Multilateralism Matters

Luigi R. Einaudi

Author’s note: Since retiring from the State Department in 1998 and completing my elected term of office at the Organization of American States (OAS) in 2005, I have split my time between Italy and the United States, and since 2007 have been a fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University.

The essay that follows is based on my remarks accepting the 2016 William J. Perry Award for Excellence in Security and Defense Education at a ceremony held at Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. on January 12, 2017. Sponsored by the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, the award ceremony symbolized State-Defense cooperation by including Ambassador Thomas A. Shannon, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, and was attended by some 200 persons, including some 40 U.S. and foreign ambassadors and flag officers.

I am proud to accept this award. I met Bill Perry when he was Secretary of Defense, and have just finished reading what he calls his “selective memoir.” With a forward by my old boss George Shultz, Perry writes how honored he was to have this Center named for him, and makes a passionate plea to eliminate nuclear weapons before they eliminate us. It is a good read, and I recommend it.

My values have been shaped by a belief in Western civilization. That bold phrase Civis romanus sum (I am a Roman citizen) is its cornerstone. I was born in the United States and am a citizen of the United States alone. But I believe the rights and obligations of citizenship that began in Rome are at the heart of mankind’s progress.

I would like to share some thoughts about where we are now and what may lie ahead.

The last twenty years or so have been hard on the international order. So much so that disorder increasingly seems a better description. The current Foreign Affairs asks whether the situation should simply be seen as “Out of Order.” Governing has become harder and more complicated. Citizen demands for a better life have grown, but disparities in power and cultural differences have not been erased; in some cases, they have sharpened. World War II ended with winners and losers; the Cold War had blocs and anti-blocs; in contrast, with what has been called the “end of ideology,” shared reference points and perspectives are fewer than ever.

These conditions hamper international understanding and disrupt long-held concepts. My professional career has focused on United States relations with countries in the Western Hemisphere. In my service on the Policy Planning Staff for Secretaries of State from two different parties, I always tried to see our neighbors in the Americas in a global context. In that spirit, I will use the Organization of American States, the world’s oldest regional organization, to exemplify the difficulties of today’s international scene.

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1William J. Perry, My Journey at the Nuclear Brink (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1915).
2 Perry’s website, www.wjperryproject.org, is co-sponsored by the Nuclear Threat Initiative.
3Foreign Affairs, Volume 96, Number 1, January/February 2017.
The OAS is a multilateral organization of the sovereign states of the Western Hemisphere. This simple definition combines three concepts.

- **Multilateralism**, based on “generalized principles of conduct” – the creation of predictable universal rules rather than a temporary coalition of a few countries on a specific problem.

- **Sovereignty**, the sovereign equality of states, the organizing principle of the international system since the 1648 Peace of Westphalia.

- **Geography**, as in the proposition that “the peoples of this Hemisphere stand in a special relationship to one another which sets them apart from the rest of the world.”

Today, these three concepts are all operationally challenged.

**Multilateralism** is associated with inefficiency more than order. International law has been weakened by repeated failures to ratify treaties or abide by their obligations. A cynic might argue that *multilateralism is now just an idealistic illusion in an increasingly Hobbesian world.*

**Sovereignty** has long meant that individual states are inviolate from outside intervention and free to decide whether or not to participate in any particular activity. The problem is that our times require cooperation. Cyberspace, illegal drugs, weapons from small arms to drones and nukes, migration, terrorism, disease, climate and most economic activity cannot be dealt with by any one state acting alone. Does this mean **sovereignty is obsolete?**

Finally, in the age of the jet and the internet, **does geography still matter?** Twenty years ago, a senior administration official told me flatly that geography was no longer relevant to foreign policy.

My colleagues at the Perry Center and the National Defense University are among those who know better. War is intimately related to sovereignty, geography and even multilateralism. The League of Nations was created to end war but had no military authority. The United Nations Charter authorized the use of force in Chapter VII. The OAS Charter purposely conveyed no coercive authority. These formulas are all incomplete. Neither force nor diplomacy can work alone.

What is needed, of course, is to **integrate** the various elements of power. You can’t say “We’ll deal with this militarily, or just economically, or just diplomatically.” You can’t say “We’ll deal with this multilaterally, that bilaterally, and this unilaterally.” Major problems require the application in some form of all elements of power, civil and military, hard and soft, multilateral, bilateral and unilateral.

Trying to integrate power by making the inter-agency system work is how I survived in Washington. My mentors at the State Department all served on the National Security Council. One of them conditioned his acceptance of becoming Assistant Secretary on also chairing the NSC Inter-Departmental Group, then promptly appointed me its Executive Secretary. Years later, in 1995, when I was asked to represent the United States in the effort to end fighting...
between Ecuador and Peru, I did the same thing so as to have the authority to team with U.S. Southern Command.\(^6\)

In a dispute that went back to colonial times, five thousand Special Forces soldiers from the two countries had become entangled in mountainous jungle terrain. To prevent escalation, Brazil, Argentina, Chile and the United States – all guarantors of an earlier treaty—contributed soldiers to a military observation mission, known as MOME, to separate forces and give diplomacy a chance.

