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The *human dimension* of 21st century diplomacy: Individual perceptions of change and continuity within the German Federal Foreign Office¹

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Is diplomacy, in essence, what diplomats make of it? Could the 'human capital' of foreign services make all the difference in 21st century diplomacy? Constructivist international relations theory provides a profound basis for these assumptions as it stresses the social construction of meaning, and thereby the importance of human consciousness and behaviour. For this reason, *the human dimension of diplomacy* has to form an integral part of in-depth analyses within – so-called – 'new diplomacy' studies², and will be central to this contribution.

Academics introduced the abovementioned term in an attempt to draw a comprehensive picture of far-reaching diplomatic changes in the 21st century. The label 'new diplomacy' underlines both the inward and outward distinction of modern diplomacy against former practices, and determines the turn of the millennium as a historical watershed. Overarching international phenomena, such as an increase and diversification of politically involved actors, globalised interdependence, technological progress, as well as social changes and political transitions, affect diplomacy in an unprecedented manner and shake it to its very foundations. Since the beginning of the 2000s, multiple definitions have been introduced to define unique characteristics of this 'new diplomacy', e.g., 'polylateral'³, 'integrative'⁴, or 'network diplomacy'⁵. For the purpose of this study, a broader understanding of diplomacy, namely as 'the conduct of relationships, using peaceful means, by and among international actors'⁶, provides the framework for an open and unbiased assessment of parallels and divergences between 20th and 21st century practices.

Regardless of whether academic research starts from the premise that 21st century diplomacy is marked by 'new' or 'traditional'

features, a *human dimension of diplomacy* has been proved influential throughout time. An assessment of this *human dimension* might involve studies on individual mind-sets and world views, interpersonal relations or socio-psychological phenomena, for instance the ability to build trust. Accordingly, individuals are at the same time initiators and addressees of diplomatic change. While departing from an extensively studied *public dimension of diplomacy*, this paper lays emphasis on individual perceptions of change *within* diplomatic institutions of nation-states, or more precisely on the German Federal Foreign Office and its civil service. In so doing, it is a basic assumption of this work that professional diplomats are more than 'spectator and reporter'⁷. Even though their space of autonomous action in foreign and security policy is institutionally limited, diplomats in the civil service play a crucial role in – among others – strategic policy planning and political negotiations; and are thus able to shape policy outcomes to a certain extent. However, there is an apparent risk for professional diplomats of getting side-lined by actors outside the diplomatic corps, such as high-level politicians who are anxious to deploy 'direct diplomacy through congresses, conferences, and summits'⁸. Taking all this into account, a 'diplomacy without diplomats'⁹ seems unlikely in the near future. On the contrary, it could be argued that the smooth working of diplomatic services is a key success factor in diplomacy, and is likely to result in an advantageous international position of respective nation-states. On this view, 'diplomatic groundwork' is closely linked to an efficient implementation of national foreign and security policies.

The German Federal Foreign Office, currently composed of more than 11 000 members of staff with approx. 1600 diplomats in the permanent 'higher service', has initiated a much-debated policy shift during the last decades. As a result of a year-long self-examination, the 'Review 2014', commitments to undertake more international re-

² Sending et al., »The future of diplomacy. Changing practices, evolving relationships«, p. 529; Kelley, »The new diplomacy. Evolution of a revolution«.

³ Wiseman, »Polylateralism. Diplomacy's third dimension«.

⁴ Hocking et al., *Futures for diplomacy. Integrative diplomacy in the 21st century*.

⁵ Heine, »From club to network diplomacy«, p. 54

⁶ Cooper et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, p. 2.

⁷ Sofer, »Being a 'pathetic hero' in international politics. The diplomat as a historical actor«, p. 109.

⁸ Atkinson, »History of Diplomacy«.

