

FLC 301/Fall 2001

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Briefing of 11/7/2001

The History and Function of the UN as a Global Institution

by

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“States like people, are basically rational and law-abiding entities capable of achieving cooperative goals.” —Hugo Grotius

1. Nineteenth Century Roots of Contemporary International Organizations

Swords into Plowshares by Ines Claude was one of the first books dealing with the idea of international organizations. Three major strands of thinking came from this book.

Strand 1--Utility of multilateral diplomacy: This was the basic principle behind the Concert of Europe (1815-1878). The Concert was made up of the leaders from the major European powers. They held multilateral meetings at which they dealt with the problems at hand. The Concert used some practices that are still used today such as multilateral consultation, collective diplomacy, and special status for great powers.

Strand 2--The formation of public international unions: These were originally developed among European states to deal with expanding commerce, communications, and technological innovation of the industrial revolution. Two such organizations were the International Telegraph Union (1865) and the Universal Postal Union (1874). These unions brought about the idea of functionalism. Functionalism is the idea that IGO's can help states deal with practical problems in their international relations.

Strand 3--The Hague System: Czar Nicholas II convened two sessions at the Hague that included both European and non-European states to discuss techniques to prevent war. This was something new since such meetings did not occur in the absence of a crisis and because both small and non-European states took part. It signaled the beginning of a truly multilateral system and the first time an international organization used techniques like the election of chairs, roll call votes, and the organization of committees.

2. The League of Nations

The League of Nations was an attempt to form a permanent structure to help prevent future wars. The League was based around two major principles, the first was member states must respect and preserve the territorial integrity and political independence of states. The second principle was collective security, i.e., the idea that aggression by one state will be met by all members acting together through sanctions and force if necessary. The League's major downfall may have been its inability to respond to acts of aggression. They also faced the problem of the major powers not upholding the principles of the League. But the United Nations still uses some of the principles that were used by the League of Nations.

3. The Origins of the United Nations

The *Atlantic Charter* of 14 August 1941 was a joint declaration by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill calling for collaboration on economic issues and a need for a permanent security system. The charter served as a base for the Declaration by the United Nations in January 1942 by 26 nations..

The *UN Charter* was drawn up on two meetings in 1944 and stated that the UN would be founded on the principles of sovereign equality among members and that all “peace loving” states would be eligible for membership. This excluded the WWII Axis powers (Germany, Italy, Spain, and Japan) in war with the U.S., the UK and the Soviet Union and their allies at the time. The founding members also agreed that security issues would need unanimity of all permanent members of the Security Council represented by the victors (U.S., Soviet Union, UK, France, China).

4. The Organization of the United Nations

Basic principles of the UN are sovereign equality of member states and the veto power of the five permanent Security Council members. Also, member states must refrain from threatening or using force, settle international differences by peaceful means, are obliged to support enforcement actions (such as economic sanctions), and pay their dues. The UN itself has to respect the norm of nonintervention in the domestic affairs of states.

The United Nation has 6 major bodies: the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice, the Secretariat, and the Trusteeship Council.

The primary responsibility of the *Security Council* is in maintaining international peace and security and the authority to act on behalf of all UN members. The Security Council was designed to be small in order to be more efficient and quicker in decision making. It is made up of the 5 permanent members and 10 nonpermanent members, each elected for 2 year terms. A nonpermanent country may not serve successive terms. The permanent members have veto power within the Security Council, but at least 4 nonpermanent members must vote in favor in order for a resolution to pass. The Security Council also has the tasks of electing the secretary general and the justices to the International Court of Justice as well as new member states of the General Assembly. They also create war-crimes tribunals.

The main goal of the *General Assembly* is to be a general debate arena where members are equally represented. The Assembly only has the power to make suggestions. Some of the functions of the Assembly are admitting states to UN membership; electing the nonpermanent members of the Security Council, and the Trusteeship Council. The Assembly shares responsibility with the Security Council for Charter revisions. The General Assembly is more of a symbolic political organ. The Assembly meets for 3 months in the fall. The General Assembly does its work in 6 committees: the Disarmament and International Security Committee, the Economic and Financial Committee, the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee, the Administrative and Budgetary Committee, and the Legal Committee.

