

TOPICAL ESSAYS

I. Introduction

Diplomats: Symbols of Sovereignty become Managers of Interdependence: The Transformation of the Austrian Diplomatic Service

Eva Nowotny

Introduction

One hundred years ago, Sir Ernest Satow—the author of the much used guide to diplomatic practice—defined the task of diplomats as “the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states.” This definition seems rather quaint or even dysfunctional today. An informed public would hardly support and legitimize the arrogance inherent in the claim that only professional diplomats would be endowed with the “tact and intelligence” required for this task.

Nor can the claim be supported that diplomats should have a kind of monopoly of being active in this field. Indeed, it seems presumptuous to raise such a claim, given the fact that today politicians do not find it difficult to contact one another directly without the intercession of their respective ambassadors. In doing so, they could—it seems—avoid misunderstandings and ambiguities that would be bound to arise so easily from the interposition of a third and fourth person. Indeed, these direct contacts between rulers proliferate.

The insistence on “official relations” seems outmoded, too, for in today’s world, the distinction between “official” and “not official” has lost much of its meaning. Prime ministers lobby potent transnational firms for selecting their country as the site for their new investments. Criticism by non-governmental bodies like Amnesty International, Greenpeace, or Transparency International usually carries greater

weight, consequence, and relevance than some critical remarks made by Ambassador A to Ambassador B at a cocktail reception of Ambassador C.

Additionally, funding this diplomatic apparatus is expensive. In the case of Austria, several hundred of diplomats have to be maintained abroad, with official residences, chauffeurs, cooks, and other support staff in a lifestyle that seems a leftover from feudal times and is not in accord with the egalitarian ethos of the democratic republic they represent.

So, if all of this is true, why, then, are diplomats still around a hundred years after their demise had been predicted? Why have they become even more numerous instead of quietly becoming extinct as a species no longer adapted to the new habitat of a modern, democratic, information- and knowledge-based society?

It is true, of course, that all bureaucracies tend to perpetuate themselves and that they tend to do so beyond the time of their functionality. This pertains, in particular, to the bureaucracies of the state. The diplomatic service should be no exception. Motivated by the narrow interest of preserving its privileges and shielded by a fog of nationalist myth about its unique symbolic value, the diplomatic corps of the world would, thus, have been able to survive even after having lost all practical usefulness.

But it seems doubtful that these are the true reasons for the survival and even expansion of the diplomatic services of the world. For one should doubt that over decades ministers of finance and critical members of parliaments would have been willing to budget for institutions which might be charming, but useless.

Using the Austrian diplomatic service as an example and drawing on my personal experience as a diplomat, political advisor, and historian, I will argue that the diplomatic service flourishes because, while preserving and honing some of its core skills, it has changed, adapting to the radically changed environment of a deeply interdependent world and developing new tools and modes of action to tackle the new tasks presented by this new environment.

Changes in the Terrain of Diplomacy

When I entered the Austrian Ministry for Foreign Affairs on 1 March 1973, my first boss installed me in an empty office and handed me a thick file which he advised me to study diligently and carefully. It was entitled “*Runderlass über die Formen der schriftlichen Aktenerledigung*” (“Circular Instruction *ad omnia* on the Appropriate Forms of Written Communications”). Having come to diplomacy with a doctorate

in history and having gone through years of archival research in preparation for my dissertation on Klemens von Metternich, I discovered very quickly that there was nothing in this “*Runderlass*” which was in any way new or surprising. On the contrary, all the various elements contained therein, from the proper way of drafting the “*Aktenvermerk*”, giving the reader of a file a brief synopsis of the case at hand and explaining the reasoning of the author for a proposed course of action, to the political report, the political instruction or the correct filing, were deeply familiar to me. They were the same used by Metternich and his staff as he drafted and negotiated his European-wide diplomatic network. These first hours on my first day into a new career gave me insight into the astounding degree of continuity, which through all the vagaries of history has marked and still marks Austrian diplomacy—a degree of continuity and a sense of tradition combined, as it is, with openness for change and the capacity to adapt very quickly to changed circumstances.

