Mapping the UN–League of Nations Analogy: Are There Still Lessons to Be Learned from the League?

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In recent years, the United Nations–League of Nations analogy has been used in U.S. public discourse with increased frequency. A major implication of the analogy is that if the UN does not undergo substantive changes it will become as ineffective as its predecessor. This article asks if the example of the League of Nations can still offer important lessons for the future of the UN. It assesses the validity of the analogy by “mapping” the similarities and differences between the recent events involving Iraq and the events preceding World War II. It further compares the structures, principles, rules, norms, and decisionmaking procedures of the two organizations and argues that several apparently minor differences have allowed the UN to be more effective and survive much longer than its predecessor. The study concludes that the analogy is not only inaccurate but also potentially damaging to the credibility of the UN and, implicitly, to the organization’s usefulness. **Keywords:** UN, League of Nations, analogy, international organizations, Iraq.

One year and one day after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush addressed the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). He used the opportunity to garner international support for a tougher stance on Iraq. To make his arguments more convincing, the president made a reference to the failures of the League of Nations: “We created the United Nations Security Council, so that, unlike the League of Nations, our deliberations would be more than talk, our resolutions would be more than wishes. After generations of deceitful dictators and broken treaties and squandered lives, we dedicated ourselves to standards of human dignity shared by all, and to a system of security defended by all.”
Although the UN–League of Nations analogy is a tempting one—after all, they are the only global international organizations (IOs) to have ever dealt with security issues—it is significant that it had not been used in official U.S. government speeches for some time. Yet, after the 2002 UNGA speech, President Bush used the same analogy more than forty times over the following two months. Moreover, several key figures in his administration, members of Congress, and several foreign officials also began to use it. Around the same time, the analogy also emerged in the press. The fact that the League of Nations example has been used intensively over the past few years implies that it is a “useful” one. But is that the case? Is it useful only for rhetorical reasons, or can the UN still learn important lessons from the failures of the League?

I address these questions in this article, discussing first how the analogy has been used, especially by top-ranking officials in the Bush administration. Then drawing from the political science literature on historical analogies, I “map” the similarities and differences between the events to which the analogy makes reference as well as the similarities and differences between the two organizations themselves. This exercise leads to the conclusion that important procedural and norm-related differences between the two organizations have made the UN much more flexible and effective than the League. Because the UN has generally been able to serve its members well, especially its most powerful ones, it has survived longer than its predecessor.

The discussion of this analogy is not only relevant for theoretical reasons, but I argue that it may also have important practical consequences. The comparison with the League of Nations may have a lingering impact on the UN’s perceived legitimacy and, implicitly, on its potential usefulness for all its members—including the United States.

The Use of the Analogy and Its Implications

In 2002–2003, the UN–League of Nations analogy was used in several different ways by many international leaders, from the British prime minister to the former Iraqi foreign minister. Yet none of them used it as frequently as members of the Bush administration. President Bush’s speech in September 2002 was just the first of many instances over the next year or so in which U.S. officials used the UN–League of Nations analogy. Bush’s many references to the League implied that the UN’s predecessor had been unsuccessful because it only allowed for deliberations and did not credibly threaten aggressive states in the interwar period. Bush’s speeches also implied that a similar pattern was
emerging once more. Even after seventeen Security Council resolutions had been adopted against Iraq, Bush believed that the country continued to pose a threat to international security and that the international organization was unwilling to take any real action. His speeches emphasized the potential irrelevance of the UN but did not go so far as to suggest that the organization would, like the League, cease to exist.

Other U.S. officials took the analogy further. Just one week after President Bush’s speech, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld argued in a testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee that if the UN did not take action against Iraq the UN would “be irrelevant and fall into the dustbin of history, as did the League of Nations as the world descended into darkness in the aftermath of World War I.” He used the analogy several more times in the ensuing months and often included in it a comparison of the UN’s inability to act against Iraq to the League’s ineffectiveness after Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia in 1935.

