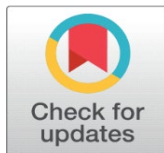
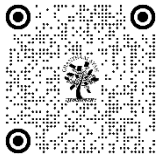


REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AS PEACE-BUILDERS: A LIBERAL APPROACH TO CONFLICT MITIGATION

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the role regional organizations play in regional peace-building within the theoretical framework of liberalism. Using a critical analysis of some of the key organizations, including but not limited to, the United Nations, European Union, African Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, this study looks at how liberal cooperation, multilateralism, and institutional governance help in efforts to prevent regional conflicts. The performance of these organizations in managing conflicts in the diverse regional context identifies their successes and shortcomings. The region of study particularly shines the light on how challenges have arisen from applying Western liberal frameworks in regions that were supposed to be non-Western and takes into consideration historical, cultural, and political conditions that require more adaptability and inclusiveness in peace-building interventions. This article argues that though liberalism remains the most significant tool in contemporary peace building, however its future requires a more fluid and multilevel engagement aimed at bringing local, national, and regional actors together in work toward sustainable peace.

Keywords: Liberalism, Regionalism, Peace-Building

1. INTRODUCTION

Background on Regional Conflicts

Regional conflicts have been a persistent feature in international relations, normally fueled by disputes over territorial boundaries, ethnic tensions, resource competition, and political instability. Such conflicts are normally prolonged and complex as they involve both local and external actors. Particularly, the post-Cold War era has been marked by growing intrastate and regional conflicts that seriously affect global peace and security. As the nature of these conflicts evolved, so did the mechanism adopted to deal with them. Regional organizations that work as a complementary tool with international institutions like the United Nations (UN) have become key players in mediating and settling these conflicts. This paper presents the theoretical underpinning of liberalism and how it underpins the role of international organizations in facilitating regional peace-building efforts.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LIBERALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The idea of liberalism tends to promote cooperation, interdependence, and the role of institutions in conflict resolution. Unlike what realism projects as a struggle for power between states putting self-interest at center stage, liberalism theorizes that cooperation by the state leads to peace and stability. International organizations also tend to act as a forum in dialogue, for norms building, and even in settling conflicts. At the heart of liberal theory is the assumption that international institutions can foster global governance, global economic integration, and collective security, by thus reducing the likelihood of conflict in international relations (Keohane & Nye, 1977). These principles represent a theoretical framework towards an understanding of international organization roles in conflict mitigation and regional peace-building.

Therefore, this paper explores how liberalism guides international organizations' strategies in addressing regional conflicts. To do this, it takes a closer look at some of the institutions represented by the UN, the European Union (EU), and regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in building peace within their regions.

3. LIBERALISM AND PEACE-BUILDING: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Liberalism argues that the anarchic nature of the international system itself does not automatically lead to conflict. Indeed, state cooperation can make mutual gains that reduce the propensity for war. Three key liberal elements particularly apply to peace-building are

1) Cooperation and Interdependence:

Liberalism argues that interdependent economies, and therefore trading states, are, intrinsically less war-prone, an argument supported by the theories of many great thinkers, most notably Michael Doyle (1986). Essentially, it holds that such complex interdependencies will create an environment that encourages peace. Where the two countries have important trade relationships, there is a growing realization on the part of both states of what constitutes loss due to the attributes of war. On the one hand, there are economic losses but, in addition, potentially disrupted beneficial alliances as well.

Perhaps one of the most salient features of economic interdependence is its highlight on the role of globalization in perpetuating peace. Increasingly, states become part of a global economic system, and it is from the interdependence of trade that negotiation and compromise can arise. As stated by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977), interdependence creates an environment in which states are likely to seek peaceful means to resolve the dispute, thus making for regional stability. In such an environment, the costs of cutting economic ties, for example lost markets, and interrupted supply chains and investments, make war less attractive.

