

# Has the United Nations Become Irrelevant?

Written by Joseph E. Schwartzberg

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/03/24/has-the-united-nations-become-irrelevant/>

JOSEPH E. SCHWARTZBERG, MAR 24 2017

Has the United Nations become irrelevant? That question is being asked with increasing frequency in recent years. While there are undoubtedly many reasons, the foremost in my estimation is the UN's poor record in respect to carrying out what many observers regard as its primary mission: peacekeeping. This perception underlies the stated determination by the new Secretary-General, António Guterres, to make peacekeeping his top priority during his five-year tenure.

Over the long term, the UN record in regard to peacekeeping has been decidedly mixed. Although there have been some remarkable successes (e.g., dealing with the Suez Canal crisis in 1956), the past decade has been marked by a succession of failures. None of these failures, one may argue, has had a more negative influence on popular perceptions of the UN than the organization's ineffectuality in dealing with the protracted and complicated civil war in Syria, much less in bringing it to an end. Comparably baneful was the aftermath of the 2011 Security Council-authorized intervention in Libya. The authorizing resolution – passed by a ten to zero vote (with Russia and China among the five abstainers) – was based on the widely acclaimed “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) principle. The resolution authorized a US-led NATO mission to undertake a humanitarian mission to avert an anticipated slaughter of opponents to the dictatorial regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi. The operation, however, soon morphed into one of regime change. The outcome was that Libya lapsed into a state of anarchy from which it has yet to fully emerge. Paradoxically, the UN appeared inept when it failed to act and inept when it did act.

Armed conflict presently characterizes much of the Middle East and Africa; and a persistent threat of conflict hangs over additional areas now nominally at peace. The possibility of nuclear warfare (more likely involving India, Pakistan, Israel, or North Korea, than the P-5 powers) is real. Meanwhile, the recently installed US President, the temperamentally mercurial and unpredictable Donald Trump – no lover of the United Nations – cavalierly professes a lack of concern in regard to a renewed nuclear arms race. In these matters, the UN has not played a major constructive role. Nor has it adequately addressed the causes of, and optimal responses to, the spate of wanton acts of terrorism, the most dramatic of which were those of 11 September 2001. These are causes for deep concern.

Nevertheless, seismic shifts in the global geo-political landscape, along with a host of other existential issues, to be noted below, make the United Nations system more relevant today, I would argue, than ever before in the seven-plus decades of its existence. Let us review some of the major changes.

### The UN in the Post-Cold War Era

Of utmost importance has been the conclusion of the Cold War during a brief period culminating with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991. This revolutionary change was presaged in a speech made before the UN General Assembly on 7 December 1988 by the Soviet premier, Mikhail Gorbachev. In that remarkable address, he called for a new, peaceful, lawful and democratic multi-lateral world order, a world characterized by ‘the de-ideologization of international relations.’ However, distrust of Gorbachev's motives prevented an American embrace of his vision, and, a mere three years later, Gorbachev lost power and esteem in his own country. The implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991 might, conceivably, have brought an end to the military, political and economic confrontation between the Western (NATO et al) and Eastern (Warsaw Pact et al) blocs of nations, along with their globally scattered allies and client states. But that was not to be.

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With the benefit of hindsight, we can now recognize the next few years as an open moment in history, one in which the United States, the undisputed colossus of a unipolar world, enjoyed an unprecedented capability to shape the future. Had it chosen to do so, the US, in concert with other relatively affluent democracies, could then have initiated a process leading to a substantially reformed United Nations. It could have led by example in strengthening newly emerging democratic regimes (mainly in Eastern Europe and Latin America). It could have become the prime mover of what later came to be called a 'global Marshall Plan' to mitigate world poverty and reduce the obscene economic gap between the global North and the global South. It could have resuscitated the aborted 1961 McCloy-Zorin accords on 'General and Complete Disarmament.' Finally, it could have taken on a key role as a steward of the world's environment, a role that many hoped it would assume at the 1992 Rio Conference on the Environment and Development.

