

2

The Purposes of Multilateralism

Diplomacy is the art of dealing with other governments by communication – as opposed to war, military deterrence, subversion, propaganda and so on. We use the same word for how a government deals with other governments (as in ‘British diplomacy in Europe’) and for the craft and profession of the officials (‘diplomats’) who specialise in this function.¹ Your responsibilities as a diplomat include representing your own nation and government to others; also helping your government to identify, evaluate and respond to external approaches, threats and opportunities. In its most elevated form, diplomacy aims to influence the behaviour of foreign governments and their agents.

When one government deals with another on a one-to-one basis only two sides are involved: this is called bilateral diplomacy. Multilateral diplomacy is dealing with several governments simultaneously. In multilateral diplomacy, not only does your government deal with several governments at the one time, but those other governments are also interacting with each other. This sounds – and is – complicated. It invites the questions: Why would anyone want to do that? Wouldn’t it be easier to conduct all dealings bilaterally?

Purposes of multilateral diplomacy

There are at least nine different reasons impelling governments to engage each other multilaterally: precisely the same reasons as those which lead them to engage bilaterally.

Information gathering and pooling

A prime motive for a government to interact with others is to access information: the experience of other governments and forewarning of

their intentions can help identify opportunities or threats for your own citizens and corporations. Your police can be more effective if they are alerted by foreign counterparts to the movements of individual criminals, to new patterns of criminal behaviour and to new methods of law-enforcement. This can be done bilaterally; but a multilateral organisation such as Interpol is a more effective way to pool and disseminate such information amongst the police forces of participating countries. Likewise, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) assembles, expertly evaluates and disseminates information on economic management to the governments of the economically advanced countries. These governments find it useful to engage in a process rather like academic 'peer review': each member country reports on its economic management, and periodically the other members, and OECD technical staff, assess and comment on this performance.

Joint projects

Pooling resources with others is often an effective way of achieving your own objectives. The supersonic airliner Concorde was the product of a joint venture between the French and British governments. Other projects require wider participation. The eradication of smallpox was a cooperative achievement by all governments working together through and with the World Health Organization (WHO). If a river flows through two countries, flood control, navigation, etc. cry out for joint management; if the river flows through several countries the obvious answer is a multilateral arrangement such as the Danube River Commission involving all riparian states. Similarly, the management of resources to which no one government has an exclusive claim, such as high seas fisheries, demands multilateral arrangements.

Managing the external environment

Just as a cooperative relationship with a neighbour can provide a political environment conducive to easing bilateral problems, multilateral arrangements can influence the regional or global environment your country experiences. Thus if the multilateral Chemical Weapons Convention results in a world where these weapons are less readily available to potential aggressors, all nations will be relatively more secure against this particular threat: their security environment will have improved.² If multilateral agreements in the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) open up markets, the trade environment for all countries will have improved.

Influencing behaviour

States are defined by their sovereignty, that is to say their ability to make decisions independently of other states and to be the sole determinants of what happens in their own territory; but paradoxically, many of the matters which their governments would wish to influence are within the sovereign control of other states.

When, in the 1960s, Sweden addressed the problem of acid rain degrading Swedish lakes, the source was found to be factories in the United Kingdom. The Swedish government could not itself control these emissions but it could (and did), by a combination of bilateral diplomacy and propaganda, persuade the British government to act to reduce the problem. Alternative, additional, routes to the same outcome are now available to the Swedish government through multilateral diplomacy. It can seek, for example, a global regime to control cross-border pollution and European Union legislation on industrial emission standards. Either of these could compel the British government to behave as the Swedish government wishes.

Mutually beneficial deals

Often the most effective way of influencing the behaviour of another party is to enter into a contractual agreement with them. This not only involves obtaining a commitment that they will do certain things, it also involves giving them an incentive to live up to that agreement in the form of undertakings as to what you will do in exchange. The essential characteristic of such agreements is that each party should believe that the benefits it derives from the deal justify the cost.

The United States has an extradition agreement with Germany. This provides that if a crime is committed in the US and the perpetrator flees to Germany, the German authorities will detain him and return him to the US for trial. The counterpart is that the US will return fugitives from German justice. The United States has similar agreements with some 109 countries, which means that there are almost as many other countries with which it does not, and where American criminals can hide. If it were possible to conclude a multilateral extradition agreement covering the whole planet, all governments would be equally helpful to each other in this field.³ Something approaching this ideal has been achieved in a number of other fields, notably that of reducing barriers to international trade. An extremely complex network of bilateral trade agreements (which were difficult to administer and caused resentment and economic distortions because of their discriminatory aspects) has

been largely superseded by global and regional (i.e. multilateral) agreements providing for uniform treatment.

The point to be emphasised is that, from the perspective of each individual government, the benefit it seeks from either bilateral or multilateral agreements of this type is that other governments should behave in ways helpful to its own concerns.

Domestic agendas

In the platonic (and self-serving) ideal expounded by British diplomats of the Edwardian period, international relations were so important that politicians should forbear from compromising the single-minded pursuit of the national interest with their 'petty' domestic concerns. The limited persuasive power this injunction may once have carried has largely evaporated. Most members of most governments (and many outside government) single-mindedly pursue their own agendas and see the international scene primarily as an extension of the domestic.

