

Canada must rebuild its diplomatic resources

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Canada's failed pursuit of a seat on the world's most powerful body – the United Nations Security Council – puts the spotlight on our performance beyond our borders, the strength of which depends on the quality of our diplomacy and the skills of our diplomats.

In Ottawa, power and influence have shifted away from the Department of Foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council. Afghanistan and climate change are handled by agencies outside of Foreign Affairs. Three deputy ministers report directly to the Prime Minister on foreign and national security affairs.

Emulating the U.S. model, with a National Security Council that controls the flow of all information and advice to the President, is not an area of our political system we should want to see Americanized. Our relative advantage lies in a system that has hitherto provided coherence, speed and consistency.

The ineffectiveness of our foreign ministry has become a cliché in Ottawa's contemporary political culture. The government has cut the operational resources of Foreign Affairs, especially representational funding – forgetting that an embassy without an entertainment budget is like a frigate without fuel. Diplomats are no longer authorized to talk publicly without the prior consent of the PMO. These remote commissars undermine the very purpose of our ambassadors – to publicly advance the national interest.

While Prime Minister Stephen Harper has made some excellent diplomatic appointments, his government is silent as to why a country needs an effective foreign service. Yet now, more than ever, we need skilled diplomats and a strong foreign ministry.

The international order of the 21st century is increasingly a world of decentralized sovereign entities and fragmentation among states. There is a deepening asymmetry between the structure of this order, with its 190 or so sovereign units, and the overwhelming transnational nature of the threats we face.

It is also a world of fracturing power within states. The explosion in the number of players – competing agencies in ever-expanding governments, narrow special interests, global activists, environmental crusaders, powerful multinationals, muscular NGOs, deep-pocketed lobbyists, legions of bloggers and self-declared experts – give rise to a single imperative: the need for interpretation.

The movements toward globalization and fragmentation place an enormous premium on the need for envoys of the highest calibre to fulfill four core functions. The first is as our chief intelligence officer in their country of accreditation. Second, the ambassador is the chief lobbyist for our national interests and chief promoter of our industry, trade and economic prosperity.

The ambassador is also our chief advocate, a role that goes in two directions. All input back home tends to come from domestic pressures, including special interests. Yet, decision-makers need to understand foreign political realities from their on-site envoy. Lack of knowledge, wrong information or mistaken beliefs can cause problems to escalate and endanger the national interest.

In the years following the Second World War, the Canadian foreign service was acknowledged to be one of the world's best. It earned this accolade because our political leadership put a premium on diplomatic service. It used our diplomats' talents in establishing relations with the new states emerging from colonialism or foreign occupation. Canadian diplomats helped to design and engineer the international theatres: the UN and its alphabet soup of agencies, the Commonwealth and, later, la Francophonie. With skill and improvisation, our diplomats found a way to break deadlocks in the General Assembly and introduced the concept of the peacekeeper. They gave us place and standing in the world.

Successful engagement will oblige significant reinvestment in our diplomatic capacity at home, a strengthening of our network of missions abroad and a revitalized foreign ministry as the focal point for co-ordination. The rebuilding of our diplomatic resources will not be easily or quickly achieved. But if we don't make the commitment, we'll need to lower expectations about our role in the world.

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