

Parliamentary Conference: Assisting Parliamentarians to Develop their Capacities.
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The Role of Parliamentary Secretariat staff in supporting International Diplomatic Duties of Parliamentarians (Case Study: Thai Senate)

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Abstract

In bicameral parliamentary systems, the main domestic duty of the Upper House is to scrutinise legislative drafts passed forward from the Lower House. However, international diplomatic duties also play a significant role in developing international relations between national parliaments and can be considered as another emerging path in developing international relations, despite critiques of international duties being secondary activities of the parliamentary institution. On international missions, not only do parliamentarians travel as the main representatives, but they are also accompanied by parliamentary staff as facilitators and providing support to help complete that particular duty. From this reason, parliamentary staff are usually responsible for the preparation and correspondence with prospective parliaments prior to each international diplomatic mission. During the missions abroad, they also facilitate with diplomatic customs and communication issues. Therefore, their role supports the existing professional skills of the senators and this makes the procedures of the mission flow more smoothly.

This paper seeks to discuss about the significance of the supporting role of parliamentary staff in facilitating parliamentarians' professional skills in conducting international diplomatic duties. An example will be drawn from the Thai Senate, focusing on the role of the Secretariat of the Senate officials in facilitating international diplomatic missions of the

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senators e.g. attending international parliamentary conferences or travelling on official visits as guests of other national parliaments. This case also highlights the relevant issues in the development of parliamentarians' skills and knowledge.

Findings suggest that individual perceptions and knowledge on the benefits of international diplomatic duties, especially relations between specific parliamentary friendship groups and regional cooperation, are important in developing senators' individual and collective performances further in a wider global context. Moreover, concise institutional strategies on diplomatic and international affairs are also important and need to be stated clearly, so that senators are able to follow and complete international missions with clear objectives and successful outcomes.

Introduction

In every national parliament, there are secretariats to support the legislative duties. Their professional experience and competency are important factors that could determine the success of parliamentary diplomacy. When we say that members of parliament have various professional experiences in order to be qualified for office, it refers to the fact that their knowledge and experience should be universal as well. In other words, the existing knowledge on particular topics should be transferable. Members of parliament should not only have specialised knowledge and experience about what they do domestically, but should have the worldly knowledge that could be applied in international duties to improve individual and collective performance with foreign counterparts. If parliament were to develop and become a solid alternative diplomatic actor, it needs people who are not only experienced in their profession, but should also have sound experience with international diplomatic activities and procedures. Not only they should have a good understanding about

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their diplomatic duties, but also aim for the improvement of their interpersonal skills and the success of the institution. The issues about the image of parliament as a diplomatic actor will be discussed in the following point on motivations that influence parliamentary diplomacy.

As this paper is focused on the study of the Thai Senate, preliminary information to support the statement above will be drawn from the researcher's ethnographic observation as a Secretariat of the Senate civil servant from the Bureau of Foreign Affairs, and also from data collection including semi-structured interviews with a group of senators and secretariat civil servants from various departments. Moreover, document analysis from reports summaries, minutes, courtesy calls, and relevant official documents were examined. Most of the findings from consulting these documents suggested that international diplomatic missions have provided the opportunity for members of parliament to build good connections with foreign counterparts. Nevertheless, the implementation of any issues from the exchange of opinions and discussions would usually be carried out through the administrative sector – that is the Foreign Ministry or government – for the results to be more concrete. This is due to the fact that parliament is a legislative institution, thus parliament's duties according to the Constitution is limited to legislative drafting and scrutiny. In the final part of the paper, I shall be discussing about a programme to strengthen parliamentarian's international and diplomatic skills, by raising a suggested issue from a semi-structured interview with a senior member of staff from the Secretariat of the Senate, Thailand.

