



Supranationalism and the Superpower Rubicon

By Imtiaz Hussain

The Chapter VII Powers of the United Nations Security Council by Erika de Wet. Portland, OR: Hart Publishing, 2004. 413pp.

By joining the United Nations (UN), countries agree to neither threaten nor violate the territorial integrity or political independence of any other state. Among the exceptions to this Article 2:4 provision of the UN Charter are the Charter's own Chapter VII articles 39-51, directed against threats and breaches of peace and acts of aggression. This is all well and good from the collective or supranational viewpoint, which assumes states, upon becoming members, voluntarily delegate a part of their sovereign rights to the UN. Occasionally, however, power rivalries intervene, subordinating collective pursuits. Anticipating such moments, the UN Charter allows recourses such as Article 96:1 by which either the General Assembly or Security Council may turn to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for an advisory opinion. One obvious question arises: Is the ICJ competent to review the legality of Security Council decisions in contentious proceedings? Since the use of force traditionally tramples on human rights, another question is implicit: To what extent do human rights norms constrain the Security Council's international peace and security enforcement measures? If these measures are economic, the victims may be innocent segments of the population at large, as in Cuba for over forty years or Iraqi children over the last ten, rather than the desired villains. If such measures are political or military, for instance, such as the Iraqi no-fly zone protecting Kurds from Baathist persecution, actual Kurdish persecution may not only continue but also become more vicious.

Erika de Wet's The Chapter VII Powers of the United Nations raises the above questions. By illustrating international relations (IR) problems such as those alluded to, it also highlights the brewing relationship between IR students/scholars and international lawyers to whom the book is addressed. Deriving from her meticulous discussions of when and how the Security Council should act, I reconsider some *spoiler* issues: subjectivism in the actual Chapter VII invocation of Chapter VII cases, where and how the ICJ may fit in and what all these mean for contemporary world governance.

Background: Substantive v. Structural Perspectives

Both substantive and structural dimensions of Chapter VII discretionary enforcement powers limit the Security Council, according to de Wet. Comprehending both is facilitated by first

understanding what is meant by *norms*. Stephen D. Krasner describes them as “standards of behavior defined in terms of rights and obligations” (Krasner 1983: 2). By substantive, de Wet means (a) “peremptory norms of international law,” such as *ius cogens*, (b) “fundamental human rights norms,” and (c) “basic norms of international humanitarian law” (180). According to Jean Allain, *ius cogens* represents norms “so essential to the international system that their breach places the very existence of that system in question” (Allain 2003: 82), and indeed, peremptory norms “may not be violated by states—full stop.” He specifically argues, “any action that falls within the domain of *jus cogens*, be it a unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral act—customary or otherwise—is, by definition, prohibited as being legal” (Allain 2003: 83). Peremptory norms, he points out, were often interpreted in terms of treaty invalidation but only in 1969 did they gain international salience. This was when the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties permitted invalidation or termination of a treaty, through articles 53 and 64, if the substance “conflict[ed] with a peremptory norm of general international law.”¹ Human rights norms and basic norms uphold UN Charter purposes and principles but still collide with SC enforcement action, as armed conflicts frequently show.

Conflicts also expose the structural component of de Wet’s argument by which she refers to “the power of the SC to delegate certain powers to sub-organs or other entities” (180). One example was the November 1950 Uniting for Peace Resolution (UPR), authorizing the repulsion of North Korean troops by a UN force under US command.

Article 39 of the UN Charter authorizes the Security Council to determine when a “threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or an act of aggression” occurs. Arguing that this significantly influences the *when* and *how* of Security Council action, de Wet’s work opens an IR Pandora’s box, as the UPR example demonstrates. Its adoption capitalized on the Soviet boycott of the Security Council rather than reflecting any Charter rule; when the authority to repulse North Korea would be terminated remained unclear; how the pursuit of a peace provision almost led to a Yalu military-crossing still begs a coherent juridical explanation; and why that Yalu-crossing was halted by a political US decision rather than a UN initiative exposes the soft underbelly of supranational rules vis-à-vis power rivalries. In addition to the proverbial IR “can of worms,” de Wet’s promotion of substantive over structural issues opens, structural considerations determining the *when* and *how* questions themselves broaden governance questions: We might ask if sponsoring human rights is really worth it within the context of military considerations since they often get trumped. An affirmative answer suggests the cumulative considerations of the *when* and *how* questions may have actually expanded the space for a meaningful ICJ role to be performed.