⁹ Kennan, »Diplomacy without diplomats?«.

sponsibility took centre stage in national debates on the country's foreign policy. The review process aimed at taking 'a fresh and critical look at German foreign policy' and sought to define Germany's 'new' role in Europe and the world. Not only was the strategic (re)orientation of German foreign policy in the 21st century critically evaluated but also inner workings of the Federal Foreign Office. To that end, approx. 1000 employees of the Federal Foreign Office took part in fish bowl discussions, ideas workshops and online discussions. 'Better mobilisation of resources'¹⁰ was one of the final proposals, referring to improved internal communication and better career development prospects.

Against the backdrop of world-spanning structural changes in diplomacy and a review of German foreign and security policy at the national level, it is particularly insightful to assess how these developments were perceived by a generation that lived through them. Therefore, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* and the personnel department of the German Federal Foreign Office carried out a survey among recently retired diplomats from the higher service in November/December 2016. Before going into detail, obvious limitations of this study must be addressed: Due to the low participation of less than 10 percent out of 102 addressees, answers to the questionnaire shall only be interpreted as personal impressions and not generalizable findings. Nonetheless, the survey data give some indications of how résumés of Foreign Service members were influenced by changes attributable to the 21st century, and suggest that – for whatever reasons – a large number of pensioners conspicuously lack an interest in recapitulating their diplomatic career. Below some recurring themes of the survey responses will be highlighted to address the following questions: What distinguishes 21st century diplomacy? To what extent do era-specific transitions impact diplomatic day-to-day business? In what way have communication processes, interaction patterns, personnel skills and governance

structures of the Federal Foreign Office changed from one generation to the next?

Change and continuity in 21st century diplomacy

Modern diplomacy studies are assuming all too often that 21st century practices are entirely different from those of bygone times. These approaches emphasise change instead of continuity, which was rather contradicted by the overall survey data. For the most part, interviewees observed no fundamental changes in diplomacy between the 20th and 21st century; and the term 'diplomacy in the 21st century' was mostly associated with definitions that have been in place through the ages. The latter applies as well to the main diplomatic tasks and objectives. In the course of the survey, peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and promotion of national interests were listed as core diplomatic elements. But the divergence in views was remarkable in this matter. Although diplomacy as such did not seem to have substantially changed, a number of pensioners referred to the fact that circumstances for its conduct have not remained the same. New and more complex requirements arise from this situation; and modern diplomatic work has to cover crisis and conflict management in light of 'comprehensive security' concepts, a broadened and more diversified spectrum of 'non-traditional' issues, as well as competition with a plethora of diplomatic actors. Most of these practical consequences were attached to general patterns of change in the international system, such as globalisation and technological progress. Besides that, the political *zeitgeist* was critically mentioned as a source of new challenges for diplomacy as it involves more complex conflict structures and worsened political framework conditions, e.g., regarding the European integration process and the transatlantic partnership. As a result of these systemic changes, an adjustment of diplomatic methods has more and more become an imperative to ensure a more efficient functioning of the Foreign Service.

¹⁰ German Federal Foreign Office, *Review 2014*, p. 46.

Communication, digitisation and *public diplomacy*

Even though 'game-changing' influences on diplomacy were generally played down by the survey participants, the crucial role of communicational and technological transitions was acknowledged. A close interaction with the public, commonly referred to as *public diplomacy* in modern diplomacy studies, was not seen as a new phenomenon. Both positive and negative perceptions of changes in communication, technology and public relations were expressed by the participants. On the one hand, there could be a facilitation of professional practices through an ongoing optimisation, automation and diversification of communicational processes, which is – above all – stimulated by the use of internet and emails. Thus, simplified internal coordination and scheduling, better information access and procurement, as well as boosted direct communication and involvement of people are positive implications of these changes. All this might lead to better work results for both analytical and operational tasks, e.g., dossier preparation, travel planning and crisis and risk management.

