

Can the United Nations Be Saved? The Case for Getting Back to Basics

BY THANT MYINT-U

The quest to fix the United Nations is almost as old as the organization itself. Eighty years ago, Allied leaders imagined a postwar order in which the great powers would together safeguard a permanent peace. The Security Council, dominated by its five veto-wielding members—the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and China—reflected the world as it was. Other, less hierarchical parts of the new UN system were meant to foster international cooperation across a host of issues: the global economy, public health, agriculture, education. The seeds of a future planetary government were evident from the start.

The UN was initially conceived as a military alliance, but that objective became impossible with the onset of the Cold War. Many observers predicted an early death for the UN. But the organization survived and was soon reenergized, fashioning aims that its founders never imagined, such as peacekeeping. Its secretary-general became a figure on the global stage as the world's preeminent diplomat, jetting off to war zones to negotiate cease-fires. Specialized agencies under the UN, such as its Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and a raft of new technical assistance programs spread their wings. For some officials, scholars, and activists both within and outside the UN, a hopeful vision of global government persisted.

The American legal scholar Richard Falk and the former German diplomat Hans von Sponeck are clearly in the camp of those who would like to see a far stronger UN. In *Liberating the United Nations*, they make the case for an organization that can deal effectively with the slew of challenges facing the world today, from climate change to nuclear proliferation. They see no alternative. At the same time, they bemoan the UN's current dysfunctional state and its increasing marginalization from the major issues of the day. The global body, they say, "is more needed than ever before and yet less relevant as a political actor than at any time since its establishment in 1945."

The authors provide a detailed overview of the UN's complex structures and multifaceted undertakings and make a spirited attempt to convince readers that a renewed investment in the organization is the best possible path to a better future. They offer a worthy vision of an ideal global body, imagining, for example, a reformed Security Council linked with civil society organizations from around the world. Their prescriptions, however, do not fully account for challenges to the UN's legitimacy and standing. Given today's realities, those who believe in the enduring importance of the UN should not seek to make the institution all things to all people but should instead adopt a laser-like focus on strengthening the organization's most fundamental function: preventing war.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

In Falk and von Sponeck's telling, the UN has demonstrated considerable innovation, even during the Cold War, despite the constraints of that era's superpower rivalry. This was especially true under Dag Hammarskjöld, who served as secretary-general from 1953 until his death, in 1961, and pioneered new forms of preventive diplomacy. The speedy deployment of blue-helmeted UN peacekeepers during the Suez crisis in 1956 was a prime example of this early creativity.

By the 1990s, with the Cold War over and Moscow's veto no longer a hindrance to American primacy, the UN expanded its peacekeeping operations, which proved successful in places as far from the seats of power as El Salvador and East Timor. The organization also became an intellectual leader—it crafted, for example, the notion of human development as a counterbalance to the simple metric of per capita GDP.

For Falk and von Sponeck, this was also a period of lost opportunity, as the United States focused its energies on consolidating a new international regime favorable to global capitalism rather than on building the foundation of a UN-centered world government. A series of peacekeeping failures, from Bosnia to Rwanda, colored the lead-up to the turn of the century, by which time the world's post-Cold War enthusiasm for the UN had largely dissipated. The American invasion of Iraq without UN authorization marked a new low point for the organization, demonstrating its impotence in the wake of great-power aggression. Today, Falk and von Sponeck say, in the face of a “dysfunctional ultra-nationalist backlash,” the organization is hobbled even more and has little political support for much-needed amendments to the UN Charter, such as reforming the composition of the Security Council.

There are problems with the book's history. For example, the authors mistakenly describe the crisis in the Republic of the Congo, which drew in the UN in 1960, as being caused principally by “tribal conflicts and ethnic regionalism,” when it was very much about attempts by white supremacists to maintain their dominance over Congo—in particular, its vast mineral riches—after the country won independence from Belgium. The authors are also mistaken in suggesting that Hammarskjöld supported what they oddly describe as Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba's “radical economic nationalism.” The two men were famously at odds, and at least a few of Hammarskjöld's aides, if not the secretary-general himself, were complicit in Lumumba's overthrow in 1960.

