

BILATERAL DIPLOMACY: A PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE

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Summary

- The bilateral process is the oldest form of diplomacy, dating to ancient times when kingdoms dealt with one another; often, a search for security and trade were the drivers. Covering relations between pairs of countries, this is the building block of multilateral diplomacy.
- It has evolved over time, especially after in the fifteenth-century Italian princely states and dukedoms began the custom in Europe of appointing resident ambassadors. In the seventeenth century, France created an office to manage them; that office became the foreign ministry. Customary diplomatic practices, such as procedures, precedence, and reciprocal privileges, evolved over time, and were codified in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (VCDR).¹
- The VCDR defines the tasks of bilateral diplomacy as: representation, protection, negotiation, reporting, and promotion. Each remains relevant but is rendered more complex by the vast and evergrowing agenda in international dialogue (bilateral, regional, and global); the entry of multiple state and non-state actors; and the increasing complexity in international affairs. We examine an alternate definition.
- The four pillars of bilateral diplomacy are: political, economic, and public diplomacy, and consular (plus diaspora) affairs. Its principal institutions are the foreign ministry, embassies and consulates, and the foreign service.
- We consider possible taxonomies for bilateral diplomacy. This is a work in progress; it may inspire deeper research into diplomacy studies.
- Today's diplomatic practices are a consequence of the globalisation of diplomacy, including the revolution in information and communication technology (ICT). Yet the core tasks are unchanged: the application of intelligence to managing relationships with foreign countries across a very broad front in pursuit of the home country's interests. We are in an age of complexified bilateral diplomacy as a result of new actors, issues, and interconnections in international affairs.
- This paper ends with an examination of the major 'tensions', national and international, that challenge effective diplomacy management.



Introduction

Through custom and convenience, countries handle relations with individual foreign states, and that state-to-state process is called *bilateral diplomacy (BD)*. The other principal format is *multilateral diplomacy (MLD)*, involving international organisation, including the UN, its specialised agencies, other world organisations, and global conferences. This engages groups of countries, or in the case of the UN, the global community. Another form that has gained salience is regional diplomacy, bringing together groups of states, either based on geographic proximity, or through other criteria (like oil producers that created the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), or the Antarctic Group composed of signatories to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty).² Both clusters belong to the multilateral diplomacy rubric, often conducted through resident 'permanent missions' that resemble embassies but are attached to international and regional organisations.³

Another perspective should be considered. MLD, including conference diplomacy, is both a counterpoint and adjunct to bilateral diplomacy. Small states, with their limited network of resident embassies, conduct some bilateral diplomacy in New York, Geneva, and Brussels – the great centres of UN and European (EU) MLD. This may involve visits by official delegations or the mobilisation of support on issues crucial to them. The net effect: the choice for states is not *between* MLD or BD; it is misleading to view them as binaries. Both are instruments useful in advancing external interests; they are intertwined. As we shall see below, BD is the basic building block of the international state system, and is often crucial to regional and multilateral work.

In BD, countries work on the subjects that serve their mutual interest. Besides foreign ministries, other ministries and official agencies also collaborate on their bilateral agendas. Thanks to the expansion in contact networks, this extends to co-operation between non-official institutions, entities, and people. Countries also carry out exchanges in culture, education, science and technology, tourism, and other fields. Good results in one field usually have positive repercussion in other fields.

When disputes or other problems arise, countries typically work together to solve the differences. In situations of persisting mutual problems, a bilateral relationship may enter a phase of slowdown or freeze, which might limit mutual interactions to a minimum. More typically, in our globalised world, countries privilege economic co-operation, i.e., promoting trade and investments, besides their mutual political and security dialogue, and are loath to snap these connections.

We distinguish between the country's *foreign policy* (the grand strategy that the cabinet, political leaders, parliament, and the nation establish) and its *diplomacy* (i.e., the delivery mechanism for implementing that policy, mainly entrusted to a professional diplomatic service, under political supervision). The two are closely interconnected, but not the same.

External relations are conducted through embassies, located in capitals; they are the prime channels for bilateral diplomacy.⁴ It is commonly held that the Italian princes and dukedoms exchanged resident embassies in the fifteenth century, but Kautilya's *Arathashastra*, compiled in the third century BC, speaks of envoys that resided at the court of neighbouring kings.⁵ This work is a comprehensive treatise on statecraft. It offers advice on the duties of resident envoys, their observation methods, and their personal conduct ('the envoy should sleep alone').

Within its assignment country, the embassy engages the foreign ministry, other ministries, and different official agencies, plus a wide range of agencies, official and non-official, as well as provincial, regional, and city administrations. Embassies increasingly pursue contact with multiple non-state actors. Consulates, which predate embassies, came into existence to assist merchants and ships at foreign ports, later handling visas and passport services when these documents became mandatory for international travel. Consulates are accredited to provinces, regions or cities, carrying out an expanded range of economic and public diplomacy, as well as political contact. They now function as 'sub-embassies'.

Evolution, content, and modes

Let us consider the origin, content, and main tasks of bilateral diplomacy. In ancient times, kings and rulers sent authorised representatives to other kingdoms to convey messages, bringing back information. They were sometimes given specific tasks, carrying proposals for alliances, making demands, or representing their masters at important events. Powerful emperors received tributes through them. Going beyond traditional hospitality extended to strangers, customs evolved on how these envoys were to be treated, centred on the principle of reciprocity – 'do that unto me, that I do to you'. It was but a short step to develop

'diplomatic immunity'. It was better to listen to the foreign envoy than eat him (figuratively or literally), even if the message was unpalatable.

In ancient China, Egypt, Greece, and elsewhere, diplomacy practices evolved over time, as did the methods and instruments of communication between rulers. In early modern Italy, around the late fifteenth century AD, resident ambassadors began to gain wide currency. The norms regulating diplomacy emerged through practice and were consolidated in treaties among regional powers, including

the Congress of Vienna (1815), which advanced diplomatic rules of precedence. The VCDR codified practices established over time, and became the enduring foundation of diplomatic practice. The central pillar of the VCDR is reciprocity – countries extend diplomatic privileges and immunities to others on the basis of receiving the same benefits for themselves. This convention is focused on bilateral diplomacy. It makes no references to multilateral, regional, or group diplomacy, though its provisions have been extended, *mutatis mutandis*, to cover these diplomacy variants. Today, while countries and public opinion sometimes rail against practices like ‘diplomatic immunity’ and endless protocol, this is the most universal and the least challenged of international legal instruments.

