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Australia and the 'New Diplomacy'

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Australia and the 'New Diplomacy'

Abstract

Extract:

Adaptability has become the key term for Australian diplomats of the 1990's and beyond. Traditionally, diplomacy has been seen as the tool by which nations communicated with each other within a common language, and with which they could head off potential conflicts between states. While conflict between Australia and states in our immediate region is unlikely, Australian diplomats posted in South and East Asian nations over the last two years, for example, have nonetheless had to adapt to rapidly changing political conditions.

Keywords

diplomacy, international relations, technology

|VIEWPOINT:

Australia and the 'New Diplomacy'

By Anne Cullen

Adaptability has become the key term for Australian diplomats of the 1990's and beyond. Traditionally, diplomacy has been seen as the tool by which nations communicated with each other within a common language, and with which they could head off potential conflicts between states. While conflict between Australia and states in our immediate region is unlikely, Australian diplomats posted in South and East Asian nations over the last two years, for example, have nonetheless had to adapt to rapidly changing political conditions resulting from the Asian economic flue. In addition, Australian diplomats have needed to adapt old models of diplomacy to create new frameworks of operation that fit with our instant technologically driven world and corresponding demand for immediate, but accurate information. Fortunately, Australian diplomatic institutions have consistently drawn on liberal notions of diplomatic organisation ensuring innovative and timely responses to circumstances beyond Australia's control, but which have a direct influence on our future in the region.

Technology today allows increased demands for information from Australia as well as the rapid relay of information from missions to the home government. But the fundamental shift from traditional statecraft diplomacy to a broader agenda in Australian diplomacy, also demanded that information was more comprehensive and timely than ever before. Technology advances has also meant that governments are no longer content to simply ponder the condition or operation of missions abroad for an extended period of time, as did Thomas Jefferson once when he realised that America had not heard from its mission Spain for two years. Jefferson's suggested response was no hastier. He simply ordered that a letter be sent to the Spanish mission, but only if there was no communication from Spain during the coming year. Of course today any silences of missions, of even considerably less time than two years, would be a matter of grave concern for governments.

For Australian diplomats, familiarisation with appropriate technology for communication has become vitally important. The occasional letter from the mission to home be no longer suffice. Rather, the Australian government takes full advantage of new

technologies to facilitate efficient information transfer, which, in turn, facilitates effective analysis of political and economic changes in the region.

Technology has also changed the public face of the Australian diplomatic corps. During the recent May political crisis in Indonesia, for example, Australian diplomats were called upon to provide 'sound bites' and '30-second analysis' of complex situations for news media hungry for footage on the latest events. Consequently, Australian diplomats have needed to adapt to the demands of (non-government) institutions that now have a role in the construction of the image of Australian diplomacy. Technology has broadened the traditional functions of diplomacy (representing state's interests, obtaining information, promoting and protecting nationals' interests, and policy-making, among others) into a new era where the tasks of the diplomat are more complex and encompassing than for any previous generation of diplomat.

Diplomacy in Australia became more complex too, as it embraced non-state actors in the international system, all of whom practice diplomacy in their own right. Some international corporations, for example, have a larger profit than the GNP of certain nations. Consequently international corporations impact on the international system in ways similar to nations as they strive to enact their internal foreign policies and have their policy demands accommodated by governments. Non-state actors such as human rights and workers' groups, and environmental constituencies all seek to share the diplomatic stage. Of late, issues such as global warming and poverty have also come share the spotlight, and diplomats have needed to adapt to the increasingly complex activity. Adapting to non-state actors on the diplomatic stage has meant that multilateral diplomacy has become an increasingly common mode of operation for all.

Fortunately for Australian diplomats, the liberalist traditions that imbues the diplomatic corps, has encouraged the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and realities. The hallmark of liberalist traditions in diplomacy is a belief in individuals who are innovative because of their democratic environment. For individuals, that means despite changes in their diplomatic realities, they are able to adapt and respond in ways that showcase their individual proficiency and initiative in the field. For the Australian diplomatic service, liberalist ideology provides a governing principle that ensures a commitment to political pluralism home and abroad.

Australian governments, likewise, cherish liberalism. They believe, overwhelmingly that events should shape our society and the way our institutions are constructed and adapt, rather than the other way round. Consequently Australia's foreign policy, while maintaining a specific focus in the national interest, responds innovatively to international events that affect Australia in some way. So when the use of technology makes the diplomatic service more visible and accountable to the Australian public, the government and the service respond by ensuring professionalism in the service. Likewise, the practice of multilateral diplomacy and the engagement with many actors (state and non-state) demands enduring professionalism. It also means a modicum of loss-of-control for the

diplomat over the security of information and outcomes. As a result, innovation and adaptability are crucial.

Diplomacy has often been referred to 'statecraft.' That is, the practice of national governments talking to each other. However that term no longer adequately describes all the activities that are now included in diplomacy, either for a nation or an individual practitioner. Revolutions in technology have largely replaced military revolutions. The notion of an elitist and 'secret' service is steadily being replaced with openness and accountability as the tools and practice of diplomacy incorporates more non-state actors from various levels of society. Consequently today's diplomats need not only to be adaptable but also to be skilled in their craft. The better trained and crafted the diplomat, the better able to adapt to changes innovatively and rapidly in the best possible national interest for Australia.