

**Thumbnail Image:**



Sep 13, 2017 by [Olga Krasnyak](#)

## Tit for Tat: Diplomatic Expulsions and Closures <sup>[1]</sup>

On September 2, 2017, U.S. authorities seized the buildings of the General Consulate of the Russian Federation in San Francisco and the Russian Trade Mission in Washington, D.C. Simultaneously, Russian representatives were denied access to the rented premises of the Russian Trade Mission in New York.

These actions were a response to Russia's demand to reduce U.S. diplomatic presence in Russia and to suspend the U.S. Embassy's access to some Moscow facilities, including the U.S. Embassy-designated country house (*dacha*). Cutting U.S. diplomatic presence in Russia, for its part, was a reaction to the new wave of U.S. sanctions against Russia signed by the Trump administration. These acts followed measures by the Obama administration, which locked Russians out of diplomatic compounds in Maryland and New York and expelled 35 Russian diplomats in December 2016.

We may continue this line by looking way back and reconstructing the history of mutual diplomatic expulsions and closures, step by step. The Internet provides tons of facts and interpretations, analyses and commentaries related to jurisdiction, politics and even emotional outbursts. However, one aspect of diplomatic expulsions and closures seems to be missed. If we think about diplomats themselves as shaping diplomatic history and its respective symbols, then we may understand the symbolic meaning of resident embassy diplomacy.

As Jeffrey Robertson noted in his 2016 book, *Diplomatic Style and Foreign Policy*, embassies symbolically represent the power, prestige, strength, technological prowess, influence and importance of the sending state in the sending country. Even the physical architecture of resident embassies aesthetically represents the sending state's national culture. The symbolic role of resident embassies might be interpreted as a key element to understanding the meaning and subsequent reaction to anything that might interfere with a state's diplomatic property in a host country.

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) decried the closures and building restrictions in San Francisco and Washington D.C. as "blatantly hostile" and "illegal invasions." The pro-government news channel RT identified this issue as an "'occupation' of Russian diplomatic properties in the U.S.," "gross violation of international law" and "degrading of U.S.-Russia relations."

## **Past embassy tensions**

There are not too many historical examples of embassy seizures, with the most severe embassy controversies between countries having peaked during U.S.-Cuba and U.S.-Iran embassy tensions. After the disintegration of official relations between the U.S. and Cuba in 1961, the American diplomatic mission technically stopped operations in Havana. Yet, the embassy building was never confiscated by local authorities. Moreover, in 1977 the former U.S. Embassy building, located at the prestigious Bay of Havana, housed a permitted organization called the American Interest Section in Havana under the protecting power of Switzerland, accompanied by the Swiss flag. After the U.S. and Cuba resumed diplomatic ties in 2015, the U.S. Embassy was restored to the American diplomatic mission. Similarly, the Embassy of Cuba in Washington, D.C. temporarily housed the Cuban Interests Section in the U.S. under Swiss-protecting power, ultimately resuming its former functioning.

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A less fortunate example of embassy seizure occurred with U.S.-Iran relations. The former U.S. Embassy in Iran, a long, low, two-story brick building mirroring the architecture of American high schools built circa 1930-40, was nicknamed "Henderson High." During the Iranian Revolution of 1979, revolutionary forces confiscated this building (pictured, top) and captured 52 American diplomats and hostages. "Henderson High" became known as the "Den

of Espionage” and was never restored to its original function. It currently houses a museum to the revolution and a bookstore. In contrast, the Former Embassy of Iran in Washington D.C., previously known as “the number one embassy when it came to extravagance” and the embassy where guests “were afforded their every desire, from champagne and caviar to sexual favors and recreational drugs,” is maintained now by the U.S. Department of State while the Iranian government has no access to the sites.

## Current embassy strife

The recent Russian-American diplomatic expulsions and closures might bring undesirable political results and strained diplomatic ties. In addition to Russia’s official announcement of plans to initiate court proceedings in response to Washington’s actions, a wide public outcry is resonating across the Russian Internet, led by Russia’s MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova.

Zakharova authored several Facebook posts about the current situation with resident embassies, employing the Russian language’s penchant for targeting the national audience with her emotiveness and quick-witted replies to comments scaled nationally across Russian social media. This evocative public dialogue contributes to Zakharova’s unique role in public engagement and forming public opinion. Zakharova’s voice is gaining public trust and can be considered the third most influential in Russia, after Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov. Through video-streamed briefings, social media posts and television appearances, Zakharova highlights that the U.S. aims to keep an “anti-Russian agenda by humiliating Russian diplomats.” The emphasis on humiliation was highlighted as the essence to be delivered to the national audience.

However, it would be wrong to think that the victims are from only one side. Notably, Zakharova illustrates the American victims: the officials—notably, the FBI agents—who served the search warrants and building checks as a job they were compelled to perform against their desires. In this regard, FBI agents deserve empathy for the deliberate actions they were required to take. To promote this empathetic narrative, Russia’s MFA tweeted several recorded videos of rummages and building checks, highlighting how both sides silently agreed about the futility of these actions.

Despite emotional coloring and personification, this situation suggests a “tit for tat” of diplomatic expulsions. The diplomats of both countries should know where to draw the line. With the newly appointed ambassadors to Moscow and Washington, D.C. in addition to regular communication between Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, we should evaluate the situation rationally. We can put aside the emotional component broadly misused in the media and primarily addressed to the general public, and we may hope for a more expedient resolution of the conflict.

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