In March 2003, a few weeks before the beginning of the war with Iraq, the secretary of defense used the analogy in a way that emphasized the gravity of the situation much more forcefully than any other U.S. official had: “That lesson [the failure of the League in the Abyssinian crisis] is as true today, at the start of the twenty-first century, as it was in the twentieth century. The question before us is—have we learned it? There are moments in history when the judgment and the resolve of free nations are put to the test. This is such a moment. The security environment we are entering is the most dangerous the world has seen. The lives of our children and grandchildren could well hang in the balance.”

Even though some administration officials like Rumsfeld offered a “harsher” version of the analogy, they never took the argument further by calling for drastic changes to the global organization, a U.S. defection from the UN, or the dismantling of the organization altogether. Yet such arguments appeared in several major American newspapers in March 2003, just prior to the war with Iraq. One of the most vocal critics of the UN’s inability to take action against Iraq, Charles Krauthammer of the Washington Post, praised the president’s use of the analogy and argued: “The Security Council is nothing more than the victory coalition of 1945. That was six decades ago. Let a new structure be born out of the Iraq coalition. . . . There were wars and truces and treaties before the United Nations was created—as there will be after its demise. No need to formally leave the organization, Mr. President. Just ignore it. Without us, it will wither away.”

Not all journalists agreed with the Bush administration’s use of the analogy. During a State Department press briefing on 8 October 2002, a reporter asked Richard Boucher if “anyone pointed out to the people who are writing the speeches that the main example that the president and the
other people in this government continue to give about the irrelevance of a world body is the League of Nations, and that the main point . . . that the League of Nations was irrelevant and failed was because the United States refused to join it?”9 A few weeks later, during a White House press briefing, Ari Fleischer was also confronted by criticism for the president’s use of the analogy.10 Such criticism is a reminder that different individuals can oftentimes infer different lessons from the same events. Therefore, before turning to the specific UN–League of Nations comparison, it is important to ask a broader question: Can we truly learn something from historical analogies? To answer this question it is helpful to review the vast political science literature on the use of historical analogies.

**Analogies as Knowledge Structures**

Cognitive psychologists have long known that to cope with the enormous amounts of incoming information, human beings rely on knowledge structures that help them order and interpret their environment.11 Political leaders are even more likely than most individuals to use them because they have a limited amount of time to deal with very complex problems; they cannot acquire all the necessary information, consider all possible options, and calculate the costs and benefits of using each particular option. Hence, these leaders need to use such simplifying cognitive mechanisms.

One such knowledge structure is the historical analogy. Analogies involve matching current instances (the “target”) with those from the past (the “source”). The literature12 sees the process of analogizing as being based on the following logic: If a past situation led to an outcome, and if a present situation is perceived as “similar” to the one in the past, then the current situation is also likely to lead to the same outcome.

As policymakers rarely have sufficient time to consider more than just a few similarities and differences across past and present situations, their analogies are usually incomplete. Indeed, one of the main conclusions emerging from the political science literature on historical analogies is that political leaders have almost always emphasized superficial and irrelevant parallels.13 Decisionmakers have long been made aware of their propensity to make such mistakes. Richard Neustadt and Ernest May offered a how-to guide on the use of analogies to reduce the likelihood of such errors. They suggested a process of mapping all possible similarities as well as differences across the situations that are being compared.14 Another useful conclusion of this literature is that although analogies often involve parallels between actors (such as states or individuals), they
are in essence comparisons of events.\textsuperscript{15} The extension of the comparison from events to actors is the result of our need for coherent models and our tendency as human beings to search for complete “one-to-one mappings” of elements involved in an analogy. Therefore, even though decisionmakers may be drawn initially to a specific analogy because of the strong similarity between two actors or between two events, they then continue to map the rest of the analogy by searching for corresponding elements in the source and target.\textsuperscript{16} This can result in additional flaws in the comparison. For example, minor similarities between individuals involved in the events (as superficial as their physical appearance) may lead to a strengthening of the conviction that the past is repeating itself.\textsuperscript{17}

The current UN–League of Nations analogy involves a rare comparison between international organizations. Underlying it is nevertheless a comparison of specific events that took place in the interwar era to those we witnessed in 2002–2003. Moreover, the analogy implies that the role of the UN is equivalent to that of the League and therefore we should expect an outcome similar to the one in the past (that is, a major war or at least the rise of dangerous authoritarian leaders) if the UN does not react differently than its predecessor.

