



The United Nations
Vision with Hope or Division with Hopelessness?

A Presentation
to the



by

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Let the title of my presentation “vision with hope or division with hopelessness’ be evidence that I firmly believe that we, mankind, still have the option to choose the kind of governance that is needed for organizing life on this planet. Despite polarization, confrontation and competition, there is agreement between protagonists to support a global institution that is able to provide legitimacy and continuity for the benefit of all.

Let us not be discouraged by the current aberrations of a single UN member country.

Arguing that the United Nations is today needed more than ever before at a time when the UN, as a political actor, is considered less relevant than at any time since it was founded in 1945, may seem contradictory. It is not. It is an encouragement to take reforms seriously, at last! According to the UN Charter, the General Assembly should have come together 50 years ago, to be exact in 1955, to discuss the adaptation of this Charter to the needs of the time.

What is obvious: the UN, as presently constituted, cannot do better than what geopolitical actors permit or undertake themselves! The current multilateral architecture, and with it the institutional centrepiece, the United Nations, have to undergo fundamental changes to replace the prevailing state-centric political ill-will; to end the breaches of international law; and, also end, the impunity that goes with the violation of law. Instead there must be multilateral collaboration; respect for agreed treaties; and accountability for failure. Only when this has happened will the world have an institution that is equipped to effectively handle the challenges of the current century for the benefit of people wherever they live.

With this in mind, I would like to divide my presentation into two part.

Part 1

- To review the lessons learnt from the UN’s predecessor, the League of Nations;
- To trace the long road from the promise of Yalta in 1945 to the geopolitical reality of today;
- To identify the political setbacks the UN system had to face during its 80 year history;
- To take into account the force of statism in the Security Council, and the asymmetrical cooperation between the SC and the GA;
- To assess the impact of the independence movements of the 1960s/1970s on multilateralism and the work of the United Nations;
- To review the linkages between the UN’s legislative, juridical and operational components;
- To present a tally of the problematic journey of UN multilateralism;

Part 2:

- To identify the current state of the UN reform debate;
- To review major individual UN reform alternatives;
- To suggest a UN reform monitoring mechanism;

Having covered in Part 1, these seven areas of relevance, depicting a ‘political’ United Nations that has not delivered; a United Nations that is widely disunited and that has often been misused, I would like to outline during the second part of my presentation, what could be a viable UN of tomorrow; a UN able to contribute effectively to sustainable security, not just for people but for the global habitat as a whole. I agree with Secretary-General Guterres that ‘no one should be left behind’. But ‘no one’ implies for me: all living organisms.

Before you conclude that I am a dreamer who needs to wake up, I want to reassure you that I am not an escapist who uses his sleep to find refuge in a world of idealism. The motto that has motivated me throughout my 32 years of UN life and beyond, has always been: look to the stars but keep your feet on the ground.

Let me begin with a review of the United Nations as it evolved over the past eight decades.

Those who undertook the preparations for the UN that was founded in 1945, especially Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin, looked at the League of Nations as a failed ‘test run of modern institutionalized internationalism’. As the three statesmen agreed in Yalta, the new institution would have to have universal membership and ‘robust decision making powers’, neither of which the League of Nations ever had, but the General Assembly and the Security Council would have. Even though profound ideological and geopolitical disparities and ambitions existed between them, the three leaders, united in their quest for power, accepted that leadership in the UN had to be shared.

US President Truman put it this way: “No matter how great our strength, we must deny ourselves the license to always do what we please.”

Despite this promising beginning, the spirit of Yalta quickly dissipated and changed from cooperation to a nightmare of confrontation, as soon as the UN began to deal with global order conflicts. The 1950-53 war between North and South Korea was nothing less than a proxy war between the US on one side and the USSR and the People’s Republic of China on the other.

It, therefore, took only a few years after the founding of the UN that the inevitable happened: a, or better ‘the’ Cold War broke out. The ideological differences between a communist east and a capitalist west were too overwhelming. Additionally, the two western powers, the US and the UK, were infinitely better prepared, strategically, militarily and financially, than the USSR, to react to such crises and to take the lead geopolitically, and concurrently, to westernize the UN governance system. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was pre-occupied with internal conflicts within the sixteen individual Soviet

Socialist Republics; the rebuilding of the country following WWII; and concurrently, dealing with Russia's enormous country-wide poverty.

The result: the team of three UN leaders, the US, the UK and the USSR, split into the US and the UK on one side, and the USSR on the other, an opportunity western leaders used to consolidate a west-centric UN governance structure that eventually became unilateralist, led by the United States.

