

**May 12, 1990**

**Plenary Session 1 [of the Second PPNN Conference  
for Diplomats, Guernsey] (Mechanics, Procedural  
Questions and Practical Experiences)**

**Citation:**

"Plenary Session 1 [of the Second PPNN Conference for Diplomats, Guernsey] (Mechanics, Procedural Questions and Practical Experiences)", May 12, 1990, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Contributed by Michal Onderco from the private papers of Benjamin Sanders. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/260425>

**Summary:**

Includes speaking notes at the outset of the conference covering the importance of the subjects and that they be taken seriously by all parties.

**Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

**Original Language:**

English

**Contents:**

Original Scan

GUERNSEY IIPlenary Session 1

(Mechanics, Procedural Questions and Practical Experiences)

Speaking Notes

I am going to speak to you about some mechanical and procedural aspects of the kind of conference that will be held in August and September of this year. Some of my remarks may strike you as rather trivial and overly general. Still, I think they are relevant. They are drawn from personal experiences at the three previous Review Conferences. Those experiences have taught me that even apparently trivial procedural matters can make or break a conference. At a political conference of which the outcome is uncertain, trivia may be decisive.

My remarks are not necessarily in order of importance.

1. Let me start by saying what may be obvious: that it is a primary requirement for success that governments, particularly the Depositary Governments, take the conference seriously. That attitude should be reflected in the first instance in the intensity and quality of preparations, in the Preparatory Committee, the inter-sessional Bureau and in one-to-one consultations before the conference. In my experience, the preparations for the first review conference were not terribly thorough; those for the second conference were somewhat better and for the third one they were very solid indeed.

2. A very important factor is the competence, prestige, knowledge of the President and the way he or she takes charge of the

conference. The President has to be aware of the substance under discussion, and of the actual and potential problems before the conference. The President must remain informed of everything that happens, at all levels and in all organs of the conference, keep a low profile, not interfere unnecessarily but taking a hand whenever and wherever that is needed.

3. In the third review conference, the President made use of a group of advisers, including the Bureau, representatives of regional groupings, the Depositaries and the Secretary-General of the Conference. The group served as a conduit of information; a source of authoritative advice; a mechanism for directing effort where it was most needed; and an organ through which regional groups could be informally consulted without necessarily binding themselves to a specific course of action.

4. In procedural and routine-political matters, it is extremely useful to rely on precedent - not only because precedent shows what to do and what not to do, but because, if there is a precedent for an action or a decision, there is less chance that it will be questioned. This makes it important that the Secretariat and the Bureau between them are aware of existing precedent for problems that might arise, or that they have sources they might consult. To the extent possible, procedural problems should be handled by the Secretariat in close consultation with the Bureau of the organ involved.

5. It is in the interest of the Conference to have an experienced and competent Secretariat which works in close coordination with the officers of the Conference, is trusted by

them and is allowed to operate to the best of its ability. While even the most competent Secretariat cannot ensure the success of a conference, a Secretariat that makes serious mistakes will contribute to its failure, especially if the outcome is in any doubt. At the third review conference, the Secretariat was greatly helped by the confidence placed in it by the Bureau which encouraged it, where this was called for, to make active contributions to the management of the conference.

6. The active use of the Drafting Committee, under a very capable chairman, enabled the third conference to give early consideration to those texts on which there was agreement and permitted it to concentrate on specific areas of disagreement. The Drafting Committee made an important substantive contribution in working out compromise language for a number of cases where main committees had not been able to achieve complete agreement.

7. An extremely useful device employed in the management of the third review conference was the continuing use of scenarios, drawn up by the Bureau in close and ongoing consultation of the various principal bodies and their secretariats, and involving some of the most active delegations. This ensured the absence of unnecessary surprises, so that the available time could be used productively for the preparation of a consensus text.

8. At the third review conference, every effort was made to deal with all procedural matters, the political problems that were only indirectly connected with the substance, and organisational questions, as a single package, before the start of the substan-

tive discussions. This was facilitated in 1985 by the fact that the "Jeunes de Geneve" - the annual Genevois summer celebration - began slightly less than two weeks after the start of the conference. Thus, there was a clear break between the procedural and the substantive part, during which delegations were able to consult as well as relax. This will not be possible in 1990, but it remains productive to try and bunch all procedural matters together and set a deadline for their completion.

If I have to summarise my conclusions, I should say that the way the conference is conducted is almost as important as its substance. The more politically controversial the substance of the discussion is, the more important conference management may become. If there is agreement in principle, procedure and management are simple and secondary. If, on the contrary, there is utter disagreement, no procedure and no management can save a conference and it probably is not worth trying. But where there is basic agreement on a principle, yet controversy about the way it may be realised, and a final agreement seems achievable through compromise, procedure tends to become as important as substance. That is how the way the conference is conducted may become the decisive factor in its success.

12 May 1990