

THE UN'S PREDICAMENT

NEED FOR REFORM

The article reviews the evolution in the structure and activities of the United Nations, mainly since the end of the Cold War and exposes the organisation's flaws and weaknesses which threaten its survival because of growing irrelevance. However, while emphasising the urgent need for reform, the author shows the obstacles that prevent radical changes.

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The United Nations (UN) is a great experiment in cooperation to maintain peace and security. Its founders tried to avoid the League of Nations' shortcomings, while pursuing similar goals. Unlike the League, the UN has become a universal organisation. Fifty-one states were Charter members, and membership later exploded, especially with decolonisation in the 1960s and 1970s and, in early 1990s with the break-up of the USSR and Yugoslavia. Today the UN has 193 members. The Holy See (the universal government of the Catholic Church operating from Vatican City State, a sovereign, independent territory), Palestine and the European Union (EU) are not members, but maintain permanent UN representation.

The UN's birth reflected recognition that a new international institution was needed to help states cooperate to attack the sources of war. In a number of key meetings during and after the Second World War, world leaders drew up rules to govern international behaviour and established a network of institutions to work together for the common good. (*Dan Plesch and Thomas G Weiss, "Wartime Origins and the Future United Nations", London, Routledge, 2015*) In the words of Article 1 of the Charter, the UN's purpose was to "maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threat to the peace, and for suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches

of the peace". (*Charter of the United Nations*, *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School*. <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/un/uchart.htm>) However, during the Cold War, superpower deadlock spurred the UN to develop novel peacekeeping techniques. The end of the Cold War again altered the global political landscape, as the United States and Russia began to cooperate on a variety of issues. Although initial hopes were high, expectations about the UN and its future were tempered as the extent of post-Cold War problems became apparent.

The UN's founders hoped that the victorious Second World War allies would continue cooperating to maintain peace. Yet even as the UN was being established, the Cold War clouds were gathering, and, with both superpowers having a veto, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was paralysed almost from the outset. Owing to differences between the superpowers, peace enforcement was impossible, and any effort to mobilise the UN against either would result in the institution's collapse. Post the Cold War we saw a gradual decline in the ability of the UN to play any meaningful role in resolving conflicts. The Israel crisis is just one of them. Over the last two-three decades, the UN has been like a bystander. With the major powers developing severe differences, they have made it impossible for the UN with its frozen membership of decision-making bodies, such as the UNSC, to undertake any effective action. (*Kallol Bhattacharjee, "Is the United Nations toothless in ending wars?" The Hindu, 3 November 2023. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/is-the-united-nations-toothless-in-ending-wars/article67490739.ece>*) The Council came to resemble a debating club and, for many of the great events of the Cold War, it had to sit on the sidelines.

Although the Security Council remained deadlocked, the UN developed an innovative process to allow it to act in cases in which superpowers were not directly involved. A technique was needed that was more robust than Chapter Six but less provocative than Chapter Seven. Peacekeeping, drawing on elements from both,

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was the technique, a sort of “Chapter Six-and-a Half”. Peacekeeping operations in the post-Cold-War period have been larger and more complex than those during the Cold War, and it is unlikely that such operations can be sustained in future without large-scale involvement of major states. Thus, the Bosnian conflict was brought to an end only after the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s (NATO) intervention. Even where they are not directly involved, the UN has to rely on major countries for logistics, transport, and funding. The demands placed on UN personnel are so extensive that they threaten to overwhelm the organisation’s peacekeepers, which are necessary where governments have collapsed, violence is endemic, and refugees number in the millions. Thus, growing burdens and the reluctance of leading members to provide necessary resources threaten the UN’s continued effectiveness as an agent of peace and security. The UN burdens are growing rapidly at a time when the United States is hesitant to entrust its interests to the organisation.

