

Foreign Policy as a Public Good

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Foreign ministries (MFAs) do not have a ‘natural’ constituency within the national body politic. A little reflection will show that there is no significant home entity that is their logical ally, much less an institution or agency that has a strong vested interest in the external affairs system. And when things go wrong in foreign relationships, that ministry becomes a natural, first sight, fall guy. We see the challenges that most MFAs face, when finance ministries carry out the annual exercise of determining the budget allocations for each department, balancing competing funding demands against the limited funds available. MFAs usually end up with the short end of the stick, with few among the non-state actors, or civil society or the media to speak out in their favor.

Example: before the outbreak of the UK-Argentine clash over the Falkland Islands, the British Foreign Office was roundly criticized by the country’s media, for having privileged good relations with Buenos Aires, in lieu a more robust assertion of British national interests. It was then said in Parliament that just as the Health Ministry looked after citizen’s physical wellbeing, and the Department of Industry looked after the manufacturing business, the Foreign Office looked after the interest of foreigners! This has a serious dimension: when dealing with ‘problem’ countries, MFAs have an ingrained proclivity towards a ‘tough’ stance, to avoid being tarred as ‘soft’ by the home public.

MFA ROLE IN THE NATIONAL BODY POLITIC

Foreign ministries lack a natural constituency within the national body politic. Yet, in a globalized world, it is in the economic sphere that the MFA and the diplomatic system can help home business enterprises, exporters, and manufacturers to build profitable connections with international markets. Empirical study shows that in most

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countries the MFA is an easy target for economy cuts. Interestingly, this goes together with widespread rises in consular charges, especially visa fees; in most countries the enhanced revenues go directly to the national exchequer; MFAs seldom retain any share. This is borne out in studies that examine the working of MFAs.² Around the world, this has happened precisely at a time when they face heightened work demands, helping home entities connect with foreign partners. The rise in the importance of diaspora affairs is another example of new responsibilities.

At home MFAs also confront new complexities in working with official agencies, which almost without exception have their own functional, specialized connections with foreign counterparts. Working with them, to coordinate actions with them, to enforce a 'whole of government' external policy stance is an increasing challenge. These ministries do not accept any primacy for the MFA, making it harder than ever before to assert seamless consistency, and uniformity. We see another dimension of this problem in federal countries, where provinces are tempted to establish their own cooperation agreements with foreign countries; Australia and Mexico are two countries where such actions have produced embarrassment when the federal government has rescinded such actions by their sub-state entities. Elsewhere, provincial entities chafe under what they see as unreasonable restrictions in their efforts to reach out to foreign states for foreign direct investments (FDI), trading arrangements, and partnerships with their diaspora organizations that.³

A consequence in Australia has been a demand that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade should be treated as having a special status vis-à-vis other ministries. This is unlikely to be conceded. Elsewhere, MFAs enlist the support of the head of government offices, or the cabinet office, to retain for themselves a seat at the decision-making table when other ministries take up issues that relate to external policy (such as trade issues at WTO and elsewhere, or global discussion on environment issues), but this is seldom easy. A UK report published in 2016 said:

'We should re-establish where the FCO can best add value to the rest

2 See: Copeland, Daryl, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: Rethinking International Relations* (Lynne Reiner, Colorado, US, 2009)

3 See: Rana, 'Centre-State Cooperation in Handling Foreign Affairs: A Comparative Perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 6, 2021, Vol LVI, No. 6.

of Government: as a department at the centre with a lead voice on all bilateral and multilateral relationships, including the UK's relationship with Europe. Our unique selling point should be our understanding of other countries and the multilateral system; our ability to make and deliver policy which exploits that understanding to increase the UK's security and prosperity and our ability to convene and deliver through the global network. 'The FCO must always retain a leading voice on the biggest thematic international issues of the day, even if the lead lies elsewhere in Cabinet.'⁴

The plain fact is that functional ministries are loathe to accept any special status for their own MFAs. The tension here is between the equality of all ministries, and the cross-cutting nature of the MFAs responsibility, which places it in a position of requiring line ministries to handle their external actions in a way that advances national interests on a broad front, i.e., conforming to a consistent, 'whole of government' policy. Line ministries are directly concerned with their own functional agenda; they tend to have little interest in the overall bilateral relationship with individual countries. That places the MFA in a situation where it may sometimes have to tread on the toes of these line ministries.

