Diplomatic departures: negotiating Britain’s international outreach in the contemporary world

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In recent years, the expansion of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office network into new countries has generated increasing interest in the role of the places and spaces where diplomacy is made,[1] in the international outreach of the United Kingdom and in the interactions between state and non-state actors and initiatives in delivering foreign policy objectives. What has received perhaps less sustained attention is the impact of diplomatic departures in Britain and in the British diplomatic network on the rethinking of Britain’s influence and power (hard, soft and smart).

Traditionally, a “diplomatic departure” occurs when an ambassador or a member of a diplomatic mission departs from their country of posting: both diplomatic departures and arrivals, as codified by the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, are based upon a principle of mutual consent, with diplomatic missions representing the interests of their home country abroad and providing a reliable channel of communication between the two countries.[2] While most often continuity is ensured beyond the departure of individuals, some departures can also result from or lead to important changes in policy. Examining diplomatic relations means therefore exploring a complex set of interactions between states, governments and individuals, with dual relations and potential tensions between diplomatic representatives and both the host and home governments. One major area of enquiry for this conference are departures at times of crisis, when heads of mission resigned, were expelled or were reposted under pressure from the host government...
Departures, in policy and style, also occur in less dramatic circumstances, when a mission is relocated within the same country, or when British offices are expanded. Perhaps more than embassies, consulates have been moved to suit the domestic requirements of host governments, with diplomats discussing the role of their premises and their own relation to local politics. Similarly, the expansion of the British Council network, in both ex-British and other territories, constitutes a transfer of expertise as much as it reflects the increasing interpenetration of cultural and foreign affairs. While there has been growing scholarship on the post-independence careers of colonial civil servants, with many administrators looking for employment in the newly independent states, particularly in the fields of education and development, the geographical and policy trajectories of British representatives, and the expertise gained on each “departure”, deserves further study. How do diplomats re-engage either in their next posting or back at home, and what does the experience of departure entail (particularly, but not necessarily exclusively, at times of crisis)?

Departure is also, to some extent, about new diplomatic actors, beyond the state itself. Of interest is therefore the role played by an increasing number of British NGOs, particularly in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, in altering more traditional representation of the state abroad, proposing their own vision of Britain – and sometimes being instrumental for the government in promoting a new British “brand”, in lieu of or alongside state actors.

A departure of sorts can also be said to occur when multilateral missions are established, or when diplomatic representation is pooled – subsuming or redeploying specifically national offices. Diplomatic missions can hardly be separated from the socio-economic and geopolitical dynamics of the country where they are located, nor from the financial means and political directions defined by the Foreign Office. While the Commonwealth seat no longer exists at the United Nations, the expansion of the European External Action Service from 2010 has seen the rise of EU diplomatic missions abroad, notably in Africa. In the context of the current debates on the United Kingdom’s departure from the European Union, the significance and use of such multilateral missions in expanding national interests abroad deserves further scrutiny (both before and after 2016). In this respect, this conference also considers the diplomatic network at play in Britain itself, and the reconfiguration of embassies, high commissions, consulates and other cultural missions. Of particular (but not exclusive) interest is the place of London in the trajectories of diplomats-in-
waiting during the struggles for the end of empire, and more recently, as a diplomatic centre for EU member states.

Finally, diplomatic departures are also intrinsically linked to style and tradition, to display and show, and such elements are central to the study of diplomatic adaptations. Up until 2006, the age-old Foreign Office tradition of valedictory despatches meant that ambassadors could write freely about their posting in a final telegram home, thus expressing their personal impressions about the host country or even broader Foreign Office policy-making. While some of the most remarkable or controversial extracts were given publicity by Matthew Parris in 2011, there is now also an extensive autobiographical literature published by former diplomats, and active representatives have also taken to blogging and social media – with a variety of outcomes, and resurrecting to some extent the valedictory despatch. The digital age has also brought its own set of constraints and freedoms for diplomatic actors, and papers looking at diplomatic leaks or the archiving of departures are also welcome.

Proposals are therefore invited on any of the areas of study outlined above, to ultimately reflect on the adaptability and resilience of Britain’s international networks, and on what characterises both British diplomacy and Britain as a diplomatic space.

Please send a proposal (300 words max.) and a short biography to Lauriane Simony (lauriane.simony@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr) and Mélanie Torrent (melanie.torrent@u-picardie.fr) by 2 December 2019.

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[1] Embassies in crisis, for instance, was the subject of a key conference at the British Academy in 2016; https://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/schoolofhumanities/history/embassiesincrisisconference/.