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Does the United Nations still exist?

The UN as a collective-security organisation has failed — with as much influence on war and peace as any other person on this planet

The General Assembly of the United Nations ended its annual session only a week ago in New York. There were more heads of state and government than ever before. Everybody gave a speech (for most delegations limited to 15 minutes). The traffic in New York was heavy for a whole week, as the delegates shuttled between the hotels and restaurants.

So, the UN seems pretty alive. But on the biggest issue on the planet, a war which has entered its eighth month between two countries with a combined population of 200 million — one of which possesses the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons and threatens to use it — the UN has been a bystander.

The UN secretary-general, António Guterres, has been seldom heard. On the most important matter for which the League of Nations and later the United Nations were created — maintenance of world peace — he has nothing to say but platitudes. He has managed, late in the conflict, to effect one trip to Kyiv and one to Moscow. That is all.

Technically, the world has entrusted Guterres with the task of preserving peace — or at least with the attempt to preserve peace.

Many argue that the secretary-general and the secretariat are hamstrung by the great powers. The five permanent members of the Security Council can veto whatever decision they do not like. This is true. But the secretary-general does possess agency. He has a moral authority, if he decides to use it.

Independently of the great powers, he can try to bring the warring sides to the table. He can set himself in Geneva, indicate the date at which he wants the 'interested parties' to send their delegates, and wait. If some do not show up, or ignore him, at least we shall know who wants to pursue the war, and who does not. He is the only non-state actor in the world with this kind of moral authority. Technically, the world has entrusted

him with the task of preserving peace — or at least with the attempt to preserve peace. He seems to have singularly failed.

Failing in its primary duty

It is not however only Guterres' fault. The origins of the recent decline of the UN go back 30 years to the end of the cold war. Three factors have made the current UN possibly worse than even the defunct League of Nations.

The first is that after the end of the cold war the United States, finding itself in the position of hyperpower, did not want to be trammelled by any unnecessary global rules. No new regional — much less global — organisations were created, save for the rather inconsequential European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. This is in contrast to what happened after the first and second world wars, as with the foundation of the League of Nations and UN respectively.

What is more, UN rules were openly violated. After the end of the cold war, the US and its allies attacked five countries on four continents without UN authorisation: Panama, Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq (the second war) and Libya. (For Libya, there was a UN Security Council resolution but its mandate of civilian protection was exceeded by the overthrow of the regime.) France and the United Kingdom, also veto-wielding members of the Security Council, participated in most of these violations of the UN Charter, even if France refused to go to war against Iraq. And Russia attacked Georgia and Ukraine (the latter twice).

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Thus, these four permanent members broke the charter eight times. Among the permanent members, only China did not do so. The UN as a collective-security organisation, whose primary duty is to protect the territorial integrity of its members, has failed in that role — simply by being ignored by the most powerful states.

These states have to be unanimous in the selection of the secretary-general, given their individual vetoes over the Security Council's recommendation to the General Assembly to that effect. They have colluded in selecting increasingly puppet-like figures for that position.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali never received a second term. Kofi Annan, Ban Ki-moon and now Guterres were much more pliable: they just went AWOL when matters of war and peace were at stake.

Perhaps nothing illustrates better — although farcically — the type of person who has come to fill the role of secretary-general than the incident in Iraq in 2007 when a bomb exploded near the place where Ban Ki-moon and the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, were holding a press conference. While Maliki was unperturbed by the sound of the explosion, Ban Ki-moon almost hid under the lectern and quickly ran for the exit.

Unlike Dag Hammarskjold, who died while trying to mediate in the conflict in the Congo in 1961, recent secretaries-general seem to have imagined that their duty consists mostly in going from one cocktail party to another. They do not realise that by running for such an office, where presence in war zones is necessary, they have also accepted the risks that come with that.

Scrambling for financing

The second reason for the decline of the UN and international organisation is ideological. According to the ideologies of neoliberalism and 'the end of history' which so heavily dominated the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, dealing with world peace and security was no longer the most pressing task of the UN. Helped by the proliferation of non-governmental organisations (and false NGOs), the new ideologues broadened the mission of the UN to many subsidiary issues with which it should have never been involved but rather left to other governmental and non-governmental bodies.

Many of these new mandates are utterly meaningless. I was asked to advise on Sustainable Development Goal number ten, reduction of inequality. I did not do so. I thought it made no sense, was impossible to monitor and consisted of pious wishes, many mutually contradictory — as any reader of the ten targets on inequality may easily convince themselves.

The third, related reason is financial. As the mandate of the UN, the World Bank and other international institutions was broadened to include practically everything imaginable, it became obvious that the resources provided by governments were insufficient. Here NGOs met billionaires and private-sector donors. In a series of actions unthinkable when the UN was created, private interests simply infiltrated themselves into organisations created by *states* and began to dictate the new agenda.

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I saw this first-hand in the World Bank research department, when the Gates Foundation and other donors suddenly began to decide on priorities and to implement them. Perhaps their objectives as such were praiseworthy, but they should have gone about realising them independently. Having an inter-state organisation depend on billionaires' whims and fancies is like outsourcing public education to the Fortune 500 list of richest US corporations.

It had a further negative effect. Researchers or country economists in institutions such as the World Bank spent most of their time chasing private donors. Being good at fundraising gave them a power base within the institution. Thus, instead of being good researchers or good country economists, they became managers of funds who then hired outside researchers to do their primary jobs. The institutional knowledge which existed was dissipated. The only international institution, as far as I know, which has not succumbed to this internally devastating trend is the International Monetary Fund.

This is how the entire UN system went into decline and we ended up in a position where the head of the only international institution ever created by humankind whose role is preservation of world peace has become a spectator — with as much influence on matters of war and peace as any other of the 7.7 billion denizens of our planet.

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