

The United Nations Needs to Learn More Besides Its Successful Learning from the League of Nations

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Abstract: Both the United Nations [hereinafter UN] and the League of Nations [hereinafter League] are important global institutions for human history. Previous research has shown that the UN has learned many lessons from the League. Meanwhile, the UN could be seen as a step further than the League. It realized many weaknesses of “the League’s failure to provide a mechanism for the enforcement of international collective security” back in the 1920s and it learned many crucial lessons from the League. Yet, those lessons have not been sufficient to address all problems that the UN is facing today. To address this problem, this paper is intended to introduce the UN and the League briefly, what are they and what they do. And then discuss in-depth the question, of what did the UN learn from the League. Lastly, the third part will be expanded around the idea of the problems that appear today that the UN needs to deal with urgently. Because although the UN had learned plenty of lessons from the League, it has been seen that there are a lot of problems within the UN today.

Keywords: United Nations, League of Nations, Security Council, Global organization.

1. Introduction

1.1. The League of Nations

The League of Nations was a seminal experiment in the quest for stable, peaceful world order formed after World War I through the establishment of a global institution. The Covenant of the League of Nations [hereinafter Covenant], made at the Paris Peace Conference, is a major inflection point in human history that marks the birth of the modern liberal order. Even though the League collapsed on the 20th of April 1946. It was an important experiment that informed the formation of the modern United Nations that still exists today.

1.2. The United Nations

The United Nations, formed after World War II, carries on the liberal international order that the League of Nations began. The Charter of the United Nations (hereinafter Charter) drew heavily on the Covenant of the League of Nations, adapting both treaty provisions and institutional structures in an effort to solve many of the problems that bedeviled the League so as to create a lasting and effective institution of global governance. Specifically, the UN sought to develop a central governing authority—which the League lacked—to overcome the lack of cooperation among member states, ensure the involvement of major powers, and address the League’s lack of a military force.

2. Differences in Organs

2.1. Scale

The League formed everything in a very short amount of time. It had its first council meeting in Paris on the 16th of January 1920, which was only six days after the Covenant of the League of Nations came into force. This was because every country hoped for a peaceful world really urgent after World War I. After so many casualties, expenses and debts they now had after the war. As a consequence of the limit of time, it made the League problematic as it had not considered everything thoroughly. The League showed a not well-structured global institution. And this made the League seem unreliable to the states. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why the League had few memberships compared to the UN.

This made The UN fully aware of this problem, hence it slowly adapted to new geopolitical realities having been forged in an era with different power dynamics and prevailing ideas. In this stage, people not only require a instant global institution but also a long last one as well as matching the states' needs for deepening interconnections and globalization around the world.

The UN considered its scale thoroughly before its establishment. There were approximately 1,400 delegates, advisers, and assistants; 2,630 journalists, radio people, film people and other observers constantly on the watch. It took ten solid weeks to work out its Charter. This made the UN more into a scale and into a system, which makes it seems reliable and more prepared to overcome all the global issues compared to the League. It was a spotlight on the world as there has never been in the history of the world before. This may also be the reason why countries are more willing to join the UN than to join the League.

It could also be found that the UN pays attention to human rights and the principle of self-determination as well as the problems of social and economics. [1] The UN declared its “recognition ... of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family”[2] in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Conversely, the Covenant made no direct reference to human rights or the principle of self-determination, but only mentioned in Article 23 and Article 25. It was observed that the international protection of human rights made by the League was still in its infancy. It was scattered and had no regularity at all.[1] This shows the UN has a wider scale in terms of responsibility.

2.2. Purpose

The purpose is an important factor when trying to understand the League and the UN because the purpose indicates the initial ideology of those two global institutions that were formed. Purpose also appeals to goals these two institutions wanted to approach at the very beginning. It provides identities of the League and the UN, to let their potential members know what they are made for.

The League was established to address “any dispute [that] shall arise between ... [member states] which they recognize to be suitable for submission to arbitration or judicial settlement.”[3] The ultimate goal was to prevent future wars. The League asked its members to accept the obligation “not to resort to war”[3]. In contrast, the UN was established “to maintain international peace and security”[2], “to develop friendly relations among nations”[2], “to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems”[2] in all possible areas, and “to be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations.”[2]

The Covenant and the Charter are fairly different in purpose. The Covenant based on the Paris Peace Conference is narrowly focused on preventing any possible future wars. For example, it only asks the members to promise “not to resort to war”[3]. Whereas, the Charter was intended to prevent and address any problems among its members that may imperil good relations between nations. From the provisions of the Charter, it is clear that the UN has a wider goal. As it focuses not only on peace

but also on security. The Charter also wants to demonstrate not just international relations that would not cause any war, but “friendly relations among nations” [2]. It aims to be a connection point to pull all nations together. This aim of the UN shows its foresight of international problems that would come up in the future, which none of the countries can solve by only oneself.

