From the Congress of Vienna to Present-Day International Organizations

1. By Bob Reinalda

When did the process of international organization start?¹ It was not in 1945 nor in 1919. Rather, it was the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) that proved to be the relevant turning point in history, when certain conditions allowed a number of European States to set in motion a series of innovations, inventions and learning processes that shaped the core of what we today refer to as international organizations (IOs).

After the French Revolution of 1789, Napoleon Bonaparte upset the balance of power in Europe with his military campaigns of conquests. Following his defeat at the battle of Paris in March 1814, however, he was forced to abdicate.² French territorial borders were re-established, and eight European States convened at the Congress of Vienna, held between September 1814 and June 1815, to restore the balance of power, while hoping to maintain a lasting peace. The Great Powers recognized that the existing state system was no longer adequate and that they had to seek new institutional arrangements. This article explains how present-day IOs have evolved from these arrangements.

Innovations, Inventions and Learning Processes

Among the conditions that allowed for the creation of a new international order at Vienna were, according to Inis Claude: States functioning as independent political units; a substantial measure of contact between them; an awareness of the problems which arose out of their coexistence; and recognition of the need to create institutional devices and systematic methods for regulating their relations with each other.³ John Ikenberry later added that in various respects the strongest state, called the hegemon, may use a strategy of institutional binding at junctions after major wars. Binding mechanisms include treaties and joint management responsibilities that create so-called “voice opportunities” for participating actors, and provide procedures to mitigate or resolve conflicts while simultaneously raising the costs of exit.⁴ In order to achieve the desired settlement, the hegemon must be generous during negotiations and lenient with regard to less important matters, which the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, the new hegemon at the time, was willing to do.

Among the innovations agreed upon in Vienna were new regulations for diplomatic relations, such as the official titles of successive classes of State representatives and the precedence of States in alphabetical order. These basic rules simplified both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, evolving into a continuing process of codification of customary diplomatic relations.

The major innovation at Vienna was the follow-up conference. This new idea resulted in the custom of participating States to convene, upon reaching an agreement, a follow-up conference to assess whether previously agreed-upon decisions and policies had been executed. Since in most cases implementation was incomplete, the situation generally required new deliberations during the conference, including decisions that called for the convening of follow-up conferences. Consequently, since 1815, that innovative idea resulted in an ongoing cycle of conferences dealing with similar and related issues. Apart from continuity, the cycle produced incremental decision-making and path dependency with regard to selected common solutions and efforts.

Path dependency was promoted by written documents. As a rule, the *Acte finale* of a multilateral conference contained a summary of the work done and an annex of documents that participating Governments had signed. Treaties resulting from these conferences built on previous agreements, enabling the further development of international law.

The early years of conference diplomacy, however, also witnessed a thorny learning process for negotiating and cooperating diplomats. They had to accept the appearance of non-diplomatic participants, such as experts and representatives of organized citizenry, and adjust to new arrangements, including preparatory conferences, which would precede diplomatic meetings. In order to make progress they also had to approach the formally agreed-upon rule of unanimity more flexibly by voting with a degree of practicality. Furthermore, the telegraph and newspapers began to spread information about negotiating processes.

From the beginning, this system of multilateral conferences was characterized by openness, with citizens travelling to conferences initiated by their Governments (representatives of the movement for the abolition of slavery who were already in Vienna attended the Congress), and, in turn, governmental representatives attended privately organized conferences. Governments appreciated such instances, because of the expertise and the insight into issues under consideration that those non-governmental organizations (NGOs) brought to the debates, while NGOs regarded multilateral conferences as an opportunity to influence official decision-making. If not invited, they would invite themselves. This inclusive character of multilateral conferences continued in the next phase of institutionalization.

Institutionalization

Since the 1860s, in a process of institutionalization, the series of multilateral conferences were replaced with permanent institutions, referred to at the time as Public International Unions. Among them were the International Telegraph Union (1865), the Universal Postal Union (1874), the International Association of Railway Congresses (1884) and the International Office of Public Health (1907). Those unions had regular (annual) general assembly meetings, rather than ad hoc conferences, and permanent secretariats, with secretaries, and later secretaries-general, mindful of path dependency.

The unions responded to the expansion of modern capitalism and technology, which had little regard for national borders, but rather pushed for uniformity in national legislative and administrative structures. The unions, thus, were engaged in establishing a common regime of regulations. Their development was promoted by institutional experimentation, including copying successful arrangements, and engaging entrepreneurs, who helped to design and build public rail, health, relief and other systems.

The unions also helped to create continental markets in Europe and the Americas, with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (1899) facilitating economic and other ties between States. The Court contributed to establishing trustful relations between Governments, since disputes could be settled in peaceful ways.

Craig Murphy has demonstrated that by 1910 the conferences called by IOs began to outnumber those arranged at the invitation of Heads of State or Government.⁵ Most States were unaware of the effects of the institutional innovation engineered by IOs, since they still saw the periodic conferences as a way to control their work, whereas the necessary preparations for the conferences in fact gave IOs power over the agenda. Interestingly, the governing boards, which also meant to control IOs' work, soon identified with the proper functioning of their organizations.