When I entered the diplomatic service, faxes and xerox machines were not yet in use. Making a long distance call (even within Austria) required prior approval by the head of the department. Diplomats were still supposed to travel to new overseas assignments by boat. Hierarchies were steep and strict. The “*Du*” among colleagues, a leftover from the feudal era of the empire, was strictly reserved for the A-level officers. In matters relating to official business, communication other than via the official hierarchic channels was not only frowned upon, but it was also punished. Truly relevant were only the things that happened within the confines of this monastic entity. Other state bureaucracies were automatically assumed to be of a lesser kind and of negligible relevance. The role model was the elegant, slightly cynical ambassador writing, every two months or so, witty, highly readable, and quotable reports based on his periodic encounters with the political director of the Foreign Ministry of his receiving state.

It was at that time, too, that Austria—a young state in many respects—had just managed to gain a firmer sense of its own identity and place in the world. But this identity being young and that place still being uncertain, much unease persisted. It influenced some activities and claims that today may seem quixotic (such as the claim that Austria should politically use its weight as a “cultural super-power,” with the Vienna Philharmonic orchestra being equivalent to the armament of bigger states). But the same unease and uncertainty also fueled the desire to gain acceptance and respectability by being useful to others by:

- lowering the risks inherent in the East-West confrontation,
- broadening contacts with its neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe in the hope of preserving their European identity,

- strengthening European fora of cooperation like the Council of Europe, and
- promoting on a global level the rule of law and widening and deepening the reach of cooperation in and through international organizations.

The new Austrian Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky was about to broaden this agenda further by claiming for Austria a role in the viciously explosive conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and—more generally—in efforts to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor nations of the world.

Thus, in terms of the tasks set for Austrian diplomats, this was a time of transition and significant change. The prior, obvious, and somehow externally imposed tasks had been completed. Independence and sovereignty were secured. Austria had adhered to stipulations by the United Nations and the Council of Europe. With neutrality, a viable security policy had been defined. To the extent possible, the rights of the Austrian population living in South Tyrol had been safeguarded. With Germany, claims and counter claims arising from the Second World War had been settled. Last but not least, Austria had managed to participate in the economic integration of Western Europe through its membership in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

These immediate tasks completed, Austria now sought its place and function in a wider regional and global setting. The concept of a “national interest” was broadened and was subsumed under the notion of “*Aktive Neutralitätspolitik*,” a policy of pro-active neutrality. Austrian diplomats, their mode of work and the tools they used, had to adapt. But this need to adapt did not just reflect the new priorities in Austria’s own foreign and security policy; it also reflected the changes in the wider world.

There is a tendency to regard the period between 1950 and 1990 as a period of great stability, in which all the main parameters of the global order remained unchanged, with the two structural cleavages being the one between the Communist “East” and the democratic “West” and the one between a poor, post-colonial “South” and the wealthy “North.” This era of tranquility would have come to an end just at the end of the last century with the downfall of the Communist empire and with terrorists smashing the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center ten years later.

But this image of an uneventful forty years is misleading. Actually, the time between 1950 and 1990 was one of massive transformation in the very structure of the global system. The relative power of the United States became somewhat lesser, and the power of its Soviet counterpart

had been in irreversible decline since the early 1960s. Japan and Germany regained their former economic status, yet renounced their historic geo-political ambitions. The number of states doubled, and next to these numerous new states, other actors became active as players on the global scene: transnational corporations and transnational groups pursuing a political agenda became both more numerous and relevant. So did the official international organizations whose number also doubled in that period.

But that was not all, and this increase in the numbers of international actors and the shifts in their relative power were not changes of a truly revolutionary kind. What had truly transformed the global order was the growing interconnectedness of all of these players. As the world's population doubled and as the world's wealth grew even faster, each one came to depend on the other in a very direct way, with lower transportation costs and the general lowering of the "transaction costs" merging the world into a single economic space and making increasingly porous the international borders that once had so clearly divided the realm of one sovereign from the territory of another.

Many profited. Quite a number of persons and states did not. While the world as such became wealthy as it has never been before, the chasm that divides wealth and poverty also became deeper than it had ever been before.

