Whither professional diplomacy?

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Abstract

The current existential juncture of professional diplomacy is marked by critical reflection on its *raison d'être*. On the one hand, critics denounce the profession as an anachronism: they claim that unprecedented changes in the form and substance of international relations have, in the course of the twentieth century, transformed the world to such an extent that the need for professional diplomats has been obviated. Proponents, on the other hand, proclaim the profession's indispensable and perennial value to international society. They point out that diplomacy has become a growth industry, and that it is experiencing, as it always has, evolutionary development and adaptation to global conditions. The ensuing article contextualises this intellectual debate in order to elucidate the changing international realities that demand and challenge the contributions of professional diplomats. It does not entertain normative reflection on the institution of diplomacy, but focuses instead on efficacy in the attendant profession and its machinery.

1. Introduction

The institution[1] of diplomacy is as old as international society itself, yet its enactment by organised agencies, i.e. the development of a professional diplomatic apparatus, is of relatively recent[2] origin. Diplomacy obtained 'institutional density' (Keens-Soper 1996, 9, 11) only during the Modern Age, when the system of sovereign states bureaucratised international relations and rendered diplomacy a predominantly statecentric activity. Ever since, the institution has undergone an incremental process of professionalisation, defined by the following aspects: the universal spread of the system of resident ambassadors, the establishment of separate and permanent state bureaucracies for foreign policy execution, the institutionalisation of an intricate legal framework, and the development of merit-based recruitment and career-specific training for diplomats.

In the contemporary world the statecentric nature of diplomacy persists, supported by the universal institutionalisation of foreign policy execution. All states dedicate specialised bureaucratic structures – generically referred to as ministries of

foreign affairs (MFAs) – to deal specifically with diplomacy. Professional diplomats[3] (as distinguished from other *ad hoc* participants in diplomacy) are the individuals employed by MFAs who (are expected to) pursue diplomatic objectives, as formulated by governments, independent of personal or partisan interests and on the basis of specialised knowledge and skills (Vale 1993, 41–45).

The seemingly inexorable universal institutionalisation and professionalisation of diplomacy has nevertheless not prevented a debate about the viability of the profession at the start of the twenty-first century. Many critics have claimed that it has become obsolete in the face of dramatic global developments over the past century. These global challenges will be examined below to determine their effect on the profession, and to determine the responses registered by the machinery of diplomacy, notably the resident embassy.

2. Contemporary challenges to the profession

The twentieth century, particularly its latter half, witnessed unprecedented global developments that metamorphosed the enabling environment of professional diplomacy. Among these changes are a radically altered political map of the world; the rivalry posed to professional diplomacy by personal, direct diplomacy; technological advances particularly in information, communications and travel; the massive expansion of the agenda of diplomatic concerns; and the 'democratisation' of diplomacy which has seen a host of competing actors becoming involved in areas traditionally considered the exclusive domain of the profession.

2.1 The changing political map of the world

The 'asymmetric' world that is entering the twenty-first century is one that has grown exponentially in membership: since the end of World War Two, almost a hundred new states have come into existence, mainly as a result of decolonisation and more recently as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Two major phenomena – globalisation and fragmentation – impact on this radically changed political map of the world. Both, in different ways, erode the Westphalian consensus on state sovereignty and thus the monopoly of traditional diplomacy in the international domain. Globalisation is of course not new to the past century but its pace and scale in recent decades has been such that it has exceeded the capacity of established political and social systems to cope. The result has been a fragmentation of global power: unprecedented decentralisation that has rendered the international order less structured and more polycentric, with regional blocs producing several centres of political gravity. The international interdependence effected by globalisation and fragmentation has reduced the social, political and economic distance between and among states, individuals and companies. In practice this means that the domestic policies of states are increasingly scrutinised and subjected to international standards, trends and obligations. This reality is

reflected in the trend towards 'global management', which implies that the most salient aspects of the security and commercial relations among states are organised through international regimes negotiated within international organisations.

Cohen (1999, 2) asserts that apart from supranational organisations, trading corporations as well as nongovernmental organisations and other transnational bodies have 'revived the medieval right of non-sovereign entities to send and receive envoys, conduct negotiations and conclude agreements'. The authority of sovereign states and their representatives (diplomats) is thus undermined, according to Vale (1993, 15), by 'competing and multiple sovereignties, at macro and micro levels of sovereignty'. For diplomats, whose representative mandate under international law is inextricably linked to the concept of state sovereignty, this reality poses a particular challenge, especially in the developing world where the hard-won battle against colonial subjugation has bred robust nationalisms. The assault on sovereignty has been exacerbated by the universal culture of human rights that has challenged the 'old consensus' about noninterference in the internal affairs of other states, with states and supranational organisations justifying intervention in terms of universal human rights protection.

2.2 The growth of personal diplomacy

Throughout the ages, certain countries and individual leaders have shown a predilection for personal diplomacy, to the exclusion of diplomatic intermediation. However, specific developments during the past century precipitated a huge increase in personal international collaborative ventures by political leaders. This has caused a surge in direct diplomacy at head of state or government level and has coincided with a vertical rise in summitry since the 1960s. Barston (1997, 108) and Eban (1998, 92, 93) observe that in the process, summits have taken on a routine profile, and have encroached on the symbolic and ceremonial domain of diplomacy.

