
Introduction

Modern diplomacy and diplomatic services grew out of the development of the nation state, particularly during the latter half of the nineteenth century. They were based on a stable sovereign state with a generally agreed national identity. Their fundamental role was to act as the channel of communication between governments. The substance of their communication was foreign policy, defined as the relations between states. This generally ignored the nature of the states and issues of domestic policy. Diplomats as a breed were encouraged to disdain politics, and treat foreign policy as a hermetically sealed world to be left to the professionals (i.e. them).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century all of these assumptions have been, or are being, broken down. And yet it is remarkable how little changed are the structures of the foreign-policy machines and diplomatic services. Although there are differences of emphasis or style, it is equally remarkable how these structures are replicated by different countries, regardless of wealth or ideology.

Even while the assumptions held, traditional diplomacy had a poor record in delivering policy objectives. Through most of the post-war period, this failure was, at least partially, hidden by the stability of the Cold War. But examples include US relations with the Third World and

Britain's relations with Europe and everybody in the Middle East. Diplomats are adept at finding others to blame for their failures: interfering politicians, unreasonable behaviour by other countries, the general unpredictability of international affairs. But the consistency of failure suggests underlying flaws in the policy-making machines and the functioning of diplomatic services.

Some of these flaws are specific to individual diplomatic services, and reflect different approaches to policy-making machines. For example, the British insistence on political neutrality among its diplomats and the marginalization of political advisors overburdens ministers with policy decisions. The under-coordinated fragmentation of power in the US system can lead to different departments pursuing rival, and occasionally contradictory, policies (by contrast, the British consensual approach to policy coordination stifles policy debate). The French pursuit of highly politicized objectives, without coordination with allies, has frequently got them in trouble. But other problems are common to most, if not all, policy machines.

A key flaw is the so-called realistic approach to international relations. This rejects ethical elements in foreign policy, as well as disregarding the nature of the regimes of other countries. According to this theory, which has dominated traditional diplomacy, diplomats should pursue the short-term interests of their country, without regard to other factors. Several consequences flow from this approach. Firstly, international affairs is a chaotic activity, which must be managed in the best way possible. Time-scales for diplomatic thinking are inevitably short-term. Foreign-policy machines are incapable of setting longer-term objectives and then securing them. Analysis is also short-term (a famously radical British planning paper in 1989 foresaw the outside possibility of German reunification within forty years). But short-term thinking produces

only short-term benefits. The appeasement policy of the 1930s should be enough to condemn this entire approach.

The end of the Cold War has brought a series of new challenges: the collapse of communism, the disintegration of some states and the emergence of rogue states no longer under the control of superpower patrons. Traditional diplomacy has been found severely wanting in tackling these challenges. Its traditional tools of negotiation, international conferences, trade embargos and limited military action have failed miserably in Yugoslavia, Africa and the Middle East. As the debate grows in the US over 'who lost Russia', a significant part of the blame must lie with diplomats. Where civic society, the essential precursor to stable democratic states, has been established successfully (e.g. in much of eastern Europe), the external credit goes to NGOs, political parties and foundations such as Soros.

But it is not simply that the geopolitical world has got more complicated with the fall of the Soviet Union. The assumptions on which traditional diplomacy was based have been severely undermined in recent years. This process will accelerate. The way in which we handle international relations needs to change to reflect a new world.

Globalization is a word which creates as much confusion as clarity. But it is undeniable that in the modern, interconnected world our problems have become global. Economy, trade, finance, human rights, the environment and organized crime are all issues that we now have to deal with at the international level. While some of these issues have always featured in international relations (e.g. terms of trade), this represents a major intrusion into the diplomatic world of domestic politics and political agendas.

The context of international relations has been revolutionized by technology. The ease of modern air travel

means that government ministers no longer have to rely on ambassadors to represent them abroad. The host of international summits, conferences and bilateral visits means that ministers will often know their opposite numbers far better than any diplomat can. The same is true of business executives, whose dependence on embassies for advice or to arrange meetings has accordingly diminished.

Mass tourist travel has given the general public a greater knowledge of, and interest in, foreign countries. A factor in British public reaction to the civil war in Yugoslavia was that many had taken their holidays there. When this is combined with the information on international affairs now relayed in real time by the electronic media and the internet, domestic public opinion has firmly entered foreign-policy calculations. While diplomats bemoan this 'CNN effect', it has strengthened the importance of ethical considerations about the nature of regimes, the absence of which was one of the structural flaws of traditional diplomacy.