The Covenant and Charter have such differences because the drafters of the UN Charter learned lessons from the failures of the League. The relationship is not repaired, just like the relationship between Germany and the Allies, which indicates the deep-rooted problem still exists. Hence the willingness of having a war could not be erased, just like Germany still wanted an act of revenge after the Munich Conference. This makes any event as small as an economic dissatisfaction could become the trigger to a world war such as World War II.

Specifically, drafters of the Charter recognized international peace and security require addressing not just the interstate wars for which the League was established, but also a far broader set of challenges that are often the underlying cause of war. The broader purview of the UN allows it to address concerns, such as global economics and human rights, which affect relationships between nations and can ultimately lead to war or conflict. Hence, the UN is charged with addressing these threats to international peace and security so as to avoid the recourse to war.

2.3. Security Council

The Security Council [hereinafter SC] is crucial in the UN. Not only because it is a special organ in the UN, but also because it is the only section within the UN that could make binding decisions.

The SC has fifteen members in total [2], five of them are permanent members, and the other ten of them are non-permanent members. The non-permanent number would be elected through the General Assembly once two years. Whereas the permanent members, France, the UK, the US, China and Russia, permanently stay in the SC. Back in the League, the principle of the unanimous resolution gave each member in the League a veto. As the result, the League lost the possibility of taking any effective action [1]. However, the SC successfully resolved this problem by only giving the right to veto to the five permanent members, making it much more easier to reach an agreement.

This solves the problem of the League’s lacked credibility and its ineffectiveness when dealing with disputes between nations. It also indicates the permanent members tend to have greater power than the non-permanent members; the non-permanent members would have more authority than those only in the General Assembly. This leadership, to a slight extent, provides the members of the UN with the direction they should follow. This prevents the member states from despising the UN like they were to the League. An example of this was Germany left the League and started another world war as a way of revenge, without considering the Treaty of Versailles she signed after World War I. The provision that all the members in the UN need to follow SC’s binding decisions gained credibility to the UN. However, another problem which reduces the UN’s effectiveness is becoming apparent today, with political divisions in the Council and the disputes between permanent members.

2.4. Power

The Covenant indicated the League was able to maintain “peace requires the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations” [3]. The League had the power to advise “how to evil effects attendant upon such manufacture can be prevented” [3]. On the other hand, the UN Charter provides that the members of the UN can make recommendations in the General Assembly. In a major break from the precedent of the League, The members of the SC can make legally binding decisions. All the other members, whether in the SC or not, should “agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council.” [2]

It could be seen that the League had only the power to “advise” but not taking an action straight away. However, the League’s actions of preventing wars were unsuccessful. Hence the Security Council of the UN had not only the power of making recommendations but also to make binding decisions, and all members of the UN have to follow the Security Council on its call. Noticeably that the UN has seen the lack of power in the League. This could be seen in the severe failure of the League during the Manchuria Crisis of 1931. The Lytton Report [4] given by the League did not stop Japan’s invasion but caused a backfire, Japan left the League. Hence the UN needs a team of great powers to force other nations to behave in certain ways. The multiple members in the Security Council also allow these great powers to mutual restraint, avoiding any dictatorship within the UN. Therefore, the UN can now more likely take successful actions even though the nation is not willing to accept them as much.

3. Differences in Involvement

Not only the differences in organs of the League and the UN but also the differences between those two global institutions are significant. The involvement does not only indicates the number of nations joining the institution but also illustrates the possibility of responses the institution might get when it is calling for help.

3.1. Membership

Membership is important when comparing the League and the UN as it directly shows the scope of the institution. More countries involved certainly means greater commitments and follow-ups around the world which makes the institution significantly stronger.

League started in 1920 and had 58 members at Largest, with initially no involvement of the greatest two powers, the US and USSR. There were more than eighty countries around the world in the 1920 s. Due to the fact that the League could only constraint its members. The small number of memberships really limited the League’s ability to control the world. And it was not as international as it aimed to be. The UN learned from the failure of the League that it should broaden its membership and the engagement of the world’s most powerful countries.

Therefore, in contrast, the UN has a much broader membership. It had 51 members, and came all over the world, representing more than 80% of the population around the world when the UN was just established[1]. The UN has 193 members and there are approximately 195 countries around the world today. It has the almost full involvement of great powers, including the US and Russia. Both of them joined the UN because they realized after World War II that, it is impossible to maintain peace without their involvement to lead and bind other nations.

