

Chapter 21

The United Nations

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Framing Questions

- Does the United Nations succeed in reconciling traditions of great power politics and traditions of universalism?
- Why has the United Nations become more involved in matters within states and what are the limits to this involvement?
- What are the United Nations' biggest successes and challenges in its efforts to prevent and resolve conflict and to promote sustainable development?

Reader's Guide

This chapter focuses on the development of the United Nations (UN) and the changes and challenges that it has faced since its establishment in 1945. The UN is a grouping of states, and is therefore premised on the notion that states are the primary units in the international system. The institutions of the UN reflect an uneasy hybrid between traditions of great power consensus and traditions of universalism that stress the equality of states. Furthermore, while the UN was established as a grouping of sovereign states, this chapter argues that UN institutions have taken on an increasing range of functions, and have

become much more involved within states. Justice for individuals is increasingly seen as a concomitant of international order. Serious deficiencies in human rights, or in economic welfare, can lead to international tensions. These developments have challenged traditional views about intervention within states. It has also prompted the expansion of UN institutions to address an increased number of economic and social questions, and a search for better ways to coordinate these activities. More recently, in the context of new threats to global security, changes in the global balance of power, and increased criticism of multilateralism, there has been renewed debate about the UN's role and effectiveness.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) is made up of a group of international **institutions**, which include the central system located in New York, the **specialized agencies**, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the **Funds and Programmes**, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). When created more than 70 years ago in the aftermath of the Second World War, the United Nations reflected the hope for a just and peaceful global **community**. It is the only global institution with the legitimacy that derives from universal membership, and a mandate that encompasses security, economic and social development, the protection of human rights, and the protection of the environment. Yet the UN was created by **states** for states, and the relationship between **state sovereignty** and the protection of the needs and interests of people has not been fully resolved. Questions about the meaning of sovereignty and the limits of UN action have remained key issues.

Since the founding of the UN, there has been an expansion of UN activities to address conditions within states, an improvement in UN capacity in its

economic and social work, and an increased tendency to accord the UN a moral status. Threats to global security addressed by the UN now include inter-state conflict and threats by **non-state actors**, as well as political, economic, and social conditions within states. Despite the growth in UN activities, however, there are questions about the relevance and effectiveness of the UN. The failure by the US and the UK to get clear UN Security Council authorization for the war in Iraq in 2003 led to well-publicized criticism of the UN and a crisis in international relations. The controversies surrounding the intervention in Libya in 2011 mandated by the UN Security Council and the difficulties faced by the UN Security Council in reaching agreement on how to respond to the Syrian conflict since 2011 have given rise to further criticism and debate.

After briefly outlining the history and the main organs of the UN, this chapter will look at its changing role in addressing matters of peace and security, and then issues of economic and social development. It will focus on how the UN's role has evolved in response to changes in the global political context, and on some of the problems that it still faces.

A brief history of the United Nations and its principal organs

The United Nations was established on 24 October 1945 by 51 countries, as a result of initiatives taken by the governments of the states that had led the war against Germany and Japan. By 2019, 193 countries were members of the United Nations, with South Sudan the UN's newest member following its independence from the rest of Sudan in 2011. When joining, member states agree to accept the obligations of the **United Nations Charter**, an international treaty that sets out basic principles of international relations. According to the Charter, the UN has four purposes: to maintain international peace and security; to develop friendly relations among nations; to cooperate in solving international problems and in promoting respect for human rights; and to be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations. At the UN, all the member states—large and small, rich and poor, with differing political views and social systems—have a voice and a vote in this process. Interestingly, while the United Nations was clearly created as a grouping of states, the Charter refers to the

needs and interests of peoples as well as those of states (see **Box 21.1**).

In many ways, the United Nations was set up to correct the problems of its predecessor, the League of Nations. The League of Nations had been established after the First World War, and was intended to make future wars impossible, but a major problem was its lack of effective power. There was no clear division of responsibility between the main executive committee (the League Council) and the League Assembly, which included all member states. Both the League Assembly and the League Council could only make recommendations, not binding resolutions, and these recommendations had to be unanimous. Any government was free to reject any recommendation. Furthermore, in the League, there was no mechanism for coordinating military or economic actions against miscreant states, which further contributed to its weakness. Also key states, such as the United States, were not members of the League. By the Second World War, the

Box 21.1 Selected articles of the UN Charter

The UN Charter contains references to both the rights of states and the rights of people.

The Preamble of the UN Charter asserts that 'We the peoples of the United Nations [are] determined ... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small'.

Article 1(2) states that the purpose of the UN 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'.

Article 2(7) states that 'Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state'.

Chapter VI deals with the 'Pacific Settlement of Disputes'.

Article 33 states that 'The parties to any dispute, the continuance of which is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security, shall, first of all, 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'.

Chapter VII deals with 'Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression'.

Article 42 states that the Security Council 'may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security'.

Article 99 authorizes the secretary-general to 'bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security'.

League had already failed to address a number of acts of aggression.

The structure of the United Nations (see **Box 21.2**) was intended to avoid some of the problems faced by the League of Nations. The UN Security Council was given the main responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. In contrast to the League of Nations, the United Nations recognized great power prerogatives in the Security Council. It includes five permanent members, namely the US, the UK, France, Russia (previously the Soviet Union), and China, as well as ten non-permanent members. Unlike the decisions of

the League, those of the Security Council are binding, and must be passed by a majority of nine out of the 15 members, including each of the five permanent members. These five permanent members were seen as the major powers at the time of the founding of the United Nations. Tension between the recognition of power politics through the Security Council veto, and the universal ideals underlying the United Nations, is a defining feature of the organization. The recognition of power politics through veto power in the Security Council can be contrasted with the universalist principles underlying the other principal organs of the United Nations.

Box 21.2 Principal organs of the United Nations

The structure of the United Nations is shown in **Figure 21.1**.