Regrettably, however, distrust dies slowly; and ideologically driven preconceptions also impede diplomatic progress. All of the possible post-Cold War initiatives noted in the previous paragraph would have required trust and cooperation between the United States and other nations, both within and outside the United Nations system. But, as recent events confirm, a majority of Americans judge the rest of the world to be less enlightened than the USA, less financially and technologically capable, less virtuous and less trustworthy. Further, the reform agenda suggested above would have necessitated a sharing of power and quite possibly lead – heaven forbid! – to limitations on the zealously guarded national sovereignty of participating nations. So, the international aid offered by the Northern rich was usually sufficient to placate, co-opt, and shore up local elites in compliant States, though rarely enough to effect wholesale transformation of many fundamentally unjust societies.

While the engagement of the global North with other nations was not devoid of altruism, it tended to be of such a nature as to promote the economic interests of the Northern donor nations. This was especially true in their dealings with countries well-endowed with oil, natural gas and/or other strategic raw materials. Countries with left-of-center regimes generally received short shrift, while those well to the left and/or opposed to the US and the former colonial powers of Europe often became targets for political coups engineered or abetted by the US' CIA or its counterparts in other affluent countries.

## A New American Century

Toward the latter 1990s a 'neo-conservative' cabal of political activists became dominant actors in American politics. Uncompromising advocates of unbridled capitalism world-wide, they promoted what many political observers called a 'Pax Americana,' or, to use their own terminology, a 'New American Century.' This presumably inevitable US global hegemony would be militarily guaranteed by 'full-spectrum dominance,' on land and sea, in the air, in outer space and cyberspace. To buttress the Pax Americana a network of military bases was established in scores of countries located, for the most part, in fairly close proximity to Russia and China, both nuclear powers and, arguably, the only two adversaries with sufficient military strength to thwart American dominance of their respective regions.

In the overweening neo-conservative worldview there was little inclination to recognize any source of authority other than the US itself, and certainly not for a reformed UN system well-endowed with both human capital and finances. Nevertheless, given the inherent moral authority that the UN alone possesses, the US does recognize that the world organization can be useful now and then, though not as a major arbiter of how the world is to be run. That role remains in the domain of great power politics. Thus, to a large extent, the shortcomings of the UN system noted in the first few paragraphs of this essay may be attributed to its being kept on a starvation diet by the US. Other countries are also complicit. They, too, deal with the UN system mainly in terms of how it might best serve their own interests, rather than those of the planet as a whole.

A concomitant of a Pax Americana was the idea that America should be the 'world's policeman' or, perhaps its sheriff, with faithful NATO allies as deputies. That notion is what keeps American troops in Afghanistan, long after meting out punishment to the Taliban for their alleged support of the Al Qaida perpetrators of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It also explains the US' premeditated invasion of Iraq on the pretense that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed — and might soon use — weapons of mass destruction. And, despite the falsification of that claim and the subsequent piecemeal destruction of the Iraqi nation, it explains calls for military intervention in Iran and other

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perceived trouble spots.

There are a number of problems with America acting as the world's policeman. First, outside the US itself, no legitimate authority has asked America to assume that role. It has no moral or legal basis. Second, it is enormously costly (running, over time, to trillions of dollars), and many American taxpayers are belatedly recognizing that the expenditure is, by no means, cost-effective. Third, the policy has not worked and will not work (witness the inability, over more than 15 years, to pacify Afghanistan). Finally, it has multiplied the number of America's enemies, creating new cohorts of jihadi terrorists faster than it decimates the old groups, real and imagined.