Threshold Question: When to Act?

Article 39 is contentiously interpreted, as de Wet recognizes (133-34): Some scholars give the Security Council unlimited discretion in determining the *when* question (Oosthuizen: 1999); others subject execution to ceilings imposed by *ius cogens* and UN principles/purposes (Kelsen: 1951; Gill:

¹ May 23, 1969, UN Doc. A/Conf. 39/27, *Entered into Force* Jan 27, 1980.

1995); yet others subordinate Security Council determinations entirely to juridical criteria (Martenczuk: 1996).

More than just politics lies behind Article 39 threats, breaches, and aggression. As de Wet points out, how the very terms, “threats to the peace,” “breach of the peace,” and “act of aggression,” are themselves defined produces at least three substantive constraints: (a) simply by distinguishing between these three criteria, the Security Council binds itself to operating with discretion; (b) the criteria themselves serve as checks and balances against the Security Council becoming a world government and thereby flaunting unlimited discretion; and (c) the Charter’s calibrated balance of competencies would be jeopardized by unlimited Chapter VII Security Council discretion (136-37).

De Wet considers “breach of the peace” and “act of aggression” as *a posteriori* charges, that is, they become valid only after the sword is swung. Since “threat to the peace” comes much before the actual swinging, whether peace is defined positively, namely in calculating non-military sources of instability, or negatively, that is the absence of conflict, matters. She further concludes that the UN seeks negative peace since positive peace is non-justifiable (144) but adopts a double strategy. This was vivid in the UN’s first usage of the strategy in April 1966 against Southern Rhodesia when internal developments carried the potential to destabilize the external *status quo* (150-51).

As we know, not all cases of interpreting domestic developments have been accurate. Those against Southern Rhodesia (November 20, 1965; April 9, 1966 and December 16, 1966), South Africa (November 4, 1977), and Iraq (May 8, 1991) were, as de Wet observes. However, the reason to go to war against Iraq in 2003—to eliminate weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—was not. No WMDs were found. The question raised was the perception of officials in the US and the United Kingdom (both permanent Security Council members) acting on political hunches rather than judicial provisions. Not every domestic development threatening external peace has either been similarly recognized or warranted action. The ongoing crisis in Sudan over Darfur is a significant case but so was Pakistan’s suppression of Bangalees in 1971: blatant genocide was subordinated to power rivalry.

War-Drumming: How to Act?

The second de Wet question of how the Security Council must act invokes articles 40-42. Where Article 40 imposes “provisional measures,” Article 41 sanctions “measures not involving the use of armed force,” and Article 42 “action by air, sea, or land forces” (178-79). These Security Council enforcement powers are restricted, as de Wet finds, by two clusters of norms: (a) *ius cogens*, from fear that Security Council action may result in genocide or violate principles of self-defense, self-determination, and human rights; and (b) UN principles and purposes, from fear of undermining self-determination principles, human rights, international humanitarian law, and state sovereignty (215-16). Tension increases between Chapter VII enforcement measures and the Charter’s recognition of basic human rights in Article 1:1.

Both her questions must grapple with financial constraints and unpredictable outcomes. In spite of the escalating thresholds stipulated, *when* to invoke each becomes a potentially costly decision and

how to monitor progress along each threshold demands more than available resources, whether in terms of human intelligence, information diffusion, capability readiness or finance. Despite recognizing Saddam Hussein's indiscriminate persecution of Kurds as a threat to peace after Operation Desert Storm, no one could stop the Kurd marginalization. Similarly, Iranian and Turkish responses suggest the US-installed, UN-approved pre-election Allawi administration in Iraq was simply unable to eliminate the very threat to peace signaled by the creation of UN-supervised no-fly Kurdistan zones.

As with the *when to act* quandary, *how to act* strains the imperfect human mind, becoming the product of either perceptions/misperceptions or imaginations. Correcting them necessitates an objective third party. Even though Security Council interventions remain invariably controversial, the ICJ is there to prevent the UN from becoming a simultaneous judge, jury, and executioner.

