



Where has the UN gone wrong?

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OCTOBER, 2024



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Any assessment of the UN and its main organ for maintaining peace and stability, the Security Council, must acknowledge that this international organization is only as successful as its member states allow it to be.

Moreover, in the case of the Security Council, on many occasions its five permanent members do not necessarily act in the name of global peace, but in support of their perceived national interests, raising the question of whether the body was designed to stall decisions on controversial issues.¹

The never-ending debate on reforming the UN, which seldom produces any concrete measures, is an indication of the lack of international consensus, and the unwillingness of the major powers to create an organization that can adequately address global stability and security challenges, and which is fit for purpose in the 21st century.

The achievements and

failures of the UN can and should be judged in relation to the mission it set itself at the outset in 1945: to maintain international peace and security, protect human rights, deliver humanitarian aid, support sustainable development and climate action, and uphold international law.²

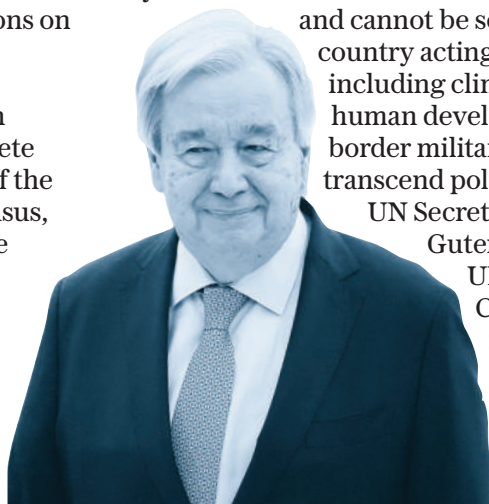
To succeed it must go beyond setting goals and focus on delivery rather than processes, and on people rather than bureaucracy.

The necessity for such a supranational organization is more important than ever.

By design it was established to deal with issues that transcend national boundaries

and cannot be solved by any single country acting alone. And issues including climate change, refugees, human development and cross-border militancy by their very nature transcend political borders.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently told the UN's Human Rights Council that the world is becoming "less safe by the day." He added: "Our world is changing at warp speed ... The multiplication



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of conflicts is causing unprecedented suffering. But human rights are a constant. They bring coherence to our search for solutions.”³ The secretary-general encapsulated here not only the mission of the UN, but also where it constantly fails, to the detriment of many millions of people across the globe.

However, the increasing number of conflicts and their casualties is undermining the very reason that the UN was formed. And the inability to reform the body that was charged in the aftermath of the calamitous Second World War to prevent conflict and guarantee human rights and development, must lead to a much closer scrutiny of the organization.⁴

It is also the length and persistence of conflicts that underlines the need for radical change of the UN system to fulfil its single most important objective of averting and resolving wars. There is no shortage of examples.

A crisis of at least eight years (2014 to 2022) ended in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; and a war that has now been underway for more than two-and-a-half years has caused an unbearable number of casualties, devastation and despair.⁵

In the Middle East, the inability to

Top: The 16th Plenary Assembly of the founding conference of the United Nations at the Opera House of San Francisco in 1945. Getty Images

Next: UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. AFP

implement the 1947 UN Partition Plan for Mandatory Palestine has led to decades of Israel’s wars, occupation and its most recent manifestation, the continuing assault on Gaza, now escalated into Lebanon, where tens of thousands of people have been killed and cities obliterated. It will take years to rehabilitate the people and rebuild their homes and infrastructure.

In the meantime, the months-long failure of the international community to bring about a ceasefire in Gaza is a dent in its credibility and is indicative of how the UN system has been marginalized in the conducting of world affairs.⁶

Similarly, in Sudan the brutal conflict ongoing since April 2023 has forced millions of people to flee their homes, leaving more than 12 million displaced.

These crises represent just a small sample of the devastation caused by unresolved wars and conflicts across the world, that have deprived so many young people of hope and opportunities. Meanwhile issues such as climate change, a ticking time bomb on a global scale, lie on the fringes of UN power and influence.⁷

To be sure, the UN system is a massive labyrinth of organizations, funds, programs and specialized agencies, each of which



has its own area of work and is semi-autonomous, with its own leadership and budget.

