

Liberal and Realist Considerations of UN Effectiveness

Written by Maria Andreea Gavrila

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Liberal and Realist Considerations of UN Effectiveness

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/02/liberal-and-realist-considerations-of-un-effectiveness/>

MARIA ANDREEA GAVRILA, MAY 2 2013

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

The presence of the United Nations in the international arena seems to become more and more controversial. Its effectiveness is being constantly put under discussion, with liberals and realists arguing in favour or against it, respectively. In this essay, the above-mentioned viewpoints will be introduced, pointing out both the successes and failures of the organisation, and deciding whether it is still of relevance to the contemporary society. The essay will be structured by providing a definition of the United Nations, as well as outlining its major principles, followed by arguments in its support and to its disadvantage alike, and rounding up by issuing an opinion on its efficacy and importance.

As it is specified both in *Everyone's United Nations* and *Basic facts about the United Nations* (Department of Public Information 1986; 1983:2), the United Nations came into being on 24 October 1945, as an organisation meant to "maintain international peace and security". Its core principles are laid out in the Charter, which comprises a complex set of rules for the proper functioning of the union within an international framework, bringing about the tranquillity that its member states desired for so long. Adhering to a liberal-institutionalist perspective, the United Nations is supportive of "democratic governments, economic interdependence" and "collective security alliances" "as means to overcome the security dilemma of the international system" (Dunne, Tim, Kurki, Milja and Smith, Steve 2010:96). It was on the same principles that its precursor, the League of Nations, has appeared and despite its dissolution, part of its legacy was adopted by the United Nations. The question raised is how come, out of two similar organisations, one has collapsed and one has encountered such longevity and prosperity? This represents the stepping stone of the disputes between liberals and realists, their opinions being highly contradictory at times.

There is disagreement stemming from the mere scope of the United Nations and its policy, with critics arguing that "the United Nations became increasingly distant from 'We, the people'", being more government-led (Thakur 1998:1). This claim, realist in its nature, is also backed up by the fact that there are "countries like India, Indonesia, Nigeria, South Africa and Brazil" which "are important middle and regional powers", but which are not taken into consideration for a place in the Security Council, regardless of the loyalty shown towards the organisation (Thakur 1998:10). This mainly happens because the five states which possess permanent membership have powerful governments, and are therefore highly unlikely to be dethroned. While this claim seems unjust towards some of the member states of the United Nations, there is always the opposite liberal argument, stating that with the creation of more vacancies within the constituent bodies of the organisation comes greater instability, resettling the atmosphere of international anarchy. While this is obviously undesirable, since it tempers with the actual goals of the United Nations, it also creates dissension among the so-called neglected states. Hence, a new counterattack arises on behalf of the realists, who pertinently say that "international stratification is never rigid, and states are upwardly and downwardly mobile" (Thakur 1998:9). A vicious circle is created, and it falls into the responsibilities of the United Nations to mediate between these two contrasting positions that countries adopt.

A fair amount of criticism also ascended in what concerns the underlying principles of the United Nations, those concerning the liberal theory. Fukuyama (1992:282) reprimands the actions of both the League of Nations and the United Nations, stating that they have "not been able to accomplish anything of real importance [...] in the critical area

Liberal and Realist Considerations of UN Effectiveness

Written by Maria Andreea Gavrila

of collective security” because they have not properly enforced Kant’s ideology. He blames the League of Nations’ decline on its improper choice of members and criticises the United Nations for having settled for “the weaker principle of the ‘sovereign equality of all its members’”, considering that the Charter is not genuinely consistent with the Kantian perspective (Fukuyama 1992:282). The illusory success of the United Nations is also condemned by Bertrand, who believes that the member states were foolish to aspire to a never-ending post-war alliance, as well as credulous for believing that “all governments would be ready to commit themselves militarily in all cases of violation of the peace, even when their vital interests were not at stake” (Bertrand, Maurice and Warner, Daniel 1997:5).

These critical accusations towards the United Nations are intertwined and have the tendency to tackle with even a more sensitive subject, that of force and military intervention. The organisation functions on the basis of sovereignty of its members, identifying “a clear distinction between the external activities of a state and its ‘domestic jurisdiction’”, as Article 2.7 of the Charter states itself (Brown 1992:112). Brown (1992:112) goes on to “draw a distinction between *intervention* and *influence*”, outlining the fact that while there might be situations in which states’ integrity is put at risk, the United Nations has to carefully assess the potential dangers posed to that particular country and choose an appropriate course of action wisely. Technically, the organisation is not to interfere and affect the state’s autonomy; nevertheless, this rule can be overseen if the peril is imminent. This again touches on the issue of the United Nations’ relevance, destabilizing the balance of its efficacy, since it is constantly joggles in order to find an adequate equilibrium point between intervention and non-intervention.

