

# Diplomacy for the 21st century. Vision and reality from the Spanish Diplomatic School

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As with the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 and the great financial crisis of 2008, the pandemic we have endured since the beginning of 2020 has had the effect of provoking reflection on the new challenges facing diplomacy and the changes that have been taking place in the world with unusual speed and on the international scene over the last few decades. In these long months of confinement in which we have had to slow down the pace of our activities and adapt our ways of working by making the most of digital tools, we have had the time to rethink what is expected of us diplomats as the main — but not sole — actors in the so-called *public diplomacy*. We have suddenly discovered, or perhaps just remembered, that the term *new diplomacy* encompasses meanings we had not thought of or had simply overlooked, including, for obvious reasons, those of *health diplomacy* and *science diplomacy*.

During the pandemic, the diplomatic academies, aware of their inexcusable duty to ensure the training of the new promotions of foreign service officials in our respective countries, first made a meritorious effort to maintain our courses and training activities, combining face-to-face and distance learning formats, depending on capacities and available resources. In the second stage, which is where we are now, when, due to vaccination campaigns, measures to prevent contagion have begun to be relaxed

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and face-to-face teaching is once again gaining prominence, it is becoming possible to transfer the new competencies that a 21st century diplomat should have to the training plans of future diplomats, these competencies require prior in-depth reflection on the new international context in which we live and in which we have to develop, on the meaning and scope of the term new diplomacy today, and on the evolving sense of our profession as specialists in diplomacy and international relations.

With this article, the Spanish Diplomatic School aims to contribute, together with the other diplomatic academies of our Ibero-American Community, to the initiative of the Matías Romero Institute and its *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior*, aimed at sharing our respective experiences on the changes in diplomatic work derived from the new global context.

### **An international arena in transition: new challenges, new actors, new problems**

We live in a time of transition, of major changes in the world and in society. The first two decades of our century have introduced some important novelties in our lives that have repercussions in the field of our work—international relations—and in the exercise of our profession—diplomacy. Reflection on the exercise and scope of the diplomatic function, while clearly not new to the 21st century, has been given a major boost by three recent stellar events and their consequences: the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers (2001), the financial crisis that began with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and the sub-prime mortgage issue in the United States (2008), and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020).

In a global scenario such as the current one, following each of these moments of crisis, countries have felt, with particular intensity, a need to strengthen the management of information and communication and have been able to count on the power of dissemination provided by digital tools, such as the internet and social networks. In order to carry out this task, it has been necessary to reflect on the presence of new factors that force us to reformulate the concept of *public diplomacy*, coined in the middle of the last century by Edmund Gullion, diplomat and dean of the Fletcher School of Law.

A primary factor in the current international scenario is the new challenges: although crises such as those in Ukraine and Afghanistan are reviving the geopolitics of the last century, new challenges and threats are growing in importance on the global stage: natural disasters and climate change, the transmission of diseases, illicit trafficking, asymmetries in well-being and economic power, migratory movements, the decline of democracies, the progress of populism, disinformation, technological advances and the resulting technological gap between countries, as well as their derivatives such as cybercrime, cyberterrorism and violations of our privacy. These are risks that know no borders and to which globalisation and interdependence inevitably make us more vulnerable.

A second factor to highlight is the growing number and diversity of relevant actors: apart from states, foreign ministries and embassies, there are now other actors in the field of international relations: international organisations, multinational companies, NGOs, ordinary citizens using social networks, illegal non-state actors such as terrorist groups and drug traffickers, and so on.

Thirdly, it has become necessary to take into account the resurgence of geopolitical and socio-economic rivalries, the growing competition for global leadership between the United States and China, and the tension between a model of power that could be called authoritarian and pluralist.

Finally, other factors such as the weakening of the rules-based multilateral order, technological leap and scientific discoveries, among others, would come into play.

## New diplomacy for the 21st century

As a consequence of the new context marked by the abovementioned factors, public diplomacy has evolved from its initial conception to the current one, which refers, in Bruce Gregory's words: "To a tool used by states and some sub-state and non-state entities to understand cultures, attitudes and behaviours; to create and manage relationships; and to influence thinking and mobilise actions aimed at promoting and advancing their interests".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Gregory, "American Diplomacy: Enduring Characteristics, Elusive Transformation", in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol. 6, no. 3-4, March 2011, p. 353.

Within this broadened concept of diplomacy, what we might call traditional diplomacy, devoid of qualifiers, has given way to new meanings of diplomacy that respond to instrumental aspects, a content and approach that today lead us to speak today of labelled diplomacy or diplomacy with epithets. Today, it is common to hear expressions such as: economic, cultural, technological or scientific diplomacy, city diplomacy, telephone diplomacy, network diplomacy, health diplomacy, human rights diplomacy, environmental diplomacy, and a host of other names.

All of these new forms of diplomacy reflect the magnitude of the challenges that the changing environment imposes on the exercise of diplomatic activity.

