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U.S. Special Envoys: A Flexible Tool

Summary

- While the U.S. government has long employed special envoys for occasional diplomatic missions, the Obama administration's 24 special envoys represent an unprecedented expansion of this mechanism after the Bush administration, which generally did not use them.
- Use of the special envoys permitted more effort, focus and attention to be placed on a given issue than would have been the case had the position not existed, according to interviews with nine special envoys currently serving and three former special envoys.
- The envoys interviewed observed that their senior, but sometimes ambiguous positions in the government structure often afforded them greater access to senior foreign officials and news media than were enjoyed by regular officials below the level of cabinet secretary.
- None of the nine envoys who are currently serving cited policy conflicts between themselves and potential bureaucratic rivals such as assistant secretaries of state. Several former envoys, whether due to different experiences or greater candor in retirement, cited such tensions.
- The recent proliferation of special envoys is a product of the operating styles of President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton who appear to have found this mechanism to be an effective tool for addressing select foreign policy issues.

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Effort, Focus and Attention

The State Department's website lists 24 special envoys, special representatives, special advisors, or special coordinators (hereafter referred to as “special envoys”) as of July 2011. At least 11 are said to report directly to Secretary of State Clinton. Outside of the few who fill congressionally-mandated positions, none require Senate confirmation. These numbers reflect an expansion of the use of special envoys under the Obama Administration compared to the previous administration, which began with Secretary of State Colin Powell purposefully eliminating most of such positions. On a parallel track, the Obama White House has more than a dozen domestic policy “czars” (as dubbed by the news media) who focus on particular high-profile domestic issues.

To examine this new reliance on the special envoy mechanism, the U.S. Institute of Peace commissioned an oral history project in which nine current and three former U.S. special envoys were interviewed between October 2010 and March 2011 by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST). To encourage candor, interviewees were promised anonymity. The project's scope did not include interviews with State Department regional or functional bureau officers, National Security Council staffers, nor others with whom special envoys interact. Thus, this report focuses on how the special envoys view their own duties, challenges and value added.

The special envoys interviewed for this analysis who are currently serving vary widely in terms of their missions and the organizations in which they operate. Their staffs range in size from one to 30. Their mandates range from coordinating strictly inside the State Department to having the acknowledged lead for U.S. government policy on an issue. Some previously held Senate-confirmed positions such as assistant secretary of state or ambassador while others are new to high-level positions. Their differing titles—envoy, representative, adviser and coordinator—offer no clear indication of the scope or nature of their duties.

What these positions do have in common is that they permit more effort, focus and attention to be placed on a given issue than would be the case if the position and its support staff did not exist. In interviews, numerous special envoys stressed that progress on their issue would be significantly slowed had action rested on a busy assistant secretary or deputy assistant secretary of state who was concurrently handling other priority issues. As one envoy put it: “In the State Department, there are so many things that have to be dealt with that it is difficult for officers at high levels to give appropriate attention to some very important issues. The special envoy process takes care of that problem. . . It can be used if there are very specific issues that are of high importance that need to be addressed over a relatively short period—maybe the term of a president—where without somebody giving the focus to those issues, they may not be adequately addressed just because of the press of what needs to be done by the regional and functional bureaus.” On the other hand, another envoy said: “If it is a problem that will be easy to solve, then you do not need a special envoy.”

Not only does appointing a special envoy allow more effort and focus to be applied to an issue, it can also elevate the profile of the issue. Several envoys, particularly those who held previous high-level positions, said that they were able to secure meetings with senior foreign officials—for example, a head of state, the U.N. secretary-general, or a foreign minister—who would normally meet only with the secretary of state or perhaps a deputy secretary of state. Said one envoy: “I think the advantage of being a special envoy is that I can get meetings in governments where the Assistant Secretary generally cannot.” One envoy said he calls on foreign ministers, for example, and finds that access very useful. “My standing is a little ambiguous and I think that ambiguity in most cases operates to our benefit,” he said.

The high profile of special envoys allows them to attract news media coverage—domestic and or foreign—when they judge that it will advance their issue. “It turned out that the skillful use of the news media was one of the most important tools that I had,” said one. Several interviewees stressed that when speaking publicly, they made sure to quote the president’s or secretary of state’s comments on the issue. Envoys who met on occasion with the president or secretary of state were able to quote statements made in those in-person meetings. Envoys who seldom or never met with the president or secretary said that they quoted the principals’ speeches or written statements to demonstrate high-level involvement in the issue.

