

# Conflict, cooperation, and consensus— the role of the U.N.: a review

Benjamin V. Cohen, *The United Nations: Constitutional Developments, Growth, and Possibilities*

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This volume reproduces the Oliver Wendell Holmes Lectures for 1961, delivered at Harvard by a distinguished American lawyer and public servant. These are reflective essays deserving the attention of all who are puzzled as to what to make of the United Nations—and as to what *can* be made of that organization.

Cohen follows a familiar—and regrettable—line in describing the United Nations, in general terms, as an instrument of international cooperation. I suggest that this characterization is regrettable because it tends to confirm the commonly held misconception that international organization is founded upon the untenable premise that international relations are, or may be readily made, primarily cooperative in nature. “Realists,” convinced of the primacy of conflict in international relations, are all too ready to dismiss the United Nations as an agency doomed to ineffectiveness by its alleged foundation in idealistic illusion. In fact, international organization is a response to the recognition that the relations of states are both conflictual and cooperative in character; it represents an urge to control conflict and exploit the possibilities of cooperation. Both in design and in ac-

tual development, the United Nations is an arena for conflict as well as a center for collaboration. To describe it in terms which exclude half of this dualism is to invite misunderstanding of its role and underestimation of its potential usefulness.

To say that Cohen repeats the standard oversimplification of the United Nations as an agency of international cooperation is not to say that he analyzes the organization in terms of such a narrow conception. He presents a perceptive statement of the case for valuing the United Nations as a mirror of the world as it really is; “If the United Nations did not reflect the trouble, strife, and want of health which exist in the world today, it would indeed be a failure” (p. 67). Far from suggesting that the mission of the world organization is simply to stimulate harmonious collaboration, he argues that one of its most important functions is “to reflect the turmoil and trouble in the world, to alert us to what is happening . . . , to inform us of the repercussions of, and reaction to, these happenings . . . , and to give timely warning of approaching storms” (p. 68). In short, Cohen sees the United Nations as an agency for helping states to cope with the grim reali-

ties of strife, not as an expression of a utopian concept of international sweetness and light.

The conflictual and cooperative aspects of international relations are not subject to neat separation; what we have here is dualism but not dichotomy. Cooperation is an essential element in measures for dealing with the dangers of conflict, and conflict is a persistent intruder into schemes for promoting international cooperation. Recognition of this phenomenon of intermixture is implicit in Cohen's major suggestion regarding the development of the international role of the United Nations. Looking at relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, the author does not purport to see a realm of potential collaboration divorced from and independent of the basic struggle between these giants; rather, he sees an area of common interest which is a direct product of the struggle, a function of the intensity of the Cold War conflict. The conflict is intolerably dangerous to the vital interests of all concerned — which is everybody. Hence, the major contestants share an interest, which can properly be regarded as a global common interest, in preventing the conflict from exploding into thermonuclear violence. This means that the great powers have a joint stake in developing and using the United Nations as an agency for minimizing the danger that their struggle will disintegrate into total war. The plea for East-West cooperation to this end is not a denial of the reality of the conflict, but an acknowledgment of the common interest which arises precisely because the conflict is so desperately real.

In essence, Cohen's position is that the United States and the Soviet Union must both develop a clearer recognition of this common interest, and learn to act upon it.

In the United Nations, the powers possess an instrument capable of being used to enhance the stability of their basically conflictual relationships, provided their sense of the necessity for collaboration to contain and control their conflicts can triumph over their instinctive urge to utilize every available instrument for the waging of their competitive struggle. The author does not expect the great contestants to discover, miraculously, a broad basis for harmonious cooperation; he hopes that they may be rational enough to collaborate in making the United Nations the effective instrument of a limited but vital consensus on the necessity for preventing war.

This is no simple matter. For the United States, it involves a break in the habit of valuing the United Nations as a pro-Western voting machine; we shall have to stop upbraiding the Soviet Union for its refusal to pay deference to the majoritarian principle, and start trying to bring the Soviet Union into a consensus rather than to put it in a minority. As Cohen puts it, "We must rely more upon an appeal to reason and common interest and less upon the power to vote" (p. 73). Parenthetically, Cohen will have to stop regarding the Soviet veto as an inconclusive barrier to a decision which can properly be toppled by a majoritarian push (pp. 13-4), and come to regard the veto as a useful indicator of the gulf which remains to be bridged before consensus can be developed on a given issue. The veto is an evil device in the eyes of a majority bent on achieving a parliamentary triumph; it is a mere signal, indicating that the job has not yet been finished, for parties involved in the quest for consensus. The Soviet Union will have to shift its emphasis from the effort to immobilize the United Nations, to prevent it from being used against Soviet interests,

to the effort to promote the capacity of the organization for action in support of the common interest in preventing global catastrophe. Realists will have to stop asking what victories can be won; idealists will have to give up the expectation of the settlement of irreconcilable differences; all of us will have to accept the containment of conflict, the indecisive bolstering of a precarious stability of essentially hostile relationships, as the best practicable achievement of the United Nations.

There is a noteworthy balance in Cohen's treatment of the United Nations and of the troubled world in which it operates. He writes as a lawyer, but he brushes aside the simple "rule of law" slogan and exhibits a sophisticated understanding of the interrelationship of legal and political factors in international affairs. He is aware of the

urgency of the problem of survival which confronts us, but he offers the advice that "In this nuclear age we must put our faith in time as the great solvent of our difficulties" (p. 89). He agrees with the pessimist that the United Nations has not realized the high hopes of its founders, but adds the optimistic note that it has "survived trials that its founders never dreamed it could survive" (p. 63). This blend of pessimism and optimism, with its recognition that the best is not probable and the worst is not inevitable, and its dedication to the achievement of the tolerable, may well be the highest form of realism.

#### REFERENCE

- COHEN, BENJAMIN V. *The United Nations: Constitutional Developments, Growth, and Possibilities*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961.