Is the United Nations an Effective Institution?
Written by Matthew John Ribeiro Norley

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

As described by Tim Dunne, the "United Nations is a multi-purpose agency directed to specific goals including collective security, peace-keeping, health, environmental and human rights concerns" (Dunne, 2007: 103). Although the concerns for the UN are many, there are two classical viewpoints which divide opinion on the UN's effectiveness in global politics; the liberal and the realist argument. The realist views international organizations such as the UN "of little help in channelling the perpetual power struggle between states, since they cannot change the anarchical structure of the international system" (Rittberger, 2006: 15). In contrast, the liberal view, strongly influenced by Immanuel Kant, argues that "well functioning international organizations contribute to the formation of peace" (Kantian project in IR, 2004). Given that the UN is a 'multi-purpose' agency, it would be inappropriate to evaluate its effectiveness based on a specific goal, and thus this essay will take into account all five major areas (collective security, peace keeping, health, environmental and humanitarian rights) identified by Dunne. I will evaluate the effectiveness of the UN since its inception in 1945 and will agree with common liberal belief that the UN is an effective institution.

Collective security was a priority of the UN's agenda post World War II. However, realists may have the slight edge when they argue that the "logic of collective security is contrasted with the difficulties of its application" (Weiss, 2007: 4). Unsurprisingly, there was a large sense of distrust after the Second World War, as highlighted by the Security Council's 193 vetoes between 1945-1990" (Baylis, 2011: 316). The United State's invasions of Vietnam, Grenada and Panama in addition to the Soviet Union's invasions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan (Weiss, 2007: 4) are merely a few examples of the constant proxy war operations conducted throughout the second half of the 20th century. This highlighted the ineffectiveness of the UN's Security Council in preventing conflict, and strongly supported realist thinkers, that "there is no supranational authority [the UN] capable of wielding overwhelming power" (Rittberger, 2006: 15). The realist school view "international organizations used by powerful states to implement their power politics more effectively and to pursue self interest" (Rittberger, 2006: 15). When looking at case studies including Rwanda and Sierra Leone (Weiss, 2007: 206) realists would argue that the reason why the UN was not as effective is largely due to the fact that Rwanda had little interest to the hegemonic powers at the time. Other conflicts however, such as the Korean War, had strong backing from countries such as the US, UK and other nations in Europe, because it was in their interests to do so. In Korea's case, the UN was effective in restoring security. This largely contradicts Kant, who claims that "international organizations can constrain decision-makers by positively promoting peace" (Dunne, 2010: 102). From the evidence presented we can deduct that hegemonic states have superior influences to those of the UN, and so it is hardly surprising that the UN succeeded in restoring security when it was in the general interest of the unipolar state at the time (the US), rather than the majority of states sitting in the General Assembly. However, liberals claim that "after the Cold War it became more difficult for states and diplomats to accept that what happened within states was of no concern to outsiders" (Baylis, 2011: 318). As a result, the UN became more involved in the mediation between nations, which granted it higher respect from member states. "By the mid 1990s the UN had become involved in maintaining international security by resisting aggression between states" (Baylis, 2011: 318). Liberalists including Kofi Annan argued that the 'security dilemma', which is built on the premise that "one country improves its security at the expense of other states" (Dunne, 2010: 81) had been averted. Although the recent past has been bright in terms of the UN serving as a successful platform for peace and

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compromise between states; I cannot disregard the period 1945-1990 where the UN was unable to prevent a series of conflicts, and thus conclude that the UN has been ineffective at establishing collective security since 1945.

