

DIPLOMACY

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Foreign Office Futures

Foreign ministries are more used to reporting on revolutions than being caught up in them. But now long-standing diplomatic practice faces its biggest challenge for generations. In an increasingly electronic environment, foreign services are squeezed between ambitious presidents and prime ministers who seek the limelight and the way domestic issues have become increasingly international.

t RADITIONAL FOREIGN POLICY HAS given way to government-to-government negotiations over the past thirty years, radically altering the context within which Foreign Offices across the developed world operate. The communications revolution, together with economic and social globalisation, has blurred traditional boundaries between the domestic and international. Every government department is now engaged in multilateral diplomacy, dealing directly with opposite numbers in other national administrations, often without keeping embassies fully informed of the business they are transacting. More ministers, from more departments, travel to foreign capitals far more often.

An explosion of staff attached to overseas posts from law enforcement agencies, deals with drug- and people-smuggling, money laundering, transnational criminal and terrorist networks. Mass travel and global communications have made migration a



sensitive political issue, and the issuing of visas and passports a major preoccupation for some posts. Millions of citizens holidaying or living abroad have imposed new demands on consular work, often under immediate and harsh media scrutiny.

Immigration control extends well beyond national borders, through bilateral and multilateral cooperation. For example, one thousand British immigration and borders officers work in France and on joint maritime patrols in the Mediterranean.

The internationalisation of manufacturing and services has complicated export promotion and economic diplomacy. British and German suppliers benefit as much as French when the French president signs an Airbus contract with China. Through sovereign wealth funds, foreign states have become minor shareholders in American and British banks, British ports, Italian and German companies.

Above all, the developed democracies operate in a much more multilateral international framework. The most extensive and active is the European Union (EU); its 29 states making up more than half the membership of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – the institutional framework for economic cooperation among democratic states with open market economies.

The EU now covers a far wider policy agenda than was envisaged in the 1970s, setting rules for competition, technological standards and product safety that often carry global implications. The OECD, far less obtrusively behind the Group of Eight (G8) leading economies, coordinates economic regulation, standard-setting, even action against financial fraud.

The United Nations and its associated agencies have also expanded their multilateral agendas: to include the Kyoto Protocol, the World Health Organization's increasingly-active efforts to contain transnational epidemics, the extension of peacekeeping and the management of a far larger number of displaced people and refugees.

REAL TIME TALK

The communications revolution has taken us from the early 1970s pattern of secure communications between governments passing through embassies, to be decrypted and delivered by diplomats to host governments, to today's encrypted phone lines, secure email and

video conferencing. Staff abroad can now participate in policy discussions in their home capitals in real time. Those in what we used to call domestic ministries can communicate informally and instantly with their foreign interlocuteurs, many of whom they know personally from multilateral working groups.

Summitry – heads of government meetings, bilateral and multilateral, from European Councils to NATO summits, G8, and the multiple consultations between – now occupy a proportion of prime ministerial time that would have astonished leaders from two political generations ago. These reduce foreign ministries to a subordinate relationship with the prime minister's staff, and can make the foreign minister in effect an assistant to the head of government.

There is a limit to the authority of a foreign ministry to coordinate the political dimensions of other departments' external relations. Even where these ministries still retain control over aid and development, they remain among the smallest departments in national administrations, with one of the smallest budgets, largely staffed by a separate service whose members spend much of their careers abroad.

SHARP SQUEEZE

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office has just been going through a strategic review of staffing and resources, driven by a sharp squeeze on its budget and rising demands on its services abroad. But it is in no way unique. Foreign ministries across the developed world are struggling to cope with the increase in the number of states since the end of the Cold War, the pressures of multilateral negotiations, and the demands of their citizens and companies abroad and of other ministries at home. In many ways the British are further ahead in adjusting to these changes than their opposite numbers on the European continent – certainly than the beleaguered State Department in Washington.

In countries with coalition governments, foreign ministries under ministers from a different party to that of the prime minister have held their own a little better in cross-departmental negotiations, but without preventing the prime minister and other members of the cabinet from pursuing direct international negotiations.

The Foreign Office review envisages a twenty-five percent reduction in its resources

devoted to European posts and issues – not as a signal of semi-detachment in European diplomacy, but a recognition that much European business is transacted in Brussels, or direct between responsible officials in relevant ministries, and that limited resources should more usefully be redeployed to the rising economic powers of South and East Asia.

The grand embassies European powers used to maintain in each other's capitals, as the prime channel of communication between them, are in many ways redundant. Yet successful diplomacy within the EU requires strong bilateral links as well as hard negotiations in Brussels. These inform negotiators about other governments' sticking points and build coalitions – with smaller states, which on some issues may be key players – as well as with large. European governments need a new public rationale for their missions in their 'near abroad': no longer embassies in the traditional sense, more permanent government representations.

Ratification of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty will add to the complexities European foreign ministries face, with the creation of an EU External Action Service, jointly-staffed from the European Commission, the Council secretariat and national diplomats on secondment. Its shape will depend on negotiations not yet under way, and on which of the major governments devotes most energy and resources to them.

In the more distant of the 192 member states of the UN, it makes sense for EU governments to pool part – or even all – of their missions. No such government, not even France or Britain, maintains embassies in all foreign countries.

There are now, for example, twenty states in Africa in which London has no resident representation, including Burkina Faso, newly-elected to the UN Security Council, and Chad, to which the EU is despatching a peacekeeping force. Some European governments – most frequently the Germans and the British – share limited facilities; the cost effectiveness of separate embassies is not easy to justify to sceptical finance ministries.

