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Diplomacy as a Profession: Reflections on a U.S. Foreign Service Career ^[1]

Visiting senior fellow Matthew Asada imagines a conversation 20 years in the future with a member of the U.S. Foreign Service's centennial class of 2024

Yesterday, I excitedly re-upped for another five years, which will make 25 when this contract is done. This will be my final overseas assignment, then we'll see about domestic service. We now have the option of up to 25 years of domestic service before mandatory retirement, again in five-year increments. There are a dozen domestic locations to choose from, thanks to a strong subnational diplomacy network and the geographic dispersion of regional and functional bureau offices.

You know we don't bid anymore, right? The Department abolished bidding after a GAO audit quantified the productivity losses, pervasive mismatching of skills to needs, and adverse impact on diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility goals – not to mention the emotional

rollercoasters and familial chaos the constant unknowns created. The Foreign Service Reform Act of 2030 finally implemented the centralized assignments process called for in the Foreign Service Act of 1980 and all of the provisions of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (notably domicile and taxation that the Foreign Service Families Act had left unaddressed). Now, you're provided with three assignment options each time you re-up. These are based on service needs, your expressed preferences, and a personalized career tracker designed to develop the skills necessary to serve across a full retirement-eligible career (now 25 years).

After the initial Washington, DC and linked overseas training tours (2 and 3 years, respectively), I served at Regional Diplomatic Platforms New Delhi and Beijing supporting embassies throughout the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs and Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. I'm now in my required domestic fourth assignment, consisting of two, two-year tours with the middle year as authorized career sabbatical or training (a previous Senior Foreign Service perk brought forward). The only functions performed in Washington are those requiring access to foreign officials or other DC-based federal offices.

The Department's five-year standard assignment length coincides with our five-year contracts, improving service efficiency and quality of life while reducing costs. Fewer people require language training due to the longer assignment lengths and there are fewer disruptive and costly household moves. Personnel on the ground are more impactful.

The American Foreign Service Association proved its worth as a union when it negotiated the transition to longer tours of duty by convincing Congress to roll the financial savings into quality of tour improvements in housing (overseas and a new domestic living quarters allowance), travel (business class for all flights exceeding 10 hours and supersonic air), a new childcare subsidy and increased representational funds in a new all-encompassing diplomatic and public engagement account.

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The Department's number one priority remains the safety and security of American citizens. The workforce required to support that function is smaller thanks to digital documents and remote citizenship adjudication. Visa issuance is primarily automated and uses an AI machine-based risk assessment linked to the traveler's digital documentation. Consular tours are no longer required and cones have been abolished too, as the Department's dynamic workforce model, coupled with five-year contracts and no bidding, made such distinctions obsolete.

Diplomacy as a profession still requires in-person engagement for relationship development, negotiations, and public engagement, but paradoxically the physical footprint of our embassies and consulates has shrunk. Employees work from their overseas residences while sharing representational and classified office spaces. The overseas presence of other federal agencies has shrunk through executive orders, and DoD-DoS collaboration has been

improved through joint crisis management exercise training. (They also generously extended world-wide commissary and exchange access.) Space for public engagement has grown in size and importance by incorporating best-in-class technology (visual holograms, automated simultaneous translation, and A/V studios and display rooms).

On evaluations, there are no more Employee Evaluation Reports. Each officer completes one performance self-assessment six months prior to the end of the five-year assignment. Every year, each employee assesses the post's collective performance and answers questions relating to a randomly-assigned section and the underlying administrative platform, building on an idea from USAID's Multisource Ratings. The composite section and post scores are attached to an individual's score and provided as developmental feedback along with quantifiable metrics pulled from open sources and Department-wide data. These include the number of reads/citations of a reporting cable, links to material from a press engagement, customer reviews (newly-instituted) for consular services, and attitudinal shifts of foreign populations.

One of the biggest and most welcome changes is non-competitive promotions for the first four assignments (20 years). Organizational psychologists had long assessed that the promotion system did not serve the organization's best interests. The "no-bid" assignments process ensures professional development and allows the service to better allocate staffing with evolving foreign policy priorities. There are now two distinct windows for entry into the Senior Foreign Service (SFS). In the third year of the fourth or fifth assignment (officers may compete once, twice, or not at all) there is now a separate machine-based writing and speaking examination along with a legacy human review panel for SFS entry. Upon acceptance, all participate in a year-long experiential learning program – a resurrected Senior Seminar. The SFS maintains its own assignments process, and yes, there is still a mix of career and non-career ambassadors.

Critical to America's diplomatic leadership is the use of technology. Personal computing devices recognize individuals on first contact, recall their history of official engagements, and suggest topics of conversation with corresponding talking points. Translation occurs simultaneously; "memcons" (memoranda of conversation) and cables write themselves; and social media pictures, captions, and posts go back to the United States for editorial use and packaging.

It all sounds a bit fantastic, no? The Foreign Service has come a long way since the centennial celebrations in 2024. While the familiar esprit de corps and shared sense of service remain, today's Foreign Service is better able to attract and retain a talented workforce that now fully reflects the diversity and strength of our majority-minority nation at all levels, including the SFS.

I almost forgot to mention the single post with one-year assignments: the Moon. The Bureau of International Organization Affairs offers outer space assignments. It's an unaccompanied post, but I'm toying with the idea. No R&Rs, but the hardship differential is out of this world!

Matthew Asada is a fourth-generation Japanese American and has served as a U.S. Foreign Service officer in Afghanistan, Germany, India, Pakistan, and the UAE. He has led the union for America's diplomats (AFSA) and the employee affinity group for Asian Americans (AAFAA). He is currently a visiting senior fellow at the University of Southern California teaching public diplomacy, with a particular focus on global mega events. He most recently served as Deputy Commissioner General of the USA Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai. The views expressed in this article are the authors alone and not necessarily those of the U.S. government.
