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MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master, that’s all.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872) ch. 6

Diplomats in Conference. Dealing with other diplomats and the Secretariat, as distinct from a host government; learning the interrelatedness of issues; drafting and negotiating resolutions and documents.

Adam was always grateful to have had a short spell, early in his career, in a multilateral post—the United Kingdom Mission (delegation) to the United Nations in New York. A multilateral post is neither an embassy nor a high commission but a national delegation to a permanent conference, dealing with all the subjects with which the conference is concerned but not accredited to any specific foreign country or government. Adam was working in the United States but not tasked to report on U.S. affairs. He was a member of the section of the UK Mission dealing with Security Council matters, which invariably kept the British delegation to the UN busy, Britain being one of the five permanent members of the Council, together with the United States, France, China, and Russia, and thus one of the five with the power of veto under the United Nations Charter.

Adam was struck, very soon after his arrival in the mission, by two things which he suspected distinguished this multilateral diplomacy post

from the majority of ordinary embassies and high commissions accredited to a single country: first, that the pace of the work was constantly hectic, with new problems blowing up in everyone's faces all the time; and secondly, that the calibre of his mission colleagues seemed to be universally and strikingly high. A slow learner, one who prized lengthy consideration above spontaneity, reluctant to say anything publicly without a carefully prepared script, would simply get left behind, overtaken by the remorseless rush of events.

Another feature of life and work at the UN was the need to familiarise yourself early on with the main tribal links and fissures between the member states: why Country X was always at loggerheads with Country Y, while Country A could almost always be relied on to support Country B. The reasons could be historical, cultural, linguistic, or even sometimes a matter of personalities. But in judging one's ability to gather support for a proposed new initiative in a UN Committee, or to put together a large enough alliance to defeat some harmful move by an adversary, it was vital to know which was the most influential African country to bring on board—because that delegation would bring a dozen other African votes with it; and which Latin American country would never agree to support you because its Latin American enemy was already on your side. These factors, Adam soon realised, tended to apply regardless of the specific issue at stake. The majority of UN member states had no particular national interest in most of the problems and crises that came before the Security Council or other UN bodies: they would either automatically follow the rest of their geographical group in deciding how to vote, or else make it clear that they were open to some quiet horse-trading: "I'll support you on this if you'll promise to support me next week in the vote on the border between Ruritania and Ozymandia." Many delegations were left on a very loose rein by their governments in their national capitals. Except on really major global issues, many could be persuaded to vote one way or the other by a friendly conversation in the Delegates' Dining Room or over a drink at a big boisterous buffet supper given by a second secretary in the delegation of a country of the utmost obscurity.

Adam's arrival at the Mission coincided with one of many crises in the middle east, marked by fighting between Israeli and Syrian forces and a partial occupation of the Gaza area of Palestine by the Israelis. Reading up on the FCO briefs for the Mission, Adam found confirmation of a situation familiar to anyone who had read the newspapers over the past

two or three decades: each side, Israelis as well as the Arabs and the Iranians, had genuine grievances against the other, the Israelis because of low-level but relentless rocket attacks against Israeli territory from Gaza, as well as periodic infiltration into Israel of suicide bombers from Syria and Lebanon; the Arabs because of what they claimed was disproportionately savage military retaliation by the Israelis, and the steadily expanding Israeli settlements on the Palestinians' side of Israel's unofficial border with the West Bank.

The Mission's briefs had been broadly agreed beforehand in capitals with the United States and French governments, both also Permanent Members, and with the Germans who were at the time elected, non-permanent members of the Council. Britain's objectives in the sudden flare-up of violence were to bring about an immediate and unconditional cease-fire; to be followed by a resumption of Arab-Israeli talks designed to work out concessions by both sides that could lead to a long-term settlement. Among the ingredients of the settlement envisaged in the briefs from London, Israel would be recognised by the Arabs as a permanent state within secure borders, in exchange for Israeli recognition of a Palestinian state and Israeli withdrawal from the illegal West Bank settlements, subject to any mutually agreed land swaps—the Arabs acquiring areas of Israeli territory in exchange for Israel retaining an equivalent area of the West Bank.

