

Is the United Nations an Effective Institution?

Written by Susanne Hartmann

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SUSANNE HARTMANN, APR 8 2013

Is the United Nations an Effective Institution? Answer the Question with Reference to Liberal and Realist Arguments.

Governments on all continents and of all political persuasions came together in the United Nations (UN) to guard international peace and security, promote human rights and protect international law (Hanhimäki, 2008:1). However, in hindsight, the liberal values-based institution has not been as effective as it was anticipated after the Second World War. Arguably, it has developed a very anarchic and realist structure, hindering the UN from effective decision-making and development. In respect to the establishment of the Security Council as part of the UN, this essay will argue that the UN is ineffective, to a large extent due to a dominant Great Power structure. The aim of this essay is to investigate and evaluate the liberal and realist arguments by exploring their different ontological views and positions towards international organizations. The first two paragraphs will focus on realist arguments, exploring how the structure of the UN has become increasingly focused and dependent on Great Powers, leading to an ineffective Security Council. The essay will then go on to look at liberal arguments and theories in regards to the UN. This will be followed by an outline in what ways the UN is, however, to some extent effective.

As long as the concepts of nation-states and national interest exist, realists see perpetual threat of conflict and war in an international anarchy, where the UN will not and cannot act independently and will therefore be ineffective. It can be argued that the realist ontological position towards the agency-structure debate already has its manifestations in the structure of the UN. As World War II drew to a close, the victors, Russia, China, the United States, Great Britain and France respectively, moved to establish a hold on the successor of the League of Nations (no democratic vote took place). Those 'winners' were granted permanent membership in the Security Council of the UN and were given individual veto powers over all UN proposals. This means that each of the Great Powers turn into agents in the arena of international affairs as they are able to block decisions that they find go against their national interests. If the UN is dependent on the development and opinions of these agents, then the organization becomes a socially-constructed process that would make the position of the Security Council a realist one, destining the Security Council to be undemocratic and, as a result, ineffective (Burchill, 2005:150). For example, the ongoing Syrian crisis can be said to be a result of the vetoes from Russia and China at the Security Council in July of 2012 "to block robust UN action to stop the massacres" (The Economist, 2012). They seemingly did so out of a pursuit of self-interest, as they fear the democratic movements behind the latest happenings across Africa and the Middle East might shift the power balance and allegiances in their respective regions. This shows that Security Council resolutions are still supreme expressions of power politics and "one cannot realistically expect the UN to solve issues in which the vital interests of one or more of the major powers are involved" (Kay, 1977:5).

The freedom of the nations in the UN to debate any pressing issue has essentially lead to the agencies to become "politicized", meaning that controversial issues that might not be relevant to the agencies' work are introduced by member-states to further their political interests, altering agenda formation (Kay, 1977- 80-86). Comparatively smaller or poorer nations would therefore be less likely to be able to put importance and priority on their issues, as Great Powers neglect their security concerns. In effect, the UN becomes an anarchic arena where states attempt to keep their balance of power, despite it being a contradiction with the doctrine of sovereign equality. Furthermore, realist concerns about cheating also hinder cooperation in the UN. Mearsheimer argued that, "states are often reluctant to enter into cooperative agreements for fear that the other side will cheat on the agreement and gain a

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relative advantage" (Mearsheimer, 2004:13). According to realists, with survival being the main thought of the member states of the UN, the states would choose absolute gains over relative gains. As Grieco writes: "A state will focus both on its absolute and relative gains from cooperation, and a state that is satisfied with a partner's compliance in a joint arrangement might nevertheless exit from it because the partner is achieving relatively greater gains" (Grieco, 1988:8). This inhibits the states from cooperation even when they would share common interests, reducing the capabilities of the UN and making it ineffective. The quantitative realist approach would measure the effectiveness of the Security Council and therefore of the UN by using the number of successful resolutions passed by the Council since its founding date in 1945. As the number of resolutions that have passed has decreased starkly since the end of the Cold War, it can be said that the UN has become increasingly ineffective.

