

A Greater Role for International Institutions?

Written by Jan Dobrosielski

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JAN DOBROSIELSKI, MAR 21 2012

The Peace of Westphalia, in 1648, is conventionally accepted to mark the beginning of modern nation-states. In the wake of the most violent religious wars Europe had ever seen, that historic council witnessed the princes of Europe take their first steps towards shedding Imperial and Papal authority in favour of their own nationally-based sovereignty. Yet if the world had never before seen nation-states, political power reaching across borders was nothing new. From military alliances such as the Hellenic League in ancient Greece to the globalizing effects of the Silk Road, the forces of international interaction have a long and storied history the support for which only continues to increase in the modern day. This essay will argue that international institutions are an integral and successful component of the global community's efforts in managing those problems that are too great for nations to confront alone.

While some international institutions have found their *raison d'être* in such contemporary problems as nuclear proliferation, military alliances are as ancient as the art of war itself. Great statesmen and thinkers of every age, from Pericles of Athens to Woodrow Wilson, have proposed the creation of leagues or communities of nations to endorse mutual security and safeguard international peace.[1] None of these proposals found sufficient traction to prevent the World Wars, yet the unprecedented destruction these produced, followed by the advent of nuclear weapons, appeared to win over the sceptics. Today, the world counts numerous alliances, including North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and even the European Union (EU). As will be elaborated, such alliances have become an indispensable aspect of international relations and act as powerful deterrents to hostilities.

The various benefits of membership in alliances – a vast umbrella of security, increased international standing, reductions in regional tensions – are immediately recognizable and explain the eagerness with which states pursue inclusion.[2] Indeed, the aspirations of ex-Soviet bloc states for a rapprochement with NATO are reflected in their participation in the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq, which would otherwise appear sufficiently remote as to have little impact in eastern Europe's geopolitical dynamics. Based on the principle of collective security specifying retaliatory measures in the event of non-member aggression, such countries have much to gain from alliances with Western powers as they live in the historic shadow of the Russian hegemon.[3]

The overall effect of these military alliances has been to limit the feasibility of international hostilities, compel erstwhile opponents to come to terms and respect the conditions of inclusion, and to give a forum for the expression of discontentment that might otherwise have no outlet but war. Not only do military alliances limit the capacity of regional powers to dominate weaker states, as is the case in eastern Europe, but they have also forced historic enemies, such as Greece and Turkey, to scale back hostilities as a necessary requisite to membership.[4] In the process military alliances provide an avenue for sustained diplomacy in a multi-actor context, limiting potential aggression and possibly even helping to bring together alienated nations by providing them with common cause.

Other factors can also help to limit the outbreak of hostilities, albeit for very different reasons. Until recently, the prospect of nuclear annihilation hung dimly over the world as the Soviet Union and America squared off in frighteningly tense bids for supremacy. And although, of late, the idea of nuclear holocaust as a result of the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) has faded, the potential devastation of those nuclear arsenals should they fall into the wrong hands continues to be very real. Consequently, the global mismanagement of nuclear proliferation is

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today one of the gravest threats facing the international community.

States acting alone have proven incapable of navigating responsibly the pitfalls of the nuclear age. It might be argued that the United States and the Soviet Union reached an eventual understanding on a degree of disarmament; yet this is mostly due to the USSR's economic collapse and political dissolution, which rendered the arms race irrelevant. In and of themselves, the ongoing negotiations for a gradual de-escalation of nuclear arsenals have proven inconclusive in light of the fact that each state has retained its offensive nuclear capabilities.[5]

The fundamental problems highlighted by this historic nuclear standoff still exist today, and are only compounded by the fact that nuclear technology is becoming less expensive, allowing smaller and less influential states to acquire it.[6] Given that the only working solution to the nuclear dilemma has been the policy of MAD, it is implausible that states locked in hostile relations, even if trying to reach a negotiated nuclear settlement, would allow officials from opposing nations to freely inspect their arsenals and facilities.[7] Such a task is best suited for third party actors with no vested interests in the confrontation, a mandate for which international institutions are the ideal candidates. By extension, if the worldwide participation in the prevention of nuclear proliferation is the aim, such politically neutral institutions are vital in obtaining assent. Although they must be enforced by international coercive pressure, international institutions provide the perfect vehicle for monitoring and reporting on the compliance of states, enforcing the conditions of nuclear treaties, and helping to limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons to those states that display the requisite responsibility and accountability.[8]

