

Katie Verlin Laatikainen and [Karen E. Smith](#) The multilateral politics of UN diplomacy: introduction

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Introduction

The Multilateral Politics of UN Diplomacy

Katie Verlin Laatikainen

Professor of Political Science, Adelphi University, 1 South Avenue, Garden City, NY 11530-0701,
United States

laatikai@adelphi.edu

Karen E. Smith

Professor of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science,
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom

k.e.smith@lse.ac.uk

Since the end of the Cold War, more and more players are influencing multilateral processes and agreements. While the role of ‘rising powers’, such as Brazil, India and China, has attracted considerable attention, little has been written about the role of groupings in multilateral processes, and in particular the extent to which regional or political groups are functioning as cohesive blocs at the United Nations (UN). Yet diplomats who are involved in multilateralism frequently work within groups, as Ioannis Vrailas, Deputy Head of the European Union’s delegation to the United Nations in New York, notes in his article for this special issue of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* on multilateral diplomacy at the UN. Diplomats engaged in the recurring climate-change debates, for example, have worked through regional groupings like the European Union (EU), as well as single-issue groups such as the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) or the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), both of which have at various times been central in the negotiations.

Groups, then, clearly play an important role in multilateral diplomacy at the UN. However, although a growing number of scholars and commentators have focused on the EU’s role in the UN, hardly any have studied the role of other groups or studied the interaction between the EU and other groups, and the similarities and differences among them. This special issue of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* will fill that knowledge gap, by systematically studying group politics at the UN, and assessing whether regional and political groups contribute to more effective and legitimate multilateral diplomacy and international cooperation.

This introductory article sets out the rationale for this special issue of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*. It begins by reviewing the literature on groups at the UN, demonstrating that while increasing attention has been paid to the role of the EU and other regional organizations at the UN, the literature on other groups is limited or rather dated. It then goes on to illustrate why we should study the role of regional and political groups at the UN and presents the conceptual framework used by authors in their articles: the set of questions each author addresses, and the factors that they consider when seeking to explain the influence of regional and political groups in particular negotiations and issue-areas. The rationale for choosing the range of topics covered in this special issue is also given. The introduction concludes with observations on the interaction, influence and importance of group dynamics in the political context of UN diplomacy.

The Literature on Groups

Our focus here is primarily on the principal organs of the UN system in which ‘multilateral politics’ — that is, the politics of intergovernmental negotiations — take place: the General Assembly; the Human Rights Council; conferences such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conferences; and assemblies of specialized agencies such as the World Health Assembly. Our aim is to illuminate group politics in part of the larger UN system, so as to stimulate further research into the dynamics of group politics in multilateralism more generally.

By regional groups, we mean the five ‘official’ UN regional groups: the African Group; the Asian Group; the Eastern European Group; the Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC); and the Western European and Other Group (WEOG).¹ These are the groups from which states are elected to limited membership bodies such as the UN Security Council and the Human Rights Council, so as to ensure ‘equitable geographic distribution’, which has become an important organizing principle at the UN even if not required by the UN Charter.² By political groups, we mean both formal regional or more widely-based organizations (such as the European Union, the Non-Aligned Movement and the G-77), and less formal groups (such as UN-based coalitions such as JUSCANZ,³ or the various ‘Friends’ of initiatives in the UN setting).⁴ Such political groups may have their genesis outside the UN context (the EU, for instance), while others have grown up wholly within the UN environment (such as the G-77). While some of the regional groups (for example, the Asia Group and the East European Group) may exist solely for the purposes of electing their members to UN bodies, others (such as the Africa Group) appear to function politically, with statements and initiatives taken in the name of the group. ‘Group politics’ describes the interactions and debates among these groups, and is more accurate than the oft-used ‘bloc politics’, which is too redolent of Cold War politics and implies that groups are quite rigid in terms of membership, discipline and positions. As will be shown in this special issue of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, group discipline varies widely, the composition of groups can be quite fluid, and group positions can be open to change through negotiation.

In the last couple of decades, the EU has attracted most of the attention focused on the role of groups at the UN. Interest has coincided with the development of the EU’s ‘external dimension’. How has integration within the EU affected its engagement with multilateralism externally? To what extent does cooperation among the EU member states in Europe filter through to cooperation in international organizations? The EU’s explicit, repeated declarations that it wishes to see a stronger UN and to contribute to ‘effective multilateralism’, along with its active engagement and support for multilateral negotiations and institutions (such as on climate change and international criminal tribunals), have sparked further research.⁵

The literature on other groups, however, is less voluminous. Much work is quite dated, having been produced in the 1960s and 1970s in the midst of decolonization and the growing role of newly independent countries at the UN. The development of voting blocs at the UN, such as the G-77,

¹ Sam Daws has written one of the few explorations of UN regional groups: Sam Daws, ‘The Origins and Development of UN Electoral Groups’, in Ramesh Thakur (ed.), *What Is Equitable Geographical Representation in the Twenty-first Century* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1999).

