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The Structure and Operation of China's Diplomatic System

Kishan Rana

Diplomacy is now under rapid evolution. This means ever-widening international contacts by official agencies other than the foreign ministry, the sub-state agencies, and non-state actors; the impact of information and communication revolution; and gradual 'democratisation', via institutional plurality, emerging public-private partnerships and a stronger role of home publics. Most foreign ministries now pursue reform as a continuous activity. China is one such example. The evolution in China's diplomatic system since 1949 demonstrates how professional expertise challenges ideological commitment, though both criteria remain relevant. On strategic policy issues, this system is highly efficient, and coordinated through the 'leading small group' mechanism operating under the Party Politburo. Yet inter-ministry harmonisation in routine issues is often blocked, thanks to the entrenched old vertical hierarchies. This limits in and out placements of officials, except within set parameters. Political diplomacy is today innovative and supple in its execution. The practice of economic diplomacy remains low key, with embassies less engaged in 'marketing' projects, compared with Western counterparts. Cultural diplomacy is shifting to high gear, and will be a major theme at the 2008 Olympics. Domestic public diplomacy, outreach to home publics has become a top priority. The foreign ministry makes effective use of think tanks and retired envoys to provide inputs into the policy process, and is far ahead of India in the multiple policy options that this plural process generates, though policy formulation remains tightly guarded and secretive. China's diplomatic service has unique features—a single class hierarchy; ruthless fast-track implementation that propels the talented to high office at early age; a major problem of attrition, with many quitting in the first few years; an excellent system of language and area specialisation; continuous gender inequality. We may count on continuing refinement and improvement of the Chinese diplomatic process.

THE CONTEXT

The story of Chinese diplomacy is the narrative of an emerging power moving from initiation of external relations, to a position of prominence on the global stage—captured in the 2004 official slogan 'China Rising'. This journey has involved

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a wary transition from the status of an outsider in the international system, to that of a cautious insider. Resumption of the UN seat of the People's Republic of China in 1971, and the consequent permanent membership of the Security Council were the culmination of a legitimisation process that began in 1949. China has since continued to work for a full insider status in world economic and political affairs.

This study focuses on the structure and the processes of the Chinese Foreign Ministry and its diplomatic service—the instruments through which its foreign policy is implemented.¹ Narration of foreign policy is incidental to this study. To disentangle diplomacy from foreign policy is difficult, but essential, to examine the process, as distinct from the content of a country's external actions. The two work in tandem, of course. After the end of the Cold War it is no coincidence that most states have undergone greater activism in both these segments. While the Chinese external policy process is far more open than what it was three decades earlier, data collection remains difficult and published materials on the diplomatic process are especially scarce (Barnett 1985; Lampton 2001).

Over this half-century, Chinese diplomacy has evolved dramatically, commencing with an early style characterised by assertive nationalism, combativeness towards adversaries, the articulation of such communist ideology as was normal in the Cold War era, and sustained wooing of the Third World. Chinese diplomats moved in pairs or in a phalanx; his stock image was the Mao-suit attired, wooden faced envoy, forever tailed by his interpreter. Today's ambassador, his sartorial elegance apart, is defined by confident professionalism, fluid ease in international languages, and an arsenal of professional skills, including savvy, nuanced coalition-building technique. Yet, Chinese diplomacy is 'work-in-progress', marked by steady evolution. Commencing in the early 1980s, with further momentum post-1993, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has implemented thorough adaptation. Some of the information compiled here is bound to be overtaken—a risk inherent in trying to freeze-frame a dynamic process.

EVOLUTION

The pace and depth of internal upheaval traversed by China's national polity, first under Mao Zedong, and after 1978 under Deng Xiaoping is unique. Chinese diplomacy falls into several phases (Adapted from Liu 2001).

The Initial Years: 1949–54

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was established in November 1949, and began from scratch, with virtually no previous structure to inherit, nor tradition or

¹ Since 1999, the author has studied Asian diplomacy, looking at China, Japan, India, Singapore and Thailand. This article is to be incorporated into a future book.

archives to guide the new diplomats.² The first seventeen Chinese ambassadors appointed in this period were all drawn from the ranks of revolutionary cadres and the People's Liberation Army (PLA); ten of them served only one term abroad and only two went on to remain and retire from the MFA.

Premier Zhou Enlai established the norms, and personally led the MFA, even after he handed over charge of the Ministry to Chen Yi in 1956. Even in those years when the Soviet Union was an obvious role model, Zhou urged that China should develop its own diplomatic style, summed up in the four-character phrase '*bu bei, bu kang*'—'neither servile, nor overbearing'. He has remained the enduring exemplar and father of the diplomatic service.

Foreign Ministry personnel proudly called themselves 'the PLA in civilian clothes', and PLA virtues were propagated: discipline, hard work, thrift and comradeship. One analyst has called it 'a sense of mission and an ethos of altruism' (Liu 2001). In one incident, the Chinese Embassy in the Soviet Union surrendered the bulk of its monthly salary, as a gesture of individual sacrifice.

Expansion of Diplomacy: 1954–66

The diplomatic apparatus expanded markedly in this period, with relative stability in external affairs, (the 1957 'Hundred Flowers' movement and the Lushan CCP meeting purges of 1959 had limited impact on the MFA, besides the exit of Senior Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Wentian). The socioeconomic disaster of the Great Leap, and the famine conditions it produced in 1961–63, also did not affect the diplomatic machine—the world learnt the magnitude of that calamity much later. With the 1960s began Beijing's acute diplomatic competition with Taiwan, producing new initiatives towards Africa.³

In all, seventy-seven new ambassadors were sent out, of whom thirty-eight came from provincial and local administrations, and twenty-one had formerly served in the PLA; the balance eighteen belonged to those who had joined the MFA after 1949. In their appointment, the emphasis was on loyalty to the Party, and ideology over professionalism. At the same time, professional considerations were not entirely lost sight of. The study of foreign languages greatly expanded. By 1957 there were 600 qualified interpreters, specialised in twenty-seven languages. A paradoxical consequence however, arose: senior ambassadors did not make any effort to study foreign languages, and the general cadre of the MFA also suffered from a reduced motivation to pursue language study.