The danger posed by nuclear proliferation cannot be fully understood without considering the growth of international terrorism, and in the same way that nuclear watchdogs acting as neutral parties are ideally suited for monitoring the global nuclear situation, the task of combating international terrorism may best be left to international military or policing coalitions. A fundamental problem that terrorism poses to domestic enforcement bodies is its internationality and lack of ties to any specific national identity. While violence for nationalistic purposes is nothing new, such as the assassination of Franz Ferdinand by Serbian extremists prior to World War One, terrorism as it has emerged through the 20th and 21st centuries is very frequently associated with ideological motives that may not necessarily be rooted in any one country alone. [9] As such, even if the terrorist cells or groups are located, it can be an exceedingly difficult and delicate diplomatic task to try to elicit cooperation from the host country. Shortly after the tragedy of 9/11, American officials were in discussion with their Afghan counterparts for the arrest of Osama bin Laden. The Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, ultimately refused to give up his guest partly because bin Laden pleaded innocence – thus invoking Omar's protection as his host in accordance with the ethnic Pashtunwali code – and partly because he did not want to appear weak in capitulating to American demands in the absence of compelling evidence.[10] The result was the American infringement, whether justified or not, of Afghanistan's sovereignty and the ensuing war. An international, anti-terrorist policing institution acting under a neutral mandate may in this case have been perceived as significantly less threatening and politically driven, allowing Omar to sanction the arrest of bin Laden without appearing weak to his own supporters and avoiding the American invasion.

A similar philosophy is already being practiced in international political economy (IPE), where nations voluntarily submit to third-party guidance and arbitration in an effort to foster global trade. The recession of the past few years, which continues to make its impact felt judging by the difficulties in certain EU member states as well as the US, serves as an important indication of just how vitally crucial the economic interplay between nations has become. The era of globalization has brought a manifold increase in wealth, safety, health, and social mobility, but this affluence has come at the increased risk of economic collapse.[11]

The world's economies have now become so intertwined that it is no longer clear if market-driven forces can be left to guide the global financial system. As the situation in Greece and Europe (which is still developing as of this writing) so pointedly demonstrates, what occurs in one country can now have a trans-continental impact. [12] The increased trade between nations has created opportunities and wealth for some of the poorest of the world's inhabitants, but this has come at the price of increased economic vulnerability for all nations in times of economic distress.

The management, oversight, and planning of trans-national economic efforts cannot be left to individual states, which too often look only to increase or protect their national markets at the detriment of external actors. Economists

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routinely point out that protectionist trade policies do little but mask larger issues under a veil of temporary benefits, while causing significantly more damage in the long run.[13] Likewise, on the global scale this problem is replicated, if not magnified. International institutions, mandated to resolve economic issues, are ideal for co-ordinating global economic efforts in everyone's best interest. Not only do they serve to advance the interests of wealthy nations – a practical and necessary condition for their participation – but they are also a lifeline to those poorest of nations that are so desperately seeking a way to catch up. As demonstrated by celebrated economist Paul Collier, destitute countries rely on institutions such as the IMF for invaluable loans without which they would face insurmountable challenges in achieving and sustaining economic growth.[14] Were such nations to rely only on loans from other countries, there is always the risk they would become irreversibly indebted and suffer grievous political consequences as a result.

The very level of global economic integration and consequent social well-being that has developed over the course of the 20th century would have been impossible were it not for the concerted and sustained efforts of the international community in establishing international bodies mandated to regulate and plan joint economic policies. The existence of the modern international economic system – and the manifold benefits it has provided to citizens across the world – relies on such international institutions, and its continued maintenance is equally dependent on their intervention. While this growing global interconnectivity and free-flowing exchange of information, ideas, and resources is perhaps responsible for the proliferation of nuclear weapons and terrorism, it is also true that the reduction in wars through military alliances and the net increase in political stability are the products of our new global village. The world is heading in a direction of increasing complexity, mutual reliance, co-operation, and diversity; and it is international institutions that provide the forums for the co-ordination of efforts, the voicing of grievances, and the communities of understanding that are needed if we are to continue on this path to prosperity.

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*Written by: Jan Dobrosielski
Written at: McGill University
Written for: Prof Stephen Saideman
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