² The 2016 selection of former Portuguese Prime Minister António Guterres as UN Secretary-General seems to counter this principle, as many argued it was the ‘turn’ of a candidate from the East European Group to hold the post. The East European Group is the only regional group that has not had a national serve as UN Secretary-General.

³ The JUSCANZ grouping is a consultative body to the UN Human Rights Council and some other UN bodies. It includes Australia, Canada, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland and the United States, with its name derived from an acronym of the founding members.

⁴ Thus the project does not explore whether groups of like-minded countries can be identified according to whether they vote in a similar way on resolutions (see Simon Hug and Richard Lukás, ‘Preferences or Blocs? Voting in the United Nations Human Rights Council’, *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2014); and Elisabeth Johansson-Nogués, ‘The Fifteen and the Accession States in the UN General Assembly: What Future for European Foreign Policy in the Coming Together of the “Old” and the “New” Europe?’, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2004), pp. 67–92). The groups explored all self-identify as such: most importantly, countries speak and act on behalf of the group.

⁵ On the EU’s role at the UN, see, for example, Edith Drieskens, ‘Towards a Systematic Analysis of the EU as an Actor in the UN System’, *Journal of International Organizations Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2010), pp. 105–108; Katie Verlin Laatikainen and Karen E. Smith (eds), *The European Union at the United Nations: Intersecting Multilateralisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006); Paul Luijck, *EU Cohesion in the UN General Assembly*, Occasional Paper no. 49 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2003); Diana Panke, ‘The European Union in the United Nations: An Effective External Actor?’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 21, no. 7 (2014), pp. 1050–1066. On the EU’s role in other international institutions, see, among other works, Spyros Blavoukos and Dimitris Bourantonis (eds), *The EU Presence in International Organizations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Knud Erik Jørgensen and Katie Laatikainen (eds), *Routledge Handbook on the European Union and International Institutions: Performance, Policy, Power* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Robert Kissack (ed.), *Pursuing Effective Multilateralism: The European Union, International Organizations and the Politics of Decision Making* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Amandine Orsini (ed.), *The European Union with(in) International Organizations* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); and Bart Van Vooren, Steven Blockmans and Jan Wouters (eds), *The EU’s Role in Global Governance: The Legal Dimension* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

attracted attention, but studies tended to be quantitative and focused on voting behaviour.⁶ More recently, the role of groups of developing countries in international trade and environmental negotiations has been studied.⁷ Only a few recent works examine group activity in a wider range of areas.⁸ Attention to single-issue groups is even scarcer,⁹ and the role of ‘informal groups’, such as the ‘Friends of the Responsibility to Protect’, has attracted virtually no attention in the scholarly literature.¹⁰

The Advantages and Disadvantage of Groups: The View from the Ground

An initial question is addressed first: why do states use groups? There are benefits but also costs to working with groups, and states must thus grapple with the tensions between the imperatives of collective action and the discomfort thus produced. While rationalist cost-benefit calculations are important in prompting the formation and/or use of groups, the role of identity is also clearly of importance, and states tend to work in groups of like-minded states.

The advantages for states of working through groups are numerous. First, groups are considered crucial in winning the ‘numbers game’ at the UN. Where decisions are taken by a majority (when a vote is called), what counts ultimately is the ability to muster the necessary votes. As Diana Panke notes, ‘the more members a group has, the more yes-buttons their members can push and the greater the chances that organization will be successful in the UNGA [UN General Assembly]’.¹¹ States therefore either actively seek to use groups to achieve those votes (and satisfy their preferences), or tolerate their membership in a group because no one wants to be on the losing side. This is important because approval of positions and policies by states in the UN is a source of legitimacy. As Inis Claude has noted, the UN is a site of ‘collective legitimization’: state representatives ‘are keenly conscious of the need for approval by as large and impressive a body of other states as may be possible, for multilateral endorsement of their positions’.¹² Being a member of a group can make this easier to achieve.

⁶ See, for example, Hayward Alker and Bruce Russett, *World Politics in the General Assembly* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965); Bruce Russett, ‘Discovering Voting Groups in the United Nations’, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 60, no. 2 (June 1966); and J.E. Vincent, ‘An Analysis of Caucusing Group Activity at the United Nations’, *Journal of Peace Research*, no. 2 (1970).