Complex systems such as a highly interconnected and interdependent world are accident-prone and vulnerable. They are in need of steering and protection, and this is what the actors in the international system have to provide. A good part of that task falls to the agents of states, who remain, after all, the dominant players on the global scene. In fulfilling these tasks, states may, of course, use different agents. Heads of governments themselves have become more directly involved in this task. They congregate at the ever more frequent summit meetings of various sorts. In between, they have adopted the habit of calling one another on the phone, or as in the European Union, they have at their disposal a special e-mail system for instant communication. Within the public administration, many different branches of government have installed special offices to administer their international agenda. Indeed, there are only few not touched by global interdependence and, thus, not obliged to interact with their counterparts in other countries of the world. Even provinces and towns have an international agenda and their own strategies and instruments for achieving it. Nevertheless, diplomats remain active, and looking at Austria, I would maintain that their assignments have multiplied. Far from receding into the irrelevance that had been predicted for them, they are multi-tasking professionals and now till fields they had not touched before.

Certainly, this could not be the case had the Austrian diplomatic service remained as it was at the time when I was initiated into its ranks. Had it remained unchanged, it would have been reduced to a reliquary of merely symbolic value, surviving in reduced scope, out of bureaucratic inertia and not because of services rendered to the public. Instead, it has been transformed. An old ambassador who retired in 1970 would feel lost after passing through the gates of Ballhausplatz 2. He would no longer recognize as his the ministry now in place.

Three forces are behind this wholesale makeover:

- the need to adapt to changes in the international environment and in the global order;
- the unprecedented ease of communication both within and outside of the country, together with the ease of providing and accessing information on a global scale; and
- finally, socio-cultural changes, which affected most nations and had their impact also on Austria.

Changes in the Austrian Diplomatic Service

Let me point to a few of the most prominent and visible of these changes in the Austrian diplomatic service and in its mode of operation.

The Flattening of Hierarchies

When I entered the service, all written communication leaving the house (and much of information that merely circulated within the house) had been drafted and re-drafted several times over and had been approved by at least three levels of the hierarchy. In part, this reflected the hierarchical inclinations common to all bureaucracies. But in a way it also was functional. Papers—and with them information—just came together at the top. Only the highest diplomats, the secretary general and the political director, were in possession of all relevant information emanating from various sources, all of which were isolated from one another. Nowadays, however, someone wishing to affect an impending decision is well advised not to call those at the top of the hierarchy, but those who actually do the drafting. The heightened workload and the greater speed of transactions has put a natural curb on repeated re-drafting as well as on too much interference or changes from higher levels. More importantly, the one doing the drafting now has access to a vast amount of information, while his superior, being less specialized and targeted, has the capacity to access a smaller amount of such information as it pertains to the specific issue under consideration. *De facto*, the power of decision making has shifted downwards. Other

factors, too, contributed to the ensuing flattening of hierarchies. The number of positions that need to be filled has expanded; thus they are no longer reserved for the most senior staff only. The tougher working conditions also favor the young over the old. In addition, the younger colleagues are also better adapted to networking across national borders and diverse disciplines, while their more status conscious seniors have difficulty embracing such skills.

Information Collection and Distribution

This flattening of hierarchies would not have been possible in the absence of changes in the distribution and retrieval of information. Xerox copying alone had a vast impact. Before these machines became accessible to the staff, there was neither the desire to nor the physical possibility of distributing to a wider group the information contained in a written document. Information was to go to and to serve the superior. Xeroxing changed that, and desk officers were quick to discover that information is a commodity that can be exchanged and traded. The better the information, the wider the list of those benefiting from its distribution, the more secure the position of the distributor in the network of his or her peers. Also, it is no longer the case that mere seniority guarantees access to more complete or more relevant information. Foreign ambassadors might call on the political director at periodic intervals as they have done since diplomatic services became established. But according to my reckoning, there is a good chance that some junior officer adept at surfing the Internet and with personal contacts to other junior foreign diplomats will come up with information more complete and less slanted by political intent than the information conveyed to the political director by the foreign ambassador he has received.