The two countries which are not members of the UN, the Holy See and the State of Palestine, it is not because they did not want to, but were vetoed to do so. Hence they decided to become the observer states instead as their first step going into the UN. In the case of the State of Palestine, the US announced that she would veto if Palestine want to become a member of the UN, as this case has to pass through the SC. However, it does not require a recommendation by SC, but only a pass voted in the General Assembly if Palestine wanted to be an observer country. As the result, Palestine became an observer country on the 29th of November 2012.

It is evident that all countries are willing to join the UN. It gained the UN much more members compared to the League. The almost full involvement allows the UN to be representative of the world and enhances its legitimacy and effectiveness.

3.2. Major Powers

There is a significant difference in the involvement of the major powers between the League and the UN. The involvement of the major powers directly indicates the strength and two types of capability: global force projection capability and agenda-setting capability [5] of the institution.

USSR and the US were involved in the UN after World War II finished, as they realized the importance to maintain a peaceful world after the collapse of the League. The formation of the SC indicates the full involvement of the major powers around the world. It shows that all of the major powers are on a united front, at least when the SC was just established, indicating their willingness to cooperate together to make a secure world. This strengthened the power of the UN as weaker countries would follow this decision in order to find protection.

On the other hand, history shows that world wars are always started by disputes between major powers. World War II also shows a single major power or two can not stop a massive invasion. This could be seen in the British and France could not stop Germany in the 1930s when it invaded Czechoslovakia. And this gained massive nationalism within Germany. Hence British and France were blamed as many people think World War II might have been prevented if they could stop Germany's invasion.

All major powers in a united front solve these problems. This shows their willingness to solve their disputes in a peaceful way in the very first place. It also makes the UN as the central power seems powerful which would gain fear in the countries who are seeking war and reduce their nationalism. And it was readily apparent throughout the historical investigations that nationalism is one of the most important factors for both the causes of World War I and World War II.

The form of collective great powers reduces any chance of hegemony, as seen from the League, that the League relied on the US severely. It has been seen that the US "dominated" the world's power after WWI. Hence the League can do nothing without US's involvement. Evidently, The Concert of Europe - a general consensus among the Great Powers of the 19th century in Europe. It created a balance of power, and "assumed the responsibility and right of the great powers" [6]. Even though it is "made obsolete in its original form" [6], its success was undeniable due to the fact that it "survived for most of the 19th century in the consultations among the great powers on territorial questions."

3.3. Public Support

The UN has been able to cultivate far more public support than did the League. This in turn shows the UN is stronger than the League. The more positive public support shows the UN itself is more worth relying on and trusting in members' impressions. It also illustrates that the members would be more likely to cooperate with the decisions that the UN made.

All three elements: the involvement of the major powers, greater finance and a more organized institution itself gained a more positive international image compared to which to the League. To back up, the Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey could show this conclusion in reality. This survey has across 32 surveyed countries. It could be seen a medium of 61% have a positive view of the UN. Regionally, support for the UN is strong in Europe, where majorities in 12 of 14 countries surveyed have a positive view of the UN [7].

This survey also indicates that the UN has settled into a relative security world, as it has spare time and energy to survey the countries to see their opinions. This shows that the UN is trying to make itself more perfect as its structure has already fully developed, which the League did not achieve in the first place. The League could never do such a survey as it was dealing with all global issues in panic and fluster.

However, it could make another problem to arise. The UN, as well as the other global institutions, got used to operating in a peaceful and secure world. This makes them hard to take an immediate

reaction. For instance, the WHO was blamed for the global pandemic of COVID-19. Because it did not get an immediate and effective solution when this virus was discovered initially. This slow reaction speed would considerably reduce the public support for the UN and other global institutions. As the result, the assistance rate might be decreased.

4. Problems Today

Even though the UN successfully adapted League's institutional structure, addressed the future more than the past. It makes the UN more long-lasting, as well as makes the UN more approachable to maintain a peaceful world. There are still more lessons that the UN could learn from the League that it has not yet.

4.1. Use of Force

The use of force was a crucial factor in the failure of the League. In both Japanese expansion and German expansion, the League did not have any force to stop them. Instead, they tried to resolve the problem peacefully by negotiating and making agreements on the affairs. However, Japan ignored the Lytton Report [4] and Hitler broke the Munich Conference [8], showing that the ambition is hard to be stopped in a peaceful way. The processes of delaying resort to war, the provisions for conciliation, arbitration or reference to the Permanent Court of International Justice, as well as the guarantee against aggression, would provide a cooling-off period. There was recognition, however, that this procedural approach would not stop a government set on a long-term policy of aggression, and, therefore, would prove not to be robust enough for the sort of ideologically driven aggression.

