

Mightier Than the Sword: Preparing American Diplomacy for a Post-Primacy World

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Let's be honest for a second. The state of American diplomacy is topsy-turvy to say the least. From historically low morale,¹ persistent staffing issues,² and complications associated with a global pandemic,³ the current diplomatic environment poses countless challenges. In a time of emergent and resurgent problems in the international arena, the United States should stand behind the chief artificer of its foreign policy – the Department of State – in order to respond to these challenges. Unfortunately, time⁴ and time⁵ again, the department has failed to address both new issues and lingering problems, instead cutting its size, support, and, consequently, its efficacy.⁶ Though a reduced diplomatic corps may appear to complement the idea of a restrained approach to the world, this is problematic for grand strategists across the spectrum. Further, a strengthened, capable diplomatic corps is invaluable in facilitating any sort of strategic shift.

At a base level, the utility of well-trained diplomats is simple: the United States needs to be able to communicate its strategy to the rest of the world. The “social media revolution” has allowed for the growth of public diplomacy, defined by United States Ambassador Pamela Smith as the dialogue and interactions between United States institutions and “foreign publics.”⁷ Whether through official Twitter pages, embassy outreach, or digital marketing campaigns, “winning hearts and minds” has proven to be effective in supporting grand strategic objectives.⁸

¹ Steven Kashkett, “Experienced State Department diplomats are getting the Trump treatment and shown the door,” *USA Today*, December 27, 2019.

² Office of Inspector General, “Inspector General Statement on the Department of State’s Major Management and Performance Challenges,” United States Department of State, 2019.

³ Ryan Heath, “For global diplomats, Zoom is not like being in the room,” *Politico*, April 16, 2020.

⁴ Robbie Gramer, Dan De Luce, & Colum Lynch, “How the Trump Administration Broke the State Department,” *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2017.

⁵ Courtney Bubl , “Watchdog Finds Serious Staffing and Leadership Problems at State Department,” *Government Executive*, January 23, 2020.

⁶ Kori Schake, “The State Department’s Dysfunction Predates Pompeo,” *Bloomberg*, January 31, 2020.

⁷ Pamela Smith, “Public diplomacy,” *Modern Diplomacy*, 1998.

⁸ Ben D. Mor, “Public Diplomacy in Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, March 8, 2006.

However, case study after case study in diplomatic history demonstrates the need for reliable interpersonal interactions in achieving strategic objectives. While the Secretary of State can tweet support (or, often, a lack thereof) for a given government, social media does not make for an effective platform for discussing, for example, the intricacies of trade deals and climate accords. However, the benefits of a strong diplomatic corps extend beyond this.

Regardless of where one stands in the strategic debate, it is undeniable the United States plays a key role in the international system (one might even argue, a hegemon).⁹ To step back from this role would open the door for other actors in the system to step forward and fill this place. As noted by Robert Gilpin, this destabilization will result in a “new equilibrium reflecting the redistribution of power.”¹⁰ In order to adopt and execute a grand strategy premised on some sense of restraint – something that necessarily includes the withdrawal of at least some level of hard power instruments – while guaranteeing the relevance of the United States in negotiating the rules and structures of the new equilibrium, a strong, effective diplomatic corps is not merely important but wholly invaluable.

What, then, will the State Department need to do to prepare for such strategic shifts? While the FY 2019 Annual Performance Report indicates strong intentions with listed goals such as promoting American leadership through “balanced engagement,” the department must reckon with the structural issues at hand.¹¹ First and foremost, it should adequately staff its embassies, consulates, and bureaus with the people necessary to achieving its goals. A 2019 report from the Government Accountability Office found, between 2011 and 2019, the number of vacant foreign service positions abroad was reduced by merely 22 jobs.¹² Specifically, the report found 18% of foreign service positions in the Middle East and North Africa were vacant (this number was second only to Central and South Asia, which reached 21%).¹³ In regions where the United States should be reconsidering applications of hard power perhaps the most, the fact that these vacancy rates are what they are is troubling. While employment across the country has been impacted severely due to COVID-19, these statistics predate the current pandemic. When

⁹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Department of State, “FY 2019 Annual Performance Report,” United States Department of State, 2020.

¹² Government Accountability Office, “Integrated Action Plan Could Enhance Efforts to Reduce Persistent Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies,” United States Government Accountability Office, 2019.

¹³ Ibid.

employment figures begin rebounding, the State Department must have a plan to recruit, train, and deploy the necessary professionals in such crucial areas.

Second, the State Department needs to develop a sense of robustness from within. While the history of American public administration has shown us the importance of outside opinions (or, the dangers of groupthink that arise without them), it is equally important to allow knowledge and experience to accumulate and grow internally. When employees are denied advancement within the organization because of an inability to fill their place, the organization suffers as knowledge and potential are left unused and unfulfilled. Further, in signaling to other employees the impossibility of advancement, the department fails to capitalize on its greatest resource – its people. As previously discussed, this stifles the accumulation of knowledge and experience internally and creates a weak bureaucracy unsuited for adapting to a changing international situation. Though the department included goals related to “investing in an agile, skilled workforce” in the most recent Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR 2015), it is evident work remains to be done.¹⁴

So long as the United States seeks to reduce the role it plays in policing the international system, it will need to develop tools to remain relevant in whatever form a post-primacy equilibrium takes. Chief among these will be a strong diplomatic corps capable of communicating the country’s interests and positions to the rest of the world and maintaining the proverbial “seat at the table.” This will necessitate a reevaluation of the current approach towards the State Department that will certainly lead to organizational changes – in leadership, in structure, and in support. However, investing time and resources into these changes in the present will allow the United States to respond to the future challenges it will undoubtedly face.

¹⁴ Department of State, “Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review – 2015,” United States Department of State, 2015.