In the next section, using the model offered by Neustadt and May, I map out the similarities and differences between the principal events that are generally viewed as having contributed to the start of World War II with the recent ones involving Iraq. I then continue with a comparison of the two organizations.

**Comparing Recent Events to Those Prior to World War II**

There are several major similarities between the two cases compared here. An obvious one is that—as some of those who use the analogy suggest—Iraq’s regime was totalitarian, just like those of Germany and Italy before World War II. More important, Iraq was deemed a threat because it had invaded Kuwait in the past, just as Italy had invaded Abyssinia in 1935 and Germany had invaded Austria in 1938 and Czechoslovakia in 1939.

Yet those who use the analogies fail to mention the difference in response between the League and the UN respective to the two crises. In 1990, the UN adopted several resolutions condemning Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Moreover, it imposed full economic sanctions against the aggressor—a tool that the organization has used (albeit mostly unsuccessfully) on numerous other occasions.

In contrast, the only time in its brief history when the League of Nations was able to reach some agreement on imposing economic
sanctions was after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. Moreover, in that case, the League had to circumvent its ordinary procedures (that required unanimity of all member states in order to impose economic sanctions) and made sanctions voluntary. It is not surprising therefore that not just nonmembers—such as Germany and the United States—did not stop their nationals from continuing to trade with Italy; even member states like Venezuela (which exported oil to Italy) and neighboring Switzerland continued to trade with the aggressor state. Moreover, the United Kingdom decided to not close the Suez Canal to Italian ships, an action that would have been crushing for Italy. Consequently, the sanctions against Italy proved ineffective.18

An even more critical difference between the two cases is that after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait the UN decided to use force against the aggressor state. It is one of the very few cases when the UN actually applied the principle of collective security. Even though the application of this principle has been rare in the UN, it is significant to note that the League was never able to take such actions, either in the case of Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia—often mentioned by Rumsfeld in his use of the analogy—or in any other case.

Another major similarity is not mentioned in the recent analogies: potential Iraqi weapons programs continued to be perceived as a threat even after the first Gulf War, just as German armament was considered a danger in the post–World War I decades. In both cases, multilateral institutions were entrusted with the task of monitoring weapons programs.

The difference in the two cases is that the League was not able to develop a working mechanism to verify German compliance with its obligations to disarm. The main reason was that some of the major powers, most notably the UK and the United States, did not support verification measures.19 Due to the great powers’ disagreements on weapons inspections, Germany was able to rebuild its military strength unhampered.

In contrast, the early UN inspections in Iraq led to the destruction of all known weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in that country and ended programs for development of such weapons. Yet, after several years of inspections, the UN teams were faced with multiple problems. Their access to key locations in Iraq was often delayed and sometimes even denied. Moreover, because of Iraqi objections, the entire process of verification was interrupted altogether several times for months and even years. Due to such Iraqi maneuvers, some believed that Saddam Hussein continued to develop his weapons programs in secret and that he had been successful in concealing them from inspectors.

Therefore, even though the UN was able to perform weapons inspections in Iraq, one could argue that the eventual result was similar to
that of the League because the inspections were not sufficiently convincing to alleviate fears that Iraq remained a threat. This lack of trust in Saddam Hussein’s regime led the United States and some of its allies to wage a second war with Iraq.

Yet, together with the economic sanctions, the weapons inspections in Iraq drastically reduced the country’s military power and, with that, U.S. costs for going to war in 2003. Overall, the complex experiences of the League and the UN with arms inspections are considered in Table 1 to be a combination of similarities and differences.