The Security Council and Chapter VII

Over 50 years, Chapter VII situations continue to bounce off power rivalry more than supranational rules, confirming the adage the more things change, the more they remain the same. The UPR against North Korea's 1950 aggression was possibly due to the Soviet Security Council boycott, and the 1990 war against Iraq also escaped Security Council veto apprehension by virtue of the end of the Cold War. After 9/11, supplemented by NATO's Article 5 support, the US unilaterally pursued the UN Resolution 1368 call "to bring to justice the perpetrators, organizers and sponsors of these terrorist attacks." Both the 1950 and 1990 instances were categorized as breaches of international peace, the third as a threat. Although the first occurred during the Cold War and the other two after the Cold War, all three elevated superpower interests over collective Security Council interests. Cold War rivalry subordinated the world body in the same way US military power is doing today. Even as we hum the Kantian mantra with more global democracies than ever before and a UN eager to capitalize on this, the more fragile the underpinnings of that peace appear to be. Yet, there may be more bite behind de Wet's global governance bark than appears at first sight.

After assessing the pros and cons of Security Council discretionary power (134-37), de Wet identifies how the ICJ could pick up some of the slack. "The weight of principled arguments for limiting the S[ecurity]C[ouncil]'s discretion will be weakened considerably," she argues, "if it turns out [Article 39] terms are *de facto* 'non-justiciable'" (138). Armed with a plausibly justiciable role, could the ICJ have altered the outcomes of the three Chapter VII situations previously identified? Perhaps nothing could have been done in the Korean case but, after Iraq had been defeated in 1991, world bodies such as the UN could have and should have paid more attention to how the consequences of the sanctions decimated Iraqi children. Given this post-Cold War opportunity to reassert world governance (defined below), the UN found itself strapped. It could not effectively stop Saddam Hussein's repeated attempts to sidestep no-fly-zone restrictions, declare precisely the length, breadth, and depth of his WMD arsenal or accurately monitor the oil-for-food flows. Rather than acting progressively, leaving the ICJ out, I argue, left the UN dangling unnecessarily.

The author frequently points out how the 1984 Nicaragua case fortified the ICJ role *vis-à-vis* the Security Council, even if belatedly (63, 114-15). Nicaragua's complaint against the US mining

harbors was vetoed, but the ICJ, in spite of the US challenging its authority to deliberate, let alone possibly reverse, a Security Council decision, did not see any jurisdictional or other technical conflicts between such a decision and its own review. Similarly, any ICJ advisory opinion on consequences of the Iraqi sanctions would have defended supporters of individual security, legitimized public sentiments and boosted the world body's role under such dubious circumstances. The author brings these Chapter VII constraints and considerations to our attention.

As to the third Chapter VII situation, no organization could have prevented the US from unilaterally avenging the 9/11 attacks. While ICJ mobilization may not have modified US retaliation, judicial reviews, if not ignored, may cast a longer future shadow than power-based resolutions. A precedent is set and the hegemon may actually learn a lesson or two, as I argue the US is doing in Iraq today where a UN supervisory role is again being sought. Since the world body has been around long enough, it simply cannot fade away or roll over upon superpower demand. Ultimately, both the superpower and supranational rules win in different ways, the former by finding an institution rather than another country or group of countries to fall back on, the latter by enhancing collective over individualized state interests. By simply invoking a supranational rule, as Nicaragua did in 1984, other countries can set the collective ball rolling. Patience in waiting for however long it takes for some results may then be the key to collective success.

International Court of Justice in Balancing Role

How can the ICJ intermediate UN-US relations? Light is shed by reviewing the *actual UN role* assigned to the ICJ and *how* the ICJ may intervene between rules and force.

Article 96:1 of the UN Charter allows both the General Assembly and the Security Council to turn to the ICJ for an advisory opinion. This is particularly important for Chapter VII implementation, which gives both UN bodies overlapping functions. Of course, no advisory opinion can nullify or void a Security Council resolution but ICJ opinions mobilize public opinion and expose the privileged position of Security Council members. By giving permanent Security Council members the veto power, Assembly-Council relations became unnecessarily complicated.

Municipal law, on the other hand, becomes more effective by not carrying such a provision—something beneficial to world governance under the long-term democratization underway today. As membership expands, the General Assembly may struggle to formulate a representative position on the Security Council, in the face of a veto. However, unlike the potential problems inherent in expanding the influence of the General Assembly, by mobilizing public or legal opinion, the ICJ facilitates incremental future change without challenging the current power asymmetry. Democratization makes public opinion a crucial world governance force, and is one reason why power-play—the ultimate Cold War factor—faces more legal roadblocks than before. Questioning these roadblocks is also more propitious now when the probing eyes of human rights watchdogs, the media and enlightened citizens spare neither countries nor individuals.

