DIPLOMACY

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Keywords: diplomacy, negotiation, prenegotiation, summitry, telecommunication, embassy, consular, representative, bilateral, multilateral, conference, mediation, track one, track two, protecting power, interests sections, multiparty mediation, ripe moment

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Summary

Diplomacy is the communications system of an international society, the most important purpose of which is to promote negotiated agreements between states. Since the end of the fifteenth century it has consisted chiefly of missions stationed permanently abroad that enjoy sufficient immunity from local jurisdiction to enable them to function even in hostile circumstances. The ministry of foreign affairs, the nerve centre of this system,

may not have the influence it attained in the nineteenth century but it remains important for the coordination of foreign policy. Following the First World War, however, the dominance of traditional bilateral diplomacy, though secured with unprecedented firmness by the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961), was increasingly eroded by multilateral diplomacy, summitry, and direct telecommunication.

Multilateral conferences bring together all of the parties whose agreement on an issue is necessary and advertise the priority they are giving it to the world. However, standing conferences freeze the founding power structure, while meetings held in public encourage posturing rather than serious negotiation. Fortunately, more importance is now attached to confidential discussion, while reaching agreement by consensus is now the favored method of decision-making. In crises the telephone is especially valued by friendly states, not least at the highest levels. Nevertheless, even enthusiastic supporters of telecommunication acknowledge its limitations. As for summits, seen as the province of amateurs, these have always made diplomatists nervous. Nevertheless, experience has improved their performance. Mediation is also an important feature of the world diplomatic system. Official, unofficial, or some combination of both, mediation tends to be most successful when one party has formal responsibility. Without diplomacy in all of its manifestations, complex relations between states on a regular basis would be impossible and it is for this reason that diplomacy is the most important institution of international society.

1. Introduction

Diplomacy is the communications system of an international society, the most important purpose of which is to promote agreements between states, whether by negotiation or tacit understanding. Since the end of the fifteenth century it has consisted chiefly of embassies and other missions stationed permanently abroad that enjoy sufficient immunity from local jurisdiction to enable them to continue functioning even in circumstances of marked hostility. Following the First World War, however, this system of bilateral diplomacy was increasingly supplemented by multilateral diplomacy, summitry, and direct telecommunication. Without diplomacy in all of its manifestations, complex relations between states on a regular basis would be impossible and it is for this reason that diplomacy is the most important institution of international society.

There is a view that diplomacy has its remote origins in the procedures employed for the conduct of their relations by the Great Kings of the Ancient Near East in the second millennium BC. These included a rudimentary norm of diplomatic immunity for messengers that was based essentially on a code of hospitality spiced with the ever-present threat that their status as guest would slip imperceptibly into that of hostage. Certainly, too, it may be unwise to minimize the significance of the introduction into Ancient Greece, roughly one thousand years later, of the *proxenos*, a citizen of one city-state employed by another as a resident agent in his own city. However, the most widely held view remains that the present world diplomatic system has its roots in late fifteenth century Italy. It was here that permanent embassies with broad responsibilities, headed by citizens of sending states, were first established, their purpose being to supplement the work of the temporary envoys upon whom exclusive reliance had previously been placed.

The system as it evolved after this exhibited other distinguishing features. These included elaborate ceremonial and protocol, the last having the task of obviating the necessity for diplomats to argue afresh about procedure each time they met. Emphases on honesty as well as secrecy in negotiations were other important characteristics, as was increasing professionalism. Apart from the ministry of foreign affairs, which first made its appearance in the early seventeenth century, its most significant feature remained permanent representation abroad.

Temporary embassies were expensive to dispatch, vulnerable on the road, and -- because of the high status required of their leaders -- always likely to cause varying degrees of trouble over precedence and ceremonial. As a result, when diplomatic activity intensified in the late fifteenth century, it is not surprising that the advantages of leaving envoys to reside permanently at important courts were soon discovered and widely appreciated. This was especially true of the city states of the Italian peninsular, where the balance of power was wobbling even before the catastrophic invasion by the French in 1494. In any case, in the new conditions it had also become difficult to find enough suitable persons to act in the role of envoy, which was even less popular than modern-day jury service. However, apart from its practical advantages, the institutionalization of the resident ambassador also signaled an increasing awareness that diplomacy itself worked most efficiently when it was a continuous rather than episodic process.

