

Giles Scott-Smith\*

# Editors' Forum: The Evolving Embassy: Changes and Challenges to Diplomatic Representation and Practice in the Global Era, Guest Edited by Giles Scott-Smith

DOI 10.1515/ngs-2017-0013

**Abstract:** The need to maintain embassies as essential outposts of diplomatic recognition and representation has been questioned by many observers. Critics deem them increasingly irrelevant in a globalized context of multiple, more adaptable actors, whereas their advocates hold on to the ongoing role of the nation-state in structures of global governance. Both sides agree that change is necessary, although they disagree on its goals and how far it should go. This Introduction sets out the main arguments present in the debate, laying the foundation for the articles that follow which explore how embassies, diplomats and diplomatic representation have all been adapted and transformed by the changing political context of the global era.

**Keywords:** embassies, diplomatic representation, city diplomacy, institutional theory

The context and characteristics of the global era have challenged many of the established norms and practices of international politics and the institutions that conduct them. Shifting governance structures and alliances, developments in summit diplomacy, regional transformations, the increasing prominence of non-state actors such as transnational corporations and NGOs, and the expansion of the terrain of diplomatic activity through information technology have all contributed to the sense of a diplomatic landscape in flux. There has also been the demand for greater efficiency in public spending, and the need to justify the continuing value of traditional diplomatic networks in a world where contacts and connections rapidly bypass existing channels. Lastly, the rise of irregular warfare and terrorism has made diplomatic outposts particularly vulnerable, undermining their public role as nodes for inter-national exchange. In 2000 Charles Maier referred to the twentieth century as a historical epoch defined by "the emergence, ascendancy, and subsequent crisis of what is best labeled

---

\*Corresponding author: Giles Scott-Smith, Institute of History/RIAS, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands, E-mail: g.scott-smith@hum.leidenuniv.nl

‘territoriality’”, meaning “the properties, including power, provided by the control of bordered political space” (Maier 2000, 807–808). It is not surprising that the continuing use-value of embassies and diplomats, as the official sites (and bodies) of representation of a particular ‘bordered political space’ and all of its accompanying legal and sovereign *accoutrements*, have come under increasing scrutiny. Yet diplomacy has always been an evolving practice and profession, an adaptable tool for maintaining stability in a changing international political context over time. Traditions have obviously been maintained, but also adapted and sometimes abandoned. Globalization – here taken as the increasing fluidity and speed of all forms of cross-border transaction – certainly presents new challenges, but is not a unique historical moment in that regard. This special issue consists of a collection of studies of how the roles, function, and personnel of diplomatic sites such as embassies and consulates were constantly changing, even in the context of twentieth century ‘territoriality’. New perspectives – a ‘new diplomatic history’ – are providing alternative readings of modern diplomacy and diplomats, focusing as much on process as on efficiency and outcome. The articles here all adopt this perspective, exploring the changing role of labor attaches and consuls, the necessary adaptations of a small-state embassy, and the impact of war on representation.<sup>1</sup>

The case against embassies has been promoted in the public sphere for a long time. Zbigniew Brzezinski famously remarked back in 1970 that if foreign ministries and embassies “did not already exist, they surely would not have to be invented” (see Hamilton and Langhorne 1995, 232). In 2016 Alex Oliver declared in *Foreign Affairs* that “The embassy, at least in its traditional form, is facing an existential crisis” (Oliver 2016). Necessary cost-cutting and policy prioritization has led to significant down-sizing by major diplomatic players such as Britain, Canada, and the Netherlands. The ease of leader-to-leader communications, coupled with an exponential growth in multilateral, policy-specific diplomacy, has also raised criticism of the need to sustain a global diplomatic presence (Gallaga 2013). Just as the prime diplomatic resident has come under attack, so too has its prime resident, the ambassador. Carne Ross, himself a former diplomat, announced that “the good old days of an ambassador are over” because the interconnectedness of global society was becoming more distanced from the stultified hierarchies of a world order based on nation-states (Ross 2009).

---

<sup>1</sup> These articles have been developed from presentations given at the second conference of the New Diplomatic History network: ‘Borders, Networks and Organisations through the 20th Century’, Copenhagen University, November 24–26, 2016. The network’s website is located here: [www.newdiplomatchistory.org](http://www.newdiplomatchistory.org)