The rapid evolution of technological innovation applied to new forms of interaction, for example between physical and virtual spaces, or scientific discoveries invite us to imagine scenarios with, so far, unpredictable implications in areas as diverse as ethics, economics or security.

Keeping pace with these developments is an immense challenge. As a consequence, we are witnessing structural and functional changes in the foreign ministries of many countries which, together with a growing number of relevant actors in both the public and private sectors, have to adapt their capacities to reconcile experience, continuity and renewal on an ongoing basis. The initial and ongoing training of diplomats and foreign service personnel in general has also been no stranger to change.

Faced with an increasingly complex and interconnected world, with security risks even more palpable than those of the Cold War era, and with immense social deprivation, there will be a growing need for professionals who are highly trained in respect for peace, the defence of human rights, the non-use of force and, above all, the peaceful resolution of international disputes.

As Professors Juan Luis Manfredi and Jorge Cachinero put it:

Foreign ministries have lost their monopoly on external action, but their resources and expertise on the ground will be essential assets in the deployment of states' strategies. Diplomats, who will require new professional skills adapted to the digital and competitive environment, will continue their work. Numerous activities

require their presence and direct contact: consular services, bilateral relations, conventional diplomacy, development cooperation, cultural action and many others.<sup>2</sup>

We can agree with the aforementioned professors that, in the face of digital advances, face-to-face diplomacy still survives, that which represents and negotiates behind closed doors with other more traditional instruments. It is therefore not a question of confronting them, but of taking advantage of the opportunities for innovation in diplomatic relations.

Indeed, we can conclude that our job as diplomats is to learn and adapt to new environments, situations, issues and contexts. Web 3.0 — the set of interactive platforms — is just another of the many challenges to be conquered. There is a whole world out there, which continues with or without our participation, but which can be enriched through our contribution.

The transformative challenge, in short, is to effectuate a new diplomacy that, as David Miliband rightly defines it, “is at once public and private, both mass and elite, real-time and at the same time deliberative”.<sup>3</sup>

As Hugh Elliott says, there is a real and well-documented shift of power from states to civil society. With power being the business of diplomats, the fundamentals of diplomacy are changing. Hierarchies are perishing. Today networks reign and to build them we need new skills and a new arena for diplomats to operate. In this new diplomacy, communication — our core business — is at the forefront.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Juan Luis Manfredi & Jorge Cachinero, “Diplomacia y gobernanza global”, in *Revista Uno*, no. 17, July 2014, pp. 54, in <https://www.revista-uno.com/numero-17/diplomacia-y-gobernanza-global/> (date of access: November 23, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Rafael Estrella, “La revolución (pendiente) en asuntos diplomáticos”, in *Revista Uno*, no. 17, July 2014, pp. 42, in <https://www.revista-uno.com/numero-17/la-revolucion-pendiente-en-asuntos-diplomaticos/> (date of access: November 23, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Elliott, “The Collapse of Hierarchy and the New Diplomacy”, in *Revista Uno*, no. 17, July 2014, pp. 61-62, in <https://www.revista-uno.com/numero-17/the-collapse-of-hierarchy-and-the-new-diplomacy/> (date of access: November 23, 2021).

## Necessary adjustments to the training programmes for members of the foreign service: the selective course, the Master's degree in Diplomacy and International Relations at the Diplomatic School and ongoing training.

The Diplomatic School is above all a training centre and an instrument of Spanish foreign policy. Through its Department of Diplomatic Studies, it provides training, with a markedly practical orientation, in its selective course, to future diplomats who have passed the competitive examination for the diplomatic career. It also offers, through the Department of Specialisation Studies, numerous courses and seminars to members of the foreign service, regardless of which branch of the Administration they belong to, not only with a view to their incorporation into their new postings abroad, but also throughout their professional career, ensuring that their skills are up to date at all times.

In addition to the selective course and the courses and seminars aimed at continuing education, the Diplomatic School offers each year the Inter-University Master's Degree in Diplomacy and International Relations, which is not only a highly prestigious postgraduate degree, particularly in the Spanish-speaking world, but also an important foreign policy instrument, which has been taken over the years by students from more than 120 countries.

Based on the reflections in the previous section on the new diplomacy and the skills required of diplomats today, many of which emerged in the discussion forums of the first courses on online diplomacy, organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation in the first half of 2014, and which appear in the book *La diplomacia española ante el reto digital* (Spanish diplomacy and the digital challenge)<sup>5</sup> the management team of the Diplomatic School has been able to ensure, on the one hand, the continuity of training for diplomats and members of Spain's foreign service throughout

<sup>5</sup> Juan Luis Manfredi Sánchez & Consuelo Femenía Guardiola (eds.), *La diplomacia española ante el reto digital*, Madrid, Secretaría General Técnica-Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación, 2016, in [http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es/SalaDePrensa/Multimedia/Documentos/2016\\_FEBRERO\\_LIBRO%20DIPLOMACIA%20DIGITAL%20version%20web.pdf](http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es/SalaDePrensa/Multimedia/Documentos/2016_FEBRERO_LIBRO%20DIPLOMACIA%20DIGITAL%20version%20web.pdf) (date of access: November 23, 2021).

the months of the pandemic and, on the other hand, the design of both the 2021 selective course for diplomats of the last promotion, and the 2021-2022 Master's degree in Diplomacy and International Relations and the continuous training programme for foreign service officials.