A crucial point that needs to be made clear before I commence my arguments about the nature of the international diplomatic missions of the Thai Senate is that the senators and the secretariat staff work together in tandem. It is true that each person has different responsibilities and the titles of their professions distinguish the roles they are expected to

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perform and fulfill. In the following parts, I shall be examining the roles of Thai senators as diplomatic actors and the roles of the Secretariat of the Senate staff as facilitators to the actual diplomatic actors respectively. Then I will be discussing about the ways to improve and develop their capacities for future international diplomatic missions for both groups of actors, as both are important in coordinating the institution's diplomatic duties. Any possible improvements, however, should remain within the regulations of the Thai Constitution². The ideology of a collective government is strong in modern governments, therefore policy-making and coordination are the objects of experiments and most established systems are circumventing some of the official structures. The reason might be that the cabinet arrangement is no longer wholly satisfied in terms of the tasks which have to be performed and the most established systems are circumventing some of the official structures (Blondel, 1982, p.172).

My argument is that apart from efficiency and capacity building for parliamentarians, another crucial point to build the parliament's institutional capacity to train parliamentarians is to improve and develop the interpersonal skills, understanding, and competency of parliament secretariat staff – who are also permanent civil servants. As the main responsibility of secretariat staff is to support the duties of the parliamentarians, findings from interviewing secretariat staff suggested that they should seek to improve their basic skills including language and communication. Moreover, secretariat staff not only should perform their supporting duties to their fullest potential but should also seek a wider context of knowledge which would enable them to familiarise themselves with further assignments³.

² The current Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand that is in use was inaugurated in 2007.

³ Interview with Director of Human Resources Training and Development group, Bureau of Human Resources Development, Secretariat of the Senate.

The role of the parliamentarian

This paper has been written as part of an ongoing research, focusing on the Thai Senate as a diplomatic actor. Before we begin to discuss about the wider image of the institution on developing foreign relations, I wish to give a brief introduction on the appointments and elections of the senators, the nature of their duties both domestically and internationally, and the knowledge and skills they are expected to require for a distinctive performance during their terms in office. Thai senators are senior representatives who should be at least 40 years of age on the election day or the date of nomination and have extensive professional background in different fields including legal profession, academia, business. Thai senators, in addition, normally hold the membership for 6 years from the date of election or the date of the published result of the selection, and no senator shall consecutively hold office more than one term⁴.

Considering from the composition, the Thai Senate can be domestically generalised as a representative institution of the elite considering its members and their professional backgrounds. Therefore, the study of elite political culture would be another focal point to discuss in order to help clarify the nature of Thai senators and might constitute to their perceptions towards both their domestic and international duties. A group of people when formed together may encompass not only their preferred form of external boundaries and social organization, but a group identity that includes their idea of time, imagined and shared history, language, even conflict resolution mechanisms (Verwiej, Oros, and Jacquin-Berdal, 1998, p.5). This would then form into a particular institution. In the era of globalisation, moreover, institutionalization is usually marked by an elaborated division of labour within

⁴ Section 117, Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2550 (2007).

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legislatures, being indispensable for coping with the proliferation of policy fields and the increasingly complicated, complex, and technical nature of legal matters confronting societies (Ruland, Jurgenmeyer, Nelson, Ziegenhain, 2005, p.191).

Methods and observations

Information to support my arguments have initially been gathered prior to conducting the research, during the period between 2007-2009 as a member of staff from the Protocol Group, Bureau of Foreign Affairs, Secretariat of the Senate, Thailand. The positive part of being a member of staff and an 'insider' from the institution has enabled the access to the senators for conducting semi-structured interviews and the official documents that would have been difficult or impossible to access if I were an outsider. The focal research instrument is the ethnographer's own inquiring experience, in joint, emergent exploration with people who once were called natives – or actors, insiders (Stewart, 1998, p.6). But then again, the advantages and disadvantages of being an insider, but having to formally conduct this research as an outsider, has in a way given a diverse angle of perspective on the institution's diplomatic duties. Various findings emerged from the fieldwork data collection, showing that senators are in fact active in a variety of responsibilities. In addition to their constituent duties and the management of an electorate (constituency) office, which is equivalent in effect to operating a small business, many are engaged in advocacy and negotiation, issue analysis and policy development (Coghill, Holland, Donohue, Rozzoli, & Grant, 2008, p.74).

