Many bilateral negotiations of secondary importance are still conducted by embassies. This is also true of some of the first order, for example on the legal status of armed forces personnel and the future of military bases abroad, not least because these can take years to conclude. But, assuming that a bilateral relationship enjoys an embassy at each of its poles, is it best for a state to negotiate with the foreign embassy in its own capital or through its own embassy abroad, at home or away? Diplomatic historians have rarely shown much interest in this question, although the choice of venue is always taken seriously by foreign ministries because it can have a distinct bearing on the outcome of a negotiation. In sporting engagements, ‘home advantage’ is well established: the players are likely to gain both from their greater familiarity with the ground and the vocal encouragement of their more numerous supporters. In diplomacy, however, the picture is less clear. Some states appear to be as keen to conduct negotiations by means of their own embassies in overseas capitals as others are to pursue them via foreign embassies at home. The reason for this is that home and abroad both have their advantages and disadvantages. But, this being the case, how are decisions actually made as to which embassy should take the lead?

**Home advantage and away advantage**

Negotiations today frequently require the participation of specialists not on the regular staff of the embassy. The first advantage of negotiating at home, therefore, is that this avoids the expense – in time wasted as well as money spent – of sending out such persons to stiffen the embassy’s negotiators; this consideration obviously weighs more heavily with poorer states. By virtue of the greater ease with which it can consult interests
affected by a negotiation, the home team can also make any necessary adjustments to its position more quickly, although modern communications probably make this a less important aspect of home advantage than it used to be, particularly for larger states. The private discussions and communications of the home team are also less vulnerable to eavesdropping, while its secret service has more opportunity to tune in to those of the foreign embassy and its visiting specialists. The home team has more influence over the choreography of the negotiations, including the choice of conference rooms, the timing of meetings, arrangements for press briefings, and the selection of more or less instructive diversions for any delegates who have come from abroad, some or all of which in some circumstances might give it a distinct edge – not least by enabling it to shape the atmosphere favouring its strategy. This is particularly appealing to authoritarian and totalitarian states, where opposition elements and a free press do not exist to disturb their tidy arrangements.

These advantages of negotiating at home might seem to be overwhelming but the appeal of negotiating away is also strong. Despite its risks, particularly that of exposing a negotiating position to espionage, Britain was one state that preferred to negotiate abroad from well before the French Revolution until well after World War II – and probably still prefers to do so today. In the early modern period, as recorded by D. B. Horn, the eminent historian of the British Diplomatic Service, there were two general reasons for what the admiring Prussians called the English plan. The first of these was that an ambassador’s elaborate written instructions provided the only record of royal assent to policy towards the country in question, and so were a vital register of political consensus. A secretary of state who negotiated directly with a foreign diplomat in London forfeited this protection and exposed himself to personal blame should any mishap occur. The second reason was that secretaries of state, who until 1782 were responsible for domestic as well as foreign business, could well have difficulties in attempting negotiations in London, for they rarely spoke foreign languages other than French and sometimes not even that.¹ In course of time these general aspects of away advantage disappeared but there were others then – and there have been others since.

What has probably always been the greatest advantage of negotiating abroad was also noted by Horn. The secretaries of state in eighteenth