



# **Renewing the United Nations to Address 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges**

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## **History and Mandate**

The United Nations (UN) is arguably the world's greatest and most enduring, all encompassing, global public good.

Its founding fathers included great statesmen like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then President of the United States of America who originally suggested the name United Nations as well as Sir Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister of Great Britain, Maxim Litvinov of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and T.V. Soong who represented pre-revolution China. The four of them, representing the victorious Allies during the Second World War, signed the Declaration by the United Nations in 1942. This was followed by the adoption of the UN Charter and Statute of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) by 50 countries at the San Francisco Conference on June 26, 1945. Poland signed it on 15 October 1945, making it the 51<sup>st</sup> Founding Member State of the UN. In accordance with Article 110, the Charter entered into force on October 24 leading to the creation of the United Nations on that date in the same year. None of this would have been possible without the leadership of the United States of America. Both former US Presidents FDR and Harry S. Truman, who followed him, played pivotal roles in the UNs creation.

It is an intergovernmental organization which commands genuine political legitimacy, derived from its unique, near universal State membership. Conceived in the ashes of the Second World War, its main purpose is to ensure global peace and security, to prevent another world war, to promote human rights and development and to create a world without discrimination and inequality. The UN, as the Organization which is the world's closest to a global governance institution, will be 80 years old this October.

**Any objective assessment would conclude that the UN's three main pillars: peace and security, human rights, and development, have stood the test of time. These three pillars are integrally linked: you cannot have peace and security without development or development without peace and security and neither will be possible without human rights. Many of the world's current seemingly intractable problems exist because of a lack of appreciation by both policy makers and ordinary citizens about the importance and interconnectedness of these three pillars.**

While it has become a truism when we talk about the United Nations today that it is based on these three pillars, then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's Forward to the UN Intellectual History Project publication in 2001 had identified **four big ideas that have animated humankind, and which are in a sense embodied in the United Nations' three pillars but also a fourth one which is not talked about very much now, but which continues to be important and relevant: Independence.**

This was extremely relevant in the early years of the UN. From only 51 UN Member States at the time of its founding in 1945, the UN has 193 Member States and 2 Observers today. The main reasons for this dramatic increase in the number of independent states have been decolonization and the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

## **Main Achievements**

**Any independent, objective assessment of the Organization will probably conclude that it has made an enormous, largely measurable, overall positive and constructive contribution to the world and its citizens over the last almost 80 years. The list of UN accomplishments is long and impressive and cannot be elaborated in this short paper. Only a few "big picture" ones can be enumerated here. At the top of the success list is overseeing decolonization which is, indeed, one of this world body's early historic achievements. Its other major achievements include, but are not limited to, significant contributions towards preventing a third world war, the adoption of universal human rights normative standards and institutions around much of the world, saving millions of lives during humanitarian crises, eradicating life-threatening diseases, and significantly facilitating the fastest pace of genuine global, regional, and national developmental progress in world history as well as achieving an unprecedented global consensus by all its 193 Member States on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

**and Agenda 2030, by far the most ambitious global development agenda ever agreed in world history.**

In terms of its continuing contributions, the world and its people should not forget that the women and men of the United Nations are daily providing shelter to over 117 million people who have had to flee their homes. The UN is also helping vaccinate 45% of the world's children; it is providing food assistance to 160 million people in 120 different countries; while 87,000 men and women in uniform are providing peacekeeping duties, just to name a few of the UNs wide-ranging and multi-faceted daily roles in the context of the world's growing challenges.

### **Unprecedented Global Challenges**

Despite the UNs innumerable “big picture” and more down to earth achievements and successes, the 21<sup>st</sup> century world we now live in is still confronted with many challenges, both new and old.

A major concern for the peace and security pillar is the increase in the number and intensity of large-scale crises. Since 2008, the number of conflicts in the world has tripled. The list includes conflicts in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Afghanistan, Mali, South Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Myanmar, Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon and the broader Middle East. This list, which is not exhaustive, is long and unfortunately growing. In addition, there is the longstanding Russian Federation induced “frozen” conflict in Georgia and its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Some of these conflicts are intra-state, not inter-state in nature while others are transnational. Together, they indicate that the nature of conflict has changed considerably since World War II as evidenced most recently by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

There were around 70 UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions between 1948 and 2015 but many of them are in the process of being shut down, not because the conflicts they were attempting to address are over or have been resolved, but because of a lack of funding, political will or both (eg. Mali, Sudan, Iraq). This is even though many of these conflicts are becoming more intractable and less conducive to political settlements due to factors such as transnational organized crime and violent extremism.

One direct result of conflict is displacement. In September 2023, forcibly displaced people worldwide (internally and externally), were estimated to be more than a staggering 114 million people (over 62 million internally) - the highest since the beginning of this century and a 21% increase from just 2021. Before Israel's invasion of Gaza, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) had projected this number would increase to over 130 million by 2024. The Israeli invasion of Gaza, Rafah and other parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territories has taken this projection significantly higher.

Displaced people now also spend longer in displacement as protracted conflicts linger. The total number of victims from brutal and violent conflict began to increase six to seven years ago, for the first time since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Poverty has also increased after Covid-19 and the inequality of both wealth and income between and within UN Member States is climbing new heights.

Transnational violent extremism has also emerged as a universal preoccupation and concern over the last few decades. Terrorism is not new, but its geographical reach, financial resources and the ability to attract minds is unsurpassed today. In addition, climate related natural disasters are becoming more existential and frequent and their destructive impacts more intense. Every year, we continue to achieve the wrong set of records, whether on pollution, rising sea levels or on greenhouse gas concentrations.