Here is an example from Australia. One of its thinktanks wrote in 2022: suggestions of DFAT collaborating with the APS through Treasury or on multi-agency taskforces have been made before and these representatives exist within embassies, but a "public service diplomacy" agenda could offer more, whereby Australian public servants from areas not usually engaged internationally work directly on policy and programs with counterparts in departments around the region. Inspiration for such a proposal could be taken from the Australian Defence Cooperation Program (DCP).⁵

FOREIGN POLICY A PUBLIC GOOD

Citizens have an intrinsic right to effective foreign policy, which advances the country's interests, across the entire span of engagement with the external world. In a globalized age, in which different agencies and institutions deal with foreign partners on political, economic, social, cultural, educational, and a range of other subjects, this beco-

⁴ See: Future FCO, UK Foreign Office, 2016.

⁵ 'The opportunities of cross-public service diplomacy', 8 Aug 22, Lowy Institute, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/opportunities-cross-public-service-diplomacy>

mes a complex, multidimensional task. When we understand this, we come recognize the centrality of the MFA, as the agency that is at the forefront of most external tasks, helping home actors to better connect with and profit from their foreign engagement, in a holistic, consistent and sustained manner.

While the expanded engagement of MFAs with their home partners is well-understood, we do not often focus on foreign policy is a public good. Just as the country's people have a right to safe water, a healthy environment and opportunities for education, employment, and social services, are also entitled to an effective foreign policy that facilitates and helps these agents to engage with institutions and people in other countries, across all the inward and outward actions that serve their interests. This point really does not need elaboration – it is simply a different way of viewing or re-framing relations with foreign states, organizations, and peoples. Those in Western countries with sophisticated institutional infrastructure may say that this is handled by all the concerned home actors, non-state and state, with their own contact networks. But for many global south countries that experience is missing. And as the agency with on-the-spot contacts, embassies and consulates are agile allies even for experienced institutions.⁶

Let us consider some facets of this public good, and why this concept has consequences in terms of the functioning of the MFA. In net terms, both home actors and the diplomatic network gain from proactive application of this concept.

First, working for the security of the country, remains is the primordial responsibilities of the state. For the MFA this translates into striving for peace and safety in the proximate neighborhood, as also finding ways to neutralize and eliminate threats to the country's security. It must also privilege the safety of its citizens that travel to or live in foreign countries. The MFA is the country's first line of defense.⁷ Do home actors sufficiently realize and act on this perspective?

Second, governments need to devise ways that support the MFA in its coordination task vis-à-vis all the other ministries and official agencies.

6 At both my bilateral diplomatic assignments in developed countries (San Francisco, 1986-89, Germany, 1992-95), I found that even experienced home non-state actors gained a great deal with the missions on-ground contact networks. For the missions too, this provided valuable learning and honed its networking skills and deepened their reach within the assignment country.

7 This is one of the centerpiece themes in Copeland's *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, (2009)

Equally, the MFA must deal with them with sensitivity, treating them as indispensable partners in the shared goal of ensuring a 'whole of government' external posture. Often, jurisdiction issues are kicked upwards to the level of the head of government, and to the office of the president or the prime minister. The real need is for a system that works in collegial fashion, minimizing inter-ministry dissonance. In practice, we usually find shortcomings on both sides of that equation, and that is of little benefit to the nation.

Third, we should realize that in parallel with expansion in the external agendas of line ministries, very many domestic non-state entities also find themselves engaged with foreign counterparts. In doing this, they bring great value to the nation, directly on issues in international dialogue, as also the country image and its attractiveness. The key players include business and industry associations, civil society actors (including NGOs dealing with development and societal issues), research institutes and think tanks, the media, educational institutions, and science and technology agencies, to name just a few. In effect, almost every entity in the body politic is engaged with its foreign counterparts. This has expanded the work remit of the MFA, even while it is not responsible for the actions of these multifarious players. Yet, some degree of harmony, or coordination actions, aimed at avoidance of dissonance with these non-official agencies is useful. This helps to create a degree of national coherence in their positions on international issues. For example, be it on climate change, or global trade and economic issues, or internet and communications policy, to name just a few topics that are on the global agenda, we realize that inter-state dialogue now makes place for perspectives thrown up by all these societal actors. The legitimacy of their interest in world affairs is a fact of life. MFAs are challenged to find effective ways to engage with these societal actors.

