«What is the professional expertise needed by a diplomat? One should not be surprised that understanding of societal affairs and economics is more important as a knowledge base than the theory of international relations.»

KISHAN S. RANA
DIPLOMAT AND AUTHOR
INDIA

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KISHAN S. RANA

DIPLOMATIC EDUCATION

In most countries, those selected for the diplomatic service are elites. This does not refer to their social background — in fact in almost all countries a democratization process is evident, in terms of the economic groups and the educational institutions to which the new entrants belong. They are elites because behind each young man or woman who wins the coveted appointment, stand dozens, or in some countries, even several hundreds, of unsuccessful applicants. Despite all the diversification in job opportunities that has taken place in our globalizing world, and the opening up of career avenues that did not exist a decade or two back, representing one's country abroad remains a coveted honor, attracting the best and the brightest in virtually every country that has an open, competitive selection process.

What kind of higher education is the best preparation for a career in a diplomatic service? Is there a particular kind of discipline that is best suited to produce envoys? What are the needs for professional training for diplomats, at the stage of induction, and later on, as the individual's career progresses?

In Europe, especially in Germany and its neighboring states, until recently a career in law was considered to be best suited for this profession. That has slowly changed; now even in Germany the majority of the entrants are economics graduates. In contrast, in North America a good number are graduates in international affairs (in Europe this subject is less popular as a mainstream university course). Most foreign ministries do not restrict entry to graduates

of a particular discipline; in the United States, Britain, India and in most other countries graduates in any discipline may apply. In contrast, China and a few others, restrict entry to those who have studied the humanities, especially international affairs and foreign languages.

Does the study of international affairs at university favor a candidate for this career? Perhaps, but only up to a point. The main reason is that university education is by its nature theoretical, especially in international affairs; the diplomat needs professional training of a practical nature, essentially a set of craft skills. A few universities offer courses in diplomatic studies, but this is limited to the US and Britain; the main emphasis in such programs is on diplomatic history, with some academic courses on negotiations and the like thrown in. In contrast, a good graduate program in almost any discipline serves as fine material for diplomatic training, which by its very nature is ideally provided at the foreign ministry's training institutions. One possible exception to this is the French Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), which together with its sister Grandes Ecoles, is a unique agency for training public service cadres.

What is the professional expertise needed by a diplomat? One should not be surprised that understanding of societal affairs and economics is more important as a knowledge base than the theory of international relations. Much of the needed knowledge of international affairs comes with the job. The breadth of competencies needed by today's professional is such that the definition of the ideal diplomat is of a generalist-pluri-specialist. This awkward phrase attempts to capture the notion that the contemporary foreign ministry professional needs both the ability of a generalist to relate to a wide range of subjects, deal with the experts, and find inter-linkages between different issues, and at the same time he needs his own expert knowledge. This point may become clear when we follow a new recruit as he progresses in his training and career.

Entry training in diplomatic services falls into two typologies. The majority of countries give basic orientation to their new recruits, for between two and six weeks, and then put them to work, mostly as desk officers in the foreign ministry (Australia, Canada, France, Britain, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and others; the US even sends them out on full-term assignments abroad). During this initial period they are pulled out to attend short courses to develop their professional skills, ranging from the technique of writing records of discussion, to negotiation simulations. The second approach is to give them concentrated, full-time training at the training institute, for about one year (e.g. Chile, India, Germany, Peru); China trains its new entrants for six months at its Foreign Affairs University, unless they are graduates from that particular institution, in which case they go straight to work on desk jobs at the foreign ministry. Thus, the dominant trend is for short initial training, followed by learning on the job, supplemented with a series of skill-based courses, each limited to a few days.

Most diplomatic services of any size ensure that their new entrants learn at least one foreign language — and English no longer counts, even if it is not the dominant language in the country. Most focus on the major world languages, but priority is also given to the languages of neighboring countries. For the official, this becomes the base for developing area expertise, because the prime aim is not to develop linguists or interpreters. It is expected that in the early years, the official will probably learn at least one more foreign language. The good services provide small financial incentives for language study, and also have a program for re-examination every four or five years so that individuals are motivated to keep up with the languages they have mastered.

