

## MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Multilateral diplomacy is as old as the Westphalian order of independent territorial states. Even though there has been considerable growth in the number and significance of multilateral institutions and non-state actors, the state-centric Westphalian system is intact. Multilateral diplomacy is distinct from traditional bilateral diplomacy by virtue of the environment or arena in which it is conducted. This arena includes, but is not necessarily restricted to, public international organizations, international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international conferences, and summit meetings. The multilateral diplomatic environment provides diplomats who operate within it with a framework that in some ways limits and in others expands how they operate.

Contemporary multilateral diplomacy evolved over many centuries to take the form it has today. From the Peace of Westphalia to the Congress of Vienna to the conferences that settled the great wars of the twentieth century, the use of multilateral diplomacy has increased in frequency and significance. For most of the period of the Westphalian order, multilateral diplomatic activity took place largely in occasional meetings convened to

deal with specific issues such as postwar settlements. In the contemporary world, most multilateral diplomacy occurs in institutionalized settings such as the United Nations, NATO, and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Several factors help account for the increased salience of multilateral diplomacy in today's world. One is the growth in the number and importance of international organizations, especially since the end of World War II. Another element in the multilateral diplomatic equation is the increase in the number and significance of NGOs that have an international agenda and membership. Also important, especially in the post-Cold War era, is the phenomenon known as globalization. Finally, the Cold War itself had a profound impact on the growth of multilateral diplomacy.

During the Cold War, multilateral diplomacy, often institutionalized in international organizations, became more the norm than the exception. One aspect of the Cold War was that both superpowers sought allies in their contest with each other, and this search led to the creation of new international organizations such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Furthermore, the Cold War era also witnessed the emergence of large numbers of newly independent states whose formal entry into the Westphalian order was typically marked by membership in the United Nations and other international organizations. In addition, some of these states also formed international organizations of their own, such as the Arab League, the Organization of African Unity, and the more global Group of 77. These organizations added a North-South dimension to the East-West orientation of the Cold War. They also augmented the significance of multilateral diplomacy.

In one sense, the Cold War froze all diplomacy in place, including the multilateral variant, as many conflicts, even those traditionally said to be within the exclusive jurisdiction of the sovereign state, were linked to the Manichean struggle between the superpowers. One consequence was that the traditional distinction between domestic and international issues became blurred. Thus, to cite only one example, a struggle for power within the newly independent state of the Congo in the early 1960s quickly became enmeshed in the global conflict between the Soviets and the Americans, the United Nations becoming part of the battlefield.<sup>1</sup> If anything, this blurring has increased in the post-Cold War era of accelerated globalization.

Globalization in all of its dimensions, but particularly the spread of capitalism to virtually all corners of the world, has accelerated in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. As globalization has increased, so, too, has the growth in the number, complexity, and importance of international transactions. The bankruptcy of a leading financial institution in Japan creates ripples in the many countries in which it served as a major source of loans. Decisions of the WTO

may affect employment and investment around the world. Similarly, a decision to send UN forces to a troubled state or region affects lives and budgets in countries far removed from the field of battle, as personnel and equipment are moved, funds are spent, and complex UN-sponsored activities are undertaken. Globalization means that domestic political concerns reverberate internationally and that international politics becomes more intertwined with local politics. Thus, although globalization enhances the significance of multilateral diplomacy, it also increases its complexity. However, multilateral diplomacy is much more suited to dealing with the problems that attend globalization than is traditional bilateral diplomatic activity. Many if not all of the most serious contemporary issues involve large numbers of states as well as the numerous intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) that have been created. As pointed out in the introduction to this volume, most IGOs have been established since the end of World War II, reflecting the growing need for such institutions and hence the increased salience of multilateral diplomatic venues.

The actors on the multilateral diplomatic stage today are not all representatives of states. Officials from multinational corporations and NGOs jostle for power and influence in the corridors of the UN and other international organizations along with professional diplomats, politicians, and international bureaucrats. The large numbers of nonstate actors such as these have contributed to the environment within which multilateral diplomacy is conducted. For example, many NGOs call for global conferences to be held, and when they are, the NGOs lobby governments, the press, and officials of international organizations on issues that concern them. They also provide diplomats with technical data and advice, a factor of special importance to diplomats representing poor countries that are unable to generate technical studies on their own.<sup>2</sup>