² In 1935 an office for foreign affairs was established at Wuhan, led by Zhou Enlai, and included people like Huang Hua who later became Vice Foreign Minister. They provided a nucleus for the future.

³ During the course of his extended tours of Africa in 1964 and 1965, Premier Zhou modified the Chinese version of the 'Halstein doctrine' on no official contact with states that recognized Taiwan. He not only visited several among them, but even signed Cultural Agreements, in *anticipation* of diplomatic recognition. The Chinese cultural, acrobat and circus troupes that were sent out, produced an impact that exceeded calculation; together with its innovative aid diplomacy, it became a defining element of external style.

The Cultural Revolution (CR) and Onset of Recovery: 1966–84

The Cultural Revolution, launched in 1966, produced a huge upheaval, and the MFA became a prime target for its perceived elitism. At the same time, the attack on the MFA served to cut down the influence of Premier Zhou. August 1967 marked the low point of diplomacy; several embassies were attacked by stone-throwing, orchestrated crowds, and suffered external damage. On 22 August the British Embassy was burnt down, a nadir of xenophobia that evoked the historical memory of the Boxer Uprising. For four days no one was in control of the MFA, until Mao finally intervened, declaring that it belonged to the CCP and that Zhou was in charge. Abroad, out of the forty-nine embassies, there were scuffles and internal turmoil in thirty-two; virtually all ambassadors and most of the staff were recalled to Beijing.⁴ In mid-1968 the PLA was deputed to the MFA. The death of Lin Biao in 1971, and the eventual arrest of the 'Gang of Four' in 1976 marked the end of the Cultural Revolution, but its impact on the MFA persisted until the early 1980s. There was no recruitment into the diplomatic service between 1966 and 1974; regular intake did not resume until 1977, leaving it with a 'missing generation'.

In 1982, the number of vice-ministers in the MFA was reduced from ten to six. Simultaneously, with the implementation of the new retirement policy, those who were committed to economic reforms, were brought in. A total of 179 ambassadors were appointed in this period, representing a 'transitional' generation; most were from the MFA, only eight belonged to the PLA or local administrations. Of the appointees of 1980–84, 64 per cent had knowledge of foreign languages. In 1982, the first of the post-1949 direct entrants were appointed ambassadors.⁵

Economic Reform Era: 1984–91

While economic reforms were launched by Premier Deng in 1979, political reform in the government began with decentralisation and a degree of democratisation. The MFA focused on specialisation and professionalism. This was accompanied by wage reform (implemented progressively in several stages; some liberalisation remains underway), retirement reform, plus other changes in regulations.

The 1989 Tiananmen events led to twenty defections by Chinese diplomats posted overseas—an unprecedented occurrence—including three couples posted in Canada. They were mostly officials from other ministries. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the principal motivation was economic opportunism, not ideology or fear of political persecution.

⁴ Senior Ambassador and former Vice-Minister Huang Hua was the only one who remained at his post in Cairo.

⁵ In India, the first of the post-1948 direct Foreign Service recruits became ambassadors from 1967 onwards.

Reform and Professionalism: 1991 Onwards

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and East Europe politically challenged China. It meant reworking the diplomatic process, in favour of flexibility and adaptation. Many of the changes initiated since that time have continued till date. Foreign ministry reform is now accepted as a near-permanent task, implemented in measured, incremental fashion, without any fanfare.

Extensive government streamlining was carried out in 1993, with large cuts in manpower. The MFA was asked to 'only' implement a cutback of 25 per cent—much smaller than other ministries. One consequence was innovative measures, including the corporatisation of some service functions.⁶

Young officials have arisen to leadership positions, exemplified in the appointment of Yeng Yichi as Vice-Minister in 1995, while he was still in his mid-40s. Similarly, a youthful breed of ambassadors has emerged, drawn from a wider educational background. They are also fluent in foreign languages (but without a past background as interpreters). Their style is confident, and articulate.

The following narrative focuses on the situation as observed in 2000–05. Reference to historical evolution, as well as foreign policy, is provided only where essential. It is based on material gathered on visits to China, interviews with officials and others, and a study of the very limited published available material.

STRUCTURE

THE PARTY AND DIPLOMACY

The Foreign Ministry enjoys high prestige within the government, zealously guarding its central role in the *execution* of foreign policy. However, the *formulation* of foreign policy at the strategic level lies outside the ministry, in the hands of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, the highest organs of the Communist Party; there is however, no rancour over this essential fact. After the end of the communist regimes in Europe, China is now the most prominent exemplar of the Leninist Party-State twinning, with no discernible tension within that system. Some analysts hold that the state system has begun to grow at the cost of the party structures, marking a shift in real authority, especially in the economic arena. But in foreign affairs management, the primacy of the Party remains unchallenged.

⁶ The 'Diplomatic Services Bureau' of the past, which held a monopoly for all services provided to diplomatic missions (ranging from supplying interpreters and other local embassy staff, including cooks, to handling all building repairs, automobile servicing, and other technical help), has been spun off into a privatised corporation. Even the provision of limousines and other cars for visiting delegations is now handled by an approved company, duly security-vetted, which charges commercial rates, whether used by the MFA for high-level visitors, or by foreign embassies needing vehicles for incoming delegations.

The Foreign Ministry executes the policy and provides *inputs* into decision making, besides *managing* the diplomatic machinery of embassies and consulates, while strategic issues lie outside its decision purview. One interlocutor has put this graphically: while the US Secretary of State ranks third in their administration, the Chinese Foreign Minister is nowhere comparable.

Lampton's study highlights the important role of the MFA, both as the source of information to the decision-making elite as well as in the actual decision-making process. As in other sectors of the government, a consequence of the Deng reforms has been relative accretion in the power of the MFA, and this process has continued. But strategic decisions, in form and substance, remain the prerogative of the highest central leadership.