On the downside, there might also evolve heightened time pressure and a more demanding public sphere, e.g., caused by an increased power of NGOs, media campaigns and the dissemination of 'fake news'. Keeping abreast with a tremendous speed of technical developments, a massive flood of information as well as multiple channels of information processing could prove extremely challenging for the human brain. Further, new technological possibilities involve the risk to harm interpersonal relations, which are an irreplaceable part of diplomatic practice. Moreover, conflicting demands for security, privacy/ confidentiality protection and economic promotion were stressed as permanent areas of tension. Here, the vulnerability of 'new media' to cyber-crime is a prime example. As to the impacts of digitisation on the Federal Foreign Office staff, waning job satisfaction due to an ever-increasing anonymization in a multi-level communication process, and the – so far neglected – Sisyphean task to ar-

chive all digital data were pointed out as negative outcomes. Poorer work results could follow from such an increase in processual complexity, information density and societal pressure in the diplomatic work.

Interestingly, the general level of interest in national diplomacy was perceived as more or less constant. According to the survey answers, large interest in the public sphere may arouse in relation to certain aspects of diplomacy, e.g., crisis management and consular service. Further, foreign policy decisions seem to occupy centre stage rather than inner workings of the Federal Foreign Office. Day-to-day diplomacy, without scandals and event coverages, does not seem to awaken the public opinion. In this sense, the survey answers indicated that public relations work is vital to render diplomatic practices comprehensible and legitimate, even if this necessitates the usage of scarce resources: Political aims cannot be achieved by 'silent diplomacy' alone.

Character traits and professional skills of Foreign Service personnel

While assessing their – former – colleagues in the Foreign Service, some pensioners held that selection criteria of the personnel department of the Federal Foreign Office have not dramatically changed over time, and professional skills of younger diplomats have neither improved nor worsened. That is why no particular distinction between the elder and younger generation of German diplomats could be made. This point of view, expressed by several survey participants, was not completely contradicted but remarkably softened by the overall data. Even though the 'condition humaine' might not be subject to change, circumstances that shape personal characteristics and work habits were perceived as constantly in motion and reasons for observable differences in diplomatic day-to-day business. For instance, 21st century phenomena, e.g., globalisation and digitisation, have allowed young people to gain international experiences, build a diverse world-spanning network and improve their learning capabilities and intercultural skills. As a logical

consequence thereof, new generations of diplomats possess a more profound and multidisciplinary understanding of the world, and are able to make best use of modern communications technology. As to personal skills: Careerism, ambition and competitiveness seemed to have remarkably increased over time. Young diplomats were characterised as fairly success-oriented, lacking inner strength and having an insufficient frustration tolerance. At the same time, a high pressure to align oneself to the traditional picture of diplomats continues to exist. Some factors, such as the – nowadays little – willingness to follow 'rotating' partners all around the world, are nonetheless evidence of an inner modernisation. Likewise, this is demonstrated by the emergence of a 'new leadership culture' within the Foreign Service., which bases itself on feedback loops, evaluations and flatter hierarchies.

The composition of the Foreign Service staff is naturally linked to recruitment processes. It was pointed out in the survey that present-day recruitment procedures of the Federal Foreign Office continue to focus on professional knowledge rather than personality assessment. Nonetheless, it became manifest in the survey responses that the modern selection procedure differs in many respects. Consequently, today's diplomats represent a wider range of personal backgrounds, implying that the Federal Foreign Office is no longer male-dominated and its employees possess more diverse professional profiles than before. It remained disputed among the participants whether the aim of the Federal Foreign Office to ensure comprehensive social and educational diversity has been achieved. So could the applicant preselection prove counter-productive as it takes criteria into account that are not equally available to all social classes, e.g., work experiences abroad. Further, more flexibility in recruitment and working conditions was demanded by several survey participants, e.g., through specialisation of the Foreign Service personnel and temporary contracts for digital experts.

