

Do IGOs Decrease the Possibility of Conflict?

Written by Giulia Amparo Bruni Roccia

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Whether international institutions can promote and achieve a more peaceful world is a question that is being examined more and more in the study of international relations. The first theory goes back to Immanuel Kant who postulated the democratic peace theory, according to which, the tripod “republican constitution – commercial spirit of international trade – federation of interdependent republics” will generate “perpetual peace” (J. R. Oneal & B. Russett, 1999: 2). Realists would later criticize this idea, claiming that “international governmental organizations reflect, rather than effect, world politics” (C. Boehmer, E. Gartzke, T. Nordstrom, 2004: 1). Literature about this issue has further developed over the last 50 years, as the world has seen the rise of new international organizations and the integration of old ones. The question which this essay will tackle is whether it is true that “shared membership in international organizations significantly decreases the likelihood of fatal disputes” (A. Hasenclever & B. Weiffen, 2006: 564). In order to answer this question, we will look at how the terms “peace” and “international institutions” are defined. Then the essay will analyse both the positive and negative responses to the question of whether international institutions reduce conflict, looking closely at the example of the EU. This example will help conclude that international institutions do increase the possibility of having a more peaceful world, although it does not eliminate war completely.

In relation to what is “peace” and what is a “peaceful world,” we should look at what is considered as its opposite, that being conflict, and also what the causes of war are. It should also be noted that security issues vary over time. The number of international institutions has been higher in the past century, therefore we should look at the current meaning of security, rather than its past definitions. According to Fearon, the definition of security is “freedom from risk of violent death, injury, or coercion at the hands of some organization” (J. D. Fearon, 2008: 2). Fearon expands this definition by adding that today’s security issues are no longer “hot wars,” but rather, the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and especially by terrorist groups, internal wars, the collapse of governments, the abuse of power by the government, and the risk of attack by other states (J. D. Fearon, 2008: 2). Therefore, peace is the absence of the dangers listed above. As will be discussed later, all of these problems are often caused by a lack of communication, a lack of transparency, and a lack of an exchange of information between states, therefore it will be argued that international institutions can solve these problems by enabling more communication among members. Another relevant point is that conflict arises because of the differences between the two (or more) sides involved; the interests, cultures, or methods of the sides clash, and thus, there is conflict. International institutions can solve this problem by assembling countries into one organization, in order to develop common interests, common methods, and to support the spread of a shared identity.

Before analysing these two arguments (communication and shared identity), it is important to note what an international institution is (from now on shortened to “IGOs” – intergovernmental organizations). According to Mearsheimer:

“I define institutions as a set of rules that stipulate the ways in which states would cooperate and compete with each other. They prescribe acceptable forms of state behaviour, and prescribe unacceptable kinds of behaviour... Institutions are not a form of world government. States themselves must choose to obey the rules they created” (J. J. Mearsheimer, 1995: 8).

Mearsheimer argues that being part of an IGO does not mean that a state will lose its sovereignty, but if a state is

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unable to protect its citizens from what is defined as a threat, then these citizens will fall under the protection of the international institution (P. D. Williams, 2008: 331). IGOs do not have to include in their agenda all societal and international issues, in fact, some institutions relate only to economic matters, and others to cultural, political, or security issues.

Regarding the correlation between international institutions and peace, there have been several theories, both for and against the idea that IGOs diminish conflict. First, we will look at the arguments against this claim. The main critique comes from the realists who claim that:

“institutions are basically a reflection of the distribution of power in the world. They are based on the self-interested calculations of the great powers, and they have no independent effect on state behaviour” (J. J. Mearsheimer, 1995: 6).

According to this view, IGOs might be relevant in spreading common norms, but they still do not promote interstate peace because they need to have a complex, all-encompassing, institutional structure, in order to actually limit conflict. They also need to be able to promulgate information to all members. Furthermore, IGOs that do not include in their agenda security issues, but only, for example, economic or cultural ones, will never be able to pursue peaceful management of conflict. Finally, if an IGO is only a group of different super-powers, then it will be difficult to find an agreement, because they will never give up their own individual interests (C. Boehmer, E. Gartzke, T. Nordstrom, 2004: 29).

The arguments in favour of the statement that international institutions decrease conflict can now be discussed. There are three different theories in this regard; the liberal institutional theory, the functionalist theory, and the democratic peace theory. The first says that IGOs promote peaceful conflict resolution and limit the emergence of discord; the second says that IGOs promote peace by changing state preferences; the third theory, which is supported by Kant, says that the combination of a republic, international commerce, and a federation of states, promotes peace. Furthermore, Kant argued that democracies are unlikely to go to war against each other (C. Boehmer, E. Gartzke, T. Nordstrom, 2004: 1).

