

In doing this, however, Young has provoked a welcome opportunity to reconsider this important topic with renewed interest. The prime purpose of this response is to stimulate that debate further.

David Hastings Dunn is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham. His main research interests are US foreign policy, security studies and diplomacy. He is the author of *The Politics of Threat: Misunderstanding Vulnerability in American National Security Policy* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), co-author of *American Security Policy in the 1990s: Beyond Containment* (London: Dartmouth, 1996) and editor of *Diplomacy at the Highest Level: The Evolution of International Summits* (London: Macmillan, 1996). He is currently writing a book on US-European relations entitled *Rethinking Transatlanticism*.

## Reforming Foreign Services for the Twenty-First Century

Shaun Riordan

shaunriordan2001@yahoo.es

Received: 17 December 2006

Accepted: 6 March 2007

### Summary

New technology, new actors, new issues and the breakdown of distinctions between foreign and domestic policy have undermined diplomats' monopoly over international relations. Foreign services have been overtaken by these changes and are no longer up to the challenges of defending and promoting national interests in the twenty-first century. They need radical reform of their structures, culture, recruitment and training. Above all, they need to reinforce their capacity for medium- and long-term geopolitical analysis and strategic thinking and introduce greater flexibility into their operations. Nevertheless, an effective foreign service is ever more essential to a country's security and economic and social welfare. Governments should give higher priority to foreign service reform. This article suggests specific areas to consider.

### Keywords

Foreign policy, foreign service reform, diplomat, diplomatic, globalization, international security agenda, non-governmental organizations, cultural relations, public, technology.

### Introduction

An effective foreign service is essential to economic and social welfare and security in the twenty-first century. An increasing number of countries appear to be recognizing this and launching corresponding efforts to reform their foreign services. This should not necessarily be seen as a criticism of individual foreign services or their diplomats. Such have been the scale and speed of changes in the world of international relations over the last 25 years that *all* diplomatic services need radical overhaul if they are to meet the global challenges of the twenty-first century.

An indication of the scale of the problems faced by foreign ministries can be found in the report of the commission that was created by the Spanish government to make recommendations on the reform of the Spanish Foreign Ministry. Although both the composition of the commission and its decision-making procedures were guaranteed to produce a conservative and uninspiring document, the problems that it identified in Spain's foreign service are striking:

- The lack of a strategic planning capacity in any Spanish government institution relating to foreign policy; and thus the inevitable short-termism of Spanish foreign policy;
- An embassy/consular network that reflected neither geopolitical realities nor Spanish interests and that proved inflexible in the opening or closing of missions;
- The failure to set clear objectives for Spain's overseas missions;
- Poor coordination in the formulation and implementation of policy between the ministries involved in Spanish foreign policy;
- Poor information flows, whether vertically or horizontally, even within individual missions;
- Lack of coordination between the different departments of individual missions, reflected in the lack of integrated webpages;
- The utter failure of coordination with other Spanish bodies involved in international relations, whether regional governments, the Spanish Parliament or NGOs;
- Inefficiency, non-coordination and non-delineation of responsibilities in cultural/public diplomacy;
- Lack of any continuous training programme for foreign service staff;
- Lack of foreign service staff with specialist (linguistic or thematic) skills and the lack of incentive to acquire such skills.

This list of shortcomings is not cited to suggest that Spain's foreign service has particular problems. On the contrary, it is impressive that a government body should be so forthcoming about what its shortcomings are. The point is that a similar list of failings could be produced, *mutatis mutando*, for any other foreign service.

Reform of any country's foreign service must be tied both to changes in the environment in which it must function, but also to the country's posi-

tion in that environment; the role that it seeks to play and the objectives that it seeks to secure. It is no longer true that, in diplomacy, one size fits all. The days in which the structure of all foreign services, both as global networks and internal embassy structures, was essentially the same is over. The kind of foreign service that a country has, and how it is deployed, will depend on the status of that country, its place in global and regional organizations, and what it is trying to achieve. Neither the structure nor the function of the diplomatic service of Finland will, or should, be the same as the US State Department. Those countries that are fastest in tailoring making their foreign services to their position and their needs will secure a significant advantage over those that cling to the structures of the past.