Governance structures within the German Federal Foreign Office

The internal governance structures of the Federal Foreign Office were in the main classified as complex, bureaucratic and centralised. So was it emphasised that more and more tasks have been redeployed from missions abroad to headquarters; and that therefore direction and guidance of the 'centre' became even more important. Besides, a poor light was cast on the administrative apparatus. But a clear dividing line was drawn between a paralysed bureaucratic and an efficient diplomatic system. In this sense, bureaucratization was related to negative consequences for the conduct of diplomacy because of structural restrictions, i.e., narrow limits of the civil service law, as well as internal weaknesses, i.e., self-absorption of the administrative apparatus. At this, opportunities for promotion were criticised as to be solely dependent on the goodwill of superiors, and this could reinforce intellectual moderateness and produce – in an extreme case – ambassadors who do not meet the job requirements. Structural adjustments, i.e., through controlling mechanisms, expanded the bureaucratic apparatus of the Federal Foreign Office only further. As feasible alternatives to this burdening complexity, delegation of tasks and staff savings were brought forward. Whereas some interviewees observed an increase and diversification of actors ('competition is good for business'), others did not experience major changes or difficulties. Incisive trends towards an interaction with certain groups of players were generally not pointed out, but societal forces seemed to have gained influence.

At the same time, decision-making procedures have developed in a more multi-layered way, particularly through an involvement of a wide range of diplomatic actors, an emergence of decision-making bodies outside the governance structures of the Federal Foreign Office, as well as digitisation. Still existing hierarchical structures within the Federal Foreign Office were described in two completely different ways: On the one hand, interviewees experienced more inclusive decision-making processes,

both internally and externally. But others pointed out that hierarchization and exclusionary governance became a part of their day-to-day work, and therefore access to a small circle of decision makers would prove indispensable for the exertion of influence. On the whole, the pensioners were divided about whether decision-making procedures, within the Federal Foreign Office and beyond, have improved or worsened over time.

The last section of the questionnaire was dedicated to the future viability of complex diplomatic apparatuses at the nation-state level, such as the Federal Foreign Office. The persistence of 'traditional' governance structures was related to a non-existence of feasible alternatives. The assumption that some core diplomatic characteristics are indispensable, e.g., special professional skills of the diplomatic corps or central supervisory and coordinating tasks of diplomatic missions, backs this. Although the *raison d'être* of the current diplomatic system was not called into question, the importance of transformative – and on the part of the Federal Foreign Office nearly uncontrollable – dynamics for the future conduct of diplomacy was accentuated. One possible outcome of these dynamics could be that bilateral embassies will be rendered redundant in the light of an ongoing European integration process; and that the *European External Action Service* takes on greater responsibility and significance.

Conclusion

As initially stated, the sample of this survey was intended to provide an insight into the thinking of recently retired German diplomats. In so doing, it revealed diverse views on the functioning of the Federal Foreign Office in the 21st century. Particularly, this is exemplified by answers given to the closing question on 'the most positive and negative reminiscences' of their work life: Some pensioners referred to personal achievements and failures (e.g., freeing of hostages ≠ powerlessness in the face of dictators), others to global trends (e.g., multilateralism ≠ nationalism), or – in line with the main theme of the questionnaire – to aspects of

their everyday work (e.g., facilitated communication ≠ bureaucratisation). However, certain overlaps in perception became visible. Even though specificities of 21st century diplomacy were rather deemphasized by the participants, it was acknowledged that global phenomena of our time affect diplomatic work and produce an unprecedented complexity of information supply, professional networks and internal operating procedures. 'Traditional' institutions and instruments, such as the Federal Foreign Office and its 'human resources', were nonetheless seen as relevant in the 21st century, despite a high pressure to keep up with new developments. In order to address empirical shortcomings of this study, its findings should be underpinned with additional qualitative research. For example, conducting one-to-one interviews with survey participants would be a feasible and academically insightful approach. Further, views of the elder generation in the Foreign Service could be contrasted with those of newly recruited 'Attachés'. All in all, it stands to reason that 21st century phenomena might not merely have an impact on diplomacy as an abstraction but rather on diplomats in their day-to-day management of foreign policy, which necessitates further research on the *human dimension* of changes in this field.

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