

The World Cup of Diplomacy

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Underlining the strength of the United Nations Security Council, this EDA Reflection sets out for the diplomats of small countries five practical suggestions. Based on his UNSC experience, Prof. Mahbubani's tips are two-fold – one, how best to learn while being a part of the 15-member group; and two, how to leave an indelible mark, both for the country and as a diplomat, at the end of the two-year term.

Every profession has its peak performing arena. In athletics, it is the Olympics. In football, it is the World Cup. In diplomacy, it is the UN Security Council (UNSC). Why? The UNSC is the most powerful international organization in the world. Its decisions are mandatory and binding on all 193 member-states. In my 33-year career in the Singapore Foreign Service, the two most satisfying and fulfilling years I had were when I was Singapore's Ambassador to the UNSC in 2001 and 2002. I learned more about diplomacy in those two years than I did in all the previous 29 years.

Any diplomat from a small country walking into the UNSC should therefore do so with a certain sense of awe as well as humility. Let me also offer five practical tips that I hope will prove to be useful.

1. Be realistic

In theory, the UNSC has 15 members. In practice, as a Chilean diplomat wisely told us, the UNSC has five members (the P5: USA, UK, Russia, France and China) and ten observers. Hence, even though the UNSC is the World Cup of diplomacy, it does not have a level playing

field. The P5 set the main directions. It is not just their national power that dictates this. Continuity in office gives an enormous advantage. Only they have the full institutional memory of the many complex cases we handled.

After more than 74 years of membership, the P5 had learnt the ropes well and knew which levers to pull to advance their interests. When an issue is of vital importance to a P5 member (as, say, Iraq was to the US), the ten Elected Members (E10) challenge the P5 at their peril. The history of the UNSC is replete with examples of E10 ambassadors who were suddenly transferred out in the middle of their UNSC terms. Whatever the official explanations, in most cases the real reason for the transfer was that they had stepped on some sensitive P5 toes. I consider myself fortunate that I kept my job, despite challenging, sometimes publicly, the P5. We were the only delegation to publicly challenge the American Presidency of the UNSC on a point of order. Later, (then) UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan telephoned me to privately convey his compliments on our courage.

Since we could not change the substantive directions of the UNSC, we tried our best to improve the procedural aspects. One of our key achievements was to transform the enormous, largely repetitive, mostly unsubstantive annual report of the UNSC to the UNGA into a tighter, more analytical and user-friendly report. This won us considerable praise when we succeeded. Another significant achievement (working with Jamaica) was to set up a new system of drawing lots for speaking positions. This transparent system killed the ability of the junior P5 diplomats to engineer good speaking slots behind the scene. However, our efforts to bring in McKinsey Consulting (on a *pro bono* basis) to help reform the Council's working methods failed because transparency and predictability would only lead to a level playing field between the P5 and the E10. As a P5 Ambassador said in response to our efforts to bring in McKinsey, 'Why are these tourists trying to rearrange the furniture in our living room?'

2. Be Idealistic

There is also a danger to being too realistic. As a result, one can become cynical and passive. This would be a terrible waste of a valuable two-year opportunity to make an effort to improve the world.

Small states should always remember the biggest contribution that the UN makes to them. Since the promulgation of the UN Charter in 1945, it has become illegal for major and medium powers to invade and occupy small states. As a result, with only a few exceptions, most small states live in peace. Hence, despite the difficulties, small states should continually strive to improve the UN, including the UNSC.

'Deploy three weapons in the United Nations: reason, logic and charm. The importance of charm is hugely underestimated.'

One of the most important responsibilities of the UNSC is to launch Peacekeeping Operations (PKO). Indeed, the PKO budget of US\$6.7 billion is more than the regular UN budget of US\$5.4 billion. There are also over 88,000 peacekeepers in the field. In the period before Singapore joined the Council, there had been a breakdown in trust and confidence between some Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) and the UNSC, with India and Jordan withdrawing their contingents from Sierra Leone in 2000. Hence, in our first Presidency of the UNSC in January 2001 (and we became the Council President on the first day we ever joined the UNSC) we launched a dialogue between the TCCs and the UNSC. It helped. At Singapore's initiative, a 'Security Council Working Group on Peacekeeping Operations' was set up. Consultation with the TCCs became more frequent. Singapore's experience taught us that in some areas, small states can make a difference in the UNSC.

3. Be hardworking

One of the biggest gifts that the three key founding fathers of Singapore (Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam) bestowed upon Singapore public servants was to inculcate the culture and tradition of working very hard. From the very first day I joined the Singapore Foreign Service in 1971, I felt the pressure to strive for excellence.

This culture of public service excellence proved useful in the UNSC. The other representatives soon noticed that the speeches made by Singapore delegates to the UNSC were among the best-researched and most thoughtful. A Russian Deputy Permanent Representative once paid an enormous compliment to us. A year after Singapore left the UNSC, he still instructed his officers to retrieve and read our speeches. In his view, they inevitably contained

valuable insights. In the first three months of 2001 (six months before 9/11 happened), we pointed out the futility of the UNSC's policies towards Afghanistan. Privately, a senior American representative pulled aside one of our officers and told her that our concerns were valid. When we spoke, the members listened. In the UNSC, as in any other organization, hard work pays off.

4. Be charming

As the Permanent Representative of Singapore to the UN for over ten years, I always told the Singapore diplomats in my team that we could only deploy three weapons in the UN: reason, logic and charm. The importance of charm is hugely underestimated.

Clearly, no small state diplomat can succeed in the UNSC if he or she doesn't have good relations with the P5 representatives. However, it would be a mistake to be charming only to the powerful countries and ignore the rest, especially the 188 other member states who are not permanently on the UNSC. Indeed, the best time to reach out and cultivate these 188 member states is when a country is serving on the UNSC. Many of the representatives of these 188 countries are hungry for information on the UNSC, especially information on the closed-door informal consultations. Similarly, many NGOs who do good work in the field (like Médecins Sans Frontières and the World Food Programme) are keen to find out more about UNSC deliberations. Singapore made it a practice to regularly brief other delegations and NGOs. This won us long-term goodwill. A little charm goes a long way.

5. Be observant

Since the decisions of the UNSC have enormous consequence, most countries send their best diplomats to serve on the UNSC, especially the P5 countries. Personally, I developed enormous respect for and close friendships with the P5 Ambassadors I served with: John Negroponte (who later became the Director of National Intelligence from 2005–2007), Sergey Lavrov, who is Russia's longest-serving foreign minister, and Wang Yingfan, Jeremy Greenstock and Jean-David Levitte, who were three outstanding diplomats. By observing them closely, I learned valuable and powerful lessons in diplomacy.

I am often asked how I was able to publish six books after I left the foreign service in 2004. An honest answer is that my writings reflect the deep learning I got from the two years in the UNSC and 33 years in diplomacy. Here's one example of a big lesson I learned. In theory, principles are as important as power in international relations. In practice, as the UNSC taught me, power always trumps principles. However, power can either be deployed in a crude, dictatorial manner or in a charming and seductive manner. I saw both strains in the UNSC. A two-year stint in the UNSC should therefore be seen as a great learning opportunity. Don't waste it!