



The UN as a Guardian of World Peace and its Role in the Ukraine Crisis

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Abstract

*Following the Second World War, the international community was reinvigorated to design an international body with the capability to limit the onset of another world war. Enshrined in the United Nations (UN) Charter was the vision for the organization to be “a guardian of international peace and security, as a promoter of human rights, as a protector of international law, and as an engineer of socioeconomic advancement”. The idea that Vladimir Putin has reacted in the way that he has because he is determined to re-create the Soviet Union under the guise of a Eurasian Customs Union has become commonplace among the chattering classes in Washington. What is really driving an essentially pre-emptive and largely defensive move on Russia’s part is the prospect of Ukrainian accession to NATO. **In Ukraine, there may be no good options for resolving the crisis, but the “least bad” option would be a settlement brokered by the UN.** The United Nations and its members have a dream of World Peace just as you and I do. Actually we have arrived in the time of history which is a turning point. Humanity has a decision to make. Will we plant the root of World Peace or are we doomed to repeat the failures of the 20th century? A world of darkness, oppression and conflict deep in war. This paper will examine the question, do we want it to stay that way or should the UN take over what is given in the Charter, as well as to what extent the present position of the UNSC and tenets of international law can enable intervention when responding to internal conflict.*

1. Introduction

The UN was created in 1945, following the devastation of the Second World War, with one central mission: the maintenance of international peace and security. The UN accomplishes this by working to prevent conflict, helping parties in conflict, making peace, deploying peacekeepers, and creating the conditions to allow peace to hold and flourish. These activities often overlap and should reinforce one another, to be effective.*

Article 1 of the UN Charter states the following purposes:

1. To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to peace, for the suppression of

* The UN Security Council has the primary responsibility for international peace and security. There is no doubt that the most effective way to diminish human suffering and massive economic costs of conflicts and their aftermath is to prevent conflicts in the first place. The UN plays an important role in conflict prevention, using diplomacy, good offices and mediation. Among the tools the Organization uses to bring peace are special envoys and political missions in the field. See “Role of the Security Council” United Nations Peacekeeping.

acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of peace;

2. To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;
3. To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and
4. To be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends

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2. What is the role of the UN? The following quotes say it all. Not just in East Timor, but any conflict.

...on January 23, 1976, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, sent a top-secret cable to Kissinger in which he boasted about the “considerable progress” he had made in blocking UN action on East Timor. Moynihan later wrote: “The department of state desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective [on East Timor]. This task was given to me, and I carried it through with no inconsiderable success” (John Pilger, Guardian 21 September, 1999).

It is little misleading to speak of the role of the UN. The UN is nearly powerless as an abstract entity or even as a representative of the world’s nations. It can act, instead, only insofar as it is authorized by the great powers, which means primarily the United States (U.S.).

The organization suffers as well from an extreme shortage of funds because of the continual refusal of the U.S. to pay its dues.*

U.S. influence is the greatest in the Security Council, but some organs of the UN, such as the General Assembly or bodies dealing with economic and social issues, have had a Third World majority ever since the era of decolonization dawned. Accordingly, the primary focus of U.S. policy has been to undermine and marginalize the UN. The UN should have an important role in world affairs, but U.S. policy and the policies of other leading states

* For example, any peacekeepers sent to East Timor will probably not be a UN force because the U.S. Congress has required that there be a 15 days' delay before the U.S. government can approve any UN peacekeeping operation and has forbidden Washington from paying its authorized share of the costs of any such operation.

severely limit the international organization. From the point of view of U.S. policymakers, however, there is one crucial role played by the UN: it serves as a convenient scapegoat when something goes wrong. For example, the current catastrophe in East Timor is directly attributable to the refusal of the U.S and other Western powers to deter the atrocities there over a period of a quarter century, yet the UN will probably take the blame (*Stephen R. Shalom, Noam Chomsky, and Michael Albert, 1999*).

3. Why are the UN Reforms needed?

Since the late 1990s there have been many calls for reformations of the UN while there is little clarity or consensus about what reform might mean in practice. However, due to contrasting interests of different countries and diverse cultures, religions and ideologies, UN reform cannot be achieved overnight.