Soon after settling into a spacious apartment on the upper east side of Manhattan, rented for Mission officers by the UK Mission administration department, Adam, by now a first secretary, accompanied one of the Mission's senior counsellors, Rob Fellowes, on a series of calls on Arab Missions to discuss possible ways to end the fighting. This, Adam was told, was better done below the level of the respective Permanent Representatives (the Ambassadors who headed their Missions) since in lower-level talks the participants would be better able to explore options and fly trial balloons without initially committing their governments to anything. Adam was accompanying Rob principally to keep a record of what was said, but he was also encouraged by Rob to chip in with any thoughts or suggestions of his own, provided that any such contributions to the discussions didn't depart too far from the UK objectives as laid down in the briefs from London.

Rob and Adam went first to the offices near the UN of the UN Mission of the rich and influential Muslim Arab country 'Abudhara,' where they

were received by the Abudharan number two, himself accompanied by a more junior Abudharan officer introduced as Mohammed. As the four men settled down round the table in the Abudharan Mission conference room, and Mohammed produced and distributed small cups of strong sweet black coffee to each of them, Mohammed murmured to Adam that he was delighted to meet him as he had himself been to Leicester University in Britain reading for a Master's degree in Diplomatic Studies with his professor, the leading academic expert on the subject, who had remained one of his many good British friends. The discussions between the two principals went along generally predictable lines, both sides agreeing on the need for an immediate cease-fire but neither having much idea about how the Israeli and Arab combatants could be persuaded either to observe a cease-fire which they feared would give their adversary an advantage, or to resume talks on a long-term settlement.

The Abudharan number two was pessimistic. There were, he confessed, extremist elements especially in Syria, Iraq, and Iran, as well as other Muslim countries, who would never agree to accept the permanent existence of a Jewish state on what they regarded "with some justification" as land forcibly stolen from the Arab Palestinian people with the active encouragement of the British and some other western powers. Such people would never agree to a two-state solution, whatever they might say now. The only hope was to persuade their governments to be more conciliatory and more ready to accept mutual compromise in the cause of peace, and to exercise strict control over dissident activity in their own populations. This, the Abudharan argued, would inevitably mean the suspension for a considerable time of progress to democracy in the countries concerned. Opponents of recognition of Israel as part of any conceivable settlement could not be allowed the freedom of expression and political organisation that Britain and the west would no doubt demand for them. Otherwise they would end up by undermining any settlement. Would Britain be willing to accept that any peace settlement would necessarily entail the continuation of authoritarian regimes across the middle east (including Abudhara, no doubt, Adam guessed)? Adam concentrated on taking notes of the conversation between the two principals and made no comments of his own.

As the discussion ended and Rob and Adam got up to leave for their next appointment (at the Jordanian Mission), Mohammed asked, shaking hands with Adam, whether Adam would be free for lunch in the UN

building with him and a couple of his friends from other Missions the following day. Adam accepted the invitation enthusiastically: he was anxious to make potentially useful contacts without delay. In multilateral diplomacy there was little or no point in making contacts among the local indigenous (i.e., American) population, other than for purely social and personal reasons. The main contacts of professional value would be with the members of other missions, with the UN secretariat (who exercised considerable influence on UN decisions and processes) and to a limited extent with the international press corps covering UN affairs.

The following day, Adam found Mohammed already installed at a table for four in the Delegates' Dining Room at the UN. They were soon joined by first secretaries from the U.S. and Lebanese Missions, both also at Mohammed's invitation. In deference to the two Muslims' practices, the four drank only iced water, but all of them ate heartily and with relish. Their conversation was animated and at times emotional, but inevitably inconclusive. It became clear at the end that by unwritten UN convention the four lunchers would "go Dutch," each paying an equal share of the total cost of the lunches. And they agreed that in principle they would meet again at least once a month for strictly informal, off-the-record discussions of current Security Council issues.

