

# Exchanges among Foreign Ministries on Diplomacy Methods: Some Thoughts

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## ABSTRACT

In diplomatic studies, comparison of foreign ministries and their methods is a niche activity, which does not draw or attract academic scholars. Few books have been published in this field. Yet, for foreign ministries, large and small, mutual learning is useful. The fact that foreign ministries are typically closed institutions also complicate study and discussion. Yet, what are the trends in the working of foreign ministries that call for attention? Some thoughts are offered, covering comparable practices in bilateral, regional and multilateral diplomacy, and harvesting embedded knowledge, as a subset of knowledge management, and also human resource management.

*Keywords:* Foreign ministries, comparative studies, training, knowledge management, human resources

## THE CURRENT SCENE

Within diplomatic studies, few specialists look at the diplomacy process in comparative terms, examining the functioning of foreign ministries and their professional diplomatic services. Some scholars have carried out pioneering work in this field, including Zara Steiner, Brian Hocking and Justin Robertson. The published works available are just about ten or so, mainly edited texts composed of essays by several authors. My book *Asian Diplomacy* (2007), which examined the working of the foreign ministries of China, Japan, Singapore, Thailand and India, was a modest effort in this direction, and is perhaps the only single author comparative work of this nature.

At present, regular information exchange and mutual learning among foreign ministries takes place in the EU (via periodic meetings of heads of MFA administration units), and within an informal cluster of Western foreign ministries, which began to meet around 2000, an initiative that originally came from Canada (in the shape of annual meetings at the level of heads of personnel or human resources). A few pairs of foreign ministries that enjoy particularly close ties also hold closed-door discussions on professional issues; one example is Austria and Switzerland. Some Western and developing countries' foreign ministries have carried out benchmarking actions, examining the working of several carefully selected foreign counterparts, but such studies are expensive to implement and the results are never published.

A few scholars have written about the manner in which different countries tackle multilateral issues, at the UN and elsewhere. In comparative studies, this is a kind of low-hanging fruit, because the positions that countries take, be it on disarmament or issues in the international economic dialogue, say at WTO or on climate change, is visible through their official statements and in the negotiations that are open and reported upon at international conferences. This can be documented in rigorous fashion. Beyond such published conference accounts, there exist the undocumented activities, behind the scene actions that reveal the way countries actually negotiate in working committees, caucuses and drafting groups. That kind of information is much more revealing than published data but it is available principally to the insiders, especially delegates taking part in these events. It is hard to pinpoint and reference such material with academic rigour, except possibly many years after the event, when the participants in such events publish their memoirs and oral history records.

Then there are occasional articles that offer wide-based, detailed comparison of the diplomacy process (e.g. Rana, 'Diplomacy Systems and Processes: Comparing India and China', *China Report*, Issue 50/4, October 2014). One academic said in a private comment that studies of this nature are not of much interest to scholars, as they do not produce theoretical insight. Perhaps but for diplomacy practitioners, and for those that examine the working of the institutions that engage in foreign affairs, it is the way countries deal with one another bilaterally, and at regional and global instances, is of real interest. One serious problem that all those carrying out comparative studies confront is paucity of published information, which compels them to rely on interviews and their own personal assessments and impressions.

However such studies are accomplished, for diplomacy professionals, such material is highly relevant to their work, especially the negotiation practices and the cultural traits of countries. In sum, raw material for comparative studies is difficult to locate and is seldom available in the formats preferred by academic scholars. There also exists another resource. Documentary evidence can sometimes be located through rigorous search of oral history records, but outside of the US and the UK, very few collections of such data exist, as noted below. There is similar paucity of published memoirs, outside of a few countries; China is one new source for such practitioner narratives, but these are available only in Chinese.

Around 2004-05, Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade carried out a benchmarking exercise, with intensive questionnaire-based discussion at several foreign ministries. They promised to share the results of their survey with the participating countries, but what was delivered to them was an anodyne distillation of the collective result, not information on specific ministries. More recently, Kenya and Uganda have also carried out such comparison with foreign counterparts, and these results too are not shared with others. Is it too difficult to think of a regional organisation-driven survey, and at a minimum, sharing of results among member-states?

The only regular, open international platform for discussion among foreign ministries is the International Forum on Diplomatic Training (IFDT), established in 1972; its two co-chairs are the Director of the Diplomatic Academy, Vienna and the Director of the Edmund Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, Washington DC.<sup>1</sup> It holds annual meetings, attended by most of the 70 training institutions that are members, with gradual accretion in its coverage and range of issues discussed. After attending some four IFDT meetings in the past 15 years, I have an impression that this forum could be more active in its discussion of shared challenges and experiences.

