
In *Commercial Diplomacy and International Business*, Dr Huub Ruël and his colleagues have written an interesting and useful selection of papers. For anyone coming fresh to this area, however, a better place to start would be a recent article co-authored by Ruël and two of his collaborators, Donna Lee and Robin Visser. The article, ‘Commercial Diplomacy and International Business: Inseparable Twins?’, which was published in Michigan State University’s *AIB Insights* (volume 13, number 1, 2013), sets the background and the context of commercial diplomacy. It defines the meaning of commercial diplomacy and sets out its relationship with international business. It makes it clear that commercial diplomacy is not a new phenomenon; for example, the Dutch established an embassy in China in 1655 ‘with the specific objective to improve trade’. It explains why commercial diplomacy is growing in importance, pointing out that with the rise of developing economies, ‘the formal regulatory and institutional context for doing business is very different from that which the business is used to’ and often involves a very active role for the state. Finally, the article raises the fundamental question of ‘how effective is Commercial Diplomacy in supporting International Business?’

A proper answer to this question requires hard evidence, both for businesses looking to expand abroad and for governments seeking to support those businesses. Here is where Ruël’s book shows its value. He and his associates have produced a useful empirical study by interviewing both the businessmen engaged in international business and the diplomats in host countries whose role it is to help those businessmen. The goal of Ruël and his colleagues is to create a coherent approach to both the study and the practice of commercial diplomacy, based on what the practitioners — both diplomats and businessmen — believe and do.

In chapter 2, Ruël and Visser set out a formal definition of commercial diplomacy, which indicates the concerns to be investigated in the book as a whole:

Commercial diplomacy is an activity conducted by state representatives which is aimed at generating commercial gain in the form of trade and inward and outward investment for the home country by means of business and entrepreneurship promotion and facilitation activities in the host country based on supplying information about export and investment opportunities, keeping contact with key actors and maintaining networks in relevant areas (p. 74).
They examine what makes for a successful commercial diplomat. They evaluate the relative importance of the background of the individual, the career path within the diplomatic service, and the view that the diplomat takes of his role. All three characteristics influence the style and the effectiveness of the commercial diplomat.

In subsequent chapters, the book investigates the perceived benefit and the effectiveness of commercial diplomacy for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). To what extent, the researchers ask, are these correlated with the service quality of the diplomats, with the nature of the SME, or with the characteristics of the host country? Further topics are investigated. Oliver Naray’s section, for example, looks at the interaction between the diplomat and business. Among other questions, Naray raises the fundamental issue of fees. Should a company using the offices of the commercial diplomat have to pay for those services? For all services? Or just for some? Other chapters look at measuring export performance, comparing commercial diplomacy across the European Union’s member states, entering the United States’ federal procurement market, and the lobbying of commercial diplomats.

Every section in this book raises interesting questions about the nature and effectiveness of commercial diplomacy. These questions are answered with empirical evidence based in large measure on responses to structured questionnaires and individual interviews. Statistical techniques are employed to evaluate the validity of perceived correlations. The results are indicative and interesting. They are, however, as the researchers themselves are at pains to note, far from conclusive. The sample is small in number and often restricted in geographic scope, with respect to both home and host countries. For example, in looking at what makes for effective commercial diplomacy, Ruël and Visser interview diplomats in Helsinki; in measuring the value of commercial diplomacy, Busschers and Ruël interview only Dutch businesses. Other companies and other countries may produce different results. Nonetheless, the conclusions — while tentative — are interesting. If there is one major criticism to be made of this collection of papers, it is the absence of a concluding chapter summarizing the results.

In a world where there is an increasing amount of international business, where much of this involves states without established and reliable institutions and legal systems, where cultures and practices vary substantially, the role of the commercial diplomat is of significant importance, and an understanding of what makes for effective commercial diplomacy is not a misplaced goal. This book provides an excellent starting point for gaining that understanding. For academics, it provides a useful starting point for further research. For companies involved in international business, it suggests what they can and should expect from their government representatives abroad. For foreign