The Foreign Ministry is traditionally subject to close supervision by the two high organs, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council (the latter resembling a very elaborate 'cabinet office' answerable to the Premier). Doak Barnett's pioneering 1985 study and subsequent works have sketched in detail how this system operates (Lu Ning in Lieberthal and Lampton 1992). The system characteristics are in brief:

- *The Standing Committee of the Politburo* is the highest national decision making body; strategic foreign policy issues are its exclusive preserve. In practice, this power is exercised by the Central Foreign Affairs 'Leading Small Group' (LSG),⁷ headed earlier by a senior politburo member, and since 1997 by the paramount leader, CCP Secretary General Jiang Zemin. His successor Hu Jintao, who took over as the Party Secretary General in March 2003, now heads this group (Shambaugh 2002).
- The LSG is shrouded in secrecy, but it is known to have a small staff. There is no practice of secondment of MFA personnel to any of these higher organs.⁸ The LSG includes the Foreign Minister and the Minister of State Security (who handles external intelligence). It meets every week, and more frequently as needed, with flexibility as the keynote. It invites expert advice from the growing foreign affairs community, and monitors major policy execution.

The working links between government organs and the Chinese Communist Party are known only in their generalities; precise data is unobtainable. Each ministry or unit has its own party committee; before the Deng Reforms, that was the principal policy route, handling information transmission upwards and downwards, as well as taking decisions on policy and discipline. Since 1979 control is less rigid, and professionalism carries greater weight. A degree of separation exists between party and state organs, and a public service system has emerged. But Tiananmen 1989 led to a suspension

⁷ There are other LSGs as well, covering different sectors, including one that oversees all matters relating to Taiwan.

⁸ As we see below, the absence of 'in' or 'out' placement is a characteristic of the entire Chinese system.

of this axis of political evolution. The net effect is *parallel* control by state and party organs, a situation unlikely to change in a hurry.

The other agencies are:

- *State Council*: In 1958 a 'staff office' for foreign affairs was created. After 1976 it was called the 'State Council Foreign Affairs Office'; one study called it the 'central processing unit' between the 'decision-makers and the implementing organs in the party, the government and the military system' (Lu Ning in Lieberthal and Lampton 1992). It was staffed mainly by former officials of the MFA, some on secondment, and was called 'a bastion of MFA influence'. An attempt to transform this office into a national security council failed. In 1998 the title of 'Foreign Affairs Office' was eliminated, and it was reduced to a consultative role (*ibid.*).
- *Party Secretariat*: It does not play a direct role in foreign affairs, apart from the International Liaison Department that traditionally handled links with other communist parties around the world, and used to be a powerful agency in the heyday of inter-party exchanges. After the end of the Cold War it has expanded its relations with non-communist (foreign) political parties, but with a reduced significance of previous inter-party work. Clearly, its role in foreign affairs has also declined.
- *People's Liberation Army*: The principal interface between the PLA and the MFA takes place though the LSG. There are no PLA officers attached to the MFA, nor any other direct coordination between them, besides formal inter-ministry coordination between the Defence Ministry and the MFA.

THE FOREIGN MINISTRY

Political Diplomacy

Post-1990, Chinese diplomacy functions on national requirement as an external framework that supports rapid economic growth, and sustains a matching political environment where China is projected as a stable, responsible international actor, while safeguarding its regional and global interests. In its implementation, the hallmarks are: cautious dynamism, prioritised management of key bilateral relationships, and measured innovation. The nuanced style changes are most noticeable at the UN and other multilateral fora where, after years of caution, Chinese diplomats now deploy tools of active persuasion and interest projection.

A few examples illustrate this. The handover of Hong Kong was negotiated with UK in determined dialogue, which ensured that Chinese state sovereignty remained sacrosanct even as they adopted the formula of 'one country, two systems'. The management of relationship with post-Soviet Russia shows the same tactical suppleness, where both have exploited the increasing congruence of interests, with China shedding its past reactive style. The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),

following the 1997 summit that brought together China, Russia, and the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, has been an unusual initiative, built on a long view of putative interests, intermingling of mutual security, geopolitics and energy access. The same dexterity and calculated risk have been visible in China's handling of the North Korean issue, especially in the management of North Korea's recalcitrance in the six-power talks over the last two years.

The policy process now is plural, collegial in its inputs, while tightly unified in decision making. A multitude of actors contribute policy papers—the foreign ministry, the think tanks and institutes that belong to that ministry, institutes and agencies belonging to several other systems, retired envoys, individual advisers and others. One such author remarked, 'No one knows who reads the policy papers one writes, but they are read for sure!' A few meet the decision makers, including the Party LSG at the apex, but that process is secretive. The Foreign Ministry retains primacy in policy execution, a respected position that should be an envied one in other capitals.⁹

Economic Diplomacy

The 2003 break-up of MOFTEC (Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation) has added to the centrality of Foreign Ministry on the strategic aspects of economic diplomacy. But trade promotion is with the Ministry of Commerce, which mans the commercial sections of embassies. In other words, the Chinese diplomatic network is not an 'integrated service'. Bilateral policy issues like anti-dumping investigations with foreign countries are handled as political subjects by mainstream diplomats. Multilateral trade policy issues, including WTO membership negotiations, lie outside the Foreign Ministry, in consonance with the pattern in most countries.

Unlike France, Japan or India, and many others, Chinese embassies seldom openly or directly support their corporates, whether they are 'state owned enterprises' (SOEs) or private entities. But their activities are carefully tracked, and figure in political-economic dialogue with foreign partners when they encounter obstacles. Hitherto, the direct engagement of the diplomatic machine in the country's burgeoning global trade and investments (the latter focused on hydrocarbons) has been discreet and modest. This does not appear to be part of any calculated decision. One might therefore speculate that Chinese diplomacy is on a learning curve; one can eventually expect greater involvement in its support to economic marketing.

