

CHAPTER 5

Intergovernmental organizations

International organizations can be formed by non-state actors, as we saw in the previous chapter, but also by states. The latter can be grouped under the term intergovernmental organizations. They must be distinguished from alliances: an alliance is a temporary cooperation between parties, an international organization is a new entity established by several parties. Alliances are of all times, on the level of individuals, families, tribes, nations, and states. Intergovernmental organizations, on the other hand, are relatively new but have become one of the most pervasive global structures in the world today. States establish these organizations to achieve at least one of three goals: prosperity, peace, and the promotion of values. In terms of 3-Is, they therefore mostly pursue *interests*, in particular peace, security, and trade. A spin-off of these interests, however, is the pursuit of certain *ideas* (like free-market, human rights) and *identities* (pan-Islam, Pan-Africanism, European unity).

In this chapter, several types of intergovernmental organizations will be discussed whereby the main question is *why* they were established. What we will see with all these intergovernmental organizations is the dilemma of their founding states who, on the one hand, feel the need to establish such organizations but, on the other hand, are reluctant to give up their state sovereignty. The result is that most intergovernmental organizations are given little power to implement their decisions or policies, which reduces their effectiveness and autonomy.

International organization is a general term for any organization that works on an international scale. **Intergovernmental organizations** are international organizations founded by states. **International non-governmental organizations** are international organizations founded by non-state actors.

International cooperation: the United Nations

As early as in the 1920s, immediately after the First World War, the initiative was taken to create a world platform where all states could come together to solve their differences. However, the League of Nations was unable to withstand the aggression of Japan in China and, later, Germany in Europe. The Second World War showed again the need for some kind of international platform for states to discuss issues of peace and conflict, and in 1945 the United Nations was established. The United Nations ran all the risks of being stillborn, just like its predecessor the League of Nations. However, two global situations arose that made the United Nations one of the most important players in international relations.

The first situation was the **Cold War** whereby the two hegemonic superpowers, the United States of America and the Soviet Union, perceived the other as an existential threat and, paradoxically, contained that threat by the doctrine of 'mutual assured destruction' (MAD). At the same time, they used all their persuasive powers to win over other states to their camp. This was what for the next decades would determine international relations. The United Nations, and especially its Security Council, was one of the few locations where the Americans and Soviets could meet and discuss their disputes. Also, in other conflicts the United Nations proved successful in diffusing some disputes that might otherwise have led to a full-blown war.

The second international issue that confronted the United Nations immediately after its foundation was the **process of de-colonization**. After the Second World War, the colonial empires started to crumble and as a result the United Nations, in the first two decades of its existence, expanded to include more than thirty new states that had gained their independence. This created tensions between the General Assembly, where these new states were voicing their anti-colonial criticism, and the Security Council where four of its five permanent members, France, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and America, had been (and in some instances still were) colonial powers. Paradoxically, in the 1950s and 1960s, America and the Soviet Union both proclaimed staunchly anti-colonialist policies, but these were mostly directed towards the British, French and Dutch colonies.

Organization of United Nations

The United Nations consists of two bodies: the Security Council and the General Assembly. The **General Assembly** represents all the member states, but their resolutions and declarations have no decisive power. That power belongs exclusively to the **Security Council**. This council has five permanent members (United States, Soviet Union, China, United Kingdom, France) and ten members that rotate with 2-year terms. Only the five permanent members have the **right of veto**.

The undemocratic set-up of the United Nations is questioned regularly, especially with the sharp increase of member states (from 51 states in 1945 to 193 states in 2024) and the emergence of new economic and political powers (India, Japan, Germany, Nigeria, South Africa, Brazil). An extra point of contention is that many of the new member states are former colonies of France and the United Kingdom who are both permanent member of the Security Council.

Regional political and economic cooperation: the European and African unions

It may seem perfectly logical for certain regions who share a historical, linguistic, and cultural legacy to cooperate in issues of trade, and perhaps even politics. It is interesting therefore that a European Union came into existence despite its multiple languages and cultures, while an Arab Union has never come about even though the more than twenty Arab countries share a language, history, and, to a certain extent, culture. This makes more pertinent the issue of ‘why’ such regional cooperation comes into existence. We will discuss this below using two examples, the European Union and the African Union.

