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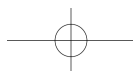
INTRODUCTION

An ambassador is not simply an agent; he is also a spectacle.

—Walter Bagehot, *“The English Constitution”* (1867) chap. IV

What Diplomats Do, among many other things, is make and carry out their countries' foreign policy—every day, in thousands of ways. I have found experienced teachers of diplomacy who assume that diplomats only ever act on the specific instructions of their governments. On the great international issues, of course, they do; but the day-to-day business of diplomacy, the routine conduct of relations between countries and their governments, is carried on by professional diplomats, officials who understand the policies of their own governments sufficiently to act without specific instructions from their capitals; and when they do need instructions, it is mostly other officials back home, usually diplomats themselves, who send them, not ministers or other politically appointed bosses.

Thus foreign policy is being made daily all round the world, in the tens of thousands of conversations, speeches, and symbolically pregnant actions of individual diplomats serving away from home. Often the smart diplomat in his country's embassy abroad writes his own instructions and simply invites the foreign ministry at home¹ to approve them—again, usually at official level. The Foreign Minister (Foreign Secretary in British parlance, Secretary of State in American) or one of his political deputies may need to be consulted if a new issue has arisen on which ministerial decisions have not been made previously, but most of the time offi-



cials at home know their political masters' minds well enough to send accurate guidance and instructions to their diplomats abroad.

Diplomats keep abreast of their governments' constantly evolving foreign policy objectives on a vast range of international issues, and a good professional diplomat is always conscious of his country's changing interests, which it is his main purpose to promote. He always speaks and acts within the constraints of those broadly agreed policy objectives and interests, or at any rate he should, although occasionally a diplomat, however senior, may succumb to the temptation to bend his government's views, even its instructions, to accommodate his own political or other personal prejudices. He may explain and defend his government's policies in a perfectly unexceptionable manner while indicating by body language or facial expression that he privately thinks it all a lot of misguided nonsense. Either kind of personal dissociation from the diplomat's government's policies and views amounts to a kind of disloyalty that is liable eventually to undermine his credibility as a trustworthy representative of his country. (In this book, I adopt the lawyers' convention of referring to diplomats in general as "he," "his," etc., where it's clear from the context that I mean "he or she," "his" or "her." Using three words where one will do just causes verbal clutter. But the reader needs to be as aware as I am that these days a high and growing number of most countries' top diplomats, and many of their political bosses, are women; and that the title of "ambassador" belongs equally to women as to men—an "ambadress" is the wife of an ambassador, not a woman ambassador. We don't yet have a word for the husband of an ambassador, but that will come.)

The oversimplified picture of foreign policy made by ministers issuing orders, and diplomats obeying them, tends to overlook the role of diplomats, especially those doing a stint at home in the foreign ministry, in advising their ministerial bosses and official colleagues on policy questions in a never-ending stream of recommendations and arguments. Generally ministers accept their officials' recommendations; sometimes they do not. Either way, once the official has had a chance to express a view and make a recommendation or raise an objection, it's his job loyally to accept his government's decision and to do his best to make it work, whether he agrees with it or not. If he's a British or other European diplomat (but not an American),² his ministers have (mostly) been demo-

cratically elected to make policy; their officials, whether diplomats or civil servants, have not.

With some notable exceptions, such as in big European Union capitals where a European diplomat's own ministers are in frequent personal contact with their EU opposite numbers, diplomats generally have greater scope for individual initiative and personal contribution to policy-making than their civil servant cousins at home. This is partly because most of them are far from their capitals and from the constant scrutiny of their official and ministerial superiors, and partly because foreign policy, in contrast with domestic policy, is less the product of party politics and much more dictated by national interests whose fundamentals don't change with every change of government. No one government can change the course of international affairs by an exercise of will, in the way that ministers can often control and change domestic policy. There's less scope for cosmic, life-changing policy decisions in foreign affairs. Ministers and their diplomatic officials alike are constrained by the limits of the possible in a multi-polar world. When a British company acts in a way that is flagrantly antisocial and contrary to the public interest, the relevant minister can always take some action to restrain it—in the last resort by new legislation, although often a minatory telephone call from a senior minister will be enough. By contrast, when a foreign government takes some action that is inimical to, even destructive of, British interests, the Foreign Secretary may issue as many statements as he likes, deploring what has been done and calling on the foreign government concerned to desist; he may refer the matter to some international organ in the hope that international opinion will persuade the erring government to change course; he may even ask others to join his government in imposing sanctions on the offending régime as long as it persists in its wrong-doing, although others may well be disinclined to comply. But in the end, there is usually nothing that the British government and its Foreign Secretary can do about it, if the foreign government concerned chooses to ignore their threats and appeals. Unlike his ministerial colleagues in charge of domestic policy, our Foreign Secretary has very limited power to alter the course of international affairs. He must act mainly by persuasion; and persuasion is, among other things, *What Diplomats Do*. Even a super-power such as the United States possesses diminishing scope for controlling global events and the behaviour of other countries, however small, weak, and insignificant: with each deployment of the enormous military

might of the United States, the threat of its use again in circumstances short of a direct physical threat to American national security becomes a little less credible.

