

Heritage Lectures

No. 1178

Delivered January 11, 2011



Published by The Heritage Foundation

February 14, 2011

The Role and Relevance of Multilateral Diplomacy in U.S. Foreign Policy

Brett D. Schaefer

Abstract: *Multilateral diplomacy is challenging. The dynamics are often more complex than bilateral negotiations because there are many more players. But while policies and venues may change, the role of diplomacy—to advance and promote the foreign policy objectives of the United States—is constant and does not change when the diplomacy is multilateral rather than bilateral. A diplomat at the United Nations is expected to rally support for U.S. policy and positions just as he or she would at an embassy in Britain or Botswana. To maximize its efforts, the United States needs to reassess its strategy and figure out how to focus on the battles that really matter. In addition, Congress and the Administration need to take a fresh look at the U.N. system and ask fundamental questions about how to reduce budgets, eliminate extraneous or unnecessary activities, and increase accountability. Experience has shown that diplomacy alone is not sufficient to achieve support for reform.*

Thank you to the American Foreign Service Association for inviting me to participate on this panel.

When I was asked to speak, I'll admit I was a bit overwhelmed. The role and relevance of multilateral diplomacy in U.S. foreign policy is a big, open-ended topic. I thought I'd break it down into three parts: the role of multilateral diplomacy, its relevance to U.S. foreign policy, and how to maximize our efforts.

The Role of Multilateral Diplomacy

In my mind, the role of diplomacy is constant. Although policies and venues may change, the role of diplomacy is to advance and promote the foreign pol-

Talking Points

- The dynamics of multilateral diplomacy are often more complex than those of bilateral negotiations and serve to illustrate the challenges of diplomacy in international organizations like the United Nations.
- Congress and the Administration need to take a fresh look at the U.N. system and ask fundamental questions about how to reduce budgets, eliminate extraneous or unnecessary activities, and increase accountability. Our diplomats can provide valuable insight into this process.
- Historically, the quickest and most effective way to help our diplomats get reform on the table has been for Congress to tie U.S. contributions to specific changes, but Congress has neglected its role as enforcer in recent years.
- Although it may seem counterintuitive, America's multilateral diplomats should welcome congressional oversight; privately, many admit that their jobs are easier when Congress plays the "bad cop."

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/h1178>

Produced by the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

icy objectives of the United States. That role doesn't change when the diplomacy is multilateral rather than bilateral. A diplomat at the United Nations is expected to rally support for U.S. policy and positions just as he or she would at an embassy in Britain or Botswana.

That said, the challenges vary depending on the diplomatic environment.

Multilateral diplomacy is challenging and often underappreciated. The dynamics are often more complex because you are dealing with multiple players. In a bilateral negotiation, you generally can quickly determine where the sticking points are and what needs to be worked out to finalize a deal. That doesn't mean the deal will get done, but the ability to clearly identify problems and positions is undeniably an asset.

Although policies and venues may change, the role of diplomacy is to advance and promote the foreign policy objectives of the United States. That role doesn't change when the diplomacy is multilateral rather than bilateral.

The more negotiating partners you have, generally the more difficult it is to identify the source of negotiating sticking points. The U.S. position may not be a problem at all. The problem may be political, economic, or even personal disagreements between the other negotiating partners.

If you're a diplomat, you could pull out your magic eight-ball and get lucky, but chances are you'll have to do a lot of digging to identify the problem. In the end, it may be impossible to reconcile differences between other negotiating partners, and a deal may falter through no fault of America's diplomats.

This is all common sense, but I mention it because it serves to illustrate the challenges of diplomacy in international organizations.

Take the U.N. as one example. Under U.N. rules, most decisions are made by simple majority vote. Decisions on important matters, such as admitting new members or approving the budget, require approval by a two-thirds majority.

America's negotiations in the U.N., theoretically, can involve all of the other 191 member states and other entities and international organizations with observer status. Often, a majority of these players have very little stake in the issue under discussion, but their views must be taken into account because they either have a vote or could potentially influence the vote.

It might seem to be a simple problem to resolve. Some might conclude that if the countries don't really care, it should be a simple matter for U.S. diplomats to get them to vote the way we want.

