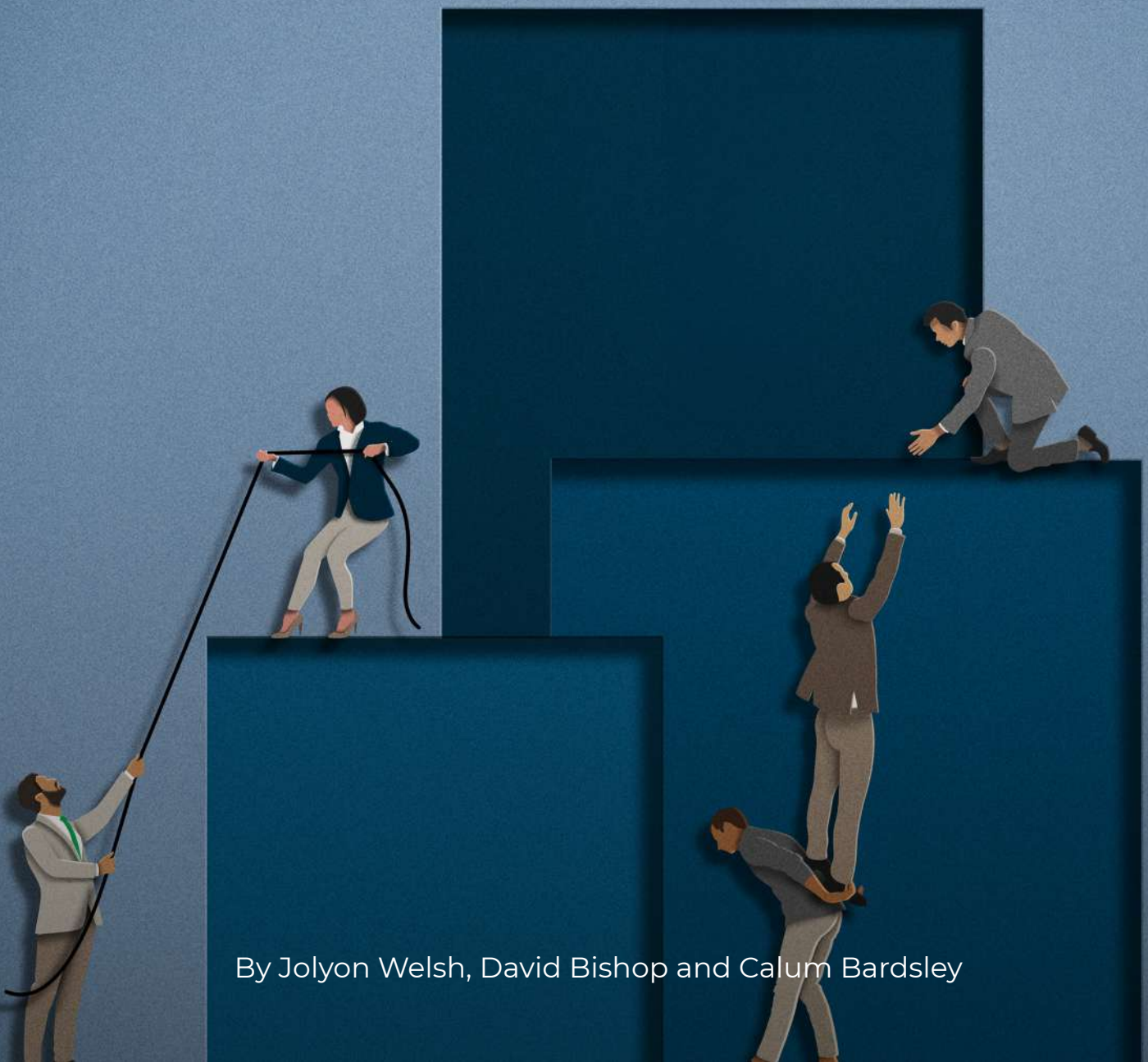


# Are your diplomats delivering?

How governments can achieve  
more through their diplomatic institutions



By Jolyon Welsh, David Bishop and Calum Bardsley

# Building diplomatic institutions which deliver real-world outcomes for the whole of government.

To deliver security, prosperity and international influence for their countries, many diplomatic institutions need to raise their game. They need sharper focus, tighter structures, and more efficient systems.