The use of the analogy in early 2003 refers to another similarity between the recent events and those of the interwar period. In both cases, great powers disagreed on the level of threat posed by a former aggressor state. After World War I, France saw Germany as a greater threat than did other members of the council (such as the UK). Smaller states in the council perceived Italy to be more threatening than did France and the UK. Similarly, in 2003, the United States and the UK perceived Iraq as a greater threat than did the other permanent members of the Security Council. In both instances, such differences precluded the IOs from agreeing on collective action.

Arguably the most important difference between the two cases is that in 2003 the United States and the UK did take action against a state that they perceived to be a threat, even though the UN did not authorize their action. No similar preventive action was taken in the interwar era against Japan, Italy, or Germany. Even after the first aggressive actions—in Manchuria, Abyssinia, Austria, and Czechoslovakia—the great powers of the time took neither collective nor unilateral military actions against potential aggressor states.

Overall, although there were several similarities between the events of the 1930s and recent ones, the two global IOs dealt with them in very different ways. The differences in the IOs’ behaviors can be explained by their design.

Comparing the United Nations with the League of Nations

Historical analogies have rarely referred to international organizations. This is probably because, in the past, IOs have not been considered as relevant to international events as states or individuals. Because most IOs have been designed to deal with different and relatively narrow issue areas, their effects on international events are difficult to compare. But as IOs have increased in number, in the complexity of tasks they deal with, and in relevance, it is possible that comparisons and analogies across IOs
In this article, I discuss the UN–League of Nations analogy by emphasizing similarities and differences across the main tasks that the two organizations were intended to deal with, the broad principles on which they were based, the rules that they need to enforce, the norms that

will become more common.

### Table 1 Comparison of the Interwar Period vs. Iraq

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Iraq Situation: 1990–2003</th>
<th>The Interwar Period</th>
<th>Similar or Different</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iraq was a totalitarian state.</td>
<td>Italy and Germany were totalitarian states.</td>
<td>Similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.</td>
<td>Italy invaded Abyssinia in 1935. Germany invaded Austria in 1938 and Czechoslovakia in 1939.</td>
<td>Similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a response to the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the UN adopted full economic sanctions against the aggressor.</td>
<td>The League of Nations adopted some economic sanctions against Italy. The economic sanctions were voluntary, so many states disregarded them.</td>
<td>Different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.-led coalition received UN mandate to take military action. The coalition liberated Kuwait but did not invade Iraq.</td>
<td>League of Nations never took military action against Italy (or against others).</td>
<td>Different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction before invading Kuwait led to fears that it may continue such programs in the future.</td>
<td>German armament before World War I led to fears that Germany may rearm after the war.</td>
<td>Similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the first Gulf War, UNSCOM (later UNMOVIC) was created to verify that Iraq was indeed discontinuing its weapons’ programs. Inspectors from the United Nations and IAEA were allowed (on and off) to verify weapons sites. In 2002, the U.S. and UK argued that Iraq still had WMDs. UNSC Resolution 1441 led to the return of inspectors to Iraq. Inspectors could not offer evidence that the Iraqi regime was rebuilding a WMD program.</td>
<td>League of Nations was created, in part, to control German rearmament. Its Disarmament Committee was never truly able to function. Germany never allowed it to. The UK and the United States opposed an effective committee because they believed that it ran counter to the principle of sovereignty.</td>
<td>Both similar and different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In early 2003, the UNSC permanent members disagreed on the use of force against Iraq. U.S.-led coalition overthrew Saddam Hussein regime without UN mandate.</td>
<td>League of Nations did not reach a common agreement on action against Germany or Italy.</td>
<td>Similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No true preventive action was taken against Germany or Italy.</td>
<td>Different</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
stood at the basis of their initial design, and the decisionmaking
procedures that were shaped by such principles, rules, and norms. I chose
these elements because of the general agreement among scholars that they
are essential in defining IOs and international regimes (see Table 2).20

