CHAPTER XVII
INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS,
SOVEREIGNTY AND THE CABINET

Two advantages of a symbolic treatment. During recent years
the public's knowledge of the nature of international agreements
has been vastly extended by the displays and debates before
the League of Nations and U.N.O.; and by this time most people
have come to have an appreciation of the underlying realities of
diplomacy. But the knowledge got in this way is intuitive and
difficult to put into words; and on that account, difficult to com­
municate to others. We might hope, therefore, that the use of a
symbolism would at least help to make explicit what people
already know intuitively. If the symbolism were no more than a
new mode of expression, finding readier terms for what we already
know, it might still be worth getting.

Also since the end of the First World War there have been
innumerable investigations by lawyers and historians on inter­
national relations, and a vast mass of factual information has been
compiled. The difficulty about this information is that it lacks a
general theoretic scheme to hold it together and in terms of which
it could be interpreted; and for this reason again it seems worth
while to see if anything can be achieved by a formal approach; it
may help to explain the existing information and show what
additional information ought to be collected.

International conferences and their procedure. In the theory
we give we shall disregard international organizations, which
sometimes reach their decisions by a simple majority or a two­
thirds majority, and concentrate on the case of international
conferences. At an international conference agreement is reached
only by a unanimous decision. Any country that dissented from
the terms would be altogether unlikely to ratify them. We may
take it, therefore, that the requirement in our committee is that
there should be unanimity.

We may also assume that steps have been taken before the con­
ference to find the amount of common ground between the nations.
There may have been an exchange of notes, or exploratory dis­
cussions between the diplomats, which have revealed a desire on

[ 140 ]
the part of the nations concerned to arrive at a common agreement
on some particular issue. For this purpose the nations have met
round the conference table.

During the conference, if we go by the usual practice, no hard-
and-fast procedure will be in use to decide the order in which pro-
posals will be discussed. It will rather be a matter of the countries
bargaining among themselves, by twos and threes, and so on, in
the search for some proposal that would be acceptable to all. And
the chairman will be happy to place before the meeting any pro-
posal that seems likely to get unanimous agreement.

If, in spite of repeated attempts, no proposal seems likely to be
adopted, the chairman may put forward the proposal that appears
to command more support than any other. Rejection of it may be
taken as the signal that no agreement is possible, and that the
search for a solution should, meantime, be abandoned.

That is the factual information we have about international
conferences. We also know that international discussion is the
stage for power politics; that behind the scenes there are promises
and threats; and that 'horses are traded', or bargains struck,
which do not call for mention in the conference room. The general
effect is that the lesser nations swim in the wake of certain great
powers, some attached to one and some attached to another; and
the ostensible reaction of any small nation will be that of the
great power to which it is attached.*

It will, therefore, be a close enough approximation to reality if
we suppose that we have, say, four great powers A, B, C and D
round the conference table, trying to sift the various proposals
that have been put forward and to agree to accept one of them.

The requirement of unanimity ensures that all of the major
powers 'benefit' from any change made. The proposal that the
conference should be held may have been made for any of a variety

* For example, E. H. Carr in discussing the League Assembly quotes as a true
description of the facts the remark of Signor Grandi that he 'never saw a dispute
of any importance settled otherwise than by an agreement between the Great
Powers' (The Twenty Years' Crisis, p. 133). Pitman B. Potter, in the same con-
nexion, ventures the opinion that 'the present situation—formal equality with
actual inequality according to actual power and influence—is the best for all
concerned' (An Introduction to the Study of International Organization, p. 393).
And Martin Wright, after considering a number of specific instances of inter-
national settlement, says 'The method throughout was the same: the Great
Powers acting as a directorate' (Royal Institute of International Affairs pamphlet,
Power Politics, p. 60).