An additional related major set of challenges we face are the multiple crises of governance fueling disruption and violence. Today's violent conflicts are often rooted in poor governance, corruption, oppression, mismanagement of natural resources, exclusion and inequality. For example, systematic discrimination against minorities is widespread and tends to exacerbate the alienation on which terrorists feed. This is sadly true even in South Asia, especially in Pakistan and Sri Lanka for decades but more recently in India and Bangladesh as well.

Covid-19 served to compound the world's challenges and make matters even more dire. The world has barely escaped the worst of this pandemic at a time when 40% of its population now live in countries paying more on debt service payments than education or health.

### **Trump 2.0: An Existential Threat to the Post World War Two Global Liberal Order from Its Most Powerful Founding Member**

The lead and most important founding Member State of the United Nations in 1945, the United States of America (USA), has become its most significant threat from within under Trump 2.0, much more than even Putin's Russia. Equally importantly, the USA under President Trump is now also a threat to the broader global multilateral post-World War II liberal order which its then President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) helped design, create and lead almost 80 years ago.

There are several key questions which need to be urgently asked about the implications of Trump 2.0 for the direction and substantive content of the evolving multilateral global order which is anchored in the UN. Both his personal decisive victory and that of his Republican Party in the recently concluded November 2024 US Presidential, Congressional and Senate elections as well as his Cabinet appointments should make citizens across the world very concerned about their world's future trajectory, given the US' continuing disproportionate influence on world affairs.

Trump's re-election is likely to push a world order, which was already tethering, and had shown visible signs of tilting in an illiberal direction, into a decisive far-right illiberal corner. His second Presidency also has the real potential to obliterate many of the tangible peace and security, human rights and development gains resulting from eight decades of world-wide liberal idealism embodied in and led by the United Nations.

While then US President FDR played a leading and outsize role in the drafting of the UN Charter which led to the creation of the United Nations and US First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was key to the drafting and adoption of one the UN Charter's most important companion documents, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), most US Presidents who came after FDR reinforced the UN founders early attempts to create a relatively democratic global world order. This was ensconced in a liberal multilateralism which itself was rooted in a universal membership, one country, one-vote, UN. This not only included Harry Truman who continued in FDR's footsteps in the early days of the UN, but more recently, Presidents Carter, Clinton, Obama and Biden.

Even Trump's Republican predecessors like President Ronald Reagan, George Bush Sr. and George W Bush, despite the latter's unilateral invasion of Iraq under false pretenses, willfully violating both the international rule of law and the UN Charter, did not fundamentally question or irretrievably undermine the existing UN based global liberal world order.

The pendulum began to swing in an illiberal direction in 2016 under Trump 1.0, reinforced in February 2022 by President Putin of the Russia Federation's illegal invasion of Ukraine. While Putin continues to show a total disregard for the international rule of law and the UN Charter, now made worse by Trump's seeming willingness to forge a bilateral deal with him on Ukraine which disingenuously seeks to exclude both the Ukrainian and European leadership from the negotiating table, Israel's genocidal invasion of Gaza followed by the West Bank and Lebanon which started in 2023, has further compounded and gone well beyond even Putin's unprecedented transgressions. Trump's early signals in his 2.0 have been both reckless and scary, already further inflaming a volatile West Asia and Middle East by endangering a fragile ceasefire between Hamas and Israel which came into effect just before he assumed the US Presidency for the second time on January 20, 2025, barely a month ago.

Despite all these gross violations of both the spirit and content of the UN Charter and the UDHR, action at the UN against Putin, backed by the Biden Administration, was still possible before Trump 2.0, sometimes even led by his predecessor. For example, the UN General Assembly expelled Russia from the UN Human Rights Council and has overwhelmingly voted against the Russian invasions in multiple UN General Assembly Resolutions, even if these, sadly, have not been binding on all UN Member States. While decisive action against Israel has not been possible because of the veto used by the US in the Security Council to protect even its worst genocidal acts, the UN General Assembly has overwhelmingly voted against the Israeli genocide multiple times as well.

The Biden Administration which succeeded Trump 1.0 had to swing the pendulum back from his predecessor's unilateral policy actions against the UN on his very first day in office, January 20, 2021, when the US rejoined both the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement and the World Health Organization (WHO), both of which Trump had initiated the process of withdrawing the United States from during his first Presidential term. Trump 2.0 reversed Biden's actions on his very first day in office on January 20, 2025, by unilaterally, once again, giving notice through an Executive Order of the US' withdrawal from both the Paris Climate Accord and the WHO once again, even though only the US Congress has the legal authority to do so after the US pays all its outstanding dues to the organization in question which it has not done and appears to have no intention of doing.

Subsequently, President Trump also withdrew the US from the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and the UN Framework Convention on Tax Cooperation currently being negotiated. He has also given notice to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that his Administration is reviewing its membership in it. This review is likely to lead to its withdrawal from that organization once again, because of its inclusion of Palestine in its governing body. This may well be only the beginning, with significant implications for UN core and other resources and much else.