The Security Council was made up initially of 11 states, and then, after 1965, of 15 states, including the five veto-wielding permanent members. When the Security Council considers a threat to international peace, it first explores ways to settle the dispute peacefully under the terms of Chapter VI of the UN Charter. In the event of fighting, the Security Council tries to secure a ceasefire and may send a peacekeeping mission. The Council can also take measures to enforce its decisions under Chapter VII of the Charter, for instance through the imposition of economic sanctions, arms embargoes, or collective military action. The Council also makes recommendations to the General Assembly on the appointment of a new secretary-general and on the admission of new members to the UN.

The General Assembly is made up of all UN member states, with one vote each. A two-thirds majority in the General Assembly is required for decisions on key issues such as international peace and security, the admission of new members, and the UN budget. A simple majority is required for other matters. The decisions reached by the General Assembly have the status of recommendations, rather than binding decisions, so they cannot force action by any state. One of the few exceptions is the General Assembly's Fifth Committee, which makes decisions on the budget that are

binding on members. The General Assembly can consider any matter within the scope of the UN Charter.

The Secretariat carries out the substantive and administrative work of the UN. It is led by the secretary-general, who provides overall administrative guidance. António Guterres from Portugal was sworn in as the ninth secretary-general in January 2017. The Secretariat consists of departments and offices with a total staff of approximately 40,000 around the world. On the recommendation of the other bodies, the Secretariat also carries out a number of research functions and some quasi-management functions. Yet the role of the Secretariat remains primarily bureaucratic, with the exception of the power of the secretary-general, under Article 99 of the Charter, to bring situations that are likely to lead to a breakdown of international peace and security to the attention of the Security Council (see **Box 21.1**). This article was the legal basis for the remarkable expansion of the diplomatic role of the secretary-general, compared with its League predecessor.

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), under the overall authority of the General Assembly, coordinates the economic and social work of the United Nations and the UN family of organizations. It also consults with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), thereby maintaining a vital link between the

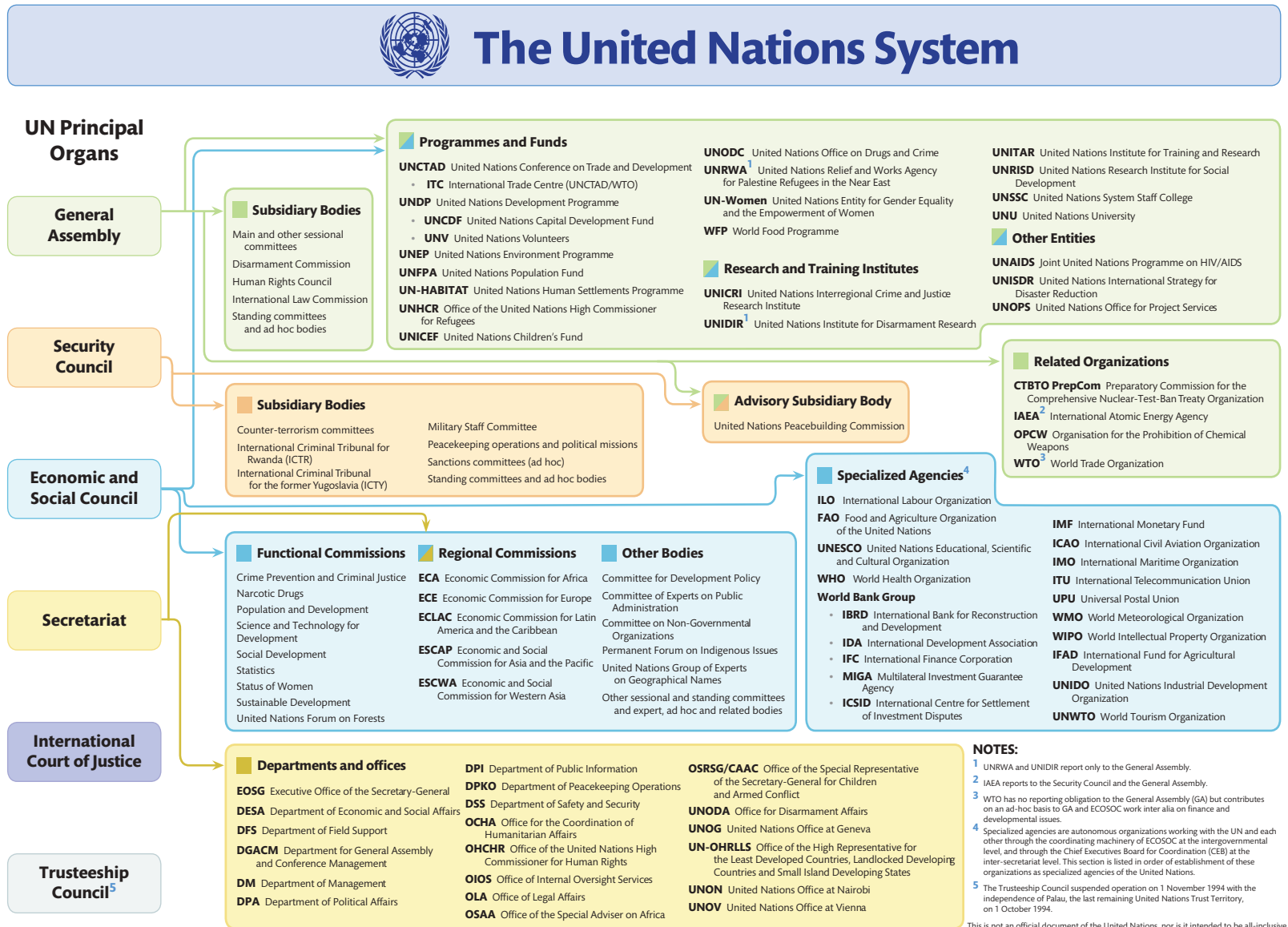


Figure 21.1 The structure of the United Nations system
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United Nations and civil society. ECOSOC's subsidiary bodies include Functional Commissions, such as the Commission on the Status of Women; Regional Commissions, such as the Economic Commission for Africa; and other bodies (see Fig. 21.1).

