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The United Nations: Implications of Soft Power

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The United Nations is often looked to for guidance in conflict prevention and intervention, but its lack of hard power has proven to be extremely limiting. Although the United Nations has been a major improvement from the League of Nations, its ability to maintain world peace is restricted by the aspirations of its member states. The Security Council is especially significant, made up of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China and Russia. Each state in the Security Council has the ability to veto any initiative proposed by the United Nations. Additionally, the United Nations cannot take action without leadership

from one or more of its states, and many states are hesitant to sacrifice their military resources even in the event of major human rights violations. This hesitancy to intervene is especially evident in the case study of the Rwandan genocide, but can also be seen in the Cold War and the Syrian Civil War, amongst other conflicts.

Established in 1920 in the aftermath of World War I, the League of Nations was formed with a mandate to provide a forum for settling international disputes. Although initially receiving broad support from numerous powerful countries, a combination of factors led to its eventual failure. In 1945 the United Nations was founded in its place. However, the original failures of the League of Nations to resolve international issues alongside critical errors made by the United Nations has led many to question the legitimacy and stability of the United Nations. This paper will argue that the United Nations has ultimately failed to serve its role in international conflict resolution because it does not hold substantial power to forcefully intervene in conflicts and similar mistakes were made in its founding as were made in the League of Nations. This paper will be divided into four sections. The first section will discuss the creation of the League of Nations and the circumstances that led to its failure. The second section will discuss the creation of the United Nations and instances in the past, which exemplify the inability of the United Nations to prevent conflict, such as during the Cold War and the Rwandan genocide. The third section will demonstrate that despite a growing number of members and support from the major world powers, the United Nations does not hold a substantial amount of power to enable preventing or interceding in international conflicts today. Finally, the fourth section will summarize the failures of both organizations to provide peace and security within the international realm.

The League of Nations was created shortly after World War I and its principle goal was to maintain world peace. However, in the aftermath of the war, the League did not play a large role in deciding territorial divisions and as the League itself had no armed forces, it relied on the armies of its member nations to enforce its policies. Most powers were reluctant to exercise any hard power due to the tensions after the First World War and the fact that some of the biggest world powers, namely the USA and the USSR, were not initially members of the League. In the case of the United States, even though the idea for the League of Nations was first proposed by President Woodrow Wilson in his Fourteen Points, he failed to convince the US Senate that joining the organization would be beneficial and resultantly the US did not become a member. Although this alone did not cause the League of Nations to fail, it is often attributed as one of the biggest failures of the League in securing international power. Another major contributing factor to the failure of the League was the sanctions placed on Germany as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, and the fact that due to the treaty Germany was not invited to join the League. Some clauses of the treaty included forcing Germany to concede territories to Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Poland, in addition to making Germany take full responsibility for the war and all the debt for the material damage the war had caused.¹ Due to the lack of support from large world powers and the fact that the League of Nations had no hard power, it was unstable and

unable to enforce the sanctions placed on Germany under the treaty. This instability caused many states to withdraw from the League. Eduard Beneš observed that, "Of the five European Great Powers, three were in the throes of revolutionary ferment: Germany was under the influence of Hitler's revolutionary movement, Italy under that of the Fascist revolution, and Russia under that of the Communist revolution." ² Due to the onset of World War II, any hope that countries had placed in the League of Nations to prevent conflict was shattered, and the organization formally dissolved in 1946 to make way for the United Nations.

After the failure of the League of Nations to prevent another war, there was still heavy international support for a forum that would assist in resolving international disputes. Thus came about the idea for the United Nations, proposed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Determined to avoid the mistakes of the Wilson administration, the Roosevelt administration sought bipartisan support, and in July 1945 the Senate approved the UN charter by a vote of 89 to 2. ³ In addition to US support, the United Nations also had support from the USSR, making its support base significantly stronger than that of the League of Nations. However, despite support from the US and the USSR, the United Nations could not prevent the onset of the Cold War that would last for decades. Ragnar Müller observed that, "In terms of securing peace, the United Nations found itself in a deep crisis in the Seventies and Eighties: although it continued to maintain a presence in the Near East and Cyprus through a series of peace-keeping missions, it failed to prevent repeated military confrontations taking place in both conflict zones. It was equally wanting in making a contribution to the settlement of newly burgeoning warring conflicts in Nicaragua, West Sahara, Cambodia and Afghanistan, and the growing war between Iran and Iraq." ⁴ Yet another significant failure of the United Nations was its lack of intervention during the structured mass killings of Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, despite indisputable evidence that these killings were taking place. After the Holocaust, the vow of "Never Again" was adopted by the international community. Nonetheless, over a period of months, hundreds of Rwandans were systematically slaughtered daily and the United Nations took little action to intervene in the genocide. Illustrating the implications of a lack of strong leadership by the United Nations, the troops sent to Rwanda by Belgium and France were pulled out as soon as there was an imminent threat, and two thousand Rwandans who had gathered around the UN headquarters for safety were left abandoned to fight for themselves. ⁵ Although arguably one of the United Nations' biggest failures, the Rwandan genocide is not the only instance in which the United Nations failed to act.

The question arises as to why the United Nations has chosen not to intervene in certain international conflicts. One factor is that much like the League of Nations, the United Nations does not have a military of its own and instead relies on contributions from its member states to enforce its policies. In addition, the permanent members of the Security Council, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China and Russia all possess the ability to veto any substantial action clause proposed by the United Nations. ⁶ Security Council approval is also required to enact the UN's "responsibility to protect" clause, which allows humanitarian intervention to override state sovereignty in the case of systematic human rights violations. ⁷ In this regard, the United Nations has run into problems similar to those of the League of Nations in that it is impossible to adapt any

resolutions without full support from the major world powers. This has been the case in the Syrian Civil War, in which UN intervention was vetoed by China and Russia, demonstrating that even though an action proposal may have significant support within the United Nations, it can still be easily overthrown by the Security Council if there are one or more countries that do not support it. Another key factor in the actions of the United Nations is the measures taken by its member states in order to prevent conflict. Even if a motion is passed, if member states do not take action, it may lead to that motion not being implemented. This was the case in the War of Darfur, where the motion to intervene was passed by the United Nations but little action was taken and the small number of troops sent lacked the necessary equipment.⁸ Whether this be due to a lack of will, resources, or a combination of the two, it points to another fundamental weakness of the United Nations: the lack of an unambiguous effort to better the United Nations by its member states, and the expectation that other member states will take action.

In conclusion, the United Nations has ultimately failed to live up to its responsibility to protect human rights because it does not hold hard power by itself and irrevocable mistakes were made in its founding, such as giving veto-wielding power to a small number of powerful states. This has prevented the United Nations from being able to prevent or intervene in conflict on numerous occasions, including during the Cold War, in Rwanda, and in Syria. Due to the fact that the United Nations is not an individual entity, it cannot act without the approval and assistance of its member nations, and can only become stronger when its member states decide to take action. Specifically, the members making up the Security Council must agree to take action. Without full approval from the Security Council, the United Nations is unable to take action even if there is major support from other states. And even with full support from its members, all missions require army and weapon contributions from states, and thus the United Nations is at the mercy of how much each state contributes. It is important to remember that the United Nations is nothing more than a forum provided to assist in international disputes, and not a self-governing state or organization with its own hard power. Therefore, due to the fact that the United Nations was founded in the spirit of cooperation from its member nations, it can only be as strong as the collective investments that states make.

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