A pragmatic incentive for increased direct negotiations among leaders has been the advances in communications and transport that have rendered international interaction instantaneous, cheap and safe. Hence Bull's (1977, 172) contention that the proliferation of 'hot lines' between the heads of a number of important states during the 1960s occurred because traditional diplomatic channels were not providing the rapid, direct communication at the highest levels deemed necessary to avoid potentially cataclysmic conflicts. Moreover, the surge in multilateralism since the end of World War Two has compelled leaders to deal with one another directly in order to reach consensus on issues of vital interest and to lend stature to global and regional alliances.

A domestic imperative for personal diplomacy has been the world-wide spread of democracy. Democratically elected political leaders have a stake in promoting their personal prestige and honouring their constitutional responsibility to constituents by pursuing *inter alia* foreign interests in a visible and assertive manner. The

omnipresence of media coverage has made high-level international contacts an attractive means for 'quasi-diplomats' to score political points with a domestic audience (Hamilton and Langhorne 1995, 226). In much of the developing world, on the other hand, the domestic imperative has been insecure political systems and inadequate diplomatic bureaucracies, especially in new states, that have made the diplomatic use of personal charisma more effective and therefore popular among heads of state. The international pursuit of the diplomacy of development has been a contributing factor, as a host of new states and other international actors have demanded visible inclusion of leaders in high-level summitry on global issues.

2.3 The technological revolution

Exponential technological advances during the past century – particularly in the areas of information, communications and transport – have reduced barriers of time and space, affecting in consequence all areas of human activity and creating an increasingly interdependent global village. The impact on the profession of diplomacy has been profound: the means and resources available to diplomats have been ameliorated and the speedier, more voluminous interaction of the international community has facilitated a frenzy of multilateral diplomatic activity.

The technological revolution has also spawned a proliferation of new issues and security concerns that transcend sovereign boundaries and have accordingly been thrust into the traditional domain of the profession. These include ethical dilemmas encountered by medical science, global environmental concerns, and the production and use of weapons of mass destruction. The intersection of IT and diplomacy, particularly in the area of international conflict management and resolution, has assumed such prominence that the United States Institute of Peace in 1995 launched the Virtual Diplomacy Initiative which sponsors global workshops, conferences and symposia to explore the IT-diplomacy relationship (VDI 2004).

Perhaps more than any other area, the revolution in information and communications technology has impacted on the very *raison d'être* of diplomacy. As Kurbalija (1999, 172) argues, it has increased opportunities for individuals to gather, disseminate and manipulate information irrespective of sovereign borders, thus challenging diplomacy's traditional role as the dominant channel for interstate communications. A related phenomenon has been the powerful ascent within global politics of the mass media. The fact that the media provide immediate information from all over the globe to an audience that spans the globe has destroyed the monopoly that governments had on dissemination of information, and has engaged public opinion on a far greater scale than ever before. Riordan (2003, 5) and Vella (1998, 12) identify the pressure that the media's influence has had on the profession: whereas in the past diplomacy was marked by prestige and discretion, it has now become routinely subject to media intervention and hence public scrutiny and ethical

evaluation. The media have also taken on roles traditionally reserved for diplomats, such as the carrying of state-to-state messages and the highlighting of priority areas for foreign policy focus.

For the developing world, the media revolution has sparked fears of information imperialism by the developed world, in light of the latter's superior technological resources. This concern speaks to the so-called digital divide which adds to the social, political and economic schism between North and South and which in itself has become a fixture on the diplomatic agenda of the South. In this regard Newsom (1989, 33) points out that whereas advances in technology have created certain challenges for professional diplomats, it is the very lack thereof that presents problems for diplomats from the developing world as they struggle to compete internationally with insufficient technological infrastructure.

2.4 Expansion of the agenda of diplomacy

Globalisation of human concerns has greatly increased the functional themes that constitute international relations, and has played up the need for new and more effective forms of global co-operation to address (previously considered domestic) problems such as illegal migration, environmental degradation and civil strife. Indeed, 'complex issues that transcend national boundaries' is identified by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in a 1998 report, as one of the reasons for the necessity to transform traditional US diplomacy (Burt and Robison 1998, x). This growing global web of human concerns has given further impetus to the expansion in multilateralism and has produced an increasing demand for specialisation among diplomats to cover issues in areas that were traditionally outside the scope of diplomacy. On the other hand, it has also facilitated, even demanded, participation by nondiplomatic experts.

A major catalyst in the expansion of diplomacy's agenda has been the growing importance of economic issues in global politics, especially since the demise of the Cold War saw ideological rivalry largely replaced by economic competition. Langhorne and Wallace (1999, 16–17) contend that the shifting of the boundary between domestic and international politics during the past few decades has produced a tendency towards economic regulation and multilateral consultation on economic policies, that is, a trend towards centralisation of global economic management – resulting in the establishment of myriad multilateral economic forums. This approach has been reinforced by the proliferation of regional economic co-operation and integration arrangements.