One obvious similarity between the two organizations is that they are
both global IOs designed primarily to maintain international peace and
security. Their inclusiveness in terms of membership21 and the equal votes
that all states received in the assemblies reflect the principles of
universality and equality among states on which the organizations were
built. That said, the founders of both IOs recognized that, even if the
organizations would be inclusive, decisions may not always be based on
“democratic principles” and should sometimes reflect the relevance of
power politics. Thus, the most powerful countries were given permanent
seats in both the League’s council and in the UN Security Council as
recognition of their special status.

In order to deal with their main goal of international security, both
organizations embraced the principle of collective security: an aggression
by one state against another would trigger a collective response against
the aggressor state by all members of the IO. Yet the designers of both
organizations recognized that they had to reconcile this principle with the
sovereignty of individual member states—an essential principle of
international relations.

The similarities across the two IOs can also be found in the rules that
were shaped by these common principles. The principle of collective
security led to similarities in the rules regarding the type of collective
responses that could be taken against aggressor states. Both IOs allowed
for peaceful means to resolve disputes among states. They both also
included procedures through which states could become subject to
economic sanctions and to collective military action. The IOs also
envisioned inspection mechanisms to control aggressive states that were
deemed to have reached dangerously high levels of armament.

As the League and the UN embraced similar major principles and
rules, they were both confronted with the same kind of tensions between
some of the principles and the need to build effective organizations, as
well as between the principles themselves. One such tension developed
between the principle of universality and the need to have a more
effective (that is, smaller and more flexible) forum for dealing with urgent
threats to international security. However, as soon as such a forum was
considered, the IOs also had to deal with the question of its membership.
The founders of both organizations recognized that great powers should
be permanent members of such a forum because they were the principal
potential enforcers of collective decisions. This led to a second tension—
one between the principle of equality among states and the principles of power politics. Last, but not least, both IOs had to deal with the tension

Table 2  Comparison of the League of Nations and the United Nations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>League of Nations</th>
<th>United Nations</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main tasks</td>
<td>Global organization primarily intended to deal with issues of international security.</td>
<td>Same as League of Nations. But it also developed additional tasks beyond those of the League.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>League had an assembly where all members were represented and a council with a limited number of permanent and nonpermanent members.</td>
<td>Similar to the League, the UN has a General Assembly where all members are represented and a Security Council with a limited number of permanent and nonpermanent members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principles</td>
<td>Sovereignty of states; universality; equality among states; collective security; principles of power politics.</td>
<td>Same as League of Nations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Aggressive states will have their armament limited. Aggression against one state leads to a collective response by all states. Specific rules are set down for mediation among parties to a conflict, for economic sanctions, and for collective military action.</td>
<td>Same as League of Nations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms</td>
<td>Idealist: emphasis on principle of universality and equality among states; state sovereignty is the main principle of international relations.</td>
<td>Different from League of Nations: realist emphasis on relevance of power and effectiveness of organization; state sovereignty may be “trumped” by other principles, such as those underlying human rights or arms control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisionmaking</td>
<td>All members of the council and of the assembly can veto decisions; council members (including permanent members) cannot vote on conflicts in which they are involved; economic sanctions are decided in assembly by unanimous vote.</td>
<td>Different from League of Nations: only permanent members of the Security Council can veto decisions; permanent members of the Security Council can veto any resolution, even on conflicts in which they are involved; economic sanctions are decided in the Security Council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>procedures</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Many great powers did not join the League, were excluded, or left it. League ceased to function after approximately twenty-five years.</td>
<td>Different from League of Nations: great powers have remained UN members. The UN continues to exist and expand six decades after its founding.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
between the principle of collective security (that implies that a state may have to conform to the general will of other members) and the principle of sovereignty (that implies that there is no higher authority than the state). For example, if an organization decides to call for arms inspections, how can such inspections be conducted without being too intrusive and eroding the state’s sovereignty?

