

September 2012
Canadian Government Executives

Canadian diplomacy and the coming challenges

Written by [Paul Heinbecker](#) Volume: 15 Issue: 4

Diplomacy is back. The short era of a single superpower is passing into history, replaced by a multi-power world in which the Americans will be more pre-eminent than predominant. This literally unruly new world will have to be managed cooperatively – diplomatically.

American science, especially medical science, will lead the world, American universities will continue to set international standards of excellence and the U.S. military will remain without peer in terms of sheer hard power. But American economic leadership has been undermined by unbridled and ill-regulated capitalism, and American political leadership has been eroded by the financial crisis and by a decade and more of dubious foreign policy decisions. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, “the times they are a-changin.” Most of that change is being driven by Asia. We in the West have forgotten that China and India not being major powers is the exception in history. Nor are Japan, Russia, the European Union and Latin America likely to stand meekly on the sidelines.

The technology of diplomacy has changed as e-mail, web-available media, search engines and Blackberry relegate the diplomatic dispatch, confidential courier, mechanical encryption and punch-hole telex to the dustbins of history. The context of diplomacy has also changed as globalization and integration have proceeded and everyone from Bono and Angelina Jolie to the Gates Foundation and the Cali Cartel and Al Qaeda privatizes diplomatic practice, or at least tries to. Nevertheless, the state remains the central fact of global governance and diplomacy the indispensable instrument of interstate relations, including for Canada.

Canadian diplomats, as the agents of the Canadian state, remain indispensable to Canada’s conduct of foreign policy, from defending national interests to representing national values, from comprehending foreign realities to communicating home truths, from recommending policy options to implementing government decisions and helping Canadians abroad. And diplomacy is set to get even more important.

Our allies, the British, French and, especially, the new American Administration “get it.” The Secretary of State recently told the U.S. Senate that she believes strongly in the need to invest in diplomacy. Further, President Obama told Agence France Press a year ago that “[i]f you don't understand [other] cultures then it's very hard for you to make good foreign policy decisions. Foreign policy is all about judgment...” For him, living and travelling overseas is the key to understanding others. Experience abroad is, in fact, indispensable to acquiring both the capacity to understand the world and the depth of judgment to provide sound advice.

This worldliness, cumulative over time and aggregated among its officers, is fundamental to the value-added the diplomats of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) offer government.

It is not always apparent that Ottawa wants it. The government's persistent minority status combined with limited international experience in the world, the potential partisan benefits of attracting Diaspora votes excepted, has tightened the traditional Ottawa-centric focus of Canadian politics. Few Canadian ministers travel and few foreigners beat a path to our door.

But foreign policy is not just an elective in this integrating world. The more effective a foreign policy we conduct, the more respect we get in Washington. The more respect we get in Washington, the more effective we can be, both in Washington and in the world, in promoting and protecting our interests, from Afghanistan to softwood lumber. The government needs DFAIT to develop and lead a foreign policy agenda that advances the country's interests, generates ideas, negotiates treaties and supports reforms and innovations in international governance.

This is an agenda that has to be much more than the sum of other departments' interests, provincial governments' ambitions abroad and Diaspora accommodations. Effective foreign policy requires a competent foreign service that can translate political vision into policy accomplishment. For example, the Canadian military's heroic efforts in Afghanistan, and Canada's \$11 billion, plus, overall expenditures by 2011, together, should give Canada ample voice in the efforts to end the conflict. Yet, without effective diplomacy, Canada's voice will be disregarded.

If the Canadian army is the best small army in the world, the Canadian Foreign Service is the best small diplomatic corps in the world, or has been. It has often provided disproportionate international leadership and ideas. Effective diplomacy depends on effective diplomats.

The good news is that 10,000 candidates applied last year for 100 plus openings (a success rate of about one percent). Further, young Foreign Service officers are more experienced, better educated and generally more competent than any previous generation. The less good news is that they have to cope with an initiative-sapping, government-wide managerial ethos that seems more attuned to mistake-avoidance and accountability than to leadership and achievement.

Incentive systems tend to reward learning how to do things rather than knowing what to do in the first place. "Spin" substitutes for policy. Merit and excellence, once bywords, seem less so as public service fashions succeed each other – Public Service 2000. La Releve. Transformation. Public Service 3000? "Policy leaders" (in reality often recent graduate students) are parachuted into jobs for which others frequently have equal qualifications and more relevant experience, undermining morale. The department struggles to provide sufficient foreign language training opportunities. Foreign Service spouses face very significant financial, career and pension penalties abroad: for many, quite simply, no pay, no careers and no pensions. All of these challenges can be surmounted. Most would respond to more money.

Diplomacy is not expensive but it is not cost free. It takes money to commission research from universities and think-tanks for evidence-based policy initiatives, to attend conferences to stay abreast of the latest thinking, to release people for specialized training, to take initiatives like banning land mines, to open even small offices in newly important cities in Asia and the U.S., to

inculcate foreign language skills, to respond to consular crises, to promote democracy and our values and culture, to provide market intelligence, to enhance international governance, including financial governance, to help destroy nuclear armaments, to contribute to development and build peace, to fund our membership in international organizations and, generally, to acquit our myriad international responsibilities.

But, in the face of growing need, as the world enlarges and develops, DFAIT's budget has contracted by about 13 percent over the last four years (main estimates 2006-7 versus 2009-10), despite the fact that at about \$2 billion, plus, it is little more than a rounding error in the government's \$200 billion, plus, accounts. Although a dollar spent on diplomacy buys more security at the margin than a dollar spent on military gear, the military budget, long under-resourced, has grown by over 30 percent in the same period. Meanwhile, DFAIT is forced to sell off properties abroad acquired generations ago for one-time infusions of cash – a telling indicator.

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