### The Changing Diplomatic Environment

A distinction should be drawn between the diplomatic environment, which consists of the actors, tools and techniques of international relations and the key issues that need to be tackled, and the geostrategic environment, which focuses on the issues to which the actors give priority and how (such as by alliances) they set about securing their objectives within those issues. Both have implications for how foreign services can and should operate, and thus for their reform. Changes to the diplomatic environment form three distinct, although closely interrelated and interdependent, areas: the development of new technology, and especially the new information communications' technology (ICT); the involvement of a new range of actors — governmental and non-governmental — in international relations; and the breakdown in distinction between domestic and foreign policy and the related evolution of a new international security agenda.

The new ICT, and the consequent increase in global interconnectedness and interdependence that we call globalization, has impacted on diplomats in four ways. First, it has called into question many of the tasks traditionally carried out by diplomats abroad. In the world of email, it makes little sense to instruct an embassy to deliver messages to a foreign ministry when such messages can be exchanged in real-time by experts in home ministries (given the spread of English as a second language, even among officials in home ministries; language is no longer a bar to such communication). Likewise with the internet, an official in a home ministry can access all the

print and electronic media in a given country, plus government and academic publications. He can even establish virtual contact networks, possibly backed up by occasional visits. The diplomat posted abroad must now find new and innovative ways of justifying the (considerable) cost to his taxpayers of keeping him there. Second, the new ICT has considerably facilitated the entry of new actors into international relations, facilitating both their ability to communicate and network, and thus operate, at a global level and their access to information. No longer can a diplomat be confronted by a businessman or NGO activist be confident of his own superior information: he will often find himself out-briefed. Third, the new ICT has increased exponentially the speed at which information flows around the global system, increasing interdependency and interconnectedness between issues, countries and actors, increasing the sensitivity (and possibly instability) of the global system, and reducing the reaction time for diplomats and others attempting to manage this global system. Finally, the new ICT offers diplomats new opportunities of flexible operating, liberating them from the strictures and inflexibilities of brick-and-mortar embassy networks. The roving non-governmental diplomat, whether commercial or NGO (and even increasingly envoys of multinational organizations or governments), dependent on mobiles, laptops and Blackberries, is already a common feature of the world's hotels and airport terminals. Diplomats will have to follow suit if they want to keep up.

The sheer range of new actors — governmental and non-governmental — in international relations is truly staggering, as is their exponential growth. Only some 25 years ago, diplomats could still see themselves as the gatekeepers, maintaining a near monopoly of at least the political side of international relations (large companies have always at least shared the protagonism with diplomats on the commercial side). This is no longer true. Diplomats' monopoly has been undermined from all sides. Governmental actors include multinational organizations such as the WTO, regional organizations such as the EU, domestic ministries, and subnational regional and even municipal governments. A European diplomat, for example, has to accept not only that some 70 per cent of what was traditionally thought of as foreign policy is now a direct competence of the EU Commission, and thus dealt with by EU officials and representative offices, but also that many domestic ministries now deal directly with their opposite numbers abroad (especially in the EU), as well as the presence abroad of representatives of subnational governments promoting their

commercial, cultural and touristic interests, often with a barely disguised political agenda. Likewise with the non-governmental actors, ranging from the major multinationals that virtually run their own foreign policy and international relations, through major NGOs, to smaller citizens' associations and groups. Never have diplomats' actions and motives been so thoroughly scrutinized by so well-informed an audience. Diplomats will never be able to banish these new agents, or regain their monopoly. Nor can they hope to control them. Rather, they must develop new working methods that enable them to live with the new actors, and take advantage of the new spaces for international dialogue that have opened up.

Breakdown in the distinction between foreign and domestic policy has perhaps been most stark in organizations like the EU, where virtually all domestic policy now has a 'European element'. This is perhaps a special case, in that it may be misleading to describe most of the policy debates in Brussels as about foreign policy in any meaningful sense. Nevertheless, a real breakdown has occurred more widely than just in a sovereignty-sharing EU. Issues such as health or agricultural policy, which once lay firmly within the domestic agenda, now take up an increasing amount of embassies' time. This has combined with a redefinition of security in terms of the welfare of the individual within the state, rather than just the stability and continuity of the state itself, to produce what is often called the new international security agenda. Aside from traditional issues such as geostrategic stability and weapons' proliferation, this agenda now also includes health and epidemic disease, environmental degradation, international terrorism, organized crime, migration, financial and capital flows, poverty and natural resource supplies (such as energy or water). The items on the new international security agenda have several features in common:

- They are all interconnected and interdependent, often dangerously reinforcing. They must be tackled holistically, not individually;
- There are no ready-made solutions or 'right answers'. Solutions must be developed through dialogue;
- No single country, or even regional group of countries, can tackle any one of these issues, let alone all of them, on its own. The new international security agenda demands a new level of global collaboration;
- Collaboration must extend beyond governments and political elites to the broader civil society if it is to be effective. This means involving our own civil society;

- These issues involve high levels of expert knowledge — the old-style gentleman diplomat no longer has a role.