2) Role of International Organizations:

It is in this contemporary international system that international organizations have played and will continue to play an important role. They are forums promoting dialogue, settlement of disputes, and enhancing collective security. According to G. John Ikenberry (2001), these institutions are critically important in bringing cooperation among states into the arena, considering how increasingly complex the international landscape has become. They offer structured environments through which states can engage in systematic communication, information exchange, and bargaining toward solving conflicts.

The importance of international organizations lies in the ability to create standards and institutional laws which guide the conduct of states. Such standards, normally drafted through collective processes, establish predictability and cooperation in interactions between states. For example, there is the UN and NATO, which have set protocols for resolution to peace and collective defense, therefore significantly minimizing any possibility of single-handed actions that may worsen the situation (Ikenberry, 2001).

Among the roles played by international organizations is promoting dialogue among member states. Dialogue will assist in the clarification of disputes and points in contention before they degenerate into violent wars. By providing a neutral discussion forum, organizations will diffuse tensions that will set an atmosphere through which the conflicting parties may resolve peacefully. The United Nations, for example, acts as an intermediary when conflicts arise. Conducting peacekeeping missions and diplomatic negotiations eases conflicts. This function not only solves the short-term conflict but also helps in providing long-term stability by re-emphasizing the importance of dialogue in international relations.

International organizations offer an avenue through which governments create legal frameworks to control the interaction between the state and the co-state. Subsequently, they determine a set of rules and standards that the states have to adhere to; this, in turn, increases predictability in international relations. The UNCLOS and other international treaties and conventions, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change, are classic examples of how international organizations can institutionalize norms that guide the behavior of states. These legal instruments orient states on behavior but also contain tools for accountability that further promote cooperative behavior by states.

The concept of collective security also explains the role of international organizations in the mitigation of conflict. Collective security arrangements where states agree to act together in response to aggression against one of their members serve as a deterrent to potential aggressors. This principle was foundational to the establishment of the League of Nations and later the United Nations. Ikenberry is absolutely right when he says that collective security frameworks increase stability. This may be because they offer reassurance to states that they will not be challenged alone; therefore, it builds a sense of community among its member states.

3) Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights:

Liberalism in international relations, for example, claims that peace is very much linked to democracy's diffusion as well as respect for human rights, thereby making democratic states less likely to engage in conflict with each other. This is supported by the work of Russett and Oneal (2001), whereby he reviews the democratic peace theory that explains the relationship between democracy and peace. According to the theory, democratic states tend to have peaceful relations due to their political setup, which more often puts emphasis on negotiation and compromise rather than conflict.

The democratic peace thesis has been based on several arguments that include: First, democratic governance promotes transparency and accountability, making the citizenry more educated and involved that makes it less likely to mobilize support for aggressive foreign policy. Democratic heads of states, being accountable to their citizens, also are confronted with formidable public opposition if a war is expected to result in loss of human life and economic unrest; such a dynamic creates an arena where policies are resolved not through arms but through words. Russett and Oneal (2001) holds that by historical record this is true since democracies have rarely engaged each other in war.

In addition, the commitment to democratic values and respect for human rights sometimes can be regarded critical to having peace that lasts. Liberal theorists contend that human rights protection within states leads to greater internal stability and social cohesion, lessening the possibility of civil wars and uprisings that can spill over to regional wars. Respect for human rights not only contributes to a fairer and more just society but also to contributors toward a stable order in international relations as well (Doyle, 1986). Together with democratic governance, which values respect for human rights, increased political participation, and rule of law breeds social stability, which in turn breeds international peaceful relations.

4. THE CONCEPT OF REGIONAL PEACE-BUILDING

Regional peace-building refers to the efforts in preventing, managing, or resolving conflicts at a certain geographical area. It encompasses a broad range of activities like mediation, peacekeeping following a conflict, post-conflict reconstruction, and political or economic stabilization. Institutions, democracy, and cooperation as perceived by liberalism become a starting point of explaining how regional peace-building processes are conceptualized and implemented (Paris 2004).