Although both organizations took all the above principles and rules into account, the founders of the two IOs adopted different mechanisms to resolve the tensions between such principles. The main differences between the two organizations thus derive from perceptions of which principles are more appropriate—that is, a difference across the norms that contributed to the shaping of the IOs. The League was built on idealist norms that emphasized the existence of collective interests, which were believed to lead to the avoidance of wars. The UN, however, was created at a time when the realist paradigm was more powerful. The UN framers thus recognized the inevitability of tensions between states’ interests and acknowledged that wars will continue to take place. Therefore, rather than trying to eliminate wars altogether, as Woodrow Wilson and the other founders of the League had, they simply looked for greater effectiveness when dealing with conflictual situations.

An important difference between the norms of the interwar era and the present-day ones is evident in terms of the understanding of sovereignty. Even though the principle of sovereignty remained important after World War II, its power has somewhat eroded. The most often cited example of such erosion is related to the emergence and increasing relevance of human rights. But, for the purposes of this article, it is more relevant to mention the changes in the perceived appropriateness of performing intrusive weapons inspections.

In the interwar era, primarily because of U.S. and UK objections to weapons inspections in Germany, the League’s Disarmament Committee and its inspection teams were never truly able to function. The U.S. position was based on the normative argument that, as long as the Treaty of Versailles returned sovereignty to Germany, it was not appropriate to undermine such sovereignty with disclosure requirements. In contrast, the multiple inspections the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) performed in Iraq, as well as in other countries, suggest a change in the balance between norms supporting state sovereignty and the need to create effective organizations.

These changes in norms were the result of the common understanding of post–World War II leaders that the idealist norms and their emphasis on the principles of universality and equality among states had led to an
ineffective organization. The realist norms that shaped the UN put greater emphasis on power politics and shaped the organization in such a way as to give great powers more benefits and fewer potential costs than the League had offered.

The founders of the UN thus took the model of the League as a starting point for the new organization. On the one hand, they decided to maintain a structure similar to that of the League, with a council and an assembly; on the other hand, the founders decided to replace the decisionmaking procedures they believed led to the demise of the League with more effective ones. For example, in the League’s council and in its assembly, all substantive decisions would pass only by unanimity. The procedure translates into a system in which all states had a veto—a reflection of the idealist norms and their emphasis on egalitarian principles rather than on the effectiveness of the IO. In the UN, only five states were given a veto and only in the Security Council.

However, the League established an exception to the use of the veto. Article 15 of the League’s covenant stipulated that the votes of the parties involved in the dispute were not to be counted nor considered when trying to reach a unanimous decision. For example, on 5 October 1935, the League’s council adopted a report condemning Italy’s attack on Abyssinia, even though Italy, a permanent member of the council, voted against the adoption of the report. The report later served as a basis for the adoption of economic sanctions against the aggressor. This exception to the use of the veto meant that even great powers were submitted to the League’s rules for dealing with aggressor states. Once more, this example reflects the League’s lack of emphasis on the principle of power and its founders’ preferences for the more egalitarian principles emerging from idealist thought.

A third difference in the decisionmaking procedures is that in the UN, the decision to impose economic sanctions is taken in the Security Council, where great powers have an advantage in voting and where all decisions are binding. By comparison, in the League, economic sanctions were discussed in the assembly, where even one negative vote would defeat a resolution. As mentioned, the League’s economic sanctions against Italy were only made possible through the creative interpretation of the covenant by a group of resourceful diplomats. This group of diplomats argued that because economic sanctions were the decision of each individual member state, the countries that would oppose such sanctions should not be allowed to veto a resolution. But this interpretation also implied that not all states had to conform to the decision. This procedure led to several countries not joining the sanctions and to the eventual ineffectiveness of the collective action.