The United Nations depends on member states for funding. They are assessed on the basis of their capacity to pay as determined by national income, and the scale is regularly reviewed. The maximum percentage by any single member was set at 25 per cent, an amount paid only by the United States. However, under US pressure this ceiling was reduced to 22 per cent in 2000. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Japan was assessed at 12.53 per cent, Germany 8.018 per cent and China only 3.189 per cent. (*UN Secretariat, “Assessment of Member States’ Advances to the Working Capital Fund for the Biennium 2010-2011 and the Contributions to the United Nations Regular Budget for 2010.”* http://globalpolicy.org/images/pdfs/Member_States_Assessment_for_Regular_Budget_for_2010.pdf, pp.8-13) Almost half the members pay for the organisation’s regular budget. Overall expenditures by the UN and its agencies run to about US\$ 30 billion or US\$ 4 per capita based on total members’ populations. (*Global Policy Forum, “UN Finance”.* <http://www.globalpolicy.org/un-finance.html>.)

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet Union was the UN’s leading deadbeat, but in recent decades the United States has had this dubious distinction. American enthusiasm for the UN waned in the 1970s as it became apparent that the US could no longer dominate the organisation. Confronting vocal opposition to American policies toward Vietnam, South Africa, and the Middle East among many developing countries, combined with demands for greater US economic aid, political conservatives in the United States grew fearful that the UN threatened US national interests. Like those of an earlier generation, some Americans today perceive the UN as a threat to US sovereignty. Some also believe that US financial contribution to the organisation is too high, that UN

bureaucracy is corrupt, and that the UN has become a vehicle for anti-American rhetoric. Increasingly, conservatives argued that the United States does not need the United Nations as much as the UN needs the United States and that the United States should not support UN actions that are not in America's national interest.

As US criticism of the UN grew in the late 1970s, so did Congressional reluctance to meet America's financial obligations to the UN. Matters worsened during the Reagan years (1980-88), when the United States refused to fund programmes that aided the Palestine Liberation Organization or SWAPO (the armed independence movement in Namibia). By the end of 1988, the United States still owed most of its regular and peacekeeping dues. President George H W Bush persuaded Congress to reverse its policy and by 1992 had reduced the US debt to the UN. During the Clinton years (1992-2000), acrimonious domestic debate ensued over UN financing, producing several compromises that reduced but did not eliminate US debt. Under the George W Bush administration (2000-08), the United States unsuccessfully tried to cap the UN budget until the organisation instituted far-reaching reforms desired by Washington. As of 31 October 2009, members' arrears to the regular budget were US\$ 829 million, of which the US owed 93 per cent. (*Ibid*) By May 2010, there remained a total shortfall of US\$ 1.061 billion and US\$ 1.24 billion in the UN regular and peacekeeping budgets respectively. (*UN Secretariat, "Assessment of Member States' Advances to the Working Capital Fund for the Biennium 2010-2011 and the Contributions to the United Nations Regular Budget for 2010."*) Fifty-two member states have yet to pay US\$ 1.5 billion in assessments as of 30 September 2024. The United States is responsible for the largest outstanding assessment at US\$ 995 million; followed by China at US\$ 381 million; Argentina at US\$ 42 million though it subsequently made a partial payment; and Venezuela at US\$ 36 million. (*press.un.org/en/2024/gaab4468.doc.htm*)

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The debate over UN financing was symptomatic of larger issues concerning America's role in the world and the UN's relevance. Is it in the interest of the world's only superpower to limit its capacity to act as it wishes, and is the legitimacy conferred by acting within the constraint of the UN important enough to justify those constraints? These questions were sharply argued about in the 2002-03 debate in UN Security Council over whether to invade Iraq.

Many of America's friends believed that in invading Iraq, the US was overreaching to terrorism and thought that the Iraq war would only increase the terrorist threat. (Mark Mazzetti, "Spy Agencies say Iraq War Worsens Terror Threat," *New York Times*, 24 September 2006, Sec.1,1) Indeed, despite Britain's "special relationship" with the United States, and its key role in America's "coalition of the willing" that invaded Iraq in 2003, in June 2006 two-thirds of Britons said their opinion of the US had worsened in recent years. This led a prominent political scientist to declare that "there has probably never been a time when America was held in such low esteem on this side of the Atlantic". (Cited in Alan Cowell, "A New Survey Suggests That Britons Take a Dim View of the US," *New York Times*, 3 July 2006, A5)