A view sometimes heard is that continuous representation made it easier to launch a diplomatic initiative without attracting the attention that would accompany the arrival of a special envoy. Nevertheless, this point may be exaggerated since an important initiative taken by a resident envoy was often attended by a flurry of messengers, the significance of whose arrival inevitably became the subject of intense speculation in the local diplomatic corps. More importantly, continuous representation in a foreign state produced maximum familiarity with conditions and personalities in the country concerned and was thus likely to produce a more regular and reliable flow of information back home. It would also be more likely to produce the kind of intelligence, personal contacts, and sheer experience that would prove invaluable when an important negotiation had to be undertaken, even if this should not be entrusted to the ambassador himself. (It remained customary to continue sending higher ranking special envoys to conduct important negotiations.)

Permanent diplomatic missions became the cardinal feature of diplomacy and, though initially greeted in some quarters with suspicion, were strengthened as the customary "law of nations" dealing with them evolved quite rapidly after the late sixteenth century. This made provision first for special immunities from local criminal and civil jurisdiction of the person of the envoy and then of the premises that he occupied. As might have been expected, however, the more powerful and thus relatively more relaxed states -- including France itself -- were slower to dispatch than to receive resident embassies. The Ottoman Empire did not experiment with residents of its own until 1793. As for Manchu China, this vast state did not entertain foreign relations on this basis until 1861. First it had to be induced to view foreign states as sovereign equals rather than as barbarous vassals whose representatives must acknowledge this status by the delivery of tribute and performance of the kow-tow to the Emperor.

In the early twentieth century the diplomatic system came under attack and was modified significantly. In an increasingly nationalistic and democratic age, "diplomatists", as its professional exponents had come to be known, were accused of pathological secretiveness, too pronounced an aristocratic lineage, a disposition to "go native", and methods of work that were simply too slow to cope with the urgent problems presented by the new era. Nevertheless, the "old diplomacy" was not -- as some hoped and others feared -- transformed altogether. The "open diplomacy" of ad hoc and permanent conferences (notably the League of Nations) was simply grafted onto the existing network of bilateral communications. As for the anti-diplomacy of the Communist regimes in Soviet Russia and subsequently in China, this was relatively short-lived. Why did diplomacy survive these assaults and continue to develop to such a degree and in such an inventive manner that at the beginning of the twenty-first century we can speak with some confidence of a world diplomatic system of unprecedented strength? The reason is that the conditions that first encouraged the development of diplomacy have for some decades obtained perhaps more fully than ever before. These are a balance of power between a plurality of states, mutually impinging interests of an unusually urgent kind, relative cultural (including religious and ideological) toleration, and efficient and secure international communication.

2. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Until the seventeenth century, responsibility for diplomacy in the states of Europe was routinely allocated between separate bureaucracies on a geographical basis, some of them also being responsible for certain domestic matters. It was in France that this picture began to change, when in 1626 the first ministry dealing with foreign affairs generally, or "Ministry of Foreign Affairs" (MFA) as it is usually known today, was created by Cardinal Richelieu, the legendary chief minister of the French King, Louis XIII. By the eighteenth century similar ministries were the general rule in Europe; the American State Department was established in 1789.

A major reason for the creation of the MFA was, of course, to recruit, brief, dispatch, finance, and maintain secure and regular communications with the state's representatives abroad. However, despite this intimate link, work at home and work abroad were very different. Persons attracted to one sort were not as a rule attracted to the other, and it was not unusual for mutual sympathy to be at a discount. The result was that, except in small states, it became the norm for the two branches of diplomacy to be organized separately and have distinctive career ladders, between which there was little transfer. It was also usual for the representatives abroad to be themselves divided into separate services, the diplomatic and the consular -- and sometimes the commercial as well. Diplomats worked in the embassy or legation located in the capital city and concentrated on the more prestigious political work, while consuls were scattered around the major ports and industrial centers and dealt more with commercial matters. Conditions and rewards in the consular service were far inferior to those in the diplomatic service and it is not surprising that its recruits came from the lower reaches of the social hierarchy.

These traditional bureaucratic divisions reinforced the prejudices of those involved in the different departments of overseas work and impeded not only mobility but also co-

operation between them. As a result, towards the end of the nineteenth century pressure for a unified service began to mount, and by the second half of the twentieth century this had borne fruit in most states. However, the Swedish services were not integrated until 1976, and the Dutch remain separate to this day.