The main goal of the *Economic and Social Council* (ECOSOC) is to coordinate the UN's economic and social programs. It meets once a year alternating between Geneva and New York. The members are elected for three year terms. They use simple majority votes.

The *UN Secretariat* is made up of a professional and clerical staff located around the world. UN employees are considered international civil servants. The members of the Secretariat are based mainly in field operations and make up the UN's tangible contribution. They are carrying out the UN's economic and social programs. The Secretary-General is the chief administrative officer of the UN and serves 5-year renewable terms, generally coming from smaller and neutral states. The Secretary-General provides leadership to the Secretariat.

The *International Court of Justice* (ICJ) provides states with an impartial body to settle legal disputes in accordance with international law. The court has 15 judges elected for nine-year terms (5 are elected every 3 years).

The *Trusteeship Council* was originally designed to oversee non self-governing territories and the process of de-colonization. The need is now gone for such a body, but it still exists though it does not meet in annual sessions. A few ideas of what should be done with the council have been circulated, such as monitoring of conditions that effect global commons or assistance to failed states respectively minorities and indigenous peoples.

5. The UN in World Politics

In their Introduction Mingst and Karns elaborate on the role of the United Nations (UN) in the post-Cold War era after 1989-91, when the UN was in greater demand than ever before to deal with peace and security issues and various other global problems. By 1995 optimism about the UN had virtually disappeared. Despite numerous resolutions the powerful UN members lacked the will to implement them. Financial downfall soon followed this lack of initiative because many members, particularly the United States, failed to pay their contributions.

6. The UN during the Cold War Period

At the end of WWII the victorious countries (the U.S., Soviet Union, Great Britain, France and China) attempted to create a world committee to keep world wars from happening again, and in particular, to use disarmament and arms control to reduce the nuclear threat. The first General Assembly meeting took place in 1946. Unfortunately the Cold War prevented unity between countries and many issues could not be dealt with because of veto's of the Security Council members or even brought before the UN Assemblies. But in order to deal with regional conflicts as a result of de-colonization the UN developed peacekeeping missions, which meant prevention, containment, and moderation of hostilities between or within states through the use of multinational forces of soldiers, police, and civilians. They were used mainly in the Middle East as "middle men" preventing the direct clash of both superpowers (U.S. and Soviet Union).

In the 1950's and 60's the UN was successfully involved in a smooth transformation of colonial rule in Africa and Asia. As a result of increased self-determination the UN

membership increased from 51 states in 1945 to nearly 185 in 1983. Parallel the Group of 77 (G-77) was formed concerned primarily with "North-South" issues regarding economic development and relations between the developed countries of the industrial North and the less developed countries of the South. In the seventies the G-77 pushed for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) which promoted government intervention in economic development and redistribution of wealth-issues that are still of relevance.

7. Changes in Post Cold War World Politics

The rapid growth of international trade, the expansion of transnational corporations, and the emergence of global financial markets have produced a global economy. The world has also been brought together by instantaneous communication. Two patterns of world politics emerged:

(1) integration = the process by which societies or nations are economically and politically brought closer together, particularly after the demise of communism and the failure of planned government intervention in less developed countries (LDC). Examples are the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the European Union (EU), and the spread of democratization.

(2) interdependence = trade, monetary flows, telecommunications, and shared interests heightened the sensitivity and vulnerability of states to each other's actions.

These trends are contradicted by disintegration, i.e., the rise of nationalism and ethnic conflicts, demands for self-determination, failed states (Africa), and protests against the adverse consequences of globalization.

Instruments to deal with integration and fragmentation is multilateralism through the UN and other international intergovernmental organizations (IGO) and nongovernmental organizations (NGO), concerned, for example, with the environment, food supply, population control, humans and women's rights.