Adam was happy to find that the conversation over lunch was more relaxed and informal than that at the Abudharan Mission the previous day. Mohammed had spoken even more openly than his senior colleague in his discussion with Rob about the obstacles to concessions, including unwillingness in some powerful quarters to accept the permanent existence of a Jewish state "in Palestine": if ever this resistance was to be overcome, the Arabs would need strong support and help from their western friends. The Americans especially, he argued, would have to move into a much more neutral position, moderating their current virtually unconditional support for Israel, which merely encouraged Israeli obstinacy and belligerence. It was clear to Adam that Mohammed was delivering an official prepared message from the Abudharans to the American first secretary and to himself, although Mohammed repeatedly claimed to be speaking "entirely personally."

In reply, the first secretary from the United States Mission pointed out that public opinion in the United States, by no means exclusively among Jewish Americans, was strongly committed to the defence of Israel and its survival as a Jewish state and that this was unlikely to change in the

foreseeable future. Nevertheless the U.S. government was equally strongly committed to an eventual peaceful settlement between Israel and its Arab and other Muslim neighbours under which each side, including a new Palestine state, would recognise the other's right to exist within secure borders. The Americans, he stressed, would continue to work for such a settlement which would be as much in the interests of the Arab states as in Israel's. A U.S. guarantee of that settlement was generally recognised, if only tacitly, to be essential to international confidence in it.

Adam had discussed with Rob before leaving the UK Mission for the UN the line he might take at the lunch and Rob had agreed, without much enthusiasm, that Adam might speculate "on a purely personal basis" about the possible abandonment of the "two-state solution" encapsulated in the celebrated Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967,¹ long regarded as the bottom line of any eventual settlement. Adam accordingly suggested to his three lunch companions that if and when a two-state solution came to be generally recognised as beyond reach, it would become necessary to consider instead a single loose federation of Israel and Palestine under a single sovereignty, with internationally backed guarantees for the rights and security of the Jewish and Arab sections of the population and a single power-sharing federal government of the whole country. Adam pointed out that a solution on these lines was already being discussed in academic circles and in the think-tanks.

This proved to be a bridge too far for the other three, who all expressed scepticism about the chances of any such international U-turn, anyway in the foreseeable future. Adam stressed that he had merely been thinking aloud, as a newcomer to the UN scene, and that his government had absolutely no current intention of embarking on such a radical change of policy. Nevertheless he said he personally believed that events in the future might eventually force the governments concerned to recognise that the obstacles to a two-state solution, including Israeli demographics and the inveterate hostility of wide sections of Muslim opinion to the existence of a Jewish state on Arab soil, were simply insuperable, and that if the Israeli Jews were to have any chance of living in their current homeland on a permanent basis, some sort of federal alternative would eventually have to be devised. He was met by more raised eye-brows and no more comments. But he had the feeling that what he had said would be reported back by the other three to their Permanent Representatives and perhaps by them to their capitals, if only as an indication that the new

British first secretary was a bit of a loose cannon, but also, probably, with some speculation that he might have been testing the temperature of the water on instructions from London. Anyway, it might have planted a seed. . . . He would discuss with Rob later how much, if any, of the lunch-time discussion and Adam's contribution to it he should report to London.

As an example:

It was at the United Nations in the 1960s. Spain was still under a fascist régime led by the infamous Generalissimo Franco. Britain was locked in an interminable quarrel with Spain over the status of Gibraltar, then as now a British colony. Spain's claim to sovereignty over the Rock was based on—

- *the commitment of the United Nations to universal decolonisation,*
- *the provision in the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) under which, if ever Britain gave up sovereignty over Gibraltar, Spain would have the option of resuming its sovereignty over the Rock (Spain claimed this would come into effect the moment that Gibraltar was "decolonised" as required by the UN), and*
- *the argument that Britain could not legally seize a piece of Spanish sovereign land, plant on it a group of British settlers, and grant them the right to self-determination.*

Britain pointed out that—

- *it had acquired permanent sovereignty over Gibraltar under a treaty that was still valid,*
- *Britain had not "planted" its own citizens as settlers on the Rock—they were of diverse national origins and many had been there for several generations.*
- *In numerous referendums over the years the vast majority of the Gibraltar inhabitants had repeatedly expressed their democratic desire to remain under British sovereignty. They had made it clear that they had no wish to be handed over against their will to Spain, whatever the character of its government.*
- *The population of Gibraltar were entitled to respect for their **wishes** concerning their future status, under the principle of self-determination, and not merely their **interests**, as Spain argued.*
- *No one, least of all its inhabitants, either wanted or proposed that Gibraltar should ever become independent, so the question of reversion to Spain under the treaty did not arise.*

The impasse seemed immutable. Neither side was willing to move an inch. Spain continued its petty harassment of the Gibraltarians, who in turn continued to proclaim their Britishness.