Modern communications also allow governments direct access to information without needing to rely on embassies. The speed of the electronic media often leaves embassies playing catch-up in trying to inform their governments. The internet opens up even further opportunities. An official in a capital with a terminal not only has access to a wide range of information, but can create virtual networks of contacts extending far wider than a diplomat on the ground relying on face-to-face contact. While this may not overtake altogether the value of personal relationships, it does mean that diplomats must now justify their existence (and costs) far more in terms of value added. They will not always be able to do so.

Beyond the basic internet, other technological developments offer, or will shortly offer, governments and diplomats a whole range of new remote sensing and complex

modelling techniques. The latter, for example fuzzy cognitive maps and fuzzy neural networks, are already well developed, but barely used by foreign-policy professionals.

Even more profound are the social and political changes which have accompanied the technological revolution. Although obituaries for the nation state may be premature, its changing nature, and the way in which it relates to the world, further undermine the assumptions of traditional diplomacy. International relations now operate at a variety of different levels, and no longer through the single portal of bilateral (or even multilateral) embassies.

At the supra-national level, organizations such as the UN, the WTO, NATO or the EU either limit the freedom of action of their members or take on their defence and foreign-policy roles. The world's remaining superpower, the US, is not immune. Despite the UN's weak performance in enforcing international law, US policy makers feel constrained to at least maintain the appearance of acting with its authority. In NATO the US must carry its allies with it, and on occasion bow to their requirements. Most striking is the WTO, which was essentially a US creation, but to whose rules the US now finds itself subject like any other country.

However, the impact is even greater on small or medium-size powers, no longer able to operate on their own at the international level. The most striking example are the member states of the EU. As the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) develops, the need for coordination in Brussels and outside the EU will increasingly call into question the sense of maintaining separate political sections in third countries. Once EU citizens' rights are established, it will be more effective to protect those rights abroad through the EU, rather than individual member states' consulates. Within the EU, policy coordination and lobbying is focused in Brussels. Embassies are

increasingly concerned with domestic rather than traditional foreign-policy issues. But the trend will be for these issues too to be dealt with in Brussels or by direct communication between ministries, as already happens with most CFSP work.

At the sub-national level, regional and city governments are becoming key nodal points in the global network. Their relations frequently bypass national embassies, either through direct networking or local representative offices. Unencumbered by the burden of tradition, they are more adept at using modern technology and methods in promoting their interests. Where embassies do remain involved, they can find themselves promoting sub-national governments whose politics and culture are radically different to, and sometimes in conflict with, those of the national governments they represent.

The internet and the network society offer the prospect of this process extending even lower. Individual citizens can now network across borders, united by themes rather than nationality. The campaigns of Greenpeace and other NGOs, the anti-globalization protests and even the Zapatistas in Chiapas show how effective this networking can be. In so far as these networks can influence and constrain the action of governments at all levels, they become an important element in international relations, but one to which traditional diplomacy is irrelevant.

These changes also impact on 'cultural' or 'public' diplomacy. Traditionally diplomatic services did not treat the promotion of cultural or political values as one of their core functions, leaving it to institutions like USIS, the Goethe Institute, the British Council or the BBC World Service. More recently they have realized that dealing only with governments is not enough and, particularly in Western democracies, influence has to be exerted on the political debate to create the intellectual climate in which

specific policy initiatives can flourish. Nor is this simply a question of promoting government policy. To be effective, such activities need to promote the whole cultural nexus of values and ideas out of which government policy grows. But doing so at national level makes decreasing sense. At one level, a set of core values (e.g. democracy, human rights, the importance of civic society) are common to most Western or European countries. If national embassies or cultural bodies compete with each other in promoting them, they risk undermining the impact in third countries. At another level, the fragmentation of the political and cultural nation described above makes it harder to identify the values that are 'national'. Diplomats risk promoting the values of a specific region, class or political party as 'national' values, or promoting values that are out of date. Where national consensus is breaking down, and where the strength of Western societies may lie in their plurality of values and ideas, NGOs, universities and groups in civil society, using the networking opportunities of the new technology, may prove more effective than government bodies.

Multinational corporations are also players in the new diplomatic world. Their economic strength, combined with international networks which frequently outstrip (and outperform) those of traditional diplomatic services, make them more influential than many states. Their interventions are no longer limited to narrowly defined commercial interests. The more forward-thinking are already carving out a role in the design of any future global governance.

