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Whither Foreign Ministries in a Post-Western World?*

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'It's the Foreign Ministry, Jim, but not as we know it.'
(with apologies to Star Trek)

The existential crisis of diplomacy is a cliché well past its sell-by date. No one seriously doubts the future of diplomats or diplomacy. The position of the foreign ministry is less secure. As domestic ministries contribute more to foreign policy, which itself becomes more domestic, many argue that foreign ministries have lost their role. They have lost their monopoly over foreign policy making. Their aspiration to coordinate the international activity of other ministries will be disappointed.

We recommend foreign ministries:

- Drive innovation in the development and management of delivery and knowledge networks, home and abroad, within and without government.
- Influence policy through ensuring that these networks map the objectives of international strategy.
- In a post-western world of fragmenting rule sets and contested values, serve as the GPS both to government and society as a whole.
- Provide the 4-dimensional vision that will ensure coherence over time and across geography.

Rather than mourning the passing of traditional roles or aspiring to roles that belong elsewhere, foreign ministries will take advantage of their 'liberation' to shape the parameters of foreign policy through the networked tools of its implementation.

Introduction

Foreign ministries and their diplomats must manage a highly heterogenous international system.

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If the first decade after the fall of the Soviet Union seemed a period of diplomatic convergence set against the background of globalization, it appears now to have been a specific consequence of a brief period of US hegemony rather than a long-term trend.

The diplomatic environment of the future will rather be marked by fragmentation of rule sets and conflicts between agendas. Different kinds of states with different historical and cultural assumptions about the nature of international relations will pursue narrow international interests while being forced to collaborate over broader civilizational threats. The fall-out from the global financial crisis will mean that national interests are progressively being framed in economic as well as political terms, increasing tensions with environmental and humanitarian agendas. Further developments in ICT and social media will continue to increase the number and variety of non-state international actors, complicating further the challenges to foreign ministries and their diplomats. Continued travel and growing diasporas will maintain the pressures on consular services.[1] At the same time, budgetary pressures will ensure that these challenges must be met with ever fewer resources. To do ever more with ever less, foreign ministries will be forced into radical innovation in structures and techniques. Yet core diplomatic skills will remain surprisingly recognizable.

Wicked Issues in a post-Western World

Globalization has left its mark on diplomacy and foreign ministries. The breakdown of the distinction between domestic and foreign policy has ended the foreign ministry's gatekeeper role and near monopoly of foreign policy. Almost all government ministries now deal with international policy. This internationalization of domestic policy is reflected by the increasing numbers of home civil servants posted on attachment in embassies overseas. In many embassies career diplomats are now a minority. This trend looks set to continue. The foreign policy of a country is no longer the product or responsibility of the foreign ministry alone, but of the National Diplomatic System of which the foreign ministry forms but a part.

The rapid development of the information communication technologies associated with globalization has transformed both the management of foreign ministries and their information gathering. If the new ICT has all too often become an excuse for the micro-management of overseas missions by the centre, its has also forced the diplomat abroad to justify her posting by value-added over a home-based official armed with a lap-top and the internet. The new ICT has also opened up new possibilities for non-governmental actors. The internet offers NGOs and other civil society groups an information gathering capacity comparable to that of governments, while combined with new social media it facilitates networking and campaigning at a global level. The in-house knowledge of many NGOs exceeds that of MFAs, especially on the new security issues. In a networked world, solutions emerge from the roots: NGOs capture these with greater agility than governments. Diplomats must take such non-governmental actors seriously as fellow participants in international relations.

The importance of non-governmental actors has been reinforced by the development of the New International Security Agenda, itself a by-product of globalization.

1. See for a recent analysis of the Australian case Alexandra Oliver, *Consular Conundrum: The Rising Demands and Diminishing Means for Assisting Australians Overseas*, Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2013, http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/consular-conundrum-rising-demands-and-diminishing-means-assisting-australians-overseas

As security is redefined in terms of the individual within the state, a new series of 'civilizational' threats such as pandemic disease and climate change have moved to the centre of international relations together with economic security. These so-called 'wicked problems' have certain common features: solutions are not straightforward, if they exist; they are global – no country, or even regional grouping, can tackle them alone; and they require collaboration beyond governments between different civil societies. The role of diplomats lays less in offering and negotiating policy responses to this agenda than in facilitating contacts and promoting networks between non-governmental and civil society groups. Civil society actors may be allies as well as rivals. Policymaking must be opened to broader debate, both within government and more widely with civil society. Foreign ministries may have a key role in integrating the divergent players, governmental and non-governmental, within coherent global debate.

