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A SYSTEM IN NEED OF RENEWAL: THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE CHALLENGES TO THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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Annotation

This paper explores the evolution, practical achievements, and contemporary systemic crises of the United Nations (UN) within the context of the liberal international order. Established in 1945 following the failure of the League of Nations, the UN was designed as the central pillar of post-war multilateralism, collective security, and global governance. The study reviews the UN's historical origins, highlighting its key operational successes in peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and standard-setting for human rights. However, the analysis demonstrates how mid-twentieth-century institutional frameworks, particularly the structure and veto power of the UN Security Council, have created severe paralysis in addressing modern geopolitical threats. Examining contemporary case studies in Syria Gaza and Ukraine, the paper illustrates how power politics and structural gridlock undermine the UN's core principles of international law and territorial integrity. The paper concludes that to safeguard the liberal international political order and restore its leverage for global stability, the United Nations requires comprehensive structural transformation adapted to twenty-first-century realities.

Keywords: United Nations, Liberal International Order, UN Security Council, Collective Security, Institutional Reform.

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Introduction

The establishment of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 marked a monumental shift in international relations. Rising from the ashes of the Second World War and replacing the ineffective League of Nations, the UN was designed as the central pillar of the newly emerging liberal international order. Built upon principles of collective security, respect for state sovereignty, human rights, and rule-based multilateralism, the organization was charged with a clear imperative: to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. Over eight decades, the UN has made indispensable contributions to global stability, conflict resolution, human development, and international law. However, as the geopolitical landscape undergoes a profound transformation, the UN finds itself severely constrained by structural gridlock. Today, the crisis of the liberal international order is starkly exposed in regions such as Syria, Gaza and Ukraine, where power politics and institutional paralysis prevent the UN from fulfilling its core mission. To regain its status as an effective leverage for global stability, the United Nations requires comprehensive transformation adapted to twenty-first-century realities.

Historical Origins: From Wartime Alliance to Global Governance

The creation of the United Nations represented one of the most ambitious attempts in history to institutionalize international cooperation. The genesis of the United Nations lies in the diplomatic negotiations of World War II. Recognizing that the failure of the League of Nations stemmed largely from its structural weaknesses and lack of broad super-power enforcement, Allied leaders sought a more robust collective security framework. Key foundational documents, such as the Atlantic Charter of 1941 and the Declaration by United Nations in 1942, laid the intellectual groundwork for post-war international cooperation.¹

The structure of the organization was formally hammered out during the Dumbarton Oaks Conference (1944) and finalized at the San Francisco Conference in 1945, where representatives of fifty nations drafted the UN Charter. The foundational document set forth ambitious objectives: maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations, and achieving international cooperation in solving economic, social, and humanitarian problems.² To balance idealistic universalism with pragmatic power dynamics, the architects of the UN designed a unique two-tier structure.³ The General Assembly provided a platform for universal representation, while the Security Council (UNSC)—dominated by the five victorious allied powers (the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and China) holding permanent seats and veto power—was entrusted with primary responsibility for enforcing peace.⁴

Practical Missions and Successes in the Global Political Order

Despite the constraints of the Cold War, the United Nations established a strong track record of practical intervention and standard-setting. One of its most notable innovations was the concept of peacekeeping, which emerged during the 1956 Suez Crisis under the leadership of Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld. Unmentioned in the original Charter, "Chapter Six-and-a-Half" peacekeeping operations deployed neutral armed forces under UN command to monitor ceasefires and buffer opposing factions. Over the decades, UN Peacekeeping has deployed more than 70 operations worldwide, successfully stabilizing volatile regions in Cambodia (UNTAC), Mozambique (ONUMOZ), and the Balkans (UNPROFOR/UNMIK).⁵

Beyond military conflict management, the UN transformed international norms through specialized agencies such as the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, and the World Health Organization (WHO). The UN led global efforts that successfully eradicated smallpox, drastically reduced global poverty through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and guided historical decolonization processes across Africa and Asia.⁶ Furthermore, the UN codified landmark human rights

¹ Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations* (New York: Random House, 2006), 18–22.

² United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, June 26, 1945, 1 U.N.T.S. XVI, art. <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf#:~:text=Article%2026,and%20economic%20resources%2C%20the%20Se%2D> (Accessed 25.07.2026).

