What are the Prospects for the United Nations?

At times prospects for the United Nations have seemed bleak, but at other times the United Nations has embodied endless opportunity for many people. In this piece of work I will attempt to understand the relationship between international society and the United Nations, the history of the United Nations and its perceived necessity, failings and successes and how it would be possible for the organisation to move even further than it has done already.

Born out of the perceived necessity to protect the world from the forms of war experienced early in the 20th century, and also the failings of the League of Nations, the United Nations became a formal institution recognised by the 'adoption of the "Declaration by the United Nations" in Washington, DC, on January 1st, 1942' (Weis, 2009: 8) and the signing of the UN Charter in San Francisco, 1945. From early on during the Second World War, talks were being conducted to help communicate aims between leaders of the Allies; mainly Britain, U.S.A and U.S.S.R, but also at times China. Conferences preceding the creation of the United Nations consisted of The Atlantic Charter 1941, Moscow Conference 1943, Dumbarton Oaks Conference 1944 (which the U.S.A specifically referred to as 'conversations') and the Yalta Conference 1945. In the U.S.A 'the State Department was still afraid of simulating isolationist sentiment in Congress, so it called the meeting "conversations"' (Yoder, 1989: 27). It is often said that the League of Nations embodied an organisation primarily designed to deal with international law and the breaking of such law. The United Nations on the other hand has fundamental differences to the League of Nations. Such differences are: 'membership is universal and not dominated by Europe, voting in the Security Council and other UN organs is not by unanimity but by majority or qualified majority, the UN is more political and flexible than the League, the UN has more emphasis on economic and social affairs and on self-determination for nations' (Yoder, 1989: 30) (to name a few).

Given the *balance of power* system of international politics present at the ratification of the United Nations Charter and also the dominant perspective of International Relations being primarily Realist in nature, it is obvious that its introduction may have appeared dubious to some, as 'the primary purpose of the UN was to deal with international peace and security, most observers no doubt think in terms of a traditional management of the use of force rather than an indirect approach to peace through economic and social development' (Weis, Coate & Pease, 2010: 47). Ultimately, if we consider the United Nations to be a collection of states through which intervention and aid can be enacted, what really matters regarding the prospects of the United Nations is any state's perception of the UN and the condition of the international system – both of which have fluctuated radically since its creation. For example, 'during the Cold War, the Security Council was paralysed by reciprocal use of the veto exercisable by the five permanent members' (Orford, 2009: 428). Such a situation wherein the UN is completely paralysed arose from the bipolar nature of the international system in which two superpowers utilised the veto power of their permanent member status.

Times in which trust has been placed in the United Nations and general opinion is high is often when the organisation faces lesser barriers to intervention and aiding social and economic troubles. However, as stated above, when the international system stagnates to a degree as that which occurred during the tenser periods of the Cold War, efforts to pacify conflict and humanitarian intervention often fall short to inter-state politics. The Cold War period has been one of the most inactive periods of the UN's short history. As illustrated by Thomas Weis, 'at times the United Nations was placed on the back burner. For much of the 1970s and even more in the 1980s, major states bypassed the world organisation on international security issues' (Weis, Coate & Pease, 2010: 47). This bypassing of the

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United Nations seemed to have stemmed from a perception of a lack of gain from participating in a collective security system that was paralysed because of the international context, also voting majorities that no longer favoured the United States and a feeling fostered within the U.S of the 'tyranny of the majority'. I feel these factors, along with the rise of neoliberalism during the 1980s as a result of economic crises were not conducive to creating an environment in which the UN could fulfil its full potential. However, there were other roles which the United Nations carried out and these conditions are not transferable to international cooperation as a whole; as Keohane points out 'the prospect of discord creates incentives for cooperation; and at least in money and trade, international regimes have been sufficiently well developed to facilitate a good deal of cooperation' (Keohane, 1984: 66). Thus, the UN can only be as effective as the states that it comprises of allow it to be and the prospects for the United Nations to act often depends upon the abilities of the states to allow it act effectively.

When the United Nations is allowed to act to its full capacity operations are often successful, and at times, even when a major power is in a position to veto, the UN is able to find a way to apply pressure on a situation. This may have possibly been harder in the early days of the UNs existence due to a lack of the prestige that the organisation now holds, and regardless of opinion towards the United Nations, its presence is sometimes still enough to diffuse a potential conflict situation. When evaluating the successes of the United Nations we can easily see its merit and justification of existence, such as the Iranian Dispute of 1946, the Korean War, the Arab-Israeli Wars and the Suez Canal crises. These events in the early history of the United Nations could have arguably ended with a lot more violence had the United Nations not been called into action, and one in particular – the Greek Crisis, in which communists were arming rebels and aiming for revolution in Greece. This situation and possibly others in the list above, had the potential to end in a drawn out revolution or civil war but the UNs ability to project the situation internationally allowed public opinion to judge and 'volumes of evidence were obtained proving without a doubt that the Communist countries' (Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria) 'were supporting the rebellion against the Greek government. The General Assembly passed resolutions every year until 1954 condemning this intervention' (Yoder, 1989: 41). This example provides us with a clear understanding of the capabilities of the United Nations when it is relatively unhindered by the international society and when universal multilateralism is allowed to proceed to its full potential, giving us a view of realistic prospects that can be improved upon. However, as mentioned previously, confidence began to waver in the capabilities of the United Nations which affected the finances of the institution due to unpaid arrears and nearly ended the modern collective security institution.

