

**The United Nations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:  
Problems and Reform  
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**ABSTRACT:**

The Organization of the United Nations (UN) founded in 1945, is the most audacious experiment in global governance idea conceived to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, world's best attempt at promoting peace and security among nations; fostering cooperation between them on matters including law, economics and social issues. This study measures the UN's performance in the 21st century with respect to its major pillars, highlights cases of success and failure, and works out structural and political critiques directed at the Organisation. The United Nations has had some of its greatest success in the area of socio-economic work and humanitarian efforts in categories under which agencies like UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, UNHCR and WFP have played critical roles in achieving great strides with poverty reduction health and refugee protection. But the UN is no more effective in maintaining peace and security than great power politics, (and) Security Council veto authority means it has proved a failure in preventing mass atrocities and addressing major conflicts. The major critiques of the UN include the lack of democracy in the setup and functioning of the Security Council, political and ideological bias in policy agendas among member states, and blizzards operational bureaucracy. The future of the UN to remain relevant assumes reforms, notably that the Security Council must be enlarged and its veto rights curtailed, as well as empowering its technical and humanitarian branches. And yet, for all its faults, the UN is still needed as an arena to set international norms; to make international law and facilitate dialogue between enemies. The central negotiating forum of the world as global challenges require ever greater global cooperation, the UN will continue to be relevant in the 21st century, precisely with its unique role as the world's central negotiating forum.

**KEYWORDS:**

UN Reform, Security Council Veto, Global Governance, Peace and Security, Humanitarian Assistance.

**Introduction:**

The UN, founded in 1945 at the end of two catastrophic world wars, is often considered the most ambitious experiment in multilateral organization and global governance. Its core promise was to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” It has prevented a third world war and spurred dramatic improvements in global development and human rights, but it struggles to persuade doubters that it is effective in keeping the peace — especially in an age of big power rivalry and messy 21st-century wars.

This essay critically evaluates the United Nations (UN) which was established in 1945 by examining its successes and failures under its main arms, assessing structural and political criticisms poured on it. Its primary thesis is that the UN, for all of its importance in the context of development and humanitarian issues, is fatally flawed when it comes to security matters, trapped in actual state power politics rather than moving beyond it as was envisioned at its founding; and that therefore meaningful future cannot be better secured unless necessary institutional changes are made.

**Research Aims and Objectives**

This study offers a complete, realistic analysis of the performance of the United Nations as it has operated in practice in relation to its founding goals.

**The objectives are:**

- To define specifically the original aims and concepts of the UN outlined in its Charter.
- To assess the UN's performance in two essential areas: peace and security at international level, economic/social progress.
- To catalogue and discuss the primary criticisms of the United Nations, with special emphasis on structural constraints (e.g., Security Council veto) and bureaucratic shortfalls.
- To consider the need for and possible modalities of institutional reform to strengthen the organization's future relevance and operational effectiveness.

**Scope of the Study**

This paper ranges broadly across the UN System since 1945, how-

ever it will concentrate on specific case studies and structural issues that are of particular significance for the period of post-Cold War (1990s to equitable present agenda). The focus of the analysis will largely be on the six main organs, primarily on how the Security Council and the General Assembly function, but also looking at work of key specialized agencies such as WHO and UNDP in order to assess non-security effectiveness.

### **The Role of the Defined: Object and Principles**

The position of the United Nations is detailed in Chapter I, Article 1 of the UN Charter. These are the purposes to be used as a yardstick for assessing the organisation's performance.

#### **1. The UN Charter: Four Pillars**

- **International Peace and Security:** To prevent and remove threats to peace and suppress acts of aggression through collective security measures (UN Security Council).
- **Friendship:** To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples (Decolonization and General Assembly resolutions).
- **International Co-operation:** In solving economic, social, health and related problems; promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms (ECOSOC and specialized agencies).
- **Concerted Action:** To act as a clearing house to organize the work of nations for these common purposes (The Secretariat and diplomacy by global conference).

