Taking Measure of the UN's Legacy at Seventy-Five

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Founded on the visions of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, the United Nations has evolved significantly over the past seventy-five years. It has registered remarkable achievements, stimulating a range of ambitious multilateral treaties; promoting human rights; and, at times, playing a central role in containing and preventing armed conflict, particularly in the avoidance of a nuclear confrontation during the Cold War. However, following what was viewed by many as a brief "golden age" during the early 1990s, it has struggled to meet emerging challenges on many fronts, finding itself increasingly stymied by geopolitical divisions, internal ossification, institutional sprawl, and internecine dysfunction. Facing even greater challenges in the twenty-first century—from climate change to new technologies—and inhibited by the increasingly fraught relationships between China, Russia, and the United States, the UN may appear to some a cumbersome relic of the past. In some respects, it is. But not entirely.

We argue that the UN has been and remains the most impactful in three areas: addressing major conflict risks through the Security Council; producing, shaping, and driving key ideas on development and human rights; and generating action to meet urgent humanitarian needs. These are not givens, and in all areas there are worrying signs. Going forward, particularly in the urgent and overwhelming context of the COVID-19 response, the organization must quickly drive new thinking, new ways of working, and greater common purpose among its member states, or else it will face irrelevance.

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Preventing Violent Conflicts

The end of the Cold War ushered in a rapid improvement in relations among the permanent five members of the Security Council (P-5), enabling more expansive responses to threats to global peace and security.[1] The Council took bold and unified action in the face of Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and, over the years immediately following, launched fifteen new peacekeeping operations.[2] This era of "new activism" was fueled by what Samuel Huntington called the "third wave of democracy"—a drive, including by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), to curb conflict risks by installing and supporting democratic governments and providing (limited) support to liberal institutions.[3]

If the early 1990s witnessed unprecedented cohesion within the UNSC, this was short-lived. As early as 1995, France's defection from the Iraq policy of the United States and United Kingdom presaged a gradual disintegration of Council unity, encouraging growing opposition from Russia and reservations from China. At the time, not much was made of these rather minor dissentions, but in hindsight they marked a fundamental shift in the political dealings of the UNSC. Since then, the Council has become ever more divided on key issues; most sharply on the 2003 U.S.- and U.K.-led invasion of Iraq, which the Council declined to authorize, but also following NATO's authorized (though messy and overreaching) intervention in Libya in 2011.[4] More recently, while routine decisions on peacekeeping and sanctions have continued, fundamental rifts within the Council have continued to deepen.

Today, antagonisms within the UNSC appear to be driving it back toward something of a Cold War posture, potentially undermining its core objective of maintaining peace.[5] The Council has been impotent in the face of major civil wars in Syria and Yemen, unable to act on the issue of Russian interference in Ukraine, and a bystander to the growing crisis of democracy in Venezuela. Few expect the Council to play a meaningful role on the volatile Iran nuclear file. Meanwhile, the United Nations General Assembly has often upstaged the UNSC during these crises, issuing well-judged nonbinding resolutions that address the critical issues at stake. Even in areas where the Council has acted—such as Libya, Mali, and the Sudans—UN presence on the ground has thus far achieved little to alter the conflicts.[6]

In light of its chronic failures, the UNSC is facing a crisis of legitimacy, unable to play the decisive role envisaged for it by the UN's founders.[7] As new security

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risks emerge around cyber technologies and artificial intelligence, the Council is mute. With less collaboration on such emerging threats, there is a higher risk that major powers will come into direct conflict themselves.[8]

The Council has, however, acted effectively on nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and peacekeeping. In spite of deep divisions within the P-5, it strengthened UN sanctions against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 2018, demonstrating its continued relevance to nonproliferation in some settings, as did its 2013 consensus on the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons. In the post–9/11 era, the Council has at times been goaded to meaningful and far-reaching action to isolate and weaken extremist groups and their supporters.[9] It has also remained a key player in many of Africa's conflicts, most effectively when acting in close cooperation with the African Union.

