



International parliamentary cooperation: A historico-political perspective

Nayimov Otabek Mardonovich

Ph.D. Student IR, University of World Economy and Diplomacy Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Abstract

This article analyzes historical and political aspects of the emergence and growth of the global inter-parliamentary cooperation. The author attempts to cover major historical periods and political preconditions for the rise of ideals of parliamentarism, as well as the role of international parliamentary institutions in spreading and deepening inter-parliamentary contacts as inseparable part of contemporary international relations. The special focus is given to the importance of parliament as an instrument of foreign and international policy and the growing impact of parliamentary diplomacy in addressing political disputes and conflicts between states.

Keywords: inter-parliamentary cooperation, international parliamentary institutions, the ideals of parliamentarism, democratic deficit, good governance, parliamentary diplomacy, parliamentary oversight

Introduction

Over the last decades the unprecedented rise of international parliamentary institutions and the development of international parliamentary cooperation have been the most enduring characteristics of international politics. Initially, the international parliamentary cooperation led by burgeoning parliamentary structures aimed at promoting dialogue and peaceful settlement of conflicts between different parties thus maintaining regional peace. Today, however parliamentary expansion in global affairs range from monitoring international activities of states' and international organizations to sustainable development, human rights, democracy and addressing global problems like combating terrorism, drug trafficking, the proliferation of WMD, environmental issues and etc. Given the fact that the role of parliaments and parliamentary institutions are growing in global decision-making the author attempts to conduct a comprehensive research on the historical roots for the rise of legislatures as a foreign and international actor as well as to better understand the political and social preconditions that made these changes possible.

The rise of global inter-parliamentary cooperation is the major hallmark of the 20th century international development. Its unique growth is largely seen as the result of the institutionalization of ideals on *good global governance* and *better democratic representation* on the one hand, and the rapid development of international relations coupled with the deepening globalization processes on the other. Historically, parliaments had no or limited impact on foreign policy; as internal state bodies they were largely occupied with representative and legislative functions. Today, however, parliamentary factor is increasingly visible in foreign and international affairs highlighting the major change in its power and prestige. This article is an attempt to study the historical and political aspects of the phenomenal rise of global inter-parliamentary cooperation as well as the prospects of international system led by parliaments.

Historical perspective

The global parliamentary cooperation is the most dynamically developing aspect of contemporary international relations. As a relatively new phenomenon, the parliamentary involvement in international affairs began at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The gradual emergence and growth of so called 'international parliamentary institutions'¹ with regional and global agendas has further widened the geography of worldwide parliamentary contacts. Although, few international parliamentary institutions had been working before the World War II (for example Nordic IPU (1907), Empire Parliamentary Association (1911)), it's worth noting that their rise to prominence had occurred in two distinctive historical crossroads. The growing involvement of parliament in international affairs had resulted in the context of global democratic awakening theorized by S. Huntington, a prominent American scholar, in his famous "The Third Wave". Given the significance of these periods, it is important to understand the expansion of parliamentary authorities over foreign and international affairs from a historical point of view.

I. Although some forms of parliamentary cooperation emerged at the end of 19th century in Europe, the devastating world wars in the region had extremely hindered its progress. Later, the post Second World War period in Europe has greatly transformed the ways public opinion has viewed the conduct of foreign policy and international decision-making. As fairly observed by Z. Sabic, in the years after the war, 'the public demand for a better transparency of decision-making in international politics came to the forefront of political debates in Europe' [12, p.260]. The rise of widespread public skepticism and mistrust was a result of disastrous wars that ruined millions of lives in Europe and beyond. According to A.

¹ It is worth to note that there are definitional challenges in identifying what actually international parliamentary institutions are and how these institutions should be categorized. The terms like "association" or "assembly" is also appear in some researches. However, over the last years, especially in annual reports of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and in the works of several noted parliamentary scholars (C. Kissling, R. Cutler, Z.Sabic and etc.) the term of "international parliamentary institution" is widely used.

