

The United Nations Author(s): PETER NADIN

Source: *AQ: Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (OCT–DEC 2019), pp. 11–17

Published by: Australian Institute of Policy and Science

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26773344>

REFERENCES

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The United Nations:

A history of success and failure



ARTICLE BY: PETER NADIN

The world is less peaceful than it was a decade ago. Economic instability is on the rise and a global recession is in the offing. The process of post-Cold War democratisation is now running in reverse across the globe. Climate change is reaping devastating impacts. Conflicts in Kashmir, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, and Afghanistan continue to rage; while new conflicts are bubbling to the surface.

Yet while global problems continue to mount, the problem-solving capacity of our politics continues to decline. Generally, national governments appear to lack the fortitude to embrace imaginative and far-reaching solutions. Multilateralism – the idea of governments working cooperatively – has stalled.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold

The United Nations (UN) – the bastion of the post-war global order – is seemingly overwhelmed. A clear-eyed assessment of the organisation might conclude the following: it is unfit to solve many of our present problems, let alone the problems looming on the horizon. This article seeks to investigate the record of the organisation and draw some conclusions about the UN's performance in the 21st Century.

PHOTO: The Soviet Union, UK and USA at the Opening Session of the Conference on Security Organization for Peace in the Post-War World (Aug 1944) © UN Photo



The UN is in the business of improving the lives of people through advancing the sustainable development agenda, addressing climate change, and delivering humanitarian relief.

IMAGE: © sanjibbakshi-Flickr

What is the UN's purpose?

The founders saw the UN as the heart of international economic and political relations – an organisation with the power and capacity to solve the world's most pressing problems. The UN was founded on three key promises.

First, **to maintain international peace and security.** The Security Council is the primary body charged with this task. It is granted the power to make binding decision on all member states. The Council decisions, under Chapter VII of the Charter, are considered law, and as such they are enforceable via means of sanctions or the use of force. Although diplomacy is prioritised, the route to escalation is clear.

Second, **to solve "international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character."**¹ The UN is in the business of improving the lives of people through advancing the sustainable development agenda, addressing climate change, and delivering humanitarian relief. The UN system is made up of a collection of specialised agencies and offices – UN Development Program, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, UN Women, Food and Agriculture Organisation, World Health

Organisation, UN Environmental Program, UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) – which all work to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – or the Sustainable Development Goals.

Third, **to promote and protect human rights.** In 1948, the UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since then, the organisation – largely through treaty bodies, the Human Rights Council, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – has worked to develop legal instruments to protect the rights of people across the globe.

The founders were ambitious for the UN. After conducting a post-mortem of the League of Nations (which had failed in the wake of Axis expansionism in the 1930), they sought to build a new system for safeguarding the peace of the world – this system was known as the *four policemen*. The Soviet Union, United States, United Kingdom, and the Republic of China – would act in concert to provide security for the smaller powers (France was added to make a quintet - or permanent-five).

The responsibility for international peace and security borne by the permanent five were considerable – so they were given power of decision-making in the new organisation. Each would be granted the power of veto – meaning that any decision made would need to be ratified by all five permanent

The founders were also naïve. Like the League before it, the UN would possess limited agency, outside that given to it by its membership.

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The founders were also naïve. Like the League before it, the UN would possess limited agency, outside that given to it by its membership. The UN too would be beholden to the relative alignment of member-states, the political will of members-states to develop robust solutions, and the readiness of member-states to commit valuable resources to enact these solutions.

So, when the alliance between the victors of the Second World War began to fracture, the UN and particularly its Security Council, became largely impotent.

Where the UN succeeds

The UN is a regular punching bag for critics. The failures gain media attention, while successes are largely ignored. There are four broad success stories worth highlighting.

1. The UN has succeeded in the diffusion of norms.

International norms constrain policy and action, and “even alter state conceptions of national interests.”² The UN has been a successful purveyor of norms across a range of fields including refugees, internal displacement, civil protection, the responsibility to protect, and humanitarian assistance. Prescriptive norms also play a role

informing the foreign policy of states when they face uncertain circumstances. These norms may or may not actually materially change state behaviour, but usually they alter the policy-making equations of decision-makers.

2. The UN has succeeded in assisting great-power cooperation.

This statement might seem a falsehood. The Cold War caused gridlock at the UN, seemingly the opposite of cooperation. However, the Cold War demonstrated the value of the Security Council as a diplomatic instrument. The parties to the Cold War never ceased talking to each other. Indeed, the Council allowed for moments of cooperation – most notably the end to the Iran-Iraq War in 1988.

