

**Book Review – “FOREIGN MINISTRIES: CHANGE & ADAPTATION”**

**(edited by Brian Hocking; Macmillan, London, 1999)**

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Review by Kishan S Rana

Comparative studies are fascinating when they deal with major national institutions that are near identical in purpose, but placed in settings that are vastly varied. This book is part of the Macmillan series of Studies in Diplomacy (with Prof. GR Berridge as general editor) and examines the operation of 12 foreign ministries (MFAs), 6 belonging to the G-8 group (Canada, France, Japan, Russia, UK and the US), plus two Western nations, Australia and Norway. The others covered are an eclectic mix, Israel, Malaysia, Mexico, and South Africa. There is also a chapter on the change afoot in the European Union under the “Common Foreign and Security Policy” (CFSP) that is taking the EU-15 into the experiment of a partly unified external policy.

Brian Hocking etches a template that is examined in each contribution – how has the MFA in the traditional “gatekeeper” role for external contacts by the governmental system adapted to the challenges of globalization, functional complexity and multiple direct international contact by different agencies? Or has “the thickening texture of exchanges, both vertically and horizontally” led it to fail also in its coordination role? His overall conclusion: they are managing external access, without acting as gatekeepers, deploying flexible methods. The country studies by academics and by diplomacy practitioners, current and retired, reveal that adaptations has been best when it has been evolutionary, from within the ministry, rather than drastic reorganization mandated from outside. The UK Foreign Office is an instance, also exceptionally managing to safeguard past exclusivity through rigorous adaptation.

Australia and Canada have successfully merged their departments of international trade with the MFA over a decade back. This is one formula for handling the unity of external political and economic relationships. They both have a combined ministry that supports two cabinet ministers, the Foreign Minister and the Minister for International Trade. (Denmark, not covered in this study does the same with an MFA that supports also a cabinet minister responsible for external aid).

Another common thread is the decline in elite-domination in a profession where this was the norm. The new entrants are responsible for re-invigorating the MFAs, and for improving interaction with other governmental agencies. We see this in the Indian Foreign Service as well, with the inclusion now of a wider spectrum of graduates from regional institutions, specialists in diverse disciplines, not just the humanities. But to make the process of participatory relationships with the other ministries really work, India also needs to pick up the linked device used elsewhere to build credibility – two-way deputation of officials on a much broader scale (e.g. as in Mexico).

The book throws light on innovative methods that have deployed to handle many issues that are in common. The ones that should be of special interest to an Indian include:

- The French Council for French Citizens Abroad, elected by Overseas French citizens, working closely with the Department of French Citizens Abroad and Foreigners in France.

- The UK Foreign Office “Board of Management” chaired by the Permanent Under Secretary, consisting of the senior-most officials that serves as an institutional mechanism resembling corporate business management.
- Malaysia’s “Institute for Diplomatic and Foreign Relations” that combines diplomatic training with research in international affairs.
- Israel’s negative example of an MFA that has suffered marginalization, save in the tenure of a strong foreign minister.

The book would have benefited from a tighter analysis of the way MFAs manage their external relationships, both in the direction of embassies (essentially no different from running a business entity) and in the full pursuit of bilateral and multilateral relationships. By its very nature hard information in these areas is relatively inaccessible. Most democratic countries have systems whereby annual reports on the performance of ministries are submitted to Parliament; the reports and hearings of the parliamentary committees with oversight responsibilities also provide considerable public information, but reading between the lines is needed. The accounts by diplomacy practitioners are another source. (This is one discipline in which the interaction between academics and those with practical experience is much less than desirable). For instance the chapter on the US State Department contains valuable data on the current performance appraisal systems, where an earlier system of “goals and objectives” has been replaced with “Mission Program Plans”, covering prioritized goals and resources identified to achieve this. An amalgam of such plans covering various countries leads to Bureau Program Plans; a less successful comprehensive Department Program Plan also exists. The book does not mention that the French have a system of formal communication of objectives to their outgoing envoy by the *Quai d’Orsay* Secretary General, in response to which the ambassador submits within six months his action plan to achieve the goals. Singapore is one country that that has, like the US, directly linked targets with resources. That should not be remarkable, viewed against their innovative system of financial devolution and responsibility assignment – all ministries are left free to use the budgeted funds as they wish (none of the Indian obsessive oversight of Financial Advisers appointed within Ministries by the Department of Expenditure, and answerable to it). But if Singapore ministries perform below the targets set for each, they are answerable to the audit authorities. It is this comprehensive method of performance audit that is so often missing in the diplomatic machinery. There is also utility in looking at the creative methods of relationship-building that some diplomatic establishments have refined.

The final chapter on the European Union’s evolving CFSP is written from the perspective of an EU civil servant, but leaves out the details of how the coordination mechanism actually operates, and the experience gained on its strength and limitations. It is an unparalleled experiment in forward evolution that needs to be evaluated by observers and by national foreign ministries on a continual basis.

All in all, an invaluable addition to international affairs studies, giving perspectives against which varied national diplomatic systems can be analyzed and evaluated. Indispensable for diplomatic study specialists and offering much value to the general reader.

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