⁷ See, for example, Richard A. Higgott and Andrew Fenton Cooper, ‘Middle Power Leadership and Coalition-Building: Australia, the Cairns Group, and the Uruguay Round of Trade Negotiations’, *International Organization*, vol. 44, no. 4 (1990); Peter Drahos, ‘When the Weak Bargain with the Strong: Negotiations in the World Trade Organization’, *International Negotiation*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2003); John Odell, *Negotiating Trade: Developing Countries in the WTO and NAFTA* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); J.P. Singh, ‘Weak Powers and Globalism: The Impact of Plurality on Weak-Strong Negotiations in the International Economy’, *International Negotiation*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2000); and Pamela S. Chasek, ‘Margins of Power: Coalition Building and Coalition Maintenance of the South Pacific Island States and the Alliance of Small Island States’, *Review of European Community and International Environmental Law*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2005), pp. 125–137.

⁸ A recent exception to this is the special issue of *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2016), on ‘The UN and the Global South, 1945 and 2015: Past as Prelude?’, edited by Thomas Weiss and Pallavi Roy. See also Thomas G. Weiss, ‘Moving Beyond North–South Theatre’, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2009); Isaac Njoh Endeley, *Bloc Politics at the United Nations: The African Group* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009); Diana Panke, ‘Regional Power Revisited: How to Explain Differences in Coherency and Success of Regional Organizations in the United Nations General Assembly’, *International Negotiation*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2013); and Norbert Götz, ‘Western Europe and Others: The Making of Europe at the United Nations’, *Alternatives*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2008).

⁹ See, for example, the work on the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), including Carola Betzold, Paula Castro and Florian Weiler, ‘AOSIS in UNFCCC Negotiations: From Unity to Fragmentation?’, *Climate Policy*, vol. 12, no. 5 (2012); Chasek, ‘Margins of Power’; and Kevin Jaschik, ‘Small States and International Politics: Climate Change, the Maldives, and Tuvalu’, *International Politics*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2014).

¹⁰ Exceptions include J. Prantl, *The UN Security Council and Informal Groups of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Teresa Whitfield, *Friends Indeed? The United Nations, Groups of Friends and the Resolution of Conflict* (Washington, DC: US Institute for Peace, 2007); and Teresa Whitfield, *Working with Groups of Friends* (Washington, DC: US Institute for Peace, 2010).

¹¹ Panke, ‘Regional Power Revisited’, p. 287.

¹² Inis L. Claude Jr, ‘Collective Legitimization as a Political Function of the United Nations’, *International Organization*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1966), p. 370.

Second, being in a group helps to magnify the influence and voice of individual members of that group, and to make it more likely that their preferences can be achieved. This is similar to what Roy Ginsberg called the ‘politics of scale’ in the EU context: states recognize that they can exercise more influence if they act collectively.¹³ For small, relatively poor and/or marginalized states in the international system (or for those whose perceptions and/or identity are such), this is extremely important.¹⁴ Even with the rise of other powers in the international system, where else but in institutions run on majoritarian principles, such as the UN, can ‘the West’ (that is, the rich and powerful states) be resisted so successfully? For example, the Council of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Foreign Ministers urges more coordination and unified voting at the UN, and recalls that the OIC is a voting bloc of 57 states, which could both advance the OIC’s objectives and values, and successfully oppose measures that run counter to them.¹⁵

Third, through groups, each state has access to more information than they otherwise would: within all groups, members share information about what they know of other states’ or groups’ positions and preferences. There are also economies of scale in dealing with groups: for example, sponsors of resolutions may need only to convince group leaders to back the resolution, rather than needing to convince all of the states in the group.

Fourth, group membership enables states to avoid isolation — for those countries that are not great or ‘emerging’ powers. Smaller states that are ‘in between’ (that is, not included in, or on the margins, of major groups such as the EU or GRULAC) find it challenging to operate when group politics are strong. States fear being ostracized by the group, and therefore isolated, with all the disadvantages that may bring, including loss of opportunities to exchange and gather information, a necessarily ‘quieter’ voice in debates, and so on.