Kreppel ‘...in the immediate post-war period in Europe many ‘federalist’ movements emerged, with the goal of creating common bonds between countries which would mitigate the return of nationalism and prevent another war [7, p.53]. Not surprisingly, this popular public feeling is well-captured in the works of founding fathers of the European Union, who went even further by calling close regional integration so to “make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible”².

It is therefore the growing need for a democratic and accountable international system with active citizen participation has led to the burgeoning of international parliamentary institutions with regional and global relevance. With relatively limited power and resources, they aimed at challenging ‘democratic deficit’ in international politics, ruthlessly exposed in the course of events that led to the world wars. Few examples include *Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (1949)*, *European Parliament (1958)*, *NATO PA (1955)*, *Benelux Parliament (1955)*, *PARLATINO (1964)*, *Arab Inter-parliamentary Union (1974)*, *African Parliamentary Union (1976)*, *ASEAN Inter-parliamentary Assembly (1977)* and etc. Several major historical events greatly contributed to the rise of parliament as an international actor. If it was the growing public consciousness of masses in Europe, coupled with a deep-rooted clamor for democratic international rule that has precipitated the emergence of International Parliamentary Institutions, the crumbling of colonial domination has accelerated the same processes in large areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

As a result, several parliamentary organizations emerged within both regional and international organizations eager to question traditional dominance of states (executives) in international affairs. The phenomenal rise of parliament with international ambitions have even led some scholars refer to the ‘ideologically divided Cold War years of 20th century as a period of “parliamentarization” of international relations, or parliamentarization of politics’ given the growth of ‘public’ and ‘parliamentary’ diplomacy³.

II. The end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s marked a unique period of transition in world history with the collapse of the communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War heralded to a new era in human progress, strengthening the feelings of inter-dependence of human destiny, mutual understanding and a sense of shared responsibility for the common future. The unprecedented changes that had followed the breakup of the Soviet Union were truly historic, making, as rightly noted, the ‘*globalization* and *democratization*’ two dominant themes of human development⁴.

In such a favorable historical context that characterizes the post-Cold war years, the world has witnessed the mushrooming of international parliamentary institutions, particularly active in foreign policy and international affairs. Over 100 informal or formal International Parliamentary Institutions can be reported

in the world today, not to mention their subsidiary organizations [6, p.10]. Ever since, global parliamentary movement has been calling for greater citizen participation in decision-making, and fervently advocating to create a kind of international system which will be marked with broad representativeness and more responsibility. The unique growth of parliamentary institutions has accelerated world-wide parliamentary contacts; parliamentary resources are increasingly being considered as an alternative force for maintaining peace and security, promoting mutual understanding through dialogue, finding negotiated settlement in today’s conflicts. Parliamentarians are also striving to build an international environment in which peaceful international cooperation would be possible. Several parliamentary structures like *the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (1990)*, *Baltic Assembly (1991)*, *Central American Parliament (1991)*, *OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (1992)*, *CIS Parliamentary Assembly (1992)*, *Belarus-Russian Parliamentary Council (1997)*, *Parliamentary Union of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (1999)*, *Asian Parliamentary Association for Peace (1999)* appeared in this period of time.

The growth of international parliamentary institutions has significantly changed the nature of international cooperation by bringing peoples’ voice ever closer to international decision-making. ‘Nowadays, inter-parliamentary contacts are having great impact on the dynamics of contemporary international relations; its forms, substance and perspectives [3, p.22]. Gradually, ever-expanding parliamentary contacts have become an inseparable feature of contemporary international relations. As an actor of international decision-making, parliament is widely viewed as a trustworthy instrument of foreign policy in mitigating conflicts, preventing wars as well as in shaping more constructive environment for peaceful cooperation.

The parliamentary dimension of international institutions has increased with the active involvement of parliaments in international affairs. This tendency has later led to the creation of parliamentary assemblies within international organizations aiming to conduct parliamentary oversight of the activities of these institutions. The parliamentary assembly of the OSCE, NATO PA can be a good example to support this claim. This phenomenon is also known as the “parliamentarization of international organizations”. Today, the activities and democratic credentials of any prestigious organization are often criticized if it does not have parliamentary body.