The UN was intended to save subsequent generations from a third-world war. The organisation can be credited for contributing to a more stable post-war environment. None of great powers have engaged in open armed confrontation. For the most part, the UN system – both political and economic – has tied the great and small powers into a system of interdependence, which contributes to diminishing the likelihood of conflict. In the current context, with tensions running high between the P5, the Security Council might return to its

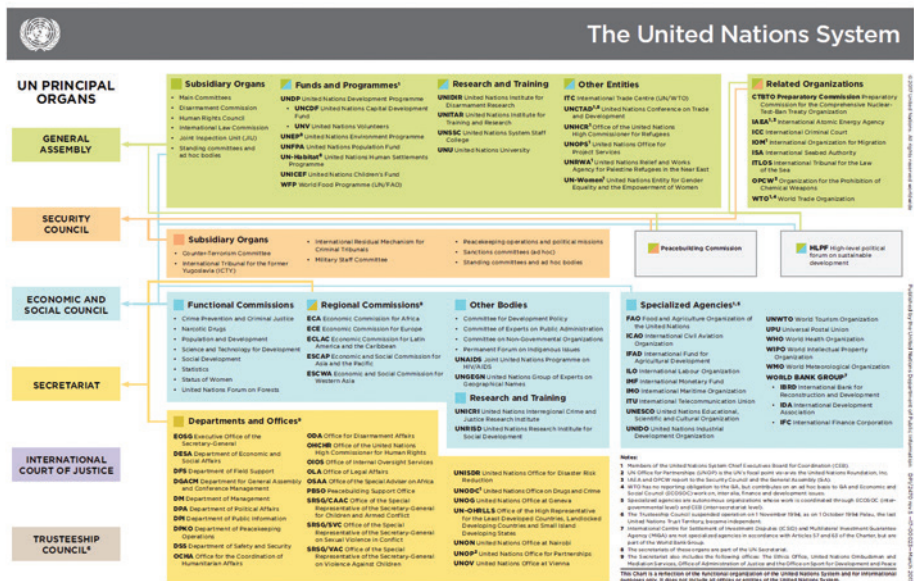


PHOTO: Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev sign the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (1987)

© White House Photo

IMAGE TOP: © Martine Perret

When the Charter was signed in June 1945, the UN had 50 members. Today, the UN has 193 members, with the majority of new members joining the organisation during the era of de-colonialisation of the 1960s.



members. Today, the UN has 193 members, with the majority of new members joining the organisation during the era of de-colonialisation of the 1960s. Membership of the UN provided fledging nations welcome international recognition of statehood – and a voice in the general assembly.

4. The UN has succeeded in mitigating the effects of humanitarian crises.

There is little argument about the value of the UN's flagship humanitarian work – UNICEF, UNHCR, and the World Food Programme. The UN – through OCHA – coordinates humanitarian relief operations to natural and man-made disasters across the globe. For the most part, the UN is effective and capable in this role.

Where the UN fails

Sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers. The introduction of cholera to Haiti. The oil-for-food scandal. The Rwandan genocide. The Srebrenica massacre. The list of failures are symptomatic of a wider set of structural maladies that are worth considering.

1. The UN continues to demonstrate the limits of external interventionism.

Civil wars are difficult to understand because they are ignited and then

“original purpose as the forum for mitigating great power tensions and preventing large-scale military confrontation between them.”⁷³ As Richard Gowan observes, the Council gives the great powers the space to reach “political bargains – comparing interests, devising compromises and concealing differences – without losing face.”⁷⁴

3. The UN has succeeded in supporting states to independence.

Chapter XI of the UN Charter concerning non-self-governing territories is a testament to decolonisation. The Chapter clearly commits member-states administering these territories to the “progressive development of free political institutions.”⁷⁵ In December 1960, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 1514 (Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples). When the Charter was signed in June 1945, the UN had 50

IMAGE: Organizational Chart © United Nations

IMAGE: © Adrien Taylor-Unsplash

propelled by a series of interconnected factors including economic grievance, sectarian division, societal structures, and legacies of colonial rule. The complexity of modern conflicts largely bewilder local, regional, and international actors – and confound their responses. Conflicts in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Afghanistan, Iraq, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan have become intergenerational. The very fabric of these societies has been fundamentally altered by conflict. The ability of the under-funded and under-resourced UN – even if it is seen as a legitimate and impartial actor – to achieve success in these circumstances is sorely limited.

