Relational Configuration in Commercial Diplomacy

Workshop on Business Diplomacy:
Managing Non-Market Corporate Relationship Capital
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Dr. David C. Bruce
Robinson College of Business
Institute of International Business
Georgia State University, USA
+1 (404) 413-7279
dbruce@gsu.edu

Dr. Leigh Anne Liu
Institute of International Business
Robinson College of Business
Georgia State University, USA
+1 (404) 413-7288
laliu@gsu.edu

The Problem

Countries are engaged these days in a variety of activities under the broad umbrella of "commercial diplomacy." In other words, they conduct diplomacy regarding commercial relations in the form of bilateral and multilateral negotiations and on-going involvement with inter-governmental organizations from regional economic integration institutions to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Some universities now address the training of country negotiators in political science and international relations courses. In business schools this has received limited attention. At times, some courses deal with the traditional aspects of business-government relations. However, the impact of commercial diplomacy on business and the associated responsibilities of managers goes well beyond that function.

When a company is facing global competition, there is often a strong push within the enterprise to open new markets, expand foreign trade, and build international sales. All are understandably high priorities for the firm's executives. Yet, the relevant business decisions will be made in the context of the potential host government's political culture and economic realities. Add to each of these situations the vast array of local customs, cultures, policies, and regulations and it is quickly evident that in reality business practices vary dramatically from market to market. Also, governments affect the environment of doing international business by creating bilateral and multilateral trade agreements with other governments.

Unfortunately, even seasoned business leaders come face-to-face with pivotal diplomatic issues in commerce for which they do not have adequate insights or experience. Knowingly or not, these leaders are often responsible for their companies missing out on enormously valuable opportunities. Executives pursuing strategies that have proven to be successful in their familiar domestic markets may find that those same strategies spell disaster when applied in unfamiliar global markets (Saner, et. al., 2000).

The Issues

Global Conditions in Flux

Since the end of World War II trade and investment have grown tremendously. This trend has been facilitated by technological advances, the reduction of trade barriers, and economic growth. Yet, although the secular trend has been upward, the path has been a rollercoaster as de-colonization brought new countries into the global marketplace, there were positive and negative multipliers to economic opening, and technology got ahead of institutions.

As steady progress was being made in reducing trade barriers among the most industrial countries (especially members of GATT, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), many developing countries increased government intervention and protectionism. At the same time, even the GATT members increased non-tariff barriers. Meanwhile, command economies such as those of the China and the Soviet Union had certain areas of success. Many developing countries, although not statist to the degree of the Soviet Bloc, nevertheless often experienced wide-spread internal political reaction against foreign investors. Extreme cases of expropriation took place not only in socialist Cuba but also in countries as diverse as Chile and Iran.

In the 1990s (especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the success of the Asian tigers, the pendulum swung the other way as privatization and downsizing were popularized. Investors began to move slowly into the regions of new opportunity, while trying to keep a close eye on the political situations in these states. On the other hand, even that road was rocky as the world experienced dramatic events such as the Tequila Effect of the Mexican meltdown, the global snowball of the 1997/98 Southeast Asian Crisis, the protests of the anti-globalization movements, terrorism-related security concerns, energy-price volatility linked to national-level political decisions, a turn to the left in several Latin American countries, and the stalemate in the negotiations for the Free Trade Area of the America (Bruce, 2007).

Despite all this, globalization is likely to continue to expand as opportunities outweigh the risks for companies going global. In fact, the risks are probably higher for companies that do not have a global strategy (Friedman, 2005). Nevertheless, all politics will remain local as political leaders must respond to domestic pressures and forces all the time and external forces only some of the time.

Political/Cultural Risks

In conducting political risk analysis, several political dimensions need attention (Rogers, 2003). Political means having to do with: a) the governance system of a country (political structure); b) the nature of particular governors (authority); c) the response of the population to the government (legitimacy); and d) the nature of the society being governed (culture, social phenomena).

One key component is political unrest and instability. Are there likely to be disruptions, civic disobedience, violence, ethnic/racial/religious conflict, embargoes, expropriation, contract repudiation, or revolutionary change? More common these days are security issues such as personal attacks, explosions, kidnapping, and shipping disruptions. These circumstances are rare but the consequences are profound. Also, they can be affected by national attitudes about foreigners. In that case, the risks become cultural.