At the same time the young officer acquires functional expertise, either through attending a training program, or on the job, covering areas such as environmental affairs, security and disarmament, international economic affairs, public diplomacy, economic

diplomacy, media affairs, and the like. The goal is that in the first ten years the official may gain knowledge of one or two functional sectors. This, taken together with the foreign languages learnt, gives the foreign ministry a range of area and functional expertise, distributed across hierarchy levels, so that people with required skills are available for jobs, where this expertise is relevant.

The other fast growing trend is for mid-career training to acquire wider range and depth. This is in recognition that lifelong learning has become a requisite in this profession. The foreign ministries that do not pay enough attention to this are the losers in an age when competency requirements change and sharpen all the time.

A few officials are sent on university courses at mid-career levels, but the numbers are always small, because of cost, and the difficulty in sparing them from their work tasks. The US sponsors a dozen or so to attend masters courses in economics, while Singapore also sends a few to universities each year, getting them to sign bonds that would require them to remain with the foreign ministry for a few years after the completion of these courses. India sends one or two each year to universities abroad. At best, this is a supplementary measure, useful to expose officials to specialized knowledge of new fields, but such academic courses do not meet the need for skill development mentioned above.

A new trend is the training programs for ambassadors, usually run for a week or so, more as seminars than as classroom courses, where a great amount of sharing of experiences takes place (though China has long run two-month courses for ambassadors and other senior appointments in its embassies). A few countries, mainly in Scandinavia, are beginning to focus also on leadership training, given that personal leadership and man-management is a prerequisite for the top jobs everywhere. It is essential to bring into such programs officials from other stakeholder ministries and agencies, which makes such training even more relevant.

Given the distributed nature of foreign service personnel, with

around half of them serving abroad, and the high cost of bringing them together for training courses, internet-based e-learning is a natural option for foreign ministries. Yet, it is surprising that while such distance education has made rapid progress in many countries, foreign ministries have been slow to adapt to the new format. Even today, major players such as Australia, China, France, Germany and Japan do not utilize e-learning, though it is believed that some of them are actively examining such options. In contrast Canada and the US are the leaders in this field and Britain is also moving forward.

One aspect of training is frequently overlooked — the mutual learning that takes place from a cohort or a batch that joins the foreign ministry in a particular year. Even when entry training is abbreviated, the ones who join in a particular year, and undergo training and their first desk jobs in the foreign ministry together build a huge set of personal connections and 'batch identity'. When they come from different disciplines, their process of mutual learning works very well; we know from experience that these personal ties endure for the full career of these officials, and even into their retirement phase of life.

In India, the induction training in the Foreign Service Institute run by the Ministry of External Affairs is preceded by a four-month course which all the new entrants to all the civil services undergo at the National Academy of Administration, in the Himalayan hill-resort town of Mussourie. This builds strong interconnections among officials who belong to the fifteen-odd top civil services of the country, including the Police Service. This reinforces the point made earlier about the value of bringing into the training process representatives of different ministries, companies, and other entities that have a stake in external affairs.

Most foreign-service institutes offer courses for diplomats from other countries, as an act of partnership. One of the best is Malaysia's Institute for Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR)

that runs around 30 courses each year, about a dozen of them aimed at international candidates, usually run over two to four weeks, covering specialized subjects such as international economic negotiations. Such targeted courses are of much greater utility than the usual run of general courses that most other institutes offer, which blend in general training for mid-level officials, with a heavy dose of information about the country hosting the program. From the perspective of the sending foreign ministries, this illustrates the rather few choices available for professional development abroad.

The DiploFoundation (Website: www.diplomacy.edu), established through an agreement between the governments of Malta and Switzerland, working with Swiss and international funding to help countries with limited means to improve their diplomatic skills, is one of the few entities that offers skill development programs, to foreign ministry personnel and others interested in the subject. It currently runs about twenty short courses per year, some of them offering credits that lead to a post-graduate diploma or a master's degree from the University of Malta. It is one more of the options that are available for professional training, using the strengths of institute-based and university accredited education in a discipline that remains a vital component of our interconnected world.