It's commonly argued that modern technology, especially the phenomenal speed of communications made possible by electronics and the Internet, has made the job of diplomats redundant. The social media add a new dimension. The British Foreign & Commonwealth Office, for example, uses Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc., to get its message across to various audiences. Those to whom they are sending their message can—and do—answer back, in a way that was not possible with conventional means of addressing the public. Many, perhaps most, British diplomatic missions are now encouraged by the FCO to publish their own regular blogs: some bland, others interesting and informative. It can be very resource intensive. Many [wo]man-hours go into writing these blog posts and keeping them up to date. The ease and immediacy of communications, including the ability to copy any message to an unlimited number of recipients, has also greatly increased the sheer volume of diplomatic work.

Instant communications also make diplomacy potentially more powerful by allowing diplomats overseas to report developments instantaneously to their capitals, and—in principle, anyway—also instantaneously to receive their governments' instructions on how to respond to them. The reality, though, is often different. A sour joke that used to go the rounds in the diplomatic service recalled:

In the old days, an ambassador serving overseas and far from home used to inform his government of a revolution that has taken place in his host country by describing it in writing, using a quill on fine parchment, in a formal dispatch to the Secretary of State. His clerk rolled up the dispatch, secured it with a ribbon, wax-sealed it, and sent it by messenger to the host country's port to await the next sailing-ship to take it to Greenwich, the port near London. From there another messenger would take it by coach to Whitehall, where it would sit in the In Box of the Secretary of State's private secretary for a day or two until it was due to be opened and submitted to the great man. For a few days, the Secretary of State would discuss with his staff and colleagues, at leisure, the implications for British interests of the revolution that had occurred in the far-away country of which he probably knew nothing. Later still, the clerk drafted a reply to the ambassador

with instructions on the attitude that His Excellency was to adopt towards the new revolutionary régime. Once approved, this reply would be elegantly copied out onto parchment, signed with a flourish by the Secretary of State, rolled up and sealed, and sent by messenger to Greenwich. . . . By the time the minister's reply was delivered into the hands of the ambassador, three or four months might have elapsed since the revolution on which his instructions had now arrived.

Nowadays things are very different (or are they?). Within minutes of hearing the result of the revolution, the ambassador dictates or types a telegram (or email, or diptel) to the Secretary of State. It is automatically and instantly enciphered and dispatched electronically to the FCO in London. Just a few minutes after being written, it's deciphered and in the hands of the Secretary of State's private secretary, and a few minutes later again it's being read by the Secretary of State himself—who has anyway already learned of the revolution from the television set in his office. Now begins the process of interdepartmental consultation on the implications of the revolution for UK interests, meetings to discuss them, and eventually the drafting and submission to the minister of a reply to the ambassador with his instructions.

Three months later . . . the ambassador receives a reply to his report from the Secretary of State with his instructions on the attitude he is to adopt towards the new revolutionary régime.

Communications may have become virtually instantaneous; but the time required to devise, submit, and authorise a response and instructions in what has long been an overworked and seriously understaffed Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London has probably doubled or trebled. The ambassador often has plenty of time to make his own decisions on how to react to fast-changing situations without the luxury, or frustration, of having to wait for instructions from home. Surprisingly often, he has to speak and act first, and ask London (or whichever is his country's capital) for retrospective approval later.

Within obvious limits, it's the relative freedom of personal action and initiative, the feeling that along with hundreds of others you're helping to make foreign policy every day by what you do and what you say and who you say it to, that makes being a diplomat such a satisfying job. It's that, along with other rewards, which largely compensates for the drawbacks, discomforts, and sometimes the dangers of the diplomatic life.

The purpose of this book is to describe, through the daily doings of an imaginary but typical diplomat, “Adam,” a kind of diplomatic Everyman, what diplomats actually do, the pains and penalties as well as the rewards and satisfactions, and how the sum of what diplomats do contributes substantially to the country’s foreign policy. Since *What Diplomats Do* impacts on their spouses (increasingly often husbands) and on their children, as well as on themselves, Adam’s wife—Eve, of course, prototypical man and woman—also figures in the purely fictitious narrative. To be clear, though, the choice of names for these avatars has no biblical, theological, or other significance.