A careful review of the debates in the Security Council shows that the Permanent Five, most frequently, the US and Russia, would veto anything, anything that was contrary to their national interests; the General Assembly would pass resolutions, year after year, calling for human rights for all; for demilitarization and denuclearization; for fairer trade relations; decolonization; and for more finances for development. These decisions by the majority of countries would be ignored year after year by a minority of countries, more often than not by the United States, frequently as the only dissenting state but at times also supported by other western governments.

It may surprise, but as of today, the US is the only UN member state that has yet to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and apart from the Pacific island state of Palau, is the only country that has yet to ratify CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Even the operational UN system of Specialized Agencies, Funds and Programmes, such as UNDP, UNICEF, the WFP, WHO, UNHCR, FAO, and others, did not escape the heavy hand of external interference. Over the years, voluntary contributions to the UN system were often provided, but not as freely useable funds, rather as contributions tied to donor preferences. Germany is an example. It provided in 2020 a total of \$484 million of voluntary contributions to the UNDP of which \$ 126 million, or only 26%, constituted freely usable core funds, but \$358 million or 74% as 'dedicated' funds reflecting donor investment preferences. A similar pattern has existed for other OECD countries.

'Dedicated' contributions based on donor preferences may be better than no contributions. Such donations, however, are not consistent with the provisions of the UN Charter which reminds UN member states (Article 100) 'not to seek to influence' the UN' in the discharge of (its) responsibilities'.

Equally problematic have been 'delayed' payments for the UN's annual budget. Such payments are due at the beginning of the year, but most governments take the liberty to pay when it suits them. As at end-February 2025, only 67 out of 193 countries, including France and the UK, two P5 countries, have deposited their obligatory contributions. China and Russia are not among them. The US has never been a timely contributor. US Governments, democratic and republican administrations alike, have traditionally paid late, 'due to govern-

ment's fiscal calendar', which is October to September. At times the US chose to not even pay at all. It currently owes the United Nations \$ 2.8 billion, or about 75% of an entire year's UN budget which in 2025 is \$ 3.72 billion. The US, however, is not the only defaulter, but the most persistent, and by far the biggest.

Altogether, late payments have created serious UN administrative impediments. Secretaries-General are forced to travel the world, year after year, with their begging bowls, to collect a pittance, even though the UN is cheap: the 2025 UN budget of \$ 3.72 billion, for a global population of 8.2 billion people, amounts to the paltry sum of 46 cents/person. And yet, a western ambassador to the UN still felt obliged to refer to, what amounts to peanuts, as 'a national sacrifice'! To make it worse, contributions to the UN are unfortunately also being used by some economically strong countries to control UN operations with the motto: we pay when you do what we want and we don't when you do otherwise.

Also important to realize is that member governments have continuously expanded the agenda of what they want the UN to do without at the same time increasing its resources accordingly. Secretary-General G Kofi Annan once made the point that his office had 193 doors to governments, all of whom expected the UN to entertain their specific concerns at whatever costs. This imbalance between UN resources and UN capacity has to be rectified through a fundamental overhaul of the organisation's financing mechanism.

What has led to the most fractious stalemate in the functioning of the political UN, more than anything else, is the abuse, and this with impunity, of international law. An impressive amount of law has become available over the past eighty years to cover in great detail all aspects of human life. There are, for example, the two UN Covenants of political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights and the UN Torture Convention, signed into law in 1987 (GA 39/46) and ratified by 184 countries including the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. But: much of such international law is often either broken or simply ignored. International law is clearly the stepchild in the family of law.

More concretely: there is awareness around the world that torture is practised in many places despite the existence of laws against it. Abu Ghraib in Iraq; Guantanamo at the US enclave in Cuba; and the Evin prison in Tehran are gruesome examples. Less well known has been the existence of prisons in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere to which, not so long ago, out-of-area governments have transported their detainees to hand them over to 'rented', torturers to carry out their trade. Governments have done so in order cover up their lawlessness. These are facts not speculations!

The UN was aware of these horrific breaches of the UN torture convention, but once again was unable to do much about it, let alone prevent them.

‘No more war’ has remained the engrained motto of peace movements around the world ever since the UN was created, yet, war and externally arranged regime changes and coup d’états have been ever present with only brief periods of peace in-between. Examples abound, from the Korean Peninsula to Indochina, from the Suez Canal to Chile, Paraguay, the Philippines and Panama, from Iraq, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia, and most recently, to Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Yemen and Ukraine. There are more!

In all these conflicts, the executive UN provided significant humanitarian assistance, often under most dangerous circumstances, e.g., in Afghanistan, Gaza, Syria and Ukraine. At the political level, the UN passed resolutions that more often than not have remained unimplemented.

