

## Diplomatic Practice: Random Thoughts

### 1. Using Economic Experts in Embassies

Some countries are seduced by the utility of deploying economic 'experts' at their embassies, in promotion work. I think this is a bad idea on several counts.

Let me set out some personal observations.

1. It is an illusion that 'experts' give real help in promotion work. Why? An investor, foreign or domestic, is spending money. They will always seek the best, impartial advice before they invest. They will NOT go by the technical or tax law or other detailed investment guidance that the 'expert' from the receiving country provides.

2. So what is the job of the embassy-based 'promoter'? Based on 20 years of hands-on experience, it is to get the investor to give real attention to your country. That is a task of politico-economic promotion, not mastery over tax laws or other investment conditions.

3. More than anyone else, it is the Ambassador that enjoys access to top management, not an economic counsellor or an adviser from the home country's investment board. But these officials have a vital role, to follow up with company executives, and work on the details.

4. It is the generalist-political diplomat that understands connections between different issues, and reaches out to business and to political leaders. Both need to be cultivated.

5. There is a further special role for the embassy. It helps the home authorities with the 'FDI Conversion Rate'. It asks: what percentage of FDI applications are actually translated into executed projects, whether involving production infrastructure or services or anything else? Inevitably, there is a gap. Market conditions change, or the company's strategy evolves in a different direction, or they find a better foreign location for their project. Therefore, there is nothing odd about the fact that not every FDI proposal is executed. For the receiving country, it is vital to track this, focusing particularly on projects not executed because the potential investor lost patience, or felt that the conditions in that country were inadequate. Therefore, this conversion rate helps us to understand the true attractiveness of one's own country as an FDI destination.

6. Finally, too many politically appointed Amb are too lazy, or disinterested to engage in real economic promotion work. As one colleague said, Africa still resorts to too many of them. And, sadly, it pays the price!....My apologies for these blunt comments.

## 2. Public Diplomacy Boards in Foreign Ministries

Public Diplomacy (PD) has grown faster than any diplomatic practice in history. It emerged as a mainstream concept in the work of foreign ministries (MFAs) and governments at the turn of the century. Currently, France and UK have PD Boards in their MFAs, chaired by their permanent secretaries. Spain has one, chaired by its Prime Minister. Kenya has a 'Brand Board', that works on parallel concepts, and the UAE has a 'Soft Power Council', headed by a minister. [We may recall that 'public diplomacy', 'country brand' and 'soft power' are parallel concepts. A simple way to understand their inter-relationships is: 'country brand' and 'soft power' are *outcomes*; they have always existed in their own right; each is shaped, *only to limited and a finite degree, by PD actions*. [It is an illusion to imagine that spending money in PD translates into greatly improved 'brand' or 'soft power']].

What does a PD Board do? UK's 'Public Diplomacy Strategy Board' first met in October 2002; chaired by the FCDO Permanent Under Secretary, it meets four times a year, to improve the cohesion, effectiveness and the impact of official efforts to promote the UK overseas. It works on a national public diplomacy strategy to advance the country's overseas interests and objectives. It also works on specific campaigns. Officials from other official agencies and organisations that can contribute to public diplomacy join, such as British Council, British Trade International, BBC World Service, British Tourist Authority, and other entities from across the UK.

What this amounts to is that the Board is a clearing house for information, and to discuss national strategy. Neither the FCDO nor the government have full oversight over those that attend, so clearly, it cannot be not a decision-maker for all the participants. But in the broad public interest it coordinates actions, as feasible. Presumably the other PD entities in France, Kenya, Spain, and the UAE act in similar fashion. And we may be sure that in China, a 'Leading Small Group' on PD exists. Other countries may also have similar entities in their administrative systems.

For me the wonder is that more countries have not set up their own 'PD Boards'. The benefits are so patently obvious. How can tourism promotion not also impact on the country brand, or on the promotion actions to attract FDI? This is an idea whose time has long been overdue.

## 3. Advisory boards for the MFA

Should an MFA have advisory boards? For me the real question is: How can a modern MFA function without at least three or more kinds of boards. Let me elaborate.