My fictitious Adam is necessarily a British diplomat, because that’s what I was for thirty years and it’s the British Diplomatic Service that I know best, or used to know. But most of what Adam does and experiences is common to members of other national diplomatic services: diplomacy is an international activity largely governed by internationally agreed rules. Some differences are little more than semantic. In Adam’s British Diplomatic Service, for example, there’s a sharp distinction between “officials”—career diplomats—and their “ministers”—nearly all of them elected professional politicians. In the United States Foreign Service the distinction is less clear-cut, but essentially the same: between the career diplomats on the one hand, and on the other hand the party political appointees in the State Department in Washington who change when there’s a change of party administration.

Adam’s and Eve’s adventures in their diplomatic wonderland are almost all fictitious, although always based on real life. To avoid causing a real diplomatic incident, some of the countries in which Adam serves are also fictionalised: the imaginary countries and their capitals are indicated when first mentioned by single quotation marks: thus ‘Côte Noire,’ ‘Pazalia,’ not to be found in any atlas. But I have repeatedly interrupted the Adam and Eve narrative with anecdotal examples drawn from my own experience as a British diplomat who served in a variety of countries and roles, eventually representing Britain as successively as an ambassador or high commissioner³ in five countries across three continents. “**As an example ...**” in the pages that follow precedes fact, not fiction.

I have used “Adam” and “Eve” to illustrate some of the many activities of diplomats ancient and modern, and their spouses. No real-life Adam could pack into a single career all the postings and experiences that I have attributed to him. The chapters that follow deal with different

aspects of the diplomat's career but they are not a chronicle of the career of any one person, whether fictitious (like Adam) or real (such as myself, or so I like to believe). Any attempt to piece together Adam's experiences into a realistic chronological account of a single career is doomed to fail. Similarly, the examples from my own career, used to illustrate different aspects of a diplomat's activities, can't be stitched together into a coherent history of that career; they are in no particular order, being introduced purely according to the subject under discussion. This is not a memoir. Adam is not me, but a device employed to demonstrate what diplomats do in various capacities and in the immensely varied circumstances that diplomats find themselves in as they are posted around the world.

My description of some of the things that Diplomats Do doesn't pretend to be comprehensive. A comprehensive account would run to many volumes. Diplomats get involved in almost every aspect of modern life and government. Diplomats in developing countries have to acquire some expertise in aid policy, development economics, aid transparency, and the international implications of poverty. In rich countries diplomats are dealing with commercial policies and practices, working with their countries' businessmen to promote their countries' exports—and inward investment in the opposite direction; learning the language of the balance of trade and trade deficits and surpluses; building up a database of local firms that can act as agents for small companies at home; collecting data for use in briefing visiting businessmen on export opportunities as well as on the host country's trade policies, its government's future prospects and the degree of stability that the businessman can expect as protection for his investment. Other diplomats are speaking and writing knowledgeably in the international jargons of climate change, environmental protection, biodiversity, and the conservation of species, the law of the sea, international cooperation on drugs and other kinds of crime, and the consequences of mass migration between countries and continents. Others again are immersed in the intricacies of the laws and politics of the European Union and its Commission and other organs, and of countless other multilateral organisations to which their country belongs or with which it conducts significant relations. Even Adam, my own creation, couldn't possibly have been involved in every one of these fields of activity. So I have had to be selective, choosing for different parts of Adam's career those which are closest to core diplomacy.

The practices and procedures of the various national diplomatic services are in a state of constant flux, buffeted by changes in technology, by new international challenges (security, climate change, recessions, development), and by fluctuating managerial fads and fashions. Britain's Diplomatic Service has been particularly disrupted, distracted, and dismayed by what Trotsky would have recognised as Permanent Revolution. It has been plagued by external consultants with little understanding of What Diplomats Do, by a traditionally parsimonious Treasury, and by managers, themselves mostly working diplomats, many of whom apparently couldn't grasp that neither the Diplomatic Service nor Britain is, or even resembles, a limited company or corporation with shareholders and a board of directors interested mainly in maximizing shareholder value. As a result, procedures and terminology, among other things, have constantly changed over the years. Some of what Adam did in the earlier years of his diplomatic career, as described in this account, may consequently need to be translated into the contemporary jargon of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. The "telegrams" that he sent then would be "dipfels" now, sent electronically like emails, not by wireless telegraphy. The letters that he wrote and signed in hard copy and sent in the diplomatic bag in those days are now mostly transmitted electronically, as attachments to emails. The names of the various grades and appointments have changed (as explained later). No matter: the substance of the job has remained much the same.

