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Editors:

Roman Kulikowski

Zbigniew Nahorski

Jan W. Owiński

Andrzej Straszak

Systems Research Institute
Polish Academy of Sciences
Warsaw, Poland

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Names of first authors: **L-Z**

Preference Adjustment and Opportunities for Agreement: Decision Analysis Applied to the UNCED Prenegotiation Process

Bertram I. Spector
Project Leader
The Processes of International Negotiation Project
IIASA, Austria

Abstract

This paper presents the framework for conducting a negotiation contingency analysis. Decision analytic methodology is applied to the pre-negotiation process for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), focusing particularly on financial resource issues and the Agenda 21, a proposed global action plan. The application of the methodology provides an analysis of several plausible scenarios. These scenarios concern opportunities for agreement on alternative negotiating proposals.

Introduction

Conducting a systematic analysis of negotiations that are in progress is a tenuous exercise. First, critical information to conduct the analysis may not be available or may be difficult to access while negotiations are still going on. For example, issues may not be fully defined. Interests and positions may not be established; even if they are, actors in the process may not view it as advantageous to disclose their preferences prematurely or through third parties. Second, negotiations are dynamic processes; an analysis in midstream cannot, by definition, provide a complete understanding of the effectiveness of persuasive strategies or tactics in reaching agreement, for example. Overall, a process that is still active is difficult to treat analytically until it has reached a stable resting state.

At the same time, one way for negotiation research to have utility for practice is to apply its conceptual and analytical frameworks to processes that are still in progress. (Another is to apply lessons learned from past cases and analyses to current negotiations.) Due to the problems identified above in obtaining information for systematic analyses, a contingency approach of negotiations-in-progress is proposed in this paper. The results of such an approach will be of interest to researchers and likely to be usable by practitioners in a realistic way. In a contingency analysis, users can ask "what if" questions that relate to future contingencies and the conclusions are stated in an "if-then" format. The analysis is based on historically meaningful or hypothesized scenarios and explicitly stated assumptions. While complete information about the negotiation is obviously not available, such an analysis uses what is known to date about the structure of the issues, positions, interests, and so on. Practitioners can employ the results to test their own assumptions about the effectiveness of a strategy, the reactions of other parties to use of a new tactic, or the likely negotiated outcome of a new proposal. Contingency analyses can provide practitioners with a common information structure and approach to diagnosing the negotiation situation and planning new strategies.

Objectives

This paper has three principal objectives:

- o To support the United Nations Secretariat during the pre-negotiation phase of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) by facilitating diagnosis of the situation and planning.
- o To analyze the dynamics of national and coalition interests on key negotiation issues.
- o To develop and demonstrate the utility of a particular negotiation analysis methodology to support negotiations while still in progress.

In particular, the paper is focused on the issue development and negotiation debates concerning financial resources and Agenda 21, a proposed global action plan to coordinate, monitor, and evaluate international actions on environmental and developmental issues subsequent to the UNCED Conference in 1992.

Approach

We use a contingency analysis based upon a decision analytic methodology, multi-attribute utility (MAU) analysis, that examines the current pre-negotiation period of the UNCED Conference and focuses on the financial resources and Agenda 21 issues. At this stage in the pre-negotiation there are many unknowns. However, it is possible to identify the specific subissues that must be debated, based upon a reading of the existing PrepCon documentation and discussions with members of the Secretariat and national delegates. It is

also possible to define a preliminary range of alternative negotiated outcomes for each of these subissues. It is much more difficult, however, to specify national interests or preferences concerning these subissues at this time.

In the absence of clearly identified national interest/preference data on these issues at this stage in the pre-negotiation, we will identify ranges of possible interests on each subissue around which coalitions *may* form as the debate progresses. Definition of these hypothesized interests and interest profiles are the result of careful examination of recent conference proceedings of the UN regional economic commissions specifically focused on eliciting and developing national and regional statements of objectives for the UNCED Conference. The profiles are described and labeled in terms of their salient dimensions; they are *not* associated with a particular country or coalition since they are hypothetical constructs. These hypothesized profiles provide the basis for the contingency approach.

It is understandable that national interests are not yet apparent since the issues themselves have not been well defined as of yet. Through subsequent data collection after the issues are debated and mature (through analysis of statements, position papers, debate proceedings, and interviews), we will be able to situate nations and identify coalitions in this hypothetical interest space with greater confidence.

This contingency approach, in which interests and preferences on issues and subissues are developed hypothetically, is seen as a meaningful way to proceed with research where the negotiation is itself at an early pre-negotiation stage. Our goal is to provide recommendations based on systematic research to the UNCED Secretariat while they are still in the process of defining issues, outlining proposals, and negotiating agreements.

A multi-attribute utility (MAU) analysis model is developed based on the current issue and subissue structure, current range of possible negotiated outcomes, and hypothesized interest profiles. (See Spector, 1991b for a description of this methodology and a discussion of how it can be applied to diagnose, understand, and explain important aspects of the negotiation process.) This decision analytic model provides the capability to conduct sensitivity analyses on the possible negotiated outcomes, that is, it facilitates analysis of the interaction of the hypothesized interest profiles and how they may impact on a negotiated agreement concerning the various outcomes. For example, "what if" questions can be asked about the divergence of interests on particular subissues, the extent of preference adjustment required to achieve agreement, and the likelihood of agreement, given a specified combination of interest profiles. If alternate interest profiles are specified, different processes and outcomes may appear to be more likely.

This type of evaluation by the Secretariat during the pre-negotiation process can help in diagnosing the current situation systematically related to national interests. It can facilitate the development of acceptable proposals that require less preference adjustments on the part of the different national or coalition actors. The report presents the analytical results of several different scenarios or interest profile interactions. The model and data will also be made available to the Secretariat so that its members can evaluate the implications of additional scenarios.

To reiterate, this contingency approach itself does not imply that certain negotiation actors have taken certain positions or hold certain interests. The Secretariat can use the model in a contingency fashion, assessing what may happen in the process and what agreements on proposals are likely if certain interest-based coalitions form. Hopefully, the Secretariat will find it useful as a decision support tool and an aid in evaluating the benefits of alternative proposals.

Retrospectively, after the UNCED Conference, it should be possible to use this same decision analytic model with data on collected on specific national and coalition interests to *understand and explain* the UNCED negotiation process. Preference adjustments, or the absence of same, that facilitated negotiated agreement or yielded impasse can then be identified with some degree of reliability.

The contingency approach may be regarded as a way of actively interjecting the concepts and methods of the research community into an ongoing negotiation process to provide policy advice and recommendations. Essentially, it offers Secretariat personnel a decision support system that can be used to help diagnose pre-negotiation opportunities and pitfalls. The desired impact is one of providing a common information and assumption set to the users from which they can draw their own conclusions. From this perspective, the approach described here seeks to facilitate the process, but does not attempt to guide, direct or bias the process in any way.

References

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