Training institutions also meet in regional groups. In 2006, I had the privilege of joining an annual meeting of heads of 'ASEAN Plus Three' training agencies held in Kuala Lumpur, as an invited expert. The discussion covered several issues in depth. I suggested to that group that they could easily extend coverage to include what at that point were three more countries of the slightly larger 'East Asia Summit', meaning Australia, India and New Zealand. That has

not happened. I am not sure if a similar group of African training academies meet regularly, but the practice is followed in Europe and Latin America.

#### POTENTIAL AREAS FOR EXPANDED COOPERATION

With a wider range of activity sectors to choose from, let us focus on four diplomacy themes that are especially amenable to dialogue among foreign ministries: the evolving forms of representation, regional diplomacy, training, and knowledge harvesting. We also address management of human resources, a major activity that does not always get the attention it deserves.

**Representation forms:** Malta and Switzerland have pioneered ‘non-resident’ representation. Slowly, this method of using non-resident ambassadors, i.e. envoys that live in the home country and travel as needed to the assignment country, is gaining traction. Some Scandinavian states and others are now experimenting with this, for representation in countries where full-time resident envoys are not viable for reason of cost, or because of local security issues, or need. Clearly, the proponents of this method find it superior to that of traditional form of ‘concurrent accreditation’, where one ambassador also wears a second hat as envoy to one or more countries. (I wonder if any foreign ministry has studied the cost-effectiveness of this latter practice; is it efficient in terms of value delivered at the concurrent charge, and the cost in terms of distraction caused at the place of primary responsibility? For an embassy actively engaged in its bilateral tasks, this is seldom worth the cost and distraction.)

The other low-cost and ‘minimal representation’ method is the use of honorary consuls. They give the designating country a limited presence, and a means for local help, say when its businessmen or others visit that jurisdiction. We note an uptick in its usage, and in the extension of subsidiary practices like holding periodic conference of such consuls, to inform and motivate them to perform better. Countries that are probably daunted from appointing more such ‘non-state representatives’ would especially benefit from experience-sharing that covers the methods used to select such appointees, which is a significant point of anxiety for many small countries that wonder if they can trust those that seek to be designated as honorary consuls in far-flung locations. The activities of agents that market such appointments (visible via advertisements in international journals) also bring the process into disrepute. But handled well, such appointments are of much value.

Another variation on diplomatic representation surfaced recently, visible in a report published in The Hague, *Modernizing Dutch Diplomacy: Progress Report; Final Report, 2015*.<sup>2</sup> The Netherlands seems to have decided to embark on an experiment, with a 'hub-and-spoke' method, under which senior ambassadors might act as regional supervisors, in relation to neighbouring missions headed by those junior to them. It is an old idea that has been considered by a few countries in the past; some may question it in terms of practicality. Again, experience-sharing seems worthwhile.

**Regional diplomacy:** A common requirement in many countries is to mobilize actions across different branches of the government, also reaching out to non-state actors, in support of activities to which member-countries commit themselves at regional instances. Too often, such actions are viewed as foreign ministry issues, with little ownership from the other domestic official and non-official actors. Small countries have much to gain from the experience of those from their own region, and others, that are the effective practitioners of regional cooperation.

Most countries now accept that developing one's own think tanks and research institutes that work on international affairs has many advantages, notably in providing inputs into the foreign policy process, and being able to engage foreign country counterpart institutions. ASEAN has achieved significant result in developing a network of international affairs institutes in member countries that initially did not possess such agencies. This has relevance in small countries in other regions where such non-state actors are scarce on the ground.

In the field, regional clusters of countries increasingly work together through their embassies that carry out joint activities in the assignment country. These embassies exchange information through lunch and dinner gatherings, and jointly visit different parts of the countries where they are located, for economic, culture, tourism and other promotional outreach. Here too, mutual learning is possible in terms of the methods employed. Through this, embassies can improve local impact, and also engage in public diplomacy that would be of benefit to individual countries and to the region as a whole.

**Training:** About fifteen years back, Canada was an early mover in developing distance learning at its Foreign Service Institute, experimenting with self-paced modules that furnished basic information in different activity areas, including bilateral, multilateral and consular affairs. The British FCO's Diplomacy Academy established in early 2015 has carried this forward with an innovative approach. Neatly dividing training into three levels; foundation, practitioner and expert, it says: 'There will be relatively little use of face-to-face classroom teaching at the Academy. Instead, instruction in the eight modules will employ a blend of techniques, including e-learning. It will also introduce to a wider FCO audience the idea of learning groups...The modules are designed so that individuals can work through them alone... We are putting the responsibility on individuals to make sure that they get involved in a group and work through the curriculum with fellow members'.<sup>3</sup> In what may be a first, this Academy has also targeted locally employed staff overseas as a key user, which acknowledges their rising importance as contributors to diplomatic activities. Mexico's 'Instituto Matías Romero' is another entity that blends traditional and e-learning methods.