For diplomats, the universal change in focus of foreign policy from geopolitics to geo-economics has necessitated a redefinition of their roles in export-driven bilateral relations as well as within the vastly increasing number of trade-based economic organisations at subregional, regional and global level – functions that demand a new diplomatic skill known as 'economic diplomacy'. For the developing world, in particular, the economic dimension to international relations is a matter of survival;

its diplomats are therefore primarily tasked with pursuing 'diplomacy of development'. In essence, this seeks to encourage the transformation of an international system that has allowed severe asymmetrical global development, and which has caused a schism between the developing world's formal equality in terms of international law and its evident inferiority as concerns socioeconomic development and political influence (Pityana 2000).

2.5 The democratisation of diplomacy

In the contemporary world, more and more entities are demanding – and providing – inputs in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy and thus in diplomacy itself. This phenomenon is induced by, as Langhorne (1998, 159) explains, new centres of power that are 'arranged horizontally across global geography, time zones, and cultures' that have loosened central, vertical control over human activity by traditional authorities, that is, governments. Although conflict between MFAs and a variety of rival agencies with external concerns has been a continuing feature at least since the late nineteenth century, visible democratisation of the foreign policy decision-making process – in the West, at least – became evident during the 1970s. The 'degovernmentalisation of foreign affairs' as Petrovsky (1998, 23) refers to it, implies that various domestic pressure groups, including the legislative branches of government, other departments and agencies, business and civil groups have started to claim a stake in diplomacy; a phenomenon that has led to a certain measure of 'domestication' of diplomacy. This development has had a dual effect on the jurisdiction of states over foreign policy. Hocking (1999a, 26, 32–33) juxtaposes on the one hand a growing intersection of the state's and society's interests and on the other hand the mounting capacity of nongovernmental interest groups to operate parallel to governments and to challenge their authority in the international arena.

The competition has not been restricted to the private sector. The traditional state-to-state negotiating role of diplomats has been diminished by the increasing involvement of other state agents, including local and provincial authorities, in international interactions. For example, Clough (1998) cites 'the inability of national institutions to serve local and regional needs fully' as one reason why many US cities and states are developing their own foreign economic policies and creating the institutional structures to carry them out. The effect has been that diplomats are more and more obliged to confer with colleagues from other areas of government in order to harmonise foreign policy execution – a phenomenon Meerts (1999, 90) refers to as 'inter-civil-servant negotiations'.

A further symptom of diplomacy's democratisation is the diversification of its culture and style. The diplomatic corps is becoming more heterogeneous and diplomatic culture – the norms and conventions associated with diplomatic procedures such as the conduct of negotiations and the forms and media of diplomatic communication – is becoming less uniform, with greater varieties in

national and regional approaches and more relaxed diplomatic practice. Sofer (1988, 200–201) observes that this dilution of the formerly universal values of European diplomatic culture and the rejection of elitist Old World codes of conduct has complicated global diplomacy in the sense that it has rendered consensus on global issues decidedly more elusive.

Diversification in the evolution of diplomatic practice during the twentieth century has spawned another major phenomenon, namely involvement in the field of what Annan (1998) calls 'an ever more robust global civil society'. There is no common descriptive term in the literature for this 'privatisation' of diplomacy: it is referred to by many names, including paradiplomacy, second track diplomacy, unofficial diplomacy and civilian/citizen diplomacy. The terms all refer to entities other than governments active in the field of diplomacy – at the same time as governments and often in the same geographic or functional areas, but not necessarily in associative relationships. As international human interests increasingly exist on a global, horizontal basis disconnected from the essentially vertical state structure, it is difficult even for supranational organisations adequately to address them. Nonofficial diplomatic dialogue is filling the vacuum by operating multidimensionally: it creates 'an additional layer of diplomacy' in which nongovernment actors communicate both with states and associations of states and with other nongovernment actors, and *vice versa*.

Petrovsky (1998, 23) identifies NGOs as the most active 'intruders' into the domain of diplomacy. The areas they target include human rights and environmental protection, as well as economic, financial and technological concerns. These new diplomatic actors (organisations such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines) are more flexible and operate more speedily and proactively than governments: they mobilise public opinion around single issues and thereby pressurise governments to act accordingly. Annan (1998) describes NGOs as being not only disseminators of public information or providers of services 'but . . . shapers of public policy'. He contends (as does Vella 1998, 16) that NGOs by virtue of their focused and practical role are often operational in the field before the international state community has organised itself into action, rendering them extremely important benefactors (particularly) in developing world crises situations.

3. Has professional diplomacy become obsolete?

In the light of unprecedented challenges to the diplomatic profession, the question arises whether professional diplomats continue to have a contribution to make in a world where all concepts are being challenged, including that of diplomacy itself. Clarification is thus sought regarding the place of diplomacy in a changing world order; the rivalry between the profession and personal diplomacy; the possible

redundancy of professional diplomacy in light of technological advances; the ability of diplomacy to handle its expanding agenda; and the potential for professional diplomacy to enter into a complementary relationship with 'unofficial' diplomacy.

