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The Counter-Revolution in Diplomacy

It is an axiom of the history of diplomacy that the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a revolution in diplomatic practice unprecedented since the resident mission was invented half a millennium earlier. Stimulated by the pressures of alliance politics in World War I and a rising enthusiasm for popular control of foreign policy, and facilitated by dramatic advances in transport and telecommunications, the ‘old diplomacy’ – a secretive world of negotiations between embassies and foreign ministries – was seriously challenged by a thoroughly ‘new diplomacy’. Associated with the name of US president Woodrow Wilson, the centrepiece of this was multilateralism, but it also witnessed much greater emphasis on openness and – before too long – on summitry and direct communication between domestic ministries which bypassed foreign ministries altogether.1 However, what seems largely to have escaped notice is that, slowly gathering in pace in the second half of the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first, we have actually witnessed a rediscovery of the value of principles, procedures and institutions associated with the old diplomacy. In short, we have witnessed a counter-revolution in diplomatic practice.

The return to secret negotiation

The first feature of the counter-revolution in diplomacy that should be mentioned appeared in multilateral diplomacy. This was the...
abandonment – in all but name – of voting, and a new emphasis on secret negotiation. Already in the 1950s an old wisdom was reasserting itself in decision-making in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, namely, that it is much better to create agreements that carry everyone along than to let a vote decide the issue.\(^2\) This is because voting runs the risk of alienating weak majorities if it is weighted and powerful minorities if it is not.\(^3\) However, a return to old ways that was too obvious would have created political problems, not least with the many small, poor countries that had come to attach such importance to their votes. Besides, priesthoods require mysteries and mysteries require that one word should never be used when three will do. As a result, after the mid-1960s, when scholars as well as diplomats began to notice that majority voting was falling from grace, all were anxious to call what was replacing it anything but ‘negotiation’. What they conspired to present to the world instead, as if fresh from the cradle, was ‘consensus decision-making’. A little over a decade later this title was bestowed on the changed procedures of the main committees of the UN General Assembly itself, not least those of the all-important Fifth Committee (administrative and budgetary). Since then the effort to achieve consensus in the General Assembly has normally been pursued through negotiations between its regional groups. If this is successful, delegations indicate to the president of the assembly or chair of a committee that they are willing to agree to the adoption of a resolution without a vote, and this is then formally proposed.\(^4\) The US secretary of state was soon able, with obvious satisfaction, to observe in his annual reports to Congress that more and more resolutions of the plenary sessions of the General Assembly were being adopted by consensus.\(^5\)

It is true that so-called consensus decision-making consists of a peculiar blend of procedural devices, among them special powers for

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\(^2\) Steinberg, ‘In the shadow of law or power?’ p. 344.

\(^3\) Buzan, ‘Negotiating by consensus’. This valuable article might with more accuracy have been called ‘Negotiating for consensus’.

\(^4\) Since 1997 the General Assembly has also been seeking to promote consensus by holding informal meetings of its plenary on certain questions, and since 2003 by holding similar meetings of its general committee. See UN General Assembly, 60th Session: Press Kit. General information available at http://www.un.org/ga/60/presskit/geninfo.htm.