Contemporary diplomacy is largely a Western product, inspired by the experience of Renaissance Europe. It was only in the later nineteenth century that Asian states (notably China, Japan, and Thailand) embraced these practices. Early in the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union avowed to abandon classic diplomacy and produce new norms. It broadcast a new title for its envoys (‘Polnomochny Predstavitel’ – plenipotentiary representatives), but the novelty wore off. The USSR soon fell in line with customary usage.

The League of Nations was created in 1919 in Geneva; the USA refused to join. It became a sideshow, and is now a footnote in multilateral diplomacy. After World War II and decolonisation, some practices of the Global South, such as ‘South-South co-operation’ and ‘development diplomacy’, have entered usage. Israel and developing countries have given impetus to the new practices of diaspora diplomacy. Other developments include: ‘overseas direct investment’ (in which developing countries invest in rich states); education diplomacy (that takes students, mainly at the university level, to study in foreign countries); and science and technology, which is another new field for bilateral co-operation.

Today’s BD is impressive in the wide range of official and non-state actors it involves. Some call this the ‘democratisation of diplomacy’, which really owes to the enhanced interdependence between countries, and is thus connected with the process of globalisation. This makes it omni-directional and demands tight management. Most home actors

handle international exchanges, involving counterparts in foreign countries and international institutions. They include ministries and other agencies, parliaments, and sub-state entities (i.e., provinces, regions, and cities).

Many non-state actors have their own international programmes (e.g. business organisations, civil society, cultural agencies, education institutions, the media, NGOs, science and technology institutions, and think tanks). A popular term is ‘multistakeholder diplomacy’. Such engagement covers an ever-widening array of subjects, including climate change, the environment, Internet governance, and actions against global terrorism. Security threats are more complex than ever before, covering ‘soft’, ‘total’, and ‘societal’ challenges, many emanating from non-state agents. Countries now need friends and allies far and wide, often building issue-specific coalitions. The pursuit of congruence of interests and the resolution of divergences or disputes are the prime diplomatic tasks.

We identify four major pillars of BD. They are:

- a) **political:** the foundation of external relations between states, including the pursuit of security;
- b) **economic:** for many countries a principal task, covering inter alia trade, investments, technology flows, bilateral and multilateral agreements covering a range of economic activities, such as aid, technical co-operation, and tourism;
- c) **public diplomacy:** partly old wine in new bottles, like culture promotion, education exchanges, and media work, plus new themes like country branding and soft power mobilisation, some of it via the Internet; and
- d) **consular diplomacy:** covering visas and international travel documentation, now intensified thanks to an explosion in international travel and migration. It covers ‘diaspora diplomacy’, with countries mobilising their ethnic communities for their own benefits (remittances, investments, professional expertise). Diasporas are also instrumentalised for advancing one’s interests in that target country, and for strengthening bilateral co-operation.

Overall, international affairs are more volatile and unpredictable than before, demanding rapid responses from

Contrasts: India’s relations with Germany and China

In 1993, Germany was the first Western country to identify India as a ‘strategic partner’.⁶ In the 2010s, the two countries decided to hold annual summit meetings, with each leader being accompanied by five or six cabinet ministers, ensuring that a broad co-operative agenda is pursued.

India and China also hold regular summit meetings, but after a new border confrontation in 2017 at the Bhutan–China–India Himalayan boundary trijunction, President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi met at an ‘informal summit’ (i.e., a prolonged discussion between the leaders with minimal protocol formalities) at Wuhan in July 2018, and another one at Chennai a year later. But despite that, border tensions have continued, with a major clash in Ladakh in May 2020, resulting in the first loss of lives of soldiers in over 30 years.⁷ High-level dialogues are conducive to good relations, but not always a sufficient guarantee.

governments. Thus, diplomacy has become multidisciplinary, dynamic, and operational at many levels. But despite transformation, the fundamentals are constant: to build mutually beneficial relationships with foreign countries which are prioritised in accordance with one's objectives and expectations. No less important are problem-solving and dispute management when bilateral relations deteriorate. In many pairs of relationships, co-operation and conflict coexist, which further complexifies diplomatic engagement.

BD engages individual foreign states, across a spectrum of subjects, to advance one's own domestic and international objectives. The focus is on activities in respect of which interests, actual or latent, are in parallel or congruent. Equally important is the identification of differences, and alert action to defuse potential problems. For each state, security is the first responsibility, and is at the core of foreign policy. It is interesting that the first compiler of diplomacy practices, Kautilya, who also framed the first theoretical model of interstate engagement, was initially called 'amoral', and a practitioner of manipulative diplomacy. Such Western analysis overlooked Kautilya's insistence that the ruler should uphold *dharma* (righteous conduct). It is only through deeper analysis of the concepts behind his writings that analysts identified him as a pioneer in political thinking, and the first to advance the *raison d'état* doctrine (Mitra and Liebig, 2016).

What is the value of personal relations between prime diplomacy actors? We read about leaders establishing close friendships with their counterparts. Example: on a visit to Moscow in June 2019, President Xi Jinping, presenting President Putin with a giant box of ice cream on his 66th birthday, said Putin was his 'best friend'.⁸ Very clearly, in today's complex powerplay between the principal global powers, China and Russia have forged a strategic

partnership, strengthening their ecopolitical co-operation, but it might be simplistic to view the two countries and their leaders as locked in co-operation.⁹ Simply put, friendships between leaders (whether notional or real) are useful, but this seldom alters the basics of their national interests in the management of international affairs.