The Trusteeship Council was established to provide international supervision for 11 Trust Territories administered by seven member states, and to ensure that adequate steps were taken to prepare the territories for self-government or independence. By 1994, all the Trust Territories had attained self-government or independence, either as separate states or by joining

neighbouring independent countries. The last to do so was the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, Palau, which had previously been administered by the United States.

The International Court of Justice is the main judicial organ of the UN. Consisting of 15 judges elected jointly by the General Assembly and the Security Council, the Court decides disputes between countries. Participation by states in a proceeding is voluntary, but if a state agrees to participate, it is obligated to comply with the Court's decision. The Court also provides advisory opinions to other UN organs and specialized agencies on request.

The UN Charter placed more emphasis than the League Covenant on the promotion of social and economic advancement as a central goal, in part because many believed that the global economic depression of the 1930s was one of the causes of the nationalism and aggression that led to the outbreak of the Second World War. Whereas the League of Nations attributed responsibility for economic and social questions to the League Assembly, the Charter of the United Nations established ECOSOC to oversee economic and social institutions. Along with the Secretariat and the General Assembly, ECOSOC is responsible for overseeing the activities of a large number of other institutions known as the United Nations system. This includes the specialized agencies and the funds and programmes (see Fig. 21.1). The specialized agencies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), have their own constitutions, regularly assessed budgets, executive heads, and assemblies of state representatives. They are self-contained constitutionally, financially, and politically, and they are not subject to the management of the central system.

The Funds and Programmes are much closer to the central system in the sense that their management arrangements are subject to direct General Assembly supervision, can be modified by Assembly resolution, and are largely funded on a voluntary basis. Since the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, a number of new issues have come onto the international agenda, such as the rights and interests of women, climate change, resource depletion, population growth, **terrorism**, and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Frequently, those issues have led to a new organization being created in the Funds and Programmes. Examples include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

In the early years of the United Nations, there were serious disagreements about many aspects of its work, including the question of membership. There were no new members between 1950 and 1955, because the US and USSR could not agree. In 1955 there was a deal in which members of the Soviet bloc such as Bulgaria and Hungary were admitted alongside Western countries such as Italy and Spain. The biggest jump in UN

Box 21.3 The reform of the Security Council

Since the Security Council is the main executive body in the United Nations with primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, it is not surprising that many discussions of UN reform have focused on the Security Council.

The founders of the UN deliberately established a universal General Assembly and a restricted Security Council that required unanimity among the great powers. Granting permanent seats and the right to a veto to the great powers of the time—the US, the Soviet Union (now Russia), France, the United Kingdom, and China—was an essential feature of the deal.

The composition and decision-making procedures of the Security Council were increasingly challenged as membership of the United Nations grew, particularly after decolonization. Yet the only significant reform of the Security Council occurred in 1965, when the Council was enlarged from 11 to 15 members and the required majority from seven to nine votes. Nonetheless, the veto power of the permanent five (P-5) members was left intact.

The Security Council does not reflect today's distribution of military or economic power, and it does not reflect a geographic balance. Germany and Japan have made strong cases for permanent membership. Developing countries have demanded more representation on the Security Council, with countries such as South Africa, India, Egypt, Brazil, and Nigeria making particular claims. However, it has proved to be impossible to reach agreement on new permanent members. How would Pakistan view India's candidacy? How would South Africa react to a Nigerian seat? What about representation by an Islamic country? Should the European Union (EU) be represented instead of individual EU member states? Should there be a permanent rotating African seat? These issues are not easy to resolve and it is very unlikely that the P-5 countries will want to relinquish their veto.

Nonetheless, while large-scale reform has proved impossible, there have been changes in Security Council working procedures that have made it more transparent and accountable.

membership occurred with decolonization. By 1975 there were 144 members, up from the original group of 51 members in 1945. The controversy over the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) request to join severely hurt the UN's credibility in the 1950s and 1960s. The PRC claimed that it was the rightful representative of all Chinese people, but it was the Republic of China (Taiwan) that represented China in the UN and on the Security Council, with American support. This changed in 1971, as relations improved between the US and the PRC. General Assembly Resolution 2758 (October 1971) recognized the PRC as the legitimate representative of China to the UN.

There are still some debates over membership. For instance, Taiwan applied for membership in 2007 but this application was denied. There are two permanent non-member observer states at the UN: the Holy See (1964) and Palestine (2012). There are also non-state observers, including intergovernmental organizations and other entities. There have been widespread and

frequent calls for reform and changes in the membership of the UN Security Council, but this is very difficult (see **Box 21.3**).

Key Points

- The United Nations was established to preserve peace among states after the Second World War.
- In a number of ways, the institutions of the United Nations reflected lessons learned from its predecessor, the League of Nations.
- The institutions and mechanisms of the United Nations reflect both the demands of great power politics (i.e. Security Council veto) and universalism. They also reflect demands to address the needs and interests of people, as well as the needs and interests of states. The tensions between these various demands are a key feature of UN development.
- There have been a number of disagreements over UN membership, and over the composition of the UN Security Council.

The United Nations and the maintenance of international peace and security

The global political context has shaped the performance of the United Nations in maintaining peace and security. The cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union hampered the functioning of the UN Security Council, since the United States or the Soviet Union could use the veto whenever its major interests were threatened. From 1945 to 1990, 193 substantive vetoes were invoked in the Security Council, compared to 42 substantive vetoes from 1990 to 2018. Furthermore, while the UN Charter provided for the establishment of a multilateral force under the command of a Military Staff Committee (Articles 43 and 47), to be set up by agreement between the Security Council and consenting states, cold war rivalries made this impossible to implement. The end result was that the UN Security Council could not function in the way the UN founders had expected.

Because member states could not agree on the arrangements laid out in Chapter VII of the Charter, especially with regard to setting up a UN army, there were a series of improvisations to address matters of peace and security. First, a procedure was established under which the Security Council agreed to a mandate for an agent to act on its behalf. This occurred in the Korean conflict in 1950, and the Gulf War in

1990, when action was undertaken principally by the US and its allies.