US military action following Iraq’s invasion into Kuwait in 1990; the Soviet Union’s participation in Afghanistan’s civil war in the 1980s; and NATO’s intervention in Libya’s civil war were indeed carried out under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and therefore, were in accordance with international law. However, the NATO war against Yugoslavia in 1999; the US attack on Afghanistan in 2001, and its invasion into Iraq in 2003; the Russian attack of the Ukraine in 2022; the callous Hamas attack on Israeli civilians in 2023, and the subsequent brutal asymmetrical Israeli response facilitated by the US, have all been carried out as profoundly illegal acts of aggression.

Article 39 of the UN Charter should be remembered here. It reads: “The Security Council shall determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of peace, or act of aggression...and decide what measures shall be taken ...to maintain or restore international peace and security.” In all the cases of illegality, I have mentioned, the Security Council and the General Assembly could only lament but ‘decide nothing.’

The UN invariably failed to prevent war, or was unable to negotiate the return to conditions of peace and security. But not only that: in no instance, has the UN, the International Court of Justice, or the non-UN International Criminal Court been able to turn impunity into accountability, whenever major powers were involved in acts of aggression. Accountability seems to have been reserved for the weak, and impunity for the strong. The case of Iraq, where I worked for some time, comes to mind as a stark example. Forgive the audacity when I say: While President Saddam Hussein has faced justice, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair have escaped justice.

It has to be seen whether the ICJ and the ICC court cases against the Israeli Government atrocities will lead to conviction and sentencing. This would be powerful ground-breaking firsts in post-WWII legal history. No, I have not forgotten to include in the list of perpetrators reactive Palestinian extremists!

Let me summarize some of the main causes that have played decisive roles in preventing the UN from fulfilling the promise of San Francisco. First and foremost, the SC's permanent Five have been unable to act as a team. Narrow national geopolitical self-interests were more important. Charter law was broken without hesitation. Linkages of cooperation between the SC and the GA for the common good have been lacking. In the absence of GA decision-making authority, majority voting in the GA was reduced to mere symbolic undertakings without consequences. Similarly, the International Court of Justice could do no more but to pronounce law-based opinions without the authority to enforce suggested actions. Bilateral policy and funding controls of the UN's executive operations, in violation of UN Charter law, reduced the freedom of action of SGs, and the UN system as a whole.

What weighed most heavily on the effectiveness of the UN involved military interventions that bypassed the UN altogether.

I would like to add here a citation from the book on UN reforms which Professor Richard Falk and I published in 2024:

“In our effort, during several years of research and reflection to understand why the UN, in particular the Security Council and the General Assembly, evolved in the way they have, we have come to a fundamental conclusion for the period since the end of the Cold War. Evidence and assessments ...show that the US in pursuit of its worldwide geopolitical interests by way of a unilateralist foreign policy makes use of its military and economic power as a matter of national discretion rather than subject to the rule of law. This pattern of behaviour has been the single most clarifying explanation of both the turbulence of international relations and the often-disappointing performance of the United Nations.”

It took us a long time to formulate this paragraph as we wanted to be sure that our conclusions about the impact of US policies on the global order could not possibly be perceived by readers as tainted in any way by ideological prejudices on our part.

In presenting a tally of 80 years of multilateralism and the performance of the United Nations, it would nevertheless not be meaningful to even attempt to apportion in any detail, achievement or failure. Our world has become an entity with a network of cells and an advanced and intricate immune system. A pre-condition for global healing must therefore be for governments and civil society, supported by academia and religious leaders, to join hands in providing the 'medicine' of joint efforts, not just for individual countries or geographical blocs but worldwide.

What are the options?

This brings me to the second half of my presentation: to address the reform challenges that lie ahead for the UN.

In September 2024, a UN Pact for the Future was adopted by the UN General Assembly to start the UN reform debate in earnest. 143 governments voted for this Pact, 7 governments voted against and 14 governments abstained. A large number of NGOs, joined by civil society representatives, were present in New York on that occasion. The latter's participation on this occasion must be seen as a significant reform in itself.

The Pact identifies eight inter-connected reform segments involving development, financing, peace and security, science, and technology, youth, future generations, and global governance. Included in the Pact is a list of 56 action areas that cover just about every subject that is relevant for building a new global order.

Global reactions to the UN Pact confirm that individual governments and non-governmental organisations have been overwhelmingly supportive. The 'reform urge' must now be followed by 'reform action'. A tight independent monitoring system needs to be put in place to accompany the process of reform implementation!