³ <https://www.un.org/en/model-united-nations/un-structure> (Accessed 25.07.2026).

⁴ Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 195–201.

⁵ Michael Howard, *UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45–52.

⁶ <https://polsci.institute/international-relations/decolonisation-external-self-determination-un-role/> (Accessed 25.07.2026).

declarations and international legal frameworks, establishing that state sovereignty is not absolute when basic human rights are violated.⁷

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, many scholars viewed the United Nations as one of the greatest institutional achievements of modern international politics. Nevertheless, the rapidly changing global security environment would soon expose structural weaknesses that had remained relatively concealed during previous decades.

Contemporary Challenges: Syria, Ukraine, Gaza and the Crisis of the Liberal Order

Notwithstanding these historical achievements, the contemporary era has laid bare the fundamental limits of the UN's institutional architecture. The liberal international order, characterized by open trade, democratic norms, sovereign equality, and multilateral diplomacy, is facing its most severe challenge since the end of the Cold War. The security mechanisms of the UN, designed in 1945, are increasingly incapable of responding to modern aggressive state behavior and complex internal conflicts.

The Syrian Civil War serves as a devastating example of UN institutional paralysis during complex humanitarian emergencies. Since the outbreak of conflict in 2011, the UN Security Council has been routinely stymied by vetoes cast by Russia and China, blocking meaningful resolutions to enforce ceasefires, impose targeted sanctions, or refer human rights atrocities to the International Criminal Court (ICC).⁸ Consequently, hundreds of thousands of civilians have perished, millions have been displaced, and chemical weapons prohibitions were repeatedly violated with institutional impunity. The UN was reduced to administering humanitarian relief while remaining powerlessly sidelined in diplomatic resolutions.

Even more destructive to the credibility of the UN system is the ongoing War in Ukraine. The Russian Federation's unprovoked, full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represents a direct violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which explicitly forbids the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.⁹ Because the aggressor state holds a permanent seat on the UN Security Council with veto power, the council was instantly rendered incapable of taking collective action under Chapter VII of the Charter. While the UN General Assembly invoked the "Uniting for Peace" resolution to overwhelmingly condemn the invasion and demand withdrawal, these resolutions lack binding enforcement mechanisms.¹⁰ The war in Ukraine demonstrates a paralysis at the heart of global security governance: when a permanent member of the Security Council actively violates international law, the UN's primary organ for peace enforcement becomes completely neutralized.

The ongoing conflict in Gaza has further intensified criticism of the United Nations. Deep political divisions among major powers have repeatedly delayed or prevented unified responses despite the severe humanitarian consequences of the conflict. The inability to establish lasting ceasefires or implement effective civilian protection measures has reinforced perceptions that the organization is increasingly constrained by geopolitical competition rather than guided by the principles of collective security.

Furthermore, contemporary security threats differ substantially from those that existed in 1945. Cyber warfare, disinformation campaigns, artificial intelligence, transnational terrorism, climate-related insecurity, and hybrid conflicts require institutional mechanisms that did not exist when the UN Charter was drafted. Peacekeeping operations originally designed to monitor ceasefires between states are often inadequate for addressing fragmented conflicts involving multiple state and non-state actors. The mismatch between modern security challenges and the institutional design of the United Nations has become increasingly evident.

The Need for Institutional Transformation

Despite these shortcomings, the United Nations remains indispensable. No alternative international organization possesses comparable legitimacy, universal membership, or diplomatic influence. The appropriate response, therefore, is not to abandon the organization but to reform it.

The most frequently proposed reform concerns the Security Council. Many scholars argue that its composition no longer reflects the distribution of political and economic power in the contemporary international system. Expanding permanent or long-term membership to include influential states from Africa, Asia, and Latin America would improve both legitimacy and representativeness. Such reform would also acknowledge the emergence of a more multipolar international order.¹¹

⁷ Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 312–320.

⁸ Richard Gowan, "The Security Council and the Crisis in Syria," *International Affairs* 89, no. 6 (2013): 1401–1413.

⁹ United Nations, Charter of the United Nations, art. 2, para. 4.

¹⁰ UN General Assembly, Resolution ES-11/1, Aggression against Ukraine, A/RES/ES-11/1 (March 2, 2022).

¹¹ <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/19-un-security-council/> (Accessed 25.07.2026).

