

Privatizing Diplomacy— the Way Forward

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SCOPE OF WORK OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

AS AN INSTITUTION OF THE NATION-STATE, THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (MFA) is still the primary actor in world politics. In fact some global economic and political developments actually bolster its role rather than diminish it. The core business of the MFA must be about conducting diplomacy through the promotion of peace and security. The main function of the MFA must therefore be to keep in touch with all aspects of foreign policy and be up-to-date with all significant global events. The ultimate objective is to defend and promote its country's national interests. The diplomatic officer should spend the major part of his time formulating national positions, interacting, outreaching, and negotiating with others for that purpose. All other activities are secondary.

The MFA's role is important as a primary custodian of democracy, social policy, security and peace. But increasingly and ironically, this main focus has been distracted by activities related to it. On a daily basis, a number of tasks carried out by the MFA have to do with operational work. These include the delivery of medical supplies for humanitarian relief, the delivery of newspapers and other documents to overseas missions, the handling of diplomatic bags and cargos, ticketing, as well as consular and protocol work.

Apart from these daily activities, several events such as the hosting of international conferences and preparing for dignitaries' visits are taking

a toll on the resources and time of the diplomatic officer and distracting him from the core of his function. Steeped in the culture and tradition of making their guests feel at home—which is emblematic of Asians—Asian MFAs in particular, engage in more elaborate preparations than their counterparts in the West. Such activities require months of preparatory work, which involves the setting up of various committees that are required to organize, prepare budgets, make purchases, deploy manpower, set up information and communications technology (ICT) and other conference services facilities, book air tickets, find appropriate accommodation for delegates, meet security and transport requirements, promote publicity, not to mention conducting a series of dry runs and food tasting—all of which are necessary for the success of an international event at home or a visit by an important foreign dignitary.

To continue to be effective in carrying out its core functions, the MFA will need to share the stage with the private sector. Corporations owe a larger debt to society beyond simply making profits. Business leaders actively address social and environmental issues, and businesses are increasingly judged by their reliability as civic partners. This does not mean that they should abandon profit-making, but with time we hope to see more and more businesses that respond to civic and social demands. This process of privatizing some aspects of diplomacy can be hastened if governments bring them in to share the burden together.

The scope of activities mentioned above can be contracted out to companies. Many of these activities will have to be farmed out. The MFA will still hold the starring role but the co-stars will help it look good.

CONCERNS

The idea of privatizing diplomacy has provoked uneasy reactions among some within the MFA. Some see it as a disturbing trend where the involvement of the private sector leads to the rise of alternative authorities, more efficient than the government. Companies can often perform event management and training more efficiently than the government, although this is not necessarily the case all the time, and governments have shown themselves to be just as good, if not better.

Some worry that these co-stars will challenge the supremacy of the ministry and will seek to be stars themselves. Others worry that by not exposing young diplomats to the grind of diplomacy, they will never learn

nor master the mundane but important activities. This is especially worrying when they will be at assignments abroad, where all activities have to be shouldered by them.

We should, however, not see the process as one of decline of its authority or a weakening of tradition and institution. The change is far more interesting than that. It should rather be seen as a *transformation* of authority, where new ideas and new ways of doing things make the parent institution more reputable.

As far as our citizens are concerned, the MFA is a consular service. They are generally not aware of the core duties of the ministry. They expect the consular officer to identify bodies—some badly injured, some decomposed. They want our officers to visit their families in prisons, some of whom are to be executed. Protocol duty is another aspect that the MFA is reluctant to let go. A *faux pas* in handling dignitaries can sometimes cause a diplomatic blunder. The ministry has to decide which to keep and which to let go so that all of its officials collaborate more easily and become more effective.

Since the role given to the private sector will be relatively insignificant, the weakening of the MFA's authority is not likely to happen. The MFA needs to sell the idea to the private sector, and to themselves, that we are creating mutual and collective responsibility. A collaboration with public relations firms, the non-governmental organizations, and the media can also be mutually beneficial.

Also, the likelihood of the diplomat disappearing is slim. As long as there is a need for summits and conferences, there is still a need for the backroom boys to do the work as leaders do not negotiate the nitty-gritty. The issues involved are complex and summit leaders cannot resolve complex details. They do not normally negotiate the terms of treaties or agreements. They usually endorse and formalize what has already been negotiated by their experts and fine-tuned by their ministers.

SOLUTIONS

The transformation of authority can be double-edged. It alienates those whose strength is in the periphery of diplomacy. But the question arises: why should those whose business is not the core of diplomacy be in that business? The participation of non-state actors requires trust on the part of the MFA and the willingness to let go some of its responsibility. It calls

for the need to trust our jobs to those who do not share our mindset and the way we do work. And the process has already begun.

The question will be to what extent and in what areas should we allow others to assume our responsibilities? Event managers, consular work, diplomatic bag, training, are some of these areas that are amenable to such delegation.

The Malaysian MFA, for example, has about 50 per cent of its employees under its payroll doing work that is related to development projects, communication, ICT, security, protocol, and consular work. This is also not to suggest that we do away completely with the peripheral departments within the ministry, but advocate that we trim down manpower, allowing only a skeletal number of officers to oversee areas such as protocol, issuance of visas, and other consular work, administration, and budgeting, as we farm out such activities.

CONCLUSION

The conflict over this trend will continue for some time, but eventually the idea will be generally accepted, because the scope of the work of the MFA is so wide that it cannot afford to do it alone. In this way, the diplomat cannot only concentrate on his core function of conducting diplomacy, but this process can also promote a culture of teamwork and commitment within the organization. Other aspects such as the welfare of officers and their families can then be looked into. This includes paying more attention to the problems of school-going children who confront problems living apart from their parents, who are out on a long foreign assignment.

The world today is one in which technologies will become cheaper, lighter, smaller, more personal, mobile, digital, and virtual. For instance, Royal Dutch Shell with over 100,000 employees is one of the biggest companies on earth, and it is trying to get very small. The challenge for the MFA is to get smaller and better.

We need to wake up to the fact that there is a fundamental change in the way we go about doing business today. The focus today is on efficiency, collaboration, and on staying sharp. We have to privatize diplomacy to move forward.