

Working Paper

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Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)/
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The Disintermediation Dilemma and its Impact on Diplomacy¹

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The problems facing diplomacy in the 21st century are unique in terms of a structural crisis. Unlike the 1930s there has been no outright abandonment of international organizations (IOs), as punctuated by the failure of the League of Nations. Rather than disappearing IOs have proliferated albeit with a bias towards informal self-selected forums including the G20 and the Financial Stability Board. Nor does the world's geopolitical environment include a cluster of totalitarian states bent on territorial expansion by military means. In many ways liberal internationalism continues to hold sway, at least as judged by the degree of complex interdependence. Instead of the hold of autarchy (with large national champions having exclusive sway in zones of control) it is the image of hyper-globalization that defines the 21st century. Nor are massive corporations the only victors from this condition, as large NGOs (Oxfam, MSF) and philanthropic bodies (The Gates foundation) have also benefited. And reflecting this pluralism it is no longer a hegemonic or unipolar era with ample space in particular for big state actors (above all the BRICS) outside of the traditional establishment within the G7/8 to exert influence.

At the core of the current dilemma is not that diplomacy (and diplomats situated in foreign ministries) are in the process of disappearing on the global stage but that these forms of institution and machinery are contested and stigmatized domestically. For concentrated components of the public, diplomacy is contested and even stigmatized as a constraining force, part of a self-serving and controlling establishment. This anti-diplomatic/foreign ministry sentiment is most noticeable in the Brexit campaign with its aversion to insiders and communities of sentiment and interest beyond the national.

Moreover, this type of contestation can be located in multiple sites beyond the UK. In China netizens push back against any impediments – including those from the Chinese foreign ministry- imposed by diplomatic culture on their emotional concerns, especially on issues of sovereignty (territorial disputes) or perceived insults. In various parts of the European populist forces rail

against considerations of diplomatic solidarity above all on the migration issue.

On top of all this, of course, is the existential challenge to contemporary diplomatic culture that US President Donald Trump presents. On one level, to be sure, Trump can be depicted as a return to an older type of diplomacy, privileging ad hoc processes as a means to go around all forms of institutionalization whether formal (UN, IFIs, WTO) or informal (G20, contact groups etc). In contradistinction to the '21st' century diplomatic culture symbolized by the Obama administration the Trump operational style is focused on personalism, detachment from any fixed ideology, a winner take all approach to negotiations, the use of bilateral one on ones, constant surprises, and direct communication with 'his' supporters.

This accumulated challenge to diplomacy and foreign ministries more specially comes therefore not from the periphery of the global system where it might be expected. After all it has been small states that have among the heaviest diplomatic casualties of the global financial crisis. On the one hand, small states have been left out of the new institutions, not only in terms of the G20 but also the BRICS and MIKTA. On the other hand, space for normatively driven diplomatic initiatives led in some considerable part by small states such as on the International Court have been curtailed.

Instead of being situated at the edges of the diplomatic system the contested view about diplomacy and diplomats is most robust in the countries at the core of the international system, a dynamic that can only be understood in the context of a backlash against a wider segment of established institutional culture including central banks and the judiciary. In terms of generic cause and effect the dilemma is one that can be associated with the concept of disintermediation. The challenge posed is that diplomacy – no less than other institutions - traditionally viewed positively as providing continuity and stability in terms of the national interest and identity are now perceived in a more negative light.

Such a sea-change should not be a complete surprise. After all, some sophisticated

foreign ministry practitioners have warned of this threat for over a decade, even as they considered diplomacy to be in the ascendancy in the post-Cold War era, concerned about a potential backlash.

Yet, notwithstanding these warnings, foreign ministries were not alert to the fragility of their standing in an era of ascendant populism. The view that diplomats/foreign service officers have a unique ability to interpret the national interest is strongly embedded, accentuated by the legacy of a distinctive culture that highlights the separation of diplomats not only from other components of governmental bureaucracy but citizens at large.

As long as foreign ministries had a special status (with the ability to some considerable extent to act as the primary conduit for external relations) the 'guild' system vis-à-vis diplomacy imparted some considerable strengths. However, increasingly it is not only central agencies of government along with some 'line departments' that can go around traditional diplomats, it is aroused and mobilized citizens as well.

Disintermediation highlights the disconnect between the priorities as defined by a perception of a worldly elite and localistic public. To exacerbate the dilemma, the effect of disintermediation is felt more pervasively because of the array of avenues and means that citizens can go around established institutions. One route is via the proliferation of hyper-empowered individuals that become the champions of 'the people'. Personalism is no longer restricted to the leaders of distinctive political parties. The cult of celebrity free of loyalty to established ways of doing things comes into play. Even the most cynical citizens are drawn to the aura of autonomous individuals who are the contradistinction of what diplomatic culture represents.

Making the challenge even more formidable is the ability of these hyper-empowered individuals to represent themselves as the flagbearers for the frustrations of ordinary and often left behind citizens through free-wheeling tactics stretching from the use of referenda, and the extensive use of social media.

All of this is not to say that the backlash extended through the process of disintermediation dismisses all diplomacy and diplomats as not fit for purpose. On the contrary, what stands out is the contrast between the generalized contestation of diplomacy and high value placed on specific diplomats, as witnessed by the tributes to Ambassador Chris Stevens and others killed in the 2012 Benghazi attack.

In the UK case, it is an open question about whether attacks on diplomacy by populist politician such as Nigel Farage is authentic or simply a response to the willingness of some diplomats such as Sir Ivan Rogers to speak 'truth to power' about Brexit. After all, Farage reveled in meeting Trump in an unofficial capacity, in particular as the idea was floated by Trump that Farage would make a 'great' British ambassador to the US.

Even with these caveats, nonetheless, the challenge to diplomacy and foreign ministries is a serious one. Given the power of the disintermediation an opportunistic set of ascendant political leaders – even those located at the core of the international system - have considerable incentive to diminish 'their' own diplomats as part of a wider campaign to stigmatize the traditional establishment.

Leaving aside the option on the one side of vocal criticism and/or mass resignations or resistance there is a logic for diplomats under this intense pressure to demonstrate their value. Some modes of operation could well be downplayed in this process, for example the high-profile efforts of ambassadors and missions to engage in public campaigns to criticize or even destabilize autocratic regimes. The efforts of US Ambassador to Russia (2012-14) Michael McFaul, on Twitter, with a following of 60,000 falls into this category. So does the effort of US Ambassador Robert Ford early on (2011) in the Syrian crisis to reach out to opposition forces and visit cities under siege by the Assad government's security forces.

With the massive twitter presence by President Trump (much of which is at odds with the value orientation of the McFaul/Ford approach) US diplomacy and

diplomats need to be far more reactive to constant surprises from the White House.

The fallback option with the most attraction for organizational maintenance in these disruptive times is one in which the institutions and machinery of diplomacy are geared towards delivery in the service of citizens. Again this is not to suggest that is a completely novel strategy, but it is one that needs to be implanted into the mantra of 'public' diplomacy directed domestically. At every opportunity diplomacy and diplomats should counter the image of 'denationalis[ation]' – originally put forward as a concern by Sir Harold Nicolson in the inter-war years, but a concept that from a national populist perspective in the 21st century underscores the dilemma of disintermediation.

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