



REFLECTION

Multilateral Diplomacy for Small States: 'The Art of Letting Others Have Your Way'

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As citizens of the world, we would all have noted that over the years, particularly in the aftermath of World War II, international relations and the concerns thereof have changed so radically that the governance system which was designed more than half a century ago to manage the new era, has become dysfunctional, ineffective and in some instances, even obsolete. Worse yet, many of the institutions within the system are far from democratic and representative of today's community of independent states. With the prevalence of change and conflict, the world around us has become a brutish and dangerous place. Reform and revitalization are now the buzz words of the day as we look to our salvation. Sadly, although we have spent more than a decade in debate, there is precious little to show for our labours.

The reasons for this are many but among the most notable are:

1. The great diversity of views among states which renders agreement on solutions very elusive. As you know, there are now one hundred and ninety three member states of the United Nations – each having its own opinion on most agenda items. Consensus, if not quickly perceived, promptly disappears.
2. The reluctance of the big powers to relinquish their dominance in international affairs. While they pay lip-

service to the need for reform and revitalization of international institutions to take account of changed circumstances, they would prefer to see the status quo remain. They will yield only if coerced.

3. The great disparity in the negotiating strength of the parties – the developed and developing countries, which invariably results in unbalanced and inequitable outcomes.
4. The deep suspicion and distrust which exists between the parties that continuously hampers agreement, often on innocuous issues.
5. The ideological differences between the positions of the two sides on such fundamental questions as the role of Governments versus that of markets, the value of external assistance – which the developing countries consider essential but is deemed wasteful by the donor community etc.
6. The fear that if we tamper with the existing structure, it will unravel somehow and come apart. Like Humpty Dumpty, it will come tumbling down and “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men” will not be able to put it together again. Moreover, amendments to the Charter must satisfy the requirements of Art. 109. For obvious reasons, this may prove difficult to achieve since there is a risk of taking the international community back to where it was in 1945. This eventuality would be unfortunate, since despite its warts and all, the United Nations has served – at least in some measure - to allow states to live “free from fear and want.”

While we haggle over reform, the world situation has become increasingly complex and chaotic. To the historical challenges of peace, stability and development have been added a myriad of new threats such as global warming, drug trafficking, terrorism and other forms of trans-boundary crime. It is generally agreed that multilateralism, more particularly multilateral cooperation, is indispensable to the resolution of these problems. The international community however, is yet to summon up the will necessary to create a stronger system of international collaboration. We continue to “plough the sea” hoping to find safe passage through the storms of the twenty first century.

The potential of multilateral diplomacy remains largely undiscovered. More is the pity, because multilateralism can be a valuable instrument for advancing the collective interests of

mankind. Its effectiveness has been clearly manifested in the plethora of treaties, conventions and agreements now extant which attest to the fair measure of consensus and cooperation reached by the international community in almost every conceivable area of human endeavour. It is important though that the multilateralism we seek to build should be enlightened, rooted in the principles of equity and capable of transforming the present world order into one that fully satisfies the needs of all states – both big and small.

Addressed in the book's various chapters are the several topics which concern today's multilateral diplomacy. They include for example, the perennial issues of peace, security, development, democracy, human rights, and the environment. The excerpts which are included reflect – as you may expect – a small state perspective. Many of the views expressed are still heard today in the various international fora where they continue to be discussed. Often though, it is no more than a stirring of echoes; only the faces of the speakers seem to change; the ideas are virtually the same as those voiced long ago.

It is noteworthy that multilateral diplomacy appears to have now become "everybody's business." The traditional small state diplomat, who was formed in the early years of our independence to be a Jack/Jill of all trades, is clearly ill equipped to handle some of the arcane and esoteric issues on today's international agenda. Not surprisingly, therefore, at the negotiating table these days, are to be found not only representatives of governments but also – depending on the nature of the meeting – representatives of the private sector, labour, non-governmental organizations and the wider civil society. In these specialized settings, the old fashioned diplomat is hardly more than a chaperone to guide the substantive representative on relevant practice and procedures and to ensure that he/she does not become "a weapon of conference destruction."

Similarly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has become more of a "gate-keeper" since, with the growing involvement of other outside actors, one of its major tasks is to provide coordination and harmonization to its multilateral diplomacy. Our developed partners often take great delight in pointing out that while we are trumpeting one message at the United Nations in New York, the officials of other Ministries particularly the Ministry of Finance convey an entirely different one to the Multilateral Financial Institutions in Washington DC. Of course, they conveniently forget the fact that when their own Heads of Government make grandiose promises at the podium, these are entirely discarded by their own

delegates when we come down to negotiation in committees. Whenever and wherever it occurs, the “forked-tongue” syndrome must be denounced as a hindrance to good faith negotiation.