One special type of multilateral diplomacy occurs when summit meetings involving more than two states take place. As argued in Chapter 5, some diplomats may wish to do without summit diplomacy, perhaps because they fear that the leaders of states would not do as good a job of negotiating the interests of the country as professional diplomats themselves. Avoiding summit meetings is no longer possible, however; the supposedly risky séances take place with considerable frequency, and many, if not most, are now multilateral events. Thus, meetings of the heads of state or governments of the Group of 7 (G-7), plus Russia,<sup>3</sup> are now at least annual events, as are summits of the members of NATO, the European Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to name only a few. The passing of the Cold War accelerated this process, as bilateral summits became less common than those involving three or more states. During the Cold War, the term *summit* inevitably referred to a meeting between the

leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States, while the rest of the world waited and watched. By the mid-1990s, however, multilateral summits were the norm rather than the exception, and this is a trend that is likely to continue.

In the preceding chapters of this book, several concepts related to multilateral diplomacy have been explored. One recurrent theme is that multilateral diplomacy and bilateral diplomacy, although sharing important features, are somehow distinct and that the differences between them matter. This chapter continues and expands that exploration. One dissimilarity between the two modes of diplomacy is related to the knowledge base required in each case. In traditional diplomacy, diplomats representing their country in the capital of another country need to have a firm grasp of the national interests of both places. They need to know where the interests of the two overlap and where they are at variance. In order to be effective, they must understand the political system and political culture of the country as well as the individuals who count in the local political, economic, and even cultural life. In a multilateral setting, successful diplomats must also develop an acute awareness of the players. However, the issues dealt with are often particular to the specific multilateral arena in question; even if they are the same as those discussed in bilateral diplomacy, they are approached in a different way. For example, negotiations regarding a trade question in a traditional setting might focus on the specific bilateral issues between two countries, whereas at the United Nations or the WTO, discussion would focus on broad issues of policy and trade law. Furthermore, just as diplomats in a traditional setting must understand the political culture of the country to which they are accredited, multilateral diplomats must realize that international organizations also have a political system and political culture. Additionally, in multilateral diplomacy diplomats must acclimatize themselves to a political arena in which people speak several languages and in which the national interests of a large number of countries must be accommodated.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, multilateral diplomacy typically involves daily personal contact with a large number of people. It is not surprising, therefore, that the ability to get along with people, regardless of political, economic, or cultural differences, is probably more important in the multilateral setting than in bilateral diplomacy, where the political and military weight of the two countries may be more decisive than ideological or cultural variances. Important in this regard is the ability to convey genuine respect for the religious and cultural diversity represented at the United Nations. Delegates who are not respectful and tolerant of this diversity may be unable to convince others to accommodate their views and may find themselves outside the UN consensus. By contrast, those who respect the

religion and culture of others will be likely to give more weight to what other delegates say than those who don't. Consequently, they are likely to try to find a way to use language that is not offensive to the culture or religion of others when drafting resolutions.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary multilateral diplomacy takes place in the environment of the "new diplomacy" referred to in this book's introduction. This new diplomacy is much more public than was the old diplomacy of preceding centuries. It also includes many nonstate actors in addition to the usual representatives of states. As a consequence, successful contemporary diplomats must master, whether in bilateral or multilateral settings, the skill of dealing with news media. However, as pointed out in Chapter 1, diplomats in multilateral venues, regardless of their nationality, must pay special attention to the US media, because so much multilateral diplomatic activity revolves around the UN headquarters in New York City.

Another distinguishing factor of diplomatic activity in international organizations is that it involves public speaking and the ability to master the rules of parliamentary procedure that are adhered to by these bodies. Multilateral organizations have decisionmaking structures that are similar to those of many parliamentary bodies. Divergent views are debated in public, many questions are settled by voting, and meetings are conducted according to established rules of procedure. Furthermore, in international conferencing to establish rules of procedure, participants are participants are "accustomed to finding solutions, often in the form of compromises, for difficult problems" (Kaufmann 1988, 145). Thus, experience in parliamentary politics and parliamentary procedure probably constitutes good training for wheeling and dealing at the UN (Kaufmann 1988, 142 and 144-145).

There are some important differences between many national legislatures and most international organizations. For example, no UN official, including the Secretary-General, has power comparable to that of the British prime minister or the Speaker of the House in the US Congress. Furthermore, although there are voting blocs in the United Nations, there are no disciplined political parties, and states may defect from their bloc with relative impunity. Although in theory diplomats at the UN must vote according to instructions from their capitals, in practice they are often relatively more autonomous than diplomats in many bilateral settings; they have considerable latitude as they participate in the extensive and prolonged lobbying that is the hallmark of diplomacy at the UN and in multilateral conferences convened to deal with such issues as global warming and the law of the sea.