The previous, pre-Trump 2.0 cumulative actions of a few UN Member States such as Russia, China, Israel and even the US under Trump's predecessor had already placed unprecedented and extraordinary stress on the UN and broader multilateral system. Against this background, and in the context of two major protracted wars in Europe and the Middle East, Trump's re-election and his actions since, could well be the straw that broke the camel's back. This is because there is now little doubt that Trump 2.0 will seek to push the post-World War II liberal world order over the cliff, through what is consciously intended by him and his loyalist Permanent Representative to the United Nations to be a decisive and rude shove.

Sadly, neither the new US Congress, US Senate or US Supreme Court are likely to have any effective checks and balances in place during Trump 2.0. The only constraining forces on Trump and his Cabinet members in the next four years that the world can count on will be the US Administration's own self-goals. The only other deviation from his policies will happen if the President's own narcissistic, narrow self-interest, one of his few predictable attributes, requires this.

There will, no doubt, be many self-goals and chaotic self-interest swings, but will these be early enough or will they elicit strong counter-reactions from consequential and other UN Member States to bring the current liberal global world order back from the brink? Even if so, and that is a tall order now, will there be enough momentum to swing the pendulum back in the opposite direction to where Trump and his loyalists want to take it? Only time will tell since much of this is hard to predict because the world is in uncharted territory in the absence of the traditional checks and balances which have existed over the last eight decades since the founding of the United Nations rule of law-based international order.

As a result of many other illiberal and ill-thought through pushes and shoves on tariffs and other policy matters under Trump 2.0, many other multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Conventions and Agreements, agreed at or centered around the United Nations system and other multilateral organizations, will inevitably also feel the negative effects very quickly in practical terms. The soldiers who will lead the charge will be Trump's Vice-President Vance, the Department of Government Efficiency's (DoGE's) unaccountable czar, South Africa apartheid-era born billionaire Elon Musk, key members of the US President's Cabinet and other senior nominees who appear to have been hand-picked for their blind loyalty to the US President, not merit, and because they mirror two of his key characteristics: hawkishness and a preference for unilateralism, or at best bilateral deals, over plurilateral or multilateral agreements.

### **The Greater Urgency and Relevance of Multilateralism and the UN in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The UN Charter's principles and values are timeless and are as relevant today as they were in 1945, notwithstanding that some further important amendments to the Charter are necessary in the changed context of the 21st century. While the post-World War Two global liberal world order, anchored in the United Nations system, currently faces unprecedented transnational challenges, ironically, only a politically legitimate body such as the UN can have a hope of addressing these in an increasingly globalized and inter-dependent world in which all its major transnational challenges, by definition, cannot be addressed by unilateral or even bilateral deals.

As a result, it should be evident that the Organization has a continuing relevance despite its many naysayers and detractors. A few commentators from the Republican far-right of the US political spectrum have deemed the UN as irrelevant and called for its abolition. Some other commentators have called not for its abolition, but for the creation of a new inter-governmental or global governance organization better suited than the existing institution to deal with 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges and problems.

The first category of commentators, few as they may be, ignore the fact at the world's peril that if the UN did not exist, we would have to reinvent it. The second category of critics fail to understand that a new similar mandate focused organization created in today's world, which lacks almost any leader who is a genuine statesman or stateswomen, would be far worse in its design and conflicts of interest than the existing UN which rose from the ashes of the Second World War.

While parts of the UN Charter clearly need to be modernized to account for the considerable changes which have taken place from the time it was written and agreed 80 years ago, any attempt to start an entirely new process of building a new international organization to replace the current United Nations would be a mistake and result in mayhem.

The recent UN Pact for the Future and its two related documents, the Global Digital Compact and the Declaration on Future Generations agreed at the UN Summit for the Future in New

York by consensus in September 2024 are a testimony to the fact that the United Nations will remain at center stage in terms of the world's current and future global, regional and national governance architecture. This is regardless of what Trump 2.0 does to undermine and even destroy some of the best examples of multilateralism, especially the Paris Climate Accord, the World Health Organization (WHO), UNESCO, the UN Human Rights Commission (HRC), and other UN bodies, commissions and conventions such as the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation currently under discussion.

The 56 commitments agreed in the 2024 UN Pact for the Future also underscored and reconfirmed that the UNs three pillars of peace and security, sustainable development and human rights are both interwoven and indivisible: one cannot have peace and security without development, or development without peace and security, and neither will be possible without human rights.

### **Major Overarching Problems and Challenges for the UN at the Current Conjuncture**

There is no doubt that the UN needs urgent and serious reform at global, regional, and national levels if it is to retain political legitimacy and have a real chance of addressing and resolving the world's current, complex growing and intractable problems as well as its future challenges.

While there have been discussions at the UN itself on the need for broad-based and comprehensive UN reform since at least 1990, they have led to inadequate outcomes thus far.

In addition to the urgent need for the transformation of the UNs global governance architecture, there is an equally urgent need for a One UN approach at country and regional levels if the UN is to live up to the promise and aspirations of the human rights based Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Agenda 2030 adopted by consensus in 2015.

Six key challenges at the global level which need highlighting and urgent attention and action are:

#### *Reducing Political Legitimacy*

While the UN remains the most politically legitimate inter-governmental organization in the world today because of its universality and comprehensive mandates, and no other global multilateral institution can aspire to come even close to it in terms of political legitimacy, it has been suffering from gradually reducing legitimacy for at least three decades, relative to what it enjoyed in its first five decades. This is closely linked to structural design flaws that have existed from its inception in 1945 which became increasingly visible and problematic after the simultaneous fall of the Berlin Wall and Soviet Union and rise of some of the larger emerging economies in the Global South in the G77 and BRICS Groupings, namely India, Brazil and South Africa.