De Wet reminds us eloquently that the force-rules tussle is not as one-sided as events would have us believe and, indeed, both expanding democratization and human rights consciousness

reinforce the ICJ's efforts to adapt general principles of laws and municipal laws. As de Wet observes, this was precisely the purpose of the ICJ's Article 38:1c, derived from the Permanent Court of International Justice (79-80). The provision calls for resorting to treaty and customary laws before resorting to municipal law, a not-so-unimportant development. By necessitating member countries to coordinate their own municipal laws, free trade agreements are already increasing the relative salience of municipal laws. Mexico's civil law adjustment to Canadian and US common law orientations under NAFTA's Chapter XIX antidumping and countervailing dispute-settlement provisions is a case in point. Thus, adversarial panel proceedings, majority voting and transparency from common law creep into Mexico's civil law traditions of tribunal proceedings, unanimous voting, and secrecy.

Although more commonplace than one might imagine, such adjustments inevitably involve areas where transferability from one body of law to another, or even compatibility between them, may not always be possible or desirable. ICJ's advisory role, drawing upon the model established by the European Union, can be profitably utilized here. Not only has a body of European law emerged over 50 years but, by also interacting with municipal laws, those laws raise Kantian hopes as much as they trigger nationalistic resentment or reaction. The point to emphasize, however, is how legal precedence rippling from one domain to another may be better positioned to square off with the security/military domain now than ever before.

World Governance Reconsidered

If the Security Council was not designed to be the world government and the ICJ's authority is too restricted to even assume that role, where does world governance stand at the start of the twenty-first century? Must we continue to be haunted by the failures of the League of Nations and the Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ)? By severely undermining the UN and the ICJ in the process, will we be able to restore some respect to the very institutions needed for peace?

The answers bring more hope than not. Defined as achieving order at various community levels and amidst constantly changing dynamics (Rosenau, 1997: 8, 10-11), world governance has come a long way since the Hague Peace Conference one century ago. When the conference convened to identify and spread institutionalized rules as a step toward arresting the cancer of conflict, sovereign rights were limited in both spread and practice,² authoritarian governments dictated the day, trade was too skewed to even need rules and military prowess was the yardstick of all undertakings and

²"There is no single definition of sovereignty," Stephen D. Krasner warns, "because the meaning of the term depends on the theoretical context within which it is used." My usage is consistent with any and all of Krasner's options: (a) "the organization and efficacy of domestic authority," (b) "the ability to exercise control over trans-border movements," (c) "the right to enter into international agreements," and (d) "an institutional structure characterized by territoriality and autonomy." See Krasner (1995: 121). Also see Abram Chayes and Antonia Chayes (1995: 26-27), to whom traditional sovereignty signifying "the complete autonomy of the state to act as it chooses, without legal limitation by any superior entity," has only broadened under such twentieth century pressures as interdependence to also mean "membership in reasonably good standing in the regimes that make up the substance of international life." If anything, my usage echoes this definitional strand as strongly.

developments. The Hague nirvana is still elusive today but substantial qualitative changes are evident: almost 200 countries practice sovereign rights, judging strictly from UN membership; more countries may be branded a mature democracy than ever before; expanding trade flows have also necessitated increasingly detailed institutionalized rules, which hardly existed then; and military force, still a dominant instrument, is but only one of several yardsticks available now. Warfare may not be banished, but neither have safeguards been abandoned. The changes may be silent but they are profound, pointing to the creeping governance in expanding aspects of our ordinary lives.