As mentioned frequently in this book, the pattern for diplomacy at the United Nations is to seek consensus. In the Security Council, consensus

among the five permanent members is most important, whereas in the General Assembly a two-thirds majority, as distinct from a simple majority, is required to pass a resolution on an "important question" (Article 18, para. 2). Even in the Security Council, the votes of the nonpermanent members are important, as any sign of dissent would weaken the appearance of resolve, especially if action under Chapter VII of the Charter is to be undertaken.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in most international organizations that operate on the basis of one state, one vote, all, or virtually all, member states are important, and the wording of a resolution must satisfy the interests and needs of the vast majority of the members. One result is that diplomats representing small countries may have a large impact on the outcome of a debate or the content of a specific resolution. Sometimes this influence is due to specific knowledge they possess, but more often it is more related to rhetorical, bargaining, or resolution-writing skills than to substantive expertise.

Not all states choose to seek a broad consensus in multilateral arenas when vital interests are at stake. This is especially true of superpowers, which may prefer unilateral action or may prefer to ignore the UN altogether if possible. For example, faced with the prospect of a veto of its preferred outcome at the Security Council, the United States has the option of acting unilaterally and doing so with impunity because the other veto powers at the UN do not have the political or economic muscle to prevent the US from doing so.

The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of an era dominated by the United States of America as the world's single superpower. Its role as a global hegemon is such that it is able to determine what role, if any, will be allotted to the UN or other major international organizations. Consequently, as a result of American preferences, the UN does not play a central role in settling the conflicts over the fates of Palestine, Afghanistan, or Iraq. The UN's irrelevance in the earlier conflict over Vietnam is being repeated in all of the key conflicts of our time. Some scholars have argued that "the forceful and unilateral exercise of U.S. power . . . is the logical outcome of the current unrivaled U.S. position in the international system" (Jervis 2003, 84). Others take the position that an ideological preference for unilateralism is neither logical nor in the long-term interests of the superpower (Albright 2003; Tharoor 2003). For example, the United States could have responded unilaterally in 1990–1991 to the challenge to world order presented by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Instead, for pragmatic reasons that Bush administration decided to lower US human and financial costs and create a multilateral coalition including the UN and a large number of states. Furthermore, it made numerous concessions in order to secure the participation of allies in that coalition. In 2003 the situation was quite different, and the coalition assembled by the United States to invade Iraq was

smaller, excluded the UN, and was quintessentially an American operation. Multilateralism broad enough to include the United Nations was eliminated as an option by that Bush administration, partly as the result of an ideological preference of the US government for unilateral action. This illustrates an important point. Superpowers dominated by elites with an ideological preference for unilateral action will make few if any concessions to secure the support of allies, even if to do so would reduce the costs to the superpower, and those allies who do ally with such a state will be little more than window dressing. Not surprisingly, most potential allies will refuse to accept this role (de Montbrtal 2003).

US Secretary of State Colin Powell disputes the assertion of critics of the foreign policy of the Bush administration, who claim, unjustifiably in his view, that "U.S. strategy is widely accused of being unilateralist by design" (Powell 2004, 23). He has articulated a strategy of forming "partnerships" with allies in pursuit of common goals and argues that the pursuit of such partnerships is the hallmark of President George W. Bush's foreign policy. However, in so doing he made scant mention of the United Nations, except as an arena for the articulation and approval of US preferences (Powell 2004, 25), and no mention was made of the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund or most major multilateral arenas. The only multilateral organization mentioned in a positive tone is NATO. It is not surprising that a superpower would prefer to operate in bilateral frameworks, as they are the traditional arena for classical power politics. Nor is it surprising that a military alliance such as NATO, in which the United States can be expected to serve as *primus inter pares* would be preferred to the less manageable Security Council of the United Nations. The thrust of Colin Powell's argument, and of President Bush's foreign policy, is to stress the importance of bilateral relations with other states, particularly relations "among the world's major powers" (Powell 2004, 28). As a result of such go-it-alone tendencies, especially by the United States, the United Nations became increasingly marginalized in the early part of the twenty-first century, especially from a security perspective. As long as Washington is propelled by this logic, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that multilateral diplomacy, and multilateral organizations, will not play a central role in the diplomacy of the single superpower.

