

Multilateralism in everyday diplomatic life

Written by Daniel Woker

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DANIEL WOKER, MAY 30 2011

In the Australian strategic community, some commentators such as Michael Wesley have recently questioned the utility of contemporary multilateral diplomacy. But there are three main reasons why multilateralism was, is, and will be part of the overall picture of ensuring the good functioning of international relations through the day-to-day work of foreign policy practitioners.

Firstly, multilateralism works and is indispensable for “the working of the global order”, as pointed out by Senator Russell Troad. To the Senator’s examples, I would like to add development cooperation, where all reasonable experts (lest those who question all development cooperation, but that is another discussion) agree that only a well-calibrated mix of bi- and multilateral cooperation brings the benefits wanted by both sides. In answer to the sceptics of multilateralism Tim Dunne asks the correct basic question: “If not multilateralism, then what?”

Secondly, multilateral organisations and bodies allow for the decent and generally accepted inclusion, within the daily work of the international community, of both very large and powerful and very small and ‘weak’ states, which is indispensable as long as that community is still based on the national state as the main actor.

Regarding the strong states, can anybody deny that China’s relations with its ‘near abroad’ are easier for everybody with ASEAN in place? Nick Bisley argues that “the seemingly never-ending (and entirely unrealistic) desire to create the ‘right’ Asian security architecture” proves the futility of multilateralism. With all due respect and in the perspective of a practitioner, the opposite is true: without ASEAN and its artful ‘ASEAN plus’ construct, we would today not have the East Asia Summit (EAS), which is certainly imperfect, but much better than nothing at all.

The choice is between an all-against-all in bilateral twilight (eg. the Thailand-Cambodia dispute), or respective summits where basic rules for acceptable behaviour exist and where international (media) lights shine? Yes, there might well be a ‘right’ Asian security architecture; it’s our common task to find it because the alternative is worse.

Interestingly enough, Minister for Foreign Affairs Kevin Rudd, in his 19 May 2011 speech at the University of Oslo, says in this context: “There is not even an OSCE (in Asia). There has never been the equivalent of a Helsinki process.” He then mentions, approvingly (and with an entirely justified side remark about the basically sound original Australian proposal for an Asia-Pacific Community), that the EAS is the place where “(we) begin to carve out a regional rules-based order for the future.”

There are lessons to be learnt for future Asian architects when studying some of the ways and means (if not the entire recipe) of the Helsinki process.

The frequently heard argument that Asian states are supposedly too different for anything like ‘Helsinki’ to work simply won’t wash. I was there, if not at the beginning but quite early in the Helsinki process, and I can tell you that in some respects participating states were very far apart indeed, with some not even recognising each other officially.

The same argument is used by Ian Hall, who then proposes, somewhat paradoxically, that Australia should work for the development of the Pacific in tandem with India and Indonesia. Surely that is exactly what multilateralism is all about: finding like-minded partners within generally accepted structures to work together without a shadow of the

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suspicion of “wanting to throw one’s (bilateral) weight around.”

As for weak countries, a good case can also be made for the vital importance of multilateralism for the Pacific Island states. We all truly appreciate the tremendous bilateral efforts of Australia and New Zealand for orderly, sustainable and corruption-free development in the Pacific, an area which covers, we know well in Europe, roughly one third of our planet, a third which will become ever more important with the global shift from West to East.

All of this is complementary to the indispensable (because globally followed and observed) multilateral platforms where these states can demonstrate that, for example, global warming is an immediate threat to their very existence. Without the Climate Conference in Cancun, otherwise not very successful but useful in this respect, no such platform, and no follow-up action by governments and NGOs, would have been possible.

Last but not least, multilateralism serves as an indispensable scapegoat for governments to justify unpalatable but necessary decisions towards their electorate and people. One recent example might be enough to illustrate my point: without EU membership, thus deflecting some of the criticism on the broad but anonymous shoulders of ‘Brussels’, the Finnish Government would probably not have succeeded in convincing a reluctant electorate that financial help for Greece and Portugal is truly in the best long-term interest of the country.

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