Diplomacy is a high-stakes business. There are rich rewards for nations which get it right – and serious consequences for those that get it wrong.

Senior figures in government can often have limited insight into what their diplomats do for a job. Diplomacy, by its nature, often happens many miles away from governments' home capitals. It is often most effective when it happens quietly, behind the scenes. And some of its processes can be opaque. But diplomacy operates in the real world – with real effects. And ministers across government can increase their impact – delivering more for their countries – if they use their diplomatic networks effectively. Some of the projects Consulum has been involved with recently show the range of diplomatic work, and the impact it can have.

Campaigns to win the right to host the biggest international sporting events – the football World Cup or the Olympic Games – against fierce competition require major diplomatic campaigns spanning multiple ministries and the country's entire embassy network. The same applies to winning a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council, putting a country, for a period, at the heart of global decision-making and enhancing its international positioning. As we have previously covered in [this article](#), during the COVID-19 pandemic countries' diplomatic networks went into overdrive to ensure their interests were protected and to secure their fair share of global

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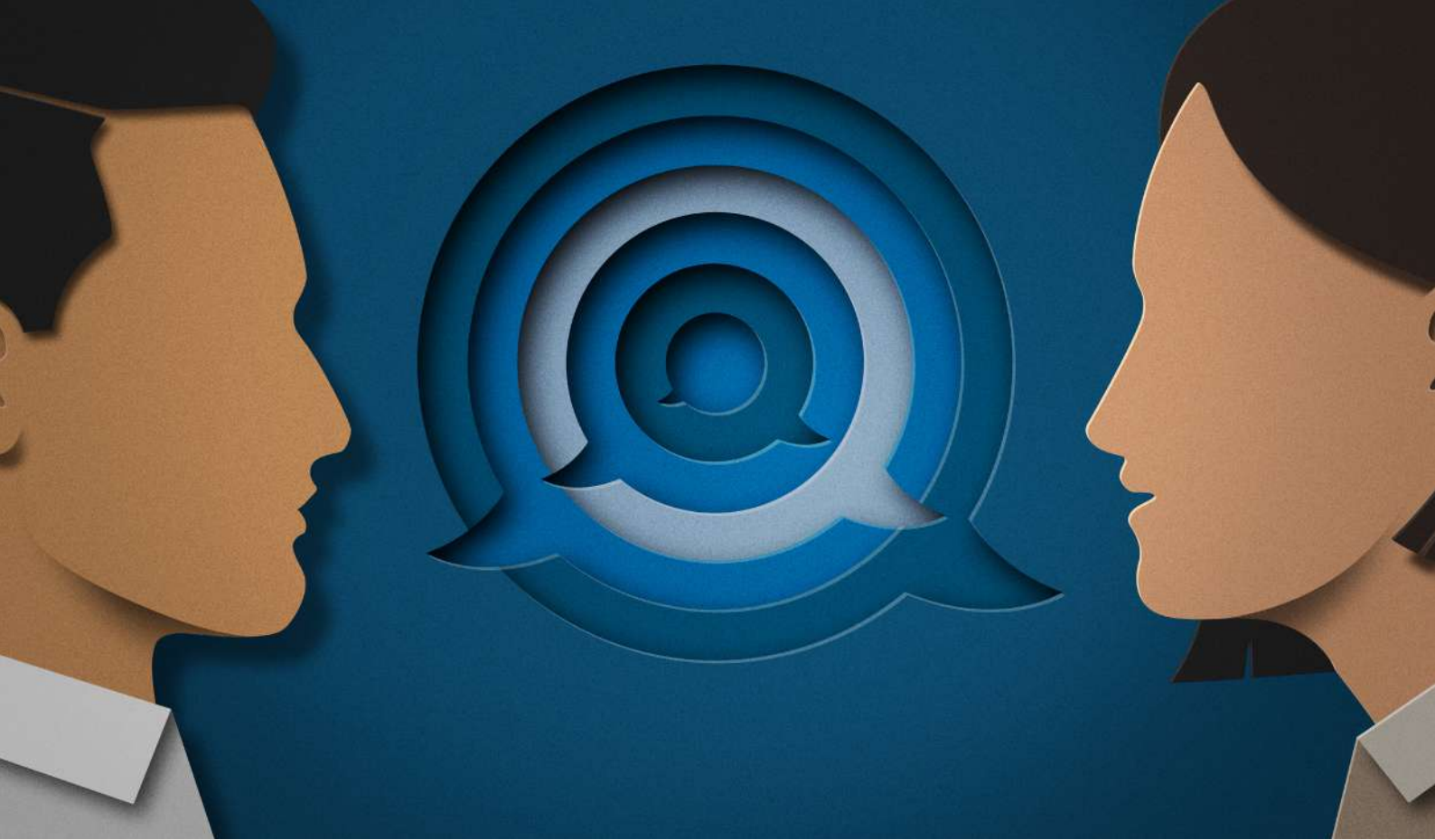
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vaccine supplies. A campaign to persuade a foreign car company to set up its regional manufacturing hub in a country – driving economic and capacity development – can play out over years of intense diplomatic activity.