The UN is aware of this problem, it also realized that the only way to solve this problem is to have its own army. The UN tried to form its own army beyond any nation in the world. However, it is clear that it is impossible to get a group of people without a country behind them. Hence the UN failed to make its own army that is not dependent on any country. This is because there is no group of people independent of all the states but only belong to the UN. This makes it impossible for the UN army to be self-governed.

This makes the UN "military personnel working under the Blue Helmet are first and foremost members of their own national armies and are then seconded to work under the command and control of the UN." [9] This means the UN's ability to use force severely depends on member states' willingness to deploy combat troops. This shows the UN practice on military measures is more akin to the voluntary one envisaged by the Covenant than the centralized system of military sanctions envisaged by Chapter VII of the UN Charter, in which "Members shall hold immediately available national air-force contingents for combined international enforcement action."

This reveals the UN's willingness to create such a structure. Yet, it failed because the UN was unable to structure this beyond the nations. This makes the UN army will always be implicated by interests between nations. This exposes the UN's problem today. This problem became increasingly urgent since the Russia-Ukrainian war.

4.2. Politics in the United Nations

"If the United Nations is to survive, those who represent it must bolster it; those who advocate it must submit to it; ... those who believe in it must fight for it." [10] However, it could be seen clearly that this approach is hard to be reached with the politicization of each decision making. The decisions are used more as a way to gain benefit. An example of this could be the so many vetoes by Russia on the issue of the Russia-Ukrainian war.

It is shown today that the UN provided the success of deepened interdependence relationships between nations. But "failed to address problems which have emerged from ...(The UN's) very

existence.”[11] The politicization of decisions would shift the meaning of the UN. It makes the UN a place for countries to make themselves stronger, but not a place where all of them cooperate together for a secure world. This could be seen as a revealing point of the UN’s ineffectiveness.

The politicization of the UN has been played out in the SC. Robert Wade[12] states that Western countries, led by the UK and the US, marginalized the UN General Assembly. Leaving all the subjects to the SC, let the UN mainly dominated by the West - “which, naturally, were careful not to propose any measures that could be harmful to Western interests.”[11] The privilege as such has been aware evidently since the Russia-Ukrainian war that started on 24th February 2022. Based on the statistics as of February 2022, Russia had used its veto 120 times, the US 82 times, the UK 29 times, and France and China 17 times[13]. The public is now challenging the permanent members as they doubt most of the vetoes were for permanent members' own country's interests only.

The absolute power of SC is increasingly questioned since the Russia-Ukrainian war, and the US ambassador was “concerned by Russia’s shameful pattern of abusing its veto privilege over the past decades”[14], said Linda Thomas-Greenfield to the UN in a statement. While many countries view the US approach to exercising the veto as likewise problematic, as well as other permanent members.

The UN is now at the spot of having an opportunity to “step forward the accountability, transparency and responsibility of all” [15] permanent members in the SC. The final conclusion still remains unknown, and whether or not should the permanent members have such an amount of power still remains controversial. There are a few solutions being suggested today. Such as getting rid of the veto; limiting the use of the veto; changing the permanent membership. It could be seen that not only Russia has been challenged its power, but also all other permanent members.

It is apparent that none of the permanent members will be willing to reduce their powers. Although some of the permanent members, such as the US, do want to use these solutions to limit Russia’s power. It is not hard to guess that the US would not be contented when its own power got limited by the same solutions. It also seems impossible for the weaker nations to force all the great powers. Even if it did succeed, another problem would rise as the UN would be not powerful enough just like the League. Therefore, it is hard to see if any perfect solution could be made for this problem at this stage.

5. Conclusion

Taking everything into account, the UN has learned a lot of lessons successfully from the League. Its broader purpose, wider membership, binding power and the special organ of the Security Council made the UN much stronger and more solid than the League. The UN also developed its own advantages due to its background history. The involvement of great powers and more public support strengthened the UN’s capability when dealing with disputes between nations, or solving any international issues.

However, the UN has also demonstrated a series of problems it faces today. Either the problem of the use of force or the problem of politicization in the UN makes the UN problematic. Both of the problems became more and more crucial in our unstable-looking world today, exposed by the Russia-Ukrainian war. It also makes people start to be concerned about the credibility of “long live the United Nations” [16].

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