

# The Reality of US-UN Relations

Written by Zaara Zain Hussain

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# The Reality of US-UN Relations

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ZAARA ZAIN HUSSAIN, MAR 19 2011

## The Reality of US-UN Relationship: Explaining the Ambivalence

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The history of United States of America (USA) and the United Nations (UN) is long and complex. The United Nations owes a lot of what it is today to the US. It was the US that breathed life into the UN with its power and resources. However, contrary to popular myth, there never was a golden age in the relationship between them.[1] It is not very surprising to see multilateralism in the UN under crisis, nor is the ambivalence of USA towards it. This ambivalence has been there for a long time. Despite that, the UN does hold an important position in US foreign policy. Mostly when UN and its agendas are in line with the future plans US has for itself. To put this in theory, I am quoting the famous realist Morgenthau: "The statesman must think in terms of the national interest, conceived as power among other powers. The popular mind, unaware of the fine distinctions of the statesman's thinking, reasons more often than not in the simple moralistic and legalistic terms of absolute good and absolute evil." Realists believe that a hegemon like the United States leads the game for international organizations such as the United Nations. A great power does not follow rules set by others.

### 2. ARGUMENT & STRUCTURE

My argument in this paper is that great powers rarely make great multilateralists.[2] I am demonstrating this argument in the explanation of the relationship between the United States of America and the United Nations. A great power like the United States will not be bound by the laws of an international institute, even if it is the United Nations. That is why they have had such an ambivalent relationship over the years. The United States of America has been the greatest force in the creation of the UN but has not been able to adjust with the constraints and obligations of the United Nations or any form of multilateralism.

In this paper I plan to bring out the reason behind the behaviour the US has had towards the UN over the years. The question I will address in the paper is:

*Despite being one of the biggest advocates for the United Nations, why has the United States of America been ambivalent towards it?*

United States of America, despite pioneering the United Nations has over the years, disregarded the Security Council, insisted on acting alone, retreated from formal multilateral obligations and declined to ratify agreements widely accepted by the international society.[3] I will analyze the relationship between the US and the UN taking empirical examples of cooperation, indifference, and defiance between the two. When a pattern of behaviour is found, I will explain that using international relations theory to answer my question.

### 3. THE UNITED NATIONS & THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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In 1945, after the second World War, the leaders of the world came together to form the United Nations with the aim of maintaining peace, stability and order in the international society. The aims of the United Nations today are broadly listed as facilitating cooperation in international law, international security, economic development, social progress, human rights, and achievement of world peace.

American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt first coined the term United Nations for an international organization meant to replace the flawed League of Nations. The UN officially came into existence on 24 October 1945 upon ratification of the Charter by the five permanent members of the Security Council; France, the Republic of China, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States and by a majority of the other 46 signatories.

The UN is not a single unit, but a group of institutes. Some are completely independent like the International Labour Organization (ILO) and World Health Organization (WHO). Some are dependent on it or related to it, such as United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The core of UN and international politics is made up of three entities: the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Secretariat. The Security Council is the club of aristocrats and the only organ of the UN that has authoritative power. It comprises of five permanent members: USA, China, Russia, United Kingdom and France who exercise tremendous power over international politics both formally and informally.[4]

The United States holds great economic, political, and military influence on the entire world and, for the time being, is an indispensable part of the UN. The political system of the United States is that of a constitutional republic and representative democracy, "in which majority rule is tempered by minority rights protected by law."<sup>[5]</sup> The head of government cannot take foreign policy decisions without at least two third support of the Senate. The president is allowed to enter into treaties with foreign states through executive agreement without the senate's approval but such agreements are rarely long standing. It is the Congress that has the power to conduct commercial activities with other states as well as go to war. Bureaucratic organizations within the US government include Office of the President, National Security Council, State Department, Defence Department, Central Intelligence Agency, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Embassies, Consulates, Federal Reserve, Treasury Department, etc. Foreign Policies of the United States, pertaining to the UN and other global issues, are greatly influenced by the domestic political environment. In the case of use of force, it is even more sensitive.

