The Role of International Organisations in World Politics

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SOPHIE CROCKETT, FEB 7 2012

During his millennium commencement speech, the Former Secretary-General Kofi Annan spoke about how the challenges of the twenty first century would not be conquered if it weren't for international organizations.*"More than ever before in human history, we share a common destiny. We can master it only if we face it together. And that, is why we have the United Nations."* (Annan: 2001) It is widely believed that international organizations should be responsible for the maintenance of international peace and stability, be this economic, social or political, and that they should act in the interest of the international community. According to critics of these institutions, there should be greater transparency, regulation and control within these organizations so that they reflect more than just the interest of the powerful States.

The creation of an international forum for multi-lateral negotiations came about with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in 1889, which is still active today and has membership of 157 national parliaments. The IPU was the predecessor to the League of Nations, created in 1919 after the end of the First World War; this later became the United Nations after the failure of the League to prevent international conflicts. (Thompson and Snidal: 1999: 693) The legacy of the IPU, the League of Nations, and other early international alliances was not the institutions' effectiveness as an actor, but rather as a forum, for nations to voice their opinions and promote dialogue. This was arguably their greatest achievement, as even after the failure of the League, nation States still felt the need for an institution that would allow them to share their ideas and provide an opportunity to settle disputes peacefully. Thus, emerged the United Nations, which to this day remains the only institution with universal membership. It is the largest of all international organisations, which is why it will be analysed for the purpose of this paper.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the role of an international institution as a stage for States to bring matters to the attention of the international community and how this is a victory in itself for international relations. This assertion will be verified by firstly examining the critiques of international institutions by using international relations theory, namely neo-realism, highlighting its limitations and breaking down its core assumptions. The paper will then follow with an analysis of neoliberal institutionalism and its discourses as an alternative to neorealism, as well as constructivism, and its theory of institutions being a socially constructed concept determined by the sharing of ideas; it will finally conclude with the idea that institutions play a crucial role in the international system.

On the other hand, Neo-liberal institutionalism prides itself on the Kantian version of the international system. While the UN attempts to coordinate the actions of States and harmonize the world community, it becomes increasingly geared towards this 'utopian' model, even though it faces innumerous challenges when rallying Member States to follow its general principles and vision. It is also argued that the United Nations has been vital in furthering decolonization, human rights, environmental protection and international law. Neo-liberal institutionalism stresses the importance of the UN's work with regional organizations, as they become indispensable in the international diplomatic process predicting, "the international community will increasingly direct itself towards combined action of the universal Organization with regional bodies." (Cassese: 2005: 338) This can be observed in the recent links between the UN and regional organizations such as the Organisation of American States (OAS), the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), the Arab League, and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is widely regarded by theorists in this field that the failure of neo-realism resides in its ontology of institutions, as they

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believe it has the capacity to redefine the behaviour of States. This is further discussed in their reasoning to how institutions influence State conduct by both creating strong incentives for cooperation whilst at the same time implementing disincentives, like trade sanctions. Scholars of this theory believe that once cooperation amongst States is institutionalised, States would be reluctant to leave it, in fear of what could happen. (Navari: 2009: 39) This is particularly true for members of the European Union, as once States enter into the formal membership they almost never abandon it. By bridging the gap between States and giving them this forum for debate, institutions help trigger important coalitions, and with its congenial approach to weaker States, aids in their pursuit of linkage strategies. Hence, States feel welcome in what was previously a hostile international environment. (Nye and Keohane: 1989: 36).

Reflecting on this, one could easily make a case in favour of institutions, but it seems prudent not to jump into generalisations of the relative successes of the UN system, as a careful empirical analysis of its record is necessary before making sweeping statements. It is also important to determine what constitutes success and failure as we can approach the United Nations system in different ways, either as an international forum or as a 'global policing force' and regardless of what approach one may take, they both have their virtues and drawbacks. This is why the neo-liberal institutionalist approach is misleading as it accounts for some of the weaknesses of institutions, but does not include enough critical analysis of its premises and actions, or lack thereof. Thereby, the role of institutions becomes a more ideological and normative one, where they infuse Member States' policies with their liberal values and principles.

