

## **Raymond Saner, (2002) "On the culture of the profession: what is a diplomat?"**

Chapter 10 : The Future of Diplomacy, 2002, Eds. Enrico Brandt & Christian F Buck, Leske + Budrich, Opladen, 2002.

### What is needed is solid craftsmanship and openness to new ideas

The job profile of a diplomat has changed over the centuries as a result of political, social and technological developments. On the other hand, there are also characteristics and skills of diplomats that have always been part of the culture of this profession. Both shall be discussed here in order to answer the question; what is a diplomat?

### The diplomat as a mirror of contemporary history

The emissaries of ancient Greece publicly negotiated their peace treaties, armistice agreements, and commercial treaties between the republics and monarchies, in keeping with the democratic values of the time. Secret negotiations were used only later, during the rule of the Macedonians. The prevailing balance of power has always had a significant influence on the selection of the diplomatic method and the associated behavior of the diplomats. The representatives of powerful states (Roman Empire, China, France in the 17th century) tended to impose their power while weaker state structures (Byzantium, small Italian states, revolutionary Russia) often negotiated with cunning and malice compensating for their weak power.

The number of international relations between states has increased tremendously since the Second World War. 51 states were founding members of the United Nations in 1945; in 1997 there were already 185 members and the number of bilateral relations has increased dramatically. Added to this is the increasing complexity of international agreements which have to be negotiated in various international organizations. The internal

coordination processes are becoming more and more complex: National positions often only come about after difficult coordination processes within the governments of subnational entities (Provinces, Länder, Cantons) which have their own staff departments responsible for foreign relations and often also have their own foreign policy goals through their own representations abroad, including in Washington, Tokyo or Shanghai present.

#### Involving non-state actors, not excluding them.

Non-state actors are also involved in coordination and negotiation processes: commercial enterprises are often cross-border actors who, depending on economic opportunities, make their investments in various other countries with a direct impact on jobs, tax income and economic growth. The same applies to non-governmental organizations that can mobilize political influence.

Both non-governmental organizations and business enterprises are often internationally networked, have their own highly professional media departments and are increasingly directly involved in international negotiations. They are also increasingly being invited by the Federal Foreign Office and the relevant ministries to contribute their specialist knowledge when shaping political decisions and negotiating positions. Sometimes representatives of non-governmental organizations are even integrated into national delegation, which requires additional coordination to avoid fragmentation and incoherence

#### Do more with fewer diplomats

There are also new features in terms of the content of a diplomat's work. Specialization is increasing, generalists are reaching their limits. More and more experts from other ministries have to be involved in the negotiations to an increasing extent. And last but not least: the request for information has reached unprecedented proportions. Only minutes after an important event anywhere in the world, the media ask for the first statements from the Federal Foreign Office. At the same

time, Foreign Service budgets and staffing levels are decreasing in most western countries.

Reforms along the lines of New Public Management, combined with demands for cost reductions are forcing the Federal Foreign Office to do more with fewer employees. To resolve this contradiction, today's diplomat is expected, in part, to increase his or her work efficiency by applying management methods that are expected to be transferrable from the private to the public sector. This is not always successful, not least because of legal regulations. For example, incentives through individually designed salary systems in public administration are usually only possible to a limited extent.

#### Diplomatic competence as an extended term

All of these changes in national foreign policy and diplomacy are rendering definitions of diplomacy obsolete that were valid 50 years ago. For example, Alan James' definition of "diplomacy is the maintenance of relations between sovereign states by accredited representatives" (James, Alan; in Melissen, Jan: "Innovation in Diplomatic Practice", Macmillan 1999, p. XIV) was at best only applicable for a brief period after the Second World War. Jan Melissen's formulation more comprehensively reflects today's complexity and extension of actors: "Diplomacy is a method of representation, communication and negotiation by which states and other international actors conduct their business". (Melissen, Jan; *ibid.* p. XIV) This definition, which better corresponds to the age of globalization, also expands the concept of the diplomat from a purely interstate notion to a mixed state/non-state field of relationships.

#### Entrepreneurial diplomacy

The increasing speed and complexity of many international conflicts requires the ability to act fast to prevent conflicts or to move quickly to limit or resolve conflicts and to do so at a critical point in time. Of course, this also requires an agreement with the

head office and the obtaining of instructions, but not in the sense of the old-style bureaucratic waiting process. Today's diplomat must be able to act quickly and adequately, which to a certain extent presupposes a willingness to take risks that, in turn, goes beyond the scope of conventional understanding of diplomacy.

### Business diplomacy of multinational companies

For a multinational company, every foreign investment means compliance with foreign political and legal regulations, which often cannot be influenced by the foreign ministry of the home country. A German company with a presence in China has to comply with Chinese legislation. Doing business across national borders requires constant internal coordination of business policy (between headquarters and foreign subsidiaries) and constant active engagement with local actors, many of whom are not even directly involved in the company's business, such as NGOs, party officials or tribal representatives.

The role of the in-house coordinator is referred to as the "corporate diplomat", while the "business diplomat" is a company representative who has to negotiate externally in third countries with local and international lobbyists and stakeholders (Saner, Raymond; Yiu, Lichia; Sondergaard, Mikael : "Business Diplomacy Management: A Core Competency for Global Companies," Academy of Management Executive, Feb.2000, Vol. 14, pp. 80-92).