My counterparts from the guarantor countries, all of us senior diplomats, and I would share intelligence, listen to each other’s views and meet until we hammered out a course our governments could all support. We approached things from different perspectives and different interests. But the give and take was mutual. Often our guarantor meetings led to a course different from anything any one of us had started with. One example was our decision to invite Peru and Ecuador to send soldiers to join the observation mission, a potentially risky move, but one designed to build confidence between the antagonists and demonstrate our position as honest brokers. Another was our decision to ask our four guarantor presidents to consult and reach a joint decision on issues the two parties felt they could not resolve themselves. Whenever innovations like these took place, interagency coordination was key to keeping Washington (and of course the other capitals) in sync as well. Sometimes I felt as though I was dealing with two wars, one abroad, and the other here at home.

The NSC had initially authorized the military deployment for a maximum of 90 days, fearing that any U.S. military casualties in the Amazon would lead to a political backlash at home.\(^7\) Others feared MOME would drag our forces into a Cyprus-like eternal deadlock. Each 90-day extension had to be approved – and each approval was won only because State and Defense kept on the same page. The peace agreements ultimately settled the land boundaries at the origins of the conflict, but extended also to river navigation, trade, parks, burial of casualties, human rights, and economic development. It took almost four years, but we succeeded where few believed we could.

The peace between Ecuador and Peru has now lasted almost a generation.\(^8\) It resolved the last active territorial conflict on the South American mainland and removed the arms race contagion in the region. Conventional war among states in the Americas today is almost unthinkable.

In this lower threat environment, collective security obligations have given way to a concept championed initially by the countries of the Commonwealth Caribbean\(^9\) that security should be understood as “multidimensional.” This approach expanded security concerns from traditional

\(^{6}\) Then headed by General Barry McCaffrey, who proved an invaluable ally.
\(^{7}\) Not incidentally, the loss of U.S. soldiers and a Blackhawk in Somalia had taken place just a year before.
\(^{8}\) Readers wishing more on this conflict, known also as the Cenepa War, may enjoy a lecture I gave at Cornell University in 2015: http://www.cornell.edu/video/ambassador-luigi-einaudi-peru-ecuador-war-impact
\(^{9}\) CARICOM – the Caribbean Community—brings together 15 states in the Caribbean Basin, geographically our near neighborhood quite as much as Canada and Mexico. CARICOM members are Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Haiti, Jamaica, Grenada, Guyana, Montserrat, St. Lucia, Suriname, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago. A majority are members of the British Commonwealth.
defense matters like weapons acquisitions and confidence building measures to trafficking in persons, drug abuse and the special security concerns of small island states.

Yet even with this more consensual approach, security and defense matters remain problematic. Uncertainty about military and police roles creates confusion. Asymmetries in power breed illusions and distrust. Tensions among neighbors still flare up. The end of the Cold War reduced but did not eliminate concerns about the activities of countries outside the hemisphere. The variety and complexity of contemporary security issues makes clear that no one policy fits all. Every country has tended to set its own course. Nothing is automatic.

So what should we do in the midst of this uncertainty? 10

First, multilateral consultations should be part of any strategy.

Multilateralism was the core of the international order the United States led in creating after World War II. The United States today is more focused inward and faces competition from many quarters. The multilateral order has eroded, and U.S. participation has been reduced. Yet even when agreement is elusive, broad consultation can reduce confusion and set the stage for future cooperation.

The excellent lead article in the Foreign Affairs issue cited earlier calls for a system of “Sovereign obligation” to deal with the world’s growing common problems. I was amused, however, that the author suggests the United States consult only half a dozen “other major powers.” 11 I was delighted to read that the powerful have obligations as well as rights. But in my experience, democracy is as important among countries as within them. If smaller countries do not receive respect, they are unlikely to be part of the solution. Democracy is as important among countries as within them.

Our Founding Fathers set a good example in our Declaration of Independence: “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind” requires that all be heard. Idealism quite aside, success is harder if you don’t consult.

Second, respect the law and support local institutions.

In the Peru-Ecuador conflict, the Rio Protocol authorized the guarantors only to “assist” the parties, not to decide. Peru and Ecuador had to agree; and a Terms of Reference had to be negotiated for the military observers. Once the rules were agreed, however, everything could be dealt with. Early on MMEP helicopters maneuvering to find ways to separate the hostile intertwined forces found that they had been locked in upon by radar that could have targeted them for being shot down. Later, both parties at different moments secretly built up fresh forces

10 I had a childhood lesson on dealing with disorder. In December 1944, when I was a boy, my grandfather returned to Italy from Swiss exile on an American Flying Fortress to help run post-war reconstruction, then became the first President under the new Republic that replaced the monarchy. Italy had come out of the war in economic free fall and intermittent civil war. There were few precedents or rules. My grandfather taught me that those in authority are always required to behave in ways that will show the way to a better order, and that this becomes critical in the midst of disorder. He called this setting a good example, and he thought it increased both moral authority and chances for survival.

near the conflict area. Both activities were in contravention of explicit agreements and when discovered were reversed. Using the law gradually enabled the parties of peace within Peru and Ecuador to seize the initiative. A key dispute was resolved by a panel headed by the Chief Justice of Brazil’s Supreme Court. That Chief Justice, Nelson Jobim, later became Brazil’s Minister of Defense. Jobim received the Perry Award in 2011.