When small countries behave unilaterally, it is one thing; but when the United States does so, it is another. If the UN's most powerful member acts without regard to the organisation, the UN is likely to become more and more irrelevant as did the League of Nations. Unilateralism in Iraq provided the United States with flexibility that would have been unthinkable had the UN been involved. But the cost, especially in legitimacy, was high, a fact recognised by the Obama administration. Without the UN support, many people around the world, including many Americans, claimed that the US had no right to do what it did in Iraq. The Iraq war brought to a head the larger question of the changing nature of threat in the modern world, the inadequacy of the existing norms, laws and institutions in being able to address such threats and the need for new "rules of the game" to replace them. In his commencement address at Harvard University on 10 June 2004, Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted: "The United Nations was never meant to be a suicide pact. But what kind of a world would it be, and who would want to live in it, if every country was allowed to use force, without collective agreement, simply because it thought there might be a threat?" (Kofi Annan, "Three Crises, and the Need for American Leadership," *UN Press Release SG/SM/9357*) American willingness to act without approval was not new. Washington paid little attention to the United Nations during the Vietnam War and in 1999 neither the US nor NATO allies obtained UN approval for intervention in

Kosovo. The more serious threat to the UN's viability may come from developing countries which have become disillusioned with the organisation as the forum for legitimising American dominance. They have mostly supported the UN as a partner in the joint quest for development and security. But if the UN becomes for the rest of the world what the old Warsaw Pact was for the former Soviet Satellites, it will be a threat to the autonomy and security of most member states, not the collective instrument for protecting them through strength in unity. Unilateralism is not a US monopoly. It has been mirrored by Iranian and North Korean intransigence about their development of nuclear weapons (in both cases condemned in Security Council resolutions), China's refusal to loosen its hold on Tibet, Israeli unilateralism in occupied Palestine, and Russian policy in Ukraine.

A few years ago, American dissatisfaction with the UN combined with revelation about inefficiency and, in some cases, corruption, produced calls for reforming the organisation. For example, the UN's reputation was tarnished by accusations of corruption in Kosovo and in the Iraq oil-for-food programme; in addition, allegations of sexual exploitation by UN peacekeepers persist. The organisation has also been accused of firing those who reveal misconduct. (*Andrew Higgins*

and *Steve Stecklow*, "UN Push to Stem Misconduct Flounders," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 December 2008, A1, A8) However, there was little agreement about what type of reform was needed.

In November 2003, Secretary-General Kofi Annan set up a "high-level panel of eminent personalities" to look into the possibility of UN reform. Among the ideas considered was changing Security Council membership. The "G-4 proposal" called for adding four non-permanent members and six permanent members, including Germany, Japan, Brazil, India, Plus two African countries. The African Union proposal was to add five new non-permanent seats and six new permanent seats (two for Africa, two for Asia, one for Latin America, and one for Western Europe). The "Uniting for Consensus Proposal" involved adding ten new non-permanent seats chosen by regional groups. (*ReformtheUN.org*, "Security Council Reform," 16 August 2006. <http://www.reformtheun.org/index.php/issues/1737?theme=alt4#overview>.)

Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla Motors, has said that it is "absurd" that India

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doesn't have a permanent Security Council seat. This absurdity has obviously become starker since India became the world's most populous country. The UNSC's structure with five veto-wielding permanent members is completely out of touch with today's geopolitical realities. The UN was born after the Second World War and continues to represent the global power structure from nearly 80 years ago. The UK, for example, is a shadow of its former self. Its permanent UN seat will be a further absurdity if Scotland secedes. Or look at Russia, which replaced the Soviet Union in the UNSC, some say illegally. It is hardly a global security guarantor today. France barely registers, while the US has undertaken many unilateral military actions outside UN purview. It's also glaring that Africa doesn't have permanent UNSC representation. Neither does South America. Meanwhile, Europe's largest economy, Germany, remains outside. So does the world's fourth largest economy, Japan. (*Absurdity Called UNSC,* *Times of India*, 24 January 2024. <https://www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-editorials/absurdity-called-unsc/>) The suggested changes in Council membership have been controversial.

