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The Purposes of Multilateralism

Diplomacy is the art of dealing with other governments by communication – as opposed to war, military deterrence, subversion, propaganda and so on. We use the same word for how a government deals with other governments (as in ‘British diplomacy in Europe’) and for the craft and profession of the officials (‘diplomats’) who specialise in this function. Your responsibilities as a diplomat include representing your own nation and government to others; also helping your government to identify, evaluate and respond to external approaches, threats and opportunities. In its most elevated form, diplomacy aims to influence the behaviour of foreign governments and their agents.

When one government deals with another on a one-to-one basis only two sides are involved: this is called bilateral diplomacy. Multilateral diplomacy is dealing with several governments simultaneously. In multilateral diplomacy, not only does your government deal with several governments at the one time, but those other governments are also interacting with each other. This sounds – and is – complicated. It invites the questions: Why would anyone want to do that? Wouldn’t it be easier to conduct all dealings bilaterally?

**Purposes of multilateral diplomacy**

There are at least nine different reasons impelling governments to engage each other multilaterally: precisely the same reasons as those which lead them to engage bilaterally.

**Information gathering and pooling**

A prime motive for a government to interact with others is to access information: the experience of other governments and forewarning of
their intentions can help identify opportunities or threats for your own citizens and corporations. Your police can be more effective if they are alerted by foreign counterparts to the movements of individual criminals, to new patterns of criminal behaviour and to new methods of law-enforcement. This can be done bilaterally; but a multilateral organisation such as Interpol is a more effective way to pool and disseminate such information amongst the police forces of participating countries. Likewise, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) assembles, expertly evaluates and disseminates information on economic management to the governments of the economically advanced countries. These governments find it useful to engage in a process rather like academic ‘peer review’: each member country reports on its economic management, and periodically the other members, and OECD technical staff, assess and comment on this performance.

Joint projects
Pooling resources with others is often an effective way of achieving your own objectives. The supersonic airliner Concorde was the product of a joint venture between the French and British governments. Other projects require wider participation. The eradication of smallpox was a cooperative achievement by all governments working together through and with the World Health Organization (WHO). If a river flows through two countries, flood control, navigation, etc. cry out for joint management; if the river flows through several countries the obvious answer is a multilateral arrangement such as the Danube River Commission involving all riparian states. Similarly, the management of resources to which no one government has an exclusive claim, such as high seas fisheries, demands multilateral arrangements.

Managing the external environment
Just as a cooperative relationship with a neighbour can provide a political environment conducive to easing bilateral problems, multilateral arrangements can influence the regional or global environment your country experiences. Thus if the multilateral Chemical Weapons Convention results in a world where these weapons are less readily available to potential aggressors, all nations will be relatively more secure against this particular threat: their security environment will have improved.² If multilateral agreements in the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) open up markets, the trade environment for all countries will have improved.