



An Assessment of the United Nations: Its Achievements, Failures and Challenges

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Abstract

As the world is facing unprecedented security challenges at different fronts—especially environment, health and economic spheres—the roles of international organizations have become important to address—especially after Cold War featured as rise of multiple powers—in order to sort out the emerging security challenges, disarmament of weapons for instance. The United Nations partly have succeeded in its main objectives to maintain international peace and security, simultaneously failed to acknowledged the concerns of developing countries to speed up reforms as the world is no longer what it was before the World War II. It is concluded by saying that the UN has succeeded in its objectives partly; however, it also requires reinforcing its main objectives and principles by adopting the dynamic and practical demands made by member states for a long. In this context, this article seeks to assessment of the United Nations and its achievement and failures after completing of its seventy-five years in 2020; it also underlines major objectives and its performances and finds out key challenges that the United Nation is facing that require restructuring internal bodies and long awaited reforms—especially in the Security Council and so on. All these present for member's UN has also an opportunity to peacefully resolve the challenges of world at today.

Keywords: Cold War; International Organization; Peace and Security; Seventy-Five years; United Nations; World War

Introduction

Managing peace and security have been key concerns among nation-states at the onset. Since the Westphalia period, the nation-states are becoming more cautious about sovereignty and boundary issues. For a long time, the roles of international organization have been neglected by theorists in the domain of international relations. This may be due to the perception difference that varies from one theory to another, however, the objective of states have been maintaining international peace and security. The realist scholarship discards the importance of international organization in

maintaining peace and security, however, believes that the international system is anarchic in nature, which means there is no supreme government over national government that can control and make binding laws; rather balance of power, self help and national interests are given priority over the international organization. In other words, the IOs have no relevance; they merely work as a puppet to fulfill the demands of powerful countries. It was not until the 1945, which pushed for the establishment of United Nations, the world has had faced lots of wars that have affected peace and stability in the world. The intention behind the UN establishment was “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our life time has brought untold sorrow to mankind” (UN Charter 1945:02). In 2020, the United Nations completed its 75th years that emphasizes on the theme of “The Future We Want, the United Nations we need” (UN 75th Report 2020). It implicitly stresses on the leadership role of the UN as surprisingly environmental and health problems are arising.

This study is although limited to the United Nation and its enhancing roles that are required to be upgraded by including other developing countries in its key decision making bodies, such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It also looks the potential of the organization to maintain peace and security and how it failed during the Cold War period. The scope of this study is sought to explore the achievements and challenges of the United Nations in the backdrop of its 75th anniversary in 2020, which itself are symbolic achievements when it is compared to the League of Nations, a failed international effort to prevent another World War second.

This article has been organized in the following sections: the first section deals with the evolution of the United Nations and is asked the question why it was needed; the second section addresses its objectives in different areas of concerned; the third section examines the major achievements of the United Nation in order to affirm its objectives of maintaining peace and security; the fourth section lists some set of failures; the fifth section talks about the challenges of UN, it is facing and opportunities the member states provide to resolve challenges peacefully and finally is concluded by stating that the United Nation is a necessary invention that not merely restrains member states to unilaterally change status quo but also provide a list of goals to achieve its human rights, security, environmental and other objectives through various agencies.

The United Nations: Origin and Evolution

The history of international system has had been characterized as a continuous conflicts and war as witnessed before the world wars—especially in the 19th century and the beginning of 20th century. The race for becoming colonial and imperial powers has had been one of the major features of that century. This created chaotic orders in the domain of international relations and prevented countries from taking any sort of effective measures to maintain international peace and security. It is claimed that without peace and stability the development process cannot be thought. The major aim behind the foundation of United Nations was to see and prevent potential wars. However, before its establishment the world community has also been witnessed of other organization that tried to maintain peace and but, failed to achieve the same objectives. The 1899 Hague peace conference is one of the major initiatives followed by the League

of Nations, 1919 established in the Treaty of Versailles. However, it was failed to achieve its objectives due to the Second World War begun in 1939.

Finally, after several rounds of meetings among countries led by the Allies group such as the United States, UK and so on, on October 24, 1945 in the history of mankind the United Nations was established. It was ratified by fifty-One countries, including India as a founding member. Therefore, it is rightly stated that “The UN was established to counter the prospect of another world war” (S.P. 2004:35). The United Nations as an international organization was brought up to save the mankind from another wars. It is believed that “the establishment of the United Nations was focused on coordinating and aiding States ‘efforts to achieve common goals under the founding principles of sovereignty and non-intervention” (Crockett 2012).