Significant divisions exist regarding the veto power of permanent members of the Security Council. Some countries oppose the veto but believe that if it is retained, it should extend to new permanent members as well (e.g., Algeria, Angola, and Egypt). Others contend that new permanent members should not be given the veto (e.g., Norway, Pakistan, Peru, and Russia). Still others want to limit the use of the veto either to Chapter Seven of the Charter or in the case of serious human rights violations (e.g., Chile, Iraq, Jordan, and Switzerland). Finally, some countries such as Argentina, Sudan and Venezuela, seek to abolish it. (See *Global Policy Forum, Security Council Reform, "Membership Including and Representation,"* <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security-council/security-council-reform/membership-including-expansion-and-representation.html>)

Any significant reform of the Security Council will be difficult, as the organisation is still mired in a power structure that reflects the balance of power following the Second World War. Major structural changes, such as enlarging the Council and reallocating veto power, require the support of two-thirds of the General Assembly and ratification by two-thirds of all UN members, including the veto power holders on the Security Council. (See *the UN Charter, Article 108*) Thus, the very structure that was intended to ensure that the major powers remained engaged in the UN has become a critical obstacle to ensuring that the organisation remains relevant in a transforming global system. Leaders agreed to reform the UNSC and recognised the urgent need to make it more representative, inclusive, transparent, effective, efficient, democratic and accountable through expansion in the permanent and non-permanent categories of membership of the Council.

A large minority of Americans hold unfavourable views of the UN in sharp contrast to majorities in Britain, France, Germany, Poland, Kenya, Nigeria, Mexico, South Korea, and Indonesia, who hold favourable views. In fact, many people around the world tend to favour strengthening the UN's authority to manage international conflict, investigate human rights violations, and regulate the international arms trade. For some of these people, the real problem with the UN is the dominance of the US. A common view in several Muslim countries, for instance, is that "US basically controls UN and can almost always make UN do what US wants". (Richard Wike, "Obama Addresses More Popular UN". <http://www.pewresearch.org/pubs/1348/united-nations-global-opinion-more-popular>: "People in Muslim Nations Conflicted about UN," 2 December 2008. http://www.world_publicopinion.org/pipa/articles/btunitednationsra/575.php)

The 2003 panel also identified six key challenges facing the UN in coming years: interstate conflict, internal violence, social and economic threats, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and crime. With these threats in mind, the panel also considered greater scope for UN humanitarian intervention and the preventive use of force (as the United States undertook against Iraq), but only after a "serious and sober assessment" of the threat by the Security Council. (A Winning Recipe for Reform?," *The Economist*, 24 July 2004, 45) In addition, the Secretary-General proposed that the UN apply pressure to rich countries to contribute 0.7 per cent of the gross national income as foreign aid and codify rules

on using military force as recommended by his panel. (Warren Hoge, "Annan Offers Plans for Changes in UN Structure," *New York Times*, 12 March 2005. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/21/international/21cnd-nations.html>)

For the supporters of the UN, the organisation is still essential and effective, especially in its promotion of economic development and social justice. The organisation has more than 30 specialised agencies and funds, staffed by 44,000 people worldwide, dealing with everything from peacekeeping and vaccinations to maritime regulations and international refugees. The agencies are involved in a wide range of development, health, education and social welfare activities across the globe. And the organisation also remains central to negotiations on many of the world's most pressing issues, from global climate change to violent

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regional conflicts, supporters say. (*Funds, Programmes, Specialised Agencies and Others*,” *The United Nations*, 2016. <http://www.tinyurl.com/nffg4jd>; “Where We Are,” *United Nations Careers*, 2016. <http://www.tinyurl.com/hrzobke>)

