



To Survive Its Existential Crisis, the U.N. Must Learn From the Past

Richard Gowan
April 16, 2025

International organizations are an endangered species these days. U.S. President Donald Trump's whirlwind of aid cuts and freezes has [hit the United Nations](#) and other multilateral institutions hard. The U.N. Secretariat and its agencies are already shedding significant numbers of staff and warning that they will be able to offer much less help to vulnerable people worldwide. In New York, diplomats fret that the U.S. could eventually defund the organization altogether—as one internal Trump administration memo [reportedly under consideration](#) proposes to do—or simply leave it, with no other country seemingly ready to take on its financial and political leadership role.

For those wondering if the U.N. system could collapse or at least shrink very drastically, it may be a good moment to look at how international institutions have fared in past existential crises. There is quite a solid academic literature on why some bodies are resilient and others are not. In recent weeks, I have looked through a few recent articles on this theme, to pull out relevant insights.

There is some good news. Multilateral organizations are often more robust than many observers think. Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni of the University of Cambridge has [counted](#) 561 international organizations founded between 1815 and 2016, and found that two-fifths of them have since closed. But she notes some significant patterns among those that survive and those that die. Institutions with large memberships, like the U.N., outperform those that only involve a few states. Bodies that promote technical cooperation between national bureaucracies are more resilient than those with security mandates. And, unlike people, international organizations become more robust as they get older. If an organization makes it through its first three or four decades intact, it is likely to develop the institutional resilience and credibility necessary to survive crises later in its life.

You can draw various lessons from these sorts of data points. At 80 years old this year, the U.N. at least has the advantage of longevity and universal membership. But Eilstrup-Sangiovanni's findings suggest that the bits of the U.N. that are likely to do best are technical agencies like the Universal Postal Union or International Telecommunications Union, which deal with functional forms of cooperation and standard-setting, not highly political bodies like the Security Council. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni also emphasizes that big geopolitical shocks can torpedo institutions that previously appeared robust. In the 20th century, the death rate for international organizations was highest in fraught periods such as the 1930s. If tensions between [the U.S. and China](#) continue to ramp up in coming years, it would be a bad sign for multilateral cooperation.

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But international organizations are not just victims of events. Hylke Dijkstra of the University of Maastricht has [looked](#) at what makes some institutions resilient and concludes that those with certain internal strengths are best-placed. These include strong leadership, professional staff and a solid network of external supporters, such as friendly member states and civil society organizations, that can back them up. At first glance, the U.N. enjoys some of these virtues. Since the 1940s, it has developed a cadre of international civil servants with a solid professional ethos. And a global ecosystem of nongovernmental organizations has sprung up around it.

But more nervous inhabitants of the U.N. bubble point out weaknesses. It is generally agreed, even inside U.N. headquarters, that the organization attracts fewer top-flight leaders to its ranks than it did in its post-Cold War heyday. The U.S. aid cuts threaten to hollow out whole U.N. agencies and departments, leaving them vulnerable to future challenges. Many of the civil society groups that advise and advocate for the U.N. are also in a lot of financial peril. On top of that, the U.N. system is about to go through a difficult leadership [transition](#), as candidates jockey to succeed Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in 2027. If the race ends up installing a weak leader, it could add to drift and distrust around the U.N. and make external actors less willing to invest in multilateralism.

What can U.N. officials and their international allies do to shore up the organization in the meantime? Gisela Hirschmann of Leiden University [offers](#) two salient bits of advice in a recent article on the League of Nations. One is that it is important that decision-makers in a troubled international organization take “timely recognition” of a crisis. If an institution can get ahead of events, it will not just be stuck reacting to other players. If it lags behind, it will be off-balance. There is a general sense in New York and Geneva that Guterres and his advisers did not fully grasp the scale of the impending Trump shock before January. But now Guterres is pushing a rapid reform agenda meant to come up with ideas to streamline the U.N. responsibly over this summer.

But Hirschmann makes a second point that may be under-appreciated at the U.N. at present: An international organization’s response to a crisis is shaped by “the degree to which the threat perception is shared throughout various actors in the institution.” If officials and diplomats working around an organization have a common understanding of the risks and stakes in a crisis, they are better-placed to find a common answer. If they do not, they will struggle.

This feels relevant in the U.N. space today because, while everyone agrees that there is a crisis, it is less clear that they have a shared perception of what that crisis is. For all that they may disapprove of Trump’s methods, some Western countries see the current disruption as at least [offering](#) an opportunity to rationalize a system that has expanded enormously. Some also hope that it is a chance to refocus U.N. diplomacy on core issues of peace and diplomacy. But for many representatives of economically developing countries, the real challenge is the potential collapse of an international aid system that, while always imperfect, at least helped them reduce

poverty and fight disease. There is a risk that these different groups will end up squabbling among themselves about how to allocate the U.N.'s much-reduced resources, rather than safeguarding the system.

This very quick skim of some very thoughtful research ultimately leads to a mix of positive and negative conclusions. On the upside, the U.N. system should be enough of a big tent and sufficiently well-established to ride out the current crisis, albeit with major changes. On the downside, there is a risk that U.N. officials and diplomats will not land on a commonly acceptable plan to preserve key parts of the international system in time. The U.N.'s friends need to move fast to protect it. But in doing so, they must also think deeply about what exactly they want to protect.

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