- First, it needs a *policy advisory board*, by whatever name it might be called. What is lost, for the MFA, in seeking advice on international affairs? It does not mean sharing with this board insider information. And it does not cede policy-making space to outsiders. All that results is for official policymakers listen to outsider views. In reality it happens all the time. Foreign Ministers have their own personal contacts to whom they listen – this simply makes the process more open, organized. For example, Italy has such an entity, which includes academics, journalists and others.
- Second, it makes sense for the MFA to have an *economic diplomacy advisory board*. Again, business organizations are routinely consulted, but this is often ad hoc, and episodic. And it is done individually. Why not more structured conversations? Even India, not an innovator in MFA practices, now has a forum for regular conversation with thinktanks. Why not extend this to a field in which the end-users (or beneficiaries) are business, and the diplomatic system and its embassies are facilitators? Many MFAs use this method now.
- Third, *a regular contact group with NGOs* that have an international agenda is even more an acute need, esp. in Global South MFAs. A side benefit may be that it might accelerate the ‘internationalization’ of such NGOs. We seldom take notice of the fact that the world’s international NGOs, esp. those engaged in humanitarian and problem-solving actions are based in the West. Is this a good thing?
- And why not an *advisory group for the diaspora*? In the early 2000s, the Indian PM created such an entity. It drew in powerful diaspora members, including some with political ambitions. It fell into disuse. A similar group created by an MFA may be more useful, but there is a constant danger of bringing in diaspora members with political ambitions in their home country. And on the flip side, Global South political parties have been increasingly active in mobilizing their diaspora for elections in the home country. Perhaps on balance, it might be useful to handle this with caution.

#### 4. Patronage appointed, non-professional Ambassadors

In almost all my diplomatic studies books I have written against the pernicious practice in so many Global South countries, of undermining the professionalism of their own diplomatic services with large scale recourse to sending out politicians and others with no awareness of international affairs as ambassadors.

At its inception, the US only had political appointees (in those days they were mainly ‘ministers plenipotentiary’ – there were rather few ambassadors. That practice persisted and was quasi-institutionalized with a rough ceiling of 25% of the total posts – of course they grab the most important appointments; Trump as President sent out a much

higher number, as befitted a maverick. That has been emulated in much of Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa.

What are the facts? Brazil is the only country that has a law that prohibits this. Argentine, a kind of competitor to them in Latin America has a fixed number of such political appointees, at 30.

Such appointments are undesirable on several counts: A. They undermine moral in the professional service. B. They are used to reward former politicians, and sometimes to get out of the way awkward ones. C. When figures from public life are sent, as is the case with around half US appointees, the method is not nearly as disastrous as when total neophytes are launched in international affairs – such as financial contributors to the presidential campaign. D. In a few countries, sometimes barely 10% of its ambassadors are professionals – this has happened in Uganda, and Namibia to name two examples. E. Western countries, plus China, India, Japan have only appointed professionals. (In the past two years, China, as part of its strangely aggressive ‘wolf diplomacy’, has begun to send out a number of non-MFA ambassadors). Now, Australia has resiled, and since 2017, around 10 political appointees are to be found in its corps of around 120 ambassadors. F. The Mexican practice is even more damaging to professionalism; political appointees are sent not only as ambassadors, but also in other diplomatic posts. G. The US and Mexico are the only countries I know where political appointees hold a sizable percentage of MFA posts. In the US, even before the Trump cyclone, up to 50% of the posts needing Senate confirmation (i.e., Assistant Under Secretary of State), were held by political appointees. No wonder there is massive demoralization in the US Foreign Service, made worse in the Trump regime.

In no walk of public life can patronage appointments, esp. sending out incompetent, unsuitable ambassadors, be justified. Is it a wonder that the diplomacy of a number of Global South countries suffers from inadequate performance?

[See: For the US, review of a book by Dennis Jett:

<https://kishanrana.diplomacy.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/American-Amb-Jett-2016.pdf>

For Australia: <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/diplomat-database/findings> ]