When talking about US-UN relationship it is difficult to coin out, the US perception of the latter. As, the self declared guardian of international order the US projects a certain view at times. Other times it is too busy in aligning its foreign policy decisions with domestic agendas. Domestic politics makes foreign policy decision very sticky for America.

It can be said that the smaller states, especially the third world view the United Nations, today, as an institute that can help them bring forward their case and upgrade their position in international society and help them against international forces over which they have no control. The Europeans, especially the large countries who were once colonial leaders, view the UN as forum where they can enjoy the power and status they once had over the world. [6]

## 4. THE RELATIONSHIP

As said by John Ikenberry, the United States has been the greatest champion of multilateralism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it has also been reluctant to tie itself too closely to these multilateral institutes and rules. [7]

It is not that US has never stood by the UN. On many occasions, the United States has been a supporter of the UN. Starting from Roosevelt in 1945 USA has been instrumental in most matters regarding the United Nations. Not only is USA a permanent member of the Security Council but many of UN's agencies are headquartered in the US as well. During the 1990s USA pioneered many multilateral treaties and arrangements such as the completion of the Uruguay Round of GATT and formation of WTO, negotiation of NAFTA and creation of the APEC.

Still, it did not take much for US to turn its back on its own baby- the UN. In 2000, former Chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jesse Helms said in a speech to the UN Security Council that no institution, be it the security council or the ICC, is competent to judge the foreign policy and national security decisions of the United

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States. [8] The United States has been very selective in assuming new international commitments with the United Nations in recent times. It has even on some occasions, retreated from past commitments with the UN. In December 2001, the United States retreated from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which allowed them to go ahead with their own missile defence system but started a new surge of American Unilateralism.[9]

As mentioned above, the United States has refused to be subject to jurisdiction of international legal bodies like the International Criminal Court (ICC) and refrained from embracing key human rights regimes with the United Nations, despite its support for the international rule of law. President Clinton signed the Rome Statute for the ICC in 2000 but it has still not been ratified. Clinton did not submit it to US Senate for ratification because apparently the court had to be assessed first. But as is evident from Helms speech, the US does not consider the UN competent enough to judge themselves. In 2002, when President Bush came into office, he sent a note to the Secretary General of the UN suspending the signature of the US and informed the Secretary General that the US recognized no obligation toward the Rome Statute. President Obama has re-established a working relationship with the court, but there still has not been any ratification. We are yet to see if the great power will subject itself to the jurisdiction of the international criminal court.

Also United States is one of the only two countries that have not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Child, and one of few who have not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. Similar to the ICC, the Kyoto Protocol on climate change was signed by President Clinton but has not yet been ratified. The Bush administration backed out from this protocol claiming it to be fatally flawed.

Although the United States has not ratified the conventions, it has on many occasions, used variety of unilateral sanctions and annual certification processes to punish nation-states that have not conformed to U.S. standards in areas like human rights and narcotics enforcement. The most controversial are extraterritorial sanctions like Helms-Burton that penalize foreigners doing business with what the United States considers rogue states.

Since the 1980s, the USA has held back in paying its assessed dues to the United Nations, leading to arrears totalling some \$1.7 Billion by the end of 2000. The primary reason given by the USA was that the UN had become a bloated bureaucratic institute needing immediate reform. However, there is much more to it than just US seeking reforms in the UN. Domestic politics and budget planning play an important role in US spending on UN peace missions etc.