Might these trends, especially UK's approach that shifts to training users the responsibility for steering their own skill acquisition, impact on the many institutions that rely on traditional methods? Potentially, this is the most exciting new approach, getting away from cookie cutter courses, and treating the individual as the best judge of the skills that are needed, viewed against elevated awareness of what is available, via the academy's resource offering and what is on offer on the internet; all that is needed is guidance on how to go about accessing this. Similar fresh approaches are also emerging among business enterprises. In essence they treat the individual as a good judge of own needs, capable of the needed motivation to gain new competencies, often working with others engaged in similar learning.

**Knowledge management:** In this wide field, let me focus on a single theme. The US pioneered the method of recording 'oral histories' of diplomats that end their career and feel free to speak of their experiences in voice recorded interviews, which are transcribed as texts, posted on a website. This serves multiple objectives: it is an act of transparency, giving public access to information on the manner in which the country's foreign policy is delivered and executed; it provides researchers and scholars with first-hand material

for study and collation; it indirectly encourages young citizens to consider the diplomatic service as a career option, especially important in the context that the general public has but a vague, superficial understanding of the nature of foreign ministry work; and it also gives officials that end their career at different levels an opportunity to tell their story in a format that is easier than writing a full memoir. Established in 1986, through an initiative by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST), a non-profit independent entity, some 1700 of these US records are available in digital format at the Library of Congress.<sup>4</sup> The British FCO has followed this method commencing in 1995, and its collection of about 200 records is at the Churchill Archives, Cambridge.<sup>5</sup> The latter are indexed, but unlike the US records, they are not digitally searchable through keywords. The US National Security Archive also holds some 20 plus records pertaining to interviews conducted with Japanese and US diplomats, available in both English and Japanese versions.<sup>6</sup> India has embarked on an oral history project since 2010, but has made slow headway in placing these online; just two were online in November 2015, but several more should be out shortly, and another 15 are in the pipeline.<sup>7</sup>

Such oral history projects are not a monopoly of large countries; any country can marshal the relatively modest resources that such a project requires, mainly for the transcription of the voice recordings to text, edited by both professionals and the interview subject. One may also note an alternative method used by the Kenya Foreign Service Institute, through organising a conference in September 2009 on its 'Early Diplomacy, 1963-93', inviting all its surviving pioneer diplomats. This Institute captured the full proceedings of this two-day event in a published record that was available on its website, titled 'Reminiscences on Kenya's Early Diplomacy: 1963-1993: Symposium on Kenya's Early Diplomacy'. It was produced through cooperation with its association of retired ambassadors, and produced an authentic narrative of rare quality. That also is worthy of emulation.

## HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Foreign ministries are essentially collections of professionals that are trained and work in a specialised field, mostly spending an entire working career at the ministry and at embassies and consulates located abroad. Managing them, from a human resource (HR) perspective is a vital task. This entails, besides training: the organisation of their work career; rotation between different

assignments ‘in the field’ and ‘at Headquarters’; placement for short periods on work assignments outside the diplomatic system, and parallel intake of outside officials to work in the diplomatic system; a method for assessing performance (usually through annual reports), accompanied by steps to encourage better performance; and a system to promote officials to higher ranks. While all these are comparable with HR methods in other organisations, given that public services increasingly borrow techniques from the business and corporate sector, diplomatic services have one special feature: typically half or more of their staff are at embassy assignments abroad. These overseas offices are typically small outposts (often consisting of just six or eight home-based officials); they operate in foreign environments that vary greatly, in comfort, security and facilities, to say nothing of social amenities. All these factors produce challenges that have no parallel with other branches of public services, but are shared in common with most other diplomatic services. It is a wonder that foreign ministries do not do more to reach out to one another to share these experiences and learn from one another.

At present, the only regular forum for HR experts to meet, mentioned above, brings together about 15 Western countries. Even ASEAN and CARICOM, two regional organisations that have been ahead of the curve in bringing member-states together on a host of subjects, have not so far turned attention to this small niche, for mutual learning on HR practices.

## RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Finally, let us consider one of the core international affairs challenges that different countries face, in their own specific ways rooted in their geopolitical situation. I refer to the perennial question of how to handle fraught relationships, in ways that protect one’s own vital interests, but also try to identify shared interests among contending states. In East Asia, a resurgent China rubs against Japan, with positions that are rooted in a blend of *realpolitik*, historical memory and contemporary challenges. That volatile region is home to another powerful state actor, the Republic of Korea, which also has its complex ties with its two great neighbours. In recent years, we have witnessed among these three countries, an established dialogue, and a new regional entity, a ‘Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat’ installed in Seoul in 2011, following the first 2008 summit between the leaders of these countries. It offers a model that has validity for other regions that face comparable schism.