One enduring mystery of UNSC dynamics continues to be the passivity of most of the ten elected nonpermanent members of the Council; with occasional exceptions (Germany, for example), these members tend to allow the five permanent members to guide the agenda of the Council's operations. By banding together more systematically, the nonpermanent members could point the P-5 in promising directions on possible compromises, or at least embarrass them over their chronic deadlocks. Instead, having devoted huge efforts and some treasure to getting themselves elected to the Council (seen in some capitals as a proxy for global influence), they display little ambition to join together to effect meaningful change in the way the Council operates.

This absence of meaningful unity within the Council is doubly damaging as new threats emerge, most obviously its embarrassing silence on the COVID-19 pandemic. Climate change, accelerating demographic shifts, and rapid urbanization are just a few of the trends that cry out for leadership from the Council. Along with the continued need to address the existential threat of weapons of mass destruction, the so-called middle powers and the UN Secretariat need to think hard and creatively about how a shift toward meaningful unity could be achieved. They will be the first victims of not doing so, given that many of the most pernicious effects of current trends will be felt first in middle- and lower-income countries.

Evolving Visions for Global Development

In 1945, the needs of the existing developing countries and those of the soon-to-be-decolonized regions did not figure prominently in debates about the

end of colonization.[10] None of the colonial powers were yet convinced that meaningful change would affect their countries postwar. But penury, pressure from the United States, and energized freedom movements, among other factors, produced a tidal wave of decolonization that crested from 1957 to 1965. Nearly all of the newly independent postcolonial countries were destitute, drained of their resources by (mostly European) colonial powers, and unable to deliver basic services to their citizens.

With decolonization, a new mission for international organizations took shape: to help newly independent countries emerge economically and socially from their former servitude. At the UN and elsewhere, thinking on development evolved in waves of roughly ten years, encouraged or constrained by global economic circumstances, depending on the decade. From the outset, international organizations were seen as a large part of the solution, in part by diluting through collective action the financial obligations of former colonial powers. Hence, the World Bank and regional development banks moved from a very small-scale "technical cooperation" to a more ambitious and sprawling approach to development.

Soon the two Cold War blocs were vying with each other to offer "solutions" to developing countries, many of them focused on industrialization. However, these countries' lack of the ports, roads, rails, and other critical infrastructure needed to ensure easy access to product inputs and markets condemned most of these early projects and programs to failure. Beginning in the 1960s, the UN provided a key forum for developing countries to articulate their grievances. In the 1970s, countries capitalizing on this forum produced a set of proposals called the New International Economic Order that envisioned a more equitable global economy. This was indicative of the sharp North-South divide on a range of issues during this period.

During the 1970s and 1980s, developing countries accrued extraordinary levels of debt as a way to fund their own development programs. Much of the debt was unrepayable and some of it "odious," in the sense that it had been provided based on dubious accounting and was subsequently used in a corrupt manner. By the 1990s, the debt crisis in the developing world had largely been overcome, but by then, the UN had shifted its main focus from development to peace and security. For some time, developing countries felt forgotten within the UN, unable to draw significant attention to their urgent development needs.

Attention refocused on development at the Millennium Summit in 2000, which convened the then largest-ever meeting of world leaders, and the Millennium

Development Goals (MDGs) were subsequently adopted in 2001, formulated under the aegis of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The MDGs offered an easy-to-grasp set of eight top-line goals, accompanied by a modest but helpful set of indicators and targets. Fortunately, economic growth soon took off in Africa and Asia—continents with the two largest concentrations of developing nations—while Latin America's social policy programming provided the continent with considerable lift as well. By 2015, most of the eight MDGs had, in fact, been achieved at a global level, or at least seen substantial progress.

It is too early to judge what will be achieved by the even more ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the product of much negotiation among UN member states and input from civil society. However, unlike with the MDGs, the global economic trends that have taken place since the SDGs went into effect have so far been unkind: around 2015, economic growth figures in much of the world (in both developing and industrialized countries) started slowing down. In particular, economic growth in India and China, two motors of the MDGs' success, began slowing down considerably. Helping governments move forward on this ambitious agenda is the principal challenge of the UN's deputy secretary-general, Amina Mohammed, who is now primus inter pares in the UN development system.

What the MDGs and SDGs have undoubtedly achieved for the UN is to restore its legitimacy (if not always its effectiveness) as an actor on development issues, no small shift and no small achievement.