Cultural Diplomacy

From the beginning, China has used its mass appealing performing arts, especially dance-and-music troupes and circuses, to win over foreign audiences. Similarly, the building of sports stadiums has figured high in its aid agenda. Its large embassies have strong cultural wings, yet China has refrained from establishing cultural centres

⁹ The definitive work on comparative diplomacy that looks at fourteen different foreign ministries is Brian Hocking (Ed.) 1999 volume. Reference to China is missing from this work, as also from an earlier study edited by Justin Robertson, 1998.

abroad—unlike past East European ‘socialist’ states. This perhaps reflected a tendency for statist control over the embassy apparatus. A new post-2003 trend is the setting up of cultural centres, and sponsorship of Chinese language teaching. One should expect a strong cultural promotion across a wide front, particularly in view of, and in preparation for the 2008 Olympics.¹⁰

Public Diplomacy

China has utilised public diplomacy as an internal outreach activity, while the external outreach has remained traditional, not synergised as contemporary public diplomacy mandates. Thus, radio broadcasts, satellite-based international television and websites are utilised in conventional fashion, with limited special emphasis. Targeting of specific foreign audiences is not discernible; engagement with people in foreign countries is not approved of, or encouraged.

China's efforts to mobilise its diaspora are seldom visible, even in North America, where other countries actively use their overseas communities for home objectives. (Europe is much less conducive to such ‘diaspora diplomacy’, with the limited exception of UK). Competition with Taiwan makes this a very complex issue—probably handled outside the Foreign Ministry. During President Clinton's 1990 election campaign in his first term, reports of improper fund contributions had surfaced, which failed to be substantiated. Such allegations make the Chinese system all the more wary of dabbling into the political process of foreign countries.

STATISTICAL PROFILE

China maintained 143 bilateral embassies in foreign capitals in 2003, while receiving 130 resident foreign missions in Beijing.¹¹

Chinese Missions Abroad:

Bilateral (not including concurrent accreditation)	143
Multilateral ¹²	3

¹⁰ This would be in consonance with efforts to promote Shanghai as a ‘world city’ and the use of foreign consultants for image marketing for specific events, like the campaign to win the bid to host the 2008 Olympics. Culture is sure to be a major theme of that event.

¹¹ The difference between the numbers of own missions abroad and foreign missions resident in the home capital can be shown as a measure of ‘intensity of external representation’. A figure higher than one indicates a strong interest in one's own external profile, even when the country receiving one's mission may not reciprocate with one of its own in the home capital. The Chinese figure indicated this to be the case, no doubt the result of long-running diplomatic ‘competition’ with the ‘Republic of China’ based in Taiwan, and the latter's scramble to sustain some credibility as a legitimate state entity. This has forced China to maintain resident missions in far-flung locations, where it is often the only non-regional entity present.

¹² The multilateral missions are located at Geneva, New York and Vienna.

Personnel strength:

At MFA	2000
In Missions Abroad	2500
Missions: Headquarters ratio	1:2
Number of Embassies (including 3 permanent missions)	146

Average number of MFA personnel at each mission
(not including technical support staff and from other agencies) 15

MFA hierarchy:

Foreign Minister	
Vice Minister/Assistant Minister ¹³	6 and 3
Director General (heads a department or 'sz')	14
Deputy Director General	1 or 2 per department
Director (Chief) of Division ('ju')	6 to 8 per department
Deputy Director	1 or 2 per division
Desk Officers or Attachés	4 to 6 per division

The two key levels are the *department* (six are territorial and the remainder are functional departments, such as administration, legal affairs, protocol, etc.), and the *division*, headed by relatively young first secretary or counselor rank officials, often in the early 30s. Having a limited number of territorial departments gives each a wider span of control, and makes for easier coordination of regional policy. (For instance, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs has 20+ territorial units, some handling just two or four countries; the Chinese MFA resembles the German and the British Foreign Offices in having a two-step formula of large departments and smaller sub-units). There are 25 departments, some of which include Translation and Interpretation, Supervision, Missions Abroad, Retired Personnel. In March 2004 a new Public Diplomacy Department was established, focused on domestic and not external activities.

The MFA is always under high party scrutiny. Party membership for MFA officials is no longer mandatory as it was in the 1980s. But that does not mean that the membership is irrelevant. In 1999, around 70 per cent were stated to be members. The reason for this clearly is that it is still the route to career advancement.¹⁴ The personnel dossiers that count are the ones maintained at the CCP Central Committee. One observer has reported that inside Chinese embassies abroad, the ambassador is no longer automatically the CCP branch secretary; 'the party grip on the embassy has been greatly diluted, but has not been completely abandoned' (Liu 2001).

¹³ While the vice ministers are senior to assistant ministers, the work they handle, i.e., oversight over territorial or functional departments, is virtually identical.

¹⁴ Personal interview, 1999.

MFA INSTITUTIONS

The China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) is a think tank dating to 1956, which in 1998 incorporated the China Center for International Affairs, a research institution under the State Council. CIIS focuses on 'medium and long-term policy issues of strategic importance, particularly those concerning international politics and the world economy' (CIIS handbook). It has almost 100 researchers, including retired diplomats and scholars; some of the latter are posted to embassies in rotation. Its policy papers go to high levels in the MFA and other institutions. A noteworthy point is the division of labour between different think tanks; for instance, the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), under the Ministry of Public Security, focuses on short-term analysis of issues as they unfold (Shambaugh 2002).

The other major institution under the MFA is the China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU), which was elevated in 2002 from its earlier status as a 'college'.¹⁵ It fulfils two roles, a teaching institution specialised in international affairs, and a training unit for the Ministry, a remnant of what used to be a typical Soviet pattern. In its former role, it takes in 400 students each year for B.A., Double B.A. and Masters courses. A certain portion of its graduates sit for the MFA entrance exam, and in practice make up about 25 per cent of the annual intake. As a training centre, it receives new MFA entrants for a year's study, recently cut to six months (CFAU graduates skip this). It also annually runs two courses of three-month duration for ambassadors and senior diplomats. A six-week training course is conducted for foreign diplomats, once or twice a year. Research papers by CFAU's 140-strong faculty go to the Ministry, some responding to specific requests.