At stake here is not simply the existence of physical entities called embassies, but the norms of diplomatic representation. The maintenance of embassies disguises how the diplomatic entourage, and that entourage's set of tasks, are changing, and have always been changing. It also brings into question the issue of who or what is being represented in the conditions of globalization. Shaun Riordan questioned the continuing usefulness of official representation being confined to the diplomatic service and called for the abandonment of expensive embassy locations and residences abroad (Riordan 2002). Others have also commented on the difficulties – both formal and practical – for state-based diplomatic structures to continue to represent the multiplicity of identities and transnational relations that modern-day societies consist of (Henrikson 2013). Even a flexible diplomatic apparatus operating with malleable processes, involving inputs from and outputs to sources outside the diplomatic network, still maintains the relevance of the state as final arbiter of what is deemed legal, worthwhile and necessary. Globalization has therefore both undermined and emphasized the importance of embassies, since abandoning them would signal a dramatic step away from the norms of the state system, while their continuing existence in order to maintain the official presence of the state leads to them (and their occupants) becoming scapegoats for an increasing inability and ineffectiveness to control events. Back in 1997 Paul Sharp announced the following:

The challenge which confronts post-cold war diplomacy, therefore, is not how to respond to the erosion of its premise; it is to reassert the extent to which that premise, the problem of relations in a fragmented human community whose components value their sovereignty, remains operative (Sharp 1997, 632).

That reassertion, however, can also lead to false assumptions, and the continuation of diplomacy as an increasingly symbolic, if not aesthetic activity.

There are two principal responses to these critical views. First, that embassies and their staff have never been static institutions, always adapting to changing circumstances. Second, that the demand for greater adaptability does not necessarily lead to a conclusion of obsolescence for the existing diplomatic apparatus. Embassies have been regarded as static because of their central place within a European conception of diplomacy and its direct connection to and involvement in maintaining a statist international order (Cohen 2013, 24–28). Rana has noted that the increasing complexity of global interactions has actually raised the importance of diplomatic functionaries abroad as eyes, ears and intermediaries able to judge the situation in the local environment. Diplomats can now act as “change agents” or become more “expeditionary” through greater attention for business and trade promotion and public

diplomacy outreach activism (Rana 2011, 139–141; Seib 2016, 117). Berridge, once a skeptic, has come round to agreeing that “The resident embassy ... has survived the communications and transport revolutions, chiefly because it remains an excellent means by which to support, if not lead in, the execution of key diplomatic functions” (Berridge 2010, 123).

However, although accusations of superfluousness may have been averted, it does not mean that the diplomatic apparatus can simply glide through these transitions smoothly. Re-training diplomats, re-tooling skill sets, re-targeting purposes and re-framing diplomatic leadership are all essential requirements for meeting the needs of twenty-first century challenges. Forms of functional hybridity are the goal. In their seminal study *Futures of Diplomacy* from 2012, Hocking et al. contrast the ‘statist’ view (diplomacy as a set of structures and processes enabling the state system) with the ‘globalist’ perspective (the marginalization of the state and its institutions in cross-border interactions), arguing that “integrative diplomacy” should look beyond these opposites to:

embrace a ‘post-globalist’ image that argues for the continuing significance of state-related diplomatic systems and processes whilst recognizing the dramatic changes in the environments – domestic and international – in which they have to operate (Hocking et al. 2012: 18).

What is being rejected here is not so much state-based diplomacy but the exclusivity of state and non-state actors. The post-Cold War 1990s saw attention shifting to the orchestration of global governance and the designation of a global society, hence the need for the ‘post-globalist’ label. It is no longer possible or sensible to claim that state institutions still hold all the diplomatic cards, nor is it efficient or effective to declare that the state is irrelevant.

Embassies will therefore survive, but the debate on how and why will go on. Their numbers will also decline as the shift to more flexible forms of ‘presence’, be that through virtual posts or the use of scattered (honorary) consuls, continues (Melissen and Fernandez 2011). As Wolfe has argued, embassies remain vital components of, and upholders of, a particular international system based primarily on the interaction of nation-states: “It follows that the nature of diplomacy will change as the international system, and ideas about that system, changes” (Wolfe 1998, 32). For others, diplomacy has been framed (symbiotically by the profession and by diplomatic studies) exactly as an exclusion of non-state actors and non-diplomatic practices, and the diplomatic culture of “everyday diplomacy”, which both involves and supersedes the embassy as locus, should in fact be mapped out on a far wider terrain than so far has been attempted (Constantinou 2016). The result may well be an increasing disjuncture between image and reality, whereby the international

structures of statist diplomacy are still deemed essential for providing a form of recognizable order, yet the connectivity, density, and complexity of global interaction largely escapes that order.

An emerging consensus is that one of the most important actors in this context is the city, which on a range of issues, from sustainability and climate change to migration, is a leading player via a new level of negotiating structures. Just as cities provided the impetus for the first wave of global connectivity centuries ago, so too are cities now establishing forms of ‘diplomacy’:

Because cities define themselves in part by their connectedness rather than their sovereignty, one can imagine a global society emerging much more readily from intercity relations than international relations (Khanna 2016, 60).