Its historical significance is derived from placing twentieth century international institutionalization in relative perspective. Whereas the League of Nations did not include all the great powers of the time, could not prevent flagrant violations in its short history, let alone build mechanisms to deter them, and simply would not have been globally representative enough given the colonies held by its member countries, the UN embraces all great powers today, acts as a buffer between warring groups through explicitly developed mechanisms and its membership represents all corners of the world. That it is still ticking after 60 years, even contemplating reforms to last the next 60, raises more than a little hope. The author despairs in advancing the worthwhile ICJ cause in part because the General Assembly underutilizes the judicial body, Security Council members tend to exercise their powers unilaterally and both of the above constrain the ICJ from reversing the Gresham laws of world governance.³ Both the author and citizens concerned about world institutions not fully delivering their pledges and purposes may take heart in at least one tangible long-run effect: Democratization not only promotes the greater desires to live by rules but also the higher costs in breaking them. Oddly, the very individualism democratization is premised upon and promotes also breeds in us, and through us the state, the tendency of bending and breaking collective rules. Egotism, interestingly and increasingly, rarely seeks the displacement of rules anymore—precisely why we have fewer dictatorships than democracies today. We have not eliminated them but celebrating their decreasing numbers is no crime. A full century of trials and errors in institutionalizing those rules globally did not produce the Kantian perpetual peace but that more countries are twice-shy of flagrantly violating them than ever before should be a source of optimism, not pessimism.

Conclusions

To move beyond Chapter VII, both caveats and opportunities need to be considered. First, the Korean invocation produced a truce along the 38th Parallel in 1953, which has more or less held for 50 years, whereas the Iraqi breach, initially followed by a cat-and-mouse game until Iraq's decisive 2003 defeat, still does not guarantee irreversible peace. Did a global military power distribution sustain peace more effectively than a collection of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures? Even the doyen of Cold War historians, John Lewis Gaddis, calls that forty-year post-World War II period *the long peace* (Gaddis 1987: title). Would an empowered ICJ even make a difference?

³Essentially meaning the bad driving out the good, in this context they mean poor or non-existent rules, reflected in increased power pursuits, driving out the desire to live by rules.

Second, with over 190 members today, the UN is almost four times as large as it was in 1945, suggesting perhaps Security Council membership arrangements should also keep abreast of ongoing changes if they are to effectively perform their functions. This itself begs the questions of if and how additional permanent Security Council members are to be determined? Even an advisory ICJ contribution to resolving those questions would boost the role of rules. As leading contenders of a permanent Council seat, Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan offer an assortment of credentials not necessarily built upon military considerations. Could this provide an opportunity to institutionalize non-military credentials for the position for once? If so, it would enormously dampen the place of the military as the be-all and end-all consideration in institutionally preserving peace.

Third, since the Chapter VII unit of analysis is the state, how can this be adjusted to cases of terrorism where the unit of analysis is not only the individual but quite likely individuals disassociated from states, or at least disowned by states? Such UN provisions to preserve peace, as outlined in Article 1:1, and to prevent unilateral use of force between states, as Article 2:4 spells out, could be broadened to adjust to the multiple levels of actors emerging during the twentieth century. After 9/11, both Great Britain and the United States ignored UN resolutions 1368 and 1373, even as the former identified a threat to peace and the latter imposed Chapter VII non-military sanctions (Myjer and White 2002: 5-17). They went their unilateral ways to connect *al Qaeda* with Iraq. If instead a world body made the same connections and conclusions, the arm of international law would have been boosted immeasurably without subtracting from the scope of relative military power and, in this case, of US military power. The subsequent 3/11 attacks in Spain reveal how treacherous it may be to connect perpetrators of terrorist acts with any single state. The US could help by changing its zero-sum perception of the UN into a win-win approach.

Fourth, in this age of terrorism, the Article 39 stipulation of immediate Chapter VII retaliation also needs modification. The US retaliation against *al Qaeda*, the *Taliban*, and Afghanistan, for example, was initiated a month after 9/11—too late according to Charter provisions. A UN emergency standing force suitable to the current need to combat terrorism offers a more widely acceptable alternative than the military force dominated by a single country. How this is to be created poses other not insurmountable problems: If the UN can develop inspection teams and peacekeeping forces, building a rapid deployment anti-terrorism force does not necessarily mean the drawing board is an entirely clean slate.

All of the above issues reiterate the growing importance of the relationship between force and law and between international relations and international law. Given the growing discussion about this relationship (Slaughter, *et al.* 1998; Chayes and Chayes 1995; Arendt and Beck 1993; and Beck, *et al.* 1996), technical works such as de Wet's serve a critical purpose and propitiously fill a missing blank. In the final analysis, they add their modest bit towards that ultimate Kantian perpetual peace under cosmopolitanized rules (Doyle 1986). We may never get there, but heck, that we should even stop trying makes us a lesser breed than the very superpowers we sit and complain about.

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