INTER-AGENCY COORDINATION

Embedded as the MFA is in the overarching system of leadership and control by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the task of internal coordination of foreign policy and diplomacy is both easier and more complicated than in other systems. Major issues of policy and strategy, as noted above, are the exclusive domain of the high leadership. The MFA is one of many agencies that provide policy inputs, together with others that include the external intelligence specialist, the Ministry of State Security, and its prime think tank, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR).

When it comes to issues of 'low diplomacy', involving tactics and action harmonisation with different agencies, the Chinese system runs into problems, predicated as

¹⁵ By 2002, all the other institutions of higher learning that were being run by different ministries were taken over by the Ministry of Higher Education, but exceptionally, CFAU has remained under the Foreign Ministry. At the university entrance examinations for joining the international affairs courses at 'Beida', Fudan and other universities, CFAU gets to pick the very best students, 'even ahead of Beida', as one interlocutor told the author, 2002.

it is, on its basic notion of unit identity. Every government unit, belongs to a hierarchical system, or *xitong*; communication takes place vertically within that system, but lateral communication and cooperation among units belonging to different systems need high approval within each, and is therefore difficult. This makes the system inflexible.

It is explicitly mandated that inter-ministerial coordination should be carried out at the level of vice-ministers.¹⁶ In practice, many external issues are not of sufficient import to be raised at this level; others are too urgent to await the encounters at that high level, some of which take place at intervals of months. This means one cannot pick up a phone and call an official in another agency to resolve an issue, or set up an inter-agency meeting. Foreign embassies sometimes find themselves cast in the role of carrying informal messages from one agency to another, to persuade Chinese partners towards a common standpoint. Chinese interlocutors are surprised at the comparative ease with which other countries are able to establish inter-ministerial teams and coordinate most issues of detail at working levels.¹⁷

Unlike most countries, there is no practice of sending MFA officials to work in other ministries that are actively engaged in external affairs. Nor are officials of other agencies, be it the ministries of commerce, defence or finance, deputed to work in the MFA on a limited assignment basis. Again, it is the rigid 'system' concept that comes in the way. This also means that there are no MFA officials in the higher organs, such as the staff of the State Council's Foreign Affairs Office, or in the exclusive team that supports the Leading Small Groups.

The one exception where personnel exchange effectively operates in a two-way direction is the provincial administration and the other local bodies. MFA officials are sent to the provinces and cities to work in the foreign affairs offices that all of them operate, handling a wide range of external-oriented liaison work, including protocol and the foreign activities of these bodies. Similarly, local administration officials are assigned to the Foreign Ministry and are sent to work in embassies. As noted earlier, some are also sent as ambassadors. Clearly, this two-way practice is of utility for a large federal state. The influence of provinces and major regions on the central machinery, and especially on the diplomatic and foreign policy process has been the focus of recent studies (Lampton 2001).¹⁸

The MFA sees itself as the lead coordinator on major issues vis-à-vis the other ministries, and even while informal coordination methods are limited, the expression often encountered is that it issues 'instructions' to the other ministries. But the same interlocutors hint that in the execution of policy many of the other agencies tend to go their own way. Some MFA officials show a sophisticated understanding of the inter-department coordination challenge, one that all foreign ministries the world over confront. When seen thus, the issue is not so much of turf or issue jurisdiction

¹⁶ Personal interview, 2003.

¹⁷ Information gathered from several confidential interviews, during 2002–03.

¹⁸ Similar sub-state level branch agencies of the Foreign Ministry are found in Germany and the US. In India initial steps to establish similar units are under consideration, but Indian states are as yet hesitant, even as quasi-autonomous actors on the international stage.

between contesting agencies, but of the MFA's responsibility to provide comprehensive information to the others, and to win their trust. Experience elsewhere shows that moving this 'coordinator' concept from theory to concrete implementation involves considerable investment of effort, and a flexible system where different kinds of co-ordination mechanisms are tried out (Hocking 1999). In China, where experimentation is not easy, this will surely be a major challenge in the years ahead.

THE DIPLOMATIC SERVICE

The Chinese MFA and its cadres have traditionally enjoyed high prestige within the country, and used to attract the very best talent. Post-1979, reforms and the introduction of a market economy have led to relative decline in attractiveness, yet the quality of talent entering the foreign service remains high. Change has produced other challenges.

China is unique in having a single class diplomatic service (apart from those providing technical support). All newly recruited officials serve for three years as non-diplomatic staff, before promotion to the rank of 'attaché' (for those with master's qualification this is reduced to one year).¹⁹ Support staff in Chinese missions consists of specialists like communications personnel, chauffeurs, cooks and the like. Foreign language interpreters have always been elites in the Chinese system, many of them rising to ambassadorships and other senior ranks in the MFA during the rehabilitation carried out after the tumultuous Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Interpreters are given higher salaries compared with other personnel given the fact that they have numerous other employment opportunities in the burgeoning corporate sector.

The basic cycle of postings is for officials to move from the MFA to missions, and then back to the MFA before another assignment abroad. But this is applied in a flexible manner at senior levels and a few go directly from one overseas post to another. This cycle is a function of a relatively large Chinese Foreign Ministry, whose total strength equals the numbers in the embassies. If we subtract non-MFA officials from the strength of embassies, it is clear that the headquarters-mission ratio is tilted more in favour of the MFA.²⁰ A weakness of such systems is excessively centralised control, which tends to stifle local initiative.

Recruitment

In a system that is partly in transition, new entrants have to clear two hurdles, the public service examination that is now common for all officials, and the MFA's own

¹⁹ Use of this rank in the standard hierarchy is also unusual; most other diplomatic services have witnessed an inflation in ranks, and direct recruits into officer grades usually commence with the rank of third secretary. These services reserve the 'attaché' rank for those promoted from the staff grade (called the 'B Branch' or administrative grade).

