

Why are questions of international politics hard to resolve?

Written by Sweta Madhuri Kannan

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SWETA MADHURI KANNAN, AUG 24 2011

'What is patriotism but the love of the good things we ate in our childhood?'^[1]

The question the title poses inherently assumes that indeed, issues of international politics are hard to resolve. As I will argue in this essay, there is a number of reasons why this might be the case. We can approach this question in different ways and I would like to begin with a point that may perhaps even be the most obvious one: it is the fact that we live in a complex world. In 'Theory Talks', Robert Cox describes this complexity with insight:

'I grew up in Canada, and early on I realized that Canada is not just a single entity, but also an assemblage of communities. I had to come to terms quite early with the fact that states, the homogenous entities that form the point of departure thinking about international politics, are in fact made up of combinations of ethnic/ religious and social forces, which more often than not have conflicting interests and aspirations'^[2]

We could further add systems of governance and control, as well as economic systems of production to the factors that contribute to the complexity of the world we live in today. Taken together, it is these factors that create the structural framework within which we experience reality on a day-to-day basis. In 'What assumptions do we start from?'^[3] Jenny Edkins bids us to reflect on these influences and the way that they shape our understanding of certain questions and their answers. I therefore aim to be self-reflective in my argument, bearing in mind the numerous personal and academic factors that have shaped my thought-processes, such as the beliefs that I hold dear, as well as the literature that I have consulted and principles that I identify with. In this case, my answer leans towards arguing for the underlying assumption inherent in the question: I believe that it is indeed difficult to resolve questions of international politics. In an attempt to answer the essay question in a way that is not overly abstract or obscure, I turn to an organization that is seen as being truly 'international'. I use the challenges that the United Nations has faced to explore some of the reasons why I believe it is hard to find resolutions to problems that arise in international politics.

There are certain shortcomings that we have to be aware of when looking at the UN: the organization is heavily influenced by Western agendas and Western ideas and values. Its organizational structure and its internal power hierarchies are subject to much criticism, and it is attacked for not being very representative of its member states^[4]. Given these internal flaws and limitations, the UN still represents one of the most appropriate international bodies of governance to use as example here. And unlike the European Union, it could not be classified as a 'regional' body of governance, but is generally accepted to be truly 'international'. The term itself only takes on meaning within a state-centric system, as it distinguishes the internal realm of the state (i.e. the 'domestic' sphere) from that external to the state (i.e., the 'international'). According to this system, the world is structured into three distinct spheres: the local, the national and the international. These three spheres, however, are not afforded the same amount of attention; indeed, as Roxanne Lynn Doty's chapter 'Why is people's movement restricted?'^[5] demonstrates, it is usually 'the national' which is understood to represent the main referent object.

So, why are questions of international politics hard to resolve? Living comfortable lives in the West, it is easy for us to forget that issues such as poverty and destitution – both issues that the UN has to address – are more than mere

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'concepts' that are discussed. They present real issues with considerable impact on individual lives. One might therefore describe issues of international politics as affecting the individual on a personal, local level^[6]. At the same time, the label 'international' politics implies that relations and actions taken in international politics are removed from the agency of individuals. 'International' politics are thus thought of as operating at a distinct sphere located at the state level. According to orthodox International Relations scholars, agency within this sphere is accorded solely to states – not individuals, thereby offering the illusion of being removed from the immediate locality and reach of the individual. This assumption is often mirrored in the way that international politics is considered in public discourses^[7]. A good example of this is the 1974 famine in Bangladesh. As most famines, the immediate cause was identified as being a shortage of food available^[8]. Subsequently, it was argued that it should have been the state's responsibility to deal with the crisis in time in order to halt the famine. In 'Poverty and Famines: an essay on entitlement and distribution', Amartya Sen, however, argues that the actual problem lay much more with the entitlement to food and the manner in which food was distributed among various sections of society^[9]. Going on from Sen's analysis, one could argue that the famine was perpetuated by individuals (elites, in this case) – and not an abstract entity like the 'state'^[10]. The assumption that this was a question to be dealt with by the state meant ultimately, that roughly one million people lost their lives^[11]. I mention this here, as it is important to note that our daily (inter-) actions heavily influence these issues that are generally made out to be 'outside' of our reach. Having established the perceived distinction made in the context of 'international' politics, we will now move on to exploring potential answers to the question.

