

THE CHANGING NATURE OF MULTILATERALISM

Cameron Munter

THOSE of us who served as diplomats consider multilateralism a rather formal thing: representatives of states meeting in stately halls in Geneva or New York, or gathering for complicated conferences at other world capitals to engage in wordsmithing (“bracket that language”), or even entertaining ourselves with the barely suppressed hissing and spitting that takes place when certain participants feel compelled to trade substance for form (“of course my minister speaks first at the press availability”).

Inasmuch as some of us have moved on to the world of non-governmental work, however, we find that multilateralism has become something quite different. It has become, quite simply, the central feature of twenty-first-century diplomacy.

By saying so, we don't mean to say that Westphalia is dead, or even dying. The seventeenth-century judgment of *eius regio, cuius religio* that expanded into the primacy of state actors in carrying out international relations still exists—and rightly so. Not only international law, but international practice demands this; there are simply too many issues that require sovereign decisions, from defense to commerce. Embassies are the unifiers of a country's interests abroad, and someone needs to get foreign tourists out of jail and staff the visa section; press sections speak to publics on behalf of foreign governments, and longstanding traditions like diplomatic immunity are still deadly relevant.

Rather, by saying that multilateralism is the central feature of twenty-first-century diplomacy, we say

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Photo: EastWest Institute

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that bilateral ties are necessary but not sufficient. The problems we face go far beyond what traditional bilateral missions can solve. From climate change, to proliferation, and counter-terrorism, to public health, human rights, trade, and women's rights, our pressing issues know no borders. Or rather, borders may be part of addressing these challenges, but they are only part of the picture.

This observation about multilateralism is generally accepted (though some states are more comfortable with this reality than others). My point is to emphasize that multilateralism itself is more than simply states work-

ing together in groups of more than two. It has become institutionally very diverse. Traditionally structured alliances, with their assumption of unity and solidarity of members to the decisions taken by the alliance itself, are by no means the norm of multilateralism. More than that, multilateralism extends beyond state representatives to other stakeholders and participants, without whom decisions and initiatives will lack full effectiveness and ultimately legitimacy.

Those stakeholders can be self-styled experts, such as members of the media or single-issues advocates—say in the

area of human rights. They can be private businesses, especially when agreements and their enforcement hold the key to whether large companies can contribute to prosperity, and ultimately, to stability around the globe. They can be nonprofits and other quasi-official organizations, whose flexibility and discretion (or ability to convene in places like Davos and Aspen) are fundamental to the definition and shaping of problems and ultimately, to their solution.

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So by calling multilateralism the diplomatic norm, we should not assume that we are simply bestowing greater powers and trust in venerable institutions like the United Nations or the World Trade Organization, or seeing NATO or ASEAN or the SCO as the new sovereigns of global politics.

These organizations will indeed remain important, but they will no longer define what it means to be multilateral. Instead, multilateralism should be seen not as a thing or even a compound noun, but as a process in which the broader and more creative the basis of participation, the more impact that process will have.

NEW DIPLOMATIC SKILLS

One important point to consider, as we look to the future of diplomatic endeavors, is that we will need

to train ourselves somewhat differently than we have in the past. I note that the new British Diplomatic Academy—in discussions before its establishment—asked many of these questions: are the people we train to serve in the British Foreign Service learning the skills they need? Rather, are the very competent officers who staff British embassies around the world actually doing the most important work, or are they doing a very good job performing tasks that are not as central to the interests of Britain (or the world community, however one wants to define it) as they used to be?

This is a rather uncomfortable problem, and not just for the UK. No one can argue that ambassadors and other diplomatic representatives in bilateral posts will become irrelevant. But it is difficult to argue, on the other hand, that they will not have to recalibrate what they do every day if they're going to have an impact.

For one thing, all diplomats are going to have to place a great emphasis on seeking information—not just about the host country to which they are accredited, but about all those who are active there: what is Google up to? Médecins Sans Frontières? That group of visiting mayors, rock musicians, or university provosts?

Embassies have always kept tabs on their nationals out of a sense of responsibility for their welfare. Now they need to learn about the actual diplomacy, in all its varieties, that these visitors engage in—not to control it, because it cannot be controlled, but to take advantage of it and to learn from it. The wise ambassador is one who avoids turf battles and instead enlists others to work in his direction.

In addition, those diplomats who are trained in classic multilateral tasks—locking oneself in a room with Yugoslav leaders at Dayton, for example, or staying up all night preparing materials for the latest revcon—will also need to consider whether other skills and attitudes are necessary for them to succeed.

I have always found, for some reason, that many of my erstwhile diplomatic colleagues were painfully introverted. They were smart, they were capable, they were creative, and they were clever. But introverted. And Hollywood, in portraying diplomats, often picks up on this, identifying the diplomat as one who is unable to utter a clear sentence or take a forceful stand on an issue.

I think those who work in the classic multilateral world will be compelled

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to open themselves up to the world of broad-based communications, even as such a world challenges the very basis of the discretion, quiet deal-making, and thoughtful observation that they are used to. Why? Because the world of stakeholders in their decisions is larger than the insiders at Turtle Bay or certain Bezirke in Vienna.

TRADITIONAL DIPLOMATIC TASKS

That said, the tasks we recognize in traditional multilateral institutions is not going to go away. In this diverse world, there are

ongoing tasks. Countries contribute to the International Financial Institutions regularly, and dedicated and competent staffs at the World Bank or International Monetary Fund study economic trends and extend credit to those who need it (or are forced to ask for it).