European Union

After the devastating experiences of First World War (1914-1918) and the Second World War (1939-1945), the *raison d'être* of the European Union was the **prevention of war**. It was in this situation that the French minister of foreign affairs, Robert Schuman, who was from the German-speaking part of the French Elzas, formed a plan “to make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible.” In 1951, Germany, France, and four other countries established the European Coal and Steel Community, in which they shared the coal and steel industry so that no country had exclusive access to these weapon-making resources. This European community was unique in the world because it was the first intergovernmental organization wherein states gave up sovereignty over these resources, and placed control of them outside its national authority. This is also known as supranationalism.

Supranationalism means that an issue is elevated outside and above (‘supra’) the national state which gives up its right of say in this issue.

In 1975, the Coal and Steel Community was turned into the European Economic Community. The main goal was still to create a situation that would guarantee peace on the continent, but this new community also hoped to attain that goal by creating an **open market** whereby people and goods could freely move across borders. This single action accomplished two aims at once: it created prospects for a European economic prosperity, and it would build an interdependency among the member states so that they would benefit from each other rather than fight each other.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated after 1989, Eastern and Western Germany were joined to become the Germany that we know today. Allowing the union to take the place of a country that only half a century ago had drawn the continent into a devastating war shows how far the Europeans had come and how much trust there was among them. This spirit of togetherness also had its effect on the community

itself. In 1992, a new transformation was made, and the European Economic Community became the European Union, a union that maintained its first two goals of preventing war and free movement of people and goods but now added a third goal as a **community of shared values**. However, these values, together with the rapid expansion of the Union, have created tensions among the member states. The large number of member states had increasing differences of views about the values they were supposed to share. Also, the system of taking decisions by consensus was harder to achieve with many than with few. And in several member states there was a growing opposition to the supranational character of the Union.

African Union

The reason for the founding of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 was decolonization: the entire African continent had been colonized by European powers, and most of these colonies obtained their independence in the 1950s and early 1960s. But the movements that had called for state independence had also called for some kind of African unity. This unity was known as **Pan-Africanism**, but although it was a notion that mobilized people, it was not entirely clear whether it referred to the unity of a shared past of colonialism, or a unity of a culture that was called Africa, or a more pragmatic unity of political or economic cooperation.

While acclaiming Pan-Africanism, all the new independent African states adhered to their separate **territorial and national unity**. However, many of these states, due to their colonial legacy, had little unity as a nation, since they upheld the colonial boundaries that cut through former tribal, territorial, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Nevertheless, territorial and national unity inherited from colonial times was strictly adhered to. Moreover, these states held a strong sense of **sovereignty**, and by consequence would not give any part of it up for some supranational organization, nor accept any interference from fellow-African states. The Organization of African Unity therefore became a loose association of independent and sovereign states. What remained of the ideal of Pan-Africanism was the objective to find African solutions for African problems, which was often more a slogan than an actively pursued objective.

This changed by the late 1990s. Two countries took the lead in reforming the Organization of African Unity: Nigeria, one of the most vibrant economies of the continent, and South Africa, that had just thrown off the system of apartheid and that had gained enormous prestige and authority in the continent. These two countries merged the concepts of good governance and human rights (based on the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe) and a project called the 'African Renaissance' which focused on poverty reduction and sustainable development. In 2002, these initiatives led to a restructuring of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union. This Union still maintains as its main goal the 'common vision of united and strong Africa'. But this time the member states had given this

Union powers to reach that goal, including the right to intervene in cases of war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, and 'serious threats to the legitimate order'. This power of intervention is like that of the United Nations but goes much further than is, for instance, the case in the European Union. Since then, the African Union has summoned numerous military peace keeping missions to intervene in conflicts on the continent.

Faith-based state-organizations: Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Catholic Church

Among the international organizations are many that are based on faith. Most of these are non-state actors, as we have seen in the previous chapter, but there are two that have a distinct state-quality that deserves closer attention.

Intergovernmental organization based on faith: the Organization of Islamic Cooperation

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) unites states with a Muslim majority population (and some with a Muslim minority population, like Surinam). What binds these states is not a region, like the European or African Union, or a purpose, like the United Nations, but a religion. However, the main reason for the OIC to be established in 1969 was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Apparently, this was considered an Islamic issue more than a political one.

