

DIPLOMATIC CULTURE AND ITS DOMESTIC CONTEXT*Kishan S. Rana*

Is there a specific, distinctive diplomatic culture? Given the fact that the conduct of diplomacy is regulated by international law and by custom, and since the structures through which states conduct their external relations, both bilateral and multilateral, are standardised, it is fair to say that both the institutions and the process form a pattern of their own, unique to this profession. The professional diplomatist actors on the international stage, and their institutions, display certain shared characteristics. Empirical evidence shows that at different times in history, diplomatic culture has varied, adapting itself to circumstance and needs. We are concerned here with the current scene, not the history or the evolution of this professional culture.

Characteristics

What are the current circumstances that shape this culture? The following elements are relevant.

- A. The number of sovereign state actors on the international stage has grown dramatically. Member-states of the UN number 192, in contrast to the 50 founder-states that signed the San Francisco Treaty of 1945. At that time, national individuality was even suppressed by non-Western diplomats. Today we celebrate diversity, in diplomatic attire, working languages, and styles of conduct, in contrast to the recent past. The working diplomats one encounters, in bilateral, regional and global settings are much more uninhibited and prone to express their individuality. One incidental effect is that cross-culture studies for diplomats are more important than in the past.
- B. At the same time, shared values lie beneath the surface. Professional and personal integrity and an ability to win trust from interlocutors are foremost, regardless of a diplomat's country of origin. Surface diversity and a measure of underlying homogeneity is one way of describing the situation. If we are candid, we might acknowledge that some countries of the global South have tended to be less serious or professionally committed to their work, especially in bilateral diplomacy, in places of medium or relatively

low interest to the home country. Some observers might assert that such situations are under evolution and one should not generalise excessively.

- C. The entry of multiple players in international affairs has led to a culture that perforce has to be more open and accessible than before. The activities and relatively autonomous stature of these state and “private” or civil society stakeholders in the diplomatic process has forced relearning of skills for the professional diplomats. In order to distinguish the latter from the “para-diplomats,” one is tempted to go back to the old term “diplomatist” to describe the full-time professionals; we should also acknowledge that we have in view mainly the professional “diplomatists.”
- D. Regional diplomacy, be it in the shape of the unification process of the European Union or the intensifying dialogue within the Organization of American States or the Association of South East Asian Countries, is producing multiple encounters among diplomats of different regions, as well as, perhaps, some degree of mutual emulation and a kind of “regional” diplomatic style, or at the very least, cross-influences.
- E. In describing diplomatic culture, we need to be aware of a normative element in our narration. We tend to describe an ideal that may exist but imperfectly, in the world of practicing diplomats.

What are the contours of a shared, generalised diplomatic culture? We may broadly distinguish between the culture of individuals and institutional culture. Both are shaped by national characteristics, but beyond their distinctiveness are some common elements typical of both the people and the structures of foreign ministries and their diplomatic services. This paper focuses on the commonalities, while noting also the national context that must be taken into account when we look at particular countries.

1. It is a culture that flows from its function, namely, managing external relations in a foreign environment that ranges from the bilateral to regional and global. Ability to handle the cross-cultural interface is central to the professional tasks, as is language and area expertise, besides other functional skills.
2. It is a culture of outreach, advocacy, communication and negotiation. These are among the core professional skills. By its very nature, diplomacy

is pragmatic, working for the possible, even while ideals and principles may provide a frame of reference. Its focus is on the possible, generally within a spirit of mutual accommodation with foreign partners. This means a focus on compromise, and on pragmatic solutions that bridge differences.

3. Our interdependent world is dominated by globalisation, subject complexity (and technicality), plus multi-level dialogue among states, with varied actors, state and private. A central task of diplomacy is to find synthesis and cross-connections between issues, to produce linkage and leverage. This changes the work description of the professional from that of the generalist of the past, to the “generalist-specialist,” or someone akin to a systems engineer, who is not the master of each element of the international dialogue, but can find the interconnections between disparate subjects, in pursuit of national interest.
4. It is a culture of gradualism, of working slowly towards objectives, mainly focused on incremental results. Each individual participant in the diplomatic process is a cog in a continuum, indebted to predecessors and aware that others will carry forward the dossiers on which he or she has worked.
5. Public service reform is widespread, even a national priority in many states. A culture of accountability and user-friendliness is beginning to emerge, though this is a new notion in diplomacy. Foreign ministries in countries as far apart as France, Thailand and the UK are today guided by public management concepts such as good governance, delivery of value and customer satisfaction. Corporate culture norms like ISO 9000 certification are creeping into diplomacy networks.¹ Other countries implement similar approaches through citizen charters.
6. Concepts of domestic public diplomacy or public communication are also reshaping this diplomatic culture. This entails two-way dialogue with the publics, and institutionalised dialogue with civil society, based on accepting them as legitimate stakeholders in foreign policy and the diplomatic process. China offers an interesting example of recent conversion to public diplomacy.²
7. The diplomatic corps has always acted as a unifying influence on professional diplomats posted abroad, reflecting shared values. A new trend is a heavy focus on bilateral interactions between countries that keep embassy

