

## Can the UN survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

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### Abstract

1. In the words of the Charter, the UN was created "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war..." "to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person" and "to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom". The creation of the UN in the aftermath of the trauma of the Second World War, with its sublime ideals as enshrined in the Charter, ushered in an era of great expectations. Soon, before the end of the 1940s, the realities of the Cold War set in, deflated many expectations and showed structural weaknesses in the young global institution.

2. The first Arab-Israeli war, the Korean war, the 1956 Suez war, the 1958 crisis in Lebanon, the 1967 war and the whole gamut of civil strife, inter-state conflicts, genocide, internal purges, regional wars and military campaigns, extending from the 1970s until the early years of the new millennium, have seriously undermined some of the most fundamental principles on which the UN was founded. The maintenance of international peace and security, the peaceful settlement of disputes and the exercise of the principles of collective security and the power of mediation were among the victims on the peace and security front.

3. True to the letter of the Charter, the United Nations did "save succeeding generations from the scourge" of global wars. But while the Second World War death toll is estimated at 55 million people, both military and civilian, total war and other casualties of violence in the twentieth century exceeded 160 million. Even though threats and outbreak of inter-state wars remained fairly stable at a low level, the number of ongoing civil wars peaked to more than 50 between 1990-93, and has since declined to 30 wars in 2002. Conservative estimates of inter-state armed conflict since the end of the Second World War has put the number at 130 wars.

**4. On the social front, one can only refer to the statistical data of the UN Millennium Development Goals, and the report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change released in November 2004 to note that:**

- **Between 1975 and 1999 sub-Saharan Africa saw no overall increase in its per capita income;**
- **More than 1 billion people lack access to clean water and more than 2 billion have no access to adequate sanitation;**
- **In the year 2000, 842 million people were undernourished, 90 per cent of them living in poor countries;**
- **Almost 30 million people in Africa are now infected with HIV/AIDS, which is decimating the resources of infected countries;**
- **Almost one billion people live on less than \$1 a day.**

**5. Human rights abuses across the globe, including torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, summary executions, arbitrary detention, discrimination, denial of access to due process of law have undermined the principle of “the dignity and worth of the human person” as stated in the Charter. The UN *ad hoc* Committee on Human Rights, meeting in New York (29 July – 9 August 2002), unveiled a database of recorded complaints of human rights abuses affecting 2,247,909 persons in 109 countries of the world during the previous year.**

**6. Unbridled unilateral use of force often replaced the concept of collective security provided for in the Charter. This was sometimes camouflaged as a self-serving UN mandate in crisis situations or outright military campaigns of choice as was the case in Vietnam, Grenada, Panama and, more recently, Iraq.**

**7. Before the scourge of war was even partially eliminated, the scourge of international terrorism set in, establishing transnational networks in many countries and hitting targets on five continents.**

**8. The peoples of the United Nations who had determined, 60 years ago, “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors” are now debating if there were indeed grounds for a clash of civilizations.**

### What went wrong?

a) **The envisioned central concept of collective security, which was conceived as the most effective antidote to threats to international peace and security, did not transpire. What we see now is a rising tendency by big powers to intervene unilaterally, in regions where their vital interests are perceived to be at stake, bypassing the Security Council. Conversely, big powers with whom the maintenance of international peace and security rested, and for which they acquired veto powers in the Security Council, shied away from threats to international peace and security, internal strife included, when they did not pose a direct threat to their national interests.**

*This was evident in the impact of the Somalia debacle on Rwanda (1994) and at various stages of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia (genocide in Srebrinica –1995, in Kosovo 1996-99)*

b) **Collective security was the enshrined principle under which member-States that subscribed to the Charter voluntarily ceded part of their sovereign prerogatives for the collective good of mankind, whether in order to resolve military conflicts, to control the threat of the outbreak of a pandemic or to respond to gross violation of human rights or ethnic cleansing. But the concept was almost stillborn since, to-date, no country has signed the Article 43 agreements that were supposed to provide the United Nations with executive military power to enforce Security Council resolutions.**

*What happened was that member States, particularly the veto-wielding powers have, more often than not, acted in self-interest or to defend the interests of their allies even when they collided with the overriding interest of international peace and security (140 Security Council and GA resolutions involving the Palestinian problem were passed. All of them were disregarded by the occupying power). (U.K. and France use of the veto against two draft resolutions to bloc the call for a ceasefire in the Suez War; Russia, U.S. to protect Israel.... etc)*

**(PDD25/ 1996)**

*Defining clearly our policy regarding the command and control of American military forces in UN peace operations. The policy directive underscores the fact that the President will never relinquish command of U.S. forces. However, as Commander-in-Chief, the President has the authority to place U.S. forces under the operational control of a foreign commander when doing so serves American security interests, just as American leaders have done numerous times since the Revolutionary War, including in Operation Desert Storm. The greater the anticipated U.S. military role, the less likely it will be that the U.S. will agree to have a UN commander exercise overall operational control over U.S. forces. Any large scale participation of U.S. forces in a major peace enforcement operation that is likely to involve combat should ordinarily be conducted under U.S. command and operational control or through competent regional organizations such as NATO or ad hoc coalitions.*