But critics say its management has become so inept and its bureaucracy so inefficient that it cannot react swiftly enough to today’s challenges. “If you locked a team of evil geniuses in a laboratory, they could not design a bureaucracy so maddeningly complex”, Anthony Banbury, a former UN Assistant Secretary-General, wrote a few years ago, explaining his resignation from the organisation. (*Anthony Banbury, “I Love the U.N., But It Is Failing,” The New York Times*, 18 March 2016. <http://www.tinyurl.com/z57x2ev>)

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in his acceptance speech upon taking office in December 2016, acknowledged that the international organisation’s rules and regulations have hindered its efficient operation. “We need to create a consensus around simplification, decentralisation and flexibility,” Guterres said. It benefits no one if it takes nine months to deploy a staff member to the field. (*Secretary-General-Designate Antonio Guterres’ Remarks to the General Assembly on Taking the Oath of Office, “United Nations Secretary-General,” 12 December 2016. <http://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2016-12-12/secretary-general-designate-antonio-guterres-oath-office-speech>*)

Still, some analysts say inefficiencies in the UN’s operations reflected the complicated structure of the organisation. Under the 1945 Charter, member nations meet in a General Assembly where they debate issues and pass resolutions calling for action in areas of concern, but the real authority is largely reserved to the 15-member Security Council, which can make the binding decisions that the Charter requires member countries to follow. Ten seats on the Council are held for two-year terms by nations representing different regions. Five countries have permanent seats on the Council, including France and Great Britain, and have veto power over UN resolutions, enabling any one of them to block action. (*“About the UN,” The United Nations. <http://www.tinyurl.com/jnug351>*)

The Secretary-General – the chief administrative officer—is appointed by the General Assembly to renewable five-year terms, but the Security Council nominates the candidates, so the five veto-wielding permanent members effectively select the Secretary-General. The Secretary-General supervises all staff at the organisation’s New York City headquarters and in offices and missions around the world. The General Assembly annually elects a President who oversees that body, but critics note that many UN agencies operate as autonomous fiefdoms and fill senior positions based on patronage rather than competency. And, they say, many of agencies or other entities operating within

the UN duplicate effort, wasting money and diluting the organisation's focus (*Chris McGreal, "70 Years and Half a Trillion Dollars Later: What Has the UN Achieved?" The Guardian, 15 September 2015. <http://www.tinyurl.com/nc8nsd6>.) This flawed governing structure, critics say, means the United Nations has struggled to respond to recent past international crises, such as Africa's Ebola outbreak and the flood of Middle Eastern refugees trying to enter Europe.*

Scandals are another serious problem: UN peacekeeping forces from France and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been accused of sexually exploiting and abusing women and children during the peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic. (*Kevin Sief, "Sometimes When I'm Alone With My Baby, I Think About Killing Him. He Reminds Me of the Man Who Raped Me," The Washington Post, 27 February 2016. <http://www.tinyurl.com/jrv4vzy>.) Charges of corruption among senior UN officials have led to calls for the organisation to become more transparent and democratic.*

Many international affairs experts credit the United Nations for shining a spotlight on human rights. In 1948, the UN adopted a "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" that called on nations and people everywhere to recognise that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", with the right to "freedom of thought, conscience and religion", as well as "freedom of opinion and expression". (*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The United Nations. <http://www.tinyurl.com/pnjck5b>.) In recent years, significant attention has been devoted to the rights of women as well as promoting equal treatment to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. (*"UN Women," The United Nations. <http://www.tinyurl.com/hvhnc5q>.)**

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Critics say the make-up of the 47-member Human Rights Council, responsible for promoting human rights, reflects the subversion of some UN programmes by including several autocratic regimes. In 2015, the Council chose Saudi Arabia to head a key Council panel. "Saudi Arabia has arguably the worst record in the world when it comes to religious freedom and women's rights", said Hillel Neuer, Executive Director of UN Watch, an independent watchdog organisation based in Geneva. (*Christopher Ingraham, "Why one of the World's worst human rights*