In the face of accumulating threats and challenges, especially in the maintenance of unity of the UN, reform of the Security Council, the crucial aspect, which scholars consider as a must, has attracted almost the greatest global attention.*

Security Council reform concerns the vital interests of all UN members and the future of the UN and will lead to major adjustment of the global governance system and international order, however, decades of attempts to reform the UN Security Council are comprehensively deadlocked.†

US supports the prioritization of increasing representation and say of developing countries, especially African countries, considering a collective rise of developing countries being the defining feature.

The country highlighted that reform must increase the opportunities for the small and medium-sized countries to sit in the Council and participate in their decision-making processes, saying that it is the only way to make the Council more democratic, transparent and efficient.

Experts say that the reform means the readjustment and distribution of interests and powers, and different member states and camps have their own demands.‡

In this regard, reform should be based on enhancing the UN's capacity to address global challenges and to lead the world in sustainable peace and development. Member States should work in solidarity and cooperation to support the UN's cause of peace, development and human rights, based on the consensus that the UN should play a central role in international affairs.§

* Reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) encompasses five key issues: **categories of membership, the question of the veto held by the five permanent members, regional representation, the size of an enlarged Council and its working methods, and the Security Council-General.** See **Reform of the Security Council** .

† Experts say that UN reform means the readjustment and distribution of interests and powers, and different member states and camps have their own demands. (UN reform: What to change and what to keep? By Duan Fengyuan, UN reform: What to change and what to keep? - CGTN)

‡ Ibid.

§ The bright side is that in the face of multiple unprecedented challenges and threats as well as snowballing difficulties of global governance, the vast majority of the UN member states are rallying around the lofty ideal: making the world a better and safer place. This is bringing new hopes to the UN, though there is still a long way to go.

4. Armed Conflict in Ukraine and the Role of the UN

The security situation in Ukraine deteriorated rapidly following the launch of a Russian Federation military offensive on 24 February 2022. The armed violence escalated in at least eight oblasts (regions), including Kyivska oblast and the capital city of Kyiv, as well as in the eastern oblasts Donetsk and Luhansk which were already affected by conflict.*

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The current armed conflict in Ukraine has sparked all sorts of questions about the UN, particularly the role of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the General Assembly and the Secretary-General.†

5. Can the Security Council stop the Ukraine-Russian war?

“I urge the Council to do everything in its power to end the war and to mitigate its impact, both on the suffering people of Ukraine, and on vulnerable people and developing countries around the world” (Secretary-General António Guterres, 2022).

The current armed conflict in Ukraine has sparked all sorts of questions about the UN, particularly the role of the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Secretary-General, as well as the question of why the UN cannot solve the Ukraine Crisis.

6. Conclusion

The world has been witnessing the inability of the Security Council to act aptly due to its structure for a while. The root cause of this has been the misuse of veto power by the P5 members in most cases. The concept was considered essential post World War II.‡

The only potential solution to this infinite loop is a change in the UNSC structure. It does not necessarily need to be the dissolution of the veto power. Instead, the veto needs to

* The escalation of conflict has triggered an immediate and steep rise in humanitarian needs as essential supplies and services are disrupted and civilians flee the fighting. The UN estimates that 12 million people inside Ukraine will need relief and protection, while more than 4 million Ukrainian refugees may need protection and assistance in neighbouring countries in the coming months.

† The Security Council has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. It has 15 Members, and each Member has one vote. Under the Charter of the United Nations, all Member States are obligated to comply with Council decisions. The Security Council takes the lead in determining the existence of a threat to the peace or act of aggression. It calls upon the parties to a dispute to settle it by peaceful means and recommends methods of adjustment or terms of settlement. In some cases, the Security Council can resort to imposing sanctions or even authorize the use of force to maintain or restore international peace and security.

‡ One of the primary reasons for the failure of the League of Nations and the happening of World War II was the lack of solidarity among nations. However, it has transitioned into a mere tool used by the P5 countries to make situations favourable to themselves. Another tricky part is that changing the structure or adding new permanent members is also a challenge, as the P5 will also veto such an idea.

be limited so that the UNSC does not face limitations in doing its intended work. (Role and Relevance of UNSC in Interstate Conflicts Prevention and Mitigation: An Analysis from the Perspectives of Russia-Ukraine Conflict). The UNSC will not be the place where the Ukraine crisis is resolved, though, especially if it escalates to open warfare, because that is exactly how the system was designed.*

That is not a good sign for the already slim chance of the U.N. intervening in any potential invasion. It is true that the U.N. was designed to act as a check on states willing to wage war against their neighbors.†

The UN Charter does say that countries that are party to a dispute as Russia is here, have to abstain on any Security Council resolutions regarding peaceful settlement of the conflict. But as UN analyst Richard Gowan explains, that does not necessarily mean there is a clever way to dodge Moscow's veto on Ukraine.

