

Giving Multilateral Diplomacy a Chance

DANIEL KURTZER

My first assignment, when I entered the U.S. Foreign Service in 1976, was as a “rotational officer” in the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of International Organization Affairs. I served for six months backstopping our delegation to the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council; then worked for six months on U.N. conferences related to water and desertification; and finally represented the U.S. at the semiannual meeting of the U.N. Development Program, where I was responsible for dispensing more than \$80 million in U.S. foreign assistance. The U.N. experiences were exciting, not just because they marked my entry into diplomacy, but more importantly because they provided an opportunity to assess up close the work of the U.N. — much that was good and some that was not.

Without excusing the excesses of what sometimes happens during U.N. debates or in some U.N. forums, I believe that the American government should embrace multilateral engagement. Many countries still look to the U.S. for leadership, and thus it is not a foregone conclusion that the sheer weight of numbers will always prevail in multilateral diplomacy. We ought to test whether the weight of reason and reasonability can win.


It will be hard to convince many Americans to adopt this approach rather than our current position, which almost instinctively opposes U.N. initiatives. It seems that most Americans think of the U.N. only when the organization or some of its members do foolish things. We all paid attention when the General Assembly adopted the odious resolution equating Zionism with racism. We recoiled when a U.N. conference on racism and racial discrimination was hijacked by anti-Israel countries and became a forum for hate and antisemitic invective. And recently we have watched as the Palestinians have turned to the U.N. for acceptance as a member state.

It wasn’t always this way. There was a time when many Americans and people around the world looked to the U.N. for inspired global leadership, for opening up the possibility of international relations governed by rules adopted through reasoned debate. Today, however, this seems like a pipedream.

Despite the experience of the past decades

— and one cannot dismiss this experience lightly or cavalierly — this situation need not persist into the future. Indeed, quietly but often effectively, multilateral diplomacy has proven helpful — at least for advancing the possibilities of peace in ways unattainable through bilateral diplomacy alone. For example, after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, an international conference was convened in Berlin to help define the shape of a future Afghan government and to bring under one roof all the local and international stakeholders in a hoped-for peace settlement. As an essential part of the 1991 Madrid peace conference, multilateral negotiations were held on such disparate issues as water, the environment, economic development, refugees, and arms control and regional security. A multilateral steering group guided this process, in which Israelis and Arabs from throughout the region, including Saudi Arabia, sat together, many for the first time.

To be sure, not all multilateral meetings have such fairy-tale qualities. In 2000, after the Palestinians launched an uprising, the Intifada, President Bill Clinton called a summit meeting in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, to try to end the violence and resume negotiations. Not only did the summit fail to produce the sought-after outcome, but the drafting session chaired by foreign ministers (which I attended) was the single most acrimonious and contentious meeting I have ever witnessed. The raw emotions being played out in the streets of Israel and Palestine were reflected in the anger of the diplomats around the table. Neither bilateral nor multilateral diplomacy could help restore comity between the sides.

Of the many extraordinary diplomatic experiences that I was privileged to witness or participate in during my 30 years of serving our country in the Foreign Service, few experiences gave me as much satisfaction as helping to create and then oversee the multilateral peace negotiations in the 1990s. We didn’t solve all the issues on our agenda, but we created opportunities for people to meet, for persistent problems to be discussed, and for the future to be examined. Using multilateral diplomacy today as it was intended might actually be healthy for our country and our standing in the international community. 

Daniel Kurtzer is the S. Daniel Abraham Professor in Middle Eastern Policy Studies at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He served previously as the U.S. Ambassador to Egypt and to Israel.