3.1 How is professional diplomacy affected by the changing political map of the world?

Transformation in the political map of the world has inevitably had an impact on the practice of diplomacy. In this regard, several writers have emphasised the profession's remarkable resilience given the quantum shift in membership of international society, which now experiences the unprecedented situation that almost all states are involved in diplomatic relations with almost all other states (Cohen 1999, 14; Hamilton and Langhorne 1995, 233; Sofer 1988, 196). Adding to the growth in diplomatic activity is the fact that more and more international organisations have representative missions attached to states or other organisations, manifesting thus as new subjects of international law and enjoying diplomatic immunities and privileges. Not only has the absolute quantity of diplomatic activity therefore increased, but its scope, style, procedures and substance have also been affected by the sheer number and variety of states, and associations of states, that compete for political and economic influence. Rather than effecting its decline, the expansion of international society has therefore rendered professional diplomacy a 'growth-sector': as Reychler (1996, 1) observes; some writers are even speaking of 'diplomatic inflation'. The phenomenal growth in the profession has made the institution of diplomacy more diverse and thus representative of global socio-politico-economic realities.

The effects of globalisation and fragmentation have, likewise, caused a groundswell in professional diplomacy, rather than a reduction. The globalisation of human concerns and the regionalisation of diplomatic responses have both fuelled a massive increase in multilateralism. The bulk of contemporary diplomacy occurs in multilateral forums, or concerns multilateral issues which are pursued in bilateral forums, thereby spawning a new diplomatic specialisation.

Proponents of professional diplomacy also counter the accusation that diplomats have been rendered redundant by the effects of globalisation on state sovereignty. They point out that diplomatic relations are, in fact, a condition of globalisation because state representatives are the ones who negotiate and manage the growing network of agreements that facilitate the flow of goods, services and people across sovereign jurisdictions (Cohen 1999, 14; Hocking 1999a, 32; Wiseman 1999, 2, 5; Wolf 2001, 190).

3.2 Where does personal diplomacy leave the profession?

Personal diplomacy grew to such an extent during the twentieth century that the question arises whether the place of professional diplomacy has been usurped.

However, various commentators have emphasised the enduring advantage, and in fact necessity, of professional diplomatic intermediation. They point out that policy makers who are unschooled in diplomacy risk the closure of communication channels that exist between states and which need to be handled, as Bull (1977, 172–173) phrases it, by 'experts in detecting and conveying nuances of international dialogue'.

An important consideration is the nature of diplomatic negotiations. A strategy seldom proceeds with linear progress: the process can be drawn out and could entail temporary setbacks, misunderstandings, bureaucratic delays and strategic ploys. This can render agreement elusive, and most leaders have neither the time nor the political inclination to subject themselves to such a fickle process. In direct negotiations politicians do not have the leeway to be seen as too accommodating, and the process can thus not incubate successfully. It is therefore politically astute to have the hard negotiations done at a less visible and controversial level, i.e. at an intermediate, 'technical' level. Most summits are, in fact, a mere culmination of successful diplomatic negotiations and in effect increase the work of professional diplomats, not just because of the preparation that is required but also as a result of the follow-up actions that need to be attended to.

When professional diplomatic intermediaries are by-passed, the stakes are very high. Meetings either fail or succeed, either way with important and very visible consequences. No set rules of engagement, the fanfare and rivalry of large accompanying delegations, and superficiality arising out of haste are other drawbacks. In addition, the excessive hospitality associated with summits can detract from the serious nature of a bilateral agenda, by obliging delegates to display demonstrative 'gratitude'. Highly publicised personal meetings also raise public expectations, often to unrealistic levels. In direct negotiations between leaders, personal rapport can become exaggerated, while it constitutes very little of the real essence or durability of the long-term relationship between two states. It is therefore in the crucial continuity of communication that diplomats make their (often mundane, but always indispensable) contribution to international relations.

3.3 Has professional diplomacy been made redundant by technology?

The spectacular contemporary advances of technology in the areas of communications, information and transport have convinced some critics that diplomacy has become technologically redundant. This argument is used specifically as concerns the media revolution. Although greater media exposure of the work of diplomats should have enhanced general appreciation of professional diplomacy, it has instead generated the criticism that media networks have obviated the need for diplomatic intermediaries. Various commentators have refuted this idea because the argument presupposes that diplomats merely relay information (Sharp 1999, 40; Sofer 1988, 196; Vella 1998, 13). The drawbacks for states that rely solely on media reporting are evident: competition for viewer numbers means that media

select sensational stories which often prevent in-depth analysis, and fail to highlight 'mundane' facts that might carry long-term implications for a particular state's interests. Also, media are seldom neutral: there is inevitably an editorial bias that reflects interest group pressure and leads to the manipulation of messages.

Indeed, with media now omnipresent and information available to anybody with access to a computer, the role of diplomats has expanded rather than diminished. They have to organise, evaluate, verify and authenticate information requisite to the formulation and execution of foreign policy. In short, they need to make sense of the barrage of information that reaches governments from a multitude of sources. Hence, rather than compete with the media, a modern diplomatic skill is employed, namely 'media diplomacy', which proactively utilises the media and its extensive audience to influence public opinion.

Most commentators agree that the primary mandate of diplomats has not been changed by technology, and that the profession's duty – as well as its strength – remains its ability to establish and maintain personal contacts. Cohen (1999, 16) adds that the case for the professional diplomat is strengthened by the resilience of cross-cultural schisms. He says an enduring role for diplomacy is 'to work on the boundary between cultures as an interpretative and conjunctive mechanism . . . the revolution in communications technology and international transport does not affect this constant, structural feature of relationships between sovereignties'. Some commentators also point out that diplomacy has become a much more flexible instrument as a result of technological advances, because diplomats have been freed up to concentrate on the core elements of their work and the advances in technology have actually made it possible to have more diplomatic activity across the globe (Berridge 1995, 180; Kappeler 1998, 40; Lino Guererro 1999; Wolfe 1997, 28).