Liberal peace-building took another form in the post-World War II era with newly formed international organizations including, among others, the UN, followed by institutions established during the Bretton Woods conference (Galtung, 1976). These were meant to establish globalization and economic stability, so nothing like another large-scale war could happen again. Regional organizations in the Cold War and through the 1990s continued the project of institutionalizing this liberal ideal that multilateral institutions could impose peace in war-torn regions.

5. ROLE OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN PEACE-BUILDING

1) European Union (EU)

Indeed, the European Union had played a very significant role in conflict prevention, specifically in the post-Cold War period where its activity goes far beyond purely economic cooperation to ambitious peace-building practices. The integration of former communist states within the EU had turned out to be very conducive for their economic recovery but also an essential pathway toward stabilization and democratic consolidation (Smith, 2003). The EU offered membership incentives to these states and encouraged them to adopt a number of reforms to bring governance structures within them in line with European norms and standards, instilling in them the principles of democracy, rule of law, and human rights as constitutive elements of their political structure.

The central mechanism in the framework of the EU strategy within this context is the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), a tool designed to support integration into the EU of the Western Balkan countries. Such a process reflects the liberal view, where it is shared that interdependence based on economics and political cooperation can promote peace in particular hostile regions (Kaldor, 2007). Through the SAP, the EU has provided substantive investment in reconstruction and development projects targeting most grievances that affect socio-economic life, which leads to conflict. In the interest of economic cooperation and stability in the region, the EU has striven to transform the Balkans from a region of war and fragmentation into one where collaboration and integration predominated. Beyond that, the intervention of the EU in the Balkans after the Yugoslav Wars represents its commitment to settlement of disputes based on diplomatic principles. The way in which the international organizations would use their influence to avail dialogue and negotiate peace settlements is quite well outlined in the Dayton Accords, which ended the Bosnian War. In that way, the EU addressed short-term security needs by actively contributing to the peace process and therefore creating a framework for reconstruction in post-conflict phases.

Further, the nature of EU engagement in peace-building in the Balkans is portrayed by good governance and the building of civil society. It has been centered on creating an effective and robust civil society strong enough to address the structural causes of conflict by investments in local institutions and bottom-up approaches. This is in tandem with liberal peace-building tenets, which emphasize inclusiveness of authority and neighborhood participation as conditions for sustaining peace. However, the role of the EU goes beyond immediate involvement in conflict situations because it provides for the establishment of norms and legal frameworks governing the actions of member states. By providing instruments like the European Neighborhood Policy and the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the EU has created a rules-based international order that calls for the peaceful settlement of conflicts and multilateral cooperation. It is, in effect, a normative dimension to be crucial in the formation of the behaviors of states and the fostering of peace culture in that region.

In Conclusion the EU had played the role of transforming post-Cold War Europe through the reduction of conflicts and peace building. It concentrated on regional stability through the integration of former communist states and targeted peace-building through economic interdependence and democratic governance as well as the development of collective security. In this respect, lessons learnt through the experience of the EU in the Balkans are especially relevant since they reveal the capabilities and weaknesses of international organizations within the context of regional processes of peace and sources of conflict.

6. AFRICAN UNION (AU)

The African Union has portrayed itself as a major player in the continent, especially when it comes to peacekeeping and the resolution of some conflicts that have been witnessed on the continent, and it has significantly contributed to regional stability through its various missions and initiatives. The commitment of the AU towards peace and security is also embedded in its Constitutive Act, which indicates the responsibility of the organization to intervene in the member states so as to prevent genocide, crimes, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (African Union, 2000). This commitment has seen several high-profile missions to keep peace in strife-torn regions such as Darfur, Somalia, and South Sudan.

The AU launched the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) in 2004 in Darfur. This marked one of the first major peacekeeping missions undertaken by the AU: it was to safeguard civilians and assist in the implementation of peace agreements amidst surging violence by government forces, rebel groups, and ethnic militias (Williams, 2011). The AU had to play a highly crucial role in bringing global attention to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, though the mission faced

considerable operational challenges, partly because of limited resources and logistical support from member states and the international community (Zanker, 2017).