All of these reasons help to explain why states work within regional, political and informal groups. However, there are also disadvantages of groups. First, in order to reach agreement within groups, compromises have to be made by individual group members. In the case of groups where consensus is necessary, a group position could represent the lowest common denominator of all the individual preferences, and therefore is disappointing to most other group members. In addition, it may not be possible to reach any agreement at all within the group, and the need to coordinate views within groups may also mean that, on fast-moving issues, states prefer to work nationally or in other groups in order to ensure that their policy priorities and preferences are met. This may introduce fluidity to the practice of using groups. It should also be kept in mind that states are members of the UN — and other multilateral institutions — in their own right, and may feel no need to be bound by a group position: each state is free to express preferences that exceed those of the group, for example. In groups with consensus decision-making processes (such as the EU, Nordic Group, Arab Group and GRULAC), this is rare, because the state could simply block ‘unacceptable’ group positions, but in groups with a majoritarian decision-making system, this is often seen. This helps to explain why voting cohesion in the larger political and regional groups — the OIC, African Group and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) — is relatively low.¹⁶

Second, the loss of visibility and manoeuvrability is another disadvantage for states working in groups. Moderates in groups have to work hard to establish links with other states from other groups, and to resist pressure against ‘defection’ from within their group. Being a ‘middle power’ in this context is challenging, but there is still some flexibility in ‘group politics’.

Third, a further disadvantage of group positions is that they tend to be ‘rigid’ — that is, any agreement that has been (perhaps laboriously) negotiated among group members is difficult to change, without returning to the process of intra-group negotiation. This is particularly true of the most unified and well-resourced group, the EU. Although it could be argued that a rigid EU position limits the ‘win-set’ that is possible in any negotiation, and therefore increases the EU’s bargaining

¹³ Roy Ginsberg, ‘Conceptualizing the EU as an International Actor: Narrowing the Theoretical Capability–Expectations Gap’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3 (1999).

¹⁴ Jacqueline A. Braveboy-Wagner, *Institutions of the Global South* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁵ Organization of the Islamic Conference, Resolution no. 41/37-POL, Council meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, from 18–20 May 2010.

¹⁶ That is, lower voting cohesion is not just because those groups have more members, as argued in Panke, ‘Regional Power Revisited’.

leverage,¹⁷ this can also backfire, as a strong EU position that is presented as non-negotiable can spark resistance. Negotiations between groups are difficult if group positions are essentially non-negotiable, but this can lead states to work outside groups if the costs of sticking to rigid positions outweigh the potential benefits.

Fourth, group politics has had a profound impact on politics and outcomes at the UN. Group politics can create ‘polarization’, with groups opposing each other as though in a ‘theatre’¹⁸ rather than engaging in debates on the actual substance of the issue at hand.

The perceived negative effects of group politics have prompted some diplomats to try to change how they work through and with groups. As seen in several of the articles in this special issue, there have been attempts to engage in more cross-regional coalition-building, with some success. The space for flexibility with a diplomatic system dominated by groups has been expanding. Many such attempts are led by the ‘moderates’ or ‘bridge-builders’ in the groups (countries such as Austria, Botswana, Jordan and Turkey), but there have also been attempts to build less progressive cross-regional coalitions (such as in the ‘Friends of the Family’ group). The negative effects of group politics have thus made possible a more flexible dynamic, as states can defect from groups (they are not, after all, forced to work within groups). However, it is important to bear in mind that groups persist even with defections. Indeed, group positions may still be staked out in debates despite the defection of one or more members. The *persistence* of political groups despite defection is precisely what makes them critical features of UN multilateralism, and points to a constructivist angle for understanding how groups may shape, rather than reflect, the interest and identities of group participants.

The Social Dynamic of Groups in UN Multilateralism

Groups can also be understood constitutively — that is, diplomatic activity reflects the practice of working in groups, and political groups constitute multilateral politics at the UN.¹⁹ However, are diplomats merely pursuing their countries’ national interest, and finding groups an efficacious approach to maximizing national interests? The vast agenda of the United Nations — after all, there is nothing that is not on the agenda — touches on so many issues that most states will not have an interest in every topic addressed. Moreover, many smaller delegations lack the human resources to develop concrete positions even on issues of direct concern. Working in groups has a rational appeal, as illustrated above. But do such groups *reflect* existing interests, or do they *shape* the interests of participants, as when a state has no clear national interest in the issue at hand? Or, most likely, do they do both?

Constructivism is a broad approach that takes seriously normative and identity factors that shape the behaviour of purposive actors. While the administrative structures of the UN seek to ensure geographic distribution and hence provide a context for regionalism, the largely inactive Eastern European Group shows how this prescribed or institutional regionalism does not necessarily have to reflect common identities or interests. Nor are politically relevant groups limited to regional groupings. The political groups that are active in the UN reflect not only common interests but also frequently a shared identity. These groups provide a framework or point of reference for defining issues that arise within the multilateral context. While shared interests may prompt the creation of a political group — for example, NAM or the G-77 — once such a community is created (or ‘imagined’ in Benedict Anderson’s terminology), it takes on a powerful life of its own.²⁰ Groups are important in UN multilateralism because they influence identity politics as well as contestation over norms.