When countries engage deeply, their discourse contains many themes and, to pursue them, requires many agents and working levels. Often, states enjoying close understanding also find themselves on opposite sides of particular issues, producing competition or even antagonism. Conversely, countries that are adversaries may find surprising congruence on particular issues. That produces a dilemma: should problems between states on one set of issues affect the totality of their relationship? In today's plurilateral, multidimensional engagement between states, a typical response is to 'compartmentalise' problems so that one set of difficulties does not poison an entire relationship. But across-the-spectrum dissonance between states does occur at times if one side views an issue to be of primordial importance. The net effect: the global scene becomes an international checkboard, resembling three-dimensional chess, in which each action produces bewildering cross-currents. This renders diplomacy management even more complex and demanding. Example: during the Cold War, the conflict between the West (led by the USA and Western Europe) and the Soviet Union (led from Moscow, and comprising its Eastern European and other allies) produced rigidities in mutual diplomacy; but it also left room for mutual dialogue, plus a mix of contestation and parallel actions at third-country locations. In contrast, in 2020, we witness a kind of freeze in dialogue between the world's major powers, both bilaterally and at the level of the G7 and G8 groups. We may ask: is the current deep freeze between China and the USA rendered more complicated by COVID-19, leading to the start of another cold war?

Typologies

A simple typology can be employed to identify the bilateral diplomacy priorities of any state. Imagine a dartboard with three circles. Placing the home country at the centre, we can delineate three zones: at the 'Core' – the foreign countries that are the most important; 'Priority' states in the middle; and finally, an outer ring, those at the 'Periphery'. Their features:

- The 'Core' would perhaps include all or most of the immediate neighbours, the major powers, and other countries that are deemed to be of special importance. Typically, they might total 12 or 15 countries.
- The middle 'Priority' zone would include countries with special connections: political, economic, cultural, or ethnic. It might number another 20 or so countries.
- The 'Periphery', better called the 'Third Circle', would consist of the rest. It might be shaded in two zones to identify those with whom more intensive connections are being forged or await exploitation.

Classification helps establish priorities and delineates avenues for action. In practical terms, it should take into account that in an interdependent world, no country is truly 'over the horizon' or unimportant, the more so for countries that have a strong stake in international affairs. Further, examining the most vital partners, one would find that in an interdependent world, sensitive bilateral relationships now hinge on the connections with third and fourth countries. Some may call this 'complexified' bilateral relations; or 'bilaterals' can become 'trilateral'. As examples, consider Bhutan and Nepal – each a landlocked state, tightly sandwiched between China and India. For both, anything that happens with one of their direct neighbours impacts, and is influenced by, the reaction of the other. This brings home the simple point that a pure bilateral relationship does not exist. And yet, the one-to-one equation remains the first point of focus.

A different, more nuanced, typology is attempted below, based on the dominant characteristic of a bilateral relationship. I imagine countries might use this for internal

purposes, not for public consumption. In an initial attempt, the set of categories given below are offered for further examination.

Bilateral relationship typology

Type	Causes	Consequences
A. Co-operative	Mutual confidence, few rivalries, easy to work, large action canvas. Some become 'strategic partners' (Japan–Australia, UK–South Africa).	Close diplomatic ties exist, including substantive co-operation in economic and public affairs, and alliances and/or security co-operation; they may have few divergences. Strategic objectives are shared. These are the best relationships.
B. Affinitive	Solid connection of ethnicity, religious affinities, other values; few conflicts of interest (France–Canada, Malaysia–UAE)	There exists strong mutual co-operation and a desire to work together. The challenge is to translate values into mutually beneficial actions. Much scope for diplomatic initiative.
C. Fragile and unbalanced	Even if no issues in active dispute, history of past conflict can produce swings in relations (China–Mongolia, India–Nepal, Mexico–USA).	Usually possible to build modest levels of co-operation, but relations are complex, and may also depend on third countries. Disruptions possible. The smaller state will seek a 'balancing' relationship with another strong power. Economic aid, often used by the larger partner, may not work.
D. Wary, sometimes hostile	Limited co-operation, some hostility, a legacy of history, or unsettled grievances (UK–Zimbabwe, Greece–Turkey)	Diplomatic relations at a formal level, but few meaningful exchanges. Efforts to build co-operation may hinge on winning over the weaker partner. Needs serious interest on both sides. People-to-people contact can help.
E. Deeply adversarial	Major cleavage based on history, religious or other disputes, mutual sense of grievance (Israel–Palestine, India–Pakistan, Iran–USA)	Constituencies on both sides may develop a stake in keeping up tensions; efforts at dialogue undermined. Diplomatic relations cut off, or if they exist, do not produce meaningful dialogue. At the core is a major dispute that is intractable; can be surmounted through prolonged effort (Ireland–UK).
F. Work in progress	Distance, lack of awareness, being overcome with new mutual efforts (Asian–Latin Americans states)	Trade and other economic co-operation can be new drivers; also contacts between non-state actors. Globalisation throws up new opportunities to work together and overcome distance.
G. Regional affinities	As members of a regional group, near-neighbours can develop new affinities and shared interests, either spurred by the group, or to overcome blocks to regional co-operation.	Group membership overcomes inhibitions to closer bilateral co-operation (ASEAN: Brunei–Vietnam; SAARC: Bangladesh–Bhutan–Nepal; building new transport links with India; also creating the sub-group BBIN).
H. Low engagement	Interaction among small states, esp. those of the Global South, is low, owing to limited diplomatic resources and minimal interest.	Usually in diplomatic relations, but no resident embassies; modest contacts, chiefly via multi-lateral diplomacy centres, esp. New York. Global issues can produce new platforms for joint action (Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)).

What countries seek are bilateral relationships that are predictable. This has special value in a world that is marked by the 'VUCA phenomenon', i.e., marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Diplomacy management is facilitated when we can gauge well the

likely response from foreign countries. A few countries make a virtue of their lack of predictability. This may happen with countries that are adversaries. This is a dimension of bilateral relations that needs deeper study.

Diplomacy institutions

The principal bilateral diplomacy institutions are the foreign ministry, embassies (and consulates), and the diplomatic service. How do they function in the today's environment?

The foreign ministry: The modern foreign ministry is the face of a country's external policy. It is answerable to the head of government (and that office), while also mindful of its quasi-autonomous role in managing diplomacy. It strives to impose a 'whole of government' template vis-à-vis other ministries, which tend to pursue their own sectoral agendas, sometimes unmindful if that fits with national policy objectives. For the foreign ministry, this may resemble trying to herd cats (FCO, 2016). Further, it has to co-ordinate actions with a growing collection of non-state actors who are independent, but play their own roles, not officially representing the nation. In degrees that vary between countries, the foreign ministry is accountable to the parliament, the media, and the public. Its effort at projecting a 'whole of nation' posture is ever elusive.