This chapter contains three essays, each of which expands on important themes related to multilateral diplomacy in contemporary global politics. The first, by Ambassador Chen Luzhi, focuses on sovereignty; the second, by Richard Langhorne, discusses relations between state and nonstate actors in the international arena; and the third, by Richard Retano and Caleb Ellenbein, concentrates on the role of the United States in global politics following the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

All members of the United Nations are sovereign states. Sovereignty is one of the key defining characteristics of the Westphalian order of states, and normally, it is guarded jealously by them. Rienk Terpstra, whose essay on post-Cold War diplomacy appears in Chapter 5 of this book, refers to sovereignty as a "bargaining chip," that is, something that can be traded in return for something else. Chinese Ambassador Chen Luzhi articulates a strikingly different approach to the importance of sovereignty in his essay. In Chen's view, the sovereignty of states must be clear and unchallenged. Only if states are truly sovereign can they delegate meaningful authority to multinational institutions, and only if those institutions have real authority can they be truly effective. Sovereignty of individual states is the defining characteristic of the international system, and diplomacy that ignores or deemphasizes this is guaranteed to fail in Ambassador Chen's opinion. Even though the interdependence of states is increasingly obvious, and sovereignty of small states is often downplayed by large states, it remains the legal centerpiece of contemporary world order.

This state-centric perspective is challenged in part by the second essay in this chapter. The world in which we live may be dominated by states, especially those at or near the peak of the hierarchy of international power, but an increasing number and variety of nonstate transnational entities are crowding the stage. Furthermore, some of them have a greater economic, cultural, or political heft than many of the states in the developing world. Richard Langhorne points out that the multilateral arena is often the venue of choice or necessity for interactions between states and transnational actors. In his essay, he explores this theme in the context of providing an overview of the development of multilateral diplomacy since the nineteenth century and up to the present period. In the contemporary world, Langhorne argues, "three changes have taken and are taking place: First, states are acquiring a different and sometimes lesser scope of action. Second, associations of states are affected by the changing role of their progenitors and some have begun to move into a more unilateral global role, though retaining multilateral in their construction. Third, the tendency for weak states to collapse into uncontrollable internal conflict has brought a new importance to private organizations offering humanitarian, human rights, and developmental relief."

One of the most important aspects of Langhorne's essay is his elucidation of the salience of the recent changes in information and communications technology, a change he likens to a "revolution" that has enabled people all over the world to communicate instantly and globally, with little or no interference from states. In such a world, states are weaker than in a system in which the possession of territory trumps all other political factors. Borders are increasingly permeable, and what has come to be called

globalization affects people and institutions everywhere in unprecedented ways. Multilateral organizations are among the organizations most affected by this revolution. Langhorne focuses much of his attention on multilateral economic institutions (MEIs) and argues that organizations such as the World Bank, with weighted voting benefiting its richest members, has to a considerable degree been superseded in importance by organizations such as the recently created World Trade Organization (WTO), whose "one country, one vote" system heralds the beginning of "a real redistribution of political power."

As states have been weakened, some have collapsed and others may follow in their chaotic wake. In such a world, conflict within weak states takes on global significance, giving added importance to multilateral diplomacy as well as to international NGOs that move in to fill the vacuum that results in these circumstances. According to Langhorne, we live in a world where multilateral diplomacy is necessary, but where "its results can be frustratingly evanescent."

A book such as this one must draw a careful balance between concentrating on theoretical material, which is likely to stand the test of time, and material that focuses on "current events" that may soon be out of date. However, the consequences for multilateral diplomacy of the foreign policy of US president George W. Bush are so sweeping and have such potentially long-term consequences that we would be remiss if the book did not address this issue directly. This task fell to Richard Reitano and Caleb Elfenbein. In the final essay in this volume, they focus on the fate of "Multilateral Diplomacy and the United Nations in the Aftermath of 9/11." Much of the essay is a critique of American diplomacy in this period and is especially concerned about the negative effect the American preference for unilateral action has had and will have on the multilateral arena and on the prospect for global peace and prosperity. A powerful subtheme is that globalization includes the "globalization of conflict," a theme also found in the essay by Richard Langhorne.

A hegemon can project power anywhere and for any reason it thinks sufficient. Few if any countervailing forces exist to constrain a superpower, but Reitano and Elfenbein suggest that the United Nations is a potential "collective counterweight to American power." This is a potentially dangerous role for the UN, as counterweights to superpowers may end up being regarded as enemies rather than as preferred partners. In the end, however, Reitano and Elfenbein conclude, "The UN may be unable to prevent the United States from engaging in military adventures, but it can remind the world (and most Americans) that diplomacy and the use of multilateral force are always preferable and that unilateral force is rarely a long-term solution to the most difficult problems."