While the Cold War ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the USSR, neither has led to Francis Fukuyama's dramatic pronouncement of the "end of history."



Instead, and to the contrary, there is now a de facto new ‘Cold War’ between two major groupings: China and Russia, on the one hand, and the US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Europe, on the other. It is also now universally agreed that the Permanent Five (P5) members of the UN Security Council—UNSC--- (USA, PR China, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, France) do not and cannot represent the changed geo-political, geo-economic, demographic or even the realpolitik realities in a dramatically changed 21<sup>st</sup> century world. The P5, visibly and untenably, excludes the geographic Global South which now comprises a significant percentage of the world’s population and economic wealth.

While India, Brazil and even South Africa’s demands for such inclusion are legitimate in terms of Global South representation, the bar for Permanent Membership of the UNSC should be higher than it was in 1945 at the UNs founding if we want a better future world than the one we inhabit today. Each one of the new aspirants needs to demonstrate more consistently and clearly that the current P5 that they can put global and regional interests before their narrowly defined national interest.

While South Africa’s willingness to take Israel to the International Criminal Court on the charge of genocidal intent in Gaza, and Brazil’s push for mainstreaming and highlighting poverty, inequality and other urgent sustainable development related issues at the G20 summit were excellent examples of this, India’s support for the genocidal Netanyahu regime, both by continuing to provide arms to Israel and by entering into and then not suspending the state-state labor agreement to export Indian labor to Israel to take over Palestinian and other jobs are not. These are particularly objectionable for a country seeking permanent membership and veto carrying powers in the UN Security Council. Moreover, India’s continuing support to Putin’s Russia, both through the purchase of discounted oil from Russia, and allegedly, covertly supplying electronics parts for defense production in Russia, are clearly not signs of its ability or willingness to put global interest before the current dispensation’s narrowly defined national interest.

In contrast to the current Indian leadership, India’s first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru was a true internationalist and arguably led the way for the Global South during the early years of the UNs existence, qualifying it then for UNSC permanent membership which did not eventuate. Three concrete examples include India’s very early recognition of the State of Palestine and support for their cause which the older generation of Palestinians have not forgotten; the country’s support to the North Vietnamese during their war with the Americans; and Indian leadership in the creation of both the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and Group of 77 countries (G77) under Prime Minister Nehru in the 1950s and 1960s as well as its willingness to co-lead NAM then.

These examples demonstrate that even a poor and newly independent India was able to put global interests before its narrow national interests and demonstrate that its UN Charter obligations could be reconciled with its national interests. Sadly, India’s current leadership and

foreign policy have failed to demonstrate this on too many occasions and in too many important areas.

The crisis of and in the UN Security Council (UNSC) has been repeatedly and continuously visible from the turn of the century. This was evident in both its inappropriate and inadequate responses, or lack thereof, to the Iraq, Syrian and Libyan interventions by major powers starting more than two decades ago as well as by its inability to do anything of significance to stop the current conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. It has also not pronounced much on the world's existential climate and other major social and economic security challenges, even though some parts of the UN have done a remarkable amount on climate change, even if that remains inadequate.

The P3 (the US, China and Russia), within the P5 of the Council, have also repeatedly undermined both its credibility and effectiveness and that of the UN, through attempts to entirely bypass the Council (eg. the US invasion of Iraq in 2003) or through the exercise of their veto power in an inappropriate and narrowly self-interested manner (eg. repeated unconscionable US vetoes in favor of Israel and the Russian Federation and Chinese vetoes on Syria during the Assad regime as well as the Russian Federation's blockage of the UNSCs discussion and resolutions on its illegal invasion in Ukraine in 2022, as clear a conflict of interest as is imaginable).

The P5 must recognize, in their own self-interest, even if not because this is clearly in the global interest, that they risk throwing the "baby out with the bath water", if they do not broaden permanent Security Council membership or restrict the use of the P5 veto. This is because if some fundamental UNSC reform is not agreed or does not take place soon, there is a real risk that rising middle powers and others who were left out of the 1945 UNSC formulation will attempt to circumvent the UN and start using other multilateral and plurilateral bodies such as the BRICS to pursue their much narrower self-interests, which may not necessarily represent the global interest either. While they may think that this addresses some aspects of the UNSCs perceived vacuum of legitimacy, there is now a real risk that their attempts to use other more Global South friendly plurilateral forums will degenerate into even narrower interests being pursued through multiple narrower groupings, none of which can ever hope to replace the breadth and depth of the UNs or its Security Council's political legitimacy, mandates and legitimacy.

#### *Exercise of the P5 Veto Power in the UN Security Council*

The veto power served a useful stabilizing purpose during the Cold War, successfully helping to prevent a Third World War. But it has been an anachronism for at least 34 years now, since the USSR was dissolved. As of March 2024, the US had used a total of 85 vetoes, around 50% of which were against resolutions condemning one country, Israel. The US also prevented Vietnam from joining the UN, twice, during 1975-77, after its defeat by the North Vietnamese in April 1975 in what the latter call the American War and the rest of the world calls the Vietnam War.

Russia used its veto an even more astonishing 128 times after the dissolution of the USSR (between January 1992 and March 2024). The undisguised purpose was to protect its allies, such as but not limited to Syria, North Korea and Yemen, and more recently to protect itself from sanction after its illegal invasion of Ukraine which was and remains another clear violation of the UN Charter by Russia, a P5 member of the Council.