Whether it is historical/cultural attitudes or dramatic political events, avoidance may be one of the few effective survival strategies. Unfortunately avoidance may not be an option in cases of natural disasters and accidents. In these cases, forecasting will not help much but preparation will when it comes to dealing with local authorities and the general public.

On the other hand, everyday policy issues often can be managed on an on-going basis. These issues are those that happen on a regular basis due to the political process. In other words, politics may affect a wide variety of potential changes in the playing field. Issue areas include government intervention, labor relations, standards, regulation, and dispute resolution processes. Addressing these types of issues is central to commercial diplomacy.

Legal Risks

Legal risks are closely related to political/policy risks since political processes may be involved in creating the legal environment and in enforcing laws and judicial decisions. Topics of concern include protection of intellectual and other property, liability, judicial process, adjudication issues, contract repudiation, expropriation, bribery and corruption, compliance with trade agreements, and the application of domestic trade law.

Economic Risks

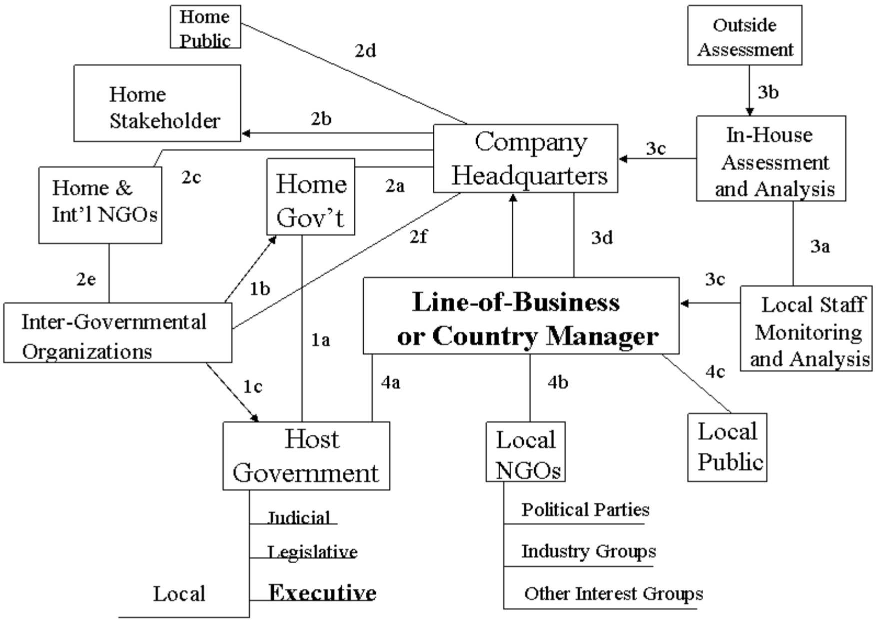
Much economic risk involves economic performance. Companies do need to forecast factors such as growth rates but usually performance issues do not involve aspects of commercial diplomacy. On the other hand, many economic issues flow out of political/policy-making and legal processes. These issues include exchange policy, investment policy, tax policy, tariff rates, subsidies, and incentives.

The Players and Clusters of Relationships

The Commercial Diplomacy theme addresses these issues by focusing on the importance of key players and relationships that affect the success of market entry. Chart 1 illustrates the key clusters of relationships and the players (individual and institutional) that relate to the commercial diplomacy activities of the line-of-business or country manager as those managers become involved in politics, process, and policy outcomes. Such managers may be "in-country" or at headquarters. The players and the relationships are discussed below as they can be visualized in Chart 1. This reflects the relationships that must be developed and the related issues. Preparation for conducting commercial diplomacy should include an understanding of these players and relationships along with the development of skill sets that will help managers establish and maintain the relationships.

Chart 1:

Commercial Diplomacy Relationships



1. Relationships between Home & Host Governments and Trade Organizations

Trade regimes involve individual country policies and direct bilateral agreements between countries (1a). In addition, multi-lateral agreements are carried out by inter-governmental organizations. IGOs report to the governments of their respective member states (1b, 1c). At the same time, the IGO bureaucracy has a degree of independence. Furthermore, companies must recognize the importance of relationships between their home government and the governments serving as their hosts (1a) whether as an export target or as sites for foreign investment. Such relations are going to be colored by the perspective of leaders in the target countries in reference to the role of trade and investment as part of overall strategies of development.