Far more important, however, is what's missing from the authors' account. For nearly all the peoples of Africa and Asia, the history of the twentieth century was first and foremost a history of empire and their long fights for freedom. Over the late 1950s and early 1960s, representatives from newly independent nations—the “Afro-Asians,” as they called themselves—transformed the UN, bringing it to the height of its ambition and vigor. The UN was the mechanism through which they asserted their hard-won independence and shaped and protected their sovereignty. For them, Congo was a test of whether white supremacy would be a mainstay of the postcolonial world.

Falk and von Sponeck correctly mention the critical role played by the UN from its very beginning in the struggle against racism globally and against the apartheid regime in South Africa in particular. But they are incorrect in suggesting that non-Western governments were more interested in the development of a fairer world economy than in the prevention of war. For the Afro-Asians, peace, development, and the realization of human rights were interdependent parts of a bigger project of equality after empire.

The Afro-Asians embraced the UN. In 1961, they were instrumental in the appointment of one of their own to secretary-general: the Burmese diplomat U Thant (my grandfather). In 1962, Thant, working closely with other Afro-Asian leaders, played a pivotal role (which is lost in most narratives) in the de-escalation of the Cuban missile crisis. His mediation efforts between U.S. President John F. Kennedy, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, and the Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro marked the apex of the organization's work in war prevention. While the Security Council was often deadlocked, the secretary-general and his team of mediators were more active than ever across a variety of conflicts, from Cyprus and India to Pakistan and Vietnam. The UN's record of peacemaking endeavors, which were intimately linked to the ascendancy of what was then called the "Third World" majority, is absent from the book.

REFORM AND REALITY

Liberating the United Nations includes a deep dive into the authors' own experiences in the organization. Falk, for many decades a professor of international law at Princeton University, was in the early 2010s the UN's special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. Von Sponeck, a career international public servant, was the UN's humanitarian coordinator in Iraq in the late 1990s; he resigned in protest over the harm that sanctions did to Iraqi civilians. Both demonstrate the many ways in which their efforts were thwarted by geopolitics—that is, the interests of the United States and other powerful governments. Behind their accounts is the central tension in the book: on the one hand, the authors' desire to see the UN become a kind of global government and, on the other, the political currents frustrating this aim.

Falk and von Sponeck are "puzzled" by the inability of the UN to "gain the political traction needed" to make itself the effective tool for peace that they believe it can be. They contend that over the decades, despite herculean obstacles, the UN has proved itself an "indispensable feature of a sustainable and positive world order." With more funding, "as well as greater forbearance by geopolitical actors and more appreciation by member governments, civil societies, and the media," the world body could again scale new heights.

The obstacle, as they see it, is an "outmoded form of 'political realism'" that "will require an ideological struggle" to overcome. Governments are trapped in their own geopolitical calculations and do not appreciate that the only answer to today's global challenges is a reformed UN at the heart of vigorous global cooperation. For this to happen, they call for a "progressive transnational movement of peoples," one "strong enough to exert a benevolent influence on governmental and international institutional practices." Only

with this kind of groundswell will the UN be able to address “such basic structural problems as predatory capitalism, global militarism, and ecological unsustainability.”

The authors are certainly right that the UN has not only survived but succeeded in a number of sectors and settings. It has produced a body of international law unprecedented in history. Its humanitarian agencies would be difficult to replace. In the event of another pandemic, only the World Health Organization, for all its flaws, could coordinate a truly global response.

Falk and von Sponeck place front and center the need to update the composition of a Security Council that is still locked in a World War II-era constellation. There are few, if any, good arguments for denying countries such as India a position at least on par with that of the United Kingdom or for denying non-Western states greater representation more generally. In recent decades, the story of the Security Council has been of a body dominated by five rich countries deliberating conflicts in low-income countries. The unrepresentative composition of the five permanent members leads to a host of inequities, such as the biased appointments of senior officials, that run through the UN system. It is easy to see why enthusiasm for the UN in much of the world has steadily declined.

But any effort to fix the UN today will run against immense political headwinds. It's nearly impossible to imagine a package of changes to the Security Council's membership that could win support among its current permanent members. It's also unclear that any change to the composition of the Security Council, however salutary to the UN's legitimacy, would improve the organization's effectiveness. The only result may be new kinds of deadlock (albeit with perhaps more interesting debates).