Moreover, soon after the foundation the Cold War likewise began which possessed serious challenges to the United Nation capability. The Cold War, featured as a war between the two superpower groups led by the United States and the Soviet Union, and its power equation largely affected the functioning of the United Nations. It would not be wrong to state that the UN became less important for international peace till 1990s. However, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United Nation became proactive to deal with the challenges arising from non-traditional security areas and its scope also was broadened to include environment, human security, health, women and so on.

In recent years, the United Nations have completed 75 years of working which has had gone through ups and downs. In the emerging areas, such as digital and so on, “The UN75 Declaration resolves to take action on a range of subjects from digital cooperation to reform of the UN” (Lakshman 2020). The roles of United Nation have also become pivotal because the world is facing unprecedented human security challenges such as the COVID-19. It was the UN efforts which created the World Health Organization in 1948 to deal with such health security challenges.

The United Nations: Objectives and Principles

The makers of the United Nations charter were caution to frame the objectives of the organization and its potential roles. Without understanding the aims and objectives of organization, the effectiveness cannot be comprehended.

The four objectives have been clearly stated in the UN charters which are as follows (UN Charter 1945:03): The first objective of the United Nations is “to maintain international peace and security”, the second is “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”, the third is “to achieve international cooperation 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 finally is “to be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends” (UN Charter 1945:03).

Thus, the above mentioned objectives reflect the work and scope of the United Nations which it has been doing at the onset of its establishment in 1945. In doing so, the United Nations follow some set of norms and rules to achieve the above said objectives. Therefore, the UN is “based on the principles of the sovereign equality of all its members...all members shall fulfill in good faith the obligations assumed by them in accordance with the present Charter...settle their international disputes by peaceful means...refrain from the threat or use of force and so on” (UN Charter 1945:03). This can be precisely seen in the article 33 of the UN charter that states that “the parties to any dispute shall seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice” (UN Charter 1945:08).

The United Nations: Its Impressive Achievements

The major motivation behind the establishment of the UN was to prevent international community from engaging in potential catastrophic wars. Therefore, the importance of international organization cannot be ignored and their achievements especially of the United Nations need to be recognized in the domain of international system. It is claimed that the UN has improved its performance after the Cold War period. Through different machinery and mechanisms, the UN has sought to achieve its objectives. For instance, “there were significant achievements outside the immediate domain of peace and security: notably the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, followed by the two international covenants of 1966 (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights); and the creation of funds and programs specialized in various kinds of humanitarian and development works” (Mortimer 2015). These are indeed crucial positive developments in the UN that provided a platform to address issues directly related to international peace and security.

Moreover, at the onset of its establishment the United Nations tried to play an effective role in the decolonization of third world countries which were for many centuries under the imperial and colonial rules. It is considered its major achievement. It is maintained that “From central Europe to Latin America, from Thailand to Mali, old assumptions and structures are being challenged and authoritarianism is giving way, in varying degrees, to more democratic forms of government and more open economies” (Ogato 1993).

As a result, “United Nations membership became an important badge or certificate of a country’s independence, and a valuable diplomatic card in the hands of any State whose territorial integrity was threatened, whether by external aggression or internal secession (or indeed a combination of the two)” (Mortimer 2015). This is pivotal because the UN provided an equal to some extent the platform to the newly independent countries to share its views regarding international issues. It was one of the major achievements of the United Nations.

However, the Cold War politics affected a lot to the functioning of the UN and restrained it to perform its duty in different parts of the world. It was the proxy wars that the superpowers were playing in the third world countries to shape the discourse of international order. It was the honest efforts of the United Nations that brought it several prizes.

After the Cold War, “in 1998 United Nations peacekeepers were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and in 1990 the Security Council adopted a series of resolutions in response to the seizure of Kuwait by Iraq, culminating in the authorization of all necessary means which led to the restoration of Kuwait’s sovereignty and integrity by a United States-led coalition in February 1991” (Mortimer 2015).

Besides, in the area of climate change the UN played a constructing role and as a mediator to prevent arising conflicts between the developed and the developing countries. It was the under UN the Millennium Development Goals were adopted in 2000 and the Sustainable Development Goals were established in 2015. The world never had seen such efforts to establish international peace in the environmental areas a critical subject that shape international and national politics as well. However, in spite of the above mentioned achievements it likewise faced several setbacks which likewise are important to understand. It is claimed that “the worst setback in the recent history of the United Nations was the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in March 2003, together with its sequel, the destruction of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad on 19 August 2003” (Mortimer 2015).

