

What to do about the United Nations?

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Death without resurrection

“The United Nations are dead”. Time after time. Just in the last decade we have heard this dull sentence during the Sarajevo siege, while genocide was perpetuated in Rwanda, when the NATO started bombing Serbia, when George Bush Jr. and Tony Blair gave the go ahead for attacking Iraq. The United Nations’ death has been proclaimed, as well, with anger and despair by those groups that have experienced overbearing actions and have asked for protection without receiving it: Chechen separatists and African liberation movements, Kashmir and Tamil minorities, stateless peoples from Kurdistan and in Palestine.

There now seems to be a malicious pleasure in stating the UN is dead. Maybe because, with the end of the cold war, one expected that the UN could become a much more important centre of power in world politics. For decades the organization had been paralysed by vetos, formal or substantial, of superpowers. The decisive choices were made in secret summits in which Krusciov and Kennedy, Breznev and Nixon, Gorbaciov and Regan redesigned the borders of the world. With the disappearing of Communist threat, important components of public opinion gave their trust to a very ambitious project: one in which the United Nations would become the central institution on the international scene, filling the unacceptable gap between the assignments given to the organization and its actual powers.

There were plenty of voices that, with very little theoretical basis, pointed out that such hopes could not receive the just response. Why did the winning states of the Cold War have to be so altruistic to give up the plunder? The bipolarity suddenly had changed into unipolarity, and there was no way that the nation with the power would have ever opted selflessly for multipolarity. The dominant theory of international relations, realism, clearly states that interests win over the actions of the states. But considering that realism’s wisdom had just been disproved by the unviolent collapse of the Soviet Empire, one could hope that the theory would have been disproved again by the winner (the liberal West dominated by the United States) taking a new decisive political direction. After all, international organizations – first the League of Nations and the United Nations later – were the outcome of the dream of American politicians like Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who wished to extend their constitutional system to the whole planet.

Numerous groups of independent experts, such as the Commission for Global Governance, took charge of developing a multilateral prospective compatible with the political and economic interests of the West, but without necessarily putting the rest of the planet at a disadvantage. Retired politicians filled their days travelling from one independent Commission to the other, re-launching, in their new function, those daring proposals that were regularly covered up when they were in charge. It is not surprising then that their successors in power have ignored such wise proposals and opted for self-interest. It was then confirmed that such grand projects belonged to the realm of crazy dreamers or politicians.

But the fact that many authoritative statesmen are themselves dedicated to the industry of the “Global Governance” testifies that it was not completely senseless to hope for radical reform of the international system.

Yet it is true that not since the decline of the Roman empire has a single world-wide power ever centralized so much political economic, cultural and military power. But from this ascertainment it

is possible to draw opposite conclusions: one could think that the power could be used in order to serve circumscribable interests, as well as to boost a world-wide system based on values and procedures of the western democracy. Antonio Gramsci has taught us that hegemony is a matter of “carrot and stick” balancing. But it seems that the logic of the stick has prevailed.

9/11 did not put an end to the search for a sustainable redesign of the international system. The wounded giant could harness this tragedy in two ways: it could become the champion of the new world-wide order, the victim who accepts the suffering rather than to inflict it, and, thanks to this, it would have become a credible leader of world-wide politics. We know instead that the opposite occurred: the spectacular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated that, under the Bush administration, the old methods used during the Vietnam war could be reemployed even without rivals. Charles Bronson’s performances won over the Perry Masons’ ones. The United Nations, therefore, died once more.

The function of the United Nations

We ask again ourselves: what is the purpose of the United Nations? The entrusted historical mandate of the organization has always been clear: to avoid conflicts and world wars, as it states in the Treaty Preamble, those which plagued the same generation. In the same moment in which the San Francisco treaty was approved, on other side of the Pacific the atomic age was beginning, to testify that total war could be much more frightening than those conflicts previously known to humanity. Like other solemn declarations, the Treaty of the UN in the first place was meant to close an era and, if possible, to open a new one.

While such a fundamental institution was being constructed, the States were denying it the necessary instruments to carry out its own functions. The plan to create a “Unified General State” (effectively a prolongation of Allied forces that defeated fascism) was then halted because of the emergent rivalry between western block and eastern block. Thus, for over half century the United Nations has been entrusted with the most ambitious projects and tasks and with almost no resources.