But just as the peace between Ecuador and Peru was proving the value of the law, the United States Senate stopped ratifying key international treaties. We have not ratified the global Law of the Sea, even after it was re-written to help meet U.S. objections. We have also not ratified conventions that advance U.S. regional interests in human rights or in fighting drugs by controlling illegal firearms. Laws are obviously not self-enforcing, but they do provide agreed goals legitimating international cooperation. Sandra Day O’Connor summarized the consequences of U.S. absenteeism: “The decision not to sign on to legal frameworks the rest of the world supports is central to the decline in American influence in the world.”

In 1991, OAS Resolution 1080 established common grounds for action against interruptions of the democratic process. But it also called for proposals and incentives to support democracy, a call that was never followed up with resources or specifics. The current tragedy in Venezuela is due to failures in implementation by the member states, starting with Venezuela, rather than to a failure of multilateralism. The Inter-American Charter stipulates in Article 3 that the “essential elements of representative democracy include, inter alia, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, access to and the exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law, the holding of periodic, free, and fair elections based on secret balloting and universal suffrage as an expression of the sovereignty of the people, the pluralistic system of political parties and organizations, and the separation of powers and independence of the branches of government.” Despite the clarity of the language, specifics are still subject to interpretation and challenge. What is striking is that no serious independent multilateral effort has been made to reconcile differing interpretations or to seek ways to reward good performance.

Much the same principle should apply to other hot-button issues like migration and trade. Sovereign nations have the right to decide who and what enters and leaves their territory. A wall that channels people and goods to an entry/exit point at which clear rules are enforced is fine,
but if the wall is breached or circumvented, or if there are no rules, even a beautiful wall becomes a Maginot line, impressive but ineffectual.

The world needs laws and relationship-building, not walls or nation-building. Lectures and barriers are less effective than relations built on respect and shared rules. Nothing will last unless all concerned feel at least some of their interests are being advanced.

Which brings me to my third and last point:

*Prepare professionals to cooperate across cultures.*

Even if interagency differences were all miraculously resolved here in the United States, we would still need to work efficiently with other countries.

To reconcile different national interests requires knowledge. Institutional ties maintained by a network of professionals who know how to work together can help contain issues that might otherwise escalate into conflict—in effect, a valuable insurance policy for progress and peace.

Bill Perry understood this. As Secretary of Defense in the years after the fall of the Berlin wall, he supported the establishment of the Marshall Center in Germany to help military and civilian officials from both NATO and the Warsaw Pact learn to work together. And because he understood that geography matters, he then supported the creation of similar centers for other parts of the world.

The Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies or CHDS, now known simply as the Perry Center, has an international faculty and students, ties to countries and institutions large and small, and an annual fall program that examines U.S. security and defense structures and policy. For years, the graduates of the Inter-American Course in International Law in Rio de Janeiro and of the Inter-American Defense College here at Fort McNair have had enviable records. Between them, the OAS and the Perry Center are forging relationships and cadres of public servants who can help turn a difficult world to mutual advantage. They provide a unique foundation for a safe neighborhood.15

And this brings me to a personnel recommendation. In this increasingly disorderly world, we in the United States might do well to link cultural sensitivity and knowledge of how to make things work to eligibility for promotion. In 1986, the Goldwater-Nichols Act established that to be eligible for promotion to General or Flag Officer, a military officer had to have both senior education and a completed a Joint Duty Tour. Stealing a page from Goldwater-Nichols, might a tour in the UN, the OAS, the IMF, or some other international organization become a requirement for promotion to the Senior Executive Service and the Senior Foreign Service?

Times have changed, but some old truths still apply. Geography and neighborhood still matter. Sovereignty still matters. Yet in today’s world, we can no longer retreat like Voltaire to cultivate our own garden. To take care of ourselves, we must also deal with the outside world, our neighbors perhaps most of all.

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15 John A. Cope (Colonel, USA, Ret), the founding Director of the Perry Center, and a colleague of mine at both State and NDU, nominated me for this award; his career has embodied the best in public service.
In international politics and security, there is no MapQuest to click for directions. There is just a lot of time consuming and necessarily inclusive hard work. It will not be easy. The logo at the bottom of the Perry Center's crest—Mens et Fides Mutua (Mutual understanding and trust)—has guided the Center during twenty years of progress. It must continue.