Despite early successes, the United Nations has at times played a minimal role in conflict prevention. Some would argue that in an imperfect world the realistic nature of the international society must be taken into consideration and others might say that the failures of an institution founded on the principle of maintaining peace count ten-fold. One of the most influential conflicts of the 20th century, the Vietnam War, evaded UN intervention despite the United States claiming an attack on a vessel to the Security Council and the North Vietnamese countering this claim with talk of strafing runs and bombing raids by American pilots. Concurrent with the appeal to the Security Council which was blocked by Soviet veto, 'other nations on the Council realised that the U.S legal case was out of context because the United States had already become deeply involved in a war against North Vietnam without bringing it to the United Nations' (Yoder, 1989: 84). This conflict became deeply embedded in the American psyche as heavy casualties peaked in Vietnam and civil disruption occurred on American soil, which caused 'the fissuring of a consensus in American society about the nations goals and priorities' and 'impacted upon the American people somewhat as had the First World War upon Europeans' (Kennedy, 1988: 404). Under Secretary-General U Thant, the Vietnam War took its toll greatly on all belligerents, Thant himself stated that 'he had without success, devoted a great deal of effort to getting the parties to negotiate, but had failed because the struggle had been dominated by power politics' (Yoder, 1989:84). The heated ideological nature of this effectively proxy war may have been too much embroiled in the nature of Cold War power politics. Any form of intervention threatened to add other belligerents into a fast escalating conflict, however, the United Nations was also almost powerless to intervene in the ensuing repressive and murderous Khmer Rouge regime and the Northern Vietnamese's successful invasion of the South in 1975 (despite violating the terms of a previous truce). These are not the only 'failings' of the United Nations, other instances include, the breakup of Yugoslavia, Somalia and the Rwandan Genocide. Vietnam is simply one of the most memorable conflicts of the 20th century and illustrates what I feel to be the main opposition to the United Nations' prospects – that of power politics.

Globalisation and growing interdependence have had great impacts on the United Nations and its organs; growing

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interdependence twinned with the collapse of the Soviet Union enabled global trade and collective security to function at levels barely seen before. Although most UN organs had been functioning before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Cold War and Warsaw Pact countries had proved a major detriment to globalisation. For example 'The United Nations Commission on International Trade Law was established by the General Assembly in 1966 to promote the progressive harmonisation and unification of the law of international trade by reducing or removing legal obstacles to the flow of international trade' (Office of Public Information, 1971: 202). This commission may not have been able to function to its fullest capacity until the Eastern markets opened to the world post-1989. Other organs also became revivified towards the end of the Cold War, such as 'a major revival of interest in the United Nations System, particularly in its peacekeeping function. The secretary general (at the time Javier Perez de Cuellar), 'estimated that the demands emerging for peacekeeping units in Namibia, Western Sahara, and Kampuchea … would require as many as 30,000 peacekeeping forces rather than the 10,000 already in place' (Yoder, 1989: 194). The peacekeeping aspect of the United Nations has only continued to grow in light of globalisation and interdependence and continues to carry tremendous prospects with 'the PBC (Peace-Building Commission) in spring 2006 a step in the right direction toward improving UN efforts to prevent any relapse into violence in war-torn countries recovering from armed conflict' (Weis, 2009: 187). This was previously accompanied by the growth in the requirement for United Nations action with Boutros Boutros-Ghali having 'reported that over 100 missions of representation, fact-finding and good offices were undertaken on his behalf during his tenure' (Knight, 2000: 136). The UN must be careful not to overextend beyond its monetary capabilities, as since the dramatic rise in requirement comes 'peacekeeping fatigue, coupled with the inability to bring about needed reforms in the organisation's military operations' (Knight, 2000: 139). Since the rise in requirements of the United Nations many felt a renewed optimism in the functions it could provide, however I stress to mention that the scope of the United Nations is not limitless.

The United Nations has not ended world conflict, nor shall it ever in my opinion. It has however, gained the chair of global moral arbiter in an essentially anarchic international society due to lack of global governance. This conclusion allows me to state that the UN works as an important international actor not an instrument of state politics. Its prospects are large in the current age of interdependence and globalisation, despite the crippling nature of past ideological tensions such as the Cold War on its framework. If such favourable conditions continue, the United Nations will be able to extend its reach to war torn countries and starving and displaced peoples in all nations unhindered. There is no doubt that 'unilateralists promoting an image of unbridled state control over events are the real utopians of the twenty-first century' (Weis, Coate & Pease, 2010: 11).

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