Much of the argument over Gibraltar took place in the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the conference of all the UN members, each with one vote, whose resolutions are not binding on member states but are not to be lightly dismissed, especially if passed by a big majority, since they may be said to represent the views of most of mankind.

Soon after I had joined the UK Mission in New York, Spain tabled a draft General Assembly resolution on Gibraltar. The draft resolution didn't go as far as to demand the return of the Rock to Spain—the UN membership would not have countenanced anything as crude as that, not least because it would have been widely seen as substituting one colonial situation for another. But some of its provisions were clearly unacceptable to the UK while looking as if they might attract quite widespread support in the UNGA. Spain's draft resolution would have the UN recognise the Gibraltar issue as a "dispute," implicitly requiring a settlement (whereas Britain said there was no dispute, only a baseless claim by Spain), declared that in accordance with numerous previous General Assembly resolutions all non-self-governing territories must be decolonised, and called on Britain to hold immediate talks with Spain in order to resolve the dispute in accordance with UN principles and the UK's treaty obligations.

As I was the first secretary responsible in the UK Mission for colonial affairs, my Mission boss invited me to suggest how we might respond to the cleverly drafted Spanish draft resolution. After mulling over several possible options, none of which had much attraction, I suggested that Britain should adopt the following strategy. We should table our own draft resolution, setting out the UK position in the most uncompromising terms. This would create the impression that the Spanish and British rival draft resolutions were at each end of the political and international spectrum. We should then encourage our friends in one of the Nordic UN Missions to table a resolution which would represent a kind of compromise between the UK and Spanish drafts, while in practice not damaging our position on Gibraltar nearly as badly as the Spanish draft would do if it was adopted. Most importantly it would include an affirmation that the colonial people of Gibraltar were entitled to the benefit of the principle of self-determination.

We could realistically hope that this Nordic "compromise" text would attract the votes of UN members who had no wish to be drawn

into a quarrel between Britain and Spain or to have to take sides on the issue, and so would welcome the opportunity to support a “neutral” compromise. I had already discussed this strategy in a non-committal way with a middle-ranking friend in one of the Nordic delegations, who had thought it might work, especially as if successful it would represent a setback for the unloved Franco régime in Madrid. My Nordic friend had promised to put the idea to his chief in New York who he hoped might then put it to his government.

Our suggested strategy was approved both by my own Permanent Representative and later by the FCO in London. My Nordic friend and I met very discreetly and drafted the Nordic “compromise” resolution together. All that remained was to persuade the relevant Nordic government to go along with the plan and table our “compromise” resolution in its own name. Messages flew back and forth between London, New York and the Nordic capital concerned. Eventually the then British Foreign Secretary telephoned his opposite number, the Nordic foreign minister, in the middle of the night from his bedroom and finally got his agreement to collaborate in our manoeuvre. The Nordic delegation, with the support of a few other Nordics and some Commonwealth delegations whom we had quietly lined up, duly tabled their draft “compromise” resolution.

In the end it all came to pieces over a procedural technicality. When there are several alternative resolutions on the table on the same subject, all saying contradictory things, the normal rule is that the resolution that was the first to be tabled is voted on first, then the second, and so on. The Nordics put down a procedural motion proposing that their “compromise” resolution, although the third to be tabled, should be voted on first. If this had happened, and their resolution had received a majority of the votes, the Spanish and British drafts would have been withdrawn. But Spain had done its homework, too, and had mustered a large collection of votes from nearly all the Latin American Spanish-speaking countries (which normally voted automatically in support of Spain unless their own contrary interests were involved) and from a large number of “non-aligned” African and Asian countries which could always be relied on to vote against “colonialism” and the colonial powers, regardless of the rights and wrongs of the specific issue in question—namely, the right of the Gibraltarians to decide their own future and not to be handed over against their will to the fascist government in Madrid or any other kind of Spanish government. The Nordic motion for priority for their own draft resolution was narrowly but decisively defeated, so the Spanish draft resolu-

tion was voted on first and approved by a modest majority. The Nordic and British draft resolutions accordingly fell away and were withdrawn.

