
The UN is at a watershed. The discord between its budget and the continually increasing demands by the international community to take over new tasks has not only exacerbated the already critical financial situation of the Organisation, but lead to widespread frustration with the UN’s potential to fulfil the tasks assigned to it by the Charter. This leaves only two potential to match the current monetary equipment of the Organisation or to make new funds available which would enable it to provide its services in a timely and efficient manner whenever the peaceful coexistence of the peoples of this world is threatened by international conflicts, violation of human rights, discrimination against certain groups of the population, unjust distribution of resources etc. Connie Peck’s book is an eloquent and encouraging plea for the second alternative.

Starting with a short analysis of the causes of the shortcomings in UN dispute settlement in the past, notably the effects of the Cold War, the author discusses the respective advantages of the three types of dispute settlement, i.e. power-based, rights-based and interest-based approaches, by taking into consideration the psychological mechanisms that determine the behaviour of the parties in a dispute. It becomes clear that, contrary to the past and present UN practice of concentrating on damage containment once fragile situations have escalated into full-fledged armed conflicts in the interest of cost-efficiency, manageability of contentious issues and long-term avoidance of future tensions much more attention should be given to the promotion of negotiations and conciliatory action before the parties have entered the vicious circle of aggression and counter-aggression. Peck also notes that traditionally in dispute resolution efforts undue preference is given to power-based approaches (‘carrot and stick’ strategies) in spite of the fact that interest-based approaches, that is good offices and mediation directed at finding a settlement which optimally reflects the interests of all parties, are much more likely to lead to the lasting termination of quarrels.

Following this survey of the dynamics of disputes in general, Peck illustrates the grievances that form the roots of intra-state conflicts and presents a range of measures governments could take to provide solutions tailored to meet the specific demands of the groups that feel politically, socially, economically or culturally underprivileged. She then examines the role international organisations, notably the UN and its affiliates, played so far and could play in the future in the prevention of clashes between ethnic groups and peacebuilding in general. The author notes that much has been achieved with regard to establishing standards for good governance as defined in various UN declarations on human rights. As an example the activities of the Centre for Human Rights are mentioned which offers various types of assistance to governments such as electoral assistance, training of public officers, advice on legislation etc. However, adequate institutionalized assistance in creating functioning democratic and pluralistic societies is not yet existing. With regard to this problem, the author presents suggestions that have been made to establish additional UN organs with mandates to support democratization processes, particularly addressing the need for economic development as a prerequisite for social peace and security.

In the following chapters, Peck focuses on preventive diplomacy as a means of avoiding an escalation of international disputes. Among the models presented she favours a ‘Regional UN Centre Model’ which would consist in setting up UN Conflict Prevention and Resolution Centres in every region of the world to monitor developments on the ground and to facilitate early solutions of crises by prompt and regular availability of expert advisory staff.

She then discusses ways to improve the UN’s right-based approach to international disputes, advancing up of the development of international law with the help of a commission of international experts and the expansion of the jurisdiction and increase in efficacy of the International Court of Justice.

The following chapter is dedicated to the task of strengthening the UN’s influence on its member states’ compliance with the UN Declarations on Human Rights. In the past UN human rights bodies such as the Commission on Human Rights and the Human Rights Committee have failed to provide satisfactory monitoring of, let alone protection of, human rights, hampered by procedural shortcomings, insufficient co-operation by governments, ideological controversies, lack of funds and the non-existence of effective sanctions for human rights violations. Nevertheless, Peck points to some positive recent developments in the performance of the human rights bodies that could be assisted by the establishment of organs like a Council for Petitions, an International Criminal Court and a Human Rights Court.

Peck’s proposals concerning strengthening the UN’s impact on international and intra-state dispute prevention and settlement via power-based methods include a review of the Security Council’s composition and decision-making process, in order to augment the legitimacy of its decisions, and the installation of a Rapid Deployment Force to make peacekeeping efforts more flexible.

Last but not least, the author addresses the crucial question of how such promising steps could be financed. The selection of possible answers she gives is small and exemplary, but all the more impressive insofar as the sacrifices required for the realization of any of the presented models seem marginal in comparison with the immense advantages the above mentioned measures would have with respect to the UN’s capacity to promote peace and prosperity in the world. Based on careful evaluation of scientific research on the topic, Peck shows that the limitation of positive results in dealing with international conflicts and human rights issues produced so far is to be largely attributed not to bureaucratic mismanagement within the Organisation, but to a lack of good will, short-sightedness and reluctance to accept responsibility on the part of the Member States. The skilful argument of the UN’s yet unexplored potential as a dispute settlement system and the capability of the author without resorting to pipe dreams to make one almost painfully aware of the discrepancy of what the UN is and what it could be make this book not only a fascinating lecture but also an effective remedy against the malaise of ‘UN-scepticism’.

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