The MFA remains a visible department of central government in almost all states. However, while its tasks bear a strong family resemblance in whatever national capital it is located, its influence over the content of policy varies rather more from one to another. In states with a long established ministry and a constitutional mode of government, as in Britain and France, it tends to remain highly influential. In others, however, the MFA is much weaker. These include states with shorter diplomatic traditions and highly personalized and arbitrary political leadership, as in much of the third world. The situation also tends to be the same in any state where anxiety over military security has always generated acute neurosis and thus given great influence to the defense ministry, as in Israel and to a lesser degree in the United States. In all states, however, the MFA's influence fluctuates over time, tending to rise or dip for any number of reasons. Among the most important, though, is the personality and level of interest in foreign affairs of the head of government, which is usually great because of the growth of summitry (see below). If a leader suspects political hostility in the MFA, or just regards it as spineless in the face of tough foreign opposition, the ministry's position will tend to be worse still. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office during Mrs Thatcher's period as prime minister in Britain in the 1980s is a case in point.

Whether influential or not, the MFA's tasks are now so considerable that its staff is now significantly larger relative to that of its missions abroad than it was in the nineteenth century. In fact, of the MFAs of the European Union and G8 countries, the personnel ratio generally favors the ministry. Five have ratios of 1:1 (as in China) but a further five actually have a ratio of staff of 2:1 in favor of the MFA. What are these tasks that now demand such relatively large numbers at headquarters? Prominent among them, in fact, are duties at home. Thus it is the MFA that is usually responsible for overseeing the arrangements for visiting dignitaries and mediating between the diplomatic corps and the local community. It also finds itself involved more and more in the traditionally difficult task of building a local constituency. So-called “public diplomacy” is also now a most important function of the MFA, both to the outside world directly and via the support that it provides to the work of overseas missions in this area. Nevertheless, its most important tasks remain staffing and supporting missions abroad, policy advice and implementation, and policy coordination.

2.1. Staffing And Supporting Missions Abroad

As already indicated, an important task for the MFA is, of course, providing the personnel for, and physical fabric of, the state's diplomatic and consular missions abroad. Under this head falls the business of recruitment, training, and selection for particular posts. It also includes finding, maintaining and providing security for buildings abroad, and supporting the diplomats (and their families), especially when they find themselves in “hardship posts” or in the midst of an emergency. Regular inspection is a less popular task now undertaken by the *administrative* departments of many MFAs as part of their general support for missions abroad.

2.2. Policy Advice And Implementation

Once it has got its diplomats and consuls abroad, the MFA has the task of making them work, as well as digesting the fruits of their labor -- policy advice and implementation. This is where the other departments come in, and most of these are arranged partly along geographical and partly along functional lines. *Geographical* departments normally concentrate on regions or occasionally individual states of particular importance to the country concerned, while *functional* departments deal typically with general issues such as arms control, drugs, human rights, and trade. Historically, the geographical departments came first and thus until relatively recently had more prestige. Functional departments focus expertise and advertise the fact that the MFA is seized with the current problems of greatest concern. With the rise in importance of international organizations, most MFAs now have *multilateral* departments as well.

Many MFAs also have departments variously known as "intelligence and research" or "research and analysis". These specialize in general background research and in assessing the significance of information obtained by secret intelligence. If policy advice and implementation is to be carried out properly, the MFA's institutional memory, that is to say, its archives, must also be in good order. This applies especially to the details of promises made and received in the past and potential promises that have been long gestating in negotiations still not complete. This is why such an important section of even the earliest foreign ministries was their archive of correspondence and treaties.

Since foreign policy should also be lawful and since in addition the MFA must sometimes seek to implement it by legal means, legal advice and support is always necessary as well. In some states it has been traditional to provide this from a law ministry (or "ministry of justice") serving all government departments. Nevertheless, the predominant pattern is now for the MFA even of the average least developed country to have its own legal, or "legal and treaties" division, headed by an officer usually known as the "Legal Adviser" or, in French-speaking states, "*Directeur des Affaires Juridiques*".