The new agenda has serious implications for how diplomacy is undertaken, and who undertakes it. While diplomats will retain an important role in engaging in debate with other governments and political elites, they are often not the ideal agents for engaging with broader foreign civil societies. As government representatives, they can lack credibility. They often lack detailed expert knowledge of the key issues. Their key role of maintaining relations with existing governments can conflict with engaging with broader civil society, especially if the government concerned is corrupt or repressive and does not like the direction or possible implications of the engagement. In many countries, being seen as too close to foreign diplomats can be dangerous, either in career terms or even physically.

Engaging with foreign civil societies may often be done best by the non-governmental agents of our own civil societies. Unlike diplomats, they do have credibility, often to the extent of being seen as critical of their own governments. Many do have specialist knowledge of the key areas. They also have more natural ways of engaging with their opposite numbers, which arouse less suspicion of their motives. They are deniable in a way that diplomats are not, meaning that the engagement with civil society can be pursued in parallel with maintaining normal diplomatic relations with existing governments. The role of government and diplomats in relation to these non-governmental agents will be more as catalysts, coordinating their activities within a broader strategy, encouraging those not already engaged in such activities, and, on occasion, providing discrete technical and financial support. But governments must bear in mind that many potential agents will be reluctant to be seen as too close to, or acting at the behest of, governments. Indeed, being seen to do so could undermine the very credibility that otherwise represents much of their added value. Governments will therefore need tact, openness and understanding.

Effective public diplomacy at home may be an essential precursor to successful public diplomacy abroad. But equally important may be 'semi-detached' governmental bodies, which retain a certain independence and cultural/intellectual prestige, and which are able to engage with civil societies both at home and abroad, acting both as catalysts and entrepreneurs in promoting exchanges across the whole range of cultural, social or polit-

ical topics. In the UK the British Council is increasingly playing this role, to some extent giving it priority over its traditional English teaching or narrower cultural promotion roles (or even subsuming these latter roles in its broader engagement of overseas civil societies — known within the British Council as cultural relations or 'mutuality'). The British Council is seen as a leader in this field, with both the *Goethe Institut* and *Alliance Française* keen to follow (and debate in the US about setting up an analogue to the British Council).

Managing the new international security agenda also has significant implications for the structure and culture of foreign ministries. Dialogue-based or collaborative diplomacy needs time to work: it does not produce instant results. Foreign ministries therefore need to develop a capacity for long-term policy thinking and geopolitical analysis. Western foreign ministries are notably weak in both. Overly hierarchical decision-making processes, and the consequent administrative burdens and premium on conformism, rather than innovation or creativity, condemn officials to short-termism, both of policy-making and analysis. Foreign ministries should learn from the experience of the private sector, which makes extensive use of the scenario planning techniques that had been developed by Shell in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as newer modelling techniques derived from network and complexity theory. Drawing on these techniques, foreign policy machines should be restructured to allow the development of medium- to long-term objectives against various future possible scenarios, which can provide the framework in which a foreign policy strategy to secure these objectives can in turn be developed.

There needs to be a change of culture as well as structure. Western foreign ministries remain tied to a 'closed' paradigm of decision-making, in which policy is decided and then 'sold' to other governments. Policies once decided may indeed be changed, but only as a result of 'defeat' by foreign governments. This paradigm largely holds true even between close allies. But it is inadequate, and even counter-productive, if the aim is to secure the collaboration of a broad range of partners and their civil societies. Dialogue-based diplomacy requires a more open decision-making process, in which broad policy objectives are set, but in which detailed policies emerge as part of the dialogue process. Dialogue means listening as well as talking, and accepting that you do not have all the answers and that others might have alternative valid solutions.