One may ask: 'Are these really doable propositions at a time of extreme global confusion, cleavage and confrontation, topped by a major nation that has lost its balance? I truly believe time has come for reforms. The West, the 8% (!) of the world population, has to realize that west-centrism, unilateralism and the unregulated world order have done immense damage to much of mankind.

What about the impact of the Trump administration, one may ask?

What about it?

First of all: the world is bigger than 1, to paraphrase President Erdogan!

Four years of possible US Government attacks on the world order are not eternity!

And: Everyone has the right to 'be stupid', to use a recent quote from former Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau.

Whether the present Government in Washington realizes it or not, the world is moving on.

As I see it, there are major institutional areas for which doable reform options are available:

1. There is, first and foremost, the reform of the Security Council. The UN Pact's objective is that the Security Council of tomorrow is 'representative, inclusive, transparent, democratic and accountable' (Pact Action 39). In plain language: The Council's membership of tomorrow must reflect universal representation with the inclusion of permanent seats for Africa and Latin America as well as seats for Asia in addition to China.

2. UN reforms confirm the right to veto by its permanent members as exclusively to implement the Security Council's multilateral policies.
3. The GA, as an assembly of the majority, gives the Security Council the mandated right to take policy decisions on its behalf on the basis of multilateral-mindedness. The GA is entitled to withdraw this Security Council privilege whenever such a joint mindset does not prevail, and to act, in such cases, in accordance with its own authority.
4. UN reforms upgrade the cooperative links between the UN and civil society, from ad hoc cooperation between the GA and the NGO community, to cooperation as a standard institutional feature.
5. The World Bank, the IMF and the IFC, three UN agencies, having acted with a west-centric orientation, become reorganized to carry out their mandates in conformity with the provisions of the UN Charter.
6. At the country level, the reformed UN carries out its political, security and peace-keeping operations and sustainable development activities through mandatory inter-departmental cooperation, taking into account local knowledge and traditions as obligatory parts of UN operations.
7. Reforms of the International Court of Justice gives the Court compulsory jurisdiction without discretionary compliance by member states
8. The reformed UN executive of specialized agencies, programmes and funds functions as a fully integrated system with one programme, one budget and led by one senior UN official appointed by the Secretary-General.
9. The United Nations University (UNU) which has pursued a research agenda largely separate from the UN's operational activities, is in the reformed UN closely aligned with the UN's sustainable development agenda, and also with the work of the Security Council and the General Assembly.
10. In 2005, the GA added to its tasks what has become known as R2P (Responsibility to Protect) to ensure that citizens in countries with conditions of severe internal disorder would be protected by the UN against ethnic cleansing, war crimes and genocide. Following the misuse in Libya by NATO countries of this added moral authority of the GA, R2P had been put on hold. In a reformed UN, R2P is once again available as a UN legal and moral responsibility.
11. The annual funding by UN member states, for both the regular budget and peace-keeping operations, is taking place at the beginning of each year. Penalty payments are not required in the reformed UN, as governments respect such timing to enable the Secretary-General to implement UN programmes in a planned manner. It is understood that Implementation of specific programmes begin only when financing is assured.
12. The UN established in 2006 an Ethics Office 'to guide the activities and decisions of UN staff' as 'ethics are the core of the UN's ability to fulfil its global functions'. Actions that are against social norms or acts that are considered unacceptable to the public', the UN argues, are considered 'unethical'. The reformed UN maintains that ethics oversight cannot be limited to the UN civil service only but must include all parties involved in UN activities. Reforms

therefore expand the mandate of the UN Ethics Office to cover the institution as a whole.

A tight monitoring system must be put in place to follow how reforms are translating into making a difference in the institutional life of the UN.

The profound challenge of the moment for global leaders and citizens alike is to accept that the tenets of the UN Charter, and other international law, have not lost their relevance. On the contrary, they are needed today more than ever before.

Reforms will travel on rocky roads full of political potholes, and land mines. And yet, citizens and political leaders must be undeterred, must be unshaken, by the present global disorder and do everything in their power to replace aggressive geopolitical competition by peaceful global cooperation. Acceptance of 'Unity in diversity' at all levels, from the smallest local community to the largest global association, the UN General Assembly, constitutes the best possible circumstance through which everyone, everywhere, would come out as a winner.

Let me end with a citation from Samuel Beckett, the Irish winner of the 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature who wrote in 1983 these moving words about failure:

„Ever tried. Ever failed.
No matter.
Fail again.
Try again. Fail again. Fail better.“

Comforting advice indeed - it has helped not to give up. But in our world of today, it is no longer good enough to 'fail better'! There must be a winner!

Let it be 'realism with hope'!