

How Successful Has the UN Been in Maintaining International Peace and Security?

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This year, the United Nations (UN) is celebrating its 75th year. Born out of war, the UN has sought to curtail plagues of a past characterized by two world wars. Based on the idea of liberal institutionalism where multilateral institutions are to facilitate inter-state cooperation, the UN intended to bring the major military powers together with the main task of maintaining international peace and security (Weiss 2018: 174, Hanhimaki 2015: 18). This has, however, been fraught with difficulties that this essay will address along with the challenges and opportunities with different peace and security initiatives, in an attempt to evaluate the UN's success in its main task. It will specifically focus on peace operations, nuclear disarmament and humanitarian intervention, some of the main areas through which the UN is maintaining international peace and security (UN 2020a). As one main actor in global governance, I conclude that the real success of the UN has been in its role as a normative power, guiding the global understanding of acceptable behavior.

UN's Role in Maintaining Peace and Security – A Tense Security Council and Ambiguous Peace Operations

The UN Security Council (UNSC) is the organ with the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. Outlining its structure and function is an essential first step for determining its success. It consists of 15 members, 5 of which are permanent and have veto power (the P5), namely the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China and France. These were considered the main military powers when the UN was founded and their veto right would prevent them from going to war against each other, while creating a necessary balance when taking decisions on security issues that would be collectively enforced (Goodrich 1965: 430). This illustrates how the constellation itself was based on peace and security considerations, and there has in fact never been a direct physical war between the P5 since the UN's beginning. Despite a period of inaction during the Cold War, many UNSC resolutions have also been passed to support peace processes, solve disputes, respond to illegitimate uses of force and enforce sanctions in situations where peace and security has been threatened. This involvement ranges from Bosnia in 1993 to Afghanistan in 2001 to its Anti-Piracy resolution in 2008 (Mingst and Karns 2011: 108). UNSC resolutions have been central for tackling conflict situations and have also demonstrated that extensive joint action can be taken to respond to crisis, such as in the case of Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in 1990 where it condemned its action and authorized states to "use all necessary means" to stop the occupation (Mingst and Karns 2011: 105). Such examples would challenge the realist assumption that there is an inherent collective action problem in international relations and the system of anarchy. Nevertheless, the UNSC has attracted vast criticism for upholding procedures that impede robust action in important situations where international law has been violated but the P5 disagree, such as in Syria (Nadin 2017), as well as for keeping an outdated permanent membership and for being undemocratic (Weiss & Kuele 2014). In the mentioned example of Iraq 1990, the agreed resolution authorized a US-led military operation, but UN oversight was weak and the autonomy of US action as well as the lack of inclusion of supportive states outside of the Council in the decision-making process is one example that points to the undemocratic structure of the Council as well as the continued importance of powerful states during interventions, rather than the UN itself (Ebegbulem 2011: 25). Furthermore, Security Council vetoes have not always managed to stop nations from proceeding with their endeavors, which was the case with the US' invasion of Iraq, 2003 (Morris & Wheeler 2007: 221). This shows that the individual interests of some states make them deviate from institutional

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constraints, pointing to flaws in the theory of liberal institutionalism that laid the basis for the UN. Such examples spark doubt about the credibility of the UN and UNSC and disrupt the balance that the composition of UNSC is to uphold, which is one important obstacle to its success in maintaining peace and security.

Beyond internal tensions, the UN has an active presence in the world through peace operations, which has become central for the UNSC and its approach to maintaining peace. The mandates range from protecting civilians to supporting state-building efforts, a list that has become more extensive in its attempt to improve the strategy towards sustainable peace. There is no mention of peace operations in the UN Charter, and the concept of peacekeeping has adapted in line with shifting nature of war and understanding of security, leading up to today's multidimensional peace operations (Williams & Bellamy 2013: 415). Traditionally, the presence of UN forces was to be approved by all parties in the host country, they were to be impartial, lightly armed, with the main goal to maintain a truce. The peace has indeed been kept between states such as Israel-Syria or Iraq-Kuwait, indicating the success of UN deployment for preventing interstate conflict (Mingst and Karns 2011: 130). With the increase of intrastate wars in the 1990s however, conflicts had become more complex, requiring a more complex response. Peacekeepers were deployed in situations where there was no peace to keep, and they encountered atrocities that put both them and civilians in danger, demanding greater military response (Bellamy & Hunt 2015: 1277, Doyle & Sambanis 2008: 2). Their mandate therefore expanded and started bordering on enforcement, as was the case of Bosnia in the 1990s. One problem was the discrepancy between the expectations of the operations and the actual capabilities in form of manpower or resources, showing a political unwillingness to transform the operations to more robust ones (Thakur 2006: 62, Autesserre 2019). Bosnia was a clear example of the failure that can ensue when undertaking *ad hoc* responses to a situation that does not match the original mandate, as it might lead to the inability to perform the envisioned tasks entrusted upon peacekeepers as they are prevented by nation state reluctance (Crossette 1999). This shows the importance of broad member state support of missions in today's complex conflict situations and the need for nations to be willing to adapt to challenges that might arise.