My argument is that international diplomatic duties are not secondary duties, but are important duties that form part of the political institution and shapes its prospects. Therefore, the actors should realise the significance of international diplomatic duties and improvise

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their existing skills and knowledge to suit the missions they are required to complete. Specific knowledge or skills, I believe, can be trained and improved according to the requirements of each specific mission and its regarded issues eg. economics, security, education etc. Even if parliamentarians are not regarded as conventional diplomatic actors, they play a crucial role in building and maintaining specific relations within the parliamentary level, as they are – undoubtedly – representatives of the people. They are alternative actors who have different levels of activeness in parliamentary diplomatic duties. As the senators represent the citizens, when they work together with the secretariat staff they can receive suggestions and information from staff who are also citizens and can get access to people in rural areas through specific committee connections. In formal representation, for example, citizens for good reasons place the representative in a position of greater potential influence and coercive power than most constituents. Appropriateness to deliberation, of nonmanipulation, illuminating interests, and facilitating retrospectively should be used as the criteria for approvable transformation (Mansbridge, 2003, p.515).

However, during fieldwork conducting semi-structured interviews with certain members of the public, they have given opinions that most people do not even know what senators do, or what the Senate as an institution actually does. An explanation to this claim is that senators are a group of senior professionals who represent the citizens in scrutinizing legislative issues and therefore support the administrative work of the government. Moreover, on the diplomatic part of their duties senators have the professionalism to represent and negotiate, for a professional diplomat should have a well-balanced personality, good self-control, a natural inquisitiveness, their manner of thinking, and an interest in understanding others (Kappeler, 1999, p.91). This, accordingly, can be related to another opinion that some senators do not actually know what they have to do until they are informed prior to any

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particular mission⁵. The hindrance for a successful level of performance would be not only the lack of knowledge and information, but the lack of understanding about the purposes of international diplomatic missions and the outcomes they have on the institution.

Again, another suggestion from one of the interviewed senators was that in terms of background prior to taking political positions in parliament senators were not diplomats. However, the chance for senators to become diplomats, or at least to consider themselves as diplomats, would depend on generosity of the senators when communicating with foreign representatives on particular matters. I argue that this could be one of the factors on how senators would realise and develop their potential to become parliamentary diplomats when they happen to be in a requiring situation. The ability to express opinions spontaneously as well as negotiate on issues that need to be discussed, senators should think further about the psychological effects of their communication, not limiting on looking for networks of interpersonal communication but have to think way beyond the purposes of informal communication that would lead on to interpersonal influence and whether that would be taken into consideration later on (Bauer, 1958, p.67).

There has been, however, some suggestions from a number of senators whom I have conducted semi-structured interviews on international diplomatic duties of the Senate, that there should be a concise strategy and policy on the international diplomatic duties of the Senate, as an institution. From the information received during interviews, most of the senators under each constituency would rely on the President of the Senate, and accordingly the Vice-Presidents to construct a proper or appropriate policy on diplomatic duties. A statement to support this argument is that leadership successions occur within a certain

⁵ Interview with senator from Energy committee, 2 May 2011.

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historical, political, and institutional context, and thus enables and constrains the behavior of incumbent individuals who are to become leaders. Moreover, factors such as the personal role conceptions, leadership styles, and political skills make up an important part of the succession puzzle (Bynander and Hart, 2006, p.708). Nevertheless, I think what is important is that once the senators are appointed or elected, they should familiarise themselves with both the domestic and international duties. A number of senators have their personal aides to help with their duties, therefore the role of the senate staff would become less important. This however, should be improved because the main duties of the Secretariat staff are to support senators. In the following part, we will be looking at the role of the Secretariat staff as main figures in supporting the international diplomatic duties of the Thai senators. A discussion will be carried out about the nature of their responsibilities and its contribution towards the building and improvement of the senator's performance in diplomatic procedures.