The rule sets, and value systems, which appeared to order international political and commercial relations in the post-cold war phase of globalization, are increasingly contested. Not only has the World Trade Organization been unable to increase the range of its remit, but it is ineffective even within its existing competences. Its inability to force Chinese compliance with its entry commitments forms part of a broader institutional fragmentation. Western value systems, including human rights instruments, are challenged by alternative value systems. The global financial crisis has called into question the worth of previously dominant western economic theories and systems. Other regional power centres are increasingly confident in their own alternative approaches. Neither governments nor firms can any longer rely on global norms protecting their international relationships. They must navigate between a plethora of local interpretations or alternatives. Smaller and rogue states can take advantage of the interstices between rule sets to indulge in behaviour thought outlawed a decade ago. Thus Argentina can expropriate a Spanish oil firm without fear of the opprobrium of the international trading system, while authoritarian states in Africa can ignore Europe's good governance agenda confident in the receipt of Chinese aid 'without strings' in exchange for their raw materials.

The Decline of European Normative Diplomacy

While European foreign ministries focus on the issues of the New International Security Agenda, in other parts of the world governments are more concerned about more traditional geopolitical conflicts over territory, influence and resources. Even in north-western Europe, geopolitical concerns feature as prominently as environmental issues in debates on the future of the Arctic. In East Asia the main preoccupation of many foreign ministries is how to manage their relations with China. For China the central concerns remain managing its relationships with the US and Russia while guaranteeing the supply of energy and raw resources essential to its continued economic growth. This growing prominence of geopolitical agendas coincides with the resurgence of the modern state. While in part this reflects the renewed importance of security issues post-9/11, it also reflects the fragmentation of global rule sets and the consequent decline of European normative diplomacy. This poses serious challenges to those self-consciously post-modern states which seek to base international relations on shared values, pooling of sovereignty and agreed analysis of global challenges. Modern and post-modern states mix uneasily.

The differences in the nature of states and their diplomatic cultures are also reflected in definitions of national interests. European foreign ministries are placing increasing emphasis on economic diplomacy. In part this is an understandable reaction to the economic crisis, in

part an effort to justify the cost of diplomatic services to a sceptical citizenry and their political representatives. This risks declining into a renewed mercantilism or even a form of 'beggar thy neighbour' national competition. To avoid this, some foreign ministries focus on facilitating the global value chains needed for international production. This in turn risks of falling foul of the postmodern versus modern conflict. In neither case is it easy to identify a specific economic diplomacy which is not part of a broader political diplomacy. Those countries perhaps more aware of the geopolitical context take a more holistic approach, even using development assistance as a crucial strategic foreign policy tool. The economic welfare of the country is seen as part of the overall national security agenda and its needs are integrated into the national diplomatic strategy. This reinforces the sense in which foreign policy is developed and implemented by the National Diplomatic System as a whole rather than the foreign ministry.

Concentrating the Network

If the work loads of foreign ministries and their diplomats looks set to increase in an uncertain and fragmenting world, the resources available to fulfil these tasks looks equally set to reduce. The fall-out of the global economic crisis has already led to draconian budget cuts, particularly for some European foreign ministries: the Netherlands Foreign Ministry is scheduled to cut about 55 million euro's from its overseas missions by 2015 while the Spanish Foreign Ministry budget was cut by 54% in 2011-2012. These cuts are more likely to be continued than reversed. Foreign ministry budgets will remain tempting targets for fiscal conservatives. To square the circle of how to do more with less foreign ministries will be forced into innovation in techniques and organization. The innovation will need to be driven by the roles and functions identified above. While diplomats can learn from other areas of activity, including business and the military, they can no longer afford to lift the latest ready-made solutions from the business shelf. Innovation in particular should focus on structures, networks and knowledge management.

The nature of diplomatic missions has changed significantly over recent years. The pressure for change will continue. Permanent postings overseas are likely to become more rather than less important, but have to be justified by value added over alternative ways of doing the work. The staffing of each mission will need to be tied much tighter to the specific tasks of that mission – a generalized 'presence' will be hard to justify. Micro, peripatetic, virtual or shared missions will play an increasing part in most diplomatic networks. To the extent that missions possess specific skills and knowledge, the ICT should be used to integrate the mission into the policy-making process. Indeed, effective use of ICT should allow skills and knowledge on a specific issue to be tapped wherever they reside in the diplomatic network. It should also enable diplomatic services to more effectively concentrate relevant human resources where they are needed in a crisis, whether consular or political.

Knowledge management will remain a major challenge for diplomatic services in the 21st century. They can no longer maintain extensive in-house knowledge reserves against a possible future occurrence of one of Donald Rumsfeld's 'unknown unknowns' (or even 'known unknowns'). Yet in a highly dynamic and unpredictable international system, it is difficult if not impossible to predict what will be the key knowledge/skill resources needed in five years (or even six months) time. The solution may lie in the creation of a 'diplomatic reserve', inspired by the analogous military reserve. A diplomatic reserve would consist of a network of foreign policy experts spread through thinks tanks and academia, the business world and elsewhere, who could be called on when and if needed.

Issues of loyalty and compensation have already been tackled in the military version, which also offers the model of short term officers who then pass into the reserve. As in other aspects of innovation, the key is the dispersal of knowledge and expertise throughout a network that can then be concentrated when necessary.