This goes on year after year, as does the work of related institutions like the Asian Development Bank or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The Arctic Council meets regularly and focuses attention on a variety of issues of concern to its members. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation has ongoing projects to serve as the voice of Muslim governments around the world.

The list goes on, and, in the best cases, such organizations keep important issues in front of the public and in the line of sight of leaders. At worst, they are seen as talk shops where lucky delegates can eat rather fancy dinners for the price of listening to endless set-piece interventions.

CYBER SECURITY

But increasingly, new multilateral efforts are emerging to try to take on new problems. In some cases there are no rules of the road, or none that have the status of being agreed upon by all. In other cases, those multilateral institutions whose habits are comfortable and repetitive are sometimes insufficient to deal with them.

These are the most fascinating cases of the new diplomacy of multilateralism in the twenty-first century. At the risk of sounding somewhat self-serving, let me mention one of them: the efforts by my own organization—a private nonprofit based in New York called the EastWest Institute (EWI)—to define, shape, and ultimately present potential solutions in that rather ungoverned field of cyber security.

Since 2009, EWI’s cyber program has built trust among major cyber powers—in both public and private sector—to enhance security and promote the beneficial aspects of cyberspace for all. But in many ways, there are no rules

to follow and no authorities to enforce norms. In cyberspace, no one can hear you protest.

Precisely in such situations, those who care come together to suggest positive and constructive behavior.

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These people represent a nexus of commerce and defense and law enforcement, discussing

issues from sovereignty and internet freedom, and personal data protection, to terrorist finance and vulnerability, and terrorism itself.

Those who work with EWI agree to enhance deterrence against malicious cyber activities; improve the security of internet products and services; and maintain efficient information and technology flows across borders consistent with local values.

There is not just one organization that holds sway in cyberspace. Sure, there’s the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which in 2016 met in Marrakesh, Helsinki, and San Juan, thus acting somewhat like a multilateral organization—assuming the role of a traffic cop in the identification of domains.

But there is no one organization in cyber security that makes rules or enforces them. EWI convenes a broad

set of stakeholders with the hope of finding common ground. Its partners include the IEEE Communications Society, the Munich Security Conference, The Open Group, and the Industrial Control Systems/Information Sharing and Analysis Center (ICS/ISAC). Other participants include, among others, Microsoft and Huawei, Interpol, government representatives from diplomats and intelligence to cops, technical experts, and policy wonks.

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The problem is keeping up with the pace of invention, so that the rules—if there are any—remain useful and flexible and relevant in such areas as the Internet of Things or encryption.

What EWI hopes to prevent is the unintended conflict that takes place when the global community does not recognize that there will be differences of interest, and therefore squares off (as was the case in the recent tiff between Apple and the FBI).

And there are cases of this multilateral effort (crossing national boundaries and sectorial bounds) coming to agreement. It has contributed to the articulation of some norms of behavior accepted by a UN Group of Governmental Experts from 20 nations,

which stated that, during peacetime, the following applies: international law applies in cyberspace; do not attack anyone else’s critical infrastructure; assist another state that asks for help with a cyber incident; and use your Cyber Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT) only for defensive purposes.

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THE NEW MULTILATERALISM

Now, this brief description of just some of what one particular nonprofit is doing is not comprehensive—not only does it not tell the reader all of what the cyber program at EWI does, but it does not do justice to the size and scope of the vast network of other partners working in the field, and in related fields. But by mentioning this work, I want to emphasize some of the qualities of the new multilateralism and its new diplomacy.

First, and most importantly, it is the nature of the problem that leads us to find the structures to deal with it. Cyber issues move fast, morph quickly, and are almost always going to provide surprises. Multilateral efforts to address

cyber issues cannot afford to wait for large, ponderous institutions to create themselves, define themselves, and constitute themselves.

It would be wonderful if we had that kind of time. But we don't. As the wizards of high tech invent systems in which your car communicates with your phone, or your thermostat with your alarm clock, the possibilities of challenges these developments present far outstrips our ability to organize a group of experts to figure it all out.

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And yet, that is what we must do. Much will be ad-hoc; much will be iterative. And the traditional sense of how meetings work, how consensus is reached, how authority is allocated, must be reexamined.

There is likely to be more polyarchy—namely, the coming together of people on some issues but not on others—itself a challenge to the traditions of alliances and structures we've come to know.

And second, inasmuch as we will have many more players from many more cultural backgrounds—all these stakeholders to whom I have constantly referred—we will have the

very real possibility that the very act of setting goals will change.

Sure, it is nice to negotiate with like-minded people. Yet, sadly, that's rarely the case in negotiations. There may be a trend toward very modest definitions of what can be done, which may make us

all wistful for the purposeful, clear articulation of the way forward we have known in the past.

Political leadership may be making this adjustment already—albeit in a rather negative sense: there are populist leaders

in many countries of the world who seem to sense that the verities of yesterday do not hold, and so have built careers on criticizing what has gone wrong and mobilizing the constituencies of those who feel dispossessed or threatened.

My point is not to expect that this will guide the diplomacy of multilateralism in the future, but quite the opposite. We may need to learn to define our tasks in such a way that expectations are realistic, and the bombast level is kept to a minimum.

Ironically, this may take us back to the good old insights of some classical diplomats: *surtout, pas trop de zèle.* ●