The Role of Secretariat staff

As this paper is focusing on the role of the Senate staff in supporting the roles of senators, I shall be pointing out that not only is it important for senators to inform themselves with the suitable knowledge on the purposes of international diplomatic duties – the professional training would be provided by the secretariat of the senate staff – but the staff themselves should also be well-informed and competent on administrating the procedures of the diplomatic duties. However, a statement to suggest this is that while providing the methodology, parliamentary officers should not influence the direction of the procedure. In other words, they viewed the maintenance of professional discipline and distance in both their training materials and their interactions with senators as imperative (Coghill et al. 2008, p.88).

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The Senate staff have main responsibilities in supporting the official duties of the senators, both domestic and international. As we are talking about their role in supporting the international diplomatic duties of senators, I will be looking at key competencies that staff should also have in order to improve their skills and professional development and able to provide support to senators proficiently. My main argument remains that senate staff and secretariat staff work in tandem. Therefore, both parts need to understand and seek to improve their competencies according to what they have to do for their official duties. On international diplomatic duties, a senator from the Committee of Transportation suggested that all senators are diplomats, that is they should have the ability to communicate with politeness, generosity, and courtesy when engaged in a topic discussion. I would say secretariat staff who work to support the senators should also possess these skills.

Further findings from semi-structured interviews with a number of secretariat staff during a fieldwork trip in Bangkok from March – May 2011 reflected that the exchange visits aim to provide secretariat staff with the opportunity to learn, observe, and acknowledge similarities and differences in other foreign institutions, so they can adopt transferable skills for their own duties⁶. Additional aspects that secretariat staff should seek to improve and be fully competent are as follows:

Language skills - this is considered very important as communication is majorly in English and not every individual staff are proficient in the spoken language to the satisfactory level for performance. Therefore, building confidence and providing appropriate training courses to all secretariat staff in every level, I believe, is important for all members of staff in every

⁶ Interviews with secretariat staff from the Bureau of Human Resources Development and Bureau of Committees 1, 2-4 May 2011.

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sections of the Secretariat to have basic English communicating skills. Although some may say that English might not be of frequent use for some particular positions, but in the case of urgent matters staff will be able to use their skills and handle the task beforehand. The responsibilities of every individual staff are aimed to constitute with the missions of the parliament in general. Currently, the Bureau of Human Resources Development, Secretariat of the Senate has been organising competency training courses for Secretariat staff from other departments and bureaus.

Knowledge on current affairs: secretariat staff should need to know what is going on in the world, and able to answer questions that may arise prior to and during an international diplomatic mission. Most importantly the staff would need to be well-informed on details, procedures, and contact information on each particular foreign trip. Secretariat staff should also be flexible; that is able to solve first-hand problems, dare to think outside of the box, and able to perform according to any task assigned. But again, their decisions should aim to contribute towards the efficient performance of the senators as a principle. Both actors – senators and senate staff – should realise the framework of their duties and not perform to overlap each other. This is to say that they should respect each other's duty framework, professional capability, as well as the position they hold within the institution.

They should also bear in mind at all times that while the secretariat staff support the senators, the senators duties - reflected through the senate or parliament as a legislative institution - supports the work of the administrative sector, that is the government. An example from the Japanese cabinet is raised here to demonstrate the impact of Japan's cabinet secretariat as an example of strengthening institutional roles and policies during the country's 2001 administrative reform. The outcomes of the successful reform were based on the strength of

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policy coordination which required political skill, experience, and connections as well as knowledge of the content and implications of specific policies (Shinoda, 2005, p.801).

Another suggestion from a senior member of the Secretariat of the Senate on human resources development was that in the future, not only the Senate but the parliament should coordinate with the Foreign Office and have specialized parliamentary representatives posted at national embassies abroad⁷. The emergence of new global actors and new mechanisms of political discourse have in some instances transcended and transformed traditional diplomatic practices (Hamilton and Langhorne, 1995, p.258).