²⁰ The author has used this as a standard device for measuring MFA structures (Rana 2004). The Chinese figure makes it one of the relatively strongest MFAs. A complete contrast is found in India, where the comparable figure is 1:4, i.e., a very small headquarters, too small for functional efficiency.

entrance exam. The latter consists of a written portion and interviews; only those that graduate from specified disciplines are allowed to apply (international affairs, political science and languages). Some 1,000 appear for the MFA exam and about half are invited for the interview, against a normal annual intake of around 200. The significant change in recent years has been that compared with earlier focus on specialists in foreign languages, since the 1990s intake catchment has been broadened to include students of humanities, especially specialists in international relations. The average age at entry is 24 years and 25 per cent of the intake consists of women. Typically, around 30 per cent of new entrants are CFAU graduates. The other recruitment source has been the reputed Foreign Language Institute at Beijing. Now graduates from a number of other universities and institutions, including some at regional levels, are permitted to apply.

Training

New recruits spend two weeks at the MFA for general briefings, and then attend a 6-month course at CFAU (graduates of CFAU are exempted from this course), followed by one month of training with the People's Liberation Army. Thereafter, they take up substantive work at the MFA and can be sent abroad on their first assignment after a year or two. In comparison with other major diplomatic services the duration of this basic training is of moderate length.²¹

CFAU runs several mid-career training programmes, and this too is in keeping with the practices of the best diplomatic services, since changes in international affairs and in the evolving requirements of external representation demand constant updating of skills. MFA officials also attend courses run within the Ministry (in 2004, twenty-four different courses were offered), and at other institutions. E-learning methods are not on the agenda, perhaps owing to concern with security, which rules out an option that is especially pertinent for diplomatic services, given the geographic dispersal of personnel. The Chinese system is marked by two distinctive features. First, before any substantive promotion takes effect, the official is required to undergo intensive training. Training is mandatory for major promotions, such as the one to the rank of Division Chief. Second, all those appointed as Ambassador must spend three months attending a special course run twice a year at CFAU, even those sent out on second or third envoy assignments. The training covers high-level briefings on national developments and extensive travel across the country to familiarise them with developments. There are, but a handful of countries that run such training programmes for ambassadors, and none is nearly as intensive.²² Third, the most important training

²¹ The American and British diplomatic services provide very limited initial training, while the Germans used to devote two years to this phase, and have cut this back to one year around 2001. The French commenced formal training for new recruits some years back. There is thus some convergence in methodology.

²² Canada, the US and the UK run such courses of about two weeks duration. In other countries the briefings and familiarisation travel within the country are handled individually for each new outbound envoy-designate, which of course misses out on the intensity of training, as well as interaction among the envoys.

programmes are run by the Party. Senior officials approved for promotion to the rank of Vice-Minister spend six months at the CCP party cadre institute, and the promotion is contingent on good performance during this training.

Promotions

In the entire public service, an institutionalised promotion gradually emerged in the 1980s. A comprehensive, modern system now exists. The immediate superior and the official at the next higher level carry out the annual evaluation. In addition, co-workers contribute to this evaluation, through a grade point system. An average tally of the result is communicated to the individual, but not the detailed comments made by specific officials. The complete evaluation is sent to the Director General heading the department. Senior officials receive comments from those working under them, which in similar fashion is conveyed to them in a summarised form.

In the standard progression from the rank of attaché to second secretary, a 4-3-3 rule applies, with officials required to spend a minimum number of years at each rank. Promotion is not a right, beyond the automatic progression to the rank of Second Secretary. Thereafter, a bidding system is used, open to anyone in the MFA, subject to qualifying grades and years of experience. In an elaborate process 40 per cent of marks are assigned on the basis of a written test; another 30 per cent come in a set of interviews where five evaluators judge the responses by the candidate to hypothetical situations, to identify the three best candidates (the ranking of these selected candidates *inter se* is not disclosed). Then for a week, the names of the three are put up for comment by anyone in the MFA, through signed statements or even anonymous observations; 30 per cent of the marks are assigned on this basis.²³ All promotions are subject to ratification by the Minister.

The age level of division chiefs—a key grade—has now come down to the mid-30s. Some Chinese ambassadors are appointed in their 40s. This proves that a fast-track promotion system operates well, coming into effect after an official has worked in the Ministry for ten years. Of course, the individual's growth potential is identified much earlier. Perhaps a method similar to Singapore's, which in turn was borrowed from the oil giant Shell, is being used for early identification of such potential (Rana 2004).

One consequence is that there are a large number of officials who are not promoted, and languish at levels of second and first secretaries.²⁴ In any system, such a large stock becomes an overhang, with potential problems. Perhaps an over-large headquarters is used as the repository for such officials. The retirement age is a relatively early 55, except for those who have risen to high rank, partly to weed out the un-promoted.

²³ These details are from a personal interview, July 2002.

²⁴ One confidential interview produced the comment that even after some 30 years of service, some officials are at the level of First Secretary.

Specialisation

Mastery over foreign languages has always been a Chinese hallmark; in the past officials were rotated exclusively between the headquarters and their specialty region (or even single countries). This produced 'over-specialization' and an absence of broad expertise. Thus, a typical ambassador in Asian country might have served in that country or its immediate region on three or even five previous assignments, and had no other foreign exposure. Since the 1990s, the new policy is cross-regional movement at middle and senior levels. Thus, the ambassador serving in Kuwait in 2003 was a four-time Nepal veteran (who also had two postings in India); the envoy sent to New Delhi in 2002 found himself in South Asia for the first time, after an early career in the West and an ambassadorship in Australia. This shift away from exclusive regional/language specialisation conforms to the practice of other diplomatic systems, and marks enhanced professionalism.