The most amazing fact is that the UN has survived for all these decades, and that it has progressively become a more important actor in the worldwide politics. The UN has had one decisive function in the decolonisation, perhaps the most important political process of the 20th Century. In spite of the scarcity of resources, the organization has increased its competences until covering virtually every aspect of social, cultural, political and economic life. So articulated are the competences of the UN that the measurement of its effectiveness cannot be done without a problematic analysis. Let’s try to identify three different areas of intervention: a) coordination, b) economic interests and c) conflicts.

Coordination here means the necessity to put in contact the many public administrations. This coordination is particularly pressing in order to create standards, measure units, codes, agreements or also in order to promote positive actions to uproot infectious diseases or to reduce pollution. In these fields, interests have focussed on cooperation rather than competition, consequently governments have been very pleased to benefit from the United Nations in order to debate and to deliberate on common problems. When the game of international politics is positive, the impediments to entrust oneself to the UN have no grounds and the effectiveness of the organization is high.

The second area concerns potentially conflicting interests. The more typical case is that of the economic and financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. These institutions are nominally part of the UN, even in practice they have a greater power than the entire organization and have total autonomy. The interests of the states are often in conflict, and to find agreement is a long and laborious process. Long before

Cancun, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organization have been the venues of arguments and of agreements. In these difficult situations, UN's institutions have acted as the clearing house and as a bearing house that has enabled the finding of feasible solutions in a multilateral context. In the same area fall specialised agencies such as the UNIDO, the FAO, the UNESCO, the WHO: in all these cases, there is a substantial disparity between the backers of the plans (mostly are the countries of the North) and the net beneficiaries (those in the South), often seen as a small compensation for the pressures posed by the labour market towards poorer countries.

The third area concerns instead conflicts. Here the role of the UN is more controversial, and it is where little successes and many failures can be listed in the UN balance sheets, in great part due to the fact that the holders of actual power, the more powerful states, have used the organization like a scapegoat in those cases where they did not have the will or the interest in marginal conflicts.

Successes and failures

The paradox is that the United Nations are more visible for what concerns the third area, where the more difficult tasks and worse results lie. The image that the public opinion has of the UN first of all regards the peacekeeping soldiers, the blue helmets. It does not matter that these soldiers are supplied from the states, and that the greatest effort of the UN secretary general is to beg governments for the provision of the necessary instruments and means. It does not matter that the effectiveness of blue helmets depends on the political, economic and aerospace coverage of the same states: in case of inefficiencies the responsibility is always blamed on the United Nations.

It is even more paradoxical that the UN is held in consideration by public opinion for something that is not stated in its Treaty: peace-keeping, in fact, is an activity which began after the foundation of the United Nations, which codified and transformed it during the Cold War. In case of conflicts the UN's Charter foresees exclusively sanctions (Chapter VI) or, alternatively, coercive interventions (Chapter VII). Stopping a conflict is not foreseen, if the counterparts are still willing to fight. If one thinks that the United Nations is often requested to, with few and poorly armed soldiers, maintain cease fire, one can understand how peculiar is its duty. During the long winter of the Cold War, the deployment of blue helmets was only justified because there was no will to carry the conflict until the last consequences or because, as a result of a meeting between USA-USSR, the sides had had instructions to stop themselves.

At the end of the Cold War, the same function of *peace-keeping* could not remain the same. The counterparts did not have any masters to comply to, and the intervention capability of the only superpower left has become infinite. One of first to signal the problem was Boutros Boutros Ghali who, newly appointed, made a clear distinction, in his *Agenda for peace* (1992), between traditional *peace-keeping* (the maintenance of peace) and *peace-enforcement* (the imposition of peace). In a decade, there has not been the lack of attempts to impose peace (Cambodia, Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo) but it has clearly emerged that *peace-enforcement* demands greater resources than *peace-keeping*. First of all, to be effective, *peace-enforcement* has to be perceived as legitimate by the populations; if lacking legitimacy, the external intervention, even if animated by the best intentions, like in the case of Somalia, has the opposite effect as the desired one. And then, it demands a battery of political, economic and diplomatic instruments that can be obtained only with a wide consent between states.

The same idea, that one could obtain the imposition of peace is based on the assumption that, after the Cold War, the main actors of international politics had a unity of intentions far beyond their own short-term interests, and that it was possible to bring to reason with few but well arranged slaps those who had gone mad.

The first one to test the rules of the new international order was Saddam Hussein with the Kuwait annexation in 1990. The event caught the international community unprepared, but there had been a traditional answer (the war) to re-establish Kuwait's sovereignty. For the first time after the Korean war, a war occurred under the United Nations' flag. With the Gulf War in 1991 was sanctioned the principle by which the United Nations could be guarantor of the status quo between states.