Another feature of conference diplomacy on which I would like to touch, is its parliamentary style. If you picture your National Assembly at work – you will have some idea of what goes on in most multilateral settings – endless speechifying, rhetoric, repetition and on occasion, verbal outbursts. At the United Nations, the paramount exemplar of multilateralism, some of these behaviours should perhaps not be considered surprising since the Organisation was built on the grounds of an old slaughter house – a gift of the city of New York to the international community. I cannot help but think that were we to move to another site, the ghosts of the past might be finally exorcised from our midst. Perhaps not, though, - since other major conference venues are often no different. Whether it be Geneva, Rome, Nairobi, Vienna or Washington, the scenario is much the same. Yet, although many diplomats complain about the hassles of life in New York, no one really wants to leave the Big Apple. It is therefore business as usual.

Multilateral diplomacy may be likened to clockwork – wheels within wheels, interlocking and working for a common purpose, or perhaps to a set of concentric circles of consultation, coordination and cooperation, each representing groups of states with shared political, economic and social objectives. Formed on a regional or sub-regional basis are those which comprise the countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Western Europe and others. Beyond these, are the larger and more eclectic bodies such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77, working respectively, on political and economic issues. Special mention should be made of the Association of Small Island and Low-lying coastal States (AOSIS) which has been quite effective in advancing CARICOM’s concerns on Climate Change. All come under the aegis of the United Nations General Assembly, the most democratic and representative of the bodies within the international constellation. Within this intricate machinery, small states are perhaps no more than a cog in a vast wheel. Nonetheless, they are pivotal to its proper functioning.

In the concluding section of the book, I address - albeit fleetingly - the challenges faced by small countries in representing their interests in international fora. These states find it difficult to hold their own in negotiations with their larger and more

developed counter-parts. Not only do most of them suffer from the constraints of limited size and resources but they also lack the strategic clout to extract meaningful concessions from more powerful states. Nevertheless, with the skillful use of the diplomacy, they can often succeed in achieving their goals.

Ideas and initiatives are the preserve not only of the powerful countries but can also be generated by the smallest state. Witness the Law of the Sea, the brainchild of tiny Malta, which today governs international maritime activities; the International Criminal Court, a proposal by Trinidad and Tobago to curb trans-boundary crime; the Low-Carbon Development Strategy – Guyana’s contribution to the conservation of the environment and of course, our submission for the creation of a New Global Human Order. These have all been meaningful contributions to promoting the welfare of human kind.

As for the diplomats of small countries – including our own - their ability and achievements should not to be underestimated. Many of them have occupied the highest offices within the multilateral system, including the Presidency of the General Assembly, the Presidency of the Security Council, Judges of the International Court of Justice and Secretary General of the Commonwealth. Their distinguished performance has been widely admired and praised by the international community. In these various high level positions, they have consistently demonstrated attributes essential to the practice of successful multilateral diplomacy – namely affability, intellect, perspicacity, good sense and *savoir-faire*. It is no coincidence perhaps, that these are all traits to be found in our folk hero – Anancy – whom nature compensated for his small size by giving him a brain to be able to “let others have (his) way.”

Diplomacy is above all, the art of persuasion – the ability to convince others of your purpose. As one wag has put it, “when you are telling someone to go to hell, you must be able to do it so that he/she actually looks forward to the trip.” Through the use of soft power, the small state diplomat must be able to persuade his powerful counterparts that what is proposed is in their mutual interest and for their common good. The outcome must be – or at least appear to be – a “win-win” situation for all. Pyrrhic victories do not last. One must also be able also to distinguish between the possible and the impossible or else, like Don Quixote, we may be simply jousting at wind-mills.

Persuasion, I may add, is the aim of all negotiation in international relations. It may be à propos for the diplomats of small states to remind themselves of the origin of the word “negotiation” from the Latin – negotium” signifying no laziness or “busyness” which has given us the words of “business” in French: “négoce” and in Spanish “negocios.” Success in negotiations, usually, results from a combination of 20% strategy and 80% busyness, i.e. hard work. This is undoubtedly so, since small states do not have enough bargaining power - whether this be economic, military or political, to rally the support of larger states.