8. Dilemmas in the Post-Cold War Era

Mingst and Karns outline three central dilemmas of international organizations like the UN:

- Sovereignty versus Intervention = the conflict between state sovereignty and the new interdependencies, pressures of transnational corporations, international human rights interventions, global environmental regulations, multilateralist policies and treaties.

- Demands for Governance versus the Weakness of Institutions = the demand for global governance, such as peacekeeping missions, without a world government that enforces payment of dues, implements reforms, mobilizes resources.

- The Need for Leadership versus the expanding Numbers of Actors = this problem addresses who should take a leadership role in the UN itself. If the only superpower left (the U.S.) is unwilling and retreats into isolationism or unilateralism, can the UN secretary general, NGO's , or smaller actors and coalitions step in?

9. The Future of the UN

Demands for global governance since the end of the Cold War era have risen consistently over time. The UN has been asked to make peace, provide emergency relief, and to step in against human rights abuses against individuals and groups. The UN has made slow

changes to meet these demands without sufficiently amending its Charter, the representation of the Security Council, management and personnel, and funding. One problem is that Charter revisions require the approval of the five permanent members of the Security Council and a 2/3 majority of the General Assembly. Since the UN belongs to all of its members with their conflicting interests its overhaul will not be an easy task.

10. Actors Promoting UN Reform

Mingst and Karns distinguish inside and outside actors. For example, the Group of Eighteen High-Level Intergovernmental Experts, established in 1985 by the General Assembly, made 71 recommendations to streamline the UN structure specializing in economic and social activities. In 1988 Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, often joined by Canada, launched a three-year program to reform the UN. Former Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali and Secretary-General Annan provided in 1992 a framework for much of the post Cold-War debate on reform to meet security needs. The UN Association of the U.S. provided in the 1980's an assessment of the UN and proposals for reform, later continued by the Ford Foundation.

11. Key Reform Issues

- Security Council Membership and Voting: Security Council operations are still rooted in immediate post-World War II politics, each of its five members exerting veto power over important issues. Many UN members feel that the Council should now better represent the changed makeup of the UN and allow all levels of powers to be represented. Many states who make important financial contributions are not even permanent members (Germany, Japan), and Europe is overrepresented. Another issue is whether or not new permanent members should be given veto power. Also many nations are worried about secret or closed meetings of only a few key members making important decisions.
- The Power of the Secretary-General: Should he have more power to preventive diplomacy, deployment of peacekeeping forces, UN management?
- UN Capacity for Promoting Sustainable Development: Better coordination of programs, tasks, staffing, and money.
- UN Finances: Since the 1980's the UN has been in a state of chronic budget crisis and the heart of the problem lies with various U.S. governments withholding funds because of disagreements with policies and UN management. Due to late payments and arrearages the UN had to cut staffing and simplify procedures to save money. The UN could not even pay its volunteer peacekeepers who put their life on the line. And peacekeeping member states had to wait for reimbursement of the costs for providing forces. A number of suggestions have been made to find other sources of revenue for use of international waterways, the resources of Antarctica, the oceans, the seabeds, or outer space. Especially the U.S. oppose the loss of control such independent revenues would entail.

12. Political Changes

- State Leadership: The biggest problem is the UN post WWII attitude which colors their judgement on who should be given leadership positions. Both Germany and Japan have offered financial support and given aid to peacekeeping actions, yet neither holds a seat on the Security Council. The U.S. tends to help the UN with finances only when it is in the immediate U.S. interest, such as during the Gulf War. And since 1994 Congress has

refused to pay arrears and dues to the UN claiming that they will not pay until their unilateral demands for reform have been made. "As a result of this failure to recognize global change... the U.S. is finding itself increasingly alone...on sanctions against Cuba, Iran, Iraq, and Libya; it is one of only a few states refusing to sign recent conventions on land mines, global warming, and an international criminal court. The United States is the lone superpower, but the world is not unipolar. Economic, security, or environmental threats cannot be dealt with by one superpower but require collaboration with several major powers, as well as middle powers and small states"(p. 215).

- Changing the Role of the NGO's: Nongovernmental organizations, which are private transnational associations of individuals or groups engaging in political activity such as human rights advocacy or environmentalism, are playing a new and continually active role in the UN. The question now arises should these organizations be given more of a formal role in the UN.

