

Nov 04, 2016 by [Daryl Copeland](#)

# Fixing Foreign Ministries: Message from Oz

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Earlier this month, a blue ribbon panel, appointed in 2008 by Australia's Lowy Institute for International Policy to enquire into that country's foreign ministry and representational capacity, reported a deep diplomatic deficit and has recommended sweeping reform and major reinvestment. The findings, which include a series of recommendations on public diplomacy, are widely applicable and warrant close inspection.

The short of it, made plain in this and many other studies, is that foreign ministries, and the conventional diplomatic business model which they embody, have not adapted well to the challenges of the globalization era. They are rigid rather than fluid and hierarchic rather than networked, authoritarian rather than innovative, and staffed for the most part by a cadre of employees whose skill sets no longer fill the bill. Too thin on the ground at home, even more severely overstretched abroad, an under-financed diplomatic corps is without the necessary tools or capacity required to respond to the rapidly changing environment in which it operates. The crisis is systemic.

For those with a preference for talking over fighting, for genuine dialogue, and for less costly, non-military approaches to conflict resolution, fixing foreign ministries must become a priority. In that respect, the release of the Lowy Institute report provides a useful point of departure.

## **The Frame**

In *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, and under the mantra of *relevance, effectiveness, and transformation*; I argue the need to re-imagine diplomats as globalization managers and foreign ministries as globalization entrepots - in effect, international policy docking mechanisms for national governments. Absent this re-framing, governments will find it difficult, if not impossible, to manage the vexing range of 21st century issues technology - climate change, pandemic disease, resource scarcity - which are rooted in science and driven by technology. The supple, directed treatment of S&T-based issues by the staff of foreign ministries is a necessary pre-condition for global security and durable development. Yet, for too many observers diplomacy seems boring, its institutions outmoded, its practitioners somewhat akin to pin-striped dinosaurs...

To that I reply, not so...or, at least, not *necessarily* so.

Foreign ministries do matter. There is certainly much more to these complex organizations than might be gleaned from a glance at the lines, boxes, and titles found in their organigrams. Indeed, an understanding of elements of public administration is vital; coming to terms with the myriad institutional interactions of people, policy, process, budgets, and programs can yield critical insights. At the highest level of analysis, foreign ministries can be seen as knowledge-rich information producers with an integrating, catalytic role to play for all national governments. But – and this is a big but - detached from domestic constituencies and oriented away from national politics, they are both too foreign, and too much like ministries. Much more

effort is required on the home front to demonstrate diplomacy's value added.

Diplomacy, the foreign ministry, and the foreign service are more, respectively, than the animus, the machinery, and the face of a nation to the world. All are closely related, and in fact, interdependent - a change in any one of the constituent parts will have knock-on effects elsewhere. Together, these elements represent what might be considered the *ecology of diplomacy*, or *diplomatic ecosystem*. This is an interlocking, organic whole, the framework of international policy, the place where new ideas live or - too often and frequently for the wrong reasons - die. Like so many other ecosystems, a cascade of adversity, well-charted in the Lowy Institute's *Diplomatic Deficit* study, is placing the health of this one, too, at risk.

Hammered by relentlessly diminishing resources, diplomacy and its supporting institutions are facing difficult times most everywhere. The initiative has passed to other actors, mainly defense departments, central agencies, NGOs, and the private sector. Leadership has waned and creative international initiatives have in recent years given way to a reactive posture that responds mainly, and not especially well, to external demands. Diplomats are leaving in droves. None of this is either desirable or sustainable; the moment has arrived to embrace comprehensive, full-bore reconstruction. Public diplomacy provides the center-piece around which this enterprise could most usefully be organized.

## **The Fix**

While the Lowy Institute report does not advocate or reflect a complete embrace of the PD-centric perspective, its recommendations are sensible and several merit highlighting:

- PD needs to be integrated with all stages of international policy development and implementation, not just in the foreign ministry but across government
- All international policy staff should be trained in PD
- Guidelines restricting diplomatic contact with the media require review
- Missions abroad need more discretionary PD resources and authority
- Major investments are needed in new media (blogs, video sharing, wikis, etc.) PD tools
- Cultural diplomacy should be re-oriented away from elite audiences towards youth, potential leaders and Islamic communities.

These conclusions reflect an understanding that in this age of uncertainty, formal state-to-state relations are still necessary; but, they are no longer sufficient to obtain the kinds of international policy outcomes required. If governments are to be effective they can, and in fact must, connect directly with foreign publics - through the new as well as the conventional media, by opening storefront operations, by negotiating joint ventures with civil society...whatever works. The days of near universal reliance upon standard operating procedures and diplomatic convention have passed.

Diplomacy may still begin and end with interstate relations, but the effective exercise of influence is related increasingly to forging partnerships, managing networks, and shaping opinions. Few foreign policy objectives can now be achieved in the absence of initiatives designed to engage, to understand, to advocate, and to influence. Whether a country needs to build international coalitions; cooperate to protect the ecosphere; or compete to attract foreign investment, skilled workers, and students; the cultivation of a broad cross-section of civic

support has become essential to success.

For these reasons and more, foreign ministries most everywhere are concluding that the doctrine and practice of public diplomacy seems best suited to meeting the challenges inherent in the era of globalization. How, then, should today's diplomats be spending their time? Building project-based networks, both conventional and virtual, negotiating mutual interest alliances with the like-minded, working on media strategy, leveraging private sector activity...in sum, by using attraction rather than coercion and exercising influence through dialogue and relationship-building.

I have not seen any official response to the Lowy Institute report, but for foreign ministers and senior officials it should be required reading. It is heartening to see that in academic and think tank circles at least, the growing consensus in favor of public diplomacy has begun to spread down under.

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