Human Rights

The seventy years following the hugely ambitious sustained effort originating in the visionary 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights saw the UN continue to serve as a forum for the transformation of the concept of human rights, including its expansion to cover specific economic, social, civil, and political rights. Explicit protections for women and children championed through the UN system have now come to be almost universally accepted, and countless serious human rights violations have been proscribed and investigated through UN machinery, often with considerable help from civil society and NGOs. Human rights are also an explicit component of the SDGs, and their banner cry of "Leave no one behind" echoes numerous human rights campaigns within the UN and well beyond.

However, this progress is now clearly at risk as more recent trends show the human rights agenda under pressure worldwide (and it is under attack in some hitherto fairly consensual fields such as women's and reproductive rights). In recent years, major powers, including three of the P–5 countries—China, Russia, and the United States—have shown themselves to be reluctant to recognize their own duty to uphold these international human rights norms and have at times openly flouted them. The U.S. treatment of immigrant children, China's detention of hundreds of thousands of Uighur citizens, and Russia's on-again, off-again restrictions on political space all point to a withdrawal from core human rights commitments. This perception of human rights backsliding is supported by a 2018 survey from the NGO World Justice Project that found a surge in authoritarianism worldwide, accompanied by a strong retreat from the implementation of international legal obligations in many parts of the world.[11]

The UN, meanwhile, has drifted into the background on many of the most worrying human rights situations today. It has been paralyzed in the face of the systematic killing, torture, and displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar; unable to prevent large-scale killings in Yemen and Syria; and unresponsive to the killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia. The UN Secretariat's current preference for "quiet diplomacy" has drawn harsh criticism from preeminent human rights advocates.[12]

The current UN high commissioner for human rights, who is also the well-respected former president of Chile and the founding executive director of UN Women, Michelle Bachelet, has been identifying crosscutting themes that can rally support without offending powerful global leaders through a head-on assault. Despite such efforts, much of the most critical human rights machinery in the UN is under pressure, facing a degree of internal incoherence and constant budgetary cuts. This should worry all citizens of the world eager to experience fundamental freedoms and equality before the law.

Humanitarian Action

Some of the most visible and measurable impacts of the UN over the past seventy-five years have been on the humanitarian front, driven by agencies such as the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the World Food Programme (WFP). In that time, the UN has provided aid to

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more than sixty million refugees fleeing persecution, and every year has provided basic nutrition for eighty million people living on the edge of starvation.[13] The UN has also saved the lives of over ninety million children since 1945, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1965.[14] And the creation of the Central Emergency Relief Fund in 2005 triggered a dramatic increase in the size and speed of humanitarian response, allowing the UN to spend over $5 billion on humanitarian relief provision in more than one hundred countries.[15] In addition, OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs), which has built a constructive and efficient work culture relative to much of the rest of the UN, has achieved extraordinary results in many areas.

While most of its attention is focused on humanitarian agencies, the UNSC has also on occasion proven quite effective in highlighting and helping to stimulate response to humanitarian distress around the world, including to that created by regional or internal conflicts. Indeed, while the amounts of official development assistance have been dropping globally for several years now in both real terms and when adjusted for inflation and exchange rates, the sums allocated by donor nations, specifically to emergency humanitarian assistance, have been increasing.[16] Council members have galvanized support for UNHCR and other UN operational actors, strengthening their emergency relief capacities. The potent and effective IOM (International Organization for Migration) is also now linked to the UN system. This dimension of UN leadership deserves to be respected and celebrated.

The Curse of UN Sprawl

The word "sprawl" often conjures an image of the unregulated growth of cities, but it also aptly describes the proliferation of UN agencies, funds, and programs (AFPs) over the years. Each one has begun with an ambitious mandate and worthwhile goals, but, in most cases, they have wound up underfunded, often rendering them somewhat impotent. There are, of course, notable exceptions: UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the FAO are all examples of UN entities with compelling mandates that have remained able to effect meaningful change. In contrast, the heavy overlap between the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) dilutes the effectiveness of each and contributes to both being underfunded. Lacking direct coordination authority over the AFPs, successive secretaries-general have struggled to limit duplication and fragmentation within

the UN system and to achieve some measure of coordination. They are often further undercut by member states or individual politicians looking to expand their own areas of influence by starting their own programs, regardless of duplication.