personnel pre-occupied; accordingly, social interaction among diplomats is reduced and, when it takes place, all too often it is in a regional framework, in terms of clusters of African, Arab or EU envoys. In the capitals that are home to a large diplomatic community, much of the socialisation takes place in the regional frame. This strengthens the regional values and styles and slightly reduces the cross-connection within the diplomatic corps as an entity.

The above list is illustrative, not exhaustive. Other elements that are distinctive to individual countries should be added to the list as we consider particular states and regions.

Domestic Interactions

Let us consider the way this professional culture interacts with the domestic environment. The first issue this raises is the manner in which diplomats and the foreign ministry apparatus are perceived at home.

In many countries, foreign ministries currently face criticism, even a sizeable image deficit. An Asian foreign ministry official that attended a conference held at Wilton Park, UK in January 2003 on the theme “Diplomacy Today” remarked: “Everywhere, diplomatic services feel themselves to be under siege.”³ In countries such as Japan and Thailand, where the foreign ministry and its embassies enjoyed a high reputation until the recent past, financial scandal and other lapses uncovered in their domestic media in the last two years have led to a loss of public trust. In Denmark, a TV documentary series titled “Our Expensive Diplomacy” found popular reception in 2002. In India, where the print media has seldom viewed its diplomats with favour, a leading daily carried an editorial page critique titled “The Indian Fossil Service”⁴ and some months later the leading economic daily carried a lead editorial blaming foreign ministry officials for the country’s low brand equity abroad.⁵ An Internet-based poll in July 2004, during the kidnapping of three Indians working in Iraq (at a time when many foreigners had been kidnapped and even killed) showed that 74% of Indians felt that the Indian government had not done enough to ensure release of the hostages.⁶ One may identify several reasons for such public disenchantment.

First, domestic publics that have progressively become interested in foreign affairs have often found the foreign ministry establishment not responding fast enough to this new development. A quick survey today in different

capitals would show countries in early stages of implementing their domestic outreach strategies. Inflated expectations may also be behind this loud media criticism of diplomatic services. Second, in some countries the foreign ministry was earlier perceived as exempt from corruption and other wrongdoing, perhaps because it was insulated from extensive public contact. The breaking of the sharp division between domestic and external work has placed the foreign ministry closer into the home context. Expansion in economic diplomacy has also exposed working diplomats to new temptations.⁷ Third, standards of public accountability and good governance have risen for all agencies of the government, and the foreign ministry is not insulated from this trend. At the same time, public expectations have also risen, led by changes in the manner in which all government ministries are expected to be accountable. Witness, for instance, the new notions of performance targets and “outcomes,” pioneered in UK in the late 1980s under the inspiration of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher,⁸ that apply in Australia, France, and New Zealand, among others.⁹ Fourth, in many countries diplomatic services have often been seen as elites that are too insulated from domestic circumstances. This produces envy among the other branches of public services, and the situation is compounded when the foreign ministry appears to function in isolation, or practices poor coordination with the functional ministries. South Asia has witnessed this over the years, especially India.

The situation described above does not, of course, obtain everywhere. But the loss of insulation from domestic publics or, to put it more positively, the necessity for the foreign ministry to integrate and work more closely with state and non-state actors at home, is part of the wider dimension of the diplomat-home interaction. For instance, Canada’s Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade regards the building of better understanding of the country’s foreign policy and support for its diplomatic service as a legitimate goal of its internal public diplomacy. Other countries may not say this openly but are motivated by the same calculation. Let us consider this further.

1. The foreign ministry has evolved from its earlier role as the exclusive channel - that is, the “gatekeeper” - to external contacts by other branches of government to the role of coordinator.¹⁰ But unlike the earlier situation of external contact monopolisation, the foreign ministry has to *earn* the confidence and the cooperation of these agencies, and that in turn hinges on the extent to which it is perceived by these partners as adding value to their work. This applies with special force to the foreign ministry’s dealings with civil society and the full panoply of non-state partners who have

to be persuaded to work with the MFA. Success hinges on the foreign ministry's openness and transparency.