The political pillar is its direct, first responsibility. The ministry contributes to, and executes, foreign policy decisions taken by the head of government and the cabinet. That involves working with different agencies of the government, especially the ministries of defence, environment, finance, home affairs, industry, trade, and intelligence agencies, among many others. Co-ordination of foreign policy, vis-à-vis all the ministries and official agencies, has become a major task (Hocking, 1999). Why is a consistent whole-of-government position difficult? Each official actor interprets its external agenda in keeping with its own remit and priorities. It happens often that even when a head of government gives a commitment to a foreign country, say on an aid project, or in relation to some action important to that foreign partner, implementation occasionally becomes a problem. The line ministry may have different goals or priorities in keeping with its work agenda. Methods applied to ensure coherence include: inter-ministry consultations, cabinet secretariat efforts to resolve differences, and taking the help of the head of government's office. A widely used method to reduce such frictions is the 'in and out' placement of officials among the ministry of foreign affairs (MFA) and other ministries. Another way to reduce such frictions: Italy appoints senior officials to work in key ministries as diplomatic advisers. Another solution is for the foreign ministry to absorb, or 'merge', with another ministry, typically a trade, economic co-operation, and/or an overseas development ministry.¹⁰ At another level, foreign ministries also increasingly engage with non-state actors,

academics, think tanks, NGOs, and the media, commissioning them to write policy papers and studies. They are also accepted as partners for dialogue with foreign partners. Sometimes these entities are used by foreign ministries for 'track-two' problem-solving efforts in problem situations. Inter-ministry co-ordination remains a problem area in most capitals.

Embassies and consulates: Around 90% of diplomatic missions around the world are bilateral – the remainder handle multilateral work. They are usually called permanent missions and are accredited to international or regional organisations.¹¹ Big embassies and consulates host officials from many different home agencies like those of defence, development finance, trade, customs, intelligence, drug enforcement, and others. That throws up the harmonisation of challenges since those officials report directly to their parent agencies, though they are nominally answerable to the ambassador or the consul general. Yet, the typical embassy is small in size, averaging three to four diplomats, plus a few support staff from home, and locally recruited personnel. The average consulate is even smaller.

Embassies and consulates have always been the eyes and ears of the home government in a foreign country. They do not compete with faster information channels, like TV networks, that deliver breaking news. Yet, embassies remain the best source for a complete, real-time view of international developments, in particular how they affect the home country. An active embassy team collects information from diverse sources and is uninhibited in its reportage, unlike published media that have to be more careful with speculative predictions.¹² Increasingly, foreign ministries realise this and accept, in consequence, that MFA territorial units need not duplicate their work. Embassies are accepted as the best policy advisers. Their on-the-ground information is blended with the foreign ministry's judgement in terms of the national perspective. Consequently, the good foreign ministries now use the embassy in a new and expanded way, integrating it into their decision process (Rana, 2004). This also connects with secure diplomatic 'intranet' communication networks. Embassies are treated as if embedded within the ministry, metaphorically located in the 'next room'.¹³ Counter-intuitively, this enlarges the embassy's responsibility, making them partners in the management of a relevant bilateral relationship. This permits the foreign ministry to redeploy staff from territorial departments to thematic and other new units (Rana, 2004). Austria,

Canada, Germany, and the UK are among the countries that have deliberately implemented such changes.

Overall, embassies are used more intensively than before. For instance, most Western countries give embassies a greater role in selecting and managing aid projects. Yet, for all the gains of our Internet-enabled virtual age, building inter-state relationships remains a human art; gaining credibility and trust with foreign interlocutors is best handled through a resident embassy. This is supplemented with a new and growing range of direct exchanges between the principals, and using new communications technology. As journalist Edward Morrow noted, the distance that is the hardest to bridge are the final few feet to connect representatives of countries.

The foreign service: Unlike chartered accountancy or the practice of law, diplomacy is not recognised as a profession, despite the fact that diplomats need specialised and increasingly deep skillsets. MFA officials are required to do more with fewer resources, facing budget cuts in most countries. Their role in advancing national interests is often undervalued (Copeland, 2009). In parallel with traditional dialogue with counterpart state actors, diplomats engage with people from most walks of life, leading to intensified outreach and public communications demands. In the past, aristocrats and elite institutions graduates dominated these services; the selection has gradually become 'democratic' in the income groups, regions, and academic institutions represented in foreign services. The Soviet Union appointed the world's first female ambassador in the modern era, in 1924, to Norway. It was only in 1933 that the USA

appointed its first female ambassador – to Denmark.¹⁵ That shattered a male bastion, and the gender balance has gradually improved in most countries. In Scandinavian states, and a few other states, women constitute half the service.¹⁶

In all countries, foreign ministry entry intake has become highly selective. Behind each successful candidate stand many scores, or hundreds, that had sought entry. The management of such high talent pools, and grooming the brightest among them for high office, is a sharp challenge. Western foreign ministries hold annual consultations, sharing human resource management experiences, and best practices.¹⁷ This method is not yet emulated by foreign ministries of the Global South. A few foreign ministries episodically send teams of officials to gain insights from outstanding counterparts, but this is expensive.

Another trend: foreign ministries have expanded focus on training diplomats. In the past two decades, the number of diplomatic academies run by foreign ministries has doubled. The International Forum on Diplomatic Training (IFDT) holds annual meetings where representatives of over 50 training institutions exchange experiences.¹⁸ Lifelong training has replaced the past notion that an initial dose of training for new recruits was sufficient.¹⁹ Training programmes for ambassadors and senior officials are now widespread. Further, annual ambassador conferences, now a staple in many countries, are tasked with quasi-training, usually via an experience-sharing format. Many foreign ministries give sabbatical leave to diplomats for academic study, focused on specialised skills fitting the ministry's requirements.