Parliament as an international actor

The rise of parliamentary involvement in foreign policy has gradually transformed the nature of international cooperation, its forms and mechanisms. Today, we witness the institutionalization of global aspirations for greater parliamentary participation in international political processes, demonstrating the rising public demand to hold global institutions accountable by universal democratic standards. In the context of so called “*global political awakening*”⁴, the

² It was the primary goal of the Schuman Declaration, which called for sharing strategic resources in order to avert future wars between conventional rivals such as Germany and France. As we know, the Schuman Declaration has later led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the cornerstone of the EU.

³Such claims were made by Z.Sabic, in his abovementioned work as well as by A. Malamud and S.Stavridis in their following research: *Parliaments and Parliamentarians as International Actors*.//Ashgate Research Companion. –P. 103. Available at: <http://apps.eui.eu/Personal/Researchers/malamud/Ashgate-Malamud-Stavridis.pdf>

⁴In his widely acclaimed work titled as the “Strategic Vision: America and the Crises of Global Power” (2013), Zbigniew Brzezinski argues that the world is witnessing ‘Global Public Awakening’, a unique historical and social phenomenon, as a result of rapid globalization of human lives and the remarkable development of visual means of communications. According to

responsibilities of international parliamentarians to meet peoples' expectations are widening. The newly-acquired global significance urging parliamentarians pursue their goals more assertively and introduce certain mechanisms of 'checks and balances' to oversee the work of influential international actors. Regarded as an embodiment of democracy, parliament can rightly be qualified an international watchdog for better global administration. It is therefore, the "parliamentary dimension" is becoming more evident in the activities of international organizations such as United Nations, IMF, WTO, World Bank, OSCE and etc. More and more, parliamentarians, along with omnipresent civil society institutions, are trying to fill the much-talked about topic of democratic deficit in global affairs by overseeing the democratic nature of international system and also monitoring the democratic legitimacy of inter-governmental institutions.

Parliamentary scholars S.Stavridis and A.Malamud made a strong case for the link between democracy and parliamentary involvement in foreign affairs. They argue that the democratic countries have expanded the 'reach' of their parliaments in world affairs [8, p.103]. Some other scholars stress that "the borderline between domestic and international policies is blurred" and that "...the days when foreign policy, and more specifically trade policy was the exclusive domain of the executive branch are over" [11]. Norwegian scholar Gram-Skjoldager stresses a similar complementary idea arguing that, "the intertwinement between international and domestic policies implies that the role of domestic actors becomes more important in relation to international affairs"⁵.

It is worth noting that the expansion of parliamentary influence over foreign and international affairs has significantly widened the global responsibilities of parliamentarians'. As a foreign policy instrument, the main functions and responsibilities of parliaments' are as following:

- To scrutinize foreign policy activities of states (executives);
- To improve the country's international standing and image abroad;
- To promote representative democracy and the ideals of parliamentarism world-wide;
- To improve the representation of peoples' interests in an international arena;
- To monitor the legitimacy of decisions taken by international organizations as well as the overall activities of international and inter-governmental institutions;
- To promote more democratic, transparent and representative decision-making in International Relations;
- To foster a world-wide parliamentary dialogue for peaceful cooperation and so on and so forth...

Moreover, we've all the rights to emphasize that the regional and international parliamentary institutions are crucial as *think tanks*, generating knowledge, advocacy and policy expertise and thus providing better alternative solutions for addressing world's major challenges. The work of Inter-Parliamentary

Union (IPU) and other parliamentary structures are cases in point. Particularly, the IPU has been consistent in strengthening parliaments around the world in order to promote representative democracy and foster global parliamentary dialogue by regularly identifying major problems and challenges facing modern legislators. The works of international parliamentarians can well be improved by the analytical research provided by scholars and handful of experts working within the parliamentary bodies⁶.