The track record of different foreign ministries in implementing openness and gaining domestic trust is uneven. It is interesting that the transition states of East and Central Europe and Central Asia have shown greater flexibility and willingness to communicate with internal stakeholders than a number of the older developing countries of Africa and Asia. This may well be since the post-communist regimes have a more urgent necessity for change, and a keener urge to sweep away the cobwebs of the past. For instance, many of them have sections within the MFA charged with dialogue with domestic and international NGOs and civil society, while in many developing countries this is yet to happen, in part because of reserve in accepting them as partners.

2. A more advanced model of internal communication occurs where the MFA has moved from coordination to "networking," as a proactive form of multi-level dialogue with the entire foreign affairs community within the country. On the face of it, communication should come easily to diplomats, since this is one of the core skills of the profession. In the UK, the networking model works well with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), not only in dealings with different home partners, but even in the shape of economic diplomacy structures – "Export Britain" and "Invest Britain" that are located in the FCO and jointly managed with another ministerial department, the Board of Trade. Contrast this with the situation of unending turf battle characteristic of the management of economic diplomacy in countries such as India and Thailand. Within the EU we witness more advanced forms of cooperation, mandated by the unification process and the fact that EU affairs are no longer "external," but a kind of hybrid "domestic-external" zone in which all branches of government have equal competence. While the response of each EU MFA is far from uniform, new models of indispensable networking have developed.¹¹ More study is needed to examine if some of these concepts and methods can be emulated elsewhere.
3. The foreign ministry is one agency that has no sectoral agenda of its own, but is a harmoniser of varied, sometimes clashing, functional interests of all the other agencies as they relate to external affairs. The only permanent interest of the MFA is in the advancement of national interests abroad, in their totality. This should give it a "natural" centrality and an honest broker status, in cases of differences between different agencies on

the policy or tactics on some foreign issue. For instance, to counter the threat from terrorism, an internal affairs ministry may demand strong visa controls on the entry of foreigners; a tourism ministry concerned with stepping up the inflow of foreign tourists may prefer a more liberal regime. The civil aviation ministry may be more concerned with the profitability of national airlines than an open-skies policy that gives more flights that bring in business visitors and tourists.¹² Ideally, the MFA should be able to adjudicate or help harmonise differences. But sometimes the MFA is perceived as excessively interested in good external relations for their own sake, or “soft.” During the Falkland War a former British Foreign Secretary accused the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of having forgotten the distinction between diplomacy and foreign policy, and having concentrated too much on the former!

4. MFAs are traditionally attuned to secrecy and “managing” information. The new dictum of openness sits heavily with them, especially those that have a strong history and self-image. While it is customary today to have a unit at the foreign ministry to handle interface with civil society and NGOs, not just in Western ministries but also in the transition states - the latter having shown themselves to be fast learners of the structures and jargon of contemporary diplomacy - that is not the case with many developing countries. India, for instance, does not have a unit to handle civil society dialogue; nor a designated agency for public diplomacy, which is still handled in compartmental fashion by at least three different agencies, with no coordination between them.¹³ One consequence is that dialogue with academia, business associations and thinktanks has an *ad hoc* and episodic character, dependent on the individual official who is in authority, lacking permanence or institutional force. In some other developing countries, such as the ASEAN member-states, the development of multiform regional cooperation is opening up the work culture of the foreign ministries, and we see the same phenomenon beginning a change process in South Asia.

The Change Process

Opinions may diverge on whether a distinctive diplomatic culture is a good thing, as seen from the home perspective. The position one takes on this perhaps depends on whether we see the principal attributes of diplomatic culture in positive or negative light. Supporters of diplomatic culture may affirm that it

is always good to have an agency of government that understands and is responsive to the external environment and, in effect, acts as a translator or intermediary between the home and abroad. Critics of diplomatic culture see the foreign ministry establishment too remote from the real situation within the country, and failing to deliver value for its rather high cost. Further, they may want the foreign ministry establishment to be less concerned with good relations abroad for their own sake, and also not to act as a disseminator of other people's values.¹⁴ Whatever the truth of the matter, clearly diplomatic culture cannot afford to be out of rapport with the domestic context, nor be perceived as providing too much of its "leadership" to unreceptive home agencies.

Underscoring the above is the notion that the MFA is much more equal to the home agencies on foreign affairs than before, and needs to earn their respect, rather than demand it as a matter of right. This involves adaptation of the institutional culture of the diplomatic establishment, especially in the tradition-bound agencies.