Following from the idea that questions and issues that arise in international politics are highly complex, we can easily argue that this is at least partially caused by the existence of a multiplicity of answers; these are as diverse as the people trying to answer them. The manner in which a question is asked can further limit the sets of answers that can be given – or, may indeed lead to the formulation of a whole host of other questions and answers. The questions themselves, then, are holders of assumptions and specific conceptions of the world^[12]. Ultimately, it is important to realize that our understanding of certain questions are influenced by hegemonic power/knowledge structures that we live in^[13]. This interpretive framework is further complemented with personal experiences. It is this subjective position from which we approach a question that also influences the way we think about its solution. There are, therefore, as many solutions and answers to questions as there are individuals.

It is interesting, that the essay question makes use of the verb to 'resolve'. The dictionary definition of 'to resolve' is to engage directly with a question/issue in a way that will lead to taking a concrete, tangible action. Problematic in this context is thus the idea that a diverse range of answers cannot actually 'resolve' a question. Rather than actually taking action, it is much more likely that we will 'respond' to questions – find similes and comparisons, with which we try and approach potential solutions. One of the core problems with trying to 'resolve' issues, particularly for the UN, has been the issue of unity: pressure is thus often exerted on member states to take unilateral action. Taking such action on an issue, however, presupposes the existence of a consensus on the action to be taken – that is: any solution that is found needs to appeal to all parties involved.

This provides us with a good introduction to a discussion of the United Nations and the problems that they – as an international body – have experienced in the past. Here, I will be looking at three main points that seem particularly pertinent in the context of the question posed: one of the major issues that the UN has struggled with since its inception is dealing effectively with the diversity of ideas and opinions that it represents. It is widely acknowledged in academic circles that the United Nations has been substantially challenged by its inability to take unanimous decisions and formulate policies with clear and significant demands^[14]. Instead, a lot of time is spent on negotiating differences of opinion and comprehension. In some cases, this may have even distracted the UN from finding practical solutions to its issues. Linked to this is a clear hierarchy of opinions within the UN, which have complicated decision-making even further. That is, not everyone's voice is heard as loudly and clearly and not everyone's opinion is acted upon. This is an issue that is inherently related to wider issues of power relations, hegemony and dominance. In the current system, hegemony and power are more often than not intimately linked to the funding that certain member states contribute to the UN's overall budget^[15].

Similarly, the status and (imagined) level of power that a state might operate at is acknowledged in the way important organs such as the Security Council are structured. I would further argue that power relations inherent within UN

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structures have contributed to a culture of asking questions and raising issues, which the UN believes that it – as an organization – can deal with. Returning to the point made earlier, the decision on the issues that the UN can deal with is taken only by a select group (usually the Security Council), which is dominated by Western nations and Western values^[16]. This fundamentally skews the approaches that the UN takes to deal with certain issues. In the light of trying to be a representative international body, the UN thus fails at being equitable. Arguably, a form of ‘Western hegemony’ exists within the UN, which fundamentally influences the ways in which questions within the UN are thought about and answered. Why is this a problem? In the context of resolving issues of international politics it is an issue, as it leads to an unbalanced way of approaching the issue in the first place. Very often, this imbalance of opinion leads to the creation of ‘solutions’ to problems that are based within Western ideologies and ideas and which may offer no viable ways of actually ‘resolving’ an issue. The solution thus found may actually serve to perpetuate these existing systems of power and domination.