Diplomacy networks

Who has the largest diplomatic network? Australia's Lowy Institute produces a 'Diplomacy Index' that sets out the details of the diplomatic networks (including embassies, permanent missions, and consulates) of the major and medium powers, plus many Asian countries, covering over 61 states.¹⁴ This index is thorough in its coverage of Africa and Latin America. China has 169 embassies and 8 permanent missions, having edged out the USA which has 168 and 9. Looking only to embassies, they are followed by: France (161), the UK (152), Japan (151), Germany (150), Russia (144), Turkey (140), and Brazil (138). In tenth place is Italy (124), followed by India (123) and Spain (115).

Are diplomatic networks shrinking? This has long been expected, on the notion that modern ICT undermines the need for resident embassies. But this has not happened much. Even though some, like the Scandinavians, have eliminated certain embassies, most countries close a few and open others (like the Philippines). In the past 15 years, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey, and India have carried out major expansions in their embassy networks, each opening 15 to 20 new missions.

Bilateral tasks

The VCDR only codified the practices of bilateral diplomacy, though its provisions have been extended, as applicable, to multilateral and group diplomacy. Article 3 identifies the key diplomatic tasks as: **representation, protection, negotiation, reporting, and promotion.** This definition does not

fully describe today's reality. Diplomacy theorists grope for a better definition, but no state has advanced a serious demand for revision of the VCDR. Its central principle is 'reciprocity'; that is the key to its enduring relevance: the facilities states extend to others mirror those they

themselves enjoy (Denza, 2008). At times, the public and the media demand restricting the absolute exemption from host country laws that foreign diplomats enjoy; this happens when diplomats engage in financial malpractices or other offences. The only recourse available under the VCDR is to declare the offending diplomat *persona non grata*, and expel that individual. This works fairly well in practice.²⁰

During the 1919–39 inter-war years, a time of classic diplomacy, foreign ministry officials were first and foremost negotiators. But much has changed with post-1945 decolonisation and the consequent changes in the international system. Take the European Union, even if by 2020 some gloss came off from what was regarded as the world's advanced model of political engineering. Among EU members, some negotiation responsibility, as well as decision-making authority, has passed to the collective entity – the European Commission, its foreign policy chief, and the Council of Ministers. Interactions among EU member states are neither quite 'foreign' nor 'domestic', but a hybrid amalgam of the two. EU negotiations are handled by the ministries concerned, not the MFA. Britain was an obstacle to integration, but we may wonder if the UK's exit will really help that integration agenda. Everywhere, regional diplomacy has become an intermediate entity in the progression from bilateral to global affairs.

Functional ministries now mostly conduct their own external negotiations. When representatives of foreign ministries and embassies join delegations, they seldom lead, unlike in the past. That owes to the technical content of complex issues, and the foreign ministry's altered role.

Other tasks and objectives have emerged. The diplomat of yesteryear dealt primarily with the host country's MFA, engaging in confidential dialogue with authorised state representatives. Now the dialogue partners have expanded beyond recognition. Some call this 'democratisation' of foreign affairs, i.e., the entry of new actors, including non-state actors, plus continual erosion of the 'exclusive' position of the foreign ministry. Economic diplomacy is a major priority. This involves cultivating business entities, chambers of commerce, and the like. Another major change: the prominence of 'public diplomacy', which is a paradigm shift for this profession. Today's envoy is an 'entrepreneur ambassador' (Rana, 2004), functioning as the promoter of what can be seen as a 'public good', i.e., advancing the state's external interests across a broad front, and in a multilayered, volatile global environment. They need the mindset of a public service chief executive officer (CEO), even using public diplomacy methods to enlist diverse 'influencers' in the target country, not just dealing with classic partner state negotiators.

My alternate description of bilateral diplomacy covers six tasks:

1. Promotion
2. Outreach
3. Negotiation

4. Feedback
5. Management
6. Servicing

Each of these has its context. *Outreach* and *promotion* are intertwined – they involve building new and proactive connections that are both extensive and intensive, pursuing a proactive agenda. *Negotiation* and *feedback* are holdovers from the past, but with differences – the latter involves embassies in providing home-country focused analysis of a kind no public sources will provide. Further, using technology and intranets, clusters of embassies join in presenting unified reports of a kind impossible in the past. *Management* is an expanded work task, covering not only the supervision of the effective functioning of diplomatic units, but also a new role for embassies, vis-à-vis the MFA, in handling the bilateral relationship. *Servicing* is a banal term that includes protection and consular services for citizens, as also the new task of connecting with the diaspora. Thanks to the migration and movement of people, this work has also expanded.

Work priorities are transformed. The diplomat of yesteryear dealt with official agencies, primarily the foreign ministry of the host country, engaging in confidential inter-state dialogue. Political issues were the main focus, with some help to home agencies on trade and basic consular tasks. We speak now of 'democratisation' in foreign affairs, as noted above, i.e., the entry of multiple state and non-state actors. The envoy has become a public service CEO, often using public diplomacy methods, communicating with vast audiences via social media, working with different non-official and state partners, as well as substate entities like provinces, regions, and cities. Altogether, the action canvas has shifted and expanded.

Countries engage with one another across a wide spectrum. For example, when students from one country go to study in another, the question of 'equivalence of degrees' comes up, especially pertinent for engineering, medicine, and many other technical disciplines. This involves negotiating a bilateral, or sometimes regional, agreement. Often, ministries send their own specialists to handle such tasks. We thus see education and science attachés, narcotics and investment experts, security service representatives, and other specialists working out of embassies. Other 'para-diplomats' include specialists working on aid, agriculture, culture, customs, and taxation. In large embassies, MFA officials are usually in a minority, but they still have to manage the embassy by providing common services.²¹

Co-ordinating and imposing coherence over such bewildering, complex, and often crosscutting networks, becomes a special task for foreign ministries and their field agent, the ambassador and his team of professional diplomats. Their goal is to ensure a 'whole of government' consistency to all actions, resolving contradictions, and ensuring smooth implementation of decisions that require the participation of different home agencies, sometimes even autonomous

actors like universities or research institutes. Inter-ministry co-ordination is thus both salient and difficult, as noted above.