Second, there have been many instances of peacekeeping. No reference to peacekeeping exists in the UN Charter, but classical peacekeeping mandates and mechanisms are based on Chapter VI of the UN Charter (see **Box 21.1**). Classical peacekeeping involves the establishment of a UN force, under UN command, to be placed between the parties to a dispute after a ceasefire. Such a force uses its weapons only in self-defence, is established with the consent of the host state, and does not include forces from the major powers. This mechanism was first used in 1956, when a UN force was sent to Egypt to facilitate the exodus of the British and French forces from the Suez Canal area, and then to stand between Egyptian and Israeli forces. Since the Suez crisis, there have been a number of classical peacekeeping missions, for instance monitoring the Green Line in Cyprus, and in the Golan Heights. The classical peacekeeping that was prevalent during the cold war was very different from the more robust peacekeeping missions that became increasingly common after the end of the cold war. One notable exception was the 1960–4 United Nations Operation in the Congo, which was an early example of more robust UN peacekeeping (see **Case Study 21.1**).

Case Study 21.1 UN peacekeeping in the Congo



Six members of the Indian contingent of the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC)

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There have been two UN peacekeeping missions in the Congo: the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC) from 1960 to 1964 and the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) from 1999 to 2010, renamed the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) from 2010 to present. These missions have had some successes, but they also highlight the challenges faced by robust UN peacekeeping (**see Case Study 15.1**).

Congo became independent on 30 June 1960. However, colonial rule by the Belgians had left the vast country severely underdeveloped and politically fractured, despite its significant mineral wealth. Soon after independence, the mineral-rich area of Katanga declared itself to be independent, with support and encouragement by Belgian mining interests and Belgian troops. Congolese Prime Minister Lumumba appealed to the UN for help against the secessionists in Katanga. Invoking Article 99 of the UN Charter, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld took the matter to the Security Council, which authorized the deployment of ONUC to oversee the withdrawal of Belgian and other foreign troops and to support the Congolese government to restore law and order in the country.

At its height, ONUC deployed just under 20,000 troops. The mission was successful in that Congo's territorial integrity was

maintained and foreign troops withdrew, but at immense political, human, and financial costs. In the context of the cold war, the mission was accused of being a tool of US foreign policy. It only took a harder line against the secessionists after Lumumba, who was suspected of being pro-Soviet, was assassinated in January 1961. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld died in a plane crash while trying to negotiate a ceasefire in September 1961. The mission was hugely expensive and generated a financial crisis at the UN. It was not until after the end of the cold war that the UN again embarked on another ambitious peace enforcement mission.

MONUC and MONUSCO were also large, expensive peacekeeping missions. MONUC was established in 1999 following the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and five regional countries. Initially, its mandate was to observe the ceasefire, but subsequent Security Council mandates extended its activities. In 2010, the mission was renamed MONUSCO and authorized to use all necessary means to protect civilians and to support the government of the DRC in its stabilization and peace consolidation efforts. As of 2018, MONUSCO had just over 18,000 uniformed personnel in the country.

These missions have had some accomplishments—for example, in 2006 MONUC supported the largest, most complex electoral process ever supported by a UN mission—but they have also been criticized. The eastern part of Congo continues to experience waves of conflict and human rights violations. The UN has drawn attention to the issue of gender-based violence, yet sexual violence continues, including allegations of sexual abuse by UN troops. There have been significant disagreements between the UN and the government, and national elections that were supposed to have been held in 2016 were delayed by two years. Furthermore, the UN has been criticized for supporting the Congolese army in its operations, even though elements of the army were responsible for human rights abuses against the Congolese population. The UN's experiences in the Congo show how difficult it is for peace operations to achieve state-building objectives.

Question 1: Do you think that it was a mistake for the UN to deploy ONUC in response to the Congo crisis?

Question 2: Do you think that UN peace operations should include state-building objectives?

Increased attention to conditions within states

At the time of its founding and during the cold war, the UN had helped promote the view of the primacy of international order among states over justice for individuals. Many people thought that diplomats should ignore the internal affairs of states in order to preserve international stability. By the 1990s, an increasing number of people believed that the UN should address individual

political and civil rights, as well as the right to basic provisions such as food, water, health care, and accommodation. Under this view, violations of individuals' rights were a cause of disturbances in relations among states: a lack of internal justice risked international disorder. The UN reinforced the view that pursuing justice for individuals was an aspect of **national interest**.

There are several reasons for this change. First, the international environment had changed. The cold war

stand-off between the East and the West had meant that member states did not want to question the conditions of the sovereignty of states. Jean Kirkpatrick's (1979) notorious essay, which recommended tolerating abhorrent dictatorships in Latin America in order to fight communism, was a reasonable report of the situation at that time: unsavoury right-wing regimes in Latin America were tolerated because they were anti-Soviet, and interfering in the other's sphere risked escalation of conflict (Forsythe 1988: 259–60).

Second, the process of decolonization had privileged statehood over justice. The UN had elevated the right to statehood above any tests of viability, such as the existence of a nation, adequate economic performance, defensibility, or a prospect for achieving justice for citizens. This unconditional right to independence was enunciated in the General Assembly Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples in 1960. There emerged a convention that the claims of elites in the putative states could be a sufficient indication of popular enthusiasm, even when the elites were unrepresentative.

Charles Beitz was one of the first to question this when he concluded that statehood should not be unconditional: attention had to be given to the situation of individuals after independence (Beitz 1979). Michael Walzer and Terry Nardin produced arguments leading to a similar conclusion: states were conditional entities in that their right to exist should be dependent on a criterion of performance with regard to the interests of their citizens (Walzer 1977; Nardin 1983). Such writings helped to alter the moral content of **diplomacy**.

The new relationship between order and justice was thus a product of particular circumstances. After the cold war, it was felt that threats to international peace and security did not emanate only from aggression between states. Rather, global peace was threatened by civil conflict (including refugee flows and regional

instability), humanitarian emergencies, violations of global standards of human rights, and problems such as poverty and inequality.