It was undoubtedly a success for Spain, not because Spain had the better arguments (it didn't), but because of the tendency at the UN for countries with no particular stake in a problem and with no national interests of their own involved, to vote with their geographical, linguistic, and cultural friends, or else on the basis of some doctrinaire approach which might in fact be irrelevant to the issue in question. For a good example of this tendency beyond the United Nations, you need look no further than the Eurovision Song Contest.

Postscript: *Since the restoration of democracy in Spain (1975–1978) and Spain's accession to the European Community (now the EU) in 1986, both the UK and Spanish governments have generally adopted a more cooperative and conciliatory attitude to the Gibraltar problem, including agreement to hold talks on regional cooperation (but not on sovereignty over Gibraltar) in which representatives of the Gibraltarians would participate. Spain continues to protest against any visits to Gibraltar by British nuclear submarines or members of the British royal family despite implicitly accepting the validity of the Treaty of Utrecht ceding sovereignty to Britain "in perpetuity," while Britain has pledged never to "enter into an agreement on sovereignty without the agreement of the Government of Gibraltar and their people." The latter continue to vote almost unanimously in periodic referendums to remain British. More recently (mid-2013) Spain has resumed its harassment of people waiting to cross the Spanish-Gibraltar border in both directions by imposing long bureaucratic delays, apparently in the context of a complex dispute over the demarcation of Gibraltar's territorial waters and its implications for Spanish fishermen.*

At a noisy cheerful buffet dinner given by Adam's opposite number in the UN Mission of 'Aranda' (the small independent Commonwealth African country next door to the French-speaking west African state of 'Trepagal'), Adam began talking to Louis, a Trepagalese member of the UN Secretariat of about the same age as himself. Louis was sitting somewhat apart from the noisier of the revellers, watching the proceedings with benevolent amusement. It emerged that Louis worked in the UN Secretariat's section dealing with Security Council affairs, which was also Adam's own area in the UK Mission. Adam asked what it was like

working in the Secretariat and having to be scrupulously neutral as between the conflicting objectives of the great powers which dominated the Council. Adam had put his question in French, but Louis replied in fluent English.

“It’s not so bad, in effect. In the Secretariat we are working for the UN Secretary-General, whose only prejudice (if one may call it that) is in favour of peace and whose only obligation is to uphold the Charter. So we are the servants of all the members of the Organisation and the servants of none of them. We take our orders from the Secretary-General and our guidance from the Charter, from no one else and from nowhere else. It is, you know, kind of liberating.”

Adam looked quizzical. “You make it sound very high-minded.”

“Well, things are not always as they should be,” said Louis. “Some Secretariat officers are far too close to their fellow citizens in the national delegations, telling them things that should remain secret inside the Secretariat and keeping much too close to them socially. For instance, if you were a first secretary in the Trepegalese delegation, I would not wish to be seen talking to you like this. People might get the wrong idea.”

Adam wanted to know what kind of secrets there were in the Secretariat which its officers were not supposed to pass on to their compatriots in the national Missions, or indeed to anyone else.

“Well, for example, the Secretary-General might be planning to launch a new initiative at the right moment in the attempt to resolve a dispute by offering his good offices as a kind of mediator on the basis of principles that he would set out. Obviously the principles would not be completely to the liking of either side in the dispute and it might be that one side would not want the Secretary-General to intervene in this way. Sometimes it suits one side best if the dispute is not resolved, for example, if that side is in possession of disputed territory, or fears being put under international pressure to make a big compromise in the interests of peace. If that side learns in advance from a Secretariat officer what the Secretary-General is planning to do, it might take some action to prevent him from taking that initiative, such as issuing a press statement questioning the Secretary-General’s impartiality on the issue and suggesting that he should not get involved in it.