The liberal idea that international security and order can develop out of an international organization has initially led to the creation of the UN. However, the ideological differences between member-states lead to a decline of the effectiveness of the UN. As outlined in Chapter II of the Charter of the UN, "membership in the UN is open to all other peace-loving states" (United Nations, 1945). In fact, around 85% of the members of the United Nations ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 2012). This can be traced back to Kant's Democratic Peace Theory, as according to him it is highly unlikely that democracies go to war with each other. However, the UN consists of a high number of diverse ideologies. This can be the cause for different stances on how to govern and to intervene, resulting in ineffective procedures. Even then, the UN must try to treat every nation equally. Once a democratic vote has taken place or a resolution has passed, it is important that all member-states of the UN abide by the same rules. The nuclear proliferation treaty (NPT), for example, aims to limit the spread of nuclear weapons, and is a good "expression of the practices of international law and multilateralism in the field of arms control" (Baylis & Smith, 2011:281). However, still today, the United States and many other states that signed the treaty are still in possession of and/or developing nuclear weapons. This seems to go back to realist assumptions that states feel a need to have means of defense. The current nuclear situation and disagreement between the United States and Iran mirror this need. The hegemonic United States want to make use of the NPT and forbid Iran to possess nuclear weapons, as, according to the realist idea of the security-dilemma, they see the actions of Iran as an offense. At the same time, they are not willing to let lose of their weapons. This illustrates how ineffective the treaties of the UN can be, as Great Powers don't seem equal to smaller member-states.

Moreover, the countries that are not part of the UN are mainly non-democratic states. In order for the liberal principle of collective security to work, the UN would be more effective if more of its member-states were indeed non-democratic. This is because an ontological persuasion of interconnectedness is one major prerequisite for a functioning UN, and also a sense of community. If the UN sees it as one of its "greatest governance challenges" to enable a "non-violent transition from non-democratic to democratic" (UNDEF, 1948) states, then there might be an increased need to start making the formation of a community possible instead. It is essential that a reform to increase the effectiveness of the UN must come from the inside of the institution, as its 'enemies', critics and essential causes of ineffectiveness are indeed found among its member-states.

Despite many arguments for the ineffectiveness of the UN, "...it is almost impossible for one country to insulate itself from the rest of the world and to pursue policies, whether economic, social or military, that can be said to be solely in their own national self-interest" (Kay, 1977:9). The UN has provided a means of communication to all member-states, of all ideologies. Member-states are permitted and welcome to bring up any issues and concerns, and are expected to state and represent the opinion of their respective country. As Grieco wrote: "...even if the realists are correct in believing that anarchy constrains the willingness of states to cooperate, states nevertheless can work together and can do so especially with the assistance of international institutions" (Grieco, 1988:3). Multilateral diplomacy at an international level continues to be an important mean of bringing nations together. For example, the United States and North Korea seemed to use the UN as a first meeting point to exchange concerns, establishing the possibility to agree to hold the six-party talks to respond to statements made at the UN. The UN should therefore not only be regarded as an institution used for peacekeeping, but also as a tool to get to know and understand different communities and cultures; a medium for exchange.

In conclusion, the UN can be said to be a fairly ineffective institution in regards to its core founding principles. The evolving Great Power structure, where the function of the UN is more ideological and focused on self-interest rather

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than traditional diplomacy, causes the Security Council to be ineffective in its duties. In the same manner, the democratic structures of the UN have been increasingly ineffective, as Great Powers such as the United States do not see treaties as necessarily binding. As an international organization, the UN has to essentially work with diverse epistemologies and ontologies due to a representation of a number of ideologies, making the decision process very subjective and, as a result, ineffective. But it remains important to acknowledge that the knowledge the UN generates is the first step towards understanding and resolving disputes globally.

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