#### **2. The Principle of State Equality**

One important principle is that of the sovereign equality of all member states, control by which keeps power under United Nations to interfere in “matters essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state” (Article 2, Section 7). This principle defines the non-repressive, voluntary character of the majority of UN activities (barring actions taken by virtue of a Security Council mandate given under Chapter VII). This tension between global mission and national sovereignty lies at the heart of almost all debates on UN effectiveness.

#### **Assessing Effectiveness: Successes and Failures**

It is possible to evaluate the UN's performance and results in its different operational dimensions, with a clear gap between success on the

technical and social levels on one side, and failure to address high political security crises on the other.

### 1. Achievement in Social, Economic and Humanitarian Spheres

“The farthest reach of the UN’s legacy is really this whole infrastructure in agencies and programs that focus on everything from development to humanitarian disasters, which we tend to think about as low politics,” he said.

- **Development and Poverty Eradication:** International organizations such as UNDP, UNESCO have played a critical role in devising global standards such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and SDG. Bold though these aims may be, they have helped entuse worldwide resources and state effort and already done much both in terms of reducing extreme poverty, child mortality and expanding access to education globally.
- **Health and Disease Control:** The WHO has organized the world’s response to health emergencies including the elimination of smallpox, combating against pandemics and endemic diseases. Its output is the foundation of global health infrastructure.
- **Humanitarian Assistance and Support for Refugees:** The UN-HCR (Refugee Agency) and the World Food Programme. In particular, the WFP exhibits tremendous operational efficiency frequently by operating in some of the most hazardous areas of the world to avoid mass starvation.

### 2. Peace and Security Constraints

It is the fundamental UN mission — to prevent war — that remains its most contested record of success.

- **Peacekeeping and Conflict Management:** The UN’s peacekeepers (Blue Helmets) have been successful, but not always so effective. They sometimes work very well in fending of combatants after peace-signing (e.g., Cyprus, Golan Heights). They are, however, voluntary to implement, their mandates are frequently narrow in scope and they are exclusively funded through voluntary member state contributions.
- **Massive Failure:** The UN is widely blamed for its inability to prevent mass atrocities. On the contrary, the international response to

both the Rwandan Genocide in 1994 and Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia in 1995 serve as clear examples of how political inaction and restricted peacekeeping mandates cost hundreds of thousands of lives.

- **The Cold War Gridlock and Post-Cold War Stalemate:** Throughout the Cold War, the Security Council remained essentially deadlocked as a result of US-Soviet animosity. Although the 1990s were years of occasional collaboration (e.g., the First Gulf War), emergent great power tensions (in Syria, Ukraine, and Middle East) have rekindled veto gridlock and paralyzed the Council from addressing major conflicts.

### **The Principal Problems with the UN:**

Critiques of the UN are also structural and political and operational and point to the deep contradictions in an international body that is governed by independent (sovereign) nations.

#### **1. The Structural Flaw: The Security Council Veto**

The most serious and long-lasting criticism is its veto structure in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) which categorically have culminated in failure over the past years, one of five members, China, France, Russia, United Kingdom or the United States can simply block any possible action by world body.

- **Impotence and Inaction:** The veto permits one great power to frustrate any meaningful resolution, often citing national interest rather than collective security. It freezes up the UN just when it is most-required: in conflicts that involve a P5 member or its close friend (ie.) Russia vis-a-vis Ukraine, China on some human rights abuses, or the US and Israel/Palestine).
- **Disproportionate Representation:** Up to the top 5 was constructed in order to see that it mimics the geopolitical situation of 1945. It leaves out most of the great powers of today — India, Brazil, Germany and Japan among them — and tilts too much power to Europe. Critics contend that this body is both illegitimate and anachronistic, flies in the face of sovereign equality, and erodes the credibility of the United Nations.

#### **2. Political and Ideological Bias**

- **Western Hegemony:** Developing countries also see the UN regime

(and various Bretton Woods institutions – IMF and World Bank) as a pawn in the hands of the Western powers, mainly led by USA in political and financial terms. Some say financial dependence on a handful of major donors gives them too much sway.