MORE FOREIGN, LESS OFFICE

Diplomatic services have traditionally attracted intellectual and social elites, an international network sharing approaches and values. Today's services risk being displaced in

the major capitals which used to represent their most distinguished postings, while required to serve for an increasing proportion of their careers in uncomfortable – even dangerous – posts in distant continents. The German foreign service, amongst others, is dividing into specialised streams which serve either the 'core' of North Atlantic states or the 'periphery', with the risk that those in the periphery become marginalised in terms of policy-making.

The Foreign Office in London is slimming numbers, in particular senior posts: the objective to become 'more foreign, less office' supports the idea that the balance of the service should be in the field, not duplicating the work of overseas posts or other Whitehall departments. That narrows openings for senior diplomats to serve in London – unless it becomes a normal part of their career to spend time in other departments.

Ambassadors who move from small states up the ladder to major countries are at an increasing disadvantage in representing their political system, economy and society, and understanding the changing cultures of politics and government, however well they follow the emails and telegrams over the years. One recently-retired ambassador remarked to a parliamentary committee that he had spent most of the past twenty years outside Britain.

There is a strong argument in terms of managing government-to-government relations that no-one should be appointed to head a bilateral mission in a major partner state who has not spent the previous three to four years in the national capital. Such appointments would therefore have to be drawn from a wider base in national administrations, and officials with expectations of overseas postings should more often serve outside the foreign ministry and the prime minister's office.

WIDER ISSUES

Now that energy security, climate change, migration and transnational crime are priorities for foreign policy and national security, there is a parallel argument for appointing officials from what used to be called domestic ministries. They need direct experience of how such issues look from the perspectives of other countries, as well as foreign language skills and a good understanding of other societies and political systems. Over the past thirty years, OECD governments have moved some way in this





direction. European diplomatic services have fiercely defended their hold on ambassadorial appointments, but the majority of home-based staff in permanent representations to the EU, and for Britain at least, in some key bilateral posts, is drawn from other ministries.

In France rising diplomats have often served in ministerial cabinets beyond the foreign service. In London the number of secondments and transfers into and out of the Diplomatic Service has been slowly rising. Bureaucratic and career rivalries, sharper in some capitals than others, limit such exchanges. It will take deliberate leadership, perhaps even a transformation of diplomatic services into foreign service groups within the wide civil service, to bring about increasing integration.

The corollary of such integration is that other ministries need wider linguistic skills, and greater knowledge of countries outside the North Atlantic area. Japan, China, India and Brazil are major players in economic and environmental negotiations. The growth of sovereign wealth funds and Middle East financial centres suggests that finance ministries need more Arabic-speakers, too. Foreign language specialists are essential in national police forces, with a growing number attached to embassies abroad. The pursuit of financial fraud requires customs and tax official's familiarity with exotic cultures and languages.

The relationship between overseas posts and national capitals has been transformed by electronics and easier travel. But no European government has yet exploited that ease of movement to bring staff back from posts abroad regularly. Ambassadorial conferences once or twice a year, in most cases only with others in the foreign ministry, could usefully be supplemented by much more regular meetings with home departments directly involved for larger numbers from overseas. Personal contacts build closer working relationships, and increase the credibility of overseas missions in contacts with host governments.

Instant and secure communications now enable posts to participate in real time policy discussions, rather than depending on foreign ministry intermediaries; so these ministries are likely to shrink further. If this is not to produce further marginalisation in national policy-making, foreign ministries will need to sustain their claim to be part of the core of government.

All heads of government have pre-empted key areas of foreign policy by building their

own secretariats, not only for defence and security but also for economic summits and, among EU states to coordinate European policy. Better a small foreign ministry as part of this, staffed by officials who move between there and other ministries as well as between the capital and abroad, than a larger ministry clinging to its separate service, increasingly bypassed.

CONSULAR CONCERNS

The further from the national capital, the more distinctive the role of overseas posts. In Tokyo and Beijing, European and north American governments need fluent linguists with a grasp of the whole range of policy concerns, necessarily operating without as large or continuous a flow of visitors from home. In third-world Africa and parts of Asia, aid administration may play a more important part in the bilateral relationship than foreign policy – though concerns about corruption and the prevention of conflict bring political and defence issues back into play.

In some distant capitals I have been struck by the close cooperation between small staffs in different European embassies – suggesting there is more room for pooling in remote states, and that the EU External Action Service offers an opportunity as well as a problem.

The expansion of consular work, to serve the rising numbers of citizens resident abroad and the millions who travel every year, imposes an increasing burden. The Foreign Office Annual Report notes that over three million British nationals asked for such help in 2005-2006. The EU is discussing pooling consular services in distant states, where already the missions of larger states protect citizens from smaller members. But it will be some time before the national media in larger states accepts that consular support from other governments is a sufficient substitute for the protection they demand for all citizens, wherever they may be.

The British Foreign Office is to be commended for its efforts to rebalance resources, and stretch out to the rest of Whitehall to reconsider the services it provides; other foreign ministries need to do the same. The future for foreign ministries depends on their more effective integration into national administrations, and their ability to maintain their threatened role as overall coordinator of political relations with other states, now that relations with other states have become at once so direct and so intricate.



International Events February

FEBRUARY 5

Super Tuesday: twenty-two US states hold presidential contests

FEBRUARY 7

War crimes trial of former Bosnian Prime Minister Gojko Kljickovic scheduled to begin in Sarajevo

FEBRUARY 6

Ninetieth anniversary of women receiving the vote in Britain

FEBRUARY 25

New South Korean President, Lee Myung-bak inaugurated

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