Nonetheless, States remained important actors in IOs. The number of States rose from 23 in 1815 to 44 in 1914, and the number of IOs from 1 in 1815 (the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine) to 37 in 1914. The outbreak of the First World War was an exogenous shock to the evolutionary development of IOs, but 27 of them, as well as the Court, survived the war period, mostly as a result of their secretaries-general's cautious leadership.

The International Secretariat

Many of the early IOs transformed into what we now call "specialized agencies," and their subdivisions (assemblies, boards and secretariats), became institutional prototypes for the League of Nations and the United Nations System. A fundamental debate took place during the drafting of the Covenant of the League of Nations in Versailles in 1919, with one of the proposals favouring a secretariat consisting of national officials who would be loyal to and paid by the major member States. That principal-agent model of the previous war councils was rejected, however, in favour of the establishment of a truly international secretariat, whose members would be required to distance themselves from national interests and devote their service to the League's purposes. They needed to be capable persons of broad vision and flexible mind, supported and paid by the organization. Eric Drummond, who became the League's first Secretary-General, defended the latter position, which was in line with the secretariat experience of the Public International Unions.

Although the organizational structure of the League and the International Labour Organization (ILO), as well as the candidates for executive offices were subject for political discussions between the founding States, there was little reflection upon the requirements for the office and the expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus. Generally speaking, only a few paragraphs of IO constitutions deal with the secretariat and its chief executives, which implies that organizational developments largely depend upon the individual leadership skills of those in office.

Albert Thomas felt strongly about his position as ILO Director, which he managed to secure within the constitutional bodies as a post "not unlike that of a minister introducing and defending his proposals in Parliament".⁶ He also initiated modifications of the founders' intentions, such as more independence from the League, and managed to secure a steadily increasing programme range of ILO conventions, as well as an expansion and enhancement of monitoring procedures. Although several member States objected to these developments, Thomas handled them in ways that States could hardly refuse in the longer term. The

biographical history of chief executives profiled in the IO BIO Project⁷ demonstrates that while secretaries-general may have been successful executives, they also need to simultaneously manage their bureaucracies while mediating between States and other international actors.

IOs also survived the Second World War. The 1945 San Francisco conference modelled the United Nations Secretariat on the League, given its requirement that staff must be loyal to the organization and that Member States must respect its exclusively international nature, as inscribed in Article 100 of the Charter of the United Nations. The Secretary-General of the United Nations became both the chief administrative officer and a political figure in international relations. Several Secretaries-General succeeded in creating elements not mentioned in the Charter, such as the observer position of IOs, peacekeeping and later peacebuilding. Important elements in the development of the System as a complex of multiple large organizations requiring capable leadership are coordination (given the numerous agencies and bodies); the growth of the institutions themselves, with bureaucratization processes and related challenges; staff professionalism; and management of demands by Member States that also exert financial pressure.

Competition by Country Clubs

This article argues that the evolutionary process of IOs started at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, with the invention of the follow-up conference, followed by a process of institutionalization, the establishment of an international secretariat and an expansion of executive leadership roles. All these elements still matter, although many challenges remain.

For a long time the post-war international system comprised three main actors: nation States, IOs and NGOs. Country clubs such as the Group of Seven and the Group of 20 became a fourth category and may be regarded as competitors to IOs.

The common definition of IOs requires three or more member States, a written constitution and a permanent secretariat. Country clubs, however, are more informal and meet only the first criterion, with the nationally-organized Sherpa system resembling the secretariat model that was rejected in Versailles in 1919. Major States are the drivers behind the clubs, arguing that small numbers work better. However, this creates legitimacy issues and troubles IOs, since club decisions, postulated by elite groups of States, present IOs with demands and instructions that may conflict with their policies and constitutionally defined procedures.

The United Nations and other IOs must address this challenge; hence, history has not yet ended.

Notes

1 Bob Reinalda, *Routledge History of International Organizations: from 1815 to the present day* (London, Routledge, 2009).

2 Napoleon returned to power, but was defeated at Waterloo in 1815 and exiled to the island of St. Helena, where he remained until his death in 1821.

3 Inis L. Claude, *Swords into Plowshares: the Problems and Progress of International Organization* (New York, Random House, 1964), pp. 17-18.

- 4 John G. Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 41.
- 5 Craig N. Murphy, *International Organization and Industrial Change: Global Governance since 1850*, (Cambridge, Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 111-112.
- 6 Victor-Yves Ghebali, Roberto Ago and Nicolas Valticos, eds., *The International Labour Organization: A Case Study on the Evolution of U.N. Specialized Agencies* (Dordrecht, the Netherlands, Martinus Nijhoff, 1989), p. 12.
- 7 IO BIO, The Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations. Available from www.ru.nl/fm/iobio.