The People's Republic of China used its veto to deny Bangladesh's admission to the UN in 1972 after it had formally displaced Taiwan, Republic of China to join the UN only a year earlier, in October 1971. It also joined Russia in vetoing resolutions on Syria numerous times after 2011.

While there is a strong case to abolish the UN Security Council P5 veto power because of this glaringly narrow partisan record, as well as to prevent further abuse and misuse, this is unrealistic and unlikely in the short term for the simple reason that current permanent member states (the P5) will not give up the veto very easily or very quickly. Big powers will continue to use the veto on issues of absolute importance to their national interest whether the UN likes it or not. A case can, therefore, be made that the abolition of the veto may in fact undermine the UN, if big countries start to act unilaterally or otherwise, outside it, as they have sometimes done in the 21<sup>st</sup> century already when they knew they could not get their way in the UNSC (eg. the US on its illegal Iraq intervention in March 2003). The UN Security Council permanent member (P5) veto power, agreed in 1945 as a prerequisite to UN Charter adoption, was built into the system as an insurance that the system itself would work and that the major powers would not act outside it and that probably largely remains true even today, 80 years later, because of their veto power.

Notwithstanding this, a stronger case can certainly be made for restraint on the use of the veto (e.g. its use only for matters which are central for the absolute national security of a UN Member State). This may also be both more realistic and desirable.

There have already been a few noteworthy initiatives in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to restrict the use of the veto. The most noteworthy of these is Liechtenstein's 2020 "Veto Initiative," authored by it with 15 other UN Member State co-authors. This initiative was spurred by deadlock at the UNSC on the Syrian war. While the resolution was delayed because of Covid-19, it was adopted in the UNGA by consensus on April 26, 2022, with 83 co-sponsors from every UN regional group, including P5 members United Kingdom, France and the United States. This was quite a remarkable achievement, led by one of the UN's smallest member states. It was also unprecedented since it "creates a standing mandate for the Assembly (UNGA) to be convened automatically, within ten working days, every time a veto has been cast in the Security Council." This successful attempt followed the earlier 2015 French-Mexico "Political Declaration on Suspension of Veto Powers in Cases of Mass Atrocity", aimed at restricting the use of the veto under certain situations and circumstances. This declaration had been signed by 104 UN Member States and the 2 UN Observer missions by July 2022, but it is notable that other than France, no other P5 Member had signed it.

Both initiatives are relevant to both the Russian Federation's illegal invasion of Ukraine and Israel's 2023-24-25 genocide in Gaza. They both need to be urgently reinforced, mainstreamed

and built upon. It is significant that three P5 members, Britain France and the United States supported the Liechtenstein initiative while France, in addition, initiated a declaration seeking restrictions on the use of the UNSC veto as far back as 2015.

### Composition of Permanent Members of the Security Council

The only major membership reform of the Security Council occurred in 1965 when the non-permanent membership was increased from six to ten. In the P5 Security Council context, the United Kingdom, France and even the Russia Federation are now anomalies, given their significantly reduced 21<sup>st</sup> century geo-economic and geo-political weight. They should have been obliged to exit permanent membership long ago, ideally in 1991, when the USSR dissolved. This was a golden missed opportunity both to reform and transform the UN Security Council. Such an opportunity is unlikely to present itself in the foreseeable future.

UN Security Council reform was unsurprisingly resisted by the Russian Federation on the USSR's dissolution. Global governance has been in a Catch-22 situation ever since because none of the P5 members other than the United States have shown any appetite for fundamental UNSC reform. Neither Russia, France nor the United Kingdom have shown an iota of willingness to voluntarily give up their veto power since it is clearly one of their last vestiges of global power.

The dire need for a more democratically constituted and 21<sup>st</sup> century relevant Security Council, nevertheless, remains urgent and essential. Most UN Member States support a comprehensive reform of the Council which means an expansion in both the permanent and non-permanent categories, not a piecemeal reform. Only a small minority of countries support piecemeal reform. Bringing greater diversity and democracy of voices to the UNSC table means the need for more permanent and non-permanent seats and more voices. This will also significantly increase the UN's political legitimacy. Hence, there is a very strong case for this.

### Continuing Growth and Spread of Illiberal Nationalism in both the Global North and South

[The growth of illiberal nationalism in the US](#) and the consolidation and deepening of already illiberal nationalist states like Russia and China have adversely impacted all three of the UN's main pillars. Russia's invasion of Ukraine violated the UN Charter and the People's Republic of China's unwillingness to honor the International Court of Justice's 2016 South China Sea ruling defied the international rule of law. Both undermine global peace and security—the UN's founding pillar.

The significant delay in releasing the UN High Commission for Human Rights' report on the Uyghurs in China due to prolonged and [severe Chinese government pressure](#) undermines human rights—its second founding pillar.

Similarly, President Trump has and continues to undermine the third pillar—sustainable development—by unilaterally and formally withdrawing the US from the WHO twice (

shockingly, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the first time) as well as the Paris UN Climate Change Convention, also twice, despite the glaringly obvious fact that this will seriously undermine successful action on climate change, perhaps the most serious, existential global sustainable development and security crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for both the planet and its peoples.

#### *The UNs Inter-Governmental Nature*

Another structural design limitation of the UN is that it is an inter-governmental, not a global governance organization. The clearly enlightened, visionary individuals led by then US President FDR were willing to prioritize global peace and security, but not at the cost of making their national interests accountable to global or regional institutions. These four nations and France became the P5 in the UN Security Council from October 24, 1945, limiting veto powers to themselves and ensuring that their national interests or those of their allies would never be compromised.