An advised plan to develop parliamentarians' capacity and efficiency in international diplomatic performances may start within the regional scope. A specialised member from the Senate along with an official from the Secretariat of the Senate could be appointed for a temporary placement to Thai embassies, starting from within the region (Southeast Asia). The appointed individuals should have professional knowledge on a particular subject and during the placement would be able to acquire first-hand diplomatic experience with Foreign Ministry officials posted abroad. The appropriate commencing period length should be around 3 - 6 months as an initiative for the project and then make an evaluation of the performance after completing the placement. Whether to extend the time period or to continue the scheme would depend upon the evaluation results. Consequently, this proposed scheme would support the objectives of parliamentary diplomatic duties mentioned earlier in the paper to enhance relations between specific parliamentary friendship groups and regional cooperation, which would therefore develop the senators' individual and collective performances further in a wider global context.

⁷ According to the senior secretariat official interviewed, this project has been discussed for an extended period of time, but the decision to proceed would have to depend on the administrative sector and the Foreign Ministry policy.

However, my personal opinion relies on the fact that the possibility of this proposal would have to be placed as a long-term plan for future consideration as there are a number of factors to be considered. The main factor is that the status of parliaments are legislative institutions, therefore parliamentarians are expected to prioritise on domestic legal duties rather than on international diplomatic duties. Moreover, the authority to make decisions regarding international issues is restricted by the Constitution. This, in my opinion, would also depend on the efficiency and direction of the institutional framework on the conducting of international diplomatic duties. Moreover, the government's foreign policy would also be another important factor that would influence the foreign office's policy on the postings of diplomats and other relevant personnel.

All in all, the most important thing is that if the placement plan were to be successfully launched in the near future, selected candidates should have the right knowledge, skills and attitude towards parliamentary diplomacy. Also, this placement scheme would be an opportunity for the senator and secretariat staff to work together in a proper diplomatic environment, enhancing their professional skills in diplomatic practices including managerial systems for appraisal, career progression, and incentives-that encourage the development of professional skill in a particular field (Dall'Alba and Sandberg, 2006, p.383).

Conclusion

Parliamentarians are crucial actors in building connection and foreign relations with fellow counterparts from other national parliaments. Therefore, capacity building and development is important not only in strengthening the skills of individual parliamentarians and secretariat staff who support the international duties, but also to develop the collective competency of

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the parliamentary institution as a whole. Apart from providing suitable training programmes for members of parliament, Secretariat staff should also be well-informed and competent with the skills required to support the works of parliamentarians, and such skills including language proficiency and the basic understandings of diplomatic procedures. As a result, the international diplomatic duties of the Thai Senate as an institution would have a continuous successful outcome and would therefore create a trustworthy image towards the actors. This is an issue that needs to be placed as a priority for most national parliaments whose members and staff represent the people themselves.

Suggestions for future research on methods to improve/develop parliamentary diplomacy for national parliaments would be to have a strong institutional policy and strategy implementation on developing international diplomatic affairs, in order to improve the prospects of national parliaments and its competency as an alternative diplomatic institution. Another thought for most national parliaments to consider is to strengthen the capacity of parliamentary secretariat staff who are responsible for supporting the international diplomatic duties of the senators. Whereas the institutional regulations may provide a structural framework to the 'limits' of their performance, they should always be attentive and able to solve any first-hand problems.

The other suggestion on the proposal for a diplomatic placement scheme would also be beneficial as senatorship is only for a contemporary period. The skills and competency of the senators are usually what they have from their professional backgrounds, therefore it is also important to improve and develop their professional skills during their term as a political representative. The reason I am making this statement is because I believe that these professional skills and knowledge will be transferable later on once they finish their term in

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office – although some senators argue that when they finish their term in the senate they do not continue any work related to politics or diplomacy due to the lack of opportunity or other personal engagements. However, interpersonal skills that may develop along the period of their tenure would always be transferable for individual senators who may consider expanding their political career later on.

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