This led to changes in the nature of UN peacekeeping and to its rapid expansion. In 1994, UN peacekeeping operations involved nearly 80,000 military personnel around the world, seven times the figure for 1990 (Pugh 2001: 115). Post-cold war missions addressed civil wars as well as international conflicts. They were more likely to use force and to be based on Chapter VII of the UN Charter (see **Box 21.1**). In 1992, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali set out a new, ambitious UN agenda for peace and security in a report called *An Agenda for Peace*, where he outlined interconnected roles for the UN, including **peace enforcement** (see **Box 21.4**). A key problem has been that UN peacekeepers have been targeted by belligerents. Examples include the intervention in Somalia in the early 1990s, the intervention in the former Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s, and the mission in South Sudan today. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2009, UN peacekeepers assisted the Congolese national army in a military offensive against rebels, prompting violent reprisals (see **Case Study 21.1**). The UN continues to play a prominent role in peacekeeping. In late 2018, the total number of uniformed peacekeeping personnel (military and police) in the UN's 14 on-going peacekeeping operations was approximately 90,000.

As issues of peace and security were increasingly understood to include **human security** and justice, there were concerns that these new activities could go against the doctrine of non-intervention. Intervention was traditionally defined as a deliberate incursion into a state without its consent by some outside agency, in order to change the functioning, policies, and goals of its government and achieve effects that favour the interests of the intervenor (Vincent 1974) (see **Ch. 32**).

Box 21.4 An agenda for peace

In the early 1990s, after the end of the cold war, the UN agenda for peace and security expanded quickly. The UN secretary-general at the time, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, outlined a more ambitious role for the UN in his seminal report *An Agenda for Peace* (1992). The report described interconnected roles for the UN to maintain peace and security. These included:

- Preventive diplomacy: involving confidence-building measures, fact-finding, and preventive deployment of UN authorized forces.
- Peacemaking: designed to bring hostile parties to agreement, essentially through peaceful means.
- Peace enforcement: authorized under Chapter VII of the Charter, and permitted to occur without the consent of the parties.
- Peacekeeping: the deployment of a UN presence in the field with the consent of all parties (this refers to classical peacekeeping).
- Post-conflict peacebuilding: to develop the social, political, and economic infrastructure to prevent further violence and to consolidate peace.

At the founding of the UN, sovereignty was regarded as central to the system of states. States were equal members of international society and were equal with regard to international law. Sovereignty also implied that states recognized no higher authority than themselves, and that there was no superior jurisdiction. The governments of states had exclusive jurisdiction within their own borders, a principle enshrined in Article 2(7) of the United Nations Charter (see **Box 21.1**).

In earlier periods, however, states had intervened in each other's affairs. The United States refused to accept any curtailment of its right to intervene in the internal affairs of other states in its hemisphere until 1933, when it conceded the point at the 7th International Conference of American States. The US position was very similar to the **Brezhnev doctrine** of the 1970s, which held that the Soviet Union had the right to intervene in the member states of the socialist commonwealth to protect the principles of socialism.

Much earlier, the British had insisted on the abolition of slavery in their relations with other states. They stopped ships on the high seas and imposed the abolition of slavery as a condition in treaties (Bethell 1970). There were also occasions when states tried to bind other states to respect certain principles in their internal affairs. A number of states in Eastern Europe, such as Hungary and Bulgaria, were bound to respect the rights of minorities within their frontiers, based on agreements made at the Berlin Conference of 1878 by the great powers. In practice, then, intervention was a common feature of international politics.

By the 1990s, some people pointed out that the UN Charter did not assert merely the rights of states, but also the rights of peoples: statehood could be interpreted as conditional on respect for such rights. Others, however, were concerned that any change in the principle of non-intervention would be used as a tool by richer and more powerful states to impose their interests and views on poorer and weaker ones.

The major pronouncements of the UN General Assembly referred to the primary responsibility of states for dealing with complex crises within their borders. A 1991 General Assembly resolution implied some relaxation of this principle when it held that 'The sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of States must be fully respected in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. In this context, humanitarian assistance should be provided with the consent of the affected country and in principle on the basis of an appeal by the affected country' (A/RES/46/182). The

use of the phrase 'in principle', and the term 'should', implied that there could be occasions where intervention was necessary even when consent from the target state was not possible. In the Outcome Document of the 2005 World Summit, the General Assembly said that if national authorities are 'manifestly failing to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity', and if peaceful means are inadequate, the international community could take collective action through the UN Security Council according to Chapter VII of the Charter (A/RES/60/1, paras 138 and 139). This document echoes recommendations from *The Responsibility to Protect*, the 2001 final report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (see **Ch. 32**).

Yet the number of occasions in which a UN resolution has justified intervention due to gross infringements of the rights of individuals has remained limited. Kosovo was arguably the first occasion in which international forces were used in defiance of a sovereign state in order to protect humanitarian standards. NATO launched the air campaign in March 1999 in Kosovo against the Republic of Yugoslavia without a mandate from the Security Council, since Russia had declared that it would veto such action. Nonetheless, NATO states noted that by intervening to stop ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity in Kosovo they were acting in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter. The intervention in Libya in 2011 was another case. A Security Council resolution approved a no-fly zone over Libya and called for 'all necessary measures' to protect civilians (S/Res/1973). A multi-state coalition intervened to implement the resolution. NATO later assumed command of the Libya mission.

The Iraq War in 2003 was questionably another case of intervention to protect the rights of individuals without host country consent, although the legality of intervention under existing Security Council resolutions is contested and the motives for intervention are disputed (see **Case Study 21.2**). The US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 is an exceptional case in which the UN Security Council acknowledged the right of a state which had been attacked—referring to the events of 11 September 2001 in the US—to respond in its own defence.