#### *The Continuing and Accelerating Resources Crunch*

The UN is arguably the world's most underfunded multilateral organization given its formidable breadth and depth of global governance and other mandates which continue to increase amidst both the world's old and its growing and increasingly complex new global challenges. While it should be clear to everyone that no other multilateral institution can ever hope to address many of this vast array of challenges, the Organization continues to be forced to attempt to address them despite the visible absence of adequate demonstrated political will or even open obstruction by many of its most powerful Member States. This political will deficit has translated into both inadequate core "assessed contributions" which are now strikingly incommensurate to the UNs long and growing list of mandates and responsibilities as well as late payments oftentimes of even what was agreed by significant P5 member states such as the USA.

This had become a cumulative and growing problem for the UN with negative consequences for the fulfilment of even some of its core mandates such as the 2019 UN Development System Reform and Peacekeeping, even before the arrival of Trump 2.0.

To understand this, one needs only to note that of the total annual budget for the entire UN family of about USD 60 billion, 62% are ear-marked funds. Moreover, 80% of the UNs development funds are earmarked. This reflects a retreat from the true spirit of multilateralism. The Organization needs to get core resources which can be used for what the UNs country analyses and Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks prioritize, not what donors earmark their funds for. Even if their funds are earmarked for certain Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), donors often cherry pick the ones they want to support.

Sadly, the resources crunch at many UN agencies has escalated much further in the first month of Trump 2.0, forcing the WHO, for example, to freeze all hiring across the world to the detriment and even death, in some instances, of some members of poor, already disempowered and marginalized population groups in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

While none of the above is a substitute for UN administrative reform since there are clear, longstanding, bureaucratic inefficiencies and wastage which need simultaneous and urgent addressing through internal organizational reforms, some of which are currently ongoing, these should not become an excuse for UN Member States not urgently addressing the “bigger picture” resources crunch which the UN currently faces, preventing the fulfilment of many of its mandates which no other Organization can ever hope to fulfil either.

### **UN Reform: What is Realistically Achievable in Today’s Increasingly Illiberal World?**

#### *The Global Level*

It is important to highlight at the outset of this section that the UNs original structural design flaws are entirely attributable to its Member States, especially the Permanent 5 (P5). Moreover, The UNs inter-governmental nature implies that any serious critique of it must really focus on its member states, particularly the large and most powerful ones, some of whom are significantly responsible for the UN’s actions or lack thereof. It follows then, that any serious structural reform will only be possible if it is preceded by serious reform or rethinking within large, powerful UN member states, especially the P5, and particularly the United States (US), China, and Russia. Consequential emerging countries such as India, Brazil and South Africa with aspirations to become permanent members of the Security Council also need to undertake appropriate reforms, as well as consistently demonstrate that they can place the global interest before their narrow national interests, as should the P5 and all other UN Member States, big or small, industrialized or developing. Similarly, progressive reform of the more than 50 different UN entities will require prior reform in the thinking and policies of the UN member states who constitute their Boards and other governance bodies.

Moreover, P5 aspirants such as India, who were not even independent at the time of the UNs founding and, therefore, cannot be either credited or blamed for their colonial British masters’ decisions in the early to mid-1940s, good or bad, including those that led to the UNs founding in 1945, cannot escape blame for decisions they are making at the current time. Its recent actions which effectively support the Russian Federation’s illegal invasion and violation of the UN Charter in Ukraine as well as Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s violation of the UN Charter and UN Genocide Convention in Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian territories are disappointing and do not reflect India’s genuine national interest but the calculating, narrow self-interest displayed by the country’s current government.

The lack of UN reform in the six areas discussed in the previous sub-section of this paper cannot and should not be attributed to the UN Secretary General or other senior UN leaders or professional staff. Sadly, this is far too often done by the public out of ignorance but also by many UN Member State senior policy makers around the world who should know better. They, often do this knowingly, disingenuously attempt to deflect the blame from where it should correctly mostly lie, which is their countries and themselves.

Regrettably, for reasons already elaborated, fundamental, appropriate, desirable and genuinely transformative 21<sup>st</sup> century-relevant reforms of the UN Security Council, and other aspects of governance of the UN's peace and security, human rights and sustainable development architecture, appear both unlikely and unrealistic at the current time.

Nevertheless, each one of us needs to ask ourselves at least the following three critical questions: how can UN Member States reform themselves better to help all countries meet real and emerging global challenges and build resilient societies through UN support that can deliver on the promise of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, leaving no one behind? How can we preserve the timeless principles, values and norms clearly outlined in the UN Charter 80 years ago to safeguard current and future generations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond it? Most importantly, how can we win back the trust of the “we the peoples” that the UN Charter was meant to serve?

At the 70th session of the General Assembly in 2015, a new momentum with respect to discussing reforms on UN Security Council membership and the exercise of the veto power began, as the General Assembly adopted a landmark decision on advancing efforts to reform the Security Council and France and Mexico put forward their Political Declaration on blocking the use of the P5 veto in certain circumstances and situations. Unfortunately, despite this and the movement forward in the UNGA in 2022, such efforts have largely stalled since then.