The downside of ineffective diplomacy can be just as significant. Countries which fail to engage effectively in the fast-moving world of geopolitics can find themselves left on the sidelines of international decision-making, sometimes with catastrophic consequences for their interests.

All countries invest in their diplomatic services. One country we work with intends to grow the footprint of its diplomatic missions by nearly 50% in the next two years. But as we repeatedly hear directly from Ministers of Foreign Affairs, governments often struggle to translate their investment in diplomatic networks into real-world outcomes. In most cases this is not about resourcing. Many costs in diplomacy – buildings, salaries, travel, IT – are fixed. And an ineffective embassy can cost the same as the most super-effective embassy. Rather it is because foreign ministries and embassies have weak structures and systems. They lack the institutional capacity to set clear goals and to deliver them.





## **Look before you leap: Diagnosing diplomatic institutions' strengths and gaps**

Many governments struggle to build effective diplomatic institutions or restructure under performing ones. Why is this? For one thing, much of what embassy networks do is not easily visible from capitals, making it difficult to judge their effectiveness – until a crisis occurs. What's more, reform programmes that have worked for domestic ministries often fail to translate well to foreign ministries and embassies, which operate differently from other parts of government.

In our experience of working with foreign ministries, it's important to begin with a full assessment of the ministry's and the embassies' strengths and weaknesses. Consulum's Diplomatic Diagnostic Tool provides a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of foreign ministry and embassy operations – offering a health check across dozens of specific checkpoints, from staffing to tasking to IT systems, to outcome delivery. At the end of this process we can tell a Foreign Minister what's working, what isn't working, and why. From here we will build a tailor-made reform programme. Fixing an entire system takes time. But our approach identifies the priorities for action – taking into account the current state, the potential impact of reform on the country's interests, and costs. This enables our clients to make rapid progress where it will have most impact, and where it will produce clear and visible results.

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## Set a clear destination: Prioritising outcomes

One of the issues we discover most often when analysing diplomatic systems is a failure to set clear, outcome-driven objectives for ambassadors and embassies – and to measure delivery.

During our diagnostic assessment of one recent client, we discovered that the ministry of foreign affairs tasked and assessed its ambassadors solely through process targets: for example, specifying how many events they should attend. In other words, the ministry was targeting activity rather than the specific outcomes the nation was seeking from its diplomatic institutions.

On the basis of these findings, we helped the ministry to develop a new system to cascade objectives – both quantitative and qualitative – from across the whole of government to individual ambassadors, to support the development of embassy business plans, and to allocate resources accordingly. This was an essential element in a wider programme of foreign ministry reform.

## Learning from best – and worst – practice

There is no single best way to run diplomatic institutions. Countries have different requirements from their systems and different cultures. So we will always help our clients to build the solutions which work best for them.

But we can learn from what other countries do.