One must note here another change. In the past young diplomats were required to study the languages of the smaller countries; Premier Zhou Enlai personally steered the policy in this direction. Consequently, the MFA could boast of in-house interpreter-level expertise in over forty languages, including all the languages of countries in China's neighbourhood.²⁵ Today, the policy focus has shifted to the major languages, partly owing to reluctance of young officials to devote a career to 'minor' languages. Old MFA hands lament this as an unwelcome change.

Traditionally, there was no system of monetary reward for learning and retaining foreign languages, but there was indication at the beginning of 2003 that such a system was under consideration. It has been the experience of other services that even a modest financial payment helps in encouraging officials to keep up with languages already mastered, though it may not by itself act as inducement for officials to undertake study of hard languages.²⁶

Human Resource Management

Reforms of the 1990s have included deliberate introduction of relevant corporate human resource management techniques. Efforts have been made to learn from ASEAN countries, especially Singapore and others. The diplomatic service also confronts special challenges, some resulting from post-Mao reforms.

- (a) The only 'out-placement' of personnel practiced since 1949 by the Foreign Ministry is to provincial, city and local administrations, and matching 'in-placement' of those officials into the MFA. In 2004, a new beginning was

²⁵ Stated by an interlocutor in 1999.

²⁶ India is one of the major countries that still does not have any method for re-qualification or regular exams for officials to receive the very small financial reward that has been the norm for over 35 years. One consequence is that even in respect of the 'compulsory' foreign language that all officials have to learn in the initial years, there is a very small pool of competent language specialists, except in the case of Chinese (for which a special *esprit de corps* seems to have developed spontaneously).

made by sending some MFA officials to a few companies, but the rigidities of the *xitong* system inhibit personnel exchanges with major counterpart ministries.

- (b) Alternate job opportunities mean that attrition through mid-career resignations is a serious issue. In 2003, the number of such officials was estimated at about 40–45 per annum, i.e., almost 25 per cent of the annual intake. Worse, some of the most talented were leaving; some were offered jobs in the private sector at ten times their public service salaries.²⁷ This was confirmed by an official with twelve years' service, that almost a quarter of his original intake had left the service. Since 2003, the rate of attrition has slowed and some who left have tried to return, but as of 2004, there was no decision on taking some back.

A series of salary increases have been implemented since 1983, both at the MFA and for those sent abroad. The latter are now paid in US dollars, at rates that are broadly comparable with the low end of the salary and allowance range for comparable diplomats from developing countries (Liu, Xiaohong 2001). This remains a topical issue.

- (c) Senior and mid-level officials view decline in discipline as a serious problem.²⁸ Changing times have led to an erosion of the extraordinary *esprit de corps* that was a hallmark of the past. One account has spoken of situations in which junior officials in an embassy in West Europe refused to accept the management style of the ambassador and refused to answer the door or drive official vehicles; other incidents have been narrated involving missions in Mongolia and Washington D.C. (Liu 2001).

In varying degrees, other diplomatic services face a similar challenge. Partly it comes from a profession where career reward comes only at the final stages. At mid-career levels, the span of authority is smaller in comparison with other public services. In the Chinese corporate world, material compensation is far more generous, and professional rewards are much less tied to seniority.

- (d) As in most other diplomatic services, spouse employment during postings abroad has become a significant issue. With two-income couples increasingly the pattern, the MFA now makes serious effort to provide jobs in embassies to the spouse of the diplomat, but increased job specialisation often makes it difficult. The Chinese system does not as yet permit jobs by spouses outside the Chinese network (i.e., the embassy, the media representatives, airline or other Chinese commercial entities). The ambassador's spouse is subject to similar regulations; a job is offered to the spouse only in consonance with qualifications—unlike in the past when looser regulations were applied—to create fairly senior assignments for the spouse in the embassy.²⁹
- (e) A related issue concerns children and family separation, made all the more acute under the prevailing 'single child' norm. In the past, diplomats rarely

²⁷ Confidential interviews, 2003.

²⁸ Several confidential interviews between 1999 and 2003.

²⁹ Liu Xiaohong (2001) asserts that after 1983 an ambassador's spouse is no longer employable in the embassy. Empirical observation and other sources confirm that such spouses continue to be employed.

took children on overseas assignments. This internal restriction was relaxed in 2000, but because of the huge differences between the Chinese school system and the education available overseas, it has always been impractical to pursue this option (Chinese embassies do not run schools). Now officials take children to countries that offer good tertiary education. In practice, separation enforced because of spouse employment and children's education add to the strains of diplomats posted abroad. In a new 2004 move, working couples may apply to take parents abroad, to help look after children.

- (f) Gender discrimination exists in subdued form. There is a *de facto* ceiling of 25 per cent for women candidates in the annual intake of about 200 (though girls are 70 per cent of the students at CFAU). One respondent explained this intake limit in terms of 'difficult' conditions in some countries. The attrition rate among women is surely higher than among men (as in most diplomatic services). Nevertheless, the low number of women in high ranks suggests glass ceilings.

The responsiveness of the system to individual needs has not traditionally been strong, but it is claimed by some that this is now changing, under a new slogan: 'Put people first'.

EMBASSIES ABROAD

Ambassadors are appointed in three grades: Vice-Minister, Director General and Deputy Director General. Grades are firmly attached to specific locations. For instance, envoys to Berlin, London, Moscow, Paris, Tokyo and Washington D.C., plus the permanent representative in New York are invariably of the highest rank, or a promotion comes with the appointment. The ambassador to Pyongyang is usually of Vice-Minister rank.³⁰ Operating such pre-assigned ranks to posts is logical and the hallmark of a strong system; the only comparable instance is the German system.³¹

The Ambassador enjoys primacy among all the other representatives of Chinese agencies in the foreign capital. But the issues of management of heterogeneity of embassy personnel, typical to all systems, are ever-present. In 2004, some twenty ambassadors belonged to departments outside the Foreign Ministry, including a good number of officials from the provincial and city governments. Most of them are initially assigned abroad as Deputy Chiefs of Mission for a year-and-a-half. Asked to comment on whether such non-career appointments generated resentment in the

³⁰ Reportedly, in 1995, Pyongyang did not give an *agrément* to a nomination as the individual concerned did not have vice-minister rank (Liu 2001). One interlocutor suggested that North Korea is not one of the countries exclusively reserved for Vice-Minister rank officials (confidential interview 2003).