These agendas are at times electoral: strident complaints by the Australian government about United States or Japanese agricultural subsidies have more to do with demonstrating to Australian farmers how vigilant it is for their interests than with any expectation of causing those governments to change tack. The same is true of many speeches made in the (multilateral) WTO. The domestic agendas pursued through diplomacy (be it bilateral or multilateral) can also be very concrete and practical. Thus the eradication of smallpox, though a global programme, was, for the Kenyan government, the solution to a domestic public health problem.

Reactively

In bilateral relations, the initiative for a particular interaction often comes from one side alone; the other party acts, not for any particular purpose of their own, but because it feels compelled to respond – as Britain did when Sweden raised the issue of acid rain. Similarly, when a multilateral conference is convened, many governments send representatives. They would not themselves have initiated a meeting on this topic, but if one is held they feel a need to be present, if only to make sure that their interests are not adversely affected. Moreover, if one party chooses the multilateral mode as a means of addressing a particular issue, others have little choice but to follow suit. If Argentina wants to deal with Belgium, on many issues it has no choice but to deal with the 15-nation European Union, because Belgium has committed itself to handling these matters in that way.

Routine

A significant share of diplomatic activity no longer needs a particular stimulus. Many bilateral and multilateral meetings are scheduled at annual or other intervals, under agreements concluded many years ago. The participants always find issues to discuss and at times conclude important agreements; but the meetings would not all take place if each one had to be set up as a new initiative.

Idealism

Cynics may doubt it but, alongside all these utilitarian and mechanistic considerations, idealism also rears its noble head amongst the purposes pursued by participants in diplomacy. Ideals such as peace and human rights can be part of the motivation of individual members of governments and of individual civil servants and sometimes they are pursued selflessly. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat made peace with Israel knowing full well that it could lead to his assassination – as it did. At times such ideals infuse whole governments, political parties and/or bureaucracies. In other cases, political leaders feel compelled to respond to ideals valued by the electorate, the media and other opinion shapers. Frequently this response impacts mainly on the presentational aspects; but it can also involve substance. The United States-led intervention in Kosovo was contrary to US Realpolitik interests but did respond to the American public's inability to stomach daily mayhem on its television screens. Any cynicism on the part of governments does not negate such humanitarian values. Finally, patriotism deserves mention in this context.⁴ As with other ideals, patriotism can be manipulated and exploited; it can also lead to actions that violate other ideals and values. But it remains an ideal which can be part of the motivation of diplomatic actors.

Lofty ideals are more frequently expressed in a multilateral context than in a bilateral one. This does not make the participants in multilateral diplomacy less realistic or less concerned for concrete results or for the interests of their own country than those who operate bilaterally. An idealistic discourse is an almost inevitable but largely incidental consequence of conducting diplomacy in a multilateral mode. The regional or planetary scale of multilateral activity and the nature of many of the topics it addresses (a litany of the woes and aspirations of mankind) invite thoughts of grandeur and grandiloquence. To that is added the prominence of an international rostrum and the natural desire to present oneself and one's cause in the most admirable way possible. The presence of an international (and at times distinguished) audience also

leads to a dampening of the expression of nationalist sentiments and often to their replacement, in rhetoric, by internationalist ones.

Ideals (even those one does not share) cannot be dismissed as necessarily vacuous. The actions they inspire can be very concrete and far-reaching – as in the case of Jean Monnet and other pioneers of the movement towards West European economic and political integration. Peace and international cooperation may be lofty ideals but they also have utilitarian benefits, if achieved. Finally, as several of the examples given above illustrate, the pursuit of international cooperation is often consistent with a strong commitment to the interests of one's own country. Paradoxically, internationalist ideals can be rooted in patriotism.

Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy

In summary, we can conclude that – like bilateral diplomacy and other government activities – multilateral diplomacy can at times be conducted for high ideals and very often it is dressed up as such; but primarily it is a practical way for governments to try to achieve their objectives, noble or despicable. Multilateral means can be used to address specific, local problems both directly (e.g. by taking a dispute to multilateral arbitration) and indirectly (e.g. by developing global or regional rules that apply, since they apply to all, to the specific government whose behaviour you are trying to influence). One might call this a case of 'acting globally to benefit locally'. Thus, multilateral diplomacy is not different in purpose from bilateral diplomacy; it is merely one of the implements in the toolkit available to governments for coping with issues as they arise.

Whenever they encounter a problem, governments need above all an immediately available presentational response to fill a political void. If they are responsible, they also need – but less urgently – a technically effective response to address concrete aspects of the issues. In short (as Juvenal noted in the first century), they need both circuses and bread to feed to the people. Since few problems have instantaneous solutions, the initial response tends to be mainly declaratory: more circus than bread. But thereafter, the two needs come together as a requirement for a succession of incremental advances towards resolution of the problem. Typically a government will first fulminate; then announce a strategy for actually addressing the problem; then periodically report progress towards that goal. Multilateral diplomacy provides for each of these phases: podiums for declamation as well as mechanisms capable of both presenting the appearance of action and actually yielding substantive results.

Multilateral diplomacy can yield concrete results because it can enable a government to mobilise the power of many nations in support of its own objectives. The main reason why this reality is not generally recognised is that it seems highly implausible. Given the limited supply of altruism among the governments of the world, it does not sound like a realistic endeavour for one government to seek to bend others collectively to its own purposes; but it does become feasible if you can define a common objective which serves their purposes as well as yours. Chapters 5, 11, 12 and 13 will attempt to show how this can be done, at times. The other hurdle to be overcome before scepticism can be allayed is the widespread misconception that multilateral constructs such as international treaties and organisations are not an effective way of controlling the behaviour of governments. The next chapter therefore addresses this threshold question.