In my book, I quote Albert Einstein as having said “Powerful states need no Ambassadors. Their force speaks for them; for small states, it matters how they express themselves.” Small states do, however, have numerical strength which gives them the advantage where the voting is not weighted in favour of the powerful. CARICOM countries – 15 in all – represent a significant voting bloc which, if wisely utilized, can bring them valuable political and economic returns. Mutual interests and reciprocity are two important negotiating tools required for successful negotiations. Leadership, mutual respect, a safe degree of compromise, and the negotiator’s personality are also most helpful. I am of the view that the Governments of small states need to be more imaginative and inventive in forging a diplomacy that better serves their needs and circumstances. They should also be less reactive and more proactive in determining the outcome of issues on the international agenda.

Much of what passes today for dialogue and negotiation is unfortunately no more than a charade – much sound and fury signifying little of substance. Small and disadvantaged states are constantly sucked into a never ending spiral of conferences, summits and meetings which invariably take a heavy toll on their treasuries. They must therefore do more to shape the processes in which they participate to ensure that, as the French would say, “the game is worth the candle.” The merits of joint representation, expert advocacy, working alliances with like minded states, the use of relevant technology are all measures which have long been recognized but are still to be fully tested to maximize capacity for negotiation. Academic institutions such as the Institute of International Relations (IIR) can also be of great help to small states whose Governments are often so stretched that they have little time to think, much less strategise. It seems to me, however,

that not enough use is made of the valuable resource which academic represents.

While all states have an interest in preserving multilateralism, it is the small and vulnerable which have the most to gain from it. For one, it offers these disadvantaged countries a greatly enlarged political space and the room to develop effective working alliances to further their aims. Not only can they use it to counter the power elite but speaking with one voice, they will be able to have some influence on the decision making process. Multilateral diplomacy is undoubtedly the weapon of choice against unilateralism which is a perhaps the single most important threat to global peace, security and development. If we are able in the end to secure the triumph of multilateralism over unilateralism, and to establish it as the basis for international relations in this new era, the earth will be a much better place for all peoples.

Although it may be hazardous for me to do so, I would like to conclude by speculating briefly on the future of multilateral relations. Over the past six decades, its influence and achievements have been significant enough to be deemed the optimal form of governance within the body politic. One may even say that its gradual enshrinement in diplomatic practice makes it virtually irreversible. Yet, we are reminded that the same was said of Communism which, though widely accepted in the aftermath of World War II, appears now to have been displaced by capitalism.

Political ideologies are as we know, subject to what may be termed the "push – pull" phenomenon – a characteristic also noted in regional integration processes. At play simultaneously are two antagonistic forces – those that are moving toward the central ideal and those that are fleeing from it. The West Indian Federation and the League of Nations are but two examples, of experiments that foundered on the principles of sovereignty and the equality of states. Other attempts at multilateralism may similarly fail as a result of poor design and construction. As a result, the continued proliferation of regionalism is seen by many as a more manageable form of international cooperation.

Of some comfort, though, to those who like myself, subscribe hopefully to multilateralism, is the occasional reiteration by some leaders in the developed world of their commitment to its concept and practice. Notwithstanding the refusal of the United States, for example, to sign on to the Law of the Sea Treaty, the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Protocol and other important agreements, second term President Obama speaks of the need for

“institutional renewal” to allow the United States to participate more actively in global governance. So impressed was the Nobel Committee by Obama’s earlier asseverations during his first term of office that he was awarded the Peace Prize based on its conviction that he represented a new hope for multilateralism. Other leaders although not similarly rewarded, also continue to call for a strengthened world organization.

It seems though, if experience is anything to go by, that these good intentions, however, are very often ousted by other pressing claims both at home and abroad such as fiscal cliffs, economic recessions, civil conflicts, the spread of terrorism, trans-boundary crime and other pre-occupations already mentioned. Amidst circumstances such as these, can we really say with any certainty what multilateralism’s future will be? I think not. As small states in a highly uncertain world, we can only warn against the dangers of world hegemony, while advocating mature and enlightened multilateralism as our preferred option for global governance.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Mr S R Insanally was Guyana’s Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2001-2008, and he now serves as Advisor to the President on Foreign Affairs. He has enjoyed an extremely distinguished diplomatic career, serving in Washington DC, Caracas, New York and Brussels. He was Special Rapporteur for the Joint ACP–EEC Assembly on the implementation of the Lome’ Convention. He has headed Guyana’s Political Division serving the Western Hemisphere, and he has served Guyana as High Commissioner to numerous Caribbean countries, as well as Ambassador to Colombia. He has also occupied the post of Guyana’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations (a post he currently holds) and has served on many different UN Councils and served in many capacities at the organisation. Mr Insanally has chaired the Group of 77 (G77). He has been Chancellor of the University of Guyana, a member of the Board of Governors of the IIR, and he is a member of the Council of Presidents of the General Assembly of the United Nations.