In contrast, the economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security
Council are binding. Like many other such sanctions in the past decades, the ones imposed on Iraq were not able to bring about major changes in that country’s policies, but they were nevertheless much more effective in reducing Iraqi economic and military power than the ones imposed on Italy in 1935. This eventually allowed a U.S.-led coalition to defeat Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003 much more swiftly than had there not been such sanctions in place.

Last, but not least, a crucial difference between the two international organizations is reflected in the much greater ability of states to take action outside the framework of the organization. In the League of Nations, Article 15 of the covenant stipulated that if members of the council could not reach agreement on a situation, “the Members of the League reserve to themselves the right to take such actions as they shall consider necessary for the maintenance of right and justice.” Similarly, Article 51 of the UN Charter allows for independent action (for “self defense”) outside the organization.

In the League, the so-called gap in the covenant—the stipulation that a state could take unilateral action—was never used. The reason for this was that even unilateral action taken outside of the League’s framework was under specific rules of the covenant that implied a “waiting period” of nine months between the time a grievance was filed in the League and the right to take unilateral action. Moreover, it was never clear how such actions would be interpreted later. For example, based on the decisionmaking procedures of the League, military action taken without the League’s consent could later have become the subject of collective decisions. As mentioned, in such decisions, the vote of parties involved in the military action would not be counted.

As an illustration of the relevance of such procedures, it is worth considering how these same procedures would have been applied in the case of the recent war against Iraq. If the UN had followed the same decisionmaking procedures as the League, then after the U.S.-led military operations commenced in March 2003, the organization could have technically passed a binding resolution calling for action against the coalition troops in Iraq. This would have been possible because in the decisionmaking process, the vetoes of the United States or the UK could not have been cast on the basis of the two countries’ involvement in the conflict.

The veto of permanent members in the UN Security Council is not subject to a similar condition. Therefore, in the UN, great powers have often acted outside the organization knowing they could not be subjected to binding UN decisions. Throughout the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union used military force without consulting the UN. They both knew that because of their ability to veto each other’s
proposals for collective military action, they would rarely be able to receive UN backing for their use of force. More important, they knew that their military actions could not be stopped by the UN. Permanent members of the UN Security Council have thus been able to circumvent the organization when they believe that their actions will not receive the necessary support in the Security Council.

Because the League’s decisionmaking procedures allowed the organization to take action against great power interests, it is not surprising that many of the most powerful countries of the interwar era did not see the benefits of joining the League, or left it at some point. By the beginning of World War II, countries like the United States, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union had either never joined the organization, had walked out, or had been excluded. Without the support of such powers, the organization indeed “withered away.”

In contrast, in large part based on the lessons learned from the experiences of the League, the UN was designed to attract the most powerful states. The great powers that emerged after World War II have had sufficient benefits, especially the absolute use of veto, to remain members of this international organization. More significantly, because the UN was deliberately designed to ensure that it cannot act against the major interests of the great powers, the potential costs of staying on as a member are negligible. The change in decisionmaking procedures from the League to the UN altered substantially the cost-benefit calculations of great powers and has kept them involved in the global organization.

In this regard, the example of the U.S. experience with Iraq is indicative. Even though the United States was not able to sway all permanent members of the UN Security Council to support the intervention in Iraq, it was able to put together a smaller coalition and take matters into its own hands. The U.S.-led war against Iraq is certainly not the first time a country or group of countries acted without UN backing, and it certainly will not be the last. Because of the flexibility the UN allows them, great powers have remained part of the organization, thus prolonging its life.

**Conclusion**

The above comparison suggests that the analogy between the League of Nations and the UN is flawed. The similarities between the two IOs are only superficial. A closer look at the norms and decisionmaking procedures reveals that the UN is fundamentally different from the League. When great powers have agreed on action, the UN has been able to set up approximately sixty peacekeeping operations that have
contributed to international security. Collective decisions have also allowed the organization to rebuild war-torn states and to avoid serious humanitarian crises. The League never had similar successes.