The AU also deployed African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to fight the Al-Shabaab insurgency and stabilize the transitional government. AMISOM has rendered critical roles in the urban areas to secure access for humanitarian and train the Somali security forces (Menkhaus, 2010). The AU's mission draws attention to its focus on collective security and regional cooperation as means of handling complex security threats. However, despite these successes, AMISOM has been continuously faced with challenges such as continuing violence, lack of troops, and fund constraints, which have not been successful in helping the mission realize sustainable peace (Menkhaus, 2010).

Another even more illustrative case is AU's intervention in South Sudan. Upon gaining independence in 2011, the state plunged into civil war. The AU responded by beginning mediation efforts and supporting negotiation of peace agreements. The AU's High-Level Revitalization Forum was to bring together conflicting parties to start discussing a lasting political settlement that reflects the AU's commitment to dialogue as a means for conflict resolution. However, the entrenched nature of the conflict, ethnic rivalries, and lack of political will among South Sudanese leadership have still limited the effectiveness of the AU.

In a nutshell, involvement in peacekeeping and conflict resolution on the part of the African Union exemplifies its responsibility as a stakeholder in seeing that security in the continent is well maintained. The AU has come out to prove commitment towards collective security by joining missions in maintaining stability in regions in Darfur, Somalia, and South Sudan. However, the problems confronting the organization are rather serious, such as the inadequacies of resources and the complexity of the conflicts that it is to resolve. The problems therefore call for an all-inclusive approach to peace-building in respect of the socio-political context of African conflicts with improvement of the capacity of the AU in undertaking its obligations.

7. ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS (ASEAN)

ASEAN's approach to peace-building is exceptional within the context of regionalism because it has its roots in core principles of noninterference and consensus-building. Given that these are integral elements of so-called "ASEAN Way, respect for state sovereignty and aversion from interventionist maneuvers within the domestic affairs of its member states ensure regional stability without ever running the risk of something being perceived as an infringement on national autonomy (Acharya, 2001). The consensus-based decision-making process also helped the ASEAN members form a cooperative environment where they would, without raising the tensions, come to terms with common challenges each confronted. It has been challenging for the same approach in handling internal conflicts where, despite the reluctance of ASEAN to interfere with internal matters, it has often restricted its capacity to effectively intervene or resolve crises.

One of the most important examples that has well illustrated the limits of the ASEAN non-interference policy is the very reserved approach taken by ASEAN toward Myanmar's internal crisis. Though serious human rights abuses committed by Myanmar's military junta-including persecuting the Rohingya minority-there has been a rare countering to stand by ASEAN more towards direct intervention, emphasizing mainly diplomatic engagement and dialogue instead. The unwillingness of the organization to engage Myanmar on human rights grounds reveals the contradiction faced by ASEAN in its peace-building expectations versus its norm of non-interference (Haacke, 2002). In fact, this tension could be seen through the instance of Myanmar's political crisis immediately after the coup in 2021, wherein ASEAN's mediation through the Five-Point Consensus appears to be insufficient, given the limitation of the capacity of the organization to enforce compliance.

Nevertheless, the input that ASEAN has into regional peace-building should not be understated. The organization has played a very important role in facilitating dialogue at the regional level, especially in areas where conflict tends to seek an escalatory way of fulfilling its purpose. A good case is when the organization took an active role in trying to downplay tensions in the South China Sea, an area marked by multiple, overlapping territorial claims and strong strategic rivalries between China and a number of ASEAN member states. The mechanisms of the ASEAN Regional Forum, as well as the ASEAN-China dialogue, have been used to air discussion and build confidence, effectively preventing escalation from disputes over the South China Sea into outright conflict. Though ASEAN has not dealt with the concerns about territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea, it has played a very important role in ensuring an almost peaceful management of tension through diplomatic dialogue.

Moreover, based on a consensus-building approach, ASEAN can easily steer around regional sensitivities while at the same time keeping unity among membership that is as diverse as its own. The crux of the consensus model is that collective decision making becomes possible without having to enforce policies that may offend or undermine the sovereignty of the states. This has played an important role in managing relations among ASEAN members with different political systems, levels of development, and strategic interests (Ba, 2009). On the other hand, however, it slows down decision-making processes; for example, in cases where immediate and decisive action may be required to effectively address regional crises.