## 5. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW: REASON BEHIND THE AMBIVALENCE

Hegemons like the United States create and finance international organizations like the United Nations to spread their ideals and values through out the international system and to solidify their grasp on power. The realist focus on relative power explains why the United States has acted unilaterally at times. Some realists completely disregard the importance of international institutions, and talk about the power of the state alone. However, it is the classical realist argument of balance of power that can explain the US support for the UN. By being part of a multilateral system such as the UN, the US could prevent counterbalancing by projecting a benign intent towards the world. Stephen Walt and many other realists argue, U.S. policy makers have demonstrated support for international institutions such as the UN, to show their satisfaction with the status quo and dampen other countries' security fears, thus preventing the emergence of a counterbalancing coalition. Walt argues that "the United Nations and other international institutions help the United States exercise its power in a way that is less threatening and therefore more acceptable to others. [10] Also, the USA over the years, from its civic culture and political mindset, has assumed a role of "reformist" of international order and "custodian" of peace and stability in world.[11]

The hegemon is not dependant on the international system and does not have to comply with all its rules. Unilateralism and multilateralism are both tools to achieving foreign policy objectives and a hegemon can chose either depending on which one will suit its benefits best at the moment. The United States of America has the power, resources and capability to move ahead alone but when it feels the need it can go along with a multilateral system as well. In the case of Iraq and Kuwait in 1990 it went with its allies. On August 3, 1990, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 660 condemning the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and demanded Iraq to unconditionally withdraw all forces

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deployed in Kuwait. After series of failed negotiations between major world powers and Iraq, the United States-led coalition launched a massive military assault on Iraqi forces stationed in Kuwait in mid January 1991.[12] On the other hand, the US did not wait for UN negotiations or decisions during the 2000s post the 9/11 incident. The US government paid little attention to international politics and attacked Iraq in 2003 without the approval of UN Security Council. President Bush and allies decided to invade because domestic politics demanded so at the time. In March 2003, the US government announced they will use military force to get rid of Saddam Hussein as well as weapons of mass destruction allegedly being produced in Iraq. Prior to this decision, there had been much diplomacy and debate between the member states of the United Nations Security Council on how to deal with the situation but a majority consensus had not been reached to approve the military attack. The Secretary General of United Nations at that time, Kofi Annan said in an interview to BBC the decision to take action in Iraq should have been made by the Security Council, and not unilaterally. In response to Annan's opinion, Randy Scheunemann, a former advisor to US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said "I think it is outrageous for the Secretary-General, who ultimately works for the member states, to try and supplant his judgement for the judgement of the member states." [13] This goes to show that United States considers the UN no more than a platform for the member states to arbitrate, not a body with any authority, especially over itself. So it can be concluded, the UN in many occasions is nothing but mediators between head of governments. Foreign policy decisions are ultimately taken by the head of governments with consideration to both domestic and international agendas. Especially, when the government in question is that of a super power like the USA.

Neorealist such as Mearsheimer, believe international society and politics is one of anarchic realm, where no agency or institution exists to protect states from each other. Contrary to classical realist belief, Mearsheimer argues that there is no such thing as status quo of power.[14] The ultimate power lies with the state and its decisions are always made to protect own sovereignty and national interest. As a result, states must ultimately rely on their own resources and strategies to survive. It is, in other words, a "self-help" world, where self interest is first and foremost. For large states self interest does not always lie with multilateralism. Often unilateral foreign policy decision makes more sense in terms of domestic agendas. All states do not have the resources to pursue self interest as do great powers. Great powers can use international institutes for advancement of their ideals while smaller states can only hope for help from such institutes. According to realist theory, a really powerful state will be less constrained by the power of others and be able to indulge all sorts of foreign policy whims. It can decide that it has "vital" interests on every continent. It can declare itself to be "indispensable" to almost every important issue, and it can convince itself that it really knows what is good for everyone else in the world. Many believe, such is the case with the United States of America.

None of this is to say that the United States has ruthlessly trampled all other in the name of national interest. The US has been invaluable in the creation of the UN, which if not everything one would like it to be, is something. Regardless of its flaws, it is better to have some sort of platform of international politics, rather than none. I would argue that the US has had positive influence on international politics on many accounts.[15]

As mentioned earlier, the scale of American dominance provides positive justifications for it acting outside multilateral institutes like the United Nations. As the world's most powerful country, the United States has assumed "responsibilities" to preserve global order. The United States raised this claim in demanding special exemptions from the ICC and the land mines ban which other countries refused to give it.