3.4 Can professional diplomacy cope with its expanding agenda?

The massive expansion of the agenda of contemporary diplomacy, in particular the issues that are of a specialised nature such as economics and science, has prompted many critics to question the ability of 'professional generalists' to cope with this agenda. They argue that there are always other international agents that are willing, and better equipped, to handle technical issues (Clough 1998). An area within diplomacy that is regularly subjected to vehement criticism is the issue of conflict prevention, particularly crises in the developing world. According to Reychler (1996, 4, 6–7), inadequate knowledge (by professional diplomats) of conflict-prevention techniques has led to inaccurate prognosis of situations that led to conflict, and to diplomatic efforts being of a reactive rather than a proactive nature. The 1994 genocide of Tutsi in Rwanda and the genocide of Muslims in Srebrenica, Bosnia in 1995, both of which occurred in full view of UN peacekeepers, serve as tragic examples. This ineffectual track record, according to Reychler, 'has diminished the prestige of the diplomatic profession' and has increased parallel diplomacy as a civil response to the perceived limits of

traditional diplomacy. Petrovsky (1998, 27–30) counters by arguing that modern diplomacy has a more subtle preventative role, that of ensuring good governance: 'its influence on political and economic leaders can channel global changes in an evolutionary, non-violent, democratic rule-based manner'. This is only possible because of diplomacy's inherent capacity as an inter-mediating institution.

Proponents of professional diplomacy agree that the extensive range of spheres that impact on international relations has made the involvement of nonprofessionals in the diplomatic process inevitable (Hamilton and Langhorne 1995, 217; Sofer 1988, 206). However, they argue that the significance of diplomats lies not in their actual handling of technical issues, but in their management of the process to address such issues – whoever the role players involved may be. Meerts (1999, 91) says the situation is paradoxical: even though diplomats are losing their monopoly in handling interstate relations, their role is becoming more crucial as they become more and more specialised as 'expert intermediaries'. Vella (1998, 13) adds that rather than becoming 'an endangered species,' professional diplomats have become crucial in helping to 'weave the fabric of regional and global political, economic and social co-operation', and to maintain and develop further that co-operation.

3.5 What is the relationship between professional diplomacy and nongovernmental diplomacy?

Various US scholars have, since 1992, argued that the structures and dynamics of world order are changing so rapidly that traditional diplomacy does not conform to the realities of the information age. They make the point that just as there have been revolutions in business and military affairs, so the diplomatic world is about to experience an IT induced revolution which they term the Revolution in Diplomatic Affairs (RDA). This, they argue, will happen because diplomats are beginning to experience competition from agile nongovernmental actors who are being strengthened by the information revolution (Cooper 2001). This theory raises a pivotal question, namely the nature of the working relationship, if any, between professional and nongovernmental diplomats. Hocking (1999a, 24) states that the development of an alternative diplomacy as managed by NGOs and transnational movements promotes the prospect of an international order that transcends the state system. Indeed, the inroads made by NGOs in the diplomatic arena inevitably raise the probability of rivalry with sovereign governments and question the monopoly of professional diplomats in the field. The failed WTO round in Seattle during November 1999 was a startling reminder of the extent to which NGOs and other representatives of international civil society can impede the processes of international diplomacy.

Supporters of the profession contend that diplomacy does not cease to be diplomacy because the actors in the field are increasing or because non-professionals contribute to its objectives. Moreover, several commentators have identified the development of a complementary relationship in the field – a new method of

diplomacy, namely polylateral diplomacy (Langhorne and Wallace 1999, 19; Wiseman 1999, 11). Hocking (1999a, 31–36) uses the term 'catalytic diplomacy' to describe this growing symbiosis between state and nongovernmental actors within the foreign policy community, and observes that there is less and less distinction between 'official' and 'unofficial' diplomacy. An example of the recognition given to the cooperative relationship is the increasing incidence of NGOs not only participating in the foreign policy agenda-setting process, but being included in national delegations to international conferences. Vale (1993, 37) points out that these cooperative ventures not only allow for a democratic input in the foreign policy making process, but also serve as a legitimising process for governments.

According to Hocking (1999a, 33), catalytic (or polylateral) diplomacy builds on, rather than replaces, more traditional 'official' diplomacy. It manifests strongly in the international pursuits of companies, who may seem a-national but do, in fact, act in support of state functions and needs. He notes that, although their paradiplomacy is most prevalent in areas of 'low' politics and military-security issues remain firmly in the domain of the state, the role of catalytic diplomacy impacts on the latter also, in that it often assumes a preventative function. In recognition of this role, Langhorne (1998, 158) says the UN's active coordinating role in the world of NGOs is an example of how the current diplomatic system can be involved in the management of changes to diplomatic practice, and actually shape such change.