Moreover, parliament can also be of great significance in the foreign policy area with its following virtues:

1. Parliamentary cooperation can be useful instrument of *international understanding* and therefore, often considered to be effective in mitigating conflicts and resolving disputes. Bringing 'parliamentary spirit' to IR implies the use of soft power and diplomatic means rather than to employ military ones;
2. Public opinion traditionally favors parliament as an important institution in 'conveying public concerns' both nationally and internationally and hence benefits substantial moral support;
3. Unlike executives, legislatures are viewed as being more reliable and trust-worthy instrument of public diplomacy.

To date, given the accelerating pace of globalization, the world-wide parliamentary contacts have become even more intense with the parliamentary factor increasingly visible in various areas of international life. Suffice to say, the deepening cooperation of parliamentarians with the United Nations in matters of global concern⁷. Not surprisingly, the number of people holding the belief that the time is ripe to create a World Parliament or the Parliamentary Assembly of the United Nations is growing in academic and particularly, in civil society communities⁸. Although it seems a distant prospect for the current political environment, one definitely should not underestimate the power of the mobilized, global civil society. The only fact that the European Union and the European Parliament have both emerged from the ashes of war-torn Europe, (where such developments were widely seen to be unrealistic) can further support the cause of the parliamentarians striving to establish a parliamentary body of the United Nations.

Parliamentary diplomacy

The extension of parliamentary authorities over foreign and international affairs led to the emergence of a new field called '*parliamentary diplomacy*'. Since parliament has traditionally been a domestic actor with legislative and representative

his theory, the populations of the world today are more politically activated and socially conscious than at any time in human history.

⁵ For a further overview please see: Shaping and controlling foreign policy.

Parliamentary diplomacy and oversight and the role of the European Parliament.

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/549045/EXPO_STU\(2015\)549045_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/549045/EXPO_STU(2015)549045_EN.pdf)

⁶ The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) is a case in point. The EPRS has been providing the European Parliament with in-depth analyses and alternative policy options in order to improve the efficiency of European legislators.

⁷ By recognizing the growing impact of parliament, the United Nations has explicitly called national and international parliamentarians for cooperation in meeting the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, the paragraph 30 of the UN Millennium Declaration emphasizes strengthening further cooperation with parliaments through their world organization, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, in various fields, including peace and security, economic and social development, international law and human rights, democracy and gender issues. To find more information please refer to the UN Millennium Declaration.

⁸ It is fair to mention the role of the Campaign for the Establishment of a UN Parliamentary Assembly (CEUNPA), which is a network of civil society groups and parliamentarians around the world dedicated to creating UNPA.

functions, the relatively new role of parliament as a foreign policy instrument is yet to be properly studied. A precise definition of what exactly consists of parliamentary diplomacy is also lacking.

However, the academic interest in the phenomenon of parliamentary diplomacy is growing over the recent years. According to Dutch legislative scholars, the term parliamentary diplomacy is used 'to describe the wide range of international activities undertaken by members of parliament in order to increase mutual understanding between countries, to better conduct government scrutiny, to democratically represent their people abroad and to increase the democratic legitimacy of inter-governmental institutions' [14, p.93-99]. On the other hand, the Portal for Parliamentary Development defines parliamentary diplomacy as 'the means by which two or more parliaments conduct an ongoing dialogue with regard to key international issues through institutionally or individually'⁹. While accepting the absence of a standard definition, R. Cutler argues that 'parliamentary diplomacy represents an important middle ground between the traditional level of interstate diplomacy and the new level of transnational co-operation amongst grassroots non-governmental organizations (NGOs) [1, p.82-83]. By summarizing many of its imperfect definitions G. Hamilton laconically referred to parliamentary diplomacy as '*diplomacy with a democratic mandate*'^[5].

Nevertheless, we can stress that the existing definitional confusions will dissipate over time once the role of parliament as a foreign and international actor becomes more apparent. Presumably, this problem can also be attributed to distinctively evolving features of parliamentary diplomacy as a new field of political discipline.