Their activities, whether in promoting development (UN Development Programme), guarding the rights of children (UNICEF), protecting and resettling refugees worldwide (UNHCR), or battling hunger (World Food Programme), are closely related to conflict prevention and resolution and peace building, and have registered many successes.⁸

However, without a determined and decisive UN General Assembly and Security Council those bodies are most often fighting rearguard battles, helping to manage conflicts but unable to bring them to an end or ensure durable, just and peaceful solutions.

For instance, the WFP provides food and cash assistance to over 80 million people. The UN provides aid to nearly 69 million displaced people who have fled their homes due to persecution, conflict or human rights violations.

Furthermore, UN agencies supply 45 percent of the world's children with vaccines, saving an estimated 2 to 3 million lives each year. But unfortunately, as important as these activities may be, they are no more than sticking plasters, not the means to prevent or end wars.⁹

It is also worth noting that UN operations come with a high price tag. The regular budget for 2024 is \$3.59 billion, to which the

Top: A child receives a vaccination for polio at a make-shift camp for people displaced by the Israeli-Hamas conflict in a school run by the UNRWA in Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip. AFP

Side: Armoured vehicles of the UNIFIL patrol the Marjayoun area in southern Lebanon, amid the war between Israel and Hezbollah. AFP

US contributes more than a fifth. In addition, the UN's peacekeeping budget is \$6.1 billion for nine of its 11 active peacekeeping operations.

This involves tens of thousands of troops from over 100 countries operating from the Western Sahara to India and Pakistan, including the UN Interim Force in Lebanon which was established in 1978 and is currently failing in its primary mission of maintaining peace and security in the country. This high operational cost of the UN brings with it the obvious question of whether it is good value for money, considering the state of global instability and the fragility of the peace it is supposed to guarantee. However, most of those who criticize it would be hard put to describe a realistic path to change.

Ironically, peacekeeping operations take place mostly in locations where there is hardly a peace to keep, and are there mainly to report violations of agreements, and provide some level of deterrence against further outbreaks of violence and bloodshed.¹⁰

Peacekeeping operations have been seen as slow to react to changing circumstances, lacking authority, standards and a proper command and control structure, and without a clear and effective chain of command.

Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian general who between 1993 and 1994 was the commander of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda,





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Top: Palestinians salvage belongings from a damaged UN-run school in the Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip after they returned briefly to check on their homes, amid the Israel-Hamas conflict. AFP

which failed to prevent genocidal attacks on the Tutsis by Hutu extremists, has suggested that “the sooner people start dropping the idea of ‘peacekeeping’ the better it will be.”

He rightly contends that the UN should be in the business of creating peace, sustaining peace and preventing conflicts. “It’s far more complex and ambiguous than in the past ... where the use of force may be required to establish the atmosphere of protection for civilians.”¹¹ But among UN member states it is hard to see any appetite for fully engaging with such an approach.

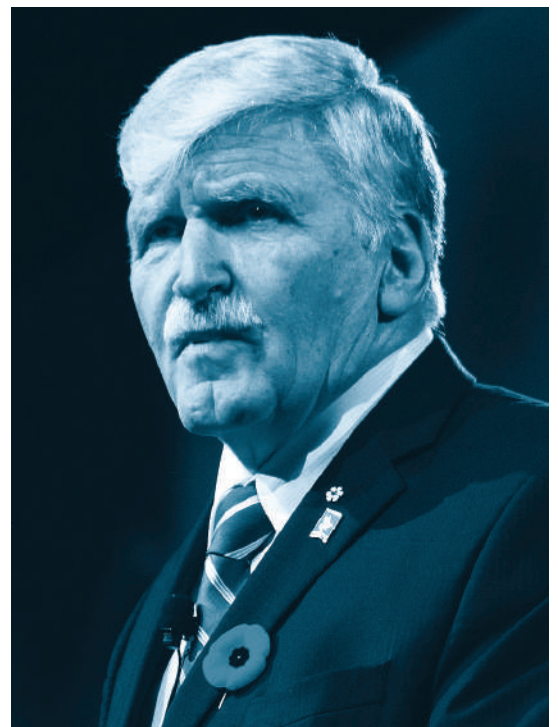
What stands out among the failures to achieve collective security is preventing wars in the first place, limiting their duration, or engaging with peace building. The tensions arising from Israel’s occupation of Palestine, which has flared up over the past year with particular intensity and cataclysmic consequences, and the dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan, are both more than 75 years old.