We have also seen that the head of government is engaged in bilateral relationship management to an unprecedented degree. Leaders meet at bilateral encounters, often called 'summits', at conclaves that might be regional or devoted to special subjects, and at global conferences; they hold preplanned or impromptu 'bilaterals', and 'pull-away'

conversations. The president or prime minister of an internationally active state may make 15 or more bilateral visits in a year (often covering several countries in one tour), in addition to group summits. The preparation and the follow-up for each involves the office of the head, the foreign ministry, plus other state and non-state agencies, and the concerned embassy, mostly behind the scene. Thus, the head and their staff continually supervise and engage with the foreign ministry.

Evolving practices

Given that the bilateral process is so central to diplomacy, much of recent evolution concerns this genre. We consider below both the change and the constants.

First, who are appointed as ambassadors? In the countries that gained independence after WWII, with no inherited foreign affairs infrastructure, they built foreign ministries from scratch. Often, liberation struggle veterans and public figures were sent as the first ambassadors. This was also the original practice in the USA. Its first ambassador, Benjamin Franklin, was sent to France (1776-78).²² Now, despite a very professional US Foreign Service, such 'political' appointments, hovering around 30% of the total, have become a US tradition (the remainder 70% are career professionals). While eminent US public figures sometimes perform well, too many appointments go to financial contributors to presidential election campaigns, which amounts to selling appointments.²³ The situation has worsened under President Donald Trump.²⁴ Among major international actors, the USA is the only one to persist with this practice.

States in the Americas and the Caribbean have imitated the USA, with the exception of Brazil, where under law ambassadors must be foreign ministry professionals. Similar practice is entrenched throughout much of Africa, which undermines the professional diplomatic services. Former politicians and others non-professionals outnumber their career envoys, though in a few countries, such as Kenya, a shift in favour of professionals is visible. In contrast, Asian

countries typically send fewer non-career ambassadors. An exception are the Philippines, where around 40% of its ambassadors are political appointees. In net terms, career diplomats are denied opportunities for advancement. Such a patronage culture impacts on embassy performance.

Second, regional diplomacy is now a strong form of group activity, driven by trade and other economic interests, as well as security and other political imperatives. This is relevant to our study, because strong bilateral co-operation is both a precondition to, and a consequence of, regional actions. As with the multilateral variant, it is a key building block. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967, and remaining a vigorous group (expanding from its original five states to cover all ten that lie in Southeast Asia), transformed past bilateral disputes to a set of impressive harmonies among all the pairs it covers. A different example also shows the connections between bilateral and regional co-operation. South Asia, home to the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), is called the least integrated region; the long-running disputes between India and Pakistan act as a block. In that situation, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has helped some of those countries to pursue other options for connecting river and road transport networks. An entity called BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) has come into existence. Another network called South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SACEC) covers the same four countries, with the addition of the Maldives and Sri Lanka.²⁵

Zones of discretion, relationship building

The support that one country extends to another, partly depends on the quality of the relationship, i.e., the extent to which the former feels committed to that relationship. This applies to global issues as well as regional organisations. Of course, this is just one of several factors that will swing the decision; for instance, when core interests are involved, that will be the determinant. In our age of wide connections and interdependence, few countries are seen as irrelevant.

A similar calculus may apply, sometimes, in intrapersonal relations between state representatives that have built a solid relationship. For example, when such an official presents a demarche to a trusted counterpart seeking support, the latter might have a small latitude of discretion on a matter of secondary importance. This might be a multilateral issue; the official receiving the request could have a limited zone for discretion. In such a case, mutual credibility and trust *might* swing a decision, of course in the expectation that the favour will be returned when needed (Rana, 2011).

Third, for most countries, economic diplomacy has been a major priority for some years now, i.e., expanding trade, foreign investments, technology inputs, aid (often both ways for the relatively advanced developing states), tourism, and other economic flows, all to advance the home development agenda. A rich country can afford to decouple its diplomacy from official interventions (as some European states have done), recommending their companies use business advisers and consultants (like the Dutch), or charge companies for such services (as the USA and some others do). In developing countries, where business consultants and advisers are thin on the ground, and business enterprises have limited funds for exploring foreign markets, embassies act as guides, mentors, and promoters, actively helping home enterprises, business chambers, and industry associations to internationalise. Interdependence among countries, and the reworking of global supply chains taking place in 2020, has added urgency to these tasks.

Fourth, 'lean' diplomacy practices have emerged. Giving ambassadors multiple 'concurrent accreditation' tasks is an old method, whereby an envoy handles representation in several countries.²⁶ New trends include:

- 'Joint' embassies, where two or more countries send a single envoy (the Organization of East Caribbean States (OECS) did that initially in Ottawa, now they have a joint mission in Brussels and at Rabat).
- 'Co-location', whereby embassies from several countries share the premises and other facilities.²⁷
- Part-time 'non-resident' ambassadors (pioneered by Singapore and Malta and gaining slow traction elsewhere). Often, they are private citizens, from business and other backgrounds, treating this as a part-time assignment; they travel once or twice per year to their assigned country.
- Countries appoint more honorary consuls than before, as a near zero-cost option to 'fly the flag', also helping visiting businessmen and delegations, using their own networks of contacts. This method is effective when the right local person is appointed.
- Small developing states use their permanent missions at New York, the hub of multilateral diplomacy, to contact foreign countries on bilateral issues via their counterparts. Further, as part of the hectic networking that is a New York hallmark, bilateral encounters take place between leaders and officials, for consultation and problem-solving.

Fifth, leaders had become globetrotters to the point of distraction from domestic affairs. Example: in Latin America, presidential inaugurations became international events involving foreign leaders. The COVID-19 pandemic has curbed that. Will online summits now become a new alternative? What will surely intensify are privileged exchanges among leaders through social media, including public platforms like Twitter, and much more important, their dialogue via direct messaging.²⁸

Sixth, innovative practices are widespread. Example: the use of eminent person groups, composed of businessmen,

academics, cultural and media figures, scientists, and others from public life; meeting annually for a couple of days, they brainstorm on ways to enrich their bilateral or regional relationship. Leading think tanks establish their own dialogue exchanges to discuss economic ties, explore strategic partnerships, and build mutual confidence. They usually report back to home governments. This opens up diplomacy to non-state actors. This is part of 'track-two' diplomacy.

