On Conference Diplomacy

The role of diplomatic conferences, in particular those held at the level of heads of states or governments, started to increase once the classical view of the Burgundian diplomat Philippe de Commynes had been balanced by the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), which was followed by similar gatherings and processes. De Commynes wrote in the 15th century: ‘Two great princes who wish to establish good personal relations should never meet each other face to face, but ought to communicate through good and wise emissaries.’

Historically, ‘conference diplomacy’ was gaining importance as a response to conflicts covering entire regions or bearing a global dimension. Diplomatic conferences or summits were perceived as a suitable framework to put an end to hostilities and open doors to post-conflict settlements. As Nicholas Eberstadt writes, in the ‘inter-war’ Europe, dominated by a series of crisis, ‘the very fact that antagonists agreed to gather at the same table was held out as proof positive that ‘Conference Diplomacy’ was working.’

Although this sort of diplomacy is rooted in the ‘old diplomacy’, which focused on the classical Westphalian principles of sovereignty and territoriality, it has somewhat flourished under the roof of the United Nations (UN) in the framework of ‘new diplomacy’. The latter addresses issues governed by principles and norms which often balance the Westphalian order, such as human rights, humanitarian

and social issues, development, environment, and other contemporary items on the very broad international agenda. International conferences have appeared, at least in some cases, to be a functional tool to look for global arrangements in these areas. Moreover, they offer a workable venue for the contemporary three tracks of diplomacy: official governmental channels, unofficial diplomatic activities (often involving governmental and non-governmental experts), and networking diplomacy based on interaction between social actors (often for advocacy purposes).

It is warrant to repeat the assessment made by the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan who said that the world conferences held under the auspices of the United Nations play a harmonising role, serve as an indispensable forum where diverse points of view are aired, where proposals are debated and where, most importantly, political consensus is achieved. As a result, the international community—governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and representatives of the wider civil society—has been able to set a new course for a new era in global affairs. In a similar spirit, another former Secretary-General, Boutros-Ghali, had recognised the world summits of the 1990s ‘as a wholly new factor for achieving change on the world stage’. He associated himself with an unnamed ‘bitter critic’ of the conferences who nevertheless stressed that these events were not just ‘talkathons’ but, on the contrary, provided opportunities ‘to seed international law with new norms and rights, many of them hidden in apparently routine language’. Boutros-Ghali also said ‘[the world conferences] were in fact democratic […] and the beginning of a new form of peoples’ control of their own destinies on issues too large or too suppressed by special interests to be handled by domestic national politics’. It seems that these words were primarily related to the relations between states and the role played at the conferences by those less

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6 Ibid., p.175.