All of these theories can be said to originate from the idea that if close relations between states are developed and supported, these states will mature and reinforce a shared set of interests and goals, and methods to achieve these goals. Through the communication and exchange of knowledge, information, and ideas, the relations will become deeper, making it more difficult for conflict to erupt, but also making it easier for governments to peacefully discuss issues of common interest. Why, however, is it important or helpful that the states involved in an IGO are democracies, as Kant argued? Democracies are culturally and politically similar, they have the tendency to prefer peaceful conflict resolution and their foreign policy will accordingly be war-adverse, and also, “foreign policymaking moves slowly” in the sense that it needs to gather great public consensus before a decision can be made to take part in a conflict, thus, “the risk of surprise attacks is considered low and elected governments dispose of extra time to settle their disputes peacefully” (A. Hasenclever & B. Weiffen, 2006: 565). Also, democracies tend to be transparent and honest in communicating their intentions, which makes it simpler for two democracies to find a solution through negotiations. As a result of these characteristics, one could say that a democratic government will support and strengthen an IGO, adding to the IGO’s ability to avoid war. As we have seen, democracies prefer the peaceful management of clashes; thus their involvement in IGOs, and at the same time an IGO’s capability to require of a government that it respects democratic values within the organization, allow us to claim that IGOs foster international peace. As Oneal and Russett note:

“Common relations draw states into a web of mutual self-interest that constrains them from using force against one another. Thus **interdependence** and **democracy** contribute to what we have called the ‘liberal peace’” (J. R. Oneal and B. Russett, 1999: 3).

What can international institutions do in practice, to secure peace and security? First, they can punish states that break the rules established by the institution, and these states can be both inside and outside the organization. Also, they can arbitrate between the parties involved in a conflict. Moreover, they can diminish uncertainty by making

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decisions more transparent and by enabling the exchange of information between states. This way it is easier to know who is a threat to the community. Furthermore, it can strengthen socialization and facilitate cooperation between member-states, which could happen through discussion and the promotion of a set of common interests. Finally, it can generate a sense of mutual identity.

Now, the third and fourth aspects will be focused on. These two aspects are connected, because they originate from the same idea, according to which “power competition is particularly dangerous in international politics both because it gives rise to enduring rivalries and because it typically precedes armed conflict” (A. Hasenclever & B. Weiffen, 2006: 571). Hasenclever argued that war is more likely to happen in unstable regions or unstable power systems. However, how can regions be unstable? There are two reasons; lack of transparency, and the existence of different interests between states, and IGOs supply a solution to both these problems. When states become members of an institution they have to be completely honest and transparent about their resources, intentions, and interests. That institution will also have its own data-research base which makes it easier to display to members information about other members. Finally, states that are part of the same organization are obliged to communicate and exchange information, which enables transparency. Transparency strengthens stability in a region, because states are more able to predict when or if a state is going to attack them, and can detect the states that are more likely to break the rules.

Secondly, a sense of shared identity, based on shared interests, builds up peace because it removes differences between states, eliminating the reasons why states would go to war against each other. An IGO can build a shared identity for its members by establishing a set of common rules, which are discussed by each government, and which later become an integral part of each government’s policy. When states discuss norms that they should all respect, they base their opinions and interests on their culture, on their sense of justice, and on their sense of morality. Through discussion and exchange of different ideas, each state learns about the other state, and together they build laws that they are ready to obey, making it difficult for war to erupt.

The European Union is one example of how international institutions work, and in particular, how communication and a shared sense of identity can work together. The European Union was born from the need of European states for peace. They had just come out of two world wars, with the last being extremely destructive for most countries involved. They knew that conflict had always been present in Europe because of the Franco-German clash of interests over Alsace-Lorraine; a region which has large amounts of steel and coal, and it had been the political goal of both countries to conquer this region for their own interests. After years of conflict though, they decided that a different solution was needed in a form of a treaty. In 1951, the Coal and Steel Community Treaty was signed by six European countries, which declared that the two resources should be shared evenly. In 1957, the European Economic Community was established, in 1992 the Maastricht Treaty was signed, in 2002 the Euro came into use, and in 2004 ten new states joined the Union; all these events helped strengthen European integration. In the end, the EU is an example of how an international institution can make the world more peaceful. Since 1951 there have not been any wars among the members, and cooperation among the governments is deepening. As Oneal and Russett said:

“The densest network of international organizations is found in Europe (particularly Western Europe), followed at some distance by Latin America. These are of course, the areas of the world exhibiting the least interstate conflict since World War Two” (J. R. Oneal & B. Russett, 1998: 443).

This is because there is communication and an exchange of information and know-how through the enhancement of free trade, free circulation of people and capital, and at least in some countries, some citizens feel “European.” For example, both an Italian citizen and a French citizen may feel like they share the same European identity.

The example of the European Union clearly shows how international institutions can influence the international system, making it more peaceful. If we consider that peace has been achieved between two countries (Germany and France) that are known for having a history of war, then it can be achieved for other countries as well. Today, no German citizens would ever think of waging war against France, and would also spend a lot of time with French citizens at their workplace in the European Parliament, or at the local bank in the town of Alsace-Lorraine, or at the ticket

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desk at an airport. This is a great achievement, because not only has peace been accomplished, but integration has also been established. One could argue that there are other institutions, such as the United Nations, that have been established “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” (P. D. Williams, 2008: 325), and that despite their existence, war is still being waged. If this is true, the European Union might be the exception, but it may also be the beginning of a series of regional and international institutions that will help promote and preserve peace. IGOs such as the United Nations might be failing to achieve peace according to some critics, but they still give a sense of hope and security to the people of the member-states who know that their governments are bound by a set of norms, that are also shared by several other states. IGOs still give the opportunity for communication between states, and for a possible shared identity, and most importantly, IGOs can no longer be neglected in a world where international relations have become so deep and intricate.

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