The roles and experiences of women, both women diplomats and the wives or partners of male diplomats, have changed especially radically over the years. Not long ago a British woman diplomat who got married was obliged to resign from the diplomatic service, regardless of her talents and perhaps starry career prospects. For many years the wives of British diplomats were forbidden to work for money when their spouses were posted overseas. Later "Eve" was allowed to work while overseas but only with the permission of her husband's ambassador or high commissioner. Later still, if Adam's head of mission refused to give permission for Eve to take a job, he was required to report his refusal, with reasons, to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London. Finally even that restriction lapsed. Nowadays it would take a bold ambassador to stop the wife of a member of his staff from finding local employment, unless it was an obviously unsuitable job liable to bring the embassy and its country into disrepute. But in many countries, especially those with high rates

of indigenous unemployment, the government forbids diplomats' spouses to take jobs that could be done by local people—so in practice Eve may still be prevented from pursuing her career when accompanying Adam on an overseas posting, however much the UK system has been liberalised over the years. When Adam becomes an ambassador, Eve is probably too busy in her role as an (unpaid) ambassadress even to think about combining it with a separate local job, however lucrative, unless she's lucky enough to be a commercially successful novelist, artist, or poet—although in recent times some British ambassadors' spouses, mainly wives, have been able to take on the paid job of “Residence manager,” a neat solution of sorts. More often it is difficult or impossible for the spouse of an ambassador or high commissioner to get or to do a paid local job, and this may have significantly adverse financial consequences for both of them, as we shall see later.

A potentially important recent development in the activities of diplomats has been the creation in December 2010 of what is generally called “the EEAS”—the “European External Action Service,” i.e., the diplomatic service of the European Union (EU). Headed by the “High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy” or, colloquially, the EU Foreign Minister, these EU diplomats act on behalf of the EU as a whole and not as representatives of any single country or government. They promote only those aspects of foreign policy that have been agreed among all the EU's member states; but just as a Nicaraguan diplomat seeks to promote a favourable image of Nicaragua and its policies to the government and people of the country in which he is posted (“the host country”), so EU diplomats explain, defend, and justify the EU itself in their host countries, both in their dealings with their governments and also publicly. Many, perhaps most, of the activities described in this book will apply equally to EU diplomats; but to the extent that they represent a new, supra-national brand of diplomat, their activities are bound to differ somewhat from those of single-nationality diplomats.

Two other interesting and potentially important developments in diplomatic life deserve mention. One is the expansion in what has come to be called “public diplomacy,” dismissed somewhat summarily in the recent *Dictionary of Diplomacy*,⁴ as “a late-twentieth-century term for propaganda conducted by diplomats.”⁵ Another is a growing resort to “Track Two” diplomacy, where informal contacts between countries, aimed at playing down threats or resolving problems, are discreetly con-

ducted by non-official, non-governmental bodies and persons, not by diplomats or other representatives of governments.

None of this, though, affects the basic character of national diplomacy as it has been practiced over centuries, and will continue to be practised so long as the nation-state remains the main building-block of international relations.

I hope that this book will help students and teachers of diplomacy and international affairs, whether amateur or professional, to understand the role of working diplomats in the formation and execution of foreign policy. Those who are considering embarking on a diplomatic career or switching to one, and their spouses, may get from the book a clearer idea of what they may be letting themselves in for—the pluses as well as the inevitable minuses. Those already pursuing a career in diplomacy may find it useful as a yardstick against which to compare what they are already doing and hope to do. Those enviable people who have no particular connection with diplomacy but who are interested in contemporary history and politics may gain some interesting insights into the workings of the international diplomatic engine, usually discreetly hidden away under the bonnet (hood, in American).

One final introductory point. Diplomacy is widely, but mistakenly, regarded as possessing a special mystique, at any rate, in the eyes of those who have never come into contact with its practitioners. It's often seen as an exotic, even glamorous, profession. Anyone who has ever been an ambassador has experienced the shocked reaction when a stranger at some reception asks "What's your position at the embassy exactly?" and receives the reply, "I'm the ambassador." The first response is invariably a horrified apology (implicitly for having failed to treat the great man or woman with the exaggerated respect assumed to be due to such a personage). Sooner or later the apology is followed by the question: "But what do diplomats actually *do*?" This book aims to provide an answer.

NOTES

1. In the diplomat's own Ministry of Foreign Affairs in his capital, variously called the Foreign & Commonwealth Office or the Department of State, or other variants.

2. In the British and other “Westminster” systems, almost all Ministers in the government are also members of parliament, generally of the House of Commons. In the United States Presidential system, members of the administration are appointed by the President from outside the Congress, under the doctrine of the separation of powers.

3. The diplomatic representative of one Commonwealth country in another Commonwealth country is called a high commissioner, not an ambassador, although his functions are to all intents and purposes the same as an ambassador’s.

4. *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*, second edition, GR Berridge and Alan James, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

5. More on this in chapter 6.