“Or a Secretariat officer might pass on to his compatriots in his country’s mission a secret intelligence briefing received by the Secretary-General which puts another UN member country in a bad light. The

Secretariat officer's national mission can then use that information to the disadvantage of the other country, which will then blame the Secretary-General for leaking the secret briefing to their enemy. This might prejudice the Secretary-General's ability to act as a neutral arbitrator between the two quarrelling governments."

Adam nodded. "Yes, I can see that. Obviously I had better make friends with some fellow Brits in the Secretariat and see if I can pick up some useful bits of secret information from them."

"You won't get very far if you do. Your Mission are always complaining that they get more useful guidance and private briefing from Russian or Chinese people in the Secretariat than they ever get from their fellow British—how to say it? your fellow Brits?"

"'Fellow Brits' is right. Why is that?"

"Because your fellow-Brits have too high principles. They will talk to anyone except their own, that is to say, 'fellow-Brits.'"

"But it must be fantastic to work in the Secretariat with the brightest and most idealistic people from all over the world, all working for peace."

"I would like that to be true," Louis said. "Unfortunately, too many governments of the world send to the UN Secretariat their laziest, most incompetent, most disloyal people, their failed politicians or else the nephews and sons-in-law of their Presidents. They want to get them as far away from their own capitals as possible, you understand it. Half of my dear Secretariat colleagues have tried and failed to overthrow their own governments and they are very happy to end up in New York instead of in front of a firing squad, believe me."

Adam protested: "But why does the Secretary-General accept such people onto his staff?"

"He has no choice. Each country has a quota of Secretariat posts that it can fill with its citizens, even if they can barely read and write. They can be very corrupt and not intellectually able enough to do the job, but once they have been nominated, they have a comfortable well-paid tax free job for life here in New York. So the rest of us must work three times as hard and three times as long to make up for the lazy, the incompetent, and the corrupt—who sometimes include our bosses that we work for. Everyone knows this but no one does anything about it."

"So how did you get a Trepagal quota place in the Secretariat, Louis?" asked Adam. "By passing a competitive examination?"

“*Non, pas de tout,*” Louis said. “In Trepegal which I love as a Frenchman loves France—a big mystery but they do—there is no competitive examination anymore. I got into the UN Secretariat because my great-uncle is a government minister and I wanted to work far away from the internal politics of my homeland.”

Adam was learning fast.

At the UN, especially in the Security Council, Adam also rapidly learned the importance of fast, accurate drafting—drafting speeches that he himself would deliver in the committees and working groups in which he often represented Britain, or drafting speeches for more senior members of the Mission to deliver, usually after fiddling (pointlessly, as Adam thought) with Adam’s finely honed arguments. Adam was also often involved in the collective drafting of resolutions and consensuses, and amendments to resolutions and consensuses, on which so much seemed to depend.

“One of the great things about a posting at the UN is that virtually everyone in the delegation, however junior, gets some first-hand experience of real-life negotiation, which is at the heart of diplomacy,” Rob told Adam. “That’s quite rare for junior or middle-ranking officers in an ordinary bilateral embassy or high commission. So make the most of it while you’re here, my lad. And one of the key rules you’ll soon pick up in negotiating is that the delegation that’s first with a text on paper starts with a huge advantage.”

Rob, a counsellor with three years’ UN experience already behind him, had a gift for suggesting a word or a phrase to substitute for the wording in some draft resolution which other Security Council members were prevented by their doctrinal positions, or by their governments’ instructions, from swallowing. Sometimes Rob’s suggestion would be accepted because it meant subtly different things to different Missions and their governments.

“When that’s the key to shifting everyone towards an acceptable solution,” Rob said, “you just have to make sure no one wrecks it by asking for a definition of the word or phrase you’re proposing, or else tries to amend it themselves to remove the ambiguity, or to stop the other side stipulating that their acceptance is conditional on their particular interpretation being adopted as the only valid one.”

“I thought diplomatic language always had to be clear and unambiguous,” Adam objected.