In contrast, conventional constructivism challenges both neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism by claiming that anarchy is not inherent in the state system, as affirmed by neo-realists, neither is it inexistent, as affirmed by neo-liberal institutionalists, it is, in truth, what States make of it. It asserts that institutions and structures, within the international system, are mutually constructed concepts by actors that employ social practice to define the 'international realm.' The previous theories, neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism, take for granted the idea that economic and military power is the primary source of influence in world politics. Constructivist theorists counter this, as they believe discursive power also plays a fundamental role in the understanding of the global political system. (Hopf: 1998: 177) Constructivists deviate from the neorealist assumption that anarchy plays a crucial role in the behaviour of institutions, and alternately create a carefully depicted discourse of the role identity and interest in the shaping of international actors. Thus, now that they have deconstructed this claim, it appears that the behaviour of institutions can no longer be objectively analysed by quantifiable forces, as social interaction now gives different meanings to ideas, actors and objects. For this reason, the theoretical model proves these interactions can affect collective decisions in a global context. (Deitelhoff: 2009: 35) The idea of anarchy and power politics has been essentially reduced, and according to notable constructivist Alexander Wendt, "if today we find ourselves in a self-help world, this is due to process, not structure. There is no 'logic' to anarchy apart from the practices that create and instantiate one structure of identities and interests rather than another; structure has no existence or causal powers apart from process." (Wendt: 1992: 394) Demonstrably, many of the assertions made by the constructivist theory were intended to focus not on the improvements and the successes of international institutions, but rather on the questioning of core assumptions of neo-liberalism and neo-liberal institutionalism, and deviate from their materialistic approaches. They draw attention to the relationship between the structure and the agency, as well as the construction of state and institutional interests. Thus, the theory holds that the role of international organizations is to uphold their carefully constructed values and ideologies to States, determining their behaviour.

Another interesting factor to note is the portrayal of the Secretary-General (SG) within the United Nations. The SG's initial role of entrepreneurship and chief of all administrative matters within the organization was a political decision, as nations did not want to transmit the notion of a global governance to the world community. However, it has been extremely debated amongst scholars and internationalists that the changing roles and duties of the 'head' of the UN has signified a symbolic change for the international system. This was observed especially during the Kofi Annan years, when the Secretary General's duties expanded to unforeseeable dimensions, largely opposed by the United States. (Traub: 2007: 197) It is claimed that the Secretary General is the world's prime example of responsibility without power, which is not always understood. The fact that he has no sovereign rights, duties or resources could signify that he becomes a reflection of the organization itself. The licence granted to the Secretary-General by Member-States is for mediation, rallying of nations, and generating awareness to pressing issues, which can be

further extended to many of the acting organs of the organization. The increase in the Secretary-General's powers is a matter of grave concern among the major power players of the UN, and this essentially shows that States are not, in fact, moving towards a 'global government' and that the role of the United Nations as an international institution is to promote dialogue and discussions in a multilateral framework and not to intervene in Sovereign territory. An example of this was in the Secretary-General's Millennium Report where he ensured States that the Secretariat was fully accountable to them and the founding principles of the United Nations as "an Organization dedicated to the interests of its Member States and of their peoples" would be preserved. (Annan: 2000: 73) In light of this, the role of the United Nations is to serve as a facilitator for cooperative action between Member States and non-state actors.

In conclusion, this paper revealed that the role international organizations should play in world politics is dependent on the theoretical framework and interpretation of what the institutional system entails. For neo-realists, international institutions are and will always be ineffective, as they cannot alter the anarchic structure of the international system, neo-liberal institutionalists argue the opposite as they believe institutions greatly influence State conduct by both creating strong incentives for cooperation whilst at the same time implementing disincentives, as observed in the case of nuclear proliferation; constructivists take a very different approach by questioning the core assumptions of the other theories and drawing attention to the relationship between the structure and the agency, as well as the construction of state and institutional interests. This essay has sought to argue that we should look at the United Nations system objectively as a forum for nations to come together and tackle issues that are of concern to the international community. This was the primary objective of the institution in 1945, which is why forcing it to develop into an impartial effective governing force seems quite naïve and unrealistic. As stated by former Assistant Secretary-General Robert Orr, "as an actor, there is so little we can do, and often the people accusing us are the same ones who prevent us from being able to act." (Weiss: 2008: 8) For this reason, perhaps instead of focusing on the failures and reform within the UN, we should concentrate on the attributes and virtues that it has as an effective centre for harmonizing discussions and developing common goals for States. Rather than reducing the solution to problems of structural reform and widening participation efforts, we could look at promoting the UN as the prime setting for diplomacy and negotiation, as this has undeniably been its role since the beginning.

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Written by: Sophie Crockett
Written at: Royal Holloway, University of London
Written for: Dr. Doerthe Rosenow
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