One of the most detrimental aspects of sprawl has been the tendency of AFPs to stray from their mandates. In 2011, for example, the national delegates of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) unnecessarily took a vote on the highly political question of admitting Palestine as a full member of the organization in the face of a U.S. threat to leave the organization if they did. Following the admittance of Palestine, the United States withdrew funding, taking with it between 25 and 30 percent of UNESCO's budget. In trying to cope with such a massive reduction in funding, rather than refocusing on UNESCO's core issues (education, science, and culture), member states decided, somewhat perplexingly, to implement new environmental programming—a field already well occupied by UN environmental programs and NGOs. As a result, UNESCO has massively increased its overlap with other UN environmental entities and now has even less programmatic coherence. This is not to suggest that mandates should be straitjackets, per se. UNICEF, for example, has gone beyond its core mandate on several occasions to more effectively serve children, with great impact. But there is a real risk that divergence from an organization's mandate will result in incoherence, dilution of programming, and institutional overlap.

One explanation for the bureaucratic sprawl is that it is easier to create new institutions at the UN than it is to eliminate or merge them. The UN General Assembly mostly operates on a consensus model, which provides outsized blocking power to herd outliers (be it the United States or Cuba, EU member states or India, for example). Thus, even units that are more or less bankrupt can be kept going by a single country or a minority group of countries insisting that it still serves some purpose. Sometimes the drivers can be ideological, such as the United States seeking to shut down some UN units that are disapproved of by individual administrations (most often Republican ones). At other times, patronage networks linking national governments to UN staffing may be at play. The result is a debilitating stasis in which the UN's organizational structure keeps expanding without concurrent contractions when there is overlap. (A rare exception is the 2010 merger of four smaller UN programs supporting women's issues into a single program, UN Women, which created a stronger, more coherent voice and, for a time, the assurance of greater funding to a crucial field of work.)

Conclusion

At seventy-five years of age, the UN is in sad shape after achieving so much for so long. Too much of the organization's time and scarce financial resources are devoted to highly politicized, essentially futile debates powered by charged ideological content, at a time when the world is at ever more risk of miscalculation by hotheaded national leaders, potentially with catastrophic consequences. Facing the worst pandemic in any of our lifetimes, the Security Council's pathetic paralysis reflects its near total irrelevance to today's global needs.

For all of the UN's powerful advocacy and progress in the areas of development, rights, and peace, it is not immune to the tides of history, which could well turn back many advances during the coming decade. And, it has fallen victim to the common problem of bureaucratic sprawl. Until recently, it could be assumed that the UN would survive indefinitely, continuing to represent and uphold the core values upon which it was founded. This can no longer be taken for granted, especially as many of the most creative and idea-driven parts of the UN appear handicapped by sprawl and politics. Though it provided a number of important precedents and lessons for its successor, the League of Nations disappeared without a whimper into the fog of World War II. It would be tragic, but no longer entirely surprising, if the tender egos of today's "strong men" states were to create the conditions under which the UN could do little more than survive as an empty husk, an ambition without meaningful impact.

We certainly hope not. We hope that the UN will be able to generate some of the constructive ideas and dynamism of the past, while adapting itself to the challenges of today. Here, the COVID-19 pandemic may offer an opportunity. Indeed, the combination of massive collective health needs, a global financial recession, and a widespread absence of constructive leadership across the major and regional powers may provide space for multilateralism to deliver. The secretary-general has sent the right messages (for example, in calling for a global ceasefire during the pandemic), has called for an unprecedented humanitarian and development response, and continues to underscore how the pandemic is harming already vulnerable populations (such as migrants) the most.[17] Alongside climate change, COVID-19 points unwaveringly to our interconnectedness, to the impossibility of addressing global systemic threats via narrow national agendas, and to the urgent need for some form of multilateral response. The responses called for may not come from the UN we see today—indeed we urge an overhaul of the

UN's structure and work culture at every level and across nearly all of its component parts to refocus the organization on what it does well—but there is no positive, optimistic alternative on the horizon.