¹⁷ See, for example, Panke, ‘The European Union in the United Nations’, p. 1053.

¹⁸ Weiss, ‘Moving Beyond North–South Theatre’.

¹⁹ On practices in international relations, see Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, ‘International Practices’, *International Theory*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2011), pp. 1–36; on practice in international organizations, see Vincent Pouliot, ‘The Practice of Permanent Representation at International Organizations’, in Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot and Iver B. Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁰ Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

In UN multilateralism, member states clearly have prerogatives, and the default is thus a rational calculation of the costs and benefits to the individual interest of working within groups as indicated above. Yet the multilateral context, unlike a bilateral context, often involves issues in which there is no defined national interest or ‘red lines’ emanating from the national capital. In such instances, shared identity or affinities, rather than interest, can dictate state behaviour. And yet, Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (following David Laitin) remind us that such communal identities are socially constructed, even as ‘actors may make rational choices about how to construct their identities. [...] They appear as natural to members of groups even as individuals engage in projects of identity construction’.²¹ In the UN context, politics for member states often involves navigating and mediating national interest and these group affinities. As Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot and Iver B. Neumann suggest, ‘a particular political order or institutional arrangement anchored in sovereignty does not regulate the behaviour of pre-constituted political actors. Rather, sovereignty is produced and reproduced (and transformed) through changing diplomatic practices’.²² It may well be that national interests in the multilateral context are sometimes learned by diplomats through the practice of group politics itself rather than endogenously generated and then pursued through group interaction.

Constructivism is also concerned with norms, and here again groups play an important role. Membership in the UN may be a signifier or validation of sovereignty — indeed member states have ‘permanent missions’ — but UN multilateral diplomacy is also centrally preoccupied in defining what is collectively held and shared by members of the international community. Perhaps uniquely, UN multilateralism is inextricably linked with contestation over universal norms and values, as well as the pursuit of national interests. Thus a constructivist approach to groups in UN multilateralism emphasizes collective legitimization, which is understood not merely as a function of amassing a preponderance of votes, but an illustration of *collectively* held norms, values and principles. Understanding groups in the UN’s multilateral processes also involves understanding how groups may shape the identities and interests of group participants.

Our Framework

Our starting point is an understanding of the United Nations as a *political* context in which global challenges are debated and addressed. The UN — and particularly bodies such as the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council — are frequently described as ‘politicized’, indicating that ‘countries use UN bodies to achieve political objectives’.²³ It is reasonable to expect there to be ‘politics’ at the UN, if politics can be understood as the attempt to influence others and to achieve particular goals.

Regional and political groups have further been blamed for ‘entrenching positions’ and contributing to ‘politicization’ on human rights, among other issues.²⁴ Thomas Weiss has decried the ‘antics’ between the industrialized North and global South — often organized in groups — as ‘dramatic and largely symbolic and theatrical confrontations, rather than a search for meaningful partners’.²⁵ But there is evidently more than theatre going on, and it is reasonable to expect states to act in groups if doing so will help them to further their goals and exercise influence.

The articles in this special issue examine how and why regional, formal and informal political groups influence outcomes and/or norms, by studying particular political debates in a variety of UN settings. The analyses involve debates in the ritualized diplomacy of the annual UN General Assembly sessions, where recurrent negotiations on resolutions are distinct from conference diplomacy, such as the review conferences of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The cases examined moreover reflect different decision-making processes, from majoritarian voting to conference negotiations where consensus is the norm. The articles also examine a diversity of outcomes of UN

²¹ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, ‘Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 4 (2001), p. 441.

²² Sending, Pouliot and Neumann, *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*, p. 17.

²³ Rosa Freedman, *Failing to Protect: The UN and the Politicization of Human Rights* (London: Hurst & Co., 2014), p. 20.

²⁴ Freedman, *Failing to Protect*, pp. 22–23.

²⁵ Weiss, ‘Moving Beyond North–South Theatre’, p. 273.

multilateral processes, from negotiations over treaty obligations to resolutions with normative legitimacy. In all instances, the emphasis is on the way in which different groups — regional, political or informal — function.²⁶ The articles address the following questions:

- How do the groups interact with each other?

Tackling this question entails exploring how groups become involved in negotiations or debates. Are they involved because the issue is of interest to group members? Are they involved as an exercise of self-promotion, perhaps because doing so allows them to resist other groups or states in general? To what extent, how and why do interests (national or collective) or identity shape group interaction?

- To what extent, how and why do group politics lead to debates that facilitate collective action, or have contributed to diplomatic theatrics and games that do not lead to any action at all?