Equally important is the debate surrounding the veto power. Although complete abolition remains politically unrealistic, many experts propose limiting its use in situations involving genocide, crimes against humanity, or large-scale humanitarian catastrophes.¹² Restricting the veto under exceptional circumstances would strengthen the credibility of the United Nations while preserving the institutional balance among major powers.

Institutional transformation should also extend beyond the Security Council. Peacekeeping operations require modernization through improved technology, stronger civilian protection mandates, and closer cooperation with regional organizations. Greater investment in conflict prevention, mediation, and early-warning mechanisms would enable the United Nations to respond before crises escalate into full-scale wars. Likewise, addressing cyber security, artificial intelligence, and climate-related security risks should become integral components of the organization's future mandate.

Most importantly, institutional reform requires renewed political commitment from member states. International organizations can function effectively only when governments are willing to prioritize collective interests alongside national objectives. Without such political commitment, even comprehensive institutional reforms are unlikely to produce meaningful change.

Unilateralism and Institutional Erasure: The Impact of the Trump Administration

The erosion of the United Nations as an effective instrument of international law has been significantly accelerated by political shifts within key powerful states, most prominently illustrated by the foreign policy of Donald Trump's administration. Guided by an transactional "America First" doctrine, the administration adopted a explicitly skeptical stance toward multilateral governance, viewing international institutions not as mechanisms for collective security, but as constraints on state sovereignty.¹³

This ideological posture translated into direct structural disruptions to the UN framework. The administration repeatedly bypassed or undermined established international norms by initiating withdrawals from key UN bodies, including the Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and UNESCO, while simultaneously halting funding to vital agencies such as the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the World Health Organization (WHO).¹⁴ Furthermore, by bypassing UN-brokered diplomatic channels in major geopolitical disputes and favoring aggressive unilateralism over rules-based consensus, the administration signaled a profound retreat from the post-1945 multilateral consensus.

These actions severely degraded the UN's operational capacity and moral authority. Financial starvation forced humanitarian and development organs to curtail essential operations, while Washington's disregard for multilateral agreements created a dangerous precedent for other major powers to ignore international treaty obligations with impunity.¹⁵ By treating global compliance as optional and international law as secondary to immediate national power, the Trump administration's policies systematically weakened the UN's institutional leverage, leaving the broader liberal political order increasingly fragmented and exposed to non-compliance by revisionist states.¹⁶

Conclusion

For more than eighty years, the United Nations has remained the principal institutional expression of the liberal international order. It has contributed significantly to peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, decolonization, and international cooperation, demonstrating that collective action can mitigate conflict and promote stability. These achievements remain central to its historical legacy.

Nevertheless, the geopolitical realities of the twenty-first century have exposed structural weaknesses that increasingly limit the organization's effectiveness. The paralysis of the Security Council, the return of great-power rivalry, and the emergence of new forms of conflict have reduced the United Nations' ability to fulfill its founding mission. Consequently, the organization is gradually losing its effectiveness as the primary institutional instrument of liberal internationalism—not because its principles have become obsolete, but because it's institutional framework has failed to adapt to a rapidly changing international environment.

¹² <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/existing-legal-limits-to-security-council-veto-power-in-the-face-of-atrocity-crimes/initiatives-to-voluntarily-restrain-veto-use-in-the-face-of-atrocity-crimes/D036BE195077E3BA3BD7AC449471DC8C> (Accessed 25.07.2026)

¹³ Stewart M. Patrick, "Trump's Multilateral Missteps," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 6 (2017): 42–48.

¹⁴ Harold Hongju Koh, "Trump vs. International Law," *Yale Law Journal Forum* 128 (2018): 413–429.

¹⁵ Richard Gowan, *Multilateralism in Retreat: The UN under Foreign Policy Shifts* (London: Routledge, 2020), 112–118.

¹⁶ Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 540–545.

The future relevance of the United Nations will therefore depend on its capacity for transformation. Reforming the Security Council, modernizing peacekeeping operations, strengthening preventive diplomacy, and adapting institutional structures to contemporary geopolitical realities are essential if the organization is to remain an effective guardian of international peace and security. Without meaningful reform, the gap between the UN's founding ideals and its practical performance will continue to widen, undermining both its legitimacy and its role in global governance.

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