City diplomacy is an established field, situated somewhat uneasily between national and international structures, “cutting across the spectrum of global governance” (Acuto 2016, 519; Acuto 2013). If its implications for diplomacy and its challenge to diplomatic norms are still being worked out, its significance as a new level and form of interaction is undeniable. Whereas older research argued for ‘measuring’ the relative importance of states based on the extent of diplomatic representation present within their capital cities (Small and Singer 1973), a twenty-first century version may focus entirely on the significance of the city location, its national context being of secondary importance.

As a particular item of study, embassies have been receiving attention primarily from two perspectives. The first concerns the historical evolution of embassies and ambassadors in bilateral relations. Up till now this has most strongly been explored in the context of British and American diplomacy, and the role of specific embassies and individuals in relation management (Colman 2004; Hopkins, Kelly, and Young 2008; Years 2009; Pastor-Castro and Young 2013). Other studies have moved away from the biographical style of focusing on ambassadors as the pivotal figure to examine the embassy as a multi-layered, multi-functional unit interacting with its local environment in particular ways through time (Arbuthnott, Clark, and Muir 2008; Berridge 2009). Holmes and Rofe introduce the concept of “transatlantic diplomacy” to define the particular contribution of the US embassy in Grosvenor Square to the density and transparency of relations between Britain and the United States (Holmes and Rofe 2012, 13). Colman uses Berridge’s list of ten basic functions that embassies fulfill in order to analyse the role of the US embassy in London during 1945–1953 (Berridge 2005, 119–132; Colman 2009; see also; Lagrou 1995). Hellema and Scott-Smith explore the wider influence of the US embassy in both the local environment of The Hague and the national environment of the Netherlands in the fields of politics and policy, military and security relations, intelligence

liaison, cultural and educational exchange, and social protest (Hellema and Scott-Smith 2016). The historical study of embassies as distinct sites of influence and exchange also includes the sub-field of architecture, analyzing the physical presence, ‘siting’ and image, and political significance of embassy buildings over time (Robin 1996; Gill Lui 2004; Loeffler 2010).

The second approach concerns the study of embassies from a social scientific perspective, with the use of institutional theory. While sociological, historical, and political institutionalism tends to explain macro-level developments at the level of the (supra-)state and (supra-)society, analyzing the embassy as institution has been most directly taken up in European integration studies (Amenta and Ramsey 2010). This approach has been triggered by the moves to create the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the subsequent aim, from a political science perspective, to ‘measure’ the influence this development has had on the scope, spread, and style of diplomacy and diplomatic representation both within and beyond the European Union. This literature has also focused on the “robustness” of the resident embassy in times of change and the possible alternatives, providing a more focused analysis than exchanges the influence of globalization for the impact of Europeanization on diplomatic cultures (Bratberg 2008; Batora and Hocking 2009; Uilenreef 2014). Geographers have also started to explore the topologies of “diplomatic clusters” in urban environments, in the process opening up space for sociological and/or anthropological studies of the ‘diplomatic terrain’ in these areas (Mamdouh, Meijer, Sidaway and van der Wusten 2015).

Building on both the historical and social scientific advances discussed above, the articles in this issue explore the changing significance of the embassy, its diplomatic occupants, and their representational roles in the global era. Louis Clerc tracks the evolution of small-state diplomacy in the form of the Finnish embassy in Paris through the twentieth century, making use of the work of Jazbec and Archetti to formulate how we can understand and appreciate the interactions between an embassy, its diplomats, and its operating environment (Jazbec 2010; Archetti 2014). Lottaz explores the enforced changes in diplomatic practices and behavior in the extreme situations of war and civil war, where protocols and allegiances are tested to the limit. Van Goethem and Scott-Smith examine the uses of specific diplomatic personnel, in the form of labor attaches and (honorary) consuls, and the insights that they provide concerning the changing norms and needs of diplomatic representation. Collectively, these articles all look to further elucidate the field of ‘embassy studies’ and the analysis of diplomacy and diplomats from alternative, ‘new diplomatic history’ perspectives in the context of globalization.