To what extent do groups contribute to effective consensus-building? Or to what extent do they inhibit meaningful conversations and, at best, lead to lowest common denominator outcomes in the negotiations? Here we build on two of the forms of interaction distinguished by Anatol Rapoport: games; and debates.²⁷ *Debates* have the objective of generating closure by changing minds and getting others to see the issues as one sees them. Debates proceed to a conclusion that enables collective action to occur. True debates are a healthy and desirable exercise and effective group politics can lead to legitimacy in collective action. In *games*, actors plan and execute strategies aimed at ‘winning’, without any outcome or consequence resulting from the competition. The contest *is* the outcome; process rather than product is what counts. To what extent are group politics at the UN a dramatic game, in which a ‘win’ at the UN serves interests in other contexts, often domestic ones? To what extent do groups provide a means to play such games better?

- How do single-issue, informal groups influence formal political and regional groups in the variety of UN settings considered here?

Do single-issue and other informal groups emerge from existing groups? Or are they formed in opposition to existing groups? Are they created primarily to engage in norm entrepreneurialism? Do they try to undermine the cohesiveness of existing groups in negotiations? Or does the possibility to ‘defect’ enable the perpetuation of long-standing groups with broader agendas?

- Why do political and regional groups have influence in UN politics? To what extent do material resources (for example, the wealth of the group and/or its members) and social resources (for example, the perceived legitimacy of the group’s positions, or the perceived unity of the group) contribute to a group’s influence?

‘Influence’ is here understood to be:

- Goal achievement. Do groups achieve the goals they had in terms of outcomes (such as passing a resolution, or increased support for their positions)? This is a classic way of understanding influence, and is also a classic way of measuring the ‘performance’ of a group.²⁸

²⁶ See Courtney B. Smith, *Politics and Process at the United Nations: The Global Dance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006), chapter 3.

²⁷ Anatol Rapoport, *Fights, Games and Debates* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1960).

²⁸ See Knud Erik Jørgensen, Sebastian Oberthür and Jamal Shahin, ‘Introduction: Assessing the EU’s Performance in International Institutions. Conceptual Framework and Core Findings’, *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 33, no. 6 (2011). See also Panke, ‘Regional Power Revisited’.

- Presence. Are groups able to establish their relevance in debates by credibly presenting group positions (demonstrating the coherence of the group)? Presence, here, is not just understood as ensuring visibility of the group, but as ensuring the relevance of the group in the particular debate because the group's position is substantive and pertinent.
- Resonance. Are groups able to affect debates and outcomes, by presenting ideas that are taken up by others?

Factors affecting a group's influence include:

- The UN context/rules of the game. Regional groups have particular privileges in the UN system, and thus might be better able to exercise influence. Whether a group itself has observer status may affect its influence; those with observer status may be 'heard' more loudly than those without.
- Group coherence/unity. This also reflects a classic understanding of what leads to influence: speaking with one voice.
- Material resources. The wealth of the group and its members may lead to success, if those resources are used to coerce or induce other countries to support it.
- Group size. The larger the group, the more votes it 'controls', the more influence it could have. But group size may have a negative impact on group coherence, as with more veto points, group positions become harder to achieve.
- Social resources. A group may be successful if its positions are considered to be legitimate — that is, the positions are approved because they resonate with pre-existing norms. Those pre-existing norms may be universal (or nearly so) — that is, widely accepted and rarely contested. Or they may be more particular norms, which are accepted only by some sections of the 'international community' and are contested by others. Influencing debates thus forms part of a general process of norm creation and diffusion, with groups acting as 'norm entrepreneurs' to try to establish wider acceptance of the norm.
- Relevance (or salience). Some groups may be active across a panoply of UN issues, and approach the status of a 'standing group' in the negotiating process. These groups may have a broad portfolio of issues and agendas, and so the relevance of issues varies. Single-issue groups, on the other hand, focus rather intently on a single issue and the salience of that issue is much higher. Does salience impact the influence of a group, or marginalize it?

Contributors to this special issue of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* are informed by both rationalist (cost-benefit) and constructivist approaches. They thus assess explanations and factors that are rooted in an understanding of group action as based in a weighing of costs and benefits, and of group influence as based on material resources. They also focus on the creation of meaning, norms and values in social contexts and how they shape interactions.

The articles in this special issue analyse the dynamics of group politics across a variety of issue-areas in a variety of settings within the UN system, from the UN General Assembly to the World Health Assembly. Katie Laatikainen's conceptual article opens the special issue and argues that emerging theories of diplomatic practice provide a meso-level approach that allows the pervasive practice of group diplomacy to be observed and analysed more concretely. The next five articles consider the dynamics of group politics in different issue-areas and settings: controversial issues in UN human rights bodies (Karen E. Smith); disarmament and non-proliferation negotiations (Megan Dee); Latin American groups in multilateral health politics (Andrea Ribeiro Hoffman and Jana Tabak); the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in the General Assembly (Alex J. Bellamy); and UN debates on global development policy (Mary Farrell). The issue concludes with an essay from the point of a view of a practitioner, Ambassador Vrailas.