Diplomats have repeatedly been pressed to take commercial promotion more seriously. Although they claim to do so, in many cases their performance has been less than convincing. But in the commercial world, traditional diplomacy is confronted with changes corresponding to

those in the political world. At the multinational level, many firms shun overt national identification. Cross-border mergers and alliances often make it difficult to identify which embassy should be promoting a given company. In any event, at this level, many companies have better access, both to information and decision makers, than embassies. Frequently they are mistrustful of sharing the commercially sensitive information that would allow diplomats to join in the game (an ironic mirror of most diplomats' own obsession with security).

Some diplomatic services (e.g. the British) have decided to focus on promotion of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), devoting little time or resources to the corporate sector. Disengagement from the corporate sector can have downsides, in particular the loss of intelligence about overseas corporate decisions that can be crucial to the home economy (e.g. the British diplomatic service's failure to foresee BMW's decision to pull out of Rover). But even the better SMEs are increasingly using the internet and private-sector companies to bypass embassies as sources of market information and export promotion skills. This is not surprising, since most diplomats lack direct commercial experience, and have no direct accountability to the companies they are trying to promote. The danger of this approach is that increasingly diplomats end up promoting those weaker SMEs with limited export potential, and decreasing cost-effectiveness for the taxpayer. In this context, a better model may be the German approach, whereby export promotion and services are focused in chambers of commerce, financed by and responsible to chambers of commerce within Germany.

The lack of qualified or experienced professionals apparent in commercial work applies to all aspects of diplomatic work. The traditional model of generalist career diplomats, who in principle can operate in any area of work, is

no longer viable. Modern international relations require specialists, whether in the specifics of a multinational organization, corporate finance, international trade negotiations or environment. Nor will theoretical knowledge always be enough. Diplomatic services are already making increasing use of specialists from other government departments. In the future this will need to be extended more to academia, the business world, the media and politics. It is unlikely that the lifelong diplomatic career, on which the traditional diplomatic service is based, will survive this influx of contract specialists.

What is true of individuals may prove true of diplomatic services themselves. Most diplomatic services have responded to the changing international context by burying their heads in the sand. Where politicians have insisted on change, these have been at the margins, and concerted efforts have been made to preserve core structures, with their associated prestige and privileges. Professional diplomats have fought hard to retain control over foreign policy. But such struggles look increasingly doomed. Within the US, the State Department has never been able to maintain a monopoly over foreign policy. The Department of Trade has recently demonstrated its muscle in negotiations with China and the EU. Within the EU, where foreign ministries have until recently held their own, there are calls for separate ministries for Europe, with their ministers based in Brussels. Foreign ministries would be consigned to relations outside the EU, and even then would be curtailed by CFSP and the increasing involvement of the European Commission in trade, environment and other international issues. Within Britain, the Foreign Office is already getting a foretaste of this, with its EU departments being reduced to shadowing the more powerful European Secretariat of the Cabinet Office. Yet, despite these changes, the networks of embas-

sies are being maintained abroad with virtually the same internal structures as fifty (or even 100) years ago.

The breaking up of the monopoly of foreign ministries over foreign policy offers the opportunity for a fresh look at the way we handle international relations, with new bodies and institutions designed for the global networks in which we live. This is unlikely to replicate the 'one size fits all' model of the traditional diplomatic service. The key will be to identify the functions needed to be performed, and then to define at which level (supra-national, national, sub-national or non-governmental). Foreign-policy-making machines need to be reformed to reflect the fragmentation of traditional diplomacy, and to be more effective in setting objectives and strategies to achieve them. To do this they will need to be more political, and less exclusive. As the barriers between domestic and foreign policy break down, together with the monopoly of government over international relations, they will increasingly be involved in coordinating rather than dictating. Such bodies will be multi-layered, reflecting the different levels at which policy is decided and implemented. Unified national embassies abroad may disappear, to be replaced by representative offices of different political levels carrying out specific functions. Governments may give up some functions altogether, e.g. export promotion and consular services, delegating them to private-sector organizations.

As the global network society develops, the fragmentation of traditional diplomacy is likely to continue. No country, however powerful, will be immune. In a complex international order, we need more subtle and variegated tools to survive.

This may not be comfortable for many diplomats. They are used to the security of a life in 'the service', and to seeing themselves as a cut above other public servants.

Radical change will have costs, for example, a loss of the *esprit de corps* that enables many diplomats to work in appalling personal conditions. But diplomats cannot be, nor should be, immune to the wider changes sweeping through the rest of society. Their collective record of serving the interests of those who pay them, or adapting to a changing world, is not sufficient to justify special treatment.