Known as the world organization of parliaments, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is leading global efforts to promote international parliamentary cooperation, representative democracy and parliamentary diplomacy, and hence challenging democratic deficit and the executive dominance in world politics. In a similar way, parliamentary involvement is also deepening in such areas like sustainable development, trade, tackling climate change and demographical issues. In order to stimulate the rising parliamentary contribution to international development in general, and the role of the IPU in particular, the United Nations has granted a permanent observer status to the IPU (2002) and even honored it branding as a 'unique parliamentary counterpart of the United Nations'^[2].

In a current international system crowded with state and non-state actors, the parliament's profile as an embodiment of democracy will continue to grow. Even now, parliaments are exerting significant influence over global decision making through national, regional and international parliamentary institutions. According to George Noulas, three major factors are important for a parliament to play a wider role in foreign affairs. They are the '*historical origins*' of the country, its '*political system*' and the overall '*position in the international arena*'^[10]. In a globalised world, one might expect further expansion of parliamentary powers, civil society, and other non-state entities in creating, as they wish, a more representative, democratically-governed and accountable international system.

Criticism

The end of the Cold War has sparked somewhat euphoric feelings about the formation of a new world order with the international institutions in alliance with global civil society at its core. Unfortunately, these hopes have later waned as the world encountered different kinds of problems and challenges. The President of the New America Foundation, A. Slaughter was right when she famously quipped that 'the new world order led by the United Nations guaranteeing international peace and security is a chimera'^[13]. Her criticism is not an isolated one. Several other scholars have traditionally been very skeptical of the role of international institutions and have often questioned the actual impact of parliaments in international politics¹⁰. For example, a distinguished American political realist J. Mearsheimer claims that 'international organizations (institutions) have minimal influence on state behavior and thus hold little promise for promoting stability in the post-Cold War world'^[9, p.7-8].

Those scholars who critically examine the role of parliamentarians as foreign policy actors point to such major flaws as the institutional deficiencies of parliamentary assemblies, implementation capabilities and also the reluctance of states to endow parliaments with substantial powers [12, p.260-262]. The critiques of parliament also refer to some common weaknesses of legislatures such as, the lack of coherent diplomatic agenda, institutional consistence, and more crucially, the lack of resources and power. But particularly, they are highly skeptical of parliaments' real ability to challenge state diplomacy or influence over international decision making. For that reason, we sometimes witness such cynical comments calling parliamentary diplomacy as being '*nothing more than parliamentary tourism*'.

Conclusion

The so called global political awakening, the rapid progress of the means of information, the Internet, sustained social and economic development have further increased the nature of international politics. In this regard, the development of international parliamentary cooperation embodies global aspirations towards more democratic, free and fair international system. The rise of parliament as a foreign and international actor should be considered as a result of overall human progress, the rapid institutionalization of universal ideals and globalization. Nowadays, the parliamentary dimension is becoming more visible in the daily activities of many international organizations and not surprisingly, these organizations are aware of the growing legislative scrutiny directed at their world-wide activities. The times when states acted solely and hence international affairs were perceived to be exclusive executive prerogative have long gone to history. With significant public support for being a source of legitimacy and for the representative nature, the global parliamentarians are more vigorously pursuing their ambitious goals of building more open, transparent and democratic world order.

It's worth noting that the international organizations, civil society institutions and global parliamentarians are at the forefront of building better, responsive and more democratic

⁹ Parliamentary diplomacy, Portal for Parliamentary Development. Available at: <http://www.agora-parl.org/>

¹⁰ The representatives of Political Realism are often critical of parliament's foreign policy role. Political realists do not believe in a world order ruled by international organizations or parliamentarians. They firmly hold a view that executives (states) are the only important actors in international politics.

world order. Therefore, parliamentary cooperation on both regional and international level is deepening by giving dynamism to the development of contemporary international relations. In our globalised, deeply inter-connected world, the rise of global parliamentary contacts as well as the active involvement of parliamentarians in foreign affairs will further grow by fostering mutual understanding between nations, cross-border solidarity, political dialogue and religious and cultural tolerance. That's why, the future activities of parliamentarians will be an important test for parliaments' claim as a force for good and also building an accountable, democratic and open international order.

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