Still, one may ask, who would wish to live in a society – global as well as local and national – without a police force? At the local and national levels, most of the world takes some measure of police protection for granted. But at a global level anarchy persists. We fall back on inadequate *ad hoc* expedients. For major operations the world may tolerate American-led operations, running the risk of unforeseen mission creep (as in Libya). Smaller jobs are typically entrusted to patchwork forces overwhelmingly recruited from the global South. The UN can and must do better. It is time to establish a standing, all-volunteer, elite, internationally recruited, rapidly deployable peace force, under direct UN command, and with both military and police capabilities. Opposition to the creation of such a force in the interest of national sovereignty has become anachronistic. The UN, not the US, must assume responsibility. Given its universality, the UN alone has the moral standing to do so. Further, no country, no matter how powerful, should have the power of the veto. Happily, several proposals are now under consideration that call for either restraint in the use of the veto or its total elimination, especially in humanitarian crises. Contrary to received wisdom that these goals are impossible to achieve, both are, in my estimation, not only necessary, but achievable in the not very distant future.

## Conclusion

We have focused in this essay on security issues with a military dimension. It is the UN's shortcomings in this regard that have led to our opening question: 'Has the United Nations become irrelevant?' Our unequivocal answer is 'No.' But we cannot close without calling attention to a host of additional global problems that, like security, call for global solutions. Foremost among these issues, without a doubt, is climate change. This is also a security issue, albeit without a significant military nexus as yet (though military responses to flows of environmental refugees is probably not so very far off).

Other problems include population growth, migration, communicable diseases (especially pandemics), the North-South economic gulf, the regulation of financial flows, narco-trafficking, sex trafficking, genocide, ethnic cleansing, other egregious violations of human rights, such mundane matters as air traffic control and weather forecasting, and so forth. (This list is far from complete.) In all of these matters, the United Nations system is playing, or should be playing, a major role. Its relevance is beyond dispute.

Though little known, much has been written in regard to how to resolve the problems alluded to in this essay. I will close by commenting briefly on three such works in ascending order of their time horizon.

For practical and achievable recommendations dealing with the UN system in its present form one cannot do better than to consult Thomas G. Weiss, *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It*, (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.) Malden, MA, USA, Polity Press, 2016. Weiss is, arguably, the leading academic expert on the UN system.

A more future-oriented and ambitious change agenda is put forth by the Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance, chaired by Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State and Ambassador to the UN; and Ibrahim Gambari, former Foreign Minister of Nigeria and UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. This report, *Confronting the Crisis of Global Governance*, was jointly published in 2015 by The Hague Institute for Global Governance and the Washington-based Stimson Center. Its proposals anticipate major rethinking of the nature of global governance in the year 2020 when the UN will celebrate its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Among its many innovative recommendations is the establishment of a UN Parliamentary Network.

Looking still further into the future, but certainly not beyond the lifetime of most readers of this essay, is *Transforming*

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*the United Nations System: Designs for a Workable World*, Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2013. This work, by the present author, Joseph E. Schwartzberg, demonstrates the ultimate need for a democratic federal world government. It puts forward scores of proposals for progressive improvements in the UN system as humankind proceeds along its arduous journey to a peacefully united world. (The book's lengthiest chapter relates to security issues.) E-editions of translations of the work into Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Russian and Spanish should become available during the year 2017, together with *Study and Discussion Guides* in those same seven languages, as well as in English.

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### About the author:

A lifelong peace and justice activist, Professor **Joseph E. Schwartzberg** has served in leadership roles in many organizations, especially in those related to world federalism. He was one of the founders in 1995 of the Minnesota Alliance of Peacemakers. After obtaining his PhD, he taught at the University of Pennsylvania (1960-64) and the University of Minnesota (1964-2000). A prolific author, his academic specialties were in South Asia and political geography. Professor Schwartzberg (schwa004@umn.edu) will welcome responses from readers to the accompanying essay. For his views on global governance please refer to *Transforming the United Nations System: Designs for a Workable World*, United Nations University Press, 2013, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/book/transforming-the-united-nations-system/>, and to The Workable World Trust's website [www.workableworld.org](http://www.workableworld.org).