a very light drizzle.

By then, the damage was done. Those of us in Kuala Lumpur know well what happens when it rains during rush hour. The many cars on the road, poor visibility, and impatient drivers mix together to produce a massive congestion.

That Friday saw three highly disruptive accidents en route from house to work, a half-an-hour crawl at the Hartamas interchange and a stalled lorry by the Jalan Ipoh roundabout.

How did I know all this even



**DR
SHAZELINA
ZAINUL
ABIDIN**

before I left the house? Thanks to my favourite Lite.fm traffic rangers and, more reliably, Waze.

An hour later I finally sat down at my workstation, a 'ping' came in — one of the WhatsApp groups at the office wanted us to move our cars because they needed to clear the parking lot for something.

My car was nowhere near where they needed clearing. As I ignored the message, I could hear colleagues grumbling while they waited for the elevator to make their way to move their vehicles.

Then a friend, who was supposed to be in our studios for a

taping on the topic of Sustainable Development Goals, sent a text saying that he was not going to drop by my office after all.

That got my attention. We had been working to get this roundtable dialogue off the ground, and now one of the panellists couldn't make it.

That same congestion that had hampered my drive to work had also caused such a delay that there was no way he could get in on time for the dialogue. As this news sank in, I could literally feel the furrows on my forehead making themselves comfy.

But, all was not lost. In fact, the show went on as planned. The studio team said it was possible to hook up the panellist via Zoom and still have him "in the studio".

I thought that that would have to be a pretty lengthy cable to connect him in Bukit Damansara with our office in Jalan Bellamy — dinosaurs are that way; it sometimes takes them a while to understand the alternate world in which we now operate.

It actually turned out well. We were able to have Chee Yoke Ling and Yin Shao Loong in the studio, while Zakiah Jaafar and Datuk Dr Anis Yusal were "fed" into the studios via online technology. I'm fairly certain the phrasing is wrong, but I am also certain that you get my drift.

More and more of our diplomatic events are a hybrid between physical meetings and an online presence. Five years ago, this would not have been possible, perhaps. The world of diplomacy too is changing, but not beyond recognition.

Many diplomats nowadays make appointments themselves — texting each other instead of writing a note to formally ask for an appointment or getting office staff to do it for them.

The highest form of communication between governments is still done in a particularly old-world writing style, however. But even then, in many instances, it is transmitted via technology first before a runner physically

sends the document.

Some of the veteran diplomats used to condemn the use of "fax diplomacy" in the 1990s, when younger officers did not bother to meet their counterparts face-to-face and instead sent notes and messages via fax to demand things from their host country.

These days, it is acceptable to just send a text message to each other to conduct matters of state, on the proviso that the face-to-face meeting has already taken place.

Change is inevitable. But, the speed of that change in the past five years alone has been dizzying. The way diplomacy works has changed so much and yet nearly not at all.

As in all fields, the resistance to change has been equally strong — much like the stretching of a rubber band. And one of these days that band will lose its elasticity.

The writer is a foreign service officer, with views on international affairs