Also, the genocides in Cambodia, Srebrenica, Rwanda and Darfur, the Somali wars, the invasions of Iraq and Ukraine — by the US and its allies, and Russia, respectively — and the war in Syria, have starkly exposed the UN’s weaknesses when it comes to maintaining peace and security.¹²

Several reasons have been given for this, and most are related to the failure of individual countries, and especially the five permanent members of the Security Council, to rise above their narrow national

Left side: Men and children search through debris in the yard of the Asma school run by the UNRWA, in the Shati camp for Palestinian refugees west of Gaza City, in the aftermath of overnight Israeli bombardment. AFP

Right side: Romeo Dallaire, Canadian general and former commander of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda. AFP



interests and overcome a zero-sum approach to international relations.

Moreover, one of the most intricate challenges that the international community faces is the failure of member states to comply with the UN Charter and, more generally, with international law, while at the same time the UN lacks any effective enforcement mechanism.

The combination of non-compliance and inability, often unwillingness, to enforce



Security Council resolutions, decisions of the International Court of Justice — the UN’s top court — or support arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court, leaves these tools of global collective order at the mercy of those individual states.

And the more militarily and economically powerful they are, the less likely it is that they will comply. It also puts at a disadvantage those countries which rely on soft power and genuinely believe in international cooperation and mutual responsibility.¹³

To begin with, the jurisdiction, for instance, of the ICJ is limited. Only states can bring a compulsory claim against another state, and even then, it requires the consent of the responding state, which in many cases for obvious reasons is not forthcoming. Otherwise, it can produce only an “advisory opinion” which, as its name suggests, is non-binding.

In the most recent case, an advisory opinion written by this court reached the conclusion that the Israeli occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories is

ICJ judges attend a hearing of the International Court of Justice in which Israel’s legal team presented its response to South Africa’s request in The Hague. Pretoria petitioned the ICJ to order a stop to the Israeli assault on the Gaza city of Rafah, which Israel said it was key to eliminating Hamas militants. AFP

unlawful, as are the practices and policies applied there by Israel, and that it should therefore come to an end without delay.¹⁴

However, unless the Security Council accordingly adapts a resolution regarding this, and enforces it, it will remain no more than the court’s opinion — as would likely be any ICJ ruling later reached on the allegation of genocide against Israel.

Another relatively recent advisory opinion that gained international attention but came with no effective consequences involved a ruling against Myanmar in January 2020, ordering the country to protect its minority Rohingya population and to stop the destruction of evidence related to genocide allegations.¹⁵

Further hindrance to an effective UN is the dominance of the West. This is largely because Western countries continue to finance large proportions of the UN’s activities and as a result enjoy a disproportionate influence that marginalizes other countries, which as a result tend to seek alternative bilateral and multilateral international political arrangements.¹⁶



Nearly 80 years after it was founded, the UN has a clear duty to undergo profound reforms that would enable all countries to have a say in it

The two major global financial arms of the UN, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which are primarily responsible for coordinating economic development in line with UN guidelines for sustainable development, are to all intents and purposes controlled by the West, which dictates the nature of development.

Both the IMF's and World Bank's conditional loans demand adherence to the principles of free-market neoliberal paradigms, insisting on liberalization and private enterprise and ignoring local variations, which leads to social and economic distortion and inequalities that can in turn cause social unrest and political instability.¹⁷

The areas in which the UN can demonstrate success are where its member states feel that their national interest is not threatened but enhanced. Where it fails is where member states fear that their independence, security and even sovereignty are compromised by giving too much power to the UN.

The inherent tension between the

sovereignty of the nation-state and what seems, sometimes rightly, but mostly wrongly, to be the UN system impinging on it, has always been a major obstacle to UN attempts to fulfil its potential in bringing peace and security.

It is also the case that the perception of peace and security has evolved from being the business of diplomats and generals, to that of addressing the root causes of conflicts and instability.

This requires development in its widest sense, including good governance, inclusivity, equality, representation and accountability, which in turn needs developing different relations between the nation-state and this global organization.

Yet, it is also the case that nearly 80 years after it was founded, the UN has a clear duty to undergo profound reforms that would enable all countries to have a say in it, and an impact on it, without the imposition of a single set of values and practices by the more powerful states.

This will be the focus of the next instalment of this series.

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