There's also a more basic challenge: the plethora of alternative avenues for governments to pursue their interests, including bilateral agreements; regional organizations, such as NATO; and forums, such as the G-20. The UN's headquarters, in New York, was once the only place in the world where representatives of many countries could meet. There were few other summits. Over the late 1950s and early 1960s, the annual General Assembly meetings stood at the very center of global politics, with everyone from Kennedy to Khrushchev to anticolonial revolutionaries, among them Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, all playing their larger-than-life roles in a dramatic theater that gripped the planet.

Falk and von Sponeck conclude that U.S. unilateralism is what has been constraining the UN, with Washington unwilling to invest in the organization's renewal. But surely, it is not only the United States that seeks to act outside the UN. For smaller states, the UN may be the one arena where they have an equal seat at the table. But for others, such as the rising middle powers of the world, there's an ever-increasing menu of options.

MISSION: POSSIBLE

There's a deeper challenge still: the nature of the UN itself. Over the decades, the UN has developed its own culture, language, and ways of working—invaluable products of

the only attempt ever to build an institution that involves all humanity. But it has long been addicted to process over outcome. The organization's built-in need to reflect everyone's views, in every paragraph of every text—in a staff circular as in a General Assembly resolution—too often strips away meaning and value from even its best-intentioned efforts.

The manner in which the UN manages its people is another vexing issue. The organization includes legions of public servants, including aid workers and peacekeepers, who are dedicated to its lofty principles and perform heroically, often under the most trying circumstances. But few of them have benefited from good management. The most capable are rarely recognized for their skill and sacrifice. Governments, especially the great powers, insist on their own (often unqualified) nominees for the top jobs, creating a perversion at the heart of the system that undermines morale, as well as efficiency. An effective UN needs at its core a highly motivated civil service staffed by the most qualified women and men from around the world. It's an area of reform that receives almost no attention.

The default scenario is one in which an unreformed or slightly reformed UN continues evolving a smorgasbord of functions—protecting refugees, facilitating climate change negotiations, providing development assistance—doing well in some areas and less so in others. Its conferences, even if they do not necessarily solve global problems, keep alive dialogue on global issues, at times providing a platform for an array of international civil society organizations. The trouble with this status quo scenario is that by spreading itself thin, the organization is distracting itself from its main purpose of preventing war.

For the foreseeable future, the Security Council, the main body responsible for international peace and security, will likely remain unable to address the primary threats of the day, among them the Russian invasion of Ukraine, conflicts in the Middle East, and disputes over Taiwan and territories in the South China Sea. Superpower tensions within the Security Council are nothing new—but they need not stand in the way of preventive diplomacy and mediation. Hammarskjöld and Thant's most important peacemaking achievements took place during the Cold War, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the late 1980s, the quiet mediation of Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar made possible several peace agreements that set the stage for the end of the Cold War itself.

In the absence of a dynamic, reformed Security Council, the key to future UN success is the secretary-general's role as the world's preeminent diplomat. Peace is the primary business of the UN. There are many conflicts that may well be resolved without any UN role. But the past 80 years demonstrate that the secretary-general, an impartial mediator representing a universal body, is at times indispensable. One who is sidelined on the issues of war and peace will have far less influence with which to lead on global challenges such as climate change and development.

The public expects the UN to head efforts to end war. Today, terrible new wars are destroying the lives of millions and raising the threat of nuclear confrontation. It's a very

different time than the 1990s, when all the great powers were content to dispatch peacekeeping operations to end internal conflicts. The world has returned to a period of warfare between states, exactly what the UN was set up to prevent.

Because there is little oxygen for reforming the UN, whatever oxygen exists needs to be deployed efficiently to restore and broaden the secretary-general's peacemaking role, which can address not only internal conflicts but interstate wars, as well. This will require building a team of experienced in-house mediators who have an intimate knowledge of what the organization can and cannot do. In the past, the UN achieved considerable success through the leadership of officials such as the Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche, who served both Hammarskjöld and Thant and was instrumental in dozens of peace efforts around the world.

In this dangerous and uncertain moment, the secretary-general of the United Nations can explore and create opportunities for conflict resolution. Only the UN has the authority and credibility to play this role. And over the coming years, it may make all the difference between global war and peace.

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