But it actually makes things more complicated. If they had a concern, we could try to address it. Their lack of concern simply puts their vote up for sale. Even though a country may not care about a particular issue, it may care deeply about another issue that is coming up on the agenda, or it may want a seat on a particular committee or board. As a result, trading votes on unrelated issues is common.

Countries are also strongly influenced by other countries in their region. Those countries may care about the issue even if the original country doesn't. Since regional groups often prefer to vote in blocs, the countries with the loudest voice can often dictate votes for neutral countries in the bloc.

There are also ideological groupings in the U.N. like the Group of 77, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

- The G-77 has 130 members—just over two-thirds of the 192 member states in the General Assembly.
- The NAM has 118 members.
- The OIC has 57 members.

The groups often orchestrate voting among their members and, given their size and influence in regional blocs, can frequently dominate the debate and the voting tally.

The U.S. is hindered by not being a leader of a tight-knit bloc. We're a part of the Western European and Others Group (WEOG), but the Europeans dominate that group through sheer numbers. Needless to say, we don't always agree. So while the U.S. wields great economic, military, and diplomatic influence, in the U.N. it is often alone or supported

by a few allies. If you want evidence, take a look at pretty much any U.N. vote on Israel.

The trick to success for U.S. diplomats is to identify the key players and try to sway them early in direct talks in anticipation of the upcoming debate or in informal meetings prior to formal consideration of the matter. Once positions calcify, change is enormously difficult.

Getting traction early is even more important because relatively few votes are taken in the U.N. The goal of “consensus” is the alpha and the omega of the international system because it implies agreement and legitimacy.

In the United Nations, the U.S. is hindered by not being a leader of a tight-knit bloc. So while the U.S. wields great economic, military, and diplomatic influence, in the U.N. it is often alone or supported by a few allies.

The desire for consensus is supported by the makeup of the membership. Most diplomats just want to get on with things as quickly as possible. Remember: For most countries, the issue being considered often doesn't matter very much.

The financial consequences are minimal for most countries because they pay a small fraction of the U.N. budget. Moreover, the national interests of most countries are pretty narrow, and most votes simply don't concern governments enough to send clear instructions to their diplomats.

This gives delegations considerable discretion. Most times they choose to hasten the process. Breaking consensus is considered rude, unhelpful, or a waste of time. Few diplomats want to be shunned or be viewed as inflexible. There is a strong pressure to compromise and go along.

On the issues that do matter to the U.S., our diplomats are nearly always starting from behind. Creating the impression of a critical mass toward consensus is a lot easier if you start with 50 or 130 countries in support of your position rather than a handful, even if you are the United States. Thus, the U.S. almost always looks to be the one “breaking consensus” if it starts raising concerns or objections.

So unless the issue is identifiably important to the Administration or to Congress, the United States often compromises and agrees to join the consensus rather than remain isolated, even if it doesn't fully support the final text. It may be smart to reserve U.S. diplomatic influence for important matters, but the end result is a gradual shift in language and policy in the U.N. away from U.S. positions.

The Relevance of Multilateral Diplomacy to U.S. Foreign Policy

This leads directly to the second half of the topic of our panel: What is the relevance of multilateral diplomacy to U.S. foreign policy? The obvious relevance for the U.S. is that the U.N. and its affiliated organizations are charged with various responsibilities. Even non-binding resolutions can carry symbolic weight internationally.

Stopping them from doing things that hurt U.S. interests and encouraging them to take actions that we support is worthwhile, but it is also exhausting. The United States belongs to 50-some multilateral organizations, from large and well-known organizations such as NATO, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the United Nations to relatively small niche organizations such as the Universal Postal Union.

In Geneva alone, the U.N. held more than 10,000 meetings in 2009. That's about 40 meetings each working day. To be sure, most U.N. meetings, resolutions, and activities are not really

Unless the issue is identifiably important to the Administration or to Congress, the United States often compromises and agrees to join the consensus rather than remain isolated. The end result is a gradual shift in language and policy in the U.N. away from U.S. positions.

consequential or are technocratic and nonpolitical. Frequently, however, the decisions and policies of these organizations can directly and indirectly impact U.S. foreign political, security, and economic interests.