Underlying UN peace operations is the ideal of a liberal democratic peace, which has been a further hindrance to success in some contexts. Afghanistan is a telling example, where democratization, rule of law and economic restructuring was promoted (Saikal 2012: 219), showing a disregard for every state's right to "choose its political, economic, social and cultural system" (UN Declaration 1965). The state-building efforts saw the quick establishment of governance structures based on Western ideals. It was a rushed affair that eventually failed as the government was neither representative nor accountable (Saikal 2012: 226). Postcolonialism offers a valid critique of the ideational dominance of Western values and understandings, and its failure to recognize imperialist tendencies in the vision that liberal peace is universally applicable and desirable (Nair 2017). Imposing structures in a top-down fashion can have important consequences in fragile situations where society is multidimensional. The conception of peace should not be equated with liberalism but rather promoted in a balanced effort through combined considerations for basic democratic principles with local understandings of governance. This is called hybrid peacebuilding by authors such as Richmond (2009: 578). Only then will the UN enable long-term success as it would empower the local community through an inclusive bottom-up approach.

Beyond Peacekeeping – Recognizing the Normative Power of the UN

The active presence of the UN in the world through its different missions has resolved disputes, inhibited escalation of conflict and spurred peace in some situations, but the inherent problems that were highlighted continue to attract criticism. The failure of the UN to foster long-term peace in settings with complex conflict-dynamics shows an important limitation to the claim to success (Sambanis 2008: 29). An alternative area in which its role as a peace and security defender has been more successful, and in my view most successful, is through the spread important norms that have ranged from expanding the security agenda to upholding a nuclear taboo. A telling example is the role of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). As authors such as Scott Sagan argue, norms embedded in the NPT shape "states' identities and expectations and even powerful actors [become] constrained by the norms they [have] created" (Sagan 1997: 76). The NPT regime helped establish shared understandings of what was considered prestigious, legitimate or delegitimated and states thereby chose to disarm rather than be classified as rogue nations by the international community (Sagan 1997: 80). It has also constrained both Russia and the US in their attempts to modernize their arsenals. Even in cases where the norm has been contested, such as when US recognized India as

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a nuclear weapons state, it never seriously challenged the core assumptions of the nuclear non-proliferation norm (Carranza 2019: 14). Critics would disagree and argue that the accomplishments in the area of nuclear disarmament has been weak, as with collective security (MacKenzie 2015: 489), but the UN's efforts have evidently hindered armament and possible escalation, pointing to a major success for maintaining peace and security in the world.

Beyond nuclear disarmament, there is also the shared understanding of illegitimate and legitimate uses of force. The UNSC holds strong authority in this realm, which again points to the normative power of the UN in its role for maintaining international peace and security (Mingst and Karns 2011: 100). Even though tensions can run high between states in the Security Council, this shared understanding has enhanced the risks that an aggressor might face when "breaking" these norms, as the response from the international community can take the form of international condemnation, coordinated sanctions or even humanitarian intervention. This last point particularly derives from the enhanced focus on human rights and human security within the UN, as well as the shifting nature of war after the Cold War (Bellamy 2013: 488). The principles of sovereignty and non-interference came into question with the atrocities committed during intrastate conflicts such as in Rwanda and Bosnia. The "responsibility to protect" principle (R2P) was thereby born during the 2005 World Summit, which came to mean that all states have a responsibility to protect civilians from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes or crimes against humanity (UN 2020b). In cases where a state couldn't or wouldn't fulfil this function, humanitarian intervention by the international community would be legitimate. This is in line with the human security agenda that was promoted by the UN in the 1990s, as the security of individuals was to be prioritized over the protection of the state (Hampson 2013: 279). While it contradicts the thesis of realism with its focus on self-interested states, there have been debates on this new role for the UN and how successful it has actually been to use force to support human security objectives (Hampson 2013: 286). One main criticism is about the questions of interpretation. Who dictates when this responsibility is to be invoked? There have also been instances where unlawful intervention has been done in the name of R2P, such as in the case of Russia's intervention in Georgia where they claimed to protect Russian citizens (Allison 2009: 178). However, the jointly accepted humanitarian intervention in Libya 2011 based on the R2P norm is an important example that illustrates how normative shifts driven by the UN can bring nations together to protect peace and security in the world. Both China and Russia agreed to humanitarian intervention, despite their traditional opposition to it, which stopped Qaddafi from proceeding with possible crimes against humanity (Bellamy 2013: 500). Beyond operational successes, the fact that the international community has agreed to legitimize action to protect human beings as such rather than states, and that there is a general understanding that states should not stand idly by while atrocities are committed, remain two key achievement for the UN in the realm of peace and security.

Conclusion – A Tale of Success?

The naiveté that liberal institutionalism has been charged with is confirmed by the difficulty to cooperate in areas that are so clearly still part of the realm of national interests (Weiss 2018: 178). Despite this, history has shown that UN nations, and the P5, are agreeing on important resolutions and overcoming their differences. States have also acted in line with the normative frameworks that the UN has promoted. The UN can be and should be criticized for its inability to act where needed or for its inability to stop action deemed damaging to peace and security, but it has an ability to adapt and reinvent itself in line with emerging global challenges that shouldn't be undermined (MacKenzie 2015: 490). Such adaptability gives constructivism right in its understanding that process affects interests, which thereby transforms structure (Wendt 1992: 393). This understanding explains how the UNCS has been able to legitimize certain norms and practices, even when they intrude into the realm of national sovereignty (Williams & Bellamy 2013: 416). The UN is indeed the sum of its parts, composed of member states with their individual interests, but state interaction in this institutional context continue to shape states' evolving interest, enabling policy change that corresponds with its task of maintaining peace and security.

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