*offenders is leading a U.N. human rights panel,” The Washington Post, 28 September 2015. <http://www.tinyurl.com/j09tzu2>) A conservative strain of Islam is the state religion in Saudi Arabia, which bans the public practice of any other religion, and strictly limits women’s rights. Saudi Arabia, however, insists it is an active defender of human rights. (Alexandra Sims, “Saudi Arabia Issues Extraordinary Defence of Human Rights Record in Speech to UN Council,” *The Independent*, 9 March 2016. <http://www.tinyurl.com/hrbrfeu>)*

Calls to reform the United Nations are a constant, with critics complaining that the organisation has too many agencies pursuing similar goals and that its bureaucracy is too insular and unresponsive. The problem of multiple agencies tasked with overlapping responsibilities, such as in water and energy, has arisen because the United Nations often responds to perceived needs by adding initiatives similar to existing efforts, analysts say. “We have 70 years accretion of various organisations, funds, Programmes, special entities etc., etc.,” says Thomas Weiss, a distinguished scholar of international relations at the City University of New York. “More and more of them are doing the same things”. Because each initiative develops its own constituency within the UN, it becomes almost impossible to get rid of them once they have been established, Weiss explains, leading to a maze of competing largely independent bureaucracies. While the core UN budget is supported through assessed contributions from each member nation based on its wealth, many programmes are supported by voluntary, direct contributions from countries or NGOs, he continues, which means agencies are competing for the same resources.

The bureaucratic overlap, Weiss says, combined with what he characterises as weak leadership at the top, particularly under former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, has created a UN often at odds with itself. “There used to be something that might be characterised as a (UN) ‘system’ when the organisation was new and smaller”, he says, “but now I use the word family—because like most of our families, this one is terribly dysfunctional”. If the United Nations continues on its present path, he says, “it’s not going to disappear, but it is going to become a kind of relic and diminished presence on the world stage”. Weiss, the author of *What’s Wrong With the United Nations and How to Fix It*, says greater centralisation, including greater authority over spending, would help end the problem of overlapping missions and competition for resources. This would also require member nations to be focused more on the greater global good, rather than on protecting pet programmes, he adds.

Antony Banbury, a former UN official, said the organisation’s administrative bureaucracy remains unresponsive in key ways, most notably in staffing up

quickly to respond to rapidly unfolding crises such as pandemics or natural disasters. “The United Nations needs to be able to attract and quickly deploy the world’s best talent. And yet, it takes on average 213 days to recruit someone”, he said, adding that recent changes in hiring policies by the Department of Management increased the delay even further. (*Anthony Banbury, “I Love the UN, But It Is Failing,” The New York Times, 18 March 2016. <http://www.tinyurl.com/z57x2ev>*)

In addition, Weiss notes, staff appointments often are made to satisfy different countries or constituents. “The leadership at the top...the senior and junior posts, are often much politicised appointments”, he says, so competency and expertise are not top priorities. Making matters worse, Banbury said, operational leaders on the ground cannot hire their own staff or reassign incompetent personnel. “Short of a serious crime, it is virtually impossible to fire someone in the United Nations”, Banbury said. While he acknowledges that the UN is still doing valuable work in some areas, thanks to “colossal mismanagement, the United Nations is failing”, he said. (*ibid*)

For more than half-a-century, the blue helmets and berets worn by UN peacekeepers have been a highly visible sign that the United Nations was on the ground in the world’s trouble-spots. Former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called peacekeeping “the flagship of the United Nations enterprise”. But peacekeeping has only become “more and more dangerous”, Ban acknowledged in 2016. “In some areas...our bleu flag has gone from being a shield to a target”. (*“Peacekeeping ‘Flagship of the UN Enterprise,’ Ban says Ahead of Day of Honouring ‘Blue Helmets’ ” U.N. News Centre, 19 May 2016. <http://www.tinyurl.com/lj5xu8jz>*) A

stark illustration of the threat occurred on 7 December 2017, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo when 14 UN peacekeepers from Tanzania were killed by rebels, described by the UN as the worst attack on peacekeeping forces in recent history. (*“UN honours 14 Peacekeepers Killed in Eastern DR Congo,” United Nations Peacekeeping, 11 December 2017. <http://www.peacekeeping.un.org/en/un-honours-14-peacekeepers-killed-eastern-dr-congo>*)

Radical Islamic groups such as the Islamic State (also known as ISIS and ISIL) and al-Qaeda reject the underlying notions that give the UN its authority. They see it as an institution representing the West. They see it as representing

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the United States, a secular, Western democracy they regard as contrary to the wishes of God.