New public diplomacy

Although a major part of the new diplomacy will fall to non-governmental agents, embassies and diplomats abroad will continue to play an important role. They too will need radical changes of culture and structure. Diplomats will continue to have an important role in engaging political elites, in many cases including key journalists and commentators. To do so they will need to be more open and willing to go 'off-message' and to engage in genuine dialogue and debate. Their knowledge of the countries in which they are posted, which will remain of enormous importance, will need to be augmented by greater expert knowledge of the key issues to give them credibility. To perform this role successfully, they need to be encouraged to take, and rewarded for taking, risks. In engaging with broader civil society, their key role will be as 'diplomatic entrepreneurs', looking for and identifying opportunities for engagement, communicating them to relevant non-governmental agents and, where necessary, facilitating the first steps in engagement. They will only be able to do this effectively if they are part of the informal network established with the non-governmental agents at home. They will also need to get out and about, and not only in capital cities. The current departmentalized embassies, and increasing micro-management from foreign ministries, pose serious obstacles to these public diplomacy roles. Larger Western embassies tend to spend too much time in self-administration, managing both personnel and large embassy estates, and talking to other diplomats. Premium is placed on the ability to handle paperwork sent from headquarters, rather than local networking. Future embassies need to be slimmer and more flexible, less tied to prestigious buildings and more structured around functional networks. In the future, five or six well-prepared and well-motivated diplomats with clear objectives, travelling constantly and linked to the foreign ministry's network through their mobile telephones and laptops will be far more effective than the current 30 to 40 diplomats who are bound to their desks.

**Recommendations**

This article does not intend to make definitive recommendations for the reform of foreign services, but rather to provoke debate over what those reforms might be. The recommendations below will therefore focus on what should be the priorities for European foreign services, although clearly they will also have implications for other foreign services.

1) *Create Overseas Strategy and Analysis Departments*

Medium- and long-term strategic planning, backed by effective analysis and assessment of global trends, will be ever more essential in twenty-first century diplomacy. So far no European diplomatic service has achieved this (there is, for example, no European equivalent of the CIA's *Mapping the Global Future*, the report of its 2020 global trends' project). Any country that takes the initiative in establishing such a department would also be able to take a lead in strategic analysis and planning within Europe. The department would be responsible for:

- Coordination, including inter-ministerial coordination, of governmental activities abroad;
- Analysis and assessment of global trends and developments, and their relevance to the country's objectives and interests. To this end it would deploy the latest scenario-building, modelling and other analytical techniques;
- Strategic planning — developing the country's long-, medium- and short-term strategic plans.

Besides foreign and other ministerial officials, the department should aim to second staff from a wide range of backgrounds to ensure wide knowledge and analytical skills, including from academia, commercial companies (including consultancy companies) and the NGO world.

There are good arguments for placing such an Overseas Strategy and Analysis Department above departmental ministries, thus strengthening its ability to coordinate inter-ministerial decision-making. Placing it within the Prime Minister's office (or equivalent) would make it analogous to the National Security Council in the US.

2) *Establish an Effective Cultural Relations' Organization*

There is increasing recognition of the importance of cultural relations' organizations such as the British Council. Such organizations have moved beyond the promotion of national cultures or language teaching to promoting exchanges on a broad range of cultural, social and political issues. By their semi-autonomous nature, they are able to establish relations with NGOs and other civil society bodies that would be reluctant to have direct

Handwritten initials and a large 'X' mark.

relations with governments, and they thus play a crucial role in promoting the inter-societal collaboration that is essential to many issues in the new international security agenda. Few other governmental cultural bodies play this role, keeping very much to the more traditional and narrower role of promoting culture and language. While this in itself has its value, any country (including even the US) will be severely hampered in its efforts to be a modern diplomatic power as long as it has no body playing the broader role.

### 3) *Recruit External Consultants to Review the Foreign Services' ICT*

Much of the ICT used by foreign services remains inadequate, both technically and culturally/structurally. It is not simply a question of buying new technology. Systems must be designed not to reflect existing bureaucratic structures, but to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the new ICT to increase flexibility in the deployments of staff, flatten out hierarchies, speed up decision-making procedures, integrate officers overseas in headquarters' policy-making and to open up generally to the outside world. In other words, it is the existing bureaucratic structures that should be radically reformed to fit with the possibilities of the new ICT. There is extensive experience of doing this elsewhere in Europe, and indeed of how not to do it (the various attempts to computerize the British Foreign Office neatly encapsulate most of the pitfalls). Governments should take advantage of this experience in creating foreign services that are thoroughly integrated in the global networks facilitated by the new ICT. At the same time, *all* foreign service officers should undergo intensive IT training.