“Quite right, my boy,” Rob said, grinning. “Usually clarity and unambiguity are among the great diplomatic virtues. But remember Henry Kissinger’s useful principle: when a negotiation of a particularly thorny problem in international affairs seems to have come to a halt, it’s often because the negotiators have rushed at the most difficult element in the problem in the hope of settling that first, whereas generally it’s wise to put the really difficult bits aside for the time being, pick out the easier elements first and concentrate on getting agreement on those. If even a little progress can be made on the easier parts, it can create a momentum that will help to keep the talks going until it’s time to tackle the big issue. Diplomats sometimes develop a certain respect, sometimes even a friendship with other diplomats across the table who may privately be suffering the same headaches. In the end frustration makes them willing to consider accepting a compromise just to get the negotiating process started again. And it can all start with someone like you, Adam, scribbling an ingenious formula on his yellow legal pad, showing it to his own immediate boss and—if it’s all about a really big crisis that ministers at home are taking an active interest in—watching while the suggested formula is considered in London, which gives us the nod to try out on the other side a new form of words that was originally your own brainchild.”

“And if it’s ambiguous, meaning different things to different people?”

“That may be the price of agreement on a different and more important principle that both sides can accept and which can be the basis for agreement later on the more difficult aspects of the problem. Remember that the historic Security Council resolution 242,² laying down the principles of a two-state solution of the Arab-Israel dispute, would never have been adopted if anyone had insisted on including an unambiguous definition of a key phrase. The resolution calls on everyone to recognise the right of Israel to exist within secure borders—in return for which Israel promises to withdraw from ‘territories’ that it had occupied in the 1967 war. It doesn’t say ‘the’ territories, which would clearly mean all the territories; but nor does it say ‘some’ territories. In the Russian-language text of the resolution, Russian of course being one of the official UN languages, it just says ‘territories,’ which can be translated as ‘the’ territories or as simply ‘territories’ because Russian doesn’t have a definite article.”

“So it was agreed, formally or tacitly (I’m not sure which), that Russian would be regarded as the official language of the resolution, so everyone could interpret ‘territories’ in the way that suited them. It just means that there’s still no agreement on whether the resolution requires Israel to withdraw from all or just some of the occupied territories: but the constructive ambiguity on that one point allowed the Security Council to agree *unanimously* on all the other important principles in the resolution, which was a huge advance. Plus, of course, it reflected general agreement that at least some Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories must be an ingredient in the settlement. The whole resolution was essentially the work of our UK delegation here in New York. One of my predecessors as the counsellor for Security Council affairs drew up a first draft and took it round all the Security Council member Missions, who of course had to seek instructions on it from their capitals. The UK Mission kept on plugging away at it, accepting small changes in some places and resisting them in others, until in the end every single Security Council delegation voted in favour of the final draft. It just shows how the work of a single diplomat, perhaps supported by one or two others, can occasionally change the world, and make the difference between war and peace. Keep at it, Adam, m’lad, and one day it might be your name up in lights. Not many people can say that!”

(No, thought Adam seditiously, and after all these years since resolution 242, we’re still no nearer to a solution of the problems of the Middle East.)

The longer Adam was working at the UK Mission to the UN, the more he was struck by the importance of language in this remarkable body—so much like a World Parliament in some respects, not so different from a World Government in others (with the Security Council having sweeping powers of coercion in certain circumstances), yet in other ways little more than a futile talking-shop, designed to give the smaller and weaker countries an opportunity to lecture those bigger and more powerful than themselves. In the Security Council, though, on which Adam’s efforts were focused, the resolutions passed by the Council often virtually created new and binding international law, and the interpretation of those resolutions by lawyers and governments around the world for decades to come would depend to a great extent on the speeches made in the debates in the Council preceding and immediately following the passage of each resolu-

tion. So words really mattered, and so did the interpretations of potentially ambiguous passages in Security Council resolutions placed on the public record by its members.