Beyond Battles over Lost Territory

If there is little debate about the future of diplomacy, many would argue that the internationalization of domestic policy and the loss of its gatekeeper role leave the foreign ministry in intensive care. Foreign ministries in many non-western countries feel under less pressure to justify their existence, but often rank much lower in the pecking order of government ministries. In some key emerging countries, as for instance in China, foreign ministries are relegated to a lower status or merely implement policies decided elsewhere.[2] Rather than fight forlorn battles over lost territory, they should focus on the key functions essential to successful foreign policy in the 21st century and identify which should be carried out within the foreign ministry.

These roles will not include coordination of foreign policy, which will either move up or down the decision-making chain. The broad range of issues now included within foreign policy, the divergent actors governmental and non-governmental, and the risk of conflict between the new security and more traditional geopolitical agendas make policy coordination within the National Diplomatic System essential. Foreign ministries will argue that their knowledge and experience of the 'foreign' makes them uniquely well-placed to coordinate. But other ministries will be reluctant to submit to what they see as foreign ministry oversight and interference. They will argue that coordination is easiest where all the relevant officials are present. For minor issues this will mean the coordination role moving down to embassies and other overseas missions. For more controversial issues, coordination will inevitably move up to prime ministers' offices and chancelleries.

The New Foreign Ministry

Instead of prolonging a futile struggle to retain the coordination role, Foreign Ministries should focus on those areas they are uniquely well qualified for:

- *Growing Importance of the Delivery Network*
  Management of the diplomatic network will extend beyond more traditional management of diplomatic estates and human resources. It will be the area in which the Foreign Ministry will most effectively shape a country's overseas strategy. The shape and structure of the network will form an essential statement of the country's diplomatic strategy. Organizational innovation will require the ability to store information about resources (human, material and virtual) and to concentrate where and when they are needed. Both the network and its individual nodes must be designed to map specific policy needs and objectives. Horizontal project teams spanning physical and organizational borders will increasingly replace stable hierarchical structures. Managing the innovation and implementation in the diplomatic networks of the 21st century will pose challenges of content as much as form.

2. See on the diluted role of China's foreign ministry as the country's international role is growing: International Crisis Group, *Dangerous Waters: China-Japan Relations on the Rocks*, Asia Report No. 245 (8 April 2013), pp. 34-36.

- *Knowledge and Skills from Within and Outside the MFA*
  Foreign ministries will take on the key challenge of knowledge management in an uncertain world. Ministries will need to be able to keep track of knowledge and skills both with the ministries' own networks (at home and abroad) as well as external networks. This will require the development of wide-ranging networks of knowledge and skills without as much as within the foreign ministry and its diplomatic network to be drawn on as and when necessary. The foreign ministry will have to manage this 'Diplomatic Reserve', finding ways of ensuring loyalty and discretion other than monetary reward. Foreign ministries should draw on the knowledge and experience of the armed forces and defence ministries in maintaining ad deploying military reserves.

- *Global Navigation*
  Foreign ministries, backed up by their diplomatic and knowledge networks, are ideally placed to provide the historical, cultural and geopolitical analysis to enable them to serve as the global GPS of the 21st century. Governments and firms will need guidance on the fragmenting and contested rule sets and value systems that will govern the 21st century. They will need to know which rules apply and how to ensure their implementation, as well as when the rule sets can advantageously be avoided. In this post-western world not everything is as new as it seems. Global fragmentation can amount to the re-emergence of older ways of dealing with the world. Here the traditional accumulated wisdom of diplomacy comes in handy.

- *Whole of Society Diplomacy*
  While the National Diplomatic System captures the all-government nature of modern diplomacy, 21st century diplomacy will move beyond this to the whole of society, at home as well as abroad. Non-state actors (including non-state governments as well as NGOs and civil society) will be collaborators as well as rivals. On some issues, especially the New International Security Agenda, they are essential partners who will bear the burden of collaboration with their overseas counterparts. To ensure effectiveness and coherence, their efforts will need to be integrated consciously or unconsciously within the national diplomatic strategy. Foreign ministries will need to develop networks of trust and collaboration at home to support similar networks abroad, integrating both with the broader policy making machine. These networks must be credible and deliver, for non-governmental as well as governmental actors. Tokenism risks undermining the foreign ministries remaining functions.

- *4-D Vision*
  It is no news that governments come under increasing pressure from the media, both traditional and new social, to react immediately to international events. Coordination and coherence are needed not only between different areas of policy but also across time and geographical space. An increasingly volatile and unpredictable world requires the ability to take the longer view, sideways as much as backwards and forwards. Foreign ministries need to develop a holistic four-dimensional vision of a country's strategic engagement with the world. They already have much of the knowledge and experience, and will access more through the exogenous knowledge network of the diplomatic reserve. But they will need to significantly improve their analytical and modelling capabilities.

About Clingendael

Clingendael is the Netherlands Institute of International Relations. We operate as a think-tank, as well as a diplomatic academy, and always maintain a strong international perspective. Our objective is to explore the continuously changing global environment in order to identify and analyse emerging political and social developments for the benefit of government and the general public.

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