The closer integration of domestic and international environments has enhanced, rather than downplayed, the role of diplomats. As Sofer (1988, 206) asserts, 'the diplomat is the liaison between the various perspectives, ensuring the primacy of political considerations in relations among nations'. This liaison supplies a crucial interpretative linkage that allows for foreign policy strategy to be formulated more comprehensively – for the developing world in particular, where government structures are often weak, a strong partnership with civil society is crucial. Whereas the nongovernmental contribution may boast more expertise, the government contribution adds enforcement capacity and legal weight in international agreements. Recognition of this new role of diplomats has given rise to a new area of specialisation known as 'public diplomacy'. It acknowledges the growing role of the public in matters that were traditionally handled exclusively by diplomats, and the attendant demand for transparency and interconnectivity within the domain of traditional diplomacy. The downside for the profession, as Perlez (2000) points out, is that skilled diplomats are becoming more attractive to the private sector or other state agencies, as their skills in handling international relations become more marketable and in demand outside MFAs.

4. Revisiting the debate about the resident embassy

The recent criticism of professional diplomacy has inevitably targeted its flagship mechanism, the resident embassy, with critics claiming that other agencies are equipped (and could even be subcontracted) to do the same work as well, if not

more efficiently (Bull 1977, 166; Kappeler 1998, 42; Reychler 1996, 3; Sharp 1999, 42; Vella 1998, 15). However, proponents point out that the criticism is rooted in ignorance about the actual work that is performed by diplomats and deficient IR reflection on changes in diplomatic roles (Hocking 1999a, 25; Magalhaes 1988, 95–96; Wolfe 1997, 4–5). In this regard, Cohen (1999, 5) notes that although some functions of the resident embassy have eroded over time, new functions have been added. This has prompted some observers to argue for an increase, rather than a reduction, in state resources to be channelled to the institutions of professional diplomacy, such as resident embassies (Perlez 1999).

4.1 Obituaries of the resident ambassador

Berridge (1995, 32–33) recounts five arguments that would have the resident embassy declared redundant: in the first place, the claim that technological advances in travel and communications have obviated the need for resident embassies; secondly, the belief that symbolic representation and negotiation are better executed *via* direct contact; thirdly, the growth of international organisations and regional integration schemes that have multiplied opportunities for direct international dealing; fourthly, the claim that media omnipresence has made redundant information gathering and reporting by diplomats; and lastly the argument that embassies are becoming security hazards in a world where they could be manipulated for ideological or other hostile reasons (arguments supported *inter alia* by Clough 1998 and Riordan 2003, 107–119).

Various commentators emphasise the additional disadvantages of cumbersome logistics and public expenses associated with maintaining a physical presence in a host country. Clough (1998) bluntly calls resident missions ‘an expensive anachronism’, and infers that resident missions are staffed by foreign service officers who do not have appropriate expertise – their mandate simplifies and underestimates the complex web of relations, especially commercial ties, among state as well as nongovernmental actors in the field of international relations.

4.2 Reprieve of the resident ambassador

Not all commentators are convinced that diplomacy should revert to the pre-sixteenth century practice of using only temporary missions. Instead, they present what Cohen (1999,1–4) calls an evaluation of diplomacy’s ‘irreducible functions, free of fashionable prejudice’. Cohen contends that there has never been a viable substitute for permanent diplomatic missions in terms of addressing the basic functions of diplomacy. Various other proponents agree that the stability and continuity offered by permanent missions are such compelling considerations that even revolutionary states that have consistently rejected Western values and institutions have gone to considerable lengths in order to establish and maintain their embassies (Berridge 1995, 1; Hamilton and Langhorne 1995, 233).

The debate about resident missions has in fact inspired world-wide research on the motivation for their continued existence. The results invariably evoke the functions of the resident embassy, as codified into international law by Article 3 of the 1961 *Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations*:

1. *The function of representation:* States continue to value and protect their sovereignty and in this regard a resident ambassador fulfils a powerful symbolic role. In many cases the establishment, continued existence or closure of an embassy is symbolically 'loaded' and intended to send a political message about the nature of bilateral relations. Seen from a practical perspective, political leaders simply cannot be everywhere all the time – the existence of embassies therefore broadens a state's representative options and thus its repertoire of nonverbal signals (Berridge 1995, 34–35).

   Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (ISD) adds another perspective. In its 1997 report on the contemporary relevance of resident missions, the ISD warns that it is easy for First World critics to argue that advances in communication and transport have made resident embassies obsolete. The reality is that technological progress is not evenly spread: certain countries may be of strategic diplomatic importance, yet may not be as 'linked to the web' or feature as prominently on international airline routes, as other countries that are politically speaking relatively less important. This is particularly true in the case of many developing countries (also noted by Wolfe 1997, 24, 25).
2. *The function of protecting state interests:* The functions that constitute an embassy's mandate, be they political, economic, administrative, consular or purely representative, remain vital to the security of a sovereign state, and cannot be delegated on an *ad hoc* basis to other agencies. Often, the mere physical diplomatic presence of one state in another state's capital prevents it from being sidelined by the host government or by the other governments represented there, in areas which could potentially yield strategic advantage. Furthermore, as the relative importance of public opinion grows world-wide, so does the necessity to have trained representatives on the ground to extend their sending state's influence and protect its interests.