2. Headquarters Links with Stakeholders and the Broader Society

The company headquarters may maintain relationships with its own home government (2a) as well as other stakeholders including stockholders, employees, customers (2b), and industry organizations, interest and advocacy groups-NGOs (2c), and the general public (2d). This category of links includes the traditional areas of business-government relations and public affairs. Companies can relate to international trade and financial institutions (IGOs) through their home governments (2a) but may also maintain IGO ties through their industry association (2e) or directly (2f), especially when trade disputes are under adjudication.

3. Relationships for In-house and Outsourced Risk Assessment, Analysis, and Forecasting

These functions are often carried out by specialists in risk identification, assessment, analysis, and forecasting. These experts may be found within the company─in the headquarters or at the business unit. Information may flow into the HQ unit from local in-country staff (3a) and/or from outside vendors (3b). Beyond risk consulting firms, analysis may also come from banks, accounting firms, law firms, and insurance organizations. In each case, units may specialize in country analysis as a whole or they may have primary responsibilities in disciplines such as risk assessment, accounting, law, and government affairs.

Headquarters may receive the analysis from the in-house units (3c) or from local managers (3d). In any case, the local or line-of-business managers need to understand the issues addressed by the specialists and the methodologies they use in making assessments and forecasts.

4. Relationships in Host Countries

From the business perspective, the most central set of relationships in commercial diplomacy are between the country operation or the line-of-business and key groups within the target country. These relationships will contribute information to the assessment function and must be maintained for that purpose as well as for affecting the outcome of policy and the link between the company and its in-country external environment.

Managers need skills for negotiation and for maintaining relationships with the local players. They include government officials—executive, legislative, and judicial (4a), opposition leaders, leaders of non-governmental organizations from industrial associations and chambers of commerce to labor unions and advocacy groups (4b), and the general public (4c).

<u>Sources of Expertise and Commercial Diplomacy Issue Areas</u>

Sources of expertise available to the firm to address commercial diplomacy issues include industry associations, accounting firms, banks, insurance companies, risk evaluation firms, home governments, law firms, and other lobbyist organizations, along with the firm's in-house public affairs office and perhaps a dedicated risk evaluation department. All of these sources must be pulled together by in-country or line-of-business managers. In turn, this expertise should be applied to monitor and assess risk information and then utilized through networking and engagement with national governments, non-governmental organizations, the general public, and inter-governmental organizations. Charts 2 and 3 illustrate the variety of these potential linkages between the support resources and the players/institutions that make up the environment of commercial diplomacy. Practitioners need to be alerted to the commercial diplomacy action options available. The options include identifying the appropriate roles of each support resource as they deal with the actors/institutions in terms of monitoring, assessing, networking, and engagement.

Chart 2: Commercial Diplomacy Internationally and in Home Country

Home or Int'l			Commercial Diplomacy Tasks: Home and International								
ACTOR or				SUPPORT RESOURCES & PLAYERS							
INSTITUTION	Ind. Assoc.	Accounting	Bank	Insurance	Risk Out	Home Gov.	Law Firm	Lobbyist	Public Aff.	Risk In	Manager
National											
Government											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											
Home or Int'l											
Opinion											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											
International											
NGOs											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											
Regional											
IGOs											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											
Global											
IGOs											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											
Other											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											

Chart 3: Commercial Diplomacy in Host Country

Host				Commercial Diplomacy Tasks: Host Country							
ACTOR or					SUPPORT RESOURCES & PLAYERS						
INSTITUTION	Ind. Assoc	Accounting	Bank	Insurance	Risk Out	Home Gov	Law Firm	Lobbyist	Public Aff.	Risk In	Manager
National Government											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											
Local Government											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											
Industry Groups											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											
General Public											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											
Local NGOs											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Engage											
Other											
Monitor											
Assess											
Network											
Monitor											

Significance of Managing Relationships in Commercial Diplomacy

The above delineated activities of commercial diplomacy suggest a great number of relationships that must be established, maintained, and managed. The concept of managing relationships is not new in either eastern or western cultures. Relationship management in commercial diplomacy, however, involves consideration of the culturally embedded schemas regarding relationships. In the western world, “social capital” is addressed in multiple literatures (Coleman, 1988; Bouty, 2000; Gulati, Nohria, Zaheer, 2000; Koka & Prescott, 2002; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998; Adler & Kwon, 2002). Social capital is defined as social channels and mutual understanding that expedite or hamper action (Jones, Pollitt, & Bek, 2007), including features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve efficiency by facilitating coordinated actions (Putnam, 1995), and the actual and potential resources embedded within the network of relationships (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In the Chinese literature, "Guanxi" refers to social connections based on mutual interest and benefits and reciprocal exchange of favors as well as mutual obligations (Alston, 1989; Hwang, 1987; Luo, 1997). Guanxi also engenders trust and thereby serves as a form of insurance in otherwise risky environment (Hsee & Weber, 1999).