Joint bilateral actions

When two countries enjoy a close relationship, and have a mutual interest in deepening their engagement, as happens with a good number of bilateral situations, joint actions are undertaken. Examples include:

1. Groups: Thailand and Australia have such an 'eminent person' group (led by ministers, and including businessmen and other public figures) that meets annually.
2. Countries encourage academic and S&T institutions, as well as think tanks, to collaborate for mutual gain.
3. The envoys of the two countries may get to trust each other to informally share ideas, and for mutual problem-solving.
4. Drafts of documents (such as resolutions that might be taken up at the UN, and even reports on third country situations) may be shared.
5. Intelligence agencies share material on priority issues for each side.

Seventh, innovation in diplomacy, as elsewhere, involves concepts and processes. In bilateral work, *conceptual* innovation includes: the better utilisation of embassies as contributors to managing relationships with foreign countries; joint embassies; a diplomatic service in which people multitask (with reduced recourse to support staff); a more extensive use of local staff, using them for relationship building and other quasi-diplomatic work; and opening up to diaspora groups, using them to better connect with key foreign actors. *Process* innovation includes: intensive use of bilateral summits where leaders are accompanied by several cabinet ministers to focus on results; using ICT, especially social media, to reach the public and improve consular services; and finally, the intensive use of honorary consuls.²⁹ Foreign ministries resort to performance monitoring techniques, motivating embassies to deliver on the targets set for them. Since the quality of bilateral relationships cannot be quantified, this involves setting descriptive goals, and using proxy indicators, as feasible.

Finally, in almost all countries, foreign ministries face serious resource challenges. Finance ministries are often unconvinced on the value of their diplomatic systems, imposing budget cuts or squeezing new allocations. Foreign ministries resort to domestic public diplomacy to convince the public at home, and to attract good candidates to join their diplomatic services.

Hard tasks facing MFAs

As institutions located in their systems of national governance, MFAs usually face several 'tensions' – or choices between competing objectives in their foreign policy actions. These are among the intrinsic challenges that result from the complexities of national governance. This too is a subject that calls for further study.

1. Enforcement of a co-ordinated national agenda. The external-affairs work remit is shared by the MFA with other agents, within and outside their government, their agendas and objectives often being different. In consequence, the 'whole of government' and 'whole of nation' harmonisation of action is a continual struggle. A key point: while other ministries and agencies have their sectorial agendas, it is only the MFA that has a holistic vision of each bilateral relationship. This also applies to regional and global issues where the MFA has to deal with cross-linkages between issues and competing external goals. Countries struggle with these complex tasks, with varying outcomes.³⁰
2. The MFA's special role in external economic policy, as the 'owner' of an unmatched overseas network. This covers trade, investment policy, and interaction with multilateral financial institutions. Despite this, MFAs sometimes struggle for a place at the decision table on issues relating, for example, to the World Trade Organization (WTO), free trade agreements, and global financial issues. The 'sherpas' who prepare for key global conclaves, such as G-20, seldom come from the MFA, which also diminishes its effectiveness.
3. As we have seen, heads of government travel abroad almost continually, though in 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic has replaced most of this with videoconferencing. This also long meant leaders exercising direct control over foreign affairs, often taking personal decisions. The MFA and the foreign minister are the policy advisers, but must compete with other information sources, political and personal, especially the intelligence agencies.³¹ They are sometimes out of the decision loop and have to play catch-up.
4. Dialogue confidentiality versus public accountability. Reporting to the public at home, and public diplomacy are essential in MFA's contemporary work ethic. But dealing with problem situations and negotiation, demands quiet, patient exploration of possible options that hinges on confidentiality. Major negotiations, and the management of fraught foreign relationships, require MFAs to navigate a risky middle path.
5. Sharp internal management challenges. A greatly expanded international agenda and complexity in handling foreign affairs issues, demand expanded diplomatic networks and a larger national diplomatic service than before. This pushes up the importance of MFA management, including personnel administration. Often, its top management is riven by the contradiction between the urgent and the important. This comes at a time when new technology, digital management, and performance norms confront all public services.

Conclusions

In the future we might see greater recourse to 'frugal diplomacy' through the methods covered above, permitting diplomatic systems to do more with fewer resources, and covering all four pillars of bilateral activity. Further, wider, more purposeful use of ICT is inevitable, including the pervasive recourses of social media, and apps to access foreign ministry services. Yet, information technology and virtual presence does not replace personal communication; building credibility with international partners requires direct engagement. At places of marginal interest, cutting back on expensive overheads, like prestige residences and chanceries, and closing marginal embassies, may well become a trend, as joint embassies run by countries that have compatible aims, including regional partners.

Foreign ministries walk a thin line in building in-house specialised skills that blend well with generalist knowledge, and recruiting outside specialists to deal with cutting-edge subjects. They must also nurture their executive services, since professional diplomats, vital for top jobs, can only gain craft skills over time. Training has risen to the top agenda. Managing human resource is a challenge in the competitive global environment. Small states face sharp

challenges: for them, diplomacy is a vital shield for dealing with world affairs, and for gaining vitally needed security. But it is hard to build professionalism among their senior staff when their leaders tend to appoint politicians to high ambassadorships. If I were to select one essential area for MFA reform for all countries, small or large, it would be the grooming and retention of top-grade professionals.

Does the COVID-19 pandemic offer lessons for bilateral diplomacy? If anything, it shows the great importance of working with other countries, both for one's own benefit, and mutual ones. Will this cataclysmic event reverse globalisation? It has ended open and at-will international travel and the movement of people. For some time, travel for study and work in foreign countries may be much reduced. Also, migration will suffer reductions. But the fundamentals of international co-operation are unlikely to be reversed. In commerce and industry, supply chains will perhaps become shorter. There will be much less reliance on 'just-in-time' industry supplies, plus a strong impulse against overdependence on external sources, and the development of parallel home-supply sources. Yet, international collaboration must continue, often via online and

virtual channels. Will multilateral co-operation get a big boost? Many have hoped this will happen, but hard evidence is not in sight in the initial months of the virus pandemic. At the end of 2020, we are still in a phase of transition and flux, and hard predictions will lack credibility.