2. The UN has failed to prevent crises and conflicts.

Even though prevention is better than the cure, the UN is and will likely

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always be a reactive organisation – responding to crises after the fact, rather than before.

Each Secretary-General since the end of the Cold War has reiterated the importance of preventive action, but to no avail. As mentioned above, crises are so complex and intractable they often defy solution. This only serves to underline the importance of prevention. The system, however, will never accept such a shift in philosophy, as it represents an unacceptable challenge to state sovereignty.

3. The UN is largely absent from key security challenges and cannot address major geopolitical conflicts.

With major powers resorting to a jealous guarding of their vital interests, there are now fewer opportunities for the UN to make a difference. Instead, all the problems too hard, too complex, or too unimportant for individual state action are dropped at the UN's doorstep. Most concerning is the Middle East, where considerable tensions exist between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The UN has not ventured a geopolitical solution to address the growing web of tensions. Meanwhile, UN efforts to mediate an end to the conflicts in Syria and Yemen have come to nil because regional tensions have acted as a countervailing force.

Even though prevention is better than the cure, the UN is and will likely always be a reactive organisation – responding to crises after the fact, rather than before.



Ultimately, member-states are the principals of the organisation – and therefore bear greatest responsibility for failure and success.

IMAGE: © Spiff-Wiki

4. The UN is knotted by process, politicisation, and needless confrontation.

Thomas Hale and David Held have theorised that the very success of post-World War II global governance has actually contributed to gridlock in multilateral institutions. The UN has seen an almost 400% increase in membership since 1945. Today, more member-states sit around the table than ever before, each holding a diverse range of interests. The

number of powerful member-states has also increased. Both factors of multi-polarity make it harder to reach a consensus, or even agreement, on important issues such as climate change. Unfortunately, the founders of the UN did not create an organisation that would “adjust organically to fluctuations in national power.”⁶ As a result of this oversight, centres of power recognised in 1945 are embedded in the foundations of the system and will likely never be undone.

Resetting Expectations

“Everything will be all right – you know when? When people, just people, stop thinking of the United Nations as a weird Picasso abstraction and see it as a drawing they made themselves.”⁷

Conflated expectations lead to disappointment. It is important to consider the UN’s limitations and better



understand the responsibilities of member-states. Use the term 'the UN' belies the fact the UN is not a single unified entity. If you consult the UN labyrinthine organisational chart, one soon comes to understand and realise the sprawling web of agencies, departments and offices.

Parts of the system are clearly more effective than others. It is important to remember that member-states play a critical role in empowering and disabling the organisation. The UN has a



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membership of 193 countries. These members come together to make decisions. When decisions are not made, the UN is blamed for inaction. When decisions lead to failure, the UN is blamed. Yet, as Hammarskjöld eludes to: the UN is a creation of governments; the UN is funded by governments; and the UN's resolutions are decided by governments. Ultimately, member-states are the principals of the organisation – and therefore bear greatest responsibility for failure and success.

An Uncertain Future

The UN is regularly called out as a toothless tiger, an anachronism of a different age. The international liberal order – to which the UN is one of the bastions – is being eroded with the unrelenting advance of authoritarianism and illiberal action. Can the centre hold?

Under Trump, the US has vacated a leadership role at the UN. China has sought to fill the void while Russia has positioned itself as a key spoiler. Meanwhile, a host of emerging problems continues to bear down on the organisation, including:

- continued advance of criminal and terrorist networks;
- the spectre of climate change wars;

- the proliferation of sophisticated cyber weapons; and
- the future ubiquity of autonomous weapons systems.

The UN has proven somewhat adaptable, but largely ineffective in the face of non-state threats – such as Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, and Islamic State. Further adaption and resourcing will be required to tackle root-and-branch causes of geographically disaggregated violent extremism.

The UN will also need to understand and respond to a likely increase in interstate political instability borne out by disruptive technologies. Technology will level the playing field – allowing for the deployment of cheap, efficient, effective weapons systems by state and non-state actors alike - see the recent Saudi oil attack. These actors will use subversive non-attributable means – use of proxies, information campaigning (including misinformation and deep faking), economic manipulation, and cyber-attacks – to influence political outcomes.

Guarding against the next generation of threats will require the adoption of an imaginative and futurist mindset. If it fails to adapt, the UN will be sidelined as a problem-solving institution. **AQ**