Conclusions

Three key conclusions arise from this special issue. First, in all of these settings, groups — both informal and formal — are significant features of multilateral diplomacy. Second, a notable conclusion by many contributors is that while ‘games’ are not entirely absent in the interactions between these groups, ‘debates’ are nonetheless a predominant feature. States use groups to put forward principled positions, in an attempt to influence a wider audience and thus legitimize desired outcomes. Third, groups are not static; indeed, nearly all of the contributors point to the idea of existing political groups being ‘made to be broken’ as new groups emerge in multilateral processes. This section elaborates on these conclusions and suggests avenues for further research.

First, groups matter in politics at the UN. Collectively, the contributions to this special issue emphasize the political nature of UN multilateralism. Observing group dynamics in UN multilateral debates points to a decidedly different perspective on UN multilateralism, one that emphasizes the political nature of UN diplomacy. Unlike the literature on negotiation, collectively this special issue highlights the social rather than instrumental nature of multilateral negotiation at the UN. States are privileged actors in UN multilateralism, but very few states ‘act individually’ in UN diplomacy. This political perspective also challenges the governance perspective on multilateralism. This special issue demonstrates that national diplomats are immersed in a context that is socially constructed by group affiliations as well as permanent representation. Group politics reveal the social-political nature of UN multilateralism, rather than its contribution (or lack thereof) to broader international order.

Second, groups often engage with each other in ‘debates’ and not just in ‘games’. This does not mean that oppositional behaviour is absent; indeed, it is clearly apparent, probably because group positions are often based on incompatible principles. Consensus is not an uncontested outcome of UN diplomacy, and this has implications for the fluidity of group formation and membership, which is the third conclusion of this special issue. As Laatikainen suggests in her framing contribution, assessing group politics requires a particular methodological approach. While regional groups and regional organizations have a rather observable existence, quite frequently the influential or preferred negotiation groups are less institutionalized. In order to capture the dynamics of multilateral politics and the importance of groups in that process, we have to look beyond the formal regional organizations and groups and examine how sub- and splinter group interactions shape diplomatic negotiations.

‘Standing’ political groups that have grown up within the UN system, such as the G-77, play an important organizing role in the initial stages of debates, but outside groups (regional organizations and single-issue political groups) are often formed during the process of debate in order to move past deadlocks. Diplomacy in the UN General Assembly and its committees seems to be the venue most characterized by entrenched formal groups, both regional and political (for example, the African Group and the European Union), but not uniformly so. Diplomacy contests often occur among other groups in the wider UN system, as can be seen in the World Health Assembly (as per Hoffman and Tabak’s article), non-proliferation negotiations (see Dee’s article) and the Human Rights Council (in the article by Smith).

Wherever debates are polarized, states have created informal groups to try to bridge stalemates, which formal groups are considered to have helped solidify. Cross-regional and cross-factional informal groups have been used by states to try to overcome stalemates and to foster debates on difficult issues. This is the case in the Human Rights Council’s debates on gender equality and sexual orientation discrimination, as Smith recounts in her article. It is the case throughout those UN forums where nuclear disarmament is discussed, as Dee’s article illustrates. In the General Assembly, states have created informal groups to try to break the static standoffs between formal groups, on issues such as the R2P, as Bellamy shows in his contribution. This effort to bridge the structural divides between what we are calling the ‘standing groups’ is itself becoming a more institutionalized practice in UN diplomacy. Farrell’s contribution shows how the creation of open-ended working groups in the negotiation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was an attempt to ‘manage’ group dynamics.

Yet states can also form such informal groups to offer more effective opposition. Smith demonstrates how small group activity by the EU and its member states in the Human Rights Council and UNGA Third Committee was met by the creation of the Like-Minded Group. Bellamy demonstrates that the momentum captured by the pro-R2P networks and groups was met by those who tried to organize opposition by creating their own cross-regional political group. This

oppositional organizing behaviour points to a political rather than a diplomatic or problem-solving orientation to UN multilateralism, as Laatikainen suggests in her article.