Change, and adapting to change, is a continual task. In essence, the external policy goal remains constant: to apply intelligence to diplomacy management, adroitly

sustaining durable, comprehensive connections with each foreign partner that contributes to advancing one's interests, plus resolving problems. These actions also shape the country's international standing. Beyond the diplomacy labels we use, be it bilateral, multilateral, regional, political, economic, public, consular, or any other, the advancement of the country's external interests, in all these settings, remains a single holistic task.

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Endnotes

- ¹ This is supplemented by the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.
- ² Some call such thematic groups 'plurilateral', reserving the term 'regional' for the geographic groups.
- ³ Often, the bilateral embassy in the concerned capital is concurrently accredited to such a regional group secretariat to function as a 'permanent mission'.
- ⁴ In rare cases, a consulate general may also serve as a bilateral political channel, as with India and Israel, which recognised each other in the 1950s, but did not raise political ties to full diplomatic relations till 1993.
- ⁵ Modern scholarship has thrown new light on the pioneering ideas offered by Kautilya. Please see a major 2016 review of a book co-authored by Mitra and Liebig that furnishes deep analysis of the *Arthashastra*. Available at <https://kishanrana.diplomacy.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Liebig-Kautilya.pdf> [accessed 17 September 2020].
- ⁶ This was an appellation used in the 1993 Asia Konzept Policy Paper, at a time when this phrase had not undergone devaluation through overuse, as it has happened in subsequent years.
- ⁷ India reported the killing of 20 of its soldiers; the number of Chinese casualties was not revealed. Both sides used sticks and stones, not their weapons, partly upholding their agreements to exercise restraint.
- ⁸ See: <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/world-news-happy-birthday-my-best-wishes-vladimir-putin-presents-ice-cream-to-xi-jinping-as-gift/332308> [accessed 17 September 2020].
- ⁹ For instance, in Central Asia, composed of states that were earlier part of the Soviet Union, the two have an intrinsic rivalry. That is also visible in the fact that Russia, while supporting President Xi's mega Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has not joined any BRI projects.
- ¹⁰ About 30 countries have such combined ministries, among them: Argentina, Australia, Canada, several Caribbean states, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Kenya, Malta, Mauritius, New Zealand, The Netherlands, and some Pacific Island states, among others. In my assessment, Denmark is among those with the best such unified ministry that combines foreign affairs, trade and investments, and foreign aid.
- ¹¹ At locations such as Nairobi, Paris, Rome and Vienna, where international organisations have their headquarters, bilateral embassies are also designated as permanent missions to handle multilateral work.
- ¹² Diplomatic reports are confidential and are required to also offer predictive analysis, unlike published media reports.
- ¹³ This expression was used by a German Foreign Office representative in a confidential interview in 2011.
- ¹⁴ See: <https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/> [accessed 17 September 2020].
- ¹⁵ See: McCarthy H (2014) *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat*. London: Bloomsbury.
- ¹⁶ In India, only a handful were appointed in the 1950s, and were required to quit if they married. That was also the norm in the UK. In both the norm ended in the 1960s. The proportion of women officials has risen in most countries, and open discrimination has ended. But a glass ceiling exists in most Western countries; virtually none have had a female head of service, unlike India that has had four in the past 20 years.
- ¹⁷ Some examples: a) annual meetings of EU foreign ministry heads of administration; b) a Canada-led group that meets to exchange personnel management experiences; and c) another group of mainly Western foreign ministry officials are invited by a Canadian think tank, CIGI, to discuss outsourcing of embassy and foreign ministry services. Countries that enjoy close ties, like the Scandinavians, and Austria–Switzerland, also share management experiences.
- ¹⁸ See: <https://forum.diplomacy.edu/> [accessed 17 September 2020].
- ¹⁹ Some innovations in training deserve note. Online methods are now used widely, and this will gain further traction with the COVID-19 pandemic. The UK established its Diplomatic Academy in 2016, dividing courses into foundation, practitioner, and expert levels. It has a slim organisation with most course work outsourced. The Emirates Diplomatic Academy runs a one-year international affairs course for about 60 graduates. The best 30 among them are taken into the UAE Foreign Ministry.
- ²⁰ Often, the sending country carries out its own judicial or administrative actions against the defaulting official or member of their family.
- ²¹ We witness some experimentation in embassy management. Since the mid-2010s, the UK has, at large missions, begun to outsource this to specialist companies; others await the results of this initiative.
- ²² Ben Franklin was designated 'minister plenipotentiary', technically lower in rank to an ambassador – such ranks fell into disuse in the twentieth century.
- ²³ See: Jett DC (2016) *American Ambassadors: The Past, Present, and Future of America's Diplomats*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- ²⁴ By 2020, President Trump had appointed 188 ambassadors, with 108 career appointments (57.4%) and 80 political appointments (42.6%). The earlier average of

political appointments had been 30%. See: <http://www.afsa.org/appointments-donald-j-trump> [accessed 17 September 2020].

²⁵ Both BBIN and SASEC are supported by the Asian Development Bank. See: <https://www.sasec.asia/index.php?page=publications-list&tag=BBIN> [accessed 17 September 2020].

²⁶ No one has researched the efficiency of this method. My gut feeling is that it is a poor alternative to the Malta–Singapore pioneered method of appointing part-time ‘non-resident ambassadors’, often from business and other backgrounds, based in the home country.

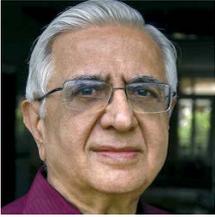
²⁷ The four-member Pacific Alliance has shared facilities at about ten locations.

²⁸ We may be certain that this is subject to snooping by the major, and not so minor, intelligence services, though no one speaks of this openly.

²⁹ Small countries use honorary consuls to prepare for visits by high dignitaries and official delegations. Most foreign ministries are open, selectively, to such expanded roles for these ‘non-official’ representatives.

³⁰ See the UK report titled *Future FCO* which details why it is vital for a foreign ministry to have a role in the decision process on climate change, world trade, global Internet policy, and similar major international issues that are in the remit of technical departments. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/521916/Future_FCO_Report.pdf [accessed 17 September 2020].

³¹ The intelligence agency networks are also often used by leaders for their ‘private’ messages to counterparts, which strengthens their domestic clout.



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