In the peacekeeping and peace building in different parts of the world, the UN played a pivotal role. Therefore, “It is credited with brokering more than 170 peace settlements, though it has proved better at preventing nation-to-nation conflicts rather than civil wars” (Bryant 2015). After the 75th yeas, the UN completed “Over 40 UN political missions and peacekeeping operations engage 95,000 troops, police, and civil personnel...an outstanding assessed contribution of \$ 1.7 billion for peacekeeping activities by the end of the financial year” (Srivastava 2020). These are the important achievements often given poor attention by the international relations theorist. Therefore, it would not be wrong to state that “Irrespective of the occasional incompatibility of the United Nations with liberal values, and its continuous criticism on behalf of realists, it has invariably represented a tremendous leap forward” (Gavrila 2013:02).

The United Nations: Its Failures

The failures of the United Nations are neglected by international relations theorists. After the establishment, the United Nations have failed to resolve several conflicts and issues, which are explicitly linked to international peace and security. Moreover, during the Cold War, “the Security Council was crippled by deep tensions between the US and the Soviet Union. The UN is not as sidelined or divided today as it was then. However, as the relationship between China and the US sours, the achievements of global co-operation are being eroded” (Symons 2020).

It is maintained that “the United Nations has failed to prevent war and fulfill peacekeeping duties many times throughout its history. Millions of people around the world have been killed and displaced since the UN was founded in 1945” (TRT World 2018). To maintain peace and security has been key object of the United Nation, however, in areas of peacekeeping operations in Africa, Middle East and others it has appeared to be failed which is required to recognize to understand the true nature of the organization. The occupation of Israeli since 1948 onwards, for instance, in which “more than 7,000 Palestinians and 1,100 Israelis have died in the conflict between 2000 and 2014” (TRT World 2018). On the other side, the Kashmir an internal matter of India, violence in Cambodia from 1975-1979. In

case of Cambodia, “the regime carried out genocide between 1975-79, killing some two million people, nearly 25 percent of the country” (TRT World 2018).

After the Cold War, the nature of conflicts has undergone a transformation stressing more on non-traditional security issues, such as environmental, poverty, pollution, disarmament of biological and chemical weapons and so on. It is believed that “In its 75th year, however, the UN is in a difficult moment as the world faces climate crisis, a global pandemic, great power competition, trade wars, economic depression and a wider breakdown in international co-operation” (Symons 2020).

It is seen that in recent years the role of the United Nations has reduced the effectiveness of its performances. It is uncontested to state that “the UN’s inability to deal with crises from the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, to civil conflict in Syria, and the failure of the Security Council to adopt a COVID-19 resolution calling for ceasefires” (Symons 2020). Thus, above mentioned failures of the United Nation need to be understood in order to maintain international peace and security.

The United Nations: Time to Address its Opportunities

No international organizations other than the United Nations have seemingly shown effective results in spite of the Cold War impacts on its performance and decision. However, the present UN is far different and effective than it was during the Cold War that not merely provides a platform to the member states in making decisions but also is committed to the welfare of international community through various means and mechanism. The UN Declaration of Human Rights, UNHCR, Human Rights, Disarmament and other important bodies have persistently been engaging in the work of implicitly maintaining international peace and security. It has been key inner potential of the United Nations that lies in its document which states that it seeks “to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples” (UN Charter 1945).

Moreover, after the Seventy-Five years the roles of UN have become dynamic that provide it several opportunities from dealing the unprecedented germination of Corona virus to preventing conflicts in different parts of the world. It is stated about the United Nations that “The United Nations has not ended world conflict, nor shall it ever in my opinion, it has however gained the chair of global moral arbiter in an essentially anarchic international society due to lack of global governance” (Colebourne 2013).

The above mentioned challenges provide opportunities to the United Nation to deal with and accommodate the new developments taking place elsewhere. Therefore, it would not be contested to underline that “the static framework of the Cold War has been replaced by a more dynamic situation, in which the risks of conflicts and refugee flows have been revived, but equally, the opportunities to address them have been renewed” (Ogata 1993).