## References

- Acuto, M. 2013. *Global Cities, Governance and Diplomacy*. London: Routledge.
- Acuto, M. 2016. "City Diplomacy." In *The Sage Handbook of Diplomacy*, edited by C. Constantinou, P. Kerr and P. Sharp. London: Sage.
- Amenta, E., and K. Ramsey. 2010. "Institutional Theory." In *Handbook of Politics: State and Society in Global Perspective*, edited by K. T. Leicht and J. C. Jenkins. Berlin: Springer.
- Arbuthnott, H., T. Clark, and R. Muir. 2008. *British Missions around the Gulf, 1575–2005*. Leiden: Brill.
- Archetti, C. 2014. "Journalism and the City: Redefining the Spaces of Foreign Correspondents." *Journalism Studies* 15:586–595.
- Batora, B., and B. Hocking. 2009. "EU-Oriented Bilateralism: Evaluating the Role of Member-State Embassies in the European Union." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22:163–182.
- Berridge, G. 2005. *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berridge, G. 2009. *British Diplomacy in Turkey, 1583 to the Present: A Study in the Evolution of the Resident Embassy*. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Berridge, G. 2010. *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bratberg, O. 2008. "Bilateral Embassies in an Integrated Europe: A Case of Institutional Robustness?" *Journal of European Integration* 30:235–253.
- Cohen, R. 2013. "Diplomacy through the Ages." In *Diplomacy in a Globalizing World: Theories and Practices*, edited by P. Kerr and G. Wiseman. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Colman, J. 2004. "The London Ambassadorship of David K.E. Bruce during the Wilson-Johnson Years, 1964–1968." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 15:327–352.
- Colman, J. 2009. "Portrait of an Institution: The US Embassy in London, 1945–53." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 4:339–360.
- Constantinou, C. 2016. "Everyday Diplomacy: Mission, Spectacle, and the Remaking of Diplomatic Culture." In *Diplomatic Cultures and International Politics*, edited by J. Dittmer and F. McConnell. London: Routledge.
- Gallaga, M. 2013. "Do We Still Need Embassies?" *The Diplomat*, September 4, 2013. <http://thediplomat.com/2013/09/do-we-still-need-embassies/>.
- Gill Lui, E. 2004. *Building Diplomacy: The Architecture of American Embassies*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Hamilton, K., and R. Langhorne. 1995. *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration*. London: Routledge.
- Hellema, D., and G. Scott-Smith, eds. 2016. *De Amerikaanse Ambassade in Den Haag*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Henrikson, A. 2013. "Sovereignty, Diplomacy, and Democracy: The Changing Character of 'International' Representation – from State to Self?" *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 37:111–140.
- Hocking, B., J. Melissen, S. Riordan, and P. Sharp, eds. 2012. *Futures for Diplomacy: Integrative Diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Report No. 1, Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'.
- Holmes, A., and J. S. Rofe, eds. 2012. *The Embassy in Grosvenor Square: American Ambassadors in the United Kingdom 1938–2008*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hopkins, M., S. Kelly, and J. Young, eds. 2008. *The Washington Embassy: British Ambassadors to the United States 1939–1977*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Jazbec, M. 2010. "Small States and Diplomacy: An Indispensable, though Much Diversified Relation." *Halduskultuur – Administrative Culture* 11:66–83.
- Khanna, P. 2016. *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization*. New York: Random House.
- Lagrou, P. 1995. "US Politics of Stabilization in Liberated Europe: The View from the American Embassy in Brussels, 1944–46." *European History Quarterly* 25:209–246.
- Loeffler, J. 2010. *The Architecture of Embassies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Maier, C. 2000. "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era." *American Historical Review* 105:807–831.
- Mamdouh, V., A. Meijer, J. Sidaway, and H. van der Wusten. 2015. "Toward an Urban Geography of Diplomacy: Lessons from The Hague." *The Professional Geographer* 67: 564–574.
- Melissen, J., and A. M. Fernandez, eds. 2011. *Consular Affairs and Diplomacy*. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Oliver, A. 2016. "The Irrelevant Diplomat: Do We Need Embassies Anymore?" *Foreign Affairs*, March 14, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2016-03-14/irrelevant-diplomat>.
- Pastor-Castro, R., and J. Young, eds. 2013. *The Paris Embassy: British Ambassadors and Anglo-French Relations 1944–1979*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rana, K. 2011. *21<sup>st</sup> Century Diplomacy: A Practitioner's Guide*. London: Continuum.
- Riordan, S. 2002. *The New Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Robin, R. 1996. *Enclaves of America: The Rhetoric of American Political Architecture Abroad, 1900–1965*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ross, C. 2009. "Its Time to Scrap Embassies and Their Ambassadors." *Europe's World*, February 1, 2009. <http://europesworld.org/2009/02/01/its-time-to-scrap-ambassadors-and-their-embassies/#.WQnje1J7F-U>.
- Seib, P. 2016. *The Future of Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Sharp, P. 1997. "Who Needs Diplomats? the Problem of Diplomatic Representation." *International Journal* 52:609–634.
- Small, M., and J. D. Singer. 1973. "The Diplomatic Importance of States, 1816–1970: An Extension and Refinement of the Indicator." *World Politics* 25:577–599.
- Uilenreef, A. 2014. "Alternatives to the Resident Embassy: Intra-EU Diplomatic Networks in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 25:356–377.
- Wolfe, R. 1998. "Still Lying Abroad? on the Institution of the Resident Ambassador." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 9:23–54.
- Years, W.-J. 2009. "Portrait of an Institution: The US Embassy in London, 1945–53." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 4:339–360.