Operations, Support and Limitations

Many of the special envoys interviewed felt their personal background was a key contributor to their effectiveness. Yet, they came from a variety of backgrounds. For example, one pointed to his personal ties with key players developed over his decades in the State Department while another envoy saw as beneficial his decades of experience outside of the executive branch. While no one particular background appears to have been the most useful, it is clear that each envoy brought key assets to the position. As one envoy explained it, “Obviously, so many of these ‘specials’—special envoys, special representatives, etc.—are a function of individual personalities and talents.

Presumably, the Secretary thought that I had some value added. . . So it really depends on who the individuals are and the priorities that the Secretary gives to particular functions.”

Most interviewees expressed satisfaction with their office staffing and budgets. However, several envoys noted that their staffs were mostly people who happened to be available on short notice (for example, presidential management fellows) rather than seasoned foreign service officers (FSOs) whose assignments are typically set six to nine months in advance. Said one envoy, “The State Department [personnel] system is not designed to staff special envoy offices with foreign service officers. . . The biggest structural problem for an envoy’s office is getting FSOs assigned. You need them because they have overseas experience.” That said, several of the highest-profile envoys indicated that the State Department personnel system did provide them with sufficient numbers of experienced foreign service officers.

Several interviewees said that being outside of the standard State Department organizational chart made it more difficult for them to move policy decision papers through the national security bureaucracy to obtain high-level approval. Other envoys indicated that they managed to develop ad hoc mechanisms and channels to secure needed interagency or National Security Council concurrence. Several envoys found it unhelpful that State Department principals were not actively engaged in the issue.

Most current envoys described their role as centering on coalition building rather than trying to dictate policy. Said one envoy: “If you approach this as an effort to try to build coalitions that will get things done and bring people into the process and get agreement on how to move forward, then I think you’ll make progress.” Another envoy stressed the importance of working within existing procedures. “I’m a believer that you accept the business systems with their limitations. . . You work the system the way it is instead of trying to invent a new one. You get a lot more done that way,” he said.

Bureaucratic Rivals

None of the current envoys who were interviewed cited policy conflicts between themselves and potential bureaucratic rivals such as assistant secretaries of state or National Security Council staffers. That said, several who were not operating under a formal written mandate from the president or secretary of state said that such explicit authority would have been valuable. “In an ideal world, I think it would be good to have a more specific mandate so that it will be clear that the person in this position really was in charge of the issue,” said one envoy.

In contrast, several former envoys, whether due to their different experiences or greater candor in retirement, did cite tensions between themselves and regular government offices. One former envoy explained that while he had a mission statement, the State Department regional bureau disputed his duties. “We debated it for three to four weeks; [my duties were] rewritten three times,” the envoy said. “It is dependent on personalities to some degree. If the assistant secretary, whether they are a career officer or political appointee, doesn’t want you doing the job or they want to do the job, you can write all the mission statements you want, but what are you going to do? You don’t have any enforcement authority. . . So I think the biggest problem was the intra-State Department tensions,” he said.

Such tensions can arise from the concern that appointing “outsiders” as special envoys removes opportunities for career officers to do important and career-enhancing work, relegating them to doing frustrating routine jobs. Interestingly, more than half of the Obama administration’s current special envoys are not “outsiders” but rather active duty or retired career State Department officers.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report is based on interviews with nine current and three former U.S. special envoys, conducted between October 2010 and March 2011. It's part of a U.S. Institute of Peace special oral history project supported by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST). The report author, John K. Naland, is the executive director of ASDT and served in a variety of foreign and domestic positions during 25 years as a foreign service officer with the State Department. The views expressed in this report are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. government. In addition, this report does not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

Conclusion

The recent proliferation of special envoys is a product of the operating styles of President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton who apparently have found this mechanism to be an effective tool for addressing select foreign policy issues. As one envoy summarized it:

"I think for this administration, for this secretary, it's been an effective approach. I think a new secretary should start from a zero base and make a decision on these 'specials'. . . These special roles can be an asset to the department and to the secretary, but it depends on the priorities of the secretary and it depends on the individuals. . . It's all *sui generis*. The roles differ from individual to individual, from portfolio to portfolio. It should be a very flexible tool that the secretary has to advance her or his objectives. And it should be personality-driven in the sense that, if you can't find the right person for the job, then don't fill the job."



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