The difficulty in relaxing the principle of non-intervention should not be underestimated. For instance, the UN was reluctant to send peacekeepers to Darfur without the consent of the Sudanese government. After intensive international diplomacy and negotiations about the nature of the force, Sudan consented

Case Study 21.2 The 2003 intervention in Iraq



A Security Council vote at the United Nations, 2003

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In March 2003, a US-led coalition launched a highly controversial war in Iraq, which removed Saddam Hussein from power. The justification for war stressed Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, in defiance of earlier UN resolutions. Unlike in Kosovo, the gross violation of human rights was not given as a main justification for the invasion until later. The failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, as well as the subsequent civil war, fuelled critics' claims that the war was unjustified.

There was no agreement over whether the UN Security Council authorized military action in Iraq. American and British diplomats pointed to UN Security Council Resolution 687 of 1991,

which required the destruction of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction under UN supervision, and UN Security Council Resolution 1441 of 2002, which threatened 'serious consequences' if this were not done. Yet efforts to reach a Security Council resolution in the winter of 2003 that would clearly authorize the use of force against Iraq were unsuccessful. France and Russia threatened to veto a second Security Council resolution authorizing force.

The credibility of the UN was damaged by the failure to agree on a second Security Council resolution, and by the decision of the US and British administrations, along with a small number of allies, to use force against Iraq without clear UN authorization. There were fears of an increased tendency for the US to act without UN authorization. The Bush administration's National Security Strategy of September 2002 stated that '[W]e will be prepared to act apart when our interests and unique responsibilities require' (NSS 2002: 31).

Nonetheless, the aftermath of the invasion and the continued difficulties in establishing security in Iraq and elsewhere in the region have highlighted the need for international cooperation. Some people argue that the UN enhances the legitimacy of military action, and can help share in global risks, burdens, and strategies for post-conflict rebuilding.

Question 1: Do you think that the 2003 intervention in Iraq and its aftermath shows the importance of the UN or its limitations?

Question 2: Do you think that there are lessons from the UN experience in Iraq that are relevant to more recent conflicts, such as those in Syria and Yemen?

and the force was established in July 2007 (S/Res/1769). In 2012, Russia and China vetoed a Security Council resolution proposing further sanctions on Syria (under Chapter VII of the UN Charter), arguing that this could open a path to external military involvement in Syrian internal affairs, and in 2014 they again vetoed a Security Council resolution to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court. Between 2016 and 2018, Russia vetoed eight Security Council resolutions on Syria. There is some concern that a relaxation of the non-intervention principle by the UN will lead to military action by individual states without UN approval (see **Case Study 21.2**). More generally, relations between the US and Russia and China have deteriorated, and there is the fear of great power unilateralism, especially as US President Trump has frequently expressed criticism of the UN.

An increasing readiness by the UN to intervene within states to promote justice for individuals would indicate a movement towards **global governance** and away from unconditional sovereignty. There have been some signs of movement in this direction, but

principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention remain important.

From peacekeeping to peacebuilding

Partly due to the terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001 as well as the impasse reached in the UN Security Council over Iraq in 2003, Secretary-General Kofi Annan named a high-level panel to examine the major threats and challenges to global peace. The 2004 final report emphasized the interconnected nature of security threats, and presented development, security, and human rights as mutually reinforcing. Many of the report's recommendations were not implemented, but some were, notably the establishment of a new UN Peacebuilding Commission (see **Box 21.5**).

Since then, there have been a number of efforts to review and reform the UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding architecture. Three peace and security reviews in 2015 expressed concern that changes in the drivers of violence in some parts of the world may be outpacing the ability of

Box 21.5 The UN Peacebuilding Commission

The UN Peacebuilding Commission was established in December 2005 as an intergovernmental advisory subsidiary body of the General Assembly and the Security Council. It was first proposed by the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change in December 2004, and again in the Secretary-General's Report *In Larger Freedom* in March 2005 (UN 2005). Existing mechanisms at the UN were thought to be insufficient in responding to the particular needs of countries emerging from conflict. Many countries, such as Liberia, Haiti, and Somalia in the 1990s, had signed peace agreements and hosted UN peacekeeping missions, but later reverted to violent conflict. The Peacebuilding Commission proposes integrated strategies and priorities for post-conflict recovery. The establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission is indicative of a growing trend at the UN to coordinate security and development programming.

The organizational committee of the Peacebuilding Commission is made up of 31 member states. There are also country-specific meetings to look at the post-conflict strategies, priorities, and programming for particular countries. So far, all of the countries on the agenda of the Peacebuilding Commission have been in Africa: Burundi, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, and the Central African Republic. The Peacebuilding Support Fund is designed to provide support during the early stages of recovery for countries on the Peacebuilding Commission's agenda as well as countries in similar circumstances designated by the secretary-general.

UN peace operations to respond effectively. The reports contain broad agreement on the need for improved intergovernmental coherence, greater focus on political solutions, more predictable financing, gender inclusivity, and more flexible peace operations. In 2019, Secretary-General Guterres reorganized the peace and security units at UN headquarters to help deliver more regionally integrated political strategies and to make transitions out of peace operations less disruptive. Nonetheless, there is no consensus among member states on issues such as the use of force and support to counterterrorism operations.

The UN's record on the maintenance of international peace and security has been mixed. On the one

hand, there has been a stronger assertion of international responsibility for gross offences against populations. Nonetheless, intimations of a new world order in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991 quickly gave way to despondency with what were seen as failures in Somalia, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia, and increasing disagreement about the proper role of the UN. Compared to the enthusiasm about the potential for the UN in the early 1990s, the disagreements over the war in Iraq in 2003 and over Syria since 2011 are striking. Debates about which institutions and actors are most effective in conducting peace operations have been reinvigorated, and a variety of non-UN actors, including regional organizations and ad hoc coalitions, have been involved in recent military operations. Likewise, there is no consensus on how best to confront non-state-based threats, such as terrorism and the proliferation of small arms. There are also concerns over the increased use of the Security Council veto in recent years, and the criticisms of multilateralism expressed by US President Trump and some other populist leaders.