E-Communications

Email and the Internet have continued and dramatically accelerated the evolutionary process started by the use of xerox copying and faxed messages. The consequences were revolutionary. Not just the mode of transaction was transformed, so, too, was the structure of the whole diplomatic apparatus, even the content of diplomatic transactions.

Central Office and Embassy Relations

In the diplomatic services, there used to be a stark division between the work at the central office and the service at some embassy abroad.

The latter was regarded as more desirable, not just because of the perks and privileges associated with diplomatic postings, but also because working abroad was considered to be the true core of diplomacy. Now thanks to effortless, cheap, broad, and instant communication, the line between work at the central office and the work abroad has become very much blurred. Each week, approximately 20 percent of the staff of the central office is away on some mission or another. "Roving ambassadors" working on specific issues or on a specific group of countries travel about the world and are received with as much honor as their colleagues residing in the country they just are visiting. The embassies, on the other hand, have come to be led on a much shorter leash. Whereas before they were given quite some leeway in deciding their priorities and in framing the political messages they tried to convey, they now are more closely integrated into the work of the central office. In some aspects, they have come to resemble extended desks of the central office, replacing or at least supplementing the "country desks" in the headquarters. Via e-mail, they have their direct input into position papers, drafts for speeches, periodic reports to parliament, and so forth. Generally, though, it is clear that in the relationship between the Foreign Ministry and its embassies abroad the weight has shifted to the detriment of the latter.

Multilateral Diplomacy

Contrary to what their name might imply, international relations are no longer mainly about what one nation does to another. Increasingly, they reflect the need of the community of states to address problems they are well advised to tackle together. Because these problems are very distinct from another, finding solutions calls for specialists with a very specific knowledge of the issues involved and the tools that might be used in resolving problems. The work shifts from bilateral diplomacy to work in and with various multilateral agencies, each of which is addressing one specific set of problems. In the diplomatic service, bilateral diplomacy and generalists are being pushed into second rank behind multilateral diplomacy and specialists. The role model is no longer the skilled and powerful bilateral ambassador, but the colleague who has contributed most to an advance in global governance and the development of international law, or, specifically within the European Union, one who works for very direct and concrete Austrian interests on a daily basis.

Diplomatic Reporting

John K. Galbraith was not just a prominent economist; he also served for a few years as U.S. Ambassador to India. Reflecting on this period of his life, he once stated that “diplomatic reporting was one of the most undervalued forms of literary art.” Characteristic for Galbraith, that was tongue in cheek, with an intended ambivalence on whether diplomatic reporting was essential and, thus, wrongly neglected, or whether it was void of real substance and existed merely as a piece of an art created for its own sake. The verdict of the present is clear. In Austria at least, the old form of diplomatic reports no longer exists. These were five or more page essays, frequently betraying otherwise unfulfilled literary ambitions. They were mimeographed to be forwarded to others more as a proof of the author’s writing skills than in order to convey information to be acted upon. This form of reporting was formally abolished several years ago. While it may be that this is the end of a precious (if little known) genre of literature, the decision was justified and even inevitable if seen from the perspective of a bureaucracy that has to maintain its practical usefulness in shaping international relations.

Reporting is now targeted on issues that have to be acted upon, that are actually on the agenda in Austria’s bilateral or multilateral relations. Such reports are artless and to the point, the shorter the better. As a source of more general information on the country of residence, embassies have ceded their function to competitors in journalism, academia, databases, and high finance. Someone searching for general information is well advised to first search the databases of the Economist Intelligence Unit, of the Institute of International Finance, of Keesing, of Reuters, and so forth. Embassies then supplement background information or add greater details on this or that point. Of course, new modes of communication have sped up not only the transmission of information, but also the rate of decision making, and have made the wide distribution of information much easier.