Fourth, some MFAs have moved faster than others in recognizing this domestic 'public diplomacy' function for themselves. Broadly, it is a by-product of an increasingly interconnected world. The driver has been the networking and emergence of epistemic communities, a result of ever-wider use of the internet since the early 1990s, which has linked institutions and like-minded people across the world, as never before. An example: the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) created a Public Diplomacy Division around 2007. A couple of years later, when the head of this unit travelled to Mumbai college for a discussion

on international affairs, he was told by a student representative in her public speech that it was a first for the college audience to receive an official from the country's MEA, though they often heard from foreign consuls general about the views of their countries. That set this official thinking putting in motion a chain of events. It produced an active home public diplomacy program by MEA, including 20 to 30 visits to different university campuses across the country by retired ambassadors, plus MEA's participate in campus foreign policy discussions, besides other forms of support to non-state actors. Two other actions followed. MEA started a program to receive interns to work for a few months on different topics. It also led to new outreach to the country's states (provinces), with mid-senior officials being designated to guide each state in its external actions, especially efforts to mobilize inward foreign direct investment (FDI), as also exports.

Fifth, citizens have a concomitant responsibility to inform themselves and understand external developments, and how these impact on the nation. This is one of the outcomes of globalization, in so far as external events impact on people as never before. In a world marked by instant social media communication it is easy and facile to see events, at home and abroad, in soundbites. But citizens have an obligation to look deeper and consider how these external events impact on their lives. The prism through which home politics are seen should also take into account these externalities. In this, the youth have a special obligation, to function effectively as the country's avantgarde and its future.

Overall, foreign ministries have consequently widened engagement with domestic constituencies. This includes two-way communication with civil society, to understand their concerns and the harness them to a 'whole of country' orientation. Such actions add to the 'legitimacy' of the nation's foreign policy, and the credibility of the MFA. This involves the MFA in close, continuous dialogue with academia, societal organizations and think tanks - all of whom are to be wooed and engaged. That also opens for the MFA a window to different domestic perspectives on foreign affairs.⁸

These are some of the strands that underpin the notion of treating foreign policy as a public good. Through that MFAs understand better

8 Many MFAs now have a mechanism for regular dialogue with think-tanks and civil society organizations. Mexico has been a pioneer on this, say in relation to climate change issues. For India, discussions at WTO have been instrumental for engaging with home non-state actors on trade and economic policy. Most developing countries are on a learning curve in developing this process.

their own direct, self-interest. Besides a general need for public support, the diplomatic system needs to appeal to the country's youth, to attract the best talent available for their annual intake into the diplomatic service. It has to be pro-active in mobilizing talent, offering itself as a career option for the country's youth. The pendulum of career choices oscillates in unpredictable fashion, as many Western countries have seen. In contrast Global South countries have seen that the diplomatic service usually retains a high position in relation to other career choices.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

The underlying factor in many of the changes we have witnessed over the past three decades in the management of foreign relations is the transformation in information and communications technology (ICT). That has produced major change in international affairs and in diplomatic practices. If one single element is to be named to represent these, it is the arrival of the internet. The fact that within the country and outside, individuals and institutions can seamlessly connect with one another, almost at zero cost, has produced paradigm transformation. Three decades after the arrival of the global internet, we are still groping to understand and deal with this, as much in our daily lives, as in the ways in which we and our institutions connect with the world around us. Simply put, politics, institutional behaviour and all manner of national and international activity has been transformed. Individuals now have instant access to global audiences, depending on both their actions and the circumstances. What we call the 'social media' have transformed politics and society – we are still groping with the consequences.

Foreign ministries, diplomats, and all manner of agencies and actors are empowered in ways that were unimaginable even a generation earlier. Managing this new system of communication, summed up under 'internet governance', has become a hydra-headed theme in the international discourse, engaging countries, the technological agencies and an array of business enterprises, non-official institutions, and public policy specialists, to say nothing of researchers, innovators and social activists.⁹

⁹ For over two decades I have been a member of the faculty team of DiploFoundation (www.diplomacy.edu), now based in Geneva, Malta and Belgrade, a pioneer in conceptualizing the relevance of modern ITC in international affairs, and its impact on diplomacy. In this, this small, focused institution has built a sterling international reputation.

Politicians and all manner of public figures work assiduously to build up their numbers of 'followers' on the public media. These numbers are having become a barometer of standing and public acclaim for almost everyone that seeks fame. At the same time, new categories and skill clusters have emerged, like 'influencers', bloggers and market leaders. Everyone wants to be a social media stars.