One revealing indicator of the way the establishment deals with the publics is the degree of openness that is practiced in relation to the official archives. Democracies recognise the right to information enjoyed by their citizens and usually open up even the most confidential of documentation after about 30 years, when the balance is deemed to tilt from secrecy of inter-government exchanges to historical accountability to the publics. However, many democracies do not practice this, on the false premise that state secrets must be guarded over a much longer term. Such attitudes fly in the face of accountability.¹⁵

Training is a key element in helping foreign ministry personnel to relate better to the domestic players. Mid-career training is especially useful, ideally where MFA officials are blended with those in the home establishments, including the armed forces, to stretch and balance the perspectives of all the participants and to learn to integrate foreign and domestic affairs. No less vital is training for ambassadors and senior officials, something that is addressed by just a few countries as yet. These exceptions are Canada, with an obligatory two-week programme that all ambassadors are required to attend before proceeding abroad, regardless of seniority, and China, with a two-month programme that seems in part attuned to language training. India sends two officials each year to the National Defense College for its one-year course for higher leadership, and a similar practice is followed in a fair number of other countries. But this does not substitute for in-house training for senior officials, where new diplomacy techniques, corporate management techniques, and public diplomacy outreach are among the issues addressed, to a blend of MFA and home administration personnel.

The other device is annual or periodic meetings of envoys, ideally held in the home capital. An increasing number of countries are adopting this practice, expensive as it is, as an essential way of integrating the diplomatic process more closely with the home country objectives and hierarchy systems. Within the past decade, China and Germany are two instances of states that hold annual conferences of all their ambassadors. (The other alternative, regional gatherings of envoys held in a foreign capital, usually coinciding with a foreign tour by the president or foreign minister, are a very poor cousin, missing the home establishment dimension.) Smaller countries, such as Namibia, hold *ad hoc* gatherings, again aimed at improved integration of the external and the home public service process.

A more sustained way of integration is an exchange of personnel between home and diplomatic services. In Western countries this is standard practice. In developing and transition states, the application is limited, often inhibited by the “trade union instincts” of the diplomatic service. One can point to a number of MFAs in these states where officials of other home services are not accepted as yet, or where some small openings have been made, but considerable resistance remains. It is forgotten that a “closed-shop” foreign ministry conveys images of aloofness and elitism that it can ill-afford.

Diplomatic culture remains a distinctive entity, in comparison with the national or civil service culture of most countries. Commonalities among all diplomatic establishments persist, but are less of a unifying force than before. The subject deserves closer empirical study, looking to different regions and continents.

Endnotes

- 1 France has obtained ISO 9000 certification for its economic services, and Thailand for its consular services. Other countries have likely already done the same or are considering this.
- 2 In March 2004, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced that it was setting up a new division for public diplomacy, mainly for communication with home publics. Its website draws a large volume of comment from citizens, and this website operates several discussion fora for members of the public to voice their opinion on foreign policy issues.
- 3 Informal conversation with the author, November 2003.
- 4 *Indian Express*, June 2003.
- 5 *The Economic Times*, November 2003.
- 6 *Times of India*, July 31, 2004.
- 7 Kishan Rana, *The 21st Century Ambassador: Plenipotentiary to Chief Executive* (Malta: DiploBooks, 2004), 180.

- 8 This transparency is exemplified in the biennial document of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office under the banal title, “FCO Expenditure Plans.” Similar material on the US State Department’s narration of performance target fulfillment, available in its annual report “Fiscal Year Performance and Accountability Report,” is thorough and exceptionally lucid. These documents are available on the websites of the two institutions.
- 9 See Kishan Rana, “Performance Management in Foreign Ministries: Corporate Techniques in the Diplomatic Services,” *Discussion Papers in Diplomacy* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations “Clingendael,” July 2004), available online at <http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/diplomacy/papers/?id=5500>.
- 10 Brian Hocking (ed.), *Foreign Ministries: Change and Adaptation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1999).
- 11 See Brian Hocking and David Spence (eds.), *Foreign Ministries in the European Union: Integrating Diplomats* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
- 12 Both these are real life instances of long-running differences between the Indian ministries handling home affairs, civil aviation and tourism.
- 13 In the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, publicity related work, including limited domestic public relations, is handled by a large XP Division (whose head doubles as the official spokesman of the government on foreign affairs). A semi-autonomous Indian Council for Cultural Relations handles most aspects of cultural diplomacy and maintains a dozen cultural centers abroad (though a separate ministry department of culture exists). The Policy Planning Division handles the interface with academia, including partially funding some specific studies and projects.
- 14 In March 1982, during a British parliamentary debate on the Falklands War, former Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington charged the Foreign Office with having forgotten the distinction between diplomacy and foreign policy, because in working to safeguard relations with Argentina it had distanced itself from the advocacy of real British interests.
- 15 This is true of a large number of developing countries that are practicing democracies, including India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.