The informal group dynamics observed throughout the contributions further suggest that the emphasis on ‘forum-shopping’ in the literature on multilateralism needs to be supplemented.²⁹ Forum-shopping occurs when international actors navigate strategically among nested international institutions and mechanisms. While the concept focuses on institutional mechanisms, the contributions to this volume show that social-selection processes are occurring as well. There is no limitation on social relations for diplomats engaged in broader multilateral processes, so standing groups (whether regional groups, regional organizations or large political groups) are not the only possibility for group interaction. Indeed, Dee shows very clearly that for many EU member states involved in non-proliferation debates, ‘like-mindedness’ is not found (only) among EU partners. Ireland, for instance, is not only a member of the EU, but also the New Agenda Coalition and the Group of 16. Diplomats are not typically constrained in negotiation partners; they seek out the like-minded wherever they can be found, and do not simply engage in whipping votes. Overlapping group affiliations reflect this social dynamic. Dee’s non-proliferation case shows that like-mindedness can trump the numbers game in difficult debates. The existing regional and political groups often do not represent the like-minded, and smaller group affiliations are preferable to larger ones even if it means duplication and redundancies. As Hoffman and Tabak demonstrate in their article, Brazil has been active within the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) at the World Health Organization, but has also acted within informal groups such as the Oslo Group in the UN General Assembly. Because UNASUR does not have a mandate on trade, it is not active in World Trade Organization negotiations relevant to global health, and therefore UNASUR member states cannot act within that grouping. In the Human Rights Council, states wishing to pursue issues such as the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation cannot act within groups where the preponderant view resists such action.

A question for further research based on these observations is how to understand the interaction of the existing political groups and regional organizations in relation to the emergence of single-issue and new groups. Are the more established groups functioning more as ‘selection pools’ from which ad-hoc or new groups emerge in specific debates? Smith suggests that the ‘Like-Minded Group’ that defends national sovereignty and non-interference in human rights debates emerged from regional groups that are largely inactive, such as the Asia Group. Thus, the importance of broader political and regional groups may be that they provide a network that can be activated in establishing these single-issue, cross-regional groupings and networks. Farrell demonstrates that there is a regional orientation and perspective in selecting negotiation facilitators and participants in the open-ended working groups that are tasked with preparing negotiations on the SDGs.

This practice of ‘representation of points of view’ simultaneously acknowledges group identities in UN multilateralism and attempts to overcome them. Smaller groups can serve as ‘brokers’ between existing group interests, or they may take more progressive or stronger positions than those that are possible within broader political groupings.³⁰ Smith shows the latter dynamic in debates over lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights at the UNGA and the Human Rights Council, as both the EU and the ‘Friends of the Family’ staked out strong positions in the debate. Bellamy shows that while the EU generally supported the R2P agenda, the role of Australia, the Netherlands and Canada as key interlocutors meant that the issue was not seen as captured by one group, thus facilitating acceptance of the R2P language at the 2005 summit. This project thus provides a different perspective than studies that focus on inter-organizational relations or nested institutions. The contributors show repeatedly that regional groups and regional organizations may have a role in multilateral negotiations even when they themselves are not ‘actors’ in the process; such groups become fertile fields for creating broader constituencies in the debates.

Furthermore, while this special issue of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* has examined group interaction among member states in the negotiation process, it is clear with the post-2015

²⁹ Marc L. Busch, ‘Overlapping Institutions, Forum Shopping and Dispute Settlement in International Trade’, *International Organization*, vol. 61, no. 4 (2007), pp. 735–761.

³⁰ Miles Kahler, ‘Multilateralism with Small and Large Numbers’, *International Organization*, vol. 46, no. 3 (2009), p. 681–708, at p. 706.

development agenda and the 2016 UN Secretary-General selection process that civil-society actors are ever more insistent on a meaningful role in these political processes. Bellamy's contribution points to the role of non-state actors in informal networks as fostering cohesion among those member states that are committed to the norm of R2P, highlighting the role of the Global Center for R2P, for instance. How such non-governmental groups influence group politics at the UN is an issue for further consideration; heretofore they have been examined as entrepreneurs in normative debates. Bellamy suggests that groups of states can effectively function as norm entrepreneurs as well. Understanding non-governmental organizations in relation to group dynamics in UN diplomacy is likely to lead to deeper understanding of politicized diplomacy in the United Nations context.

Our understanding of multilateral diplomacy in the UN context has benefited from drawing upon both rationalist and constructivist frameworks in articulating an explicitly political perspective on UN multilateralism. This political perspective is surprisingly novel and provides a new way to look at UN multilateralism — that is, what diplomats do in the UN is engage in politics, and that politics is embedded in the social dynamic of groups. National interests are embedded in group dynamics, and groups are not simply about playing a numbers game. Groups in UN multilateralism are a rational way to build consensus, but they are also repositories of identity and ideas.