**c) The Cold War era paralyzed the Security Council; the disintegration of the former Soviet Union and the collapse of the Cold War balance of power resulted in the emergence of a single superpower. This single super-power resolved to re-shape the world in its own interests and vowed to wage pre-emptive wars, unilaterally if necessary, to safeguard its interests whenever the international community fails to keep up with its step or to accept its judgment.**

**d) The growth of the UN membership from 51 member-States in 1945 to 191 now- adding 140 members – has meant greater diversity and more difficult multilateral diplomacy. The “Group of 77” developing countries and China, which started in the early 1970s, now numbers 134 countries. During the Cold War years these countries were still weak and dependent on their former colonial powers. Despite the rise of the Non-aligned movement in the late 1950s many of its members were soon polarized, politically and economically, either by the Western bloc or the Eastern bloc. The end of the Cold war and the demise of the former Soviet Union left many of these countries out in the cold, although, as a group, they still tend to harmonize their positions within the UN. Moreover, the instrument of “preventive diplomacy”, which is available to the S-G under article 99 of the Charter – a prerogative that Hammaskjold so admirably used - remains largely underutilized. (Kofi Annan and Iraq, 1997).**

e) **The classical concept of peacekeeping has dramatically changed. The UN is being confronted with new challenges for which it was not, and still is not, well prepared. Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Srebrenica, Kosovo and the Congo were traumatic experiences for the UN that not only reflected the inadequacy of the system but sometimes the collision of interests among the big powers and their surrogates. On the other hand, the U.N. role in ending the strife in Sierra Leone, Liberia and in guiding East Timor towards independence were shining examples of how effective the world body can be whenever the community of international interests guided United Nations' missions.**

f) **The proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has further worsened the international security environment, despite several treaties banning such weapons. As the 5-year Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) gets underway in New York this week a number of countries are getting restive over the inequitable distribution of Treaty obligations. A great many countries admit that the provision and objectives of the Treaty have been compromised. Non-nuclear nations are being strictly watched and coerced to sign the additional protocol to the Treaty, while other undeclared nuclear powers, Israel for one, are being shielded from international inspection. This not only undermines the system of collective security, but it will also encourage, within the context of regional rivalry, the emergence of more nuclear-power aspirants. Iran and North Korea will not be the last examples if the current system of double standards continues unchecked.**

g) **Member States became less respectful of the independence and impartiality of the United Nations Secretariat – a principle on which Dag Hammarskjöld, whose centenary were are celebrating today, so strongly insisted and so fiercely defended. Nothing could illustrate this loss of independence and the prevailing complicity of interest more poignantly than recent revelations about the abuse of the oil-for-food program.**

**But since the founding of the UN in 1945, the world has undergone some deep changes that have rendered the static UN**

almost out of tune with the times and ill-suited to face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is no more evident than in the undemocratic composition and the play of power politics in the Security Council –the only UN organ that has executive powers.

### What is to be done?

In the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, few institutions have taken their own pulse so regularly with a view to reform as the United Nations has done. It happens almost every decade. But, as the axiom goes, it undergoes only so much change to remain fundamentally unchanged. This is primarily a structural problem that largely depends on the will of the membership.

*(Article 109 of the Charter)*

Regrettably, as the rising challenges to the world of the United Nations become more pressing and more global, we see an increasing tendency towards unilateralism. During the closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a consensus was building up to the effect that global problems were becoming so diverse and so complex that only concerted multilateral action can successfully address them. This equally applied to terrorism, environmental degradation, civil strife, the pandemic of HIV/AIDS and the rise of new infectious diseases, inter-state and intra-state conflicts, transnational organized crime, drug trafficking and money laundering, the shameful spread of poverty in a world of plenty, the use and abuse of force, massive human rights' violations and the continued presence of land-mines and weapons of mass destruction in all their forms: nuclear, biological, chemical and radiological.

The nature and scope of all these challenges call for a new United Nations: better-structured, better-equipped and more united. But this is not going to be the case anytime soon. Because of the disparity of interest, even when it comes to the question of collective security, the United Nations will neither collapse nor become omnipotent, at least for the remainder of this decade. It will continue to be used to the extent and for the purposes that member-States, both the powerful and the weak, want to use it.

**They will make it as much effective and formidable as it suits their interests, individually and collectively. They will exercise preventive diplomacy, settlement of disputes, conflict-resolution, military intervention and counter-terrorism both through the United Nations and outside it. This is not the end of the Second World War, the U.N. is no longer the panacea the post-war generation of idealists wanted it to be and, at the age of sixty, it is not perceived as the last best hope.**

**But this is only how governments, who are the masters of the United Nations, see it. It remains to be seen what impact, if any, a global citizenry movement, with close enough identity of interest, could bring to bear on the attitudes of governments towards the United Nations. It was, after all, “the peoples of the United Nations” who, through their representative governments, crafted the Charter and still look up to its ideals. (The Green Party, WSF ..etc)**

**The reform of the U.N. would require resolve, boldness and imagination, not necessarily a global crisis. Member-States do not have to wait for a massive environmental disaster (Tsunami) or for global terrorism to destabilize the world in order to join ranks and act. However, reforming the U.N. to make it effective enough to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century means almost reinventing it. Despite all odds, five years from now this proposition may not seem as far-fetched as it may appear today.**

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