³¹ Most diplomatic services have notional ranking system for overseas posts, but apply it in a flexible way to accommodate personnel management needs.

diplomatic service, one official remarked that there may be some resentment, but it is accepted as a decision of the higher authorities. Only four of the ambassadors were women.

'Lateral circulation' of embassy reports, to sister mission abroad, is more frequent than in the past, but practices in this area remain conservative. This situation would change dramatically if and when an internet-based communications system comes into existence.

Up to the mid-1990s, Chinese embassies in Western countries did not employ local personnel, to preclude the possibility of betrayal. Missions in developing countries made limited use of local staff as chauffeurs, gardeners and for other basic services, but not as office staff. This self-restriction meant greater resort to home-based personnel. Since 1994, local personnel are employed in all embassies, corresponding to a global trend, to reduce costs, profit from local expertise and have leaner embassies.

Annual conferences of ambassadors have become a regular feature since the mid-1990s, and are combined with their annual leave. The envoys meet for two weeks, and have an opportunity to meet the top leaders and ministers for extensive briefings—making this one of the most intensive of such processes, compared with other systems. The ambassadors also visit one or two provinces. This system has been a major contributor to the reforms process. But in contrast, the envoy has few opportunities to return home for consultations, save those at places of exceptional importance. Unlike in other systems, the option for the envoy to accompany high personalities of foreign countries is also limited to visits by heads of state and government. This cuts down a little on home travel by the envoy and chances for face-to-face consultations at home.

China does not appoint honorary consuls (typically drawn from one's own citizens who are long-term residents in foreign countries, or local nationals with strong connections to one's country). Perhaps this results from lingering reluctance against using outside agents. This may change in time, since this system is cost-effective, provided the honoraries are well chosen.

TECHNOLOGY

The Foreign Ministry began to use the internet in 1999, and its use is now standard procedure. The MFA website is comprehensive and an excellent source of information. Since 2003, the MFA has considered an 'intranet' to link the MFA and missions and streamline communications, but has been inhibited over the confidentiality of such systems, especially when intensive resources are deployed by major powers to listen in on diplomatic communications.³² Overall, incorporating technology into the system, and mastering it, was seen as a significant future challenge, according to several officials.

³² India is another country that has delayed its shift to internet-based communications network owing to concerns over the impermeability of such systems.

The Foreign Ministry's web page received 110 million hits in 2002; a discussion portal had 7,000 registered users in 2002, who posted over 40,000 messages. The same year the web page established an on-line series 'Interviews with People in the Foreign Service'. Exponential growth in Chinese internet usage has continued (Annual Report, MFA 2004).

DIPLOMATIC STYLE

China's diplomacy has undergone rapid evolution. At the start it bore the strong personal imprint of Zhou Enlai in the early years; its *leitmotif* today is progressive professionalism, in step with post-1979 reforms. Since 1993, reform has been pursued in deliberate fashion, and the head of one of the Administrative divisions of the MFA is in charge of this process. Current distinctive characteristics of Chinese diplomacy are:

- Emphasis on building personal ties between leaders was one of the hallmarks of the Zhou Enlai method. He made nine journeys to Burma, and received some fifteen visits to China by his counterparts, U Nu and Ne Win. Later Chinese leaders have travelled less intensively, but the emphasis on building personal links has persisted.
- The past style was reactive than proactive when confronting new external opportunities. But the younger, more international minded diplomats tend to move with greater speed and self-assurance. Where direct Chinese interests are involved, there is little inhibition in acting directly, even to the point where it becomes counter-productive. For instance, in 2000, when there was speculation that a Chinese dissident might be considered by the Norwegian Noble Peace Prize Committee for the award, the Chinese Embassy directly attempted to dissuade the Committee, little realising that such an approach would force the Committee to go public. Some would argue that this is in part a mindset issue: accustomed to their own system, the Chinese find it difficult to believe that legality or systemic norms should come in the way of the politically expedient.
- Methods of setting annual targets and other performance enhancement methods are of course known, but implementation has been limited, and the issue is reportedly under discussion. At present, annual plans are prepared by embassies with quantitative targets in areas such as, trade and tourism flows. These plans are also shared with the other ministries concerned. In fact, performance management is a growing issue for foreign ministries (Rana 2004).
- The individuals who rise to the top as ambassadors and senior officials at the MFA are manifestly competent. The same is true of the key personnel at major multilateral diplomacy missions like New York and Geneva. Clearly, this highly competitive system allows the best talent to rise to the surface.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

This is one more area in which new methodology has been implemented since the mid-1990s. Special teams are entrusted to handle identified crisis situations by drawing manpower from different departments of the foreign ministries, and are customarily headed by vice or assistant ministers. Their function is to report direct to the leadership, and to implement the policy decision taken at higher levels. They operate on a part-time basis. They do not include representatives of other ministries and agencies, but do call in outside experts and academics, primarily from the same system (*xitong*).

PROSPECTS

The Chinese diplomatic network is no longer as rigid as it once was. It has transformed itself into a supple instrument of foreign policy implementation. Innovation, seen earlier as anathema, is practiced at a measured pace. The old PLA comparison is challenged; one interlocutor remarked: 'Soldiers only followed orders!' He went on to explain that the new focus is on cultivating initiative, as well as developing individuals and attending to careers. On the downside are problems of numbers, an excessively large headquarters establishment, and some of the systemic issues narrated above.

The volatility and unpredictability of the post-Cold War world of the new millennium challenges all diplomatic systems. For China, its own reform agenda blends into this broader requirement. We can expect continuing improvement in the manner in which China mobilises the diplomatic process to advance its external interests.

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