ASEAN's peace-building approach, though unique, and of course, effective in specific areas, underlines the various trade-offs associated with emphasizing non-interference and consensus over more direct interventional roles. That ASEAN has proven capable of promoting regional dialogue and, at times, reducing tensions—such as those surrounding the South China Sea—promotes a value for peace through multilateral cooperation. At the same time, however, its approach also has significant limits in situations like those of Myanmar's internal conflicts, where the need for sovereignty and non-interference prevents ASEAN from taking a more assertive role in conflict resolution.

8. CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS OF LIBERAL PEACE-BUILDING

Bureaucratic Inefficiency

Regional organizations possess a tremendous potential to prevent conflicts and rebuild peace, but have been relatively criticized for their slow and often inefficient response to regional conflicts. One of the primary challenges is the method for making a decision, which generally calls for consensus among the member states. This basis of unanimity can cause delays in action because members have diverse priorities and interests or other political constraints that might hinder an appropriate, timely intervention. For instance, at the level of AU or ASEAN-type organizations, the pressure for consensus sometimes results in prolonged debates that enable the spillover of conflicts before there is real action (Paris, 1997). Moreover, missions of these organizations are usually under-resourced, in terms of finances and logistics, which undermines their ability to tackle adequately the scale and complexity involved in regional conflicts. Insufficient funding, lack of the right equipment, and an inability to find sustained international support have dogged AU peace-keeping missions in Darfur or Somalia. As such, missions by regional organizations are never successful in achieving the intended goals and reinforce this perception that regional entities, good as their intentions might be, are too slow and unable to respond to crises in their regions. This criticism speaks to an underlying problem of institutional capacity and greater requirements for reforms that ought to strengthen the operational effectiveness of regional organizations in conflict mitigation efforts.

Sovereignty vs. Intervention

One of the significant dilemmas that liberal peace-building faces is the tension between respect for state sovereignty and the need for intervention in the event of internal conflicts. Such dilemma, in particular, is highly visible in regional organizations, as exemplified by the case of ASEAN, where non-interference is one of its core elements making up its operational ethos. Liberal peace-building, insisting on cooperation, institution-building, and democratic values, faces serious frustration in making peace even if it has to compromise the respect for sovereignty enjoyed by many states. Indeed emphasis on consensus and non-interference within ASEAN has reduced the ability of the organization to address internal crises within its members. A classic case in point here is the apparently very timid and even passive stance that ASEAN has taken on Myanmar's internal conflicts, be it over the military coup or the Rohingya crisis. For instance, ASEAN has opened the avenue for dialogue and diplomatic engagement. However, its direct intervention is hobbled by its founding principles, wherein state sovereignty is emphasized and direct involvement in the affairs of the member countries is de-emphasized (Bellamy & Williams, 2010). This tension reflects a deeper challenge in liberal peace building: international institutions, chastened by the need to respect state sovereignty, are impotent against violations of human rights or the exercise of authoritarian governance. But the result is a compromise between regional stability and cooperation and effective intervention in conflict situations thus undermining the general goals of peace-building and resolution.

Liberalism's Overemphasis on Western Models of Peace-building

Liberal peace-building, which is based on democracy, cooperation, and institution-building, has received a lot of critics over time since it tries to impose Western values and models on the non-Western societies with minimal regard to the local contexts. For example, scholars like Chandler (2010) were adamant that many liberal peace-building initiatives were hinged on the assumption of transplanting Western-style democratic institutions and market-oriented economies into the specifics of post-conflict regional circumstances. This tends to lead, for instance, in Afghanistan and Iraq, where liberal peace-building was driven by external actors who pursued the imposition of democratic governance, to conflicts with local populations. This resistance was rooted in a conflict between liberal values and deeply entrenched local practices, informal power structures, and political dynamics that did not fit the liberal peace-building framework. However, the lack of ownership in such processes, although incorporating external governance models, more often led to only weakened legitimacy and to failed peace mainly because it became unsustainable. This one-size-fits-all model of liberal peace-building runs the risk of ignoring legitimacy at the grassroots level and then alienates local actors, diminishing sustainable chances for peace. Critics argue, therefore, for a more context-sensitive approach-to the specific needs, histories, and cultural dynamics of these regions in which peace-building is undertaken-instead of applying a rigid, Western-centric model of governance.