The OIC had set itself three goals. The first was the **defense of Palestine**, but the organization failed to achieve any change or to play any significant role in the conflict. The OIC provided no material support nor did it initiate any diplomatic initiatives. The second goal was to promote **unity and cooperation** among its member states. The assumption was that the common bond of faith would generate shared interests. But this did not transpire, because even though the member states included such extremely wealthy countries as Saudi Arabia and Brunei, as well as extremely poor and developing countries like Bangladesh and Afghanistan, the solidarity among these states was apparently not enough to establish a system of sharing wealth and economic assistance.

The third goal was to create a **pan-Islamic identity**. This was perceived as a shared identity, and not as an ideology to unify the states. The charter of the OIC made clear that the member states enjoyed a sovereignty that was not to be violated nor surrendered to any supranational ideals. Nevertheless, it was in this identity that the member states found a common goal in the 1990s. In those years, criticism of Islam had become increasingly strong in Europe and in the United States. The OIC quite successfully used its diplomatic channels to put this issue on the international agenda: it introduced a resolution at the United Nations that

called on the member states to prohibit the 'defamation of religion'. After years of deliberation, a compromise was reached: the OIC agreed that European countries did not need blasphemy laws to protect Islam, but the European countries would pledge themselves to jointly combat intolerance, discrimination, and violence that was based on religion.

Faith-based state with a transnational community: the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church has maintained organizational structures that date back more than a thousand years. At the same time, the Church has absorbed key elements of today's state and international organizations, making it a unique hybrid organization that is national as well as international and transnational (see chapter 'Transnationalism'). This shows in the following characteristics:

National: the place where the seat of this organization is established, Vatican City, is effectively a state, but with the special feature of being an absolute autocracy, with the Pope holding full legislative, executive, and judicial powers. This situation is not intentional but has grown historically. Vatican City State is not only functioning as a state but is also internationally recognized as such.

International: The Catholic Church has permanent observer status at the United Nations. This requires some explanation. Even though Vatican City is a recognized state, it never applied for membership of the UN. Instead, it preferred the status as permanent observer, which it got in 1964. Its full title was 'Non-Member State Permanent Observer' which is not a state like all the other states, but it is effectively treated like a state. The only other two entities that have such status are Switzerland (until it decided in 2002 to become a full member state) and Palestine since 2019.

Transnational: the Catholic Church represents a community of 1.2 billion believers all over the globe. This makes it the largest transnational organization in the world. The leader of the Church, the Pope, has an absolute say in what unites all these people: their faith.

Through all these organizational forms the Catholic Church has, in the words of Pope Francis (since 2013), one principal mission: 'evangelization, bringing the Good News to everyone'. The International Relations theorists therefore call the Catholic Church a '**norm entrepreneur**', that is. an actor who promotes certain norms.

The Catholic Church maintains **two separate foreign relations**. One is political, by means of diplomats, also called nuncios, who are posted in other states (and those states also send their ambassadors to Vatican City). The other is religious, by means of bishops, who are also posted all over the world.

Other international purpose-oriented organizations

States have also established other types of organizations, mostly for specific purposes. Some of these organizations are intergovernmental, and some can be classified as alliances or as mere forums to meet. For instance, the United Nations has set up several intergovernmental agencies that are semi-independent and that work on specific issues, like the World Health Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the Food and Agriculture Organization. States have also set up their own intergovernmental agencies for specific purposes, separate from the United Nations, like the World Bank (goal: 'reduce poverty'), NATO (goal: 'consult and cooperate on defence and security-related issues'), International Organization for Migration (goal: 'humane management of migration'), to name but a few. The degree of independence of these organizations from their founding states differs per organization.

Other intergovernmental forms of regional cooperation

ASEAN - Association of Southeast Asian Nations (10 member states): cooperation among states to "accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development". No transfer of sovereignty: non-interference is explicitly agreed upon.

OAS - Organization of American States (34 member states): pursuit of four goals: democracy, human rights, security, and development. No transfer of sovereignty, but mutual accountability and transparency.

OSCE - Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (57 member states): Comprehensive approach to security, which also includes concerns about democracy, human rights, minorities, environment. Partial sovereignty transfer by means of the organization's ministerial council and parliament.

G-7: Forum where the 7 states with the world's largest economies (all Western) meet and discuss pressing issues. Sometimes the forum is extended to 20 states.

BRICS - Forum of emerging market economies that meets to discuss pressing issues. The forum is a political-economic response to the G-7. The acronym refers to the founding states: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa. Since 2024, new member states are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Ethiopia.

Further reading

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