Both of the two schemas about relationship networks are present in the context of commercial diplomacy at the interpersonal level, the organizational level, and the country level. In the global arena, the organization and country can be personalized through powerful leaders or key players whose relationship schemas can set the tone for the whole organization or nation when negotiating with other parties. In cultures with tightly knitted networks, such as Japan, it will be difficult for outsiders to break into and join the network. Organizations of certain industries, such as restaurants, banks, or universities, or certain clustered countries, such as the G77 or G8, have different norms and expectations on relationships both inside and outside their own identified networks. Western and eastern managers who aspire to conduct constructive negotiations in commercial diplomacy need to understand the hallmarks and mechanisms of both schemas in order to navigate the dynamic and complex relationship networks.

At the country level, trade negotiations often involve experts that begin the process with more knowledge of the issues than of the players from other countries. Differences may occur depending as much on the professional background of the negotiators as on their respective national cultures. This was identified in the case of the NAFTA negotiations where the professional backgrounds of the Canadian, American, and Mexican negotiators respectively were quite different (Cameron & Tomlin, 2000). Over time, however, the personal relationships between the negotiators may have changed the dynamic of the negotiations. Similarly, as negotiations moved toward conclusions, the relationship between top government ministers and even heads of state may have helped to complete the process due to personal relationships.

Many approaches to foreign policy behavior stress the basic characteristics of countries as they pursue the "national interest." However, at times analysts along with the general public focus on the importance of individuals. For example, the recent U.S. presidential campaign raised questions about the potential difficulties of a future President Obama or a Vice President Palin since neither had the personal experience of "knowing foreign leaders" compared to presidential nominee Senator McCain or vice presidential nominee Senator Biden. Now, what personal relationships will President Obama be able to establish and utilize in conducting U.S. foreign policy? Is this different than a head of state using "political capital" in his or her own domestic political process?

When considering commercial diplomacy from the perspective of business managers, how can relationships be established, maintained, and managed? This analysis proposes that a key element for managers is to understand the key players and relationships. Then, it can be useful to consider one's own experience and training in determining what can be done by the manager and what requires dependence on others. In that context, the different activities of monitoring, assessing, networking, and engaging come into play. This mix is in part addressed by Saner, Yiu, and Sondergaard (2000). They propose two key elements in improving corporate capabilities. First, top managers need to view business diplomacy as one of their key responsibilities. Second, the establishment of high-level business diplomacy units is recommended. This can lead to "…the development of a new competency—business diplomacy management and a new organizational role—business diplomacy manager.

For country or line-of-business managers, this means that the business diplomacy function needs to be approached in the context of the strategic goals of their respective units and of their firm. This linkage to specific business issues is crucial. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, political risk assessment was viewed as an increasingly important function for global companies. However, as the threat of radical political changes (e.g., expropriation) seemed to decrease, the enhanced role of political risk forecasters moved from "last hired" to "first fired." Traditional business-government relations remained but not special "political risk" units. Now, the world again looks more frightening. The key is to "manage risks" rather than just forecast possible problems. Such an approach is central to the concept of commercial or business diplomacy as a core competency of any company.

Conclusions

Clearly commercial diplomacy can play a pivotal role when firms seek to introduce new products and services in established markets, execute important mergers, or open foreign research and development and manufacturing facilities. Increased world trade, coupled with the ever-greater search for ways to open new markets, is here to stay. So is the need for commercial diplomacy. For many universities, this is a topic for political science, international relations, or economics. Managers must be aware of the work of trade negotiators and intergovernmental organizations that deal with trade and investment. Yet, at the same time, they need to link that knowledge to the work on the ground in a variety of host country environments. This means applying the field of business-government relations in the context of other countries. It means linking government relations with public relations. It means engaging in "diplomacy" with host governments with an appreciation of the cross-cultural dimensions of the exercise. It means linking the operations of foreign subsidiaries with the global personal and institutional linkages maintained by the company.

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