Let me acknowledge up front the fact that the U.N. and multilateral organizations can be useful in a

number of areas. The WTO has greatly facilitated economic growth and prosperity. The World Health Organization has helped save millions of lives. The U.N. has a staying power on humanitarian efforts that the U.S. and other nations lack. But, frankly, multilateral diplomacy is rarely an easy path to achieving positive actions that serve to advance U.S. interests.

The U.N. and multilateral organizations can be useful in a number of areas, but multilateral diplomacy is rarely an easy path to achieving positive actions that serve to advance U.S. interests.

The sheer number of bad initiatives and ideas coming from various member states is overwhelming. Simply policing the nominations and elections of countries to various U.N. bodies is a thankless task. Like Sisyphus, our multilateral diplomats seemed cursed to block a country only to start all over again a few months later. For instance:

- Each year, the U.S. tries to convince countries to run for the Human Rights Council to keep repressive countries off the Council. It sometimes succeeds, but last year, Libya, an undeniably repressive government, was elected easily. It joined China, Cuba, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and other human rights abusers.
- Last summer, the U.S. and others convinced East Timor to run for a seat on the board of the new U.N. women's organization in order to block Iran, but Saudi Arabia won a seat, and Iran was elected to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women as a consolation prize.
- These countries run for these seats in order to undermine the work of the organizations. They are often successful.
- For several years, the U.S. has chipped away at the support for the OIC's Defamation of Religions effort, which threatens the fundamental freedoms of expression and religion, but both the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly passed the resolution again in 2010.
- Countries consistently work to weaken U.N. Security Council resolutions on proliferation. Iran and North Korea routinely thumb their

noses at the U.N. and its resolutions with little fear of consequences.

- U.S. concerns about international conventions and treaties are increasingly dismissed, and the final documents are presented to us in a take-it-or-leave-it fashion. The Kyoto Protocol and the Rome Statute spring to mind.
- Only rarely can the U.S. vote unreservedly for a resolution that clearly espouses a principle we support, like resolutions condemning human rights violations in Iran, Burma, and North Korea.

Every year we have a few success stories, but looking at things historically, our main focus has been to stop resolutions or other actions that run counter to our interests or that would reward our adversaries. This has value, but largely because failing to oppose them would imply U.S. support.

How Can We Maximize Our Efforts?

The time and effort involved in these endless battles is enormous. The U.S. is generally on the defensive because we are outnumbered by countries that do not share our values and principles. Unfortunately, the best that the U.S. can do most times is to water down the worst parts.

If it seems like a disheartening and losing battle, it is, but it's a battle that has to be fought. The fact of the matter is that most countries strongly support multilateral organizations like the United Nations and place great stock in their actions.

Historically, our main focus has been to stop resolutions or other actions that run counter to our interests or that would reward our adversaries.

So how do we maximize our efforts to get the most benefit with our limited resources?

We need to reassess our strategy and figure out how to focus on the battles that really matter. We get tied up with engaging and supporting all the activities of all these multilateral institutions simply because they exist or have admirable goals and objectives, but are the organizations doing what they claim to do? Are they doing it well? Does the U.S. need to engage with every

part of the U.N.? Can we pare it down to a more manageable task?

We need to step back and objectively assess whether this engagement and support advances important U.S. interests to an extent that justifies the time and resources expended.

The need for an assessment led me to edit and help write *ConUNdrum: The Limits of the United Nations and the Search for Alternatives*.¹ The various experts who contributed chapters in the book took a look at various parts of the U.N. system to determine where the U.N. is necessary, useful, or effective and where it is unnecessary, ineffective, or a hindrance to resolving problems.

For instance, after researching and writing about the U.N. for 15 years, I am at a loss to identify any U.S. interests harmed by the absence of the U.S. from UNESCO² for two decades. I am similarly at a loss to identify any core U.S. interests significantly advanced by our return to UNESCO in 2003. The dubious merits of UNESCO membership cost U.S. taxpayers \$81 million in 2010.

What tangible benefit does the U.S. gain from its financial support of and our diplomatic efforts in the U.N.'s regional economic commissions? Or UNCTAD?³ Or the ILO?⁴ There may be some, but we shouldn't assume that there are—or overlook the possibility that those benefits could be achieved elsewhere.