NOTES

[1] See David M. Malone, ed., *The UN Security Council: From the Cold War to the 21st Century* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004), p. 4.
[2] Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M. Malone, and Bruno Stagno Ugarte, eds., *The UN Security Council in the 21st Century* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2015), p. 4; and David M. Malone, "Security Council," in Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws, eds. *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 117–35.)
[3] See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
[4] von Einsiedel et al., *Security Council in the 21st Century*.
[5] Richard Gowan, *Minimum Order: The Role of the Security Council in an Era of Major Power Competition* (New York: United Nations University, Centre for Policy Research, March 2019), i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/post/3333/UNU-Minimum-Order-FINAL.pdf.
[6] Bruce Jones, Charles T. Call, and Daniel Touboulets, with Jason Fritz, *Managing the New Threat Landscape: Adapting the Tools of International Peace and Security* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, September 2018), www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP_20180919_prevention_agenda1.pdf.
[7] Ian Martin, "In Hindsight: What's Wrong with the Security Council?," Security Council Report, March 29, 2018, www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2018-04/in_hindsight_whats_wrong_with_the_security_council.php; see also Martin Binder and Monika Heupel, "The Legitimacy of the UN Security Council: Evidence from Recent General Assembly Debates," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (June 2015), pp. 238–50.
[8] Mats Berdal, "The Security Council and Peacekeeping," in Vaughan Lowe, Adam Roberts, Jennifer M. Welsh, and Dominik Zaum, eds., *The United Nations Security Council and War: The Evolution of Thought and Practice since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 179. This chapter notes that a key aspect of the Council's conflict management role has been to keep great powers from direct confrontation.
[9] Sebastian von Einsiedel, "Assessing the UN's Efforts to Counter Terrorism," in *2016 Global Terrorism Index: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, December 2016), pp. 88–91, economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2016.2.pdf.
[10] We point here to two important outputs: the volumes of the UN Intellectual History Project, overseen by Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss; and Bruce Currie-Alder, Ravi Kanbur, David M. Malone, and Rohinton Medhora, eds., *International Development: Ideas, Experience, and Prospects*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[11] See "Rule of Law Index 2017–2018," World Justice Project, n.d., worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP-ROLI-2018-June-Online-Edition_0.pdf.
[12] Kenneth Roth, "Why the UN Chief's Silence on Human Rights Is Deeply Troubling," *New York Times*, April 24, 2019.
[13] "70 Ways the UN Makes a Difference," United Nations, n.d., www.un.org/un70/en/content/70ways/index.html#humanitarian.
[14] Julia Zorthian, "5 United Nations Achievements Worth Celebrating on U.N. Day," *TIME*, October 23, 2015, time.com/4085757/united-nations-achievements/.
[15] United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund, cerf.un.org/sites/default/files/resources/CERF_Results_2019_edition_4.pdf.
[16] Global Humanitarian Assistance, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2019* (Bristol, U.K.: Development Initiatives, October 2019), reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GHA%20report%202019_0.pdf.
[17] United Nations, *Policy Brief: COVID-19 and People on the Move* (United Nations, June 2020), www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_on_people_on_the_move.pdf?utm_source=IOM+External+Mailing+List&utm_campaign=0129b3aedo-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_05_12_10_10_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_9968056566-0129b3aedo-.

Abstract: Over the past seventy-five years, the UN has evolved significantly, often in response to geopolitical dynamics and new waves of thinking. In some respects, the UN has registered remarkable achievements, stimulating a wide range of multilateral treaties, promoting significant growth of human rights, and at times playing a central role in containing and preventing large-scale armed conflict. As part of the special issue on "The United Nations at Seventy-Five: Looking Back to Look Forward," this essay argues that the organization has been the most impactful in three areas: producing, shaping, and driving key ideas, particularly on development and rights; generating such effective operational agencies as UNICEF and the World Food Program; and, especially in the immediate post–Cold War period, addressing major conflict risks through the Security Council. Since then, however, the UN has struggled to meet emerging challenges on many fronts and been increasingly hampered by internal ossification and institutional sprawl as well as internecine dysfunction. The twenty-first century has confronted the UN with further challenges relating most notably to climate change; to risks arising from new technologies; and to the increasingly fraught relationships between China, Russia, and the United States. If the past seventy-five years can offer one lesson, it is that new thinking and new ideas will need to drive the organization to evolve still further and faster, or else risk irrelevance.

Keywords: United Nations, multilateralism, Security Council, geopolitics, development, conflict prevention, COVID-19