If the international system is in the midst of a long-term trend toward preference for the unilateral exercise of power by its leading members, especially the United States, then multilateral organizations of all kinds may face an extended period of being marginalized. In this context, it will be necessary for the United Nations, as the preeminent multilateral arena, to survive and thus keep the concept of multilateral action alive, awaiting the eventual and perhaps inevitable ebb tide of the unilateral impulse.

In the future, hegemons with an ideological preference for unilateral action may be confronted by a broad coalition of states and other political actors whose only means of defense against the hegemon is to act collectively to constrain it. As the dean of Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs has observed, in the aftermath of September 11, the Bush administration's unilateralist impulses and resistance to international institutions in pursuit of the 'war on terrorism' were constrained by virtually unanimous support among other governments and NGOs around the world for supra-national institutions like the United Nations" (Anderson 2003, 5). Paradoxically, therefore, a unilateralist superpower may stimulate a multilateral countervoice. It is too soon to tell if or when this will happen, but even the staunchest supporters of US supremacy must admit that it is a realistic possibility.

With the end of the Cold War, the world has moved from domination by a system of bipolarity to a world of unipolarity, with the United States as the "sole surviving superpower." Major initiatives in the United States Council or the International Monetary Fund, for example, cannot succeed without American support and leadership. However, as pointed out in Chapter 3, as the importance of economic issues increases in the age of globalization, so, too, does the (potential) weight of the European Union, Japan, and other current and future centers of international commerce. It is possible, therefore, that the unipolar aspects of the world that became increasingly apparent in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century will be succeeded by multipolarity. If so, multilateral meetings and conferences could become even more central to global politics than during the Cold War. Unilateral action by the single superpower may become less prominent, and joint action, negotiated in multilateral settings, that a multipolar world system will come about soon or that it will lead inevitably to a more peaceful world.

While reflecting on prospects for multilateral diplomacy and the changes the world is undergoing, it is important to remember that new technology, the proliferation of international organizations and NGOs, and globalization have not yet rendered the nation-state obsolete. The fact that people all over the world can watch a political crisis or even a

war unfold on television does not necessarily mean that the Security Council will act to resolve the crisis, or that if it does the action it undertakes will be effective. Multilateral diplomacy coexists with traditional diplomacy, globalization with nationalism, and the pursuit of the national interests of individual states with a search for the means to serve the often-inchoate interests of the global community. The appeal of multilateralism is strong, but the incentive for powerful states to act unilaterally and their ability to do so remain. The importance of multilateral diplomacy may increase, but as long as the Westphalian order survives, independent states will retain the ability and the legal right, enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter, to employ such traditional geopolitical stratagems as unilateral military action in what their leaders perceive to be their own national interest. There is no reason to believe that they will forsake that right in the near future.

### Notes

1. Although the Congo crisis may have helped augment the role of multilateral diplomatic activity, it is perhaps best known for leading to the UN payments crisis of 1960-1965. See Morphet 1994, 197-200.
2. Yehia Auda of the Egyptian Mission to the United Nations, interview by author, September 5, 1997.
3. The G-7 consists of the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Canada. Russian officials are often included as well.
4. Yehia Auda, interview.
5. For a review of the provisions of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, see Chapter 2.

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## MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY IN A TIME OF "RELATIVE" SOVEREIGNTY

Ambassador Chen Luzhi<sup>1</sup>

In academic, political, and business circles there has been much ado about making sense of the changes in international relations since the end of the Cold War. And one disturbing—and mistaken—conclusion is that the state system is seemingly irrelevant and sovereignty eroding. To say this is to suggest that there is not much of a future for multilateral diplomacy. But sovereignty is the defining principle of diplomacy, and a system of sovereignty is the organizing principle of multilateral diplomacy; without sovereign states there can be no multilateral diplomacy—or bilateral diplomacy, for that matter.

It is true the modern state system feels the pressure of the forces of globalization and is challenged by increasingly powerful nonstate actors in the post-Cold War period. But this is not necessarily a new development. There has been a challenge to the sovereignty of the state dating to the founding of the United Nations, the rise of human rights claims, and continuing on through economic interdependence and environmental issues," notes J. Brian Hehir, in a 1996 lecture to the Woodrow Wilson Center in