13. Conclusion

Although the concept of the UN is a great idea, financial distress, unequal distribution of power, manipulation by superpowers, management problems, and a lack of reform have weakened its positive influence on world affairs. The question is, can the UN and its members stand up to these challenges and make the necessary changes to accommodate a new globalizing world?

14. Questions for the Discussion at the UN

UN AS GLOBAL MEDIATOR

- 1) This is the UN Year of the Dialogue of Civilizations. What practical measures has the UN and its central bodies (Security Council, General Assembly) taken to initiate and enact this dialogue?
- 2) The U.S. press reported mostly negative or was silent about the September Durban conference on racism. What exactly was discussed at the conference? Who was represented? What resolutions came out of the meeting? Had the conference any impact? When and where are future racism conferences held and what topics will most likely come up again?

DEVELOPMENT & TRADE ISSUES

- 3) Less than 0.14 % of the U.S. GNP is used to aid foreign countries. We believe this percentage is surprisingly low. What are UN diplomats from less developed countries thinking about the appropriate percentage aid contribution of developed countries? And for what purposes should these monies be used? And who controls the funds?
- 4) Is it fair to other less developed countries and trade rules in general that the U.S. suddenly allows a favorable import quota increase on textiles and clothing from Pakistan because we are now an ally of Pakistan in the war against terrorism? Was this decision coordinated with other UN members or trade partners of the

U.S.? How important is this decision to prop up Pakistan's economy? Is this kind of trade "favoritism" a legitimate economic & political instrument? Will it be persistent or removed as soon as the relations between the U.S. and Pakistan sour? How do other nations in the region perceive this issue?

IMPORTANCE OF UN IN WORLD AFFAIRS & NGO ROLE

- 5) Has the importance of the United Nations decreased as a result of the growth of regional organizations, i.e., NATO and the EU taking on peacekeeping roles via K-Force and Rapid Reaction Force, respectively?
- 6) Do plans exist to give NGO's a more formal role in the UN? From the point of UN member states, what are the benefits and the drawbacks of NGO involvement? Why are state governments resisting NGO involvement?

HUMAN RIGHTS & MIDDLE EAST

- 7) If one of the UN functions is to protect human rights and alert the world public to human rights violations, what has been done so far by the Security Council, the General Assembly, and other UN organizations with regard to the situation of women in countries like Afghanistan?
- 8) People in Arab and Muslim countries argue that the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a central cause for unrest in the Middle East. What has the UN done in the past and what can it do now and in the future to help resolve this conflict? Why are there no UN observers or peacekeeping forces on the ground to separate the Israeli military and the Palestinians?
- 9) Is it--from a non-U.S. view--in the U.S. interest to support the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza & East Jerusalem through repeated use of the U.S. Security Council veto against UN resolutions supported by a huge majority of members?

CURRENT EVENTS IN AFGHANISTAN & INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

- 10) Why has the UN Security Council and the General Assembly not ratified the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan? Is it because the U.S. has not officially declared war against Afghanistan? Is the U.S. after 9/11 acting "in defense" and according to the wording and spirit of the UN Charter or was the 9/11 attack not a "war" declaration against the U.S. but an international crime against which only legal action according to international criminal law is legitimate?
- 11) How do non-Western countries--like Pakistan--view President Bush's statement that countries are "either with us or against us" in this so-called "never-ending war against terrorism"? Do governments and people elsewhere feel they are forced into compliance with the U.S.? What are the instruments the U.S. has used and what can it legally use to make other nations comply with their interests? Is tough rhetoric and "arm twisting" of the rest of the world sustainable or will it eventually create what it intends to prevent, namely anti-U.S. resistance, boycott

of U.S. goods and culture, and perhaps even more resentment?

- 12) Should Osama BinLaden, the alleged mastermind of the 9/11 attack, if caught alive, brought to justice at an international court instead of a U.S. court? What would be the appropriate channel & action according to UN rules and international law?