But, just as important, even when great powers could not agree on collective actions, the UN did not adopt decisions running counter to the major interests of great powers, as the League had. This is the result of a conscious decision made by the UN framers. The decision was based on the lessons they learned from the League’s mistakes. Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill did draw the analogy between their role in 1945 and the role of Woodrow Wilson and the League’s architects in 1918. This World War I–World War II analogy was based on events the framers of the UN had lived through and remembered very well. They were therefore able to build a more robust organization, one that has withstood many great power disagreements and has grown in membership and complexity over the past six decades.

In contrast, the more recent analogies between the League of Nations and the UN involve events that officials did not experience firsthand and only read about. It is unlikely that the current comparisons, based on vaguely remembered history lessons, are thorough enough to draw meaningful conclusions regarding the improvement of the UN.

Yet the question of the flawed analogy is not only of theoretical value; its use in public discourse also has practical implications. By arguing that the UN is becoming as useless as its predecessors, U.S. officials have affected public perceptions about the organization. For example, whereas in January 2003 about 40 percent of Americans believed the UN was doing a “poor job at solving the problems it faces,” in March 2003, after intense public criticism of the organization, this figure jumped to approximately 60 percent. This negative image affects the UN’s perceived legitimacy, which in turn can have a negative impact on the organization’s potential usefulness for all member states. The United States might be among the first to find this to be true as it turns once more to the organization for support of its policies, such as the rebuilding of Iraq.

Notes

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Problems of Post-Communism.
2. A comprehensive search on White House, State Department, and Defense Department websites indicated that the last time a top-ranking U.S. official used the analogy was in 1996 when, in a speech on 13 May at Harvard University, then secretary of defense William Perry made a reference to the League of Nations in order to contrast U.S. isolationism and lack of support for the League in the interwar era with post–Cold War U.S. determination to engage in the UN.
5. This research found that other top U.S. officials used the analogy, such as National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. It is perhaps noteworthy that several searches through recent official speeches could not uncover cases in which Vice President Dick Cheney or Secretary of State Colin Powell used it.
11. See, for example, James Galambos, Robert Abelson, and John Black, eds., Knowledge Structures (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986).
13. See, for example, David Patrick Houghton, U.S. Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press,
2001), pp. 21–45.

14. See Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time* (New York: Free Press, 1986). The authors also suggested that decisionmakers should distinguish between the “known,” “unclear,” and “presumed” facts of each situation. This study cannot try to identify these three categories, as we are still too close to the current events to assess the actual information that U.S. officials had with regard to Iraq. A complete mapping out of the analogy may only be possible later on, when additional resources such as memoirs and interviews become available.


21. There are exceptions to this inclusiveness. Germany and the USSR are the most relevant examples of states that were initially excluded from the League. Italy and Japan were not included in the UN until a decade after the founding of the organization. The two Germanys were able to join the UN only in 1973.


23. For a discussion of how IO intrusiveness has eroded state sovereignty, see, for example, Arthur Stein, *Constrained Sovereignty: The Growth of International Intrusiveness*, paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, September 1999.


26. One needs to note that even such binding sanctions were not fully
respected by all states.

27. One apparent exception to this is the “Uniting for Peace” procedure based on General Assembly Resolution 377, passed in 1950. The resolution provides that if there is a threat to peace and the permanent members of the Security Council do not agree on action, the General Assembly can recommend collective measures to UN members. At first sight, this procedure can potentially lead to UN decisions that indeed run counter to great power interests. But, as practice has shown, this has rarely (if ever) happened, even in the ten cases in which the procedure has been used over the past five decades. This is primarily because, as opposed to the Security Council, which can adopt binding decisions, the General Assembly’s authorization of enforcement measures is only “permissive” and carries no binding force. See, for example, discussion in Ernst B. Haas, “The Collective Management of International Conflict, 1945–1984,” in United Nations Institute for Training and Research, The United Nations and the Maintenance of International Peace and Security (Hingham, Mass.: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987), p. 37.

28. In 1950, in the vote on Korea, the USSR learned the value of being present in the UNSC in order to cast its veto.


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