Absent transformative Security Council membership and other reforms, with respect to the Organization itself at its New York Headquarters, one possible realistic approach, as already indicated, is to strengthen the accountability of the Security Council to the UNGA. This was already foreseen and envisaged when the UN Charter was drawn up in 1945, so it does not require any change to the UN Charter.

There is some cause for hope because there is a very vital discussion going on in the United Nations about the revitalization of the UNGA which led to the decision to adopt Liechtenstein's “veto initiative” in April 2022. Much more can be done in the General Assembly, but unfortunately, there is a limitation because any radical reform of its role, for example, giving it the power to pass binding resolutions on matters relating to peace and security, would necessarily require an amendment of the UN Charter. Such an amendment requires the buy-in of the entire P5 in the Security Council, which is not something which will happen very easily.

Despite these difficulties, there are lots of possibilities. We should not give up because there is a crying need to make the United Nations fit for purpose for the 21st century. The proposal of India and many other countries in the traditional Global South to convene a UN Charter Review Conference, as a first step towards fundamental UNSC Reform, should continue to be pursued. For this to happen, nine of the fifteen UNSC members need to support this proposal. Luckily, according to the UN Charter, no P5 veto is possible. In addition to passage through the UNSC, 129 of the UNs 193 member states need to support a vote in the UNGA in favor of this proposal. The 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the UN, which will be commemorated in September 2025 in New York, appears to be a perfect opportunity to launch such a Charter Review Conference.

In the meanwhile, the 2020 “veto initiative” launched by Liechtenstein which aims to raise the political cost of exercising the veto power by the P5 should be put into practice on a consistent basis. Significantly facilitated by Russia’s war in Ukraine, a UNGA Resolution was agreed upon by consensus, without a vote, [on 26 April 2022](#), with the active support of three P5 members, the US, UK and France, allowing it to take effect immediately.

All P5 members are now under pressure to explain future “vetoes” to the full UN membership in the UNGA. This is a structural reform in the right direction but needs to be fully backed by China and the Russian Federation because the latter has been responsible for the overwhelming majority, 31 out of around 35 Security Council vetoes since 2011, with China joining it at least 12 times since then. There is also a need for the role of the UNGA to be strengthened on other issues where the United Nations Security Council has not delivered on peace and security.

Together with the “Uniting for Peace” mechanism, which allows the UNGA to step into and fill serious security gaps left by the Security Council, this should lead to greater accountability of the Council to the UNGA which is a more democratic body with universal membership, one-country, one-vote and no veto power. The 1950 Uniting for Peace resolution has also been increasingly invoked recently, both in the case of Ukraine and Gaza, including in a UNGA resolution and vote leading to Russia’s expulsion from the UN Human Rights Council.

UN reforms should also lead to the broadening of representation and participation in the UNGA to bring in the private sector, civil society groups, academia, local elected bodies. This would be a step towards fulfilling the promise of what is referred to as a “whole of society” approach reflected in Point 55 of the September 2024 UN Pact for the Future.

The two Bretton Woods institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which are specialized agencies of the United Nations, no different from the WHO or the International Labour Organization (ILO), have had a life of their own with little or no accountability to the UN. Such accountability needs to be prioritized through a strengthened UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) which should jointly address economic, environmental and social peace and security issues like the climate change challenge with the UNSC. There is also a need for a strengthened Peace Building Commission (PBC) which can take up some of the UN Security Council’s agenda, leaving it to concentrate on the most important “big picture” transnational peace and security issues.



Such realistic global reforms, even achieved, should not be considered modest even when measured against the transformative structural reforms really needed. They can be useful stepping stones in the right direction, as well as a prelude to more profound reforms which will help the UN become truly effective in addressing the multi-faceted, complex challenges the world and the UN currently face or are likely to face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century just like the Organization successfully did for the first half century after its creation in the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century after the devastation caused by World War II.

*The Country Level: A One UN to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030*

Today, as the consequences of climate change become ever more clear, the UN pillar of sustainable development is absolutely vital – particularly as progress on the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda [remains](#) off track. To achieve the SDGs, reform for an effective and efficient One UN architecture – spanning global, regional and country levels – should be one of the UN’s highest priorities.

Too often, the country and regional levels are forgotten when we discuss UN reform. Yet, arguably, the country level, supported by the regional level, is where action is most important, if the world has any chance of achieving the SDGs. This, therefore, requires much greater discussion of the “One UN” approach at both levels. This is now in danger of serious jeopardy because of the UN’s resources crunch in its core “assessed contributions,” both because they have not increased to adequately core fund the One UN at country and regional levels and because of the late payments by some UN Member States, especially the USA.

The One UN approach was the essence of Secretary-General António Guterres’ [UN Development System \(UNDS\) Reform Agenda](#), implemented in January 2019 but born out of the legacy of the 2006 UN “Delivering as One” pilot, which took place in seven geographically distributed countries around the world. While the UNDS Reform Agenda has [made some progress](#) in the last five years, it needs urgent reinforcement if Agenda 2030 is to be achieved.

Arguably, no level is more important than the national level for the delivery of SDGs. Many agencies work and engage at the country level in the same mandate area but from different vantage points. For example, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, the IMF and many others work on challenges presented by climate change. On the one hand, a One UN approach will inevitably help create positive multiplier effects because of synergistic implementation of these institutions’ different mandates and the cooperation, coordination and pooling together of technical and policy expertise. On the other, it will help avoid or even eliminate inconsistencies, bureaucratic inefficiencies and duplication. This will also allow the increasingly limited financial and human resources of the UN to be used much more effectively and efficiently.