In Mali, where drug smugglers, arms dealers and jihadists have created a chaotic and violent situation, it is said that 146 peacekeepers died since the UN mission began there in 2013, making it the organisation's deadliest peacekeeping mission. Other missions have resulted in more deaths, but over longer periods of time. (Kevin Sieff, "The World's Most Dangerous Peacekeeping Mission," *The Washington Post*, 17 February 2017. http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2017/the-worlds-deadliest-u-n-peacekeeping-mission/?utm_term=0c738e13ca3c)

Throughout the organisation's history, UN troops most often were not sent to fight but to help preserve a tentative peace between warring parties and to shield vulnerable civilian populations. Analysts note that the effectiveness of such missions largely depended on a willingness by combatants to seek an end to the conflict and show respect for the United Nations as a neutral arbiter. It also depended on an acceptance of the UN's legitimacy as a representative of world order. UN personnel, both peacekeeping forces and other staff, still play a unique role that allows them to step into any conflicts in a way others cannot. It is still understood to have a degree of impartiality, and that's not to be underestimated, but of late, battling some transnational terrorist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda presents a challenge to the United Nations which was set up to deal with member states, says Sue Eckert, adjunct senior fellow at the Centre for a New American Security, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington DC. "These non-state actors are entirely different, and how you deal with them is different", Eckert says. "It's hard because UN was not set up to deal with these threats, but it is evolving and has taken some innovative approaches". Those approaches include non-military options, such as imposing targeted economic sanctions against terrorist groups to cripple their financing capabilities and helping member nations increase security along their borders. ("*Themes and Priorities*," *United Nations Counter-terrorism Centre*, 2016. <http://www.tinyurl.com/h4engb8>)

UN peacekeeping forces increasingly have pursued "coercive action", abandoning neutrality and taking offensive military action against local militias or insurgent forces in an effort to protect civilians or restore order. "You get into 'second-generation' peacekeeping, which tends towards combat. You have these military operations which are not neutral operations at all", says the University of Nebraska's Forsythe. "They are really efforts to coerce militias and other groups into not attacking civilians...and you have got to have some real capability to carry these out".

Some analysts doubt that the United Nations can carry out more aggressive missions, given that its annual peacekeeping budget is US\$ 7.87 billion. (*Peacekeeping Fact Sheet,* *The United Nations*, 31 March 2017. http://www.peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/pk_factsheet_03_17e.pdf) Moreover, the UN does not have its own military. It borrows troops and equipment from member nations for each mission. Many troops come from developing countries and are not considered as well trained as more professional armies “Even though these international security deployments have been around since 1956, they are still put together with duct tape and chewing gum”, Forsythe says. “The secretary-general has to go around and ask for countries to volunteer forces and equipment, and sometimes the equipment sent is cast-off stuff that doesn’t work, so it’s very hard for international forces to prove themselves against these very nasty guys”. The United States, which provides only a handful of troops but pays a quarter of the peacekeeping budget, has been pushing for a more aggressive use of peacekeeping forces. Some experts believe that’s a mistake. “We may be stumbling into an enormous strategic trap because, if we have learned over the last decade that very highly capable NATO forces, actually can’t suppress Islamic extremist groups, why on earth do we think slightly strengthening UN missions is going to give us a tool that allows us to fight terrorists?” said Richard Gowan, a non-resident fellow at the Centre on International Cooperation at New York University. (*Chris McGreal, “What’s the Point of Peacekeepers When They Don’t Keep the Peace?” The Guardian*, 17 September 2015. <http://www.tinyurl.com/nchbbew>)