Diplomats working out of their embassies abroad could generally rely on the tradition that almost everything they wrote or said would be treated as private and confidential, between the embassy and its own government or between the embassy and the government to which it was accredited. Of course when an ambassador or an embassy information officer gave an interview to the local television station or newspaper, or a speech to the local Rotary Club or Elks, the text would be public property: but in those circumstances it was rarely that anything new or really significant would be said, and no one would think it necessary to crawl over every word of the article or interview in search of some hidden significance. At the United Nations (and most other international bodies), by contrast, every speech or statement in the Security Council, the General Assembly, and their numerous committees and working groups was published verbatim, usually in the five working languages of the UN: and the same was true of their resolutions and agreed statements. In this well-lit goldfish bowl, the slightest verbal indiscretion could have frightening consequences. The informal discussions among Security Council delegations leading up to a resolution were generally agreed to be off the record and in confidence (although there is some dispute about whether such discussions can be used to interpret the intended meaning of passages in the resolutions that result from them, despite the absence of any official records of what is said at them). But once the Council goes into formal session, everything said at the meeting and every document used by the Council is on the record, just as everything said by a U.S. Congressman appears in the Congressional Record, and everything said by an MP in the UK parliament is published in *Hansard*. Some diplomats, accustomed to a degree of leeway in their diplomatic correspondence and conversations, find this aspect of multilateral diplomacy disturbing. One consequence of the public openness of formal UN proceedings is that the heads of delegations, "Permanent Representatives" and ambassadors to the United Nations, especially the ambassadors of the five permanent members of the Security Council, often act more like politicians than officials or diplomats, frequently giving press conferences on current crises which are transmitted all over the world, and giving highly political interviews to the television and radio stations and newspapers of their own countries.

To be an effective “perm rep” at the UN, Adam reflected, you needed to have lots of self-confidence, to be ready to take risks, to be a little bit flamboyant. Sometimes one’s political masters back home or visiting New York for the General Assembly in the autumn could be seen to be uncomfortable at finding their ambassadors better known to the local media and more in demand for interviews than themselves.

Whether diplomat or politician, at the UN you had to watch your words if you wanted to keep out of trouble. Adam had been in the UK seat at a General Assembly committee meeting at which the Russian representative, talking about an obscure British colonial territory, had used a quotation in Russian from a poem by Pushkin to the effect that there must be something seriously wrong in another unnamed country. The UN interpreter, simultaneously translating from Russian to English in her glass booth high above the committee chamber, had enterprisingly substituted for the Pushkin quotation the similar quotation from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “There’s something rotten in the state of Denmark.” The Danish delegate, listening to the English translation through his ear-phones, had immediately demanded the right of reply, speaking in English.

“Mr. Chairman, it’s most unfortunate that the distinguished representative of the Soviet Union should make this unprovoked attack on my country, especially at a time when the prime minister of the Soviet Union is about to pay an official visit to Copenhagen. I shall of course report the matter immediately to my government, which will no doubt wish to have an explanation of these unfriendly remarks by the distinguished Soviet representative. Meanwhile, speaking entirely personally and without instructions, I would like to assure my Soviet colleague in this committee that there is absolutely nothing rotten in my country, which had been much looking forward to his prime minister’s visit—until this afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.”

The unfortunate Russian, who of course had not even mentioned Denmark in his speech in the original Russian, and naturally had not heard the English translation of his own speech, was bewildered and appalled. Adam, as the representative of the country of Shakespeare whose reference to Denmark in *Hamlet* had caused the misunderstanding, guessed what had happened and asked for the floor to clear it up, much to the relief of the Soviet delegate (and that of the young woman interpreting from Russian to English in her glass box). After the meeting, the Danish

delegate to the committee, chatting to Adam in the delegates' bar, refused to say whether he had genuinely believed that the Russian had referred disparagingly to Denmark in the Russian original of his speech, or whether he had simply been exercising his Danish sense of humour to cause a little temporary embarrassment to the representative of the Soviet superpower. From the Dane's mischievous grin, however, Adam was able to make a pretty good guess about what had happened. In this case it had been the interpreter who had been too clever in thinking of an English equivalent to the Russian quotation. But it could easily have been a delegate, a diplomat from one of the UN Missions, using a familiar English quotation without thinking how it would be translated into the other languages.

At the UN, every word matters.

NOTES

1. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/middle_east/israel_and_the_palestinians/key_documents/1639522.stm.
2. <http://unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/0/7D35E1F729DF491C85256EE700686136>.