The following are the main aspects of the Diplomatic School's efforts to adapt its courses and training programmes to the demands of the "new diplomacy".

### *The digital transition during the pandemic*

In the wake of the COVID-19 health crisis, a series of actions were undertaken to strengthen the Diplomatic School's digital capabilities, given the need to move many of its training and non-teaching activities from face-to-face to a virtual format.

In 2019, both the virtual campus of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation and the digital platform of the School's Master's programme were inaugurated, without which it would have been impossible to complete the fifteenth edition of the programme following the government's declaration of a state of emergency. Throughout 2020, improvements were made to the platform, making virtual classrooms available that can be used not only for the Master's programme but also for other courses and training. In fact, all the courses to prepare diplomatic career civil servants for their entry to the post, following the general competition in 2020, as well as part of the courses for sectoral counsellors/aggregates in embassies, were held online. In recent months, although it is foreseeable that many of the face-to-face training activities will soon be restarted, the digital and audiovisual capacities of the Diplomatic School have continued to be strengthened. It cannot be ignored that, from now on, we will live in a "hybrid world" that will combine online and face-to-face training.

### *A renewed programme for the selective course*

The current selective programme for the LXXIII promotion of trainee diplomats has been revised to emphasise the eminently practical focus of the training, which complements the extensive theoretical knowledge acquired during the competitive examination phase. The guiding thread

of the course is a message from the School's management and faculty aimed at fostering an innovative and critical spirit among new diplomats, open to adapting the diplomatic function to the new competencies demanded by the changing context of the international scene.

Among the subjects covered in the course, in addition to the traditional ones aimed at learning about the main lines of Spanish foreign policy, with special emphasis on the European and Ibero-American dimensions, and those of the Government's Foreign Action Strategy, those that seek to increase digital and communication skills, relations with the media, leadership, international negotiation techniques, the environmental agenda, conflict mediation, cultural, scientific and technological diplomacy, new financial instruments, consular work, with emphasis on actions in emergency situations, development cooperation, new threats to security, and the geopolitics of artificial intelligence, among others. The course also includes modules on gender equality, feminist foreign policy, protection of victims of gender violence and prevention of and action against harassment.

The training programme for new diplomats includes visits to international institutions, to state bodies with competencies in external action and to other actors in civil society and in the business sphere that participate in the aforementioned "network diplomacy".

Finally, as a complement to the selective course, internships were included during the summer across the different departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, which allowed the new members of the diplomatic career to familiarise themselves with the functioning of the Ministry, which they will join in January of next year. As these internships coincided with the exit operation from Afghanistan, practically all the trainees collaborated on a voluntary basis in reinforcing the Ministry's consular emergency unit.

### *Master's in Diplomacy and International Relations*

During the time of the pandemic, online training has been incorporated into the regular practice of the Master's degree in the academic year 2020-2021, in which most of the seminars have been carried out under this modality, as well as meetings with ambassadors and a joint conference with the Diplomatic Academy of Bolivia on consular assistance.



A large part of the face-to-face teaching has also been offered in a bimodal format, in order to reach students in quarantine, and to allow foreign diplomatic students to participate in the Ibero-American Studies Module.

On the other hand, the Master's programme has been intensified by collaboration with other teaching centres in the ecosystem of thought such as the Centre for National Defence Studies CESEDEN (Geostrategy Module), with Casa Árabe, Casa África and Casa Asia (which organise specialised seminars that are compulsory for all Master's students to attend), with the Spanish Network for Sustainable Development (which organises the seminar on the SDGs), and with the eight universities of the agreement.

Finally, the Diplomatic School, from its dimension as an instrument of State foreign policy, organises conferences, book presentations, courses open to the public and round tables that this year are focusing on the main axes of the Foreign Action Strategy for the period 2021-2024: the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, the promotion of human rights, a markedly feminist foreign policy, the commitment to an equitable economy and society, the defence of a more sustainable planet and the improvement of global governance mechanisms. In its programme of activities, the Diplomatic School gives priority to cooperation with the Latin American region, with which we share historical, human, economic, unity and political values and ties.

## Conclusions

The circumstances marked by the times in which we live require diplomats to have a critical attitude inclined to promote innovation in their work, to be open to learning new disciplines, techniques and working procedures, as well as having a predisposition to work in teams in which experts and members of other administrative bodies and private initiative increasingly participate, contributing the added value of their training as generalists, with all that this entails in terms of an overall vision. Diplomatic academies' training programmes should incorporate this approach as part of their important task of training new generations of diplomatic professionals.