The 2020s are dealing body blows to the UN-led system from within. COVID-19 shut down borders, for both people and goods, ignoring the goal of bringing prosperity based on ever greater cooperation. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine revealed the hypocrisy of one of the rule-makers refusing to follow rules, and, finally, the war in Gaza has exposed the fault lines between the developed and developing worlds; between the guilt over the Holocaust and the recognition of the Nakba; and between the need of the great powers to support the UN and its organisations and the expediency of questioning its legitimacy and effectiveness when support for Israel demands it. Most importantly, this conflict

Calls to reform the United Nations are a constant, with critics complaining that the organisation has too many agencies pursuing similar goals and that its bureaucracy is too insular and unresponsive.

tests the commitment of several of the permanent members to the bedrock of the UN system – a commitment to human rights and the genocide convention. As West Asia teeters at the precipice, the UN is being marginalised by the very players that established it. (Priyjali Malik, “The Global order – a fraying around many edges”, *The Hindu*, 28 February 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-current-global-order-a-fraying-around-many-edges/article67892912.ece>)

Despite the challenges facing the United Nations, no one expects it to disappear any time soon. After all, the 80-year-old organisation has survived the Cold War, the birth of dozens of new states following the collapse of colonialism and communism; the emergence of new economic powers like China, India and Brazil; the transformation of the global economy through free trade; and the rise of the internet age, but opinions differ sharply on how the UN will cope in the changing world. The UN must make fundamental changes in how it operates—by centralising power and reining in the bureaucracy—if it hopes to remain an effective player on the world stage. Addressing the landmark UN “Summit of the Future” in New York on 23 September 2024, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said, “Reform is the key to relevance”. Without any significant changes, it’s going to become more and more marginalised. (*Success of Humanity doesn't lie on battlefield: PM at UN*, *The Times of India*, 24 September 2024. <https://www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/success-of-humanity-doesnt-lie-in-battlefield-pm-at-un/articleshow/113613594.cms>)


Big power conflicts—as occurred during the Cold War—once again define and limit the UN’s ability to act. The re-emergence of fundamental disagreements between the United States and Russia over how the international community should react to trouble spots in the Middle East and elsewhere, along with increased tension between the United States and China over several issues, have put three of the five permanent members of the Security Council at odds. The only solution can be found if Russia and the United States stop opposing each other again and if China and the US get along. Otherwise, the UN’s role in the world will remain pretty much as it is right now, that is to say, “continue business as usual”. Yet, with its flaws, the United Nations Organisation provides an essential platform for global discussion and action that helps to avert some global crises and prevents others from getting worse.

“There’s an old saying from the second UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld: ‘The purpose of the UN is not to get us into heaven, but to save us from hell’,” Webster University’s Pease says. “I think what it’s designed to do is to provide a forum for states and other actors to be heard. It provides that forum and tries to address collective problems, and it’s always going to be messy, and

isn't going to agree. But it's the only game in town. There is no other place to go".

The responses to date for calls for UN action have neither been as prompt, effective nor uniform as they need to be. The UN is charged with the neutral stewardship of the world's collective destiny. However, the gap between promise and performance remains unacceptably large, so much so that few rely on the UN for protection, fearing betrayal because the world body lacks the ability to make critical decisions quickly, or has the mandate and resources to act. Structural reforms in the UNSC remain stalemated and most countries see it as having been captured by the major powers. The main donors are frustrated with the protracted, wasteful and counter-productive posturing in the General Assembly. Summit conferences become battlegrounds for vested interest groups to carry out ideological trench warfare by other means.

UN peacekeeping forces increasingly have pursued "coercive action", abandoning neutrality and taking offensive military action against local militias or insurgent forces in an effort to protect civilians or restore order. "You get into 'second-generation' peacekeeping, which tends towards combat".

To be faithful to the notions and peoples of the world that have kept faith with it for almost eight decades, the United Nations must persevere in its efforts to consolidate its strengths, fill in the gaps and eliminate wasteful habits and procedures. Without the United Nations, in the last 80 years, the world would have been a more, not less, dangerous place. But with the United Nations remaining essentially unchanged in structure, authority and power, the world is unlikely to more free, healthy, prosperous and peaceful in the next 80 years. 

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