

American Diplomacy and the Foreign Language Challenge

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It's an exciting—and challenging—time to be a diplomat. America's diplomats are reaching out to local populations as never before, and are working to support economic prosperity and development in countries throughout the world. For every challenge, the key to outreach, understanding and impact is the ability to speak directly to people in their own language and the capability to understand local perspectives. In this important time, this crucial capacity to communicate and connect empowers US diplomats to better address the world's critical challenges.

Secretary of State Rice has made it a priority for all diplomats overseas to conduct outreach to communities and populations that are not our “traditional” points of contact—youth, people living outside the major cities, and key influencers in a society. She directed the movement of over 100 positions to key areas where she wanted to increase the US presence. She hoped to bolster US impact and influence in countries like China and India, and throughout the Middle East, South Asia and elsewhere.

For the first time, State opened Media Hubs in Dubai and Brussels focused on expanding the US presence on local media, and augmented an office in London focused on the Arabic media. The Dubai Hub is staffed by two Arabic-speaking Foreign Service officers whose full-time job is to get on Arabic language television and radio to present the US perspective. It also supports efforts by Arabic-speaking Ambassadors and officers throughout the region as they use media to get out their messages.

In Brussels, the Hub programs officials and visitors on television and radio throughout Europe, greatly enhancing the US presence and perspective on national and local media. American Presence Posts (APPs)—where one diplomat lives and works in cities outside the capitals—have expanded American outreach into key regional population centers. Innovative Virtual Presence Posts (VPPs) involve the use of Internet sites to focus US government outreach into local communities, touching millions of citizens across Europe, Asia and Latin America.

Central to the success of this initiative is the ability of these “transformational” diplomats to be able to communicate and operate in the local languages, often at a high level of proficiency. Currently the Department of State has 3,875 positions (“language designated positions”) requiring foreign language proficiency in some 70 foreign languages compared to 3,267 language designated positions in 2005.

Meeting the language requirement, which can demand up to two years of training in the more difficult languages such as Arabic and Chinese, is a challenge for a Foreign Service already facing personnel shortages. Fortunately, Congress has answered our calls

for support, providing 300 additional positions to the Department in FY 2009 supplemental funding, with plans for additional personnel in the coming years. To attract well-qualified candidates with language skills to careers in the Foreign Service, the Department of State now offers hiring incentives to those with proficiency in Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Dari, Hindi and Urdu and other critical needs languages.

Meanwhile, at the Department of State's Foreign Service Institute, we are providing more training than ever before. Arabic enrollments have more than tripled since 2001 while Chinese enrollments have more than doubled. We have expanded and enhanced language and area training to more advanced levels including focused targeted in-language media training and other job-specific modules designed to meet the needs of the 21st century foreign affairs professional. Technology is used extensively in both classroom settings and distance learning products offered around the world. Last year alone, over 1,000 State Department and other US government personnel enrolled in distance learning courses to acquire, maintain and improve language proficiency in 18 languages.



Instructors from the Defense Dept. and FSI (at left) and two students (at right) engage in a role playing exercise during a Pashto language training session

Interest in having language-proficient personnel extends beyond State to other foreign affairs agencies, many of whose employees study foreign languages at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) programs in the United States and abroad, or in their own institutions. Through the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) and other groups devoted to cross-agency coordination, the language professionals at FSI maintain close ties with their colleagues at the Defense Language Institute, the military academies, other US government training facilities and academia to share best practices and keep current with trends in foreign language education.

We recognize, however, that there are substantial differences between the intensive and highly focused language training offered at FSI and general foreign language classes at universities. For example, the average foreign language major from an American university is likely to test at 1+ or 2 on a proficiency scale of 0 to 5. The expectation for FSI students would be to reach level 3, general professional proficiency, after only six months of intensive training six hours per day in a language like French, Spanish or Italian, or up to a year or two in languages like Russian or Japanese.

I know my colleagues at the Department of Defense also are working hard in this area. Their Senior Language Authority, Dr. Gail McGinn, recently noted the need to dramatically increase the number of personnel proficient in key languages such as Arabic, Farsi and Chinese to meet the expanding requirements for language and understanding of foreign cultures. The 2005 Defense Language Transformation Roadmap provided the

framework for identifying language requirements and capabilities and expanding language and cultural expertise throughout DOD.

The National Security Education Program (NSEP), launched in 1991, has provided fellowships for language study abroad to undergraduate and graduate students in return for working in the federal national security arena. Since 1994, over 1,000 fellowship recipients with critical needs language skills have entered government service, with the majority entering on duty at the Department of Defense or the Department of State. NSEP also sponsors the National Flagship Language Programs and the National Language Service Corps. The Flagship program has sponsored development of K-12 and university programs in Arabic, Chinese, and Hindi/Urdu among others, whereas the National Language Service Corps will reach out to Americans with proficiency in critical languages to be mobilized in times of national need or emergency.

In January 2006, President Bush launched the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) designed to increase the number of Americans learning critical need foreign languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hindi, Farsi and others through new and expanded programs from kindergarten through university and beyond. Under the direction of the President, the Secretaries of State, Education and Defense and the Director of National Intelligence have developed a plan focused on three goals: (1) to expand the number of Americans mastering critical need languages and to start at a younger age, (2) to increase the number of advanced-level speakers of foreign languages, especially the critical needs languages, and, (3) to increase the number of foreign language teachers and the resources needed to train them. Over time, the benefit to the Department of State, other US government agencies and to the nation will be a larger cadre of speakers of foreign languages available to respond to the nation's diplomatic, military, economic and social needs.