Key Points

- The cold war and the decolonization process discouraged more active involvement by the United Nations within states.
- By the mid-1990s the UN had become involved in maintaining international peace and security by resisting aggression between states, attempting to resolve disputes within states (civil wars), and focusing on economic, social, and political conditions within states.
- The United Nations does not have a monopoly on peace operations. While the UN often provides legitimization, operations are sometimes conducted by regional organizations, ad hoc coalitions, or hybrid arrangements involving UN and non-UN actors, such as the African Union.
- The UN has paid increasing attention to peacebuilding and the gendered dimensions of peace and security, with a number of important reports and initiatives in these areas. Critics, however, point to severe shortcomings such as allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse committed by some UN peacekeeping personnel.

The United Nations and economic and social questions

Promoting social and economic development is an important UN goal. The preamble to the UN Charter talks of promoting 'social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom', and the need to 'employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples'.

The North–South divide along with cold war rivalries profoundly shaped the UN's efforts in these areas. The US and the USSR had very different ideas about how to promote economic and social progress. The UN's economic agenda was originally dominated by the Bretton Woods institutions, which promoted a free-market ideological

agenda. Voting rights and decision-making in these institutions were skewed towards rich Western countries, and their early focus was on post-war rebuilding (see Ch. 16).

The increase in UN membership through decolonization in the late 1950s and 1960s prompted an increasing focus on global economic inequalities, and a push to find alternative ways to promote development within the UN system. The number of institutions in the UN system addressing economic and social issues increased significantly. In the 1960s UNCTAD was a key forum for dialogue between developed and developing countries, and this led to the creation of the Group of 77, a coalition of developing countries to promote their collective economic interests at the UN. The UNDP was established in 1965 as a Fund and Programme (see Fig. 21.1) and became a key actor in the UN's efforts to reduce global poverty. The UNDP was important in promoting the idea of human development, and since 1990 it has published the influential annual Human Development Report, which links security and development concerns.

Even as economic and social issues became increasingly important at the UN, the main contributor states reduced their funding. By the mid-1990s, there was a crippling financial crisis in the regular Assessed Budget for the UN and in the budget for peacekeeping operations. This was mitigated only when the US agreed, under certain conditions, to repay what it owed the UN and when it returned to full funding in December 2002 (see Box 21.6).

Paradoxically, despite the shortage of funds, the UN acquired new skills with regard to key economic and social problems. During the 1990s, a number of new issues were brought onto the international agenda. Several global conferences were convened to discuss pressing problems, such as environmental issues at a conference in Rio de Janeiro (1992), human rights at a conference in Vienna (1993), population questions at a conference in Cairo (1994), and women's issues at a conference in Beijing (1995). These conferences each spawned a commission to carry forward the programme. Such conferences represented a growing sense of interdependence and the globalization of human concerns. They also translated broad socio-economic concerns into more specific manageable programmes (see Box 21.7). Follow-up conferences were held to take stock of progress.

Alongside growing UN involvement in development issues in the 1990s, the UN economic and social arrangements underwent reform at the country (field) level and at headquarters level. A key feature of the reforms at the country level was the adoption of Country Strategy Notes, written on the basis of discussions between the specialized agencies, funds and programmes, donors, and the

Box 21.6 Assessed contributions to the UN Regular Budget

Contributions to the UN Regular Budget are set by the General Assembly. The assessed contributions are based on the size of a member state's national economy as a proportion of the global economy, to a ceiling of 22 per cent. For 2018–9, the General Assembly approved a budget of \$5.39 billion (GA/11997), down from \$5.8 billion for 2014–5. The member states with the six highest assessed contributions for the 2018–9 Regular Budget are as follows:

1. United States	22.00 per cent
2. Japan	9.68 per cent
3. China	7.92 per cent
4. Germany	6.39 per cent
5. France	4.86 per cent
6. United Kingdom	4.46 per cent

The Funds and Programmes, such as UNDP and UNICEF, are not included in the regular budget and are financed through voluntary contributions by member states. In recent years the proportion of voluntary funding in overall budgets has significantly increased.

host country. These described the plans of the various institutions and donors in a particular country, clearly setting out targets, roles, and priorities. Another reform at the country level was the strengthening of the Resident Coordinator, usually an employee of the UNDP. He or she became the responsible officer at the country level. At headquarters level, the 1990s reform focused on the reorganization and rationalization of ECOSOC, allowing it to become more assertive and to take a leading role in the coordination of the UN system (A/50/227, para. 37).

By the end of the 1990s it was clear that development was still very unequal around the world. In 2000 the UN convened a Millennium Summit, where heads of state committed themselves to a series of measurable goals and targets known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals included reducing by half the number of people living on less than a dollar a day, achieving universal primary education, and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS and malaria (A/55/L.2). At the time of the MDG deadline in 2015, there had been significant accomplishments, but progress had been uneven across regions and countries.

In September 2015, the UN Summit agreed on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which provide a vision for the world by 2030. There are 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets, ranging from

Box 21.7 The United Nations climate change conferences

The United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris in 2015 (COP21) was one of a series of UN Global Conferences focusing on environmental issues. The first UN Conference on the Human Environment, which took place in Stockholm in 1972, stimulated the creation of national environment ministries around the world and established the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Twenty years later, the UN Conference on Environment and Development, the Earth Summit, was held in Rio de Janeiro. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was one of three conventions signed by many governments at the 1992 Earth Summit. The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 was an addition to the UNFCCC, which set binding targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The UNFCCC has guided future climate diplomacy and established the principle of common but differentiated responsibility, meaning that all countries have a role to play in protecting the environment but that highly developed countries have the most responsibility.

There have been annual intergovernmental meetings to discuss progress on the limitation of greenhouse gases and to agree a successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol. It has been difficult for representatives to agree on a legally binding set of targets for the reduction of gas emissions, due to their different interests. For instance, small island states pushed for zero global emissions, whereas oil producers such as Saudi Arabia and Venezuela were more sceptical of decarbonization language. There were also disagreements about which countries should pay. Developed countries that had been the largest polluters in the past often disagreed with large emerging economies such as India, China, Brazil, and

South Africa over compensation, legal liability, and verification procedures.