### 4) *Increase the Flexibility of the Embassy/Consular Network*

All countries need to think hard about their embassy/consular networks to reflect more accurately their objectives and interests, as identified by the new Overseas Strategy and Analysis Department. In doing so, they should avoid the rigidities of the current networks with their focus on prestigious buildings and overlarge embassy staff. Future embassies should increasingly be placed in rented office space with smaller, but highly motivated staff. Administrative norms should be amended to allow a more flexible and agile approach to acquiring and disposing of buildings overseas. Rather

than the mentality of embassies with their imposing entrances and diplomatic-titles, the focus should be on a flexible network of representative offices, well-targeted and motivated, which are able to adapt quickly and effectively to meet new or unforeseen contingencies.

European countries should build on the model of 'crisis teams', which were created within the British diplomatic service to deal with emergencies. The establishment of effective databases on the abilities and skills of individual diplomats, combined with flexible use of technology, would allow diplomats to be brought together from their routine postings to deal with urgent or emergency situations, returning to their postings once the crisis has passed. This would, for example, have been a more effective means of dealing with the current illegal immigration crisis than opening a raft of new embassies in sub-Saharan Africa, which will subsequently prove politically difficult to close.

### 5) *Use Objectives as a Tool to Direct and Motivate Diplomatic Resources*

It has been noted how diplomats abroad must increasingly justify their maintenance overseas against other more cost-effective ways of securing the same ends. All foreign services should think hard about why they maintain diplomats in certain posts, and what they expect from them. To this end, clear and evaluable objectives should be introduced for both overseas missions and individual diplomats. These objectives should represent the *raison d'être* of either the mission or the individual position, and be related to the resources that are available to secure them. Objective evaluation procedures should be developed into a tool through which the ministry can evaluate the relative importance or value of different missions and individual positions and thus take decisions on future deployment or redeployment of resources.

### 6) *Radical Reform of Training and Selection Procedures*

Life-long diplomatic careers may increasingly be a thing of the past. Foreign services need to experiment with more flexible approaches to recruitment, including:

- More members of the foreign service should be seconded for specific positions for fixed periods. Such secondments should be imaginative

and contribute to broader strategic objectives (for example, some years ago the British Foreign Office recruited the Head of its Human Rights Policy Department from Amnesty International and the Deputy Head of its Environmental Department from an environmental NGO);

- More experts should be employed on a contract basis, both to serve in the Foreign Ministry at home and in missions abroad, to fill the specialist knowledge gaps in the foreign service.

Foreign services also need to overhaul radically their approaches to training, including:

- Focus on training courses related to key international issues (especially items on the new international security agenda), techniques of international geostrategic analysis, scenario-building, planning and modelling (including inviting outsiders to speak on the latest techniques), and specific tools needed by diplomats (for example, practical classes on public diplomacy techniques and their uses, and decision-making in crises);
- Courses in languages and culture (including political culture) need to be developed and promoted among diplomats, according to the priorities identified by the new Overseas Strategy and Analysis Department;
- Develop effective career-long continuous training programmes, using both short courses during leave or gaps between postings and custom-made on-line courses delivered over the foreign service's intranet (this latter is now common practice among private corporations, and considerable experience is available on the design and implementation of such courses);
- Specific training for new areas with which diplomats increasingly have to deal, for example peacekeeping and nation-building.

#### 7) Create a Foreign Relations Board

It is essential that governments should include all of the relevant agents in the development of foreign policy. To some extent this could be done by the activities of new cultural relations' organizations, particularly for those

elements of civil society that are most sensitive about their relations with government. Other agents, governmental and non-governmental, are less sensitive about direct involvement with government. These could include more established NGOs (particularly those involved in international development), major corporations, leading foreign policy think tanks and sub-national (regional and major city) governments. These should be invited to elect representatives for a Foreign Relations Board that would advise the government on foreign policy and overseas strategy. They should also be invited, where relevant, to take part in analytical and strategy debates in the new Overseas Strategy and Analysis Department.

#### Conclusion

The English poet John Donne wrote that no man is an island; in the twenty-first century neither is any household nor any company. The world invades the sitting room every day not only through the television. The economic and social, as well as physical, security and welfare of a country and its citizens depends on its ability to navigate the interconnected and interdependent geostrategic challenges of the new millennium. This requires, as a minimum, a modern and effective foreign service within an equally effective foreign policy machinery. Existing foreign services were designed for a world that no longer exists. Their reform is not a quixotic luxury, nor an issue that can be allowed to lounge at the bottom of the political agenda. Foreign service reform is central to countries' economic, political and social development over the next 30 years.

Shaun Riordan is an independent geostrategic analyst. A former British diplomat, he is a member of the editorial board of Foreign Policy (Spanish version) and author of *The New Diplomacy* (London: Policy, 2003).