- **Inaction of the General Assembly:** Although the General Assembly (UNGA) is the body where all 193 members are equal, its resolutions are typically non-binding, and have only moral or recommendatory value. This results in two bodies: the most representative is the weakest, and vice versa, that is, the shallowest (the UNSC) exercises all of the power to compel.

### 3. Operational and Bureaucratic Inefficiency

- **Bureaucratic Red Tape:** Stifling Bureaucracy, The UN is often said to be a bloated, labyrinthine bureaucracy that takes forever to make decisions and has overlapping responsibilities and high administrative costs. This “organizational drag” may slow its capacity to react quickly to new crises.
- **Sovereignty as Protection:** The concept of national sovereignty is often employed by member states for the purpose of shielding against inquiries, accessing humanitarian aid, or monitoring human rights inside their borders. The United Nations doesn't have the power on its own to override this when it comes to internal conflict or human rights abuses, meaning that in these situations is more an observer that's been dragged there.
- **Lack of Independent Force:** It is a force that doesn't fight for its own rights. Their standing peacekeeping forces depend on the contribution of troops and resources voluntarily offered by member states, who at any time can withdraw. But this dependency has profoundly curtailed its ability to enforce decisively and respond rapidly to crises.

### The Future Role: Reform and Relatedness

The relevance of the UN is in the 21st century very closely linked with its capacity for reform especially to address those transnational threats that must not be bound by borders.

#### 1. Agenda for Reform

Among the largest proposals for reform are those focusing on the Security Council and transparency of operations:

- **Expansion:** The most pressing and delicate aspect of the reforms is to expand the UNSC members including permanent ones (like G4 nations — Brazil, Germany, India, Japan) and non-permanent. What is to be achieved is greater representation and legitimacy of the Council, but there was no consensus as long as the P5 are preventing their relative power from being diminished.
- **Veto Restraint or Abolition:** Proposals vary from eliminating the veto altogether, to restricting its application in relation to mass atrocities (genocide, war crimes). But to change the veto any way would need to be agreed by all five permanent members, a political leap that comes close to being denied by human nature.
- **Reforming the Secretariat and ECOSOC:** The technical/humanitarian pillars of the UN (ECOSOC) need to be rationalized in order to enhance efficiency and coordination, particularly with regard to delivery for the SDGs and mobilizing climate action (a new critical function of the UN).

## 2. The Necessity of the UN

Flawed as it is, the UN continues to be indispensable. It is the only institution with near-universal membership and has no specific mandate for any one problem.

- **Norm Setting and International Law:** The UN is also indispensable when it comes to setting international norms (such as human right or the Responsibility to Protect—R2P) and creating international law. Even when they are violated, decrees remain a juridically credible international standard against which acts of states can be measured.
- **Global Platform:** It offers an uninterrupted, nonpartisan ground for adversaries to talk, and “quiet diplomacy” is often able stop a problem from growing into war, though it may not be able to end an ongoing one. In a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented, its strength as a convening power around the globe is more essential than ever.

### Conclusion:

The United Nations is not a super-state; it is the representation of balance of power of the world and an image reflecting of its political

divides. Its mandate as established in 1945 has been fulfilled to some degree; it has constructed an architecture for development, health and humanitarian assistance that has saved untold lives and raised global living standards.

However, it is fundamentally hampered in its core task, peace and security, by the P5 veto and national sovereignty primacy. The complaints regarding gridlock, outdated power-sharing allocations and failure of enforcement are legitimate and serious. Ultimately the effectiveness of the organization is as good as the political will of its member states.

The future salience of UN is dependent on its dynamism. Absent a more fundamental reform of the Security Council, its role in securing peace will always be at the mercy of great power politics. However, as existential threats from worldwide crises such as climate change, pandemics and mass migration continue to require global cooperation, the U.N.'s function as the planet's primary plaza for negotiations long guarantees that for good or ill it will chalk up on its way out of the 21st century "the average of all countries in dealing with universal problem."

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