Little after, however, the inability of the UN was assessed in stemming intra-state conflicts: in Somalia, in Rwanda, in Bosnia, the deployment of forces to prevent genocide has been late or absent. Even if the number of blue helmets in the field has increased (in a few years the number has increased from 10.000 to 50.000) peace enforcement has proved to be more complex than what was expected. The two greater cases of so-called "humanitarian" intervention, Bosnia after 1995 and Kosovo in 1999, have been both implemented outside UN's jurisdiction. The onslaught in Afghanistan in 2002 has been an American military operation. The onslaught in Iraq begun on April 2003 upset the rules once again and it opened a new period of which the future outcomes are still to be verified. The ambition of the United Nations to effectively become the arbitrator in case of armed conflicts has been once again repressed.

The unsuccessful agreement

It is difficult to find something positive in the last onslaught in Iraq and the official motivation, that of preventive war, is laughable under the legal profile: preventive war has been banished from the internationalist legal tradition since the second half of the 17th century. But before the military campaign began, the United Nations had a moment of sort-lived but meaningful glory: for the first time in their history, they have been the place in which the states have explicitly expressed their opinions: the Security Council has become a debate organism. In the past, choices relatively about war and peace were made in secret diplomatic negotiations, and if it was necessary to bring the issue at hand in front of the Security Council, it was only to ratify an agreement already taken or to embarrass a superpower obliging it to throw the veto on the table. In the case of the crisis in Iraq, the decisional process has happened in an amazingly transparent way inside of the institutional centre. That is where Colin Powell exhibited the evidence of the presumed weapons of mass destruction, and UN inspectors reported the results of their work.

This transparency in the choices has made it clear that the contrast has nothing to do with opposing ideologies. Like in the case of the Suez crisis in 1956, the oldest liberal democracies were divided. The liberalism champions, United States and Great Britain paid the price with the consequent international isolation. The alliance constructed by France, instead, has included Germany and Russia, Arabic countries and China: like in traditional anti-hegemonic politics, they didn't split hairs. On the other side, the stubbornness with which the United States tried to obtain a favourable vote from the Security Council has shown how important UN formal legitimation is for public opinion. For months the world's press talked about the Security Council, illustrating the differences between permanent and elected members and proposed hypotheses about how single states would have voted.

Given France's use of the veto to deny legitimacy to the attack on Iraq, Collin Powell was instructed to do anything to garner the majority of votes, to demonstrate to the American public that their government followed the majority principle. Washington's manoeuvre did not succeed, obliging the invading states to pay a high political price - the perceived total violation of the international rights and of the principles of democracy. Whilst these matters were being debated in the Security Council, there were worldwide protests against the war. For the first time, a world wide public opinion was formed on an institutional dispute that had its locus in the UN. However, the

beginning of the war demonstrated the futility of the UN, let alone the embitterment of political mobilisation. It has sadly confirmed the saying that the power is in the barrel of the gun.

Which resurrection?

Is the Iraq war enough to claim once more that the UN is dead? The problem, obviously, depends on which are the strategic objectives pursued. There are those who pursue clearly an anti-systematic perspective, totally opposing any form of coordination of international politics, thus advocating the shelving of the UN. There have been many appeals for developing countries to abandon the organization because it is instrumental only to the interests of the rich countries. Hardt and Negri are among the inspirers of this tendency, and it is not strange that their thesis has found interest not only among the radical no-global movements, but also in the establishment. In other words, to oppose to any kind of coordination in politics gives to everyone too much freedom: to alternative groups in their protests and to the ruling class in pursuing their interests. It is not difficult to imagine who out of these groups would succeed first in satisfying their own needs. But, in fact, to abolish such coordination is not a feasible strategy for the simple reason that even a minimal presence of the UN is convenient for all. This does not mean that the anti-systemic perspective should be underestimated: it is simply a propagandistic strategy that has the effect of perpetuating weak policy within the UN and to damage its reputation.

More insidious is the will to reduce the UN to a mere technical secretariat, a pen pusher of the decisions of the more important governments, denying the organisation any substantial independence. This strategy works by blackmailing. In the case of the Iraq's crisis the most convincing argument of American diplomacy was to say: "the war is inevitable, it is more convenient for the United Nations to endorse it than to see it happening against its will". Governments have the means to to implement such project: it would be enough to cut the organization's resources and then UN's activities would have to be retrenched. The Bush administration wants to suffocate multilateralism and only leverage its own strategic advantage in worldwide politics. We have to wonder then why Washington has not yet sunk the UN.