   Whereas embassies in the past primarily engaged with governments, they now deal increasingly with nongovernmental clients in host countries, covering everything from human rights advocacy to educational exchanges and arms reduction. In practice much more work is therefore being done by embassies, and across a much wider spectrum, than ever before. In many cases the sheer volume of bilateral exchanges, necessitating consular or technical assistance by embassy personnel, requires the existence of a resident mission. The ISD argues that the effects of globalisation's perforated borders have strengthened this imperative. Its 1997 report points out that many problems such as organised crime, terrorism, illegal immigration and narcotics trafficking, among many other issues that were

previously dealt with sufficiently within the context of municipal law, now necessitate very close collaboration among countries. This co-operation often calls for government agents to be stationed in foreign countries and in such cases embassies are the natural umbrella and enabling environment, protected by international law, under which these officials function.

3. *The function of negotiating:* Dr EM Debrah (1996), a former Ghanaian ambassador, insists that the contemporary increase in summitry has enhanced rather than diminished the role of professional diplomats. He says 'politicians are no substitute for the accumulative experience of professional diplomats abroad. Agreements concluded between top-ranking statesmen must be maintained, nurtured, and subjected to periodic reassessment'. In the same vein, Berridge (1995, 1, 40) notes that important state-to-state messages sometimes specifically need unhurried and discreet handling, so as not to attract undue public attention. In such cases a resident ambassador is in a better position to handle the communication in the course of routine duties, especially when the negotiation process is arduous and requires tenacious persistence. He also points out an indirect, multilateral advantage of resident embassies: they have occasion to negotiate with the resident representatives of hostile states on the neutral territory of the host state.
4. *The function of gathering information and reporting thereon:* In spite of the mass availability of global information, certain aspects of information can still only be obtained through traditional diplomatic information-gathering procedures, based mainly on human contact. In closed societies, for example, resident embassies have more access to information than do media, partly because of their immunities and privileges. In open societies, the resident ambassador fulfils a different role: rather than collect information, and 'uninhibited' as Sofer (1988, 207) observes 'by considerations of domestic politics and popular rhetoric', he has to present perspective on a barrage of public information, analysing and packaging it for consumption by his own government.
5. *The function of promoting friendly bilateral relations:* Debrah (1996) asserts that the need for continuity *via* a trusted interlocutor who 'is there all the time' is the 'real justification for the resident ambassador'. The promotion of friendly relations requires a professional who can cultivate contacts and network on a continuous basis, and permanent residence provides much needed opportunities to facilitate the rectification of errors and occasional unintended misunderstandings.

The human element of international relations, which is lost in distance communications, is considered indispensable by all proponents of resident missions. Equally important is the continuity of such personal interaction. In the same way that major corporations have representative offices abroad, governments also need representatives who know the situation on the ground and who can interact accordingly, on a continuous basis.

5. Reforming the profession

MFAs have, since World War Two, increasingly come under attack for wasting resources and for failing to address more complex and competitive international conditions. In an attempt to counter the spectre of redundancy, and to overcome what Burt and Robison (1998, xii, 53) call 'unacceptable performance gaps', many MFAs have during the past two decades responded *via* a process of self-imposed transformation, aided by the implementation of more professional standards in diplomatic recruitment and training.

5.1 Transformation of foreign ministries

Apart from wider reflection on the conduct of contemporary diplomacy, the following functional aspects of MFAs have recently been subjected to review and reform:

1. *Organisational structure:* Most MFAs have undertaken structural reforms in response to global challenges to the profession, *inter alia* establishing specialised multilateral divisions and functional areas that reflect the new issues on the global diplomatic agenda. Restructuring has affected not only MFA head offices but also the number, location and function of missions abroad. An increasingly common development is the functional amalgamation of foreign ministries with other government agencies that focus on the international environment, such as those responsible for international trade, development assistance, environmental issues and energy. Barston (1997, 11) says that for newer states, implementing the appropriate organisational structure for the formulation and implementation of international development strategies is of particular concern.
2. *Expenditure:* In response to financial constraints – as a result of either public scrutiny or, in the case of poor states, actual lack of resources – a current trend for MFAs all over the world is to reduce operational costs. A basic step has been the reduction or outsourcing of functions that can be performed by other agencies. Another method has been attenuation of universal diplomatic representation by decreasing the number of nonessential missions abroad, or by downscaling the transferred staff component in missions and extending the use of locally recruited personnel.
3. *Democratisation and professionalisation of MFA management:* In response to democratic imperatives for transparency and productivity, and in an effort to shed a historical image of societal elitism, MFAs world-wide are professionalising internal management styles and methods. An important trend is to employ management techniques that mirror private sector paradigms of efficient client service delivery. Administrative streamlining has also been utilised not just to make professional diplomacy more cost effective but to enhance its competitive advantage by means of technological support.
4. *Coordination of foreign policy execution:* Many MFAs are being repositioned to

prevent marginalisation in the management of external affairs in light of rivalry within the domestic governmental apparatus and the activity of a growing number of other foreign policy stakeholders. This means that MFAs are redefining their role, as 'the pyramid of authority is being flattened by the nature of the work to be done' (Langhorne 1999) and moving in the direction of 'being a node in the interdependent network which is world politics' (Neumann 1999, 153). In the process of advising on policy formulation, MFAs therefore increasingly consult on an intragovernmental level and consider (even solicit) the many new and often divergent opinions within the foreign policy community. For the developing world, coordination of coherent national policy responses to regional and global developments assumes an even higher priority in light of the need to render developmental imperatives the driving force of foreign policy execution.