In spite of the UN's mediocre success with regards to security, the institution has a lot more to boast concerning peacekeeping and health efforts. The UN's peacekeeping operations which include the UN Transition Assistance group (UNTAG) in Namibia, UN Observer Group in Central America (ONUCA) as well as the UN Iraq-Iran Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG) are a few examples of the peacekeeping missions ranging from 1948 up to 2012, many of which are still active. Likewise, the World Health Organization (WHO) is a branch of the UN which helps promote health and development in areas of extreme poverty and conflict. These 'branches' reinforce Kant's liberalist theory that international institutions are effective tools in solving health and preventing conflict. However, realists such as George Gibbs, an American ethnologist assert the view that the agenda of the WHO interferes too much with the legislations of sovereign states (WHO Profile, 2008); then again, in defence of liberalists, "critics and supporters alike celebrate the eradication of smallpox; in this the WHO has made a big difference in the world" (WHO Profile, 2008). With regards to peace-keeping, although realists can make the point that "the network of international organizations is spread very unevenly across the globe" (Dunne, 2010: 104), liberalists have the upper hand when defending UN success rates in areas of civil conflict; "Namibia (1989-90), El Salvador (1991-95) and Cambodia (1991-93) are repeatedly cited as success stories" (Weiss 2007: 104-5). In addition, the presence of peacekeeping forces "are involved in the democratization processes" (Ritterberger, 2006: 134). As Kant claims in his works, one of the objectives of international organizations such as the UN is to democratize single party countries through this process, allowing countries to benefit in areas such as health and human rights and prevents further conflict. It is unarguable to counter the claim that the 'UN, through organizations including the WHO, UNTAG, ONUCA and UNIIMOG have provided general healthcare and peacekeeping efforts effectively'. Thus, in agreement with Immanuel Kant's liberalist theory that international institutions promote positive results in countries in need of aid and mediation; I conclude that the UN has been an effective institution in establishing peace and promoting health-care efforts.

Similarly, the UN has been equally effective in implementing humanitarian rights around the world, as well as raising awareness and legislating environmental practices in most of its member states. The Kyoto Protocol was a major step towards the UN framework on climate change. But despite this, realists heavily criticise a collective attempt to prevent environmental work "the aim of critical research is to highlight how scientific explanations of environmental chance provide only partial insights into complex processes, and existing models of explanation reflect the agendas of the societies that created them" (Kim, 2001: 146). Heavy economic powerhouses such as the US, (the only nation to not attend the conference) found that it was not in their interest to curb production at the expense of the environment. This approach strongly emphasises a realist attitude. The alarming nature of climate change however has been addressed by the UN through the creation of the Environmental Programme in 1972, followed by the introduction of an Environmental Committee in the same year. The UN's response to environmental concerns strongly backs liberalist belief in that "liberal societies have become a fertile ground for the promotion of ecological attitudes and environmental philosophy" (De Shalit, 1995: 49) and evidence highlighted by the Rio Summit, Montreal and Kyoto Protocol's (UNEP, 2012) suggest that the UN has effectively dealt with recognising and fighting environmental problems such as deforestation and climate change. Furthermore, the UN has made an enormous step in the promotion of humanitarian rights. Article 1 of its charter "promotes and encourages respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without discrimination as to race, sex, language or religion" (UN Charter, 2012). "For the past century most liberals have strongly endorsed human rights as the best mechanism for providing a life of autonomy" (Baylis, 2011: 505). Through the UN, liberalists have enjoyed equality across all cultures. However, classical realism "stresses the 'national interest defined in terms of power.' Human Rights clearly reveals this notion to be a deeply problematic political prescription" (Baylis, 2011: 506). Unlike most liberal thinkers, realism "draws our attention to the fact that states are principally concerned with the national interest" (Baylis, 2011: 506) and often humanitarian values have become no more important than environmental or economic interests. However, the UN's Human Rights Council has been a highly influential means to promoting issues such as homosexuality, torture rights as well as women and child rights. As a result, we have witnessed a massive liberalisation in developed countries including the UK, France, and the US etc who embrace liberal approaches to humanitarian issues discussed in the UN. Due to this successful collaboration, we have witnessed the UN to be an effective institution in the world wide legislation of environmental and humanitarian rights laws.

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As this essay has demonstrated, the topic 'is the United Nations an effective institution' has a variety of viewpoints and interpretations subject to the school of thought one follows. Essentially, the realist argument is one that is strongly linked to national self interest, and thus it is unsurprising that through a realist scope, the UN failed in assuring security to the nations affected by the proxy wars of the Cold War. On a different note, the idea that "most states in the world have come to understand their interest include the fate of foreign nationals living abroad who are suffering gross and persistent systematic violations" (Baylis, 2010: 507) is by large a liberalist view, which has undoubtedly succeeded in shaping the UN's response to Dunne's 'five goals'. It is therefore unsurprising that this essay concludes by acknowledging the United Nations as an effective institution.

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