In some cases, our engagement may be harmful. Jackson Diehl, hardly a rock-ribbed conservative, wrote a piece last week in *The Washington Post* stating:

When the administration touts its [human rights] record it often focuses on the declara-

Advancing international policy doesn't have to be broadly multilateral to be effective. Nor is working through the U.N. the only way to address international problems multilaterally.

tions it has engineered by multilateral forums, such as the U.N. Human Rights Council. The ideology behind this is that the United States is better off working through such bodies than acting on its own. The problem is that, in practice, this is not true. Set aside for the moment the fact that the U.N. council is dominated by human rights abusers who devote most of the agenda to condemnations of Israel. Who has heard what the council said about, say, the recent events in Belarus? The obvious answer: far fewer people than would have noticed if the same critique came from Obama or Clinton.⁵

I couldn't have said it better. Advancing international policy doesn't have to be broadly multilateral to be effective. Nor is working through the U.N. the only way to address international problems multilaterally.

Frankly, we need to take a hard look at the U.N. with an eye toward cutting some fat, increasing accountability, and exploring our options. Former Deputy Secretary-General Mark Malloch Brown agrees—and to be honest, we probably don't agree on much. In *The New York Times* last week, he noted that “There's a huge redundancy and lack of efficiency” in the U.N. system and that the budget is “utterly opaque, untransparent and completely in shadow.”⁶

1. See *ConUNdrum: The Limits of the United Nations and the Search for Alternatives*, ed. Brett D. Schaefer (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).
2. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
3. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.
4. International Labour Organization.
5. Jackson Diehl, “Dangerously Silent on Human Rights,” *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2011, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/02/AR2011010202381.html?hpid=opinionsbox1> (February 2, 2011).
6. Mark Malloch Brown, quoted in Matthew Saltmarsh, “A Bloated U.N. Bureaucracy Causes Bewilderment,” *The New York Times*, January 5, 2011, at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/06/world/europe/06iht-nations06.html?_r=1&src=twrhp (February 2, 2011).

A fundamental assessment of the U.N. system is long overdue. The Office of Management and Budget reported this past summer that U.S. contributions to the U.N. system totaled over \$6.3 billion in FY 2009. That is more than double the level of FY 2001. Can we honestly say that the U.S. has gotten twice as much from the U.N. as it was getting a decade ago?

Congress and the Administration need to take a fresh look at the U.N. system and ask fundamental questions about how to reduce budgets, eliminate extraneous or unnecessary activities, and increase accountability. Our diplomats can provide valuable insight into this process. After all, they deal with the organizations daily. But if we have seen anything over the past few decades, it's that diplomacy alone has not been sufficient to achieve support for reform.

Our diplomats need an enforcer. That enforcer is Congress.

Historically, the quickest and most effective way of helping our diplomats get the issue of reform on the table has been for Congress to tie U.S. contributions to specific changes.

- This was how the OIOS,⁷ the U.N.'s quasi-inspector general, was created.
- This was how the U.S. got the U.N. to reduce its U.N. assessment.
- This is how the U.S. was able to keep the U.N. regular budget at zero growth throughout most of the 1990s.
- Fear of congressional action, including financial withholding, has helped spur decisions to adopt

new rules for U.N. peacekeepers, to establish the Volker Commission to investigate the Iraqi Oil-for-Food program, and to suspend UNDP⁸ operations in North Korea.

Unfortunately, Congress has neglected its role as the enforcer in recent years. U.N. reform legislation hasn't been marked up, much less passed, since 2007. There have only been a handful of U.N. oversight hearings in recent years.

Our diplomats need an enforcer. That enforcer is Congress.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, America's multilateral diplomats should welcome congressional oversight. For the most part, diplomats want to be the "good cop" in negotiations. Privately, many multilateral diplomats admit that their jobs are easier when Congress plays the "bad cop."

Looking at recent statements, I think Congress is about to become far more involved. I think that will pay dividends in Turtle Bay, Geneva, and elsewhere.

—*Brett D. Schaefer is Jay Kingham Fellow in International Regulatory Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation and editor of ConUNdrum: The Limits of the United Nations and the Search for Alternatives (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009). He delivered these remarks at a meeting of the American Foreign Service Association.*

7. Office of Internal Oversight Services.

8. United Nations Development Programme.