In a different way, ASEAN is a long-standing exemplar. The 'ASEAN Way' and its attitude of mutual accommodation among neighbours, implicit in the notion of 'comfort zones' that countries ought to consider and respect, has wide relevance. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), as a regional plus dialogue mechanism among states, and CSCAP as a track two process for wider exchanges among the think tanks of some 20 countries are familiar to the global community. Their structures and methods could be relevant to other parts of the world.

In 2006, DiploFoundation held a two-day conference in Geneva at which foreign ministries were invited to discuss themes related to the practice of diplomacy, including the ways in which they had used the internet in their work. As conference hosts, we were gratified that representatives of 30 foreign ministries attended; the papers presented there are available in a book that emerged a year later.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, a second conference was held in Bangkok, hosted by the Thailand Foreign Ministry, with active participation by Diplo, a larger event with a different cluster of 30 plus foreign ministries represented. Diplo has also organised smaller conferences, mainly in Malta, on narrow focus themes that have included: Information Technology and Diplomacy (1997); Modern Diplomacy (1998); Knowledge and Diplomacy (1999 and 2000); Language and Diplomacy (2001); Web-Management in Diplomacy (2001 and 2002); Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy (2003); Organisational and Professional Cultures and Diplomacy (2004); Multistakeholder Diplomacy (2005); and Internet Governance: The Way Forward (2006).<sup>9</sup> This has been a stretch for a small, underfunded non-profit NGO. There remains a persisting need for some agency to take the lead in organising more events of this nature, drawing even wider participation, especially from the developing world that needs exposure to new trends.

## A WAY FORWARD

By their nature, foreign ministries are sensitive silos, seldom open to public scrutiny. But practices evolve. The UK's FCO brings in officials from NGOs and private enterprises to work alongside its staff, and sends out British diplomats on similar secondment. In the past five years, India's Ministry of External Affairs has brought in officials from other ministries and the open market, to work on contract assignments in several of its units, most notably the Development Partnership Administration created three years back to handle

Indian outbound aid activities. More importantly, a reinvigorated 'Policy Planning and Research Division' in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is in the process of hiring a fresh crop of perhaps a dozen researchers that will for the first time – since the 1950s, but now in an entirely altered context – work in this and other MEA units. Some may even find assignments in embassies, which would borrow a leaf from the Chinese practice of installing in all major embassies at least one academic researcher for a three-year term. Such field exposure also becomes one method of improving understanding between academics and practitioners.

NAFTA now swaps officials between its three members – Canada, Mexico and the US, to work in each other's foreign ministries, which is a significant leap across working cultures, especially for a country such as Mexico, which straddles the divide between rich states and the developing world. Austria and Switzerland have long practised such personnel exchanges as part of their sharing arrangements as Europe's fellow-neutrals. EU members have taken this to the next level by exchanging even officials among their embassies located in major capitals; these embassies also write joint reports on political issues. But among developing countries of the Global South, even in regions where extensive cooperation has taken root, it may take a while for foreign ministries to even begin to consider such personnel swaps.

In informal discussions in the past ten years, at the headquarters of a well-known regional organisation, and at two foreign ministries that are members of another significant regional entity, I made soundings on the utility of sharing experiences in foreign ministry management, but found no takers. Old habits of aloofness die hard, but change could emerge, perhaps driven by a desire to understand how others function, and a need to stretch resources for maximum value at times when all public service budgets are under pressure.

It is possible that practice-oriented diplomatic studies will gain traction in the years ahead. Witness the recent appointment of several professors in the US to chairs that for the first time include in their title words such as 'practice of diplomacy' and 'practice of international affairs'. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some study courses now focus on the practical end of diplomacy. One hopes this may contribute to narrowing that long-persisting gulf between working diplomats and academic theorists, though for now a few swallows on the horizon do not make summer.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See: <http://forum.diplomacy.edu/>

<sup>2</sup>This 2015 document is available on the website of the Dutch Foreign Ministry (not to be confused with the 'Interim Report' published in 2013).

<sup>3</sup>Jon Davies, Director of the British Diplomatic Academy, in an article published in *Foreign Service Journal*, July/August 2015

<sup>4</sup>See: <http://www.loc.gov/collection/foreign-affairs-oral-history/about-this-collection/>

<sup>5</sup>See: <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/bdohp/>

<sup>6</sup>See: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/japan/ohpage.htm>

<sup>7</sup>I have played a small role on this project in the conception, and have conducted four interviews. See: <http://www.icwa.in/oralhistory.html>

<sup>8</sup>See: Kishan S Rana and Jovan Kurbalija, eds. *Foreign Ministries: Managing Diplomatic Networks and Delivering Value*, (DiploFoundation, Malta and Geneva, 2007).

<sup>9</sup>Reports on most of these are at: <http://www.diplomacy.edu/resources/books>