Vietnam’s experience, over the last two decades, well preceding the 2019 UNDS reform, presents an excellent case study of the One UN approach, with demonstrable results in [achieving](#) all the 2015 Millenium Development Goals (MDG) early as well as [progress on the SDGs](#).

There is broad consensus that Vietnam has been the world leader of the One UN at country level for the almost 20 years since it joined the UN’s Delivering as One (DAO) initiative in 2006. There has been a singular strategic partnership between the UN and Vietnam, allowing for programmatic synergy, coordination and consistency under the UN Resident Coordinator (UN Country Head) and, ultimately, a One UN Program that delivers maximum impact.

The “Delivering as One” pilot phase, the precursor to the global 2019 UNDS Reform, led to the creation of the One UN Communications Team at the UN in Vietnam 18 years ago in 2007. This team has been essential in conveying a consistent “One UN” message in the country since then. From the time of the move of most UN agencies resident in Vietnam to the Green One UN House in Hanoi in 2015, there has also been a One Common Back Office (CBO) Team servicing them.

An even bigger step taken by the UN in Vietnam, well before the latest January 2019 reforms began to be implemented, was to get almost all UN Agency Program staff present in Vietnam to physically sit and work together, not by Agency, but by what strategic areas they substantively worked on in terms of the priorities of the One UN Strategic Plan 2017-2021. In practice, this meant that everyone in the Green One UN House was grouped and sat in Program Clusters under the Plan’s four substantive strategic areas: Inclusive Social Development, Inclusive Growth, Climate Change, and Governance and Access to Justice. Staff working in functional areas such as Communications and Finance had already been part of Operational Clusters since 2015.

This was truly revolutionary for the UN both in Vietnam and globally. It was also essential for breaking down institutional barriers between different UN agencies and a step towards working creatively and synergistically together to help Vietnam achieve Agenda 2030.

A key lesson from Vietnam’s experience is the importance of the government leading the One UN on the ground. Without this leadership, progress on achieving the SDGs will be slower than what it would otherwise have been. This remains a challenge in many developing countries.

Another set of challenges surround the fact that, even though the Resident Coordinator, since 2019, is officially acknowledged by all parties as the full-time Representative of the UN Secretary-General at country level, and while all 193 UN Member States have endorsed the SDGs which are human rights-based, most of these same Member States do not accept the Resident Coordinator’s role on human rights and peace and security issues.

A One UN cannot be effective, and Agenda 2030 cannot be achieved at the country level, unless the One UN at the country level is comprehensive and includes the implementation of programs under all three indivisible UN pillars under the leadership and responsibility of both the UN Resident Coordinator and UN Country Team (UNCT).

The Government of Vietnam effectively did that. This positively impacted not just Vietnam’s domestic objectives and progress towards the achievement of Agenda 2030 in Vietnam, but it also contributed to their global contributions to the UN and the world, significantly increasing, for example, both the country’s military, police and health sector contributions to global peacekeeping in South Sudan as well as in New York and their contributions to the UNSCs Women, Peace and Security agenda. Some of their politically sensitive human rights concerns were also directly conveyed to the High Commissioner for Human Rights by the UN Resident Coordinator.

At a broader level, the UNDS Reform Agenda’s full implementation at the global, country and regional levels is constrained by at least five limitations. **First**, there is inconsistent buy-in of all Members States and some specialized and non-resident agencies of the “One UN” concept. These include but are not limited to the Bretton Woods institutions and some specialized UN Agencies, some of whom predate the UN’s founding. Some of them, on both sides, still contest the overall leadership role of the UN Resident Coordinator. **Second**, there is a lack of critical reform of global corporate policies at headquarters level, including human resources and procurement. There is also a lack of commitment and communications by the top leadership of some UN organizations to their Representatives and staff at regional and local levels. **Third**, there are tensions in the co-leadership roles of the One UN at the regional level between the UNDP and the UN Regional Economic Commissions (RECs). **Fourth**, as earlier stated, there are inadequate core and other resources because of inadequate political and financial commitment by many UN Member States in providing their increased and timely UN core “assessed contributions” to support the new UNDS Reform architecture at global, regional and national levels. **Finally**, as also earlier stated, but worth repeating here, UN Member States and other donors  [earmark](#) 80 percent of the UN’s development funds, which means donors can cherry-pick which SDGs they want to support. This is contrary to the true spirit of multilateralism. Core resources are vital for the UN’s country analyses and country-level Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks.

Agenda 2030, for most countries, is in serious peril of not being achieved by its target year. Heightened commitment to the achievement of the One UN at all levels, but especially the country level, can help the UN and the international community make much faster, irreversible progress towards the achievement of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

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### **Acknowledgements**

This White Paper brings together in one place but also updates and provides fresh analysis, building on four recent publications or Panel discussions put together by the author:

(1) The United Nations and Global Public Policy, School of InterWoven Arts and Sciences (SIAS) Krea University, Sri City, India, September 10, 2024;

(2) A United Nations for the 21st Century, Panel discussion, October 22, 2024, YouTube post on October 24, 2024 as well as the publication, Cross Section Conversations: The Bigger Picture, India, November 2024;

(3) A One United Nations for Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, Global Development Policy Center, Boston University, USA, November 2024; and

(4) Trump 2.0: Global Challenges, Cross-Section Conversations: The Bigger Picture, India, December 2024.

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(Please note that a longer CV is at: <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/profile/kamal-malhotra/>)

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