Maintaining harmony among states and building peace indeed are the potential challenges and opportunities to maintain it. On the other hand, “the coronavirus that has claimed nearly 1 million lives has underscored the failure of the United Nations to bring countries together to defeat it, prompting renewed calls to reform the world body so that it can meet challenges for different—and more daunting—than those it faced at its birth” (Lederer 2020).

The experiences of the United Nation demonstrate that it has undergone a dramatic fluctuation since its inception in 1945. It was the same period when the Cold War politics began between the two superpowers which not merely challenged the efficacy of the United Nations, but also prevented it from engaging in conflict resolution in the third world countries.

The United Nations: Its Global Challenges

Also, it has been observed that the international organizations especially the United Nations have continuously faced such unprecedented security challenges after the Cold War in areas such as hunger, global disease, environment, nuclear disarmament and so on. This demands an effective role from the United Nations in these critical areas. The first challenge is come up from the troop requirement. It is maintained that as “Several UN reports and various experts have also talked about the lack of commitment of troop contributing countries (TCCs)” (Bardalai 2018: 6). It becomes crucial subject of discussion but fails to contribute from the side of member countries. The second important challenge is the upgrade of old system of United Nation decision making monopolized by five countries in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Thus, “the need for a new Security Council” is indeed a dynamic and rational demand to upgrade the old UN decision making system as things have undergone a transformation and other countries such as India has emerged to lead it (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan).

The Chinese assertion in the South China Sea possesses an important challenge in front of the UN and its mechanism under the UNCLOS. In other words, “China’s policies in the South China Sea have unsettled the region and clearly raise doubts about China’s willingness to commit to multilateral solution and international law if it regards it as not being in its interest” (Oertel 2015). Also, the shortages of funds present key challenges to the UN. Given the history of the UN funding by the member countries it is recounted that “We face a major management problem within the UN system; the system experiences a constant shortage of funds and frequently we settle for poor results” (Kirvalidze 2019).

Preventing human rights violations in African, Asian and Latin American countries is a serious challenge for the UN in order to establish international peace and security. The UN is criticized for its late response in world’s serious conflicts, such as genocide in Rwanda. It is contended that “During the Rwanda genocide, UN peacekeepers deployed in the country concentrated on evacuating expatriates and government officials, failing to intervene as 800,000 Tutsis and sympathetic Hutus were slaughtered” (Bryant 2015). On the other hand, in local conflicts the UN failed to show an active role as seen “In some conflicts, such as Yugoslavia, the UN was slow to respond...in others such as Vietnam and the Iraq was, it was sidelined” (Bryant 2015).

Besides, it was also believed that “the UN fail to affect lasting, positive change in Somalia through humanitarian relief, even the celebrated UN victory in Desert Storm, the battle to oust Iraq and other problems that persist in that region” (S.P. 2004:36).

Therefore, the above mentioned challenges require to be resolve and seek to adopt constructive reforms in the organization as “Any organization established in the aftermath of the Second World War obviously cannot fulfill its functions, in a world that has changed so dramatically, without adapting itself to the contemporary realities of international politics and economics” (Shah 2011:910). Likewise, “the early reforms were driven primarily by international developments, notably the superpower Cold War contestation, as well as the rapid process of decolonization and the expanding membership of the UN” (Sidhu 2018).

Conclusion

After the examination, it could be stated that the United Nations since its establishment has achieved its main objectives of maintaining international peace and successfully prevented the countries partly from engaging in another world wars, however, that is not enough, it requires structural reforms to upgrade its 1945 the UN system controlled by few powers, at present there are 193 recognized countries shall be given equal chance to prove and represent their region. The United Nations although has presented an effective model to deal with the challenges as far as international organization is concerned. In spite of that it faces several setbacks from its international structuring. In case of African continent, there is no permanent member country in the UNSC which can raise and deal effectively its issues, which is not possible without its representation of voice. In the new challenges, such as the COVID-19 and its long awaited challenges in the form of funding, UN troops (which still dependent on other countries), UNSC, human rights abuses, its roles have expanded also.

The celebration of the UN 75th anniversary would only be seen successful when it becomes inclusive, dynamic and binding organizations than it was since the world wars. The twenty first century international order is far different from the previous ones that require all the members of organization to resolve their conflicts peacefully. The UN has believed amidst of COVID-19 that “the total lack of international coordination in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and warned that the go it alone policy of many countries will not defeat the coronavirus” (The Hindu June 2020). Thus, the UN has played an effective role and dealt constructively the challenges in order to forge an environment of international peace and stability.

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