The Paris conference of 2015 was referred to as COP21 since it was the twenty-first meeting of the Committee of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol. The Paris Agreement was historic because countries adopted the first ever legally-binding global climate deal. The 195 countries at the meeting agreed to the goal of keeping the increase in the global average temperature to 'well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels' (Art 2, section 1). They also agreed to a goal of zero net emissions by the second half of the century. Countries can choose their own targets, thereby overcoming an obstacle that had plagued earlier conferences, but these will be reviewed regularly and transparently. By the end of the Paris conference, there were pledges by 187 countries to make 'intended nationally determined contributions', but critics pointed out that these pledges do not go far enough and that many details were moved out of the legally binding agreement and into more flexible decisions. The parties directed the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to draw up a report, which was published in October 2018. The report concluded that urgent and unprecedented changes and shifts in energy systems and transport would be needed to reach targets of 1.5–2°C goals. Some countries have expressed reservations; for instance, US President Donald Trump and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro have threatened to withdraw from the accord.

Despite their limitations, the climate conferences make clear that environmental issues remain prominent on the UN agenda, and demonstrate the importance of the United Nations as a framework for moving towards global agreement.

eradicating extreme poverty, to combatting inequalities within and between countries, to empowering women, to improving energy efficiency. Compared to the MDGs, which consisted of narrower goals focused mainly on developing countries, the SDGs are universally applicable to all countries. The process leading to the SDGs was much more inclusive than the one for the MDGs, involving a large consultation programme and an open working group with representatives from 70 countries. The ambitious breadth and inclusive nature of the agenda have been praised by some but criticized by others for not being achievable and for making it difficult to prioritize. In 2018, Secretary-General Guterres launched a number of institutional

reforms to help achieve the SDGs, including strengthening the role of the Resident Coordinators in the field.

Since the founding of the UN there has been growing activity in areas of social and economic development. Various reforms have meant that the two poles of the system were better coordinated: the pole where intentions are defined through global conferences and agendas, and the pole where programmes are implemented. The reform of ECOSOC sharpened its capacity to shape broad agreements into cross-sectoral programmes with well-defined objectives. The adoption of the MDGs and SDGs has provided a focus to the UN's work in these areas, although progress remains uneven.

Key Points

- The cold war and the North–South divide led to differences in opinions over how best to address economic and social development.
- The number of institutions in the UN system that address economic and social issues has increased significantly. Several Programmes and Funds have been created in response to global conferences.
- Reform of the economic and social arrangements of the UN in the late 1990s aimed at improving coordination and clarifying spheres of responsibility.
- The MDGs consisted of measurable socio-economic targets and further integrated the work of the UN at the country level. They have been replaced by the SDGs, which are universally applicable to all countries.

Conclusion

Over the past 70 years, the rules governing the **international system** have become increasingly numerous and specific, covering a large range of the activities of relations among states. With its extensive accomplishments and continued challenges, the UN is an indispensable part of the global system. Disagreements remain over the conditions in which, and extent to which, the UN should concern itself with the internal affairs of states, and there are tensions between power and equality, but the mere fact that the UN continues to exist shows that it serves important functions in the world.

Participation in the United Nations gives governments status in the international system. Membership and success in the UN has come to be regarded as legitimizing **state autonomy**. Hence, holding office, taking initiatives, providing personnel, and policing norms are seen to have value because they add to the self-esteem as well as to the power of the state. The UN has become

the essential club for states. The capacity of the UN in its economic and social work and its management of peacekeeping and peacebuilding have expanded since the 1990s. Nonetheless, global great power rivalries, the possibility of US unilateralism, the heightened concern over terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, the inability to respond effectively to many crises, for instance in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan, Myanmar and Syria, and the pervasiveness of inequality and injustice across the world, signal that further changes in the UN system will be necessary (see **Opposing Opinions 21.1**).



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Opposing Opinions 21.1 The United Nations is the best-placed actor to maintain international peace and security

For

There has not been a Third World War since the creation of the UN. Despite the fact that many countries have disagreements and possess large weapons arsenals, these conflicts have not escalated into another world war.

There is no other organization with the legitimacy of universal membership. Only the UN has the legitimacy that comes with universal membership. Even when military action is carried out by regional organizations, there is an attempt to get UN Security Council authorization.

The UN has succeeded in ending many conflicts and mitigating tensions, and in improving development in many parts of the world. The work of the UN has been critical in resolving conflicts and preventing their recurrence. The UN has been flexible enough to respond to new kinds of threats (e.g. civil wars). Development programmes have improved the lives of millions around the world, making it less likely that they will resort to violence to resolve disputes.

Against

The UN no longer reflects the global balance of power. The current composition of the Security Council does not represent today's balance of power, showing that it is an outdated institution in need of reform.

The UN is unable to act effectively in areas of interest to the permanent members of the Security Council. Due to the use of the veto, it is not possible for the UN to respond effectively to certain conflicts, such as the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and Israel/Palestine.

The UN is ill-equipped to deal with new international security threats. The UN was designed to respond to interstate conflict and has difficulty dealing with new threats from non-state actors. It is ill-equipped to take on counter-insurgency roles.

1. If the UN did not exist, how would countries respond to threats to international peace and security?
2. Do you think that new sources of security threats and changes in the global balance of power mean that the UN is becoming less relevant?
3. How can the UN be reformed to better address global threats and challenges?



For advice on how to answer these questions, see the pointers www.oup.com/he/baylis8e

Questions

1. How does the United Nations try to maintain international order?
2. Does the UN primarily reflect the interests of the most powerful states?
3. What are some of the barriers to UN Security Council reform?
4. Does increased UN activity undermine the sovereignty of states?
5. How far have traditional restraints been relaxed with regard to UN intervention within states?
6. How have UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding evolved?
7. Is the UN equipped to respond to new threats to global security?
8. Has reform of the economic and social arrangements of the UN been effective?
9. Are the Sustainable Development Goals an improvement over the Millennium Development Goals?
10. Has the UN outlived its usefulness?



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Further Reading

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