INTRODUCTION

THE CONSULAR DIMENSION OF DIPLOMACY

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Blending Diplomacy and Consular Affairs

This book aims to contribute to a better understanding of key themes in consular affairs, the consular challenges that are facing three of the world’s great powers—the United States, Russia and China—as well as the European origins of the consular institution. It analyses the multifaceted nature of diplomacy’s consular dimension in contemporary international relations and also aims at a forward-looking reading of the history of the consular institution. As the academic literature on consular affairs is rather thinly scattered, particularly in the field of diplomatic studies, this book will hopefully break some new ground. As far as the following essays enhance our knowledge of the consular institution and contemporary consular challenges for a foreign ministry (MFA), this should be seen as the result of a collective effort by its sixteen contributors, and predominantly from the point of view of the disciplines of politics and history.

This introductory chapter intends to give a general grasp of what consular affairs are all about and delves into various themes and issues from the perspective of diplomatic studies. One thread running through this book is how consular affairs can be understood in the broader context of diplomatic practice and, vice versa, how the much-neglected study of the consular institution may improve our understanding of contemporary diplomacy. Four conceptual and empirical observations that help frame our analysis are suggested at the start of our discussion. First, the book’s outline at the end of this introductory chapter immediately shows how the core function of consular affairs has radically been transformed throughout history, roughly speaking from special judicial responsibilities and the promotion and facilitation of particular trade flows to the assistance of individual citizens living or travelling overseas in any conceivable capacity. With the evolution of international society and the needs of its citizens, the consular function has thus been shown
to possess an almost chameleonic quality, a flexibility that overrides diplomacy’s proverbial adaptability to change.

Second, one way or another the consular function has always been enmeshed with diplomacy. One basic finding emerging from this book is that juxtaposing contemporary diplomacy and consular affairs—as distinct activities with entirely different functions—does not help us to comprehend the essence of what are in reality overlapping areas of work within foreign ministries. One may speculate about how consular work will look in 2050. There is little doubt, however, that a permanent need will remain for the resolution of practical consular issues, and that such issues will overlap with diplomatic concerns. Typically consular tasks are here to stay, including administrative services, practical duties in the national economic interest, urgent jobs and assignments during emergency operations, as well as humanitarian tasks, but the distinction between consular and typically diplomatic functions is only useful up to a point. It will be increasingly hard to identify diplomats who have not been personally involved in consular work. In the eyes of practitioners, the opposition of ‘consular’ and ‘diplomatic’ may look anything but academic. In the complex MFA environment, the traditional contradistinction between separate consular and diplomatic worlds is in fact well beyond its ‘sell-by’ date.

Third, and put briefly, the ‘consular perspective’ has always been tied up with unfolding transnational relations instead of mere inter-state relations. Throughout history, the traditional division between ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ was alien to the world in which consular officers operated, as their daily tasks guaranteed a variety of contacts with citizens from different strata of society. A perspective on diplomacy infused by the consular experience contributes, and could have contributed, to an earlier questioning of traditional modes of thinking about a neatly organized ‘Westphalian’ diplomatic world. Fundamentally, the consular dimension of diplomacy draws attention to the long-time neglect of the societal dimension of world politics and diplomacy. That issue is also being addressed in the recent surge of studies on public diplomacy and thus reflects the largely hidden reality that, in spite of all their differences, consular work and public diplomacy are somehow kindred activities. To all intents and purposes, both are evidence of new priorities and changing working practices in foreign ministries.

Finally, this study appears to show that in modern times the growth in the structural demand for different types of consular services responded to sweeping economic and social change in periods that