Ireland's successful campaign to win a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2021-22 is a great example of diplomatic best-practice. Ireland's government launched a branded campaign – Global Ireland – in 2018, which aimed to double its diplomatic network by 2025 to drive critical foreign-policy objectives, such as growing export markets, inward investment and tourism, building global alliances, and advancing international development and world peace. Ireland's Security Council bid was central to this effort, involving an intensive and co-ordinated global campaign by Ireland's entire network of diplomats. In an article entitled "How Ireland Gets its Way", [The Economist](#) named Ireland an unlikely diplomatic superpower, saying that, "On a per head basis, Ireland has a good claim to be the world's most diplomatically powerful country."

At the same time, the United Kingdom's negotiation of Brexit and its new relationship with the EU was an example of institutional failure. Britain's ministers struggled to understand the issues and made policy on the fly. Britain's negotiating team was weak, with multiple changes of personnel across the negotiations



and staff drafted in from across government, often with no experience of international negotiation and little knowledge of the EU. In contrast, the EU entered the negotiations with an experienced chief negotiator in Michel Barnier, a skilled and professional negotiating team, robust systems and structures and a clear negotiating mandate. The result was that the EU got what it wanted – including key concessions on its citizens' rights and the financial settlement. And Britain did not.

## The importance of diplomatic expertise

While these are public and well-known examples of diplomatic success and failure, much diplomatic work happens behind the scenes. This is as true for the operation of diplomatic institutions as it is for diplomatic policymaking. Occasionally the workings of a country's diplomatic machine come to light. The massive 2010 leak of US diplomatic cables ("Cablegate") provided a unique insight into the US State Department's global diplomatic effort. Notwithstanding the negative fallout from the leak, it did show the State Department and its embassies – a well-resourced, highly-skilled and well-structured diplomatic machine – were delivering for the United States. But such examples are rare.

Real understanding of different diplomatic systems can only be developed over years of real world experience. Consulium's approach – of combining management consulting specialists with diplomatic specialists – enables us to develop solutions for our clients based on a genuine understanding of international best practice and the advantages and disadvantages of different models, and effective change-management processes.

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## Build a diplomatic system that delivers: Developing the right structure and processes

James Clear, author of the New York Times bestseller, *Atomic Habits*, wrote: “You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.” Among the many diplomatic institutions around the world that we observe or work with, systems are often the weakest link, preventing governments from realising their foreign-policy objectives.

Like those of the United States, diplomatic institutions must be properly resourced if they are to be effective. They need enough capable people in sufficient places with the tools to do the job. Nevertheless, resourcing is rarely the principal reason systems are underperforming: the issue is usually poor structure and systems, and ineffective management.

There is no off-the-shelf solution to building an effective diplomatic system: it must be tailored to the unique objectives and circumstances of each country. That's why it's essential to bring the right combination of expertise and experience to the task, melding a systematic approach with deep diplomatic experience. Individuals who have specialist diplomatic knowledge – diplomats themselves – often lack the wider perspective and experience of change management needed for radical restructuring. Conversely, change-management specialists – for example, from traditional consulting firms – typically



lack understanding and experience of diplomatic institutions and how they work in practice.

From our experience of working in government transformations, the only effective change model merges specialist diplomatic expertise with high-quality change-management skills and a wider perspective. This combination facilitates a positive environment for change: diplomats can have confidence that their unique environment is understood, and leaders can have confidence that the programme will support real improvements.

Countries invest significantly in their diplomatic institutions, and these diplomatic structures are essential for their prosperity, security and successful international positioning. However, governments often put too little effort into optimising their diplomatic institutions and ensuring they deliver value for money. While reforming an entire diplomatic system takes time, targeted and prioritised improvements can bring rapid results. More governments should be making this a priority, and with a systematic and expert-led programme, more governments can reap the rewards of doing so.

## About the authors

**Jolyon Welsh** leads Consulum's Diplomatic Outcomes Practice. He has more than 30 years' international diplomatic experience with the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and as a consultant to governments around the world. He has been a regular guest lecturer on public diplomacy theory at Oxford University, and in 1996 was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur by President Chirac of France.



**Jolyon Welsh**

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**David Bishop**

**Calum Bardsley** is a Consulum Director and an expert transformation consultant. He has extensive experience in both government and private sectors, working with leading organisations such as PwC, Sky, BAe Systems, Virgin Media O2, as well as foreign ministries and other central government bodies in the UK and Middle East. He specializes in capacity-building and organisational design.



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