The arduous problem that concerns the activity of the United Nations still remains whether they are entitled to take specific courses of action or not, if they are legitimate and contribute towards the long-run well-being of the member state under discussion. Despite its good intentions, the organisation is virtually always found guilty for the miscarriage of certain missions. While “the United Nations was designed to cope with interstate war”, it is “ill-equipped to cope with civil conflict”, with brought about great dissatisfaction and attracted negative remarks if we are to consider the cases of Cambodia, Somalia and Rwanda (Thakur, 1998:4). Nevertheless, this also gives way to the birth of a paradox, because while the United Nations is put under pressure to adopt a more prophylactic position towards disputes of this kind, it is at the same time hindered by its own policy. In other words, the United Nations cannot overlook national sovereignty, and neither can it take action in the appropriate amount of time, before altercations have burst into sheer conflict.

Although these contradictions continuously appear, making the entire system seem flawed, they have also cleared the way for a more comprehensive and elaborate view, being preliminary to the accomplishment of a greater goal: that of reform. Either critics or supporters of the United Nations, it has seemed unbelievable to many social and political scientists that “the United Nations Charter and the constitutional documents of the specialised agencies have proved to be sufficiently flexible that, virtually unaltered, they have been able to provide a framework for a changing United Nations system” (Groom, 1989:285). Arguably, probably the organisation would have undergone less criticism should it have “enfranchise[d] NGOs and multinational corporations (MNCs) in the United Nations system so that it more accurately reflects the world of today” (Thakur, 1998:9). As Bertrand claims, “social, cultural and political integration”, alongside further strategies for economic development might be too much for “a world not prepared for this accelerated change” (Bertrand, Maurice and Warner, Daniel 1997:xiii). As it has been pointed out earlier throughout the essay, the United Nations has barely managed to achieve a derisory consensus over fifty years’ time; it is highly improbable that it will adopt any radical changes in such an unstable, ever-changing contemporary international milieu. The idea of a reform of the Charter is nevertheless plausible, considering that the United Nations has no choice but to adapt to and mend its rules according to a metamorphosing global system.

Irrespective of the occasional incompatibilities of the United Nations with liberal values, and its continuous criticism on behalf of realists, it has invariably represented a tremendous leap forward. Although its member states are on different cultural, political and economic levels, “there are certain common purposes and principles which have wide popular appeal and which governments accept as being not only morally good but also as conforming to the best interests of their respective peoples” (Goodrich 1974:27).

Drawing matters to a conclusion, the United Nations has been an important actor on the stage of peace-keeping ever since its formation. Despite its shortcomings, which have been severely looked down upon, the United Nations has

Liberal and Realist Considerations of UN Effectiveness

Written by Maria Andreea Gavrilă

struggled to pursue its goal. It must be born in mind that every international organisation “is conditioned by the moment of inertia of time and history” and it “does not begin on a *tabula rasa*” (Thakur 1998:9). Therefore, taking into consideration that the international system is inherently a constantly changing one and keeping in mind the shifts in the global order within recent years, the United Nations has done its best to preserve the balance between its member states. Its effectiveness is not contestable, given the circumstances in which it has to function.

Bibliography

1. Bertrand, Maurice (1997) “Introduction” and “The Necessity of a New Charter” in Bertrand, Maurice and Warner, Daniel (eds) *A New Charter for a Worldwide Organisation?*, The Hague:Kluwer Law International
2. Brown, Chris (1992), *International Relations Theory – New Normative Approaches*, Exeter:BPCC Wheatons Ltd
3. Department of Public Information (1983), *Basic facts about the United Nations*, New York:United Nations Publication
4. Department of Public Information (1986), *Everyone’s United Nations*, New York:United Nations Publication
5. Fukuyama, Francis (1992), *The end of history and the last man*, Harmondsworth:Penguin Books
6. Goodrich, Leland (1974), *The United Nations in a changing world*, New York:Columbia University Press
7. Groom, A. J. R. (1989) “Reflections on a Changing System” in Groom, A. J. R. and Taylor, Paul (eds)*Global issues in the United Nations’ Framework*, Basingtoke:The Macmillan Press Ltd
8. Russett, Bruce (2010) “Liberalism” in Dunne, Tim, Kurki, Milja and Smith, Steve (eds)*International Relations Theories – Discipline and diversity*, New York:Oxford University Press
9. Thakur, Ramesh (ed) (1998), *Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, Basingtoke:The Macmillan Press Ltd

Written by: Maria Andreea Gavrilă
Written at: University of Birmingham
Written for: Marco Vieira
Date written: November 2012