A well-known example of failed business diplomacy is the behavior of Shell in Nigeria at the time of the military dictatorship and human rights violations towards the local Ogoni minority where the company was seen as being co-responsible for human right violations. The company experienced a major international image loss with long-term repercussions. The Nestlé Company made a similar mistake with breast milk replacement through milk powder in developing countries, where the mixture of milk

powder and polluted groundwater led to dangerous health consequences for the children and their mothers.

Another area that multinational companies are increasingly trying to influence through business diplomacy is negotiations at the international standards organizations (WTO, ITU, ILO, and ISO). Negotiated agreements, for example at the WTO, have a direct influence on the freedom of action of multinational companies for instance with regard to patent protection (TRIPS), transfer payments and investment protection (TRIMS) or entitlement to national subsidies (trade in agricultural products). Business diplomats from big companies try to influence these negotiations by influencing their own government or the local government. This can go so far that representatives of a company take part in the negotiations as members of national delegations.

#### Saddle-proof and crafty Diplomacy

What technical skills must the diplomat have? These include writing negotiation texts and press releases, confident media appearances, good knowledge of protocol practices, understanding of the legal implications of conventions, knowledge of the structure and functioning of international organizations and much more, but the key focus is on negotiation skills. This means the ability to actively determine the position of the other parties, to constantly observe the further development of the decision-making process of the other parties and to always be ready for contact attempts by the other side.

#### Negotiation and conflict skills

Negotiation competence means mastering the technique of bilateral, multilateral and multi-organizational negotiation and skillfully using it. This in turn requires an ability to actively explore the positions of the other parties, to constantly monitor the evolution of the other parties' decision-making and to be always ready for any contact attempts by the other side. At the same time, the diplomat should also have the ability to speak

firmly and tactfully when responding to a demand by an other country or multinational company that might jeopardize national vital interests.

### Cognitive and emotional flexibility

The bread and butter of diplomatic work consists in mediating and bridging differences. Negotiated solutions mean that your own maximum position(s) as well as the other(s) can only be starting positions. Even the most objective, most thorough, most honest solution (from one's own point of view) must be thrown into the cooking pot of the concession process. Diplomats must understand how to think ahead, introduce solutions and, after the exchange of concessions be able to take back concessions if the overall solution worked out is not sufficient.

Constantly adapting solutions requires creativity and composure and mental openness to suggestions from the other side, who may bring in more efficient solutions. This intellectual and analytical flexibility presupposes that the diplomat does not personally identify himself with his own preferred solution, which would only lead to emotional inflexibilities and hasty value judgments. Important international negotiations take time, sometimes several years, such as the Uruguay Round of the WTO.

The diplomat must be able to deal with ambiguity and constant conflict. The stress of being on standby often cannot be avoided in multilateral negotiations, if only because all representatives have to negotiate with their respective headquarters. This is even more complicated in international negotiations with time zone differences and with countries that only find a position internally after lengthy negotiations. The Federal Republic of Germany, for example, with its federal structure, is known for at times slow decision making within the EU negotiation process.

### Playing roles and not falling out of character

The diplomat should be able to modulate his own appearance depending on the situation. The reading of an official note in front of the UN General Assembly has usually been determined by the head office, hence the diplomat's performance is all about effective communication. It is different with the negotiations in the working groups. Simply reading and repeating pre-written positions is ineffective, both for the diplomat and for the other parties. A collegial style of communication would be more appropriate there. Finally, the diplomat should also be able to drink a coffee with the representative of another country and to sound out solutions in an informal manner, even if he does not find the other side sympathetically.

### Adhere to the limits of your own mandate

The increasing complexity of international relations, coupled with increasing problems of internal and external coordination leads to two possible behaviors, which are sometimes mutually exclusive and sometimes complementary. The urgency of a crisis, for example, requires an immediate creative response even without 'instructions' from headquarters. How far should the diplomat improvise? There is often a temporary paralysis at headquarters because internal decision-making is blocked. If the diplomat goes too far, there could be conflicts with headquarters. In return, headquarters should understand that the diplomat on the ground needs a certain amount of freedom to explore solutions with other parties. Detailed instructions restrict the scope for action too much and stifle initiatives and, if coupled with the threat of disciplinary measures, turn the diplomat into a risk avoider and official mouthpiece of the headquarters.

The diplomat needs a gray area in which he can and should take initiatives, and at the same time he should avoid the danger of wanting to determine the foreign policy of his own capital on the spot or of confronting headquarters with a fait accompli, even if

he perhaps has better ideas than his superior at headquarters. The trust must be mutual, and in return the diplomat's supervisor should be willing to shield the diplomat from above and from the outside criticism.

### The permanence despite continuous change

The new diplomacy, with its complexity and its new non-state actors, is somewhat reminiscent of the time before the Peace of Westphalia. It is in the interest of all actors involved to avoid sinking into new feudalistic-particularistic interests. However, this requires a constant readiness for dialogue between state and non-state diplomatic actors. The diplomats of the Foreign Office are challenged more than in the days of secret diplomacy and established bilateral relations. The modern diplomat must learn to share his competence with others without becoming obsolete.

The job description of diplomats needs to be expanded, a culture of openness guaranteed and the participation of legitimate non-state actors be made possible. At the same time, however, there is an increasing demand on government diplomats to expand their own areas of competence and to constantly take the initiative so that the multitude of often contradictory voices and interests can find a common denominator. Too much fragmentation harms the suffering state as well as other states and institutions. What is urgently needed for international relations are trustworthy, competent and capable diplomats, so that cross-border cooperation is characterized by sustainability and does not get weakened and fragmented due to multiple turbulences of a new medieval type instability.

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