5.2 Refining diplomatic training

Until fairly recently, diplomats were universally selected from small social and intellectual elites and professional requirements were merely, as Kappeler (1998, 39) notes, 'an excellent general education, perfect manners and of course full fluency in French'. This practice reflected the popular notion that diplomacy was an art rather than a science, and thus not 'trainable' – a myth that the professionalisation of diplomacy has dispelled with. Indeed, a prominent element in the transformation of MFAs has been the world-wide widening and deepening of career-specific training for diplomacy as a crucial element of MFA capacity building. This trend reflects a growing appreciation of the increasing – and increasingly complicated – roles that contemporary diplomats need to fulfil. Moreover, the global trend is towards making training continuous throughout a diplomatic career, and targeting a wider group than just professional diplomats, i.e. making training available to the spectrum of government officials involved in international liaison.

The expansion of international society, in particular the many new states emerging from decolonisation and the disintegration of the communist bloc, and the resultant need for many new functional foreign services, has added to the groundswell in diplomatic training. By the start of the new millennium there were more than forty formal diplomatic training academies in the world. The world-wide demand for diplomatic training has resulted in the multiplication of the hosts of training to include nontraditional private and multinational host institutions, making the outsourcing of diplomatic training more common and acceptable. The growth in career-specific training for diplomacy has caused unprecedented international co-operation among stakeholders in the field, as a result of which more resources and information are shared and programmes are amended to reflect international best practice. The net beneficiary has been the profession of diplomacy – it has gained in status, integrity and expertise.

6. Conclusion

Diplomacy has always been in a state of evolution but the past century has had a particularly dramatic impact on the institution, exponentially expanding its scope and means and the number of actors involved. Humankind's most violent century prompted an 'avalanche of history', as Feltham (1993, 2) phrases it, causing change at every conceivable level at a tempo that left people bewildered and systems inadequate. Whereas the focus of diplomacy had for centuries been Europe, the twentieth century diffused this centre of gravity as dozens of new states entered the international arena. They impacted on every aspect of diplomacy – its demographics, its agenda and its styles and methods.

One constant has been the incremental professionalisation of the institution. If anything, diplomacy has become more institutionalised, more legalised and more exercised than ever before. As Sofer (1988, 208) says, rather than characterising the contemporary era as the decline of diplomacy, it may well become known as the 'century of diplomacy'. Criticism that the statecentric profession has become obsolete in the face of theoretical and practical challenges to the primacy of the state therefore seem to be premature and lacking in understanding of its *raison d'être*. The reality remains that the entities professional diplomats represent are predominantly states with complex and vital external interests, the management of which cannot simply be outsourced on an *ad hoc* basis. Whatever their relative size or power, all states have a stake in the symbolic and utilitarian value of diplomatic representation, hence the irrefutable fact that the institutional framework of diplomatic practice is universally replicated, even by states that are attempting to reform the international order.

If the profession has experienced quantitative changes, it has, however, also experienced a qualitative metamorphosis. Diplomacy, along with all the other areas of human concern, has become truly globalised, as an increasing number of international issues now transcend the traditional jurisdiction of states. Moreover, the democratisation of international society and the fact that many issues on the diplomatic agenda are of a technical nature have prompted the involvement of anational and subnational entities in the international arena. As a result the field of diplomacy has become much more complex and the profession increasingly subject to public scrutiny. The practice of diplomacy, which was traditionally reserved for the executive branch of government and professional diplomats, has thus become a polylateral activity. As Hocking (1999a, 26) points out, this 'diffusion of diplomacy' has witnessed the development of a multiplicity of actors and channels in the conduct of foreign relations, with a symbiotic relationship developing between 'official' and 'unofficial' diplomacy. As MFAs lose their monopoly in the conduct of external relations, the role of professional diplomats shifts to facilitation and management of diplomatic processes, a mandate that is enabled by their legal status as representatives of sovereign states.

The criticisms of diplomacy and its mechanisms are important because they highlight the areas within the profession that fail to meet the changing needs of the players on the international stage. A crucial response in this regard is MFA transformation, a trend that is gaining momentum as MFAs across the globe are restructured and repositioned: *inter alia* by means of career-specific training to produce the kind of professionals who can counter the risks and seize the opportunities presented by contemporary challenges to diplomacy.

Notes

1. Institution, in this context, refers to the officially recognised international practice of diplomacy. The term diplomacy thus implies more than just an activity or process: as Wolfe (1997:14) explains, the practice of diplomacy is an institution precisely because its structures are reproduced by action.

2. There were some historical exceptions – India and China, for example, during classical antiquity had well-developed diplomatic institutions.

3. From a legal procedural perspective, the term diplomat (hence 'diplomatic staff' in the context of diplomatic missions) is applied to those officials who are accorded legal diplomatic status when working abroad and who, in hierarchical professional ascent in their MFAs, are in line to attain the eventual rank of ambassador. The term excludes, therefore, other categories of transferred personnel that are employed in diplomatic missions, namely administrative staff, technical staff and service staff.

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