To some extent US feels a threat to its sovereignty from United Nations. USA fears losing freedom of action abroad, as well as domestically if there is continued involvement from the United Nations. It is feared that if international regimes like the UN become too strong then the country's domestic legal framework, constitutional traditions, and political institutions will become subordinate to it. Defenders of American sovereignty claim that domestic institutions and law take supremacy over international commitments and obligations and those domestic standards of political legitimacy may require opting out of certain international initiatives at times.

What really makes it difficult for the United States to maintain multilateralism with the UN is its constitutional separation of powers that grants the executive and legislature joint control over foreign policy. This shared power

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often complicates domestic approval of multilateral commitments, particularly when the two branches are controlled by different parties. Because the ratification of treaties requires approval by at least two-thirds of the Senate, political minorities frequently block U.S. participation in proposed conventions. As the debates over the League of Nations in 1918–19 demonstrated, the separation of powers can complicate America's assumption of multilateral commitments.

The United States is ultimately a rational actor in world politics. It is rational for any major power to try to minimize external constraints on its freedom of action generated by multilateral institutes and processes. Many other nation-states wish that they had such an option, but few have the power to defy the will of international community. From the origins of the interstate system, no strong power has allowed itself to be subject to rules set by weaker nations, unless those rules benefit it also.

The United Nations was built upon the assumption that with the co-operation of the great powers along with smaller states, an international society of peace and economic prosperity will be created. But without the support of US, UN loses its legitimacy and effectiveness to a great extent. International politics on the whole gets effected by the withdrawal of US from multilateralism. The weakening of the UN, and international system makes smaller states very unsafe and vulnerable. They need the protective umbrella of the UN and a code of ethics for behaviour in the international arena, which protects their sovereign rights and ensures their existence as independent states.<sup>[16]</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

Over the years the US and UN have worked together on many occasions. With peacekeeping duties in Africa the UN has led and the US supported. On the other hand, the US has led and the UN supported it during the 1950s in Korea and 1990s in the Middle East. The United States more than any other country, after World War II, established a system of multilateralism and international society through the UN.<sup>[17]</sup> Within the most important organ of the UN, that is the Security Council, the US has always held a great sway. Even when the General Assembly has taken decisions against the wishes of the US most resolutions were non-binding and did not really harm the country. According to Mahbubani, the international community has actually bend over backwards to comply with the wishes of the great power, the United States of America.<sup>[18]</sup> But the United States has in most accounts not practised what it preached, or follow through with the commitments it entered. The United States has used military force without explicit Security Council approval, as against in Iraq and, the intervention in Kosovo. USA has not been compliant of multilateralism in trade either. In 1999, the Clinton administration proposed binding labour and environmental standards in the trade regime at Seattle WTO summit. Despite the apparent support shown by United States at the Doha round of negotiations towards the developing countries, protectionism remains strong.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, as the US progressively expanded its power relative to every other state, it treated multilateral institutes with deliberate constraints. At various moments in the late twentieth century when the US saw little use for the UN it faced precarious moments. Today the survival of UN may not be in doubt, but its existence is in a crippled state. Regardless of our wishful thinking of a world of cooperation and creation of a body of global governance, multilateralism, as defined by Ruggie, requires that states sacrifice substantial levels of flexibility in decision making and resist short-term temptations in favour of long-term benefits. Undermining the UN would make it somewhat easier for the US to pursue unilateral foreign policy and act alone when it feels the need to. It is somewhat unrealistic to expect USA to not prioritize self interest and conform to pure multilateralism.<sup>[19]</sup> However as Ian has mentioned, multilateralism and institutionalism is unlikely to totally disappear from US foreign policy. The ambivalent attitude of the US towards the UN reflects unstable nature of the institutional bargain but the relationship is more enduring than it seems. The UN after all is an epitome of the values and principles United States of America embodies and envisions for the world. The UN has been a good place for the US to exercise and extend its substantial reservoir of 'soft power'. The UN's value to the US and the constraints it imposes are a by – product of the organization's role in cultivating and implementing norms through a discursive process that the US has had a major role in shaping.<sup>[20]</sup>

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