9. DEPENDENCY ON EXTERNAL ACTORS

Liberal peace-building mainly seeks to entrust peace building to international organizations, foreign governments, and NGOs. While such a move puts resources and expertise to the fore, it constitutes a decisive role that offends local owners of the process, which lessens long-term sustainability. According to the convincing argument raised by Paris (2004), external-imposed peace, which is delivered without adequate participation of local actors, lacks cultural input and legitimacy for eventual stability. This results in a tentative peace which appears to be resting on outside actors and resources, as was the case with Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose post-conflict reconstruction was heavily influenced by international interventions but raised much doubt about the sustainability of the long-term prospects since no local stakeholder owned them. These externally driven policies can also perpetuate local imbalances of power or create aid dependencies abroad, halting even the possibility of viable, self-reliant institutions from being formed. Then only shall peace be sustainable when local actors are constructively involved in the peace building process through shaping and leadership that fosters a sense of ownership and legitimacy critical for long-term success (Mac Ginty, 2011).

10. PROSPECTS OF LIBERAL PEACE-BUILDING IN REGIONAL CONFLICTS

In the context of world politics, the emergence of multipolarity, non-state actors, and decentralized conflict calls for a reconsideration of conventional liberal peace-building models. Basically, the liberal approaches take the position of institutions, democracy, and economic solutions, and are incapable of handling the depth and complexity of modern conflicts as reflected in transnational threats and fragmented political landscapes (Duffield, 2007). Regional bodies, the African Union (AU) and ASEAN, are also increasingly emerging as important forces in peace-building, but they also continue to be hampered by a meager allocation of resources and a weak operational capacity. Improving these institutions' peace-keeping frameworks and capacities for conflict prevention will have to be done for them to be successful in the role of resolving conflicts. This would entail moving liberal peace-building into a much more inclusive methodology, with local, national, and regional actors all included in the process. Even as it gives prominence to the local capacity building, this will allow organizations at the international level to play the kind of supporting role by offering resources and legitimacy rather than trying to be central in the process. The hybrid approach has, as Richmond (2011) suggests, balanced aspects of local ownership against international support can provide a more durable and contextually responsive solution to conflict management. It is therefore hoped that liberal peace-building frameworks can be designed in a far more conceptual way to accommodate more complex and interrelated global conflicts as they are manifested today.

11. CONCLUSION

This study has sought to understand the role played by international organizations in regional peace-building based on the basis of liberalism that acts as a conceptual theory. Liberalism has emerged as a basis on which most of the existing institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), African Union (AU), and the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN) have established its liberal principles of cooperation, multilateralism, and democracy promotion as a mechanism for preventing regional conflicts. International cooperation and institutions are based on liberal premises that encourage dialogue, build up norms, and create economic interdependence to prevent conflict and bring long-term peace-building.

However, liberal peace-building has several challenges and issues attaching to it. These include, among others, the trade-off between sovereignty and intervention, applicability of the Western models in the non-Western context, and the limitation of externally led peace initiatives that do not enhance local ownership. These therefore mean that there is a need for international and regional organizations to change their peace-building strategy in response to the changing dynamics in global politics. As the rise of multipolarity and decentralized conflicts implies, the application of liberal principles will need to be reshaped in a manner that does not undercut core tenets of cooperation, institution-building, and multilateralism. Insofar as involving local actors bolster regional capacities over and above traditional approaches, liberal peace-building remains an indispensable ingredient for achieving durable, sustainable peace in troubled regions.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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