Neither the U. S. nor any of the other permanent five (P5) members of the Council are likely to want to create precedents for limiting their own veto powers in future, just to score what may amount to a symbolic point. Forcing Russia to veto a resolution as the West has often done over Syria would make the point equally clearly.‡

The UNSC could do nothing to respond to Russia's armed conflict in Ukraine, because reform must be made urgently.

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During negotiations to establish the United Nations in the final years of World War II, the Soviet Union had a seat at the table as one of the Big Three, alongside the United States and the United Kingdom. (France and China round out the permanent five Security Council members we know today.) But the Russians were deeply wary about any constraints that the new international order would have on its own security. Being kicked out of the League of Nations in 1939 weighed heavily on Stalin's mind as he grappled with whether to take part in the new organization President Franklin D. Roosevelt was advocating.

Part of the agreement during the Yalta meeting of the Allies in 1945 was that the Big Five members would get a veto over most Security Council decisions. So, while a simple majority could bring any issue to the table, any coercive action needs the unanimous approval

* The Russians objected to the meeting, forcing the council's 15 members to vote on whether to discuss Ukraine at all—only Russia and China voted no. But, as Foreign Policy's Colum Lunch noted, the meeting did not go as U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas Greenfield likely intended. While all the speakers urged diplomacy over conflict the U.S.'s condemnations of Russian troop buildups were not echoed quite as loudly as Washington would have preferred. We are still a long way from having "the world ... speak out in one voice," as President Joe Biden put it in recent statement.

† The classic example at this point is the Council's authorization of force to turn back Saddam Hussein's Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in the early 1990s. There is absolutely no chance though for direct U.N.-authorized action to turn back any Russian aggression or multilateral economic sanctions like those that were levied against Iran's nuclear program last decade.

‡ Making matters more difficult for U.N. diplomacy, Russia recently assumed the rotating presidency of the Security Council. That power means no amount of escalation will result in an emergency meeting of the council in the month ahead. And while the General Assembly, where every country has one vote, could condemn any Russian invasion of Ukraine, any solutions it offers would be non-binding on Russia.

§ That is not a good sign for the already slim chance of the U.N. intervening in any potential invasion. It is true that the U.N. was designed to act as a check on states willing to wage war against their neighbors. The classic example at this point is the council's authorization of force to turn back Saddam Hussein's Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in the early 1990s. There is absolutely no chance though for direct U.N.-authorized action to turn back any Russian aggression or multilateral economic sanctions like those that were levied against Iran's nuclear program last decade.

of all five. It was an acceptable trade-off for Moscow's negotiators, ensuring that the new organization could never be turned against the Soviet Union or its successor at the UN, the Russian Federation.

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Making matters more difficult for UN diplomacy, Russia assumed the rotating presidency of the Security Council. That power means no amount of escalation will result in an emergency meeting of the council any time ahead. And while the General Assembly, where every country has one vote, could condemn any Russian invasion of Ukraine, any solutions it offers would be nonbinding on Russia.

This is not to say that the UN will be completely useless here. There is definitely an element of public diplomacy involved in open Security Council meetings, offering a chance for member-states to blow off steam as Indiana University Professor David Bosco has argued. We may be seeing the results of that given the interest in diplomacy we have seen from all sides since the UN meeting.

The UNSC met to discuss tensions between Russia and Ukraine that may or may not end with the former further invading the latter.

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But all this means that there will be no firm action at the UN on this front. And that is exactly what the Soviet Union wanted from its seat at the table. Their position both allows for collective action but guarantees that the UN can be blocked from doing anything that is not in Moscow's own national interests.

There is a reason that for all of the Russians' griping about the United Nations and infringements on their sovereignty, they never threaten to leave entirely. Instead, they know that it is way better to be at the table with a veto than on the outside looking in. For fellow member states like Ukraine, though, that means that any promise of protection from aggression by the UN falls short when it is one of the victorious World War II allies knocking at their door. Yes, the United Nations has made important contributions for peaceful talks, but almost at its 70th anniversary the UN has not yet found a way to fulfill its founding purpose.

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