Secondly, and closely related to the section above, is the idea, that it is impossible to find one authoritative answer to many of the issues that are raised. Local or regional contexts contribute significantly to the way in which individuals may perceive certain issues and answers; at the same time, socio-economic, historical, political and/or geographic landscapes can alter the way in which a question is understood and may limit the ways in which it could be answered (if at all). A case in point would be the UN’s belated and often insufficient response to humanitarian crises or armed interventions, such as the outbreak of hostilities in Georgia in the summer of 2008^[17]. Studying the UN’s ‘Principles of Peace Support Operations’^[18], I found that many of the handbooks make a point of highlighting the importance of contextuality whilst trying to establish standards and norms for the manner in which issues and situations can be dealt with. The focus then shifts from simply dealing with a problem, to dealing with it effectively. But, at which point does the idea of ‘effectivity’ and reaching certain aims outdo the actual resolution of the problem? Trying to find overarching solutions to issues that concern different people in different locations easily leads to the creation of generalizations. These in turn facilitate the generation of stereotypes, which then lead to a very specific, narrow way of looking at the problem and understanding its solution. On the other hand, as the example with the Peace Support Operations has shown, the notion of dealing with issues ‘effectively’ can completely shift the focus of our attention from the issue at hand to a bureaucratization of efforts. It is therefore does not seem very useful to try and find an overarching, all-encompassing answer to the question ‘why are questions of international politics hard to resolve?’.

The third point that we need to consider is the ‘interconnectivity’ of issues, particularly as it has contributed substantially to the deceleration of decision-making within the UN. The UN has encountered this in almost every aspect of its work as an international organization. The ‘international’ issues that the UN seeks to address are thus rarely clear-cut, isolated phenomena that can be treated as such. Instead, the UN has found that in attempting to resolve one issue, it has had to at least ponder the consequences of *not* dealing with others – even those, which on the surface may not even be related. Here, UNAIDS offers an interesting case in point: it is widely recognized within the organization that the issue of AIDS cannot be resolved without also improving maternal and infant health, while also working towards better health systems more generally. The improvement of health systems and the regulation of aid flowing into this sector are very often intimately linked to dominant ideas on ‘good governance’ and democracy promotion. On a societal level, treating HIV/Aids without ensuring that wider social issues related to the condition are addressed, can leave patients vulnerable to social stigmatization and, in some cases, to self-harm and suicide^[19].

Therefore, in order to deal with HIV/Aids in a more sustainable way, it is crucial to also engage with issues such as the lack of sex education, social stigmas of using condoms and wider issues of female empowerment. As can be seen by this example, it is these existing complexities and interlinkages that make resolving problems seen as belonging to the sphere of international politics difficult. Arguably, it is the impossibility of isolating certain factors historically, socially, economically, politically and geographically from their context, which complicates finding solutions that can address a particular question. Indeed, one of the questions that UNAIDS in this context and other UN organizations more generally come up against is the question of ‘how do we tackle this problem?’ and ‘where do we start?’. This brings us back to the first point that we looked at – being aware of the assumptions and ideas that we have. It may seem impractical for an organization such as the UN to even begin to ‘think about they way (they) think’^[20], however, such reflection could offer valuable insights into why they might find it so difficult to deal with situations arising from international politics.

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Conclusion

Ultimately, it is the diversity and the complexity of these issues that complicate finding answers, or even solutions to them. The four points that I mention here – differences of opinion, the hegemony of certain ideas, the contextuality of issues and their interconnectivity should thus be considered as a starting point for such an enquiry. We could view these points as a supporting structure, within which individuals may still – albeit being influenced by the same ‘structure’ – come to very different conclusions. The problems that we thus look at may mean very different things to different people, just as much as the answers that we may find to them may appeal differently to them (or, not at all). Issues, problems and questions of ‘international’ politics are thus almost impossible to resolve, largely because of the sheer diversity and complexity of the issues themselves, as well as the structures and ideas, within which they operate.

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^[5] in *Global politics*, pp.170-191; particularly pp. 180-183

^[6] see for instance, the way in which simple individuals influenced the politics of the two Germanies when they took to the streets in East Berlin in 1987: see Edkins, J., 'Why do we obey?' in *Global politics*, pp. 123-146; particularly pp. 132-133

^[7] see p. 161, Stuart Hall in Lisle, D., 'How do we find out what's going on?' in *Global politics*, pp. 147-169

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^[9] see Sen, A. 'Poverty and Famines: an Essay on Entitlement and Distribution' (India: Oxford University Press, 1999)

^[10] see also the example of the 'hole' in the flag for an interesting discussion of the (non-) existence of the state p. 142, Slavoj Zizek's in Edkins, J., 'Why do we obey?', *Global politics*, pp. 123-146

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