Distributing Information

The easier supply of decentralized information dovetails with a greater need for such wider distribution. It used to be that the Ministry for Foreign Affairs was an island unto itself. It was captive to its own mechanisms, fascinated by its own internal power plays, absorbed by its own internal administration. Such tendencies towards insularity are, of course, not peculiar to Ministries for Foreign Affairs. They are endemic in all bigger bureaucracies. In the case of Austrian diplomacy, extraneous developments and entry into the European Union forced the recognition that others also had entered the realm of external relations,

rightfully or at least in a way that could not be reversed. If Austrian diplomats were to retain some role in the coordination of the country's overall external relations and to retain their claim of shaping its overall direction, they had to accept the direct communication between these other players and the international realm. They were well advised to facilitate it, for, by facilitating it, they conserve some function and control. From being a self sufficient and self enclosed institution, the Austrian Ministry for Foreign Affairs has, thus, morphed into one providing services not just directly to citizens, but to other Austrian ministries, as well as to state and local government and to the various non governmental organizations active in the international arena.

Sharing Power and Information

Some claim that the European Union presents the image of things to come in relations among all states of the world. I hope that this is true and that nations will indeed move ever closer to a more peaceful, more institutionalized, more law based and democratically legitimized form of interaction. The patterns that have emerged since 1995 in managing our membership in the Union might then become applicable in managing an ever greater number of relations to other countries. But for the time being, EU membership alone has radically transformed the Austrian diplomatic services and its mode of operation. It has accelerated and reinforced the trends that have been described above. Since the Union might be seen as a federal state in the process of being born, the lines between internal and external policy have become blurred to the extent of no longer being discernible. In the pecking order of the various European councils, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs have managed to preserve in the General Affairs Council a special and privileged role as overall coordinators. Frequently, however, it was not the General Affairs Council that had the last say in important matters, but the council of the Ministers of Finance, because it has control over the purse strings. The Austrian embassy in Brussels consists of delegates from practically all Austrian ministries, from Austrian *Länder*, and from all major official organizations. Most of them report directly to the organizations in Austria that had sent them to Brussels. Yet even when reporting directly to their home base, they might be bypassed by the European Commission itself, which also distributes its documents electronically to all institutions in Austria that are affected by a decision about to be taken. Reports on the outcome of a meeting have to be expedited the very same day, even if that implies a deadline close to or after midnight. The list of the addressees of such reports is very long, and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs is just one of them. Politically sensitive instructions

based upon such reports must be cleared—in the short interval of just two or three days—in a complex intergovernmental procedure.

Responding to Increased Pressures

Pressure emanating from internal political coordination, managing a vast network of interdependent organizations, the quantity of work, the number of decision makers involved, and accomplishing much in a short period of time, all that adds up to a workload widely removed from the image of diplomatic work as it is assiduously preserved in the public: of neatly dressed, overprivileged and underemployed champagne drinkers, bestowing upon each other the gift of redundant phrases and cultivated irrelevancies.

The Evolution of Diplomatic Tasks

The Austrian diplomatic service has quite successfully adjusted to new tasks and to a changed global order. But that opens yet another question. Why should it be that diplomats alone may rise to this challenge? What is it that should so eminently qualify them for being better at that job than others?

One part of the answer has already been provided. Many persons from very different backgrounds and very different organizational cultures have now become involved in a field that once was the exclusive domain of diplomats. Nevertheless, and more often than not, diplomats still lead the pack. If issues become controversial, others tend to defer to them, accepting them in a role as negotiators and mediators. But if the diplomatic service has changed as radically as I claim, why insist that it is still the old diplomatic service? Where, in such a deep overhaul, is the element of continuity that evidences a link to the past, to past codes of conduct and to a very special professional ethos?

My tentative answer would be that—then as now—diplomats are facilitators of consensus, that they have internalized the need to think with the other's head, and that unlike other professionals, they base their craft not on the unchangeable certainty of fixed rules, but on the rule of uncertainty and the art of navigating in fog.

It is exactly these skills that are responsible for the continuing ambivalence of the public and their enduring distrust of everything "diplomatic." In a world hungry for predictability, security, and certainty, diplomats stand for the open-ended and the non-committal. With borders having become porous and societies multicultural, there is a yearning for stable, secure, and unchallenged identities and symbols like flags and anthems to confirm them. While formerly diplomats had been

such symbols, affirming the presence of their own state on the world stage, they have now and by their actual work become the symbol of things that are difficult to internalize and to accommodate. They recall that, in most cases, there are two sides to a coin, that things are not simply black or white. They remind the public that besides the “us” there also is the “other” with equal claim for respect. In the public’s perception, diplomats have come to stand for a world order in which no one is truly independent and where every actor, thus, has to make concessions. This perception, much more than the trappings of a privileged life, made diplomats suspect. The remark that someone has been “too diplomatic” is pejorative and implies a lack of resolve and conviction and the failure to be blunt, direct, and final.