The MFAs of the developed states, and a few others, also have a policy planning department. Very much a product of the period since World War II, this is a response to the criticism of unpreparedness and was inspired in part by the planning staffs long employed by military establishments. Planning units appear in practice to be chiefly concerned with trying to anticipate future problems and thinking through how they might be met -- and, in the process, challenging conventional mind-sets. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are usually permitted to work directly under the executive head of the MFA.

However the MFA's departments are organized and whatever particular titles they are given, they collect reports and opinions from their missions abroad as well as from outside bodies, including NGOs. In light of this information they advise their political masters on policy and issue instructions to missions consistent with the policy that is agreed. In an acute crisis, this work may be given to a special section within the ministry. With the benefit of the constant stream of new information, the functional and

geographical departments are (or should be) constantly re-examining the advice that they pass upwards.

It is inevitable that the policy advice and implementation function should lead MFA officials to adopt more or less pronounced "departmental" attitudes on certain issues, even entrenched prejudices. For example, the British FCO was for long associated with pro-Arab sentiment, though when the issue of "departmental attitudes" is raised today it is normally its pro-European reflexes that are mentioned. The Progressive Conservative leader, John Diefenbaker, who defeated the Liberal government of Canada in elections in 1957-8, was so convinced that officials in the Department of External Affairs were card-carrying supporters of Lester Pearson, who had been secretary of state since 1948, that he referred to them as 'Pearsonalities'.

2.3. Policy Coordination

Despite the MFA's continuing role in foreign policy advice and implementation, it is rare for it now to have the same authority in the conduct of foreign relations relative to other ministries that it once had. Indeed, it is now a commonplace observation that in all states the "line ministries" -- trade, finance, defense, transport, environment, and so on, not forgetting the central bank -- now engage in direct communication not only with their foreign counterparts but also with quite different agencies abroad. The extent of "direct-dial diplomacy", as it is appropriately called, is now so great that the line ministries commonly have their own international departments. As a result, it is no longer practical for the MFA to insist that all calls to and from abroad be routed through its portals in order to ensure consistency in foreign policy and prevent foreigners from playing off one ministry against another. In short, the MFA can no longer aspire to be the state's "gatekeeper" or "international operator".

The development of direct-dial diplomacy was, of course, a result of the growing complexity and range of international problems during the twentieth century, the diminishing ability of the generalists in the MFA to master them, and the increasing ease with which domestic ministries could make contact with ministries abroad. This development does not mean to say, however, that the MFA has relinquished the task of promoting consistency in the general design and implementation of foreign policy. On the contrary, it has used this trend, together with others, to emphasize the importance of this task and seek to accomplish it in a different and more modest way; that is, by *coordinating* the foreign activities of the line ministries. One way of doing this is to retain a strong emphasis on the geographical principle in the organization of their own departments. Another is to ensure that senior MFA personnel are placed in key positions on any special foreign affairs committee attached to the office of a head of government, such as the Cabinet Office in Britain or the Prime Minister's External Affairs office in Japan.

In most states today the ministry of foreign affairs must formally share influence over the making of foreign policy with other ministries and executive agencies. Nevertheless, in many of them it retains significant influence via its geographical expertise, control of the diplomatic service abroad, investment in public diplomacy, cultivation of domestic alliances, and growing acceptance that it is uniquely well positioned to coordinate the

state's multidimensional international relationships. Most of these, from time to time, issue in the activity of negotiation, which -- even narrowly conceived -- represents the most important function of diplomacy.

3. Negotiation

In international politics, negotiation, narrowly conceived, consists of discussion between officially designated representatives designed to achieve the formal agreement of their governments to the way forward on an issue that is either of shared concern or in dispute between them. Negotiation is only one of the functions of diplomacy and in some situations not the most urgent; this might be issuing a warning or seeking clarification of a statement. In diplomacy via resident missions, it is also true that negotiation is not the activity to which most time is generally devoted. Depending on circumstances, this may be lobbying or public diplomacy. Nevertheless, negotiation even conceived narrowly remains the most important function of the world diplomatic system as a whole. And negotiation becomes more and more its operational focus as we move into the realms of multilateral diplomacy, summitry, and above all into that other growth sector of the world diplomatic system -- mediation. Furthermore, it hardly needs laboring that it is the process of negotiation that grapples head-on with the most threatening problems, whether they are economic dislocation, environmental catastrophe, or war. Students of negotiations usually divide the process into three distinct stages: those concerned with prenegotiations, formula, and details.

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Biographical Sketch

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