The reason probably lies in the desires of the American public opinion, including that in favour of the war in Iraq, which prefers multilateral solutions to unilateral ventures. There is in the United States a widely held conviction that if one cannot isolate itself from the world it is better not to act alone.

There are those who say that, for it to be more effective, the UN should have a greater congruence of formal and substantial power. Is a given fact that today only one state has the power of veto: nothing can be accomplished on the planet without the United States' agreement. It is also true that the political and military price paid by the United States in order to 'go alone' is often extremely high. They can easily win wars in any part of the world, but this does not mean that they are also able to impose peace: what as happened in Afghanistan and in Iraq shows that military might it is not enough to realise its own civil objectives. The United States, have a limited capacity of *prohibition*, but of *contained* concept.

To what extent can these new relationships be institutionally redesigned inside the UN?

For example, giving the power of veto only to the United States, on the condition however that they do not act against the widespread will of the international community. In part, it would be to ratify a given situation, since the 90's the United States used the veto 9 times, against the two times of China and Russia.

We cannot ignore that fact that on many occasions the Security Council has been bypassed: in the cases of the Kosovo conflict and the Iraq war, and as a result of constant diplomatic negotiations,

the Security Council has been exonerated from its functions. The implicit agreement should be then that to codify the rapport de force and then to respect them.

Let's restart from three

There is then the sound reformist perspective, that states that even today the United Nations must be seen as the most important institution in world politics. This perspective is not unaware of the organization's limitations, and its institutional and formal obstacles.

At the same time, though it bases itself on supporting the fundamental values of democracy within the organization, which are instead absent in the practice of diplomacy. We can summarize them in two aspects: transparency and legality.

Transparency in decisions. In the UN system, the governments are called to account in public for their actions, in total contrast with the typical procedures of international politics, fogged by the "reason of state", where one can only hint to the security services without actually showing them.

The search for Mass Destruction Weapons in Iraq demonstrates the discordance between national security service actions and citizens' interests. The UN however is one of the institutions that, at least partially, helps place the public in a better position to judge.

It is often said that in the UN not all states are equal and, going back to the case of the search for weapons of mass destruction, some states are more transparent because they are democratic, others are not at all. That democratic states are more transparent than others, in defense policy, is not always a verifiable assumption: the United States and Israel do not supply better detailed information on their listed arsenals than Pakistan and North Korea do. But this is not the point: the fact that many states are still in the hands of totalitarian governments does not justify the analogous behaviour in democratic states. And, still today, the President of the United States pays a higher political price for lying about his own affair with an intern than for lying about Iraq's arsenal stockpiles: it is difficult to not see in this disparity the different importance given to internal and external facts by US public opinion.

From the normative point of view, it is right to demand that democratic states apply the principle of transparency even if other states do not apply it. The effectiveness of transparency is, obviously, greater if there is a stronger and more organized public opinion who intends to control the executive. We know well that public opinion does not have the same weight in all states. In some countries a scandal can bring down the government, in others, the only way that the public has to affect the executive is through uprising. But the democratic states should have to base themselves on the principle that two wrongs do not make a right, especially in a moment in which their muscles are not more powerful than those of the possible adversaries.

Rule of Law. There are those who ignore international law completely. Nevertheless, all international organizations, starting from the United Nations, exist because there is, however imperfect, an international law. In the absence of any effective measures against the transgressors, the value of the international law will continue to be limited. But, also in this case, it cannot be ignored that world politics today are dominated by the democratic states. These states consider themselves as such because they respect the rule of law internally and even in foreign policy, they alone would be able to give a great improvement to the respect of international legality.

The paradox is that the democratic states (starting from the United States) are not at all willing to underwrite international agreements, neither in respecting some of its rules. Therefore, an indefensible situation is created in which democratic states define the norms of the international law

only to then force the weaker (and often not democratic states) to respect them. **To revitalize the United Nations means therefore to demand democratic states to expand the norms of the law and to apply them in one shared legal system.**

This strategy of revitalizing the United Nations is based on a given fact and an ethical assumption. The given fact concerns the absolute predominance of the western states and, in particular, of the United States. There are no longer threats to freedom such as those represented by the Soviet Union of Stalin and Breznev. Today the West possesses a massive range of weapons against which nobody can compete. This power demands that the same rules are applied internally as externally. It also means that the West should trust the United Nations as depositary of the best ideas born from western liberalism, those of equality, participation, dialogue, and the non violent resolution of conflicts.

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