But these negative perceptions in the public provide proof of the functionality of diplomatic ethos and culture. Globalization has not been a steamroller, squeezing everything and everybody into a flat sameness. On the contrary, it has made for a closer confrontation of values, lifestyles, and ideologies, which often are at variance and irreconcilable by their very nature. Neither have things become more predictable and certain. With so many international actors in place, the need for coordinated action has become more pressing and also more difficult. The desired more stable, more humane, and just world order cannot be built by representatives who stand unyieldingly on the base of supposedly unchangeable “national interest.” On the contrary, the task calls for the capacity to listen, to keep an open mind, to understand. It calls for skills in networking, for the resolve of never completely closing the channels of communication, for persistence in working for a positive outcome, and last but not least, for the preparedness to accept an unsatisfactory outcome in preference to an even worse one.

These are the old, traditional, and sound operating principles of diplomacy. In today’s world, they have lost nothing of their relevance. In fact, they have even become more useful and precious. The tasks of diplomacy have changed. The operating field and the tools of trade have undergone change. However, the ethos and the culture that have sustained diplomacy over the centuries have remained the same.

Conclusion

If in the definition of Satow at the beginning of this article diplomats are credited with having tact and intelligence—not in a sense of superiority, but as an indicator of the enduring relevance of the traditional diplomatic culture—then I can accept it also as a definition of today’s diplomacy. I would, however, change the application of these virtues from Satow’s words, “to the task of facilitating, for the national

and for the general benefit, cooperation among all who impact upon the world order.”

Despite its successes at responding to a changing environment, I see Austria’s diplomacy as still deficient and its apparatus in need of repair in four areas.

First, it is under-funded and too small. For example, only two of the present EU members have embassies in Washington smaller than the Austrian embassy: Cyprus and Malta. The number of international actors has expanded and so have the tasks of diplomacy. The Austrian Foreign Service, however, has over the last several years shrunk to a point no longer commensurate with the expansion of its tasks.

Second, the opening of the service is still incomplete, both to the outside world as well as to the Austrian public and other Austrian institutions. I certainly do not mean that the career should be open to everyone regardless of aptitude and training. On the contrary, I hold it as absolutely essential that the service preserves its integrity through the barrier of an objective and demanding entrance exam. But this should not impede closer cooperation and even some form of integration with other ministries dealing in international affairs. Greater openness and interchange of personnel could and should also be sought with other EU member countries, the EU Commission, and international organizations. Closer cooperation with the Austrian and the international academic community would be advantageous to both sides, as well.

Third, the internal structure of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs no longer corresponds to its present tasks, and in some respects has become dysfunctional. The traditional separation of the multilateral and the bilateral from European integration no longer makes sense because European politics permeate almost every area of our involvement abroad.

Fourth, it was not by accident or chance that the Austrian Ministry for Foreign Affairs was the first to change to a paperless office and to work fully on electronic files. Its website is up to international standards; all of the staff is computer literate. All this confirms my claim that the diplomatic service was under great pressure to respond to changes in global affairs and in global governance. What remains to be accomplished is a tighter and more complete insertion into the overall electronic flow of information.

Things are evolving fast. Austria’s specific function in the East-West conflict has disappeared together with that conflict. Others now are better placed to provide the services Austria once rendered. Many chances resulting from the new membership in the European Union have been wasted, and Austria still has to find a steady pace and solid place in the formulation of EU policies. There is still uncertainty about its own

future security strategy. The cleavage between Austria's public opinion and its actual foreign policy has become wider, as has the distance between rhetoric and actual commitment. In the realm of international politics, nothing is ever securely achieved and permanent. Standing still implies falling behind. Austria's diplomatic service and Austria's diplomacy have changed and adapted over time. But the process must continue and even accelerate.