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The United Nations in a Multi-Polar World

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents **1**
Introduction **2**
Definition of Key Terms **3**
Balance of power 3
Global South 3
P5 Nations 3
Major powers 3
Multilateralism 3
Polarity 3
Polarization 3
Rising powers 4
Security Council 4
UN Charter 4
Veto Right 4
Western Nations 4
General Overview **5**
Origins of the United Nations 5
History of the United Nations: a brief overview 5
Calls for reforms 6
Obstacles for reforms 7
Next steps 7
Major Parties Involved **8**
Africa Group 8
French Republic 8
People's Republic of China 8
Russian Federation 8
United States of America 8
Timeline of Events **9**
Possible Solutions **10**
Bibliography **11**

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) in a multi-polar world refers to the ongoing shift in the world order, and how it affects the functioning of the UN. In 1945, at the foundation of the UN, international geopolitics were dominated by two global superpowers. This influenced the functioning of the UN, as politics were more 'black-and-white' as opposed to the vast diversity of political opinions and desires from the different Member States of the United Nations. This shift from a bipolar order to a multipolar configuration has had significant implications on the UN's effectiveness, authority, and structure.

Many nations are calling for significant reforms in the UN to restructure what many consider an outdated organization, rusted in the ways of the past. Having been established in post-WWII scenario's, many nations have begun to question the relevance of the UN and its ability to operate in modern contexts. These doubts are further enhanced by the creation of newer and smaller multilateral organizations that many consider to be more agile when handling crises and representative of the current global balance of power.

While the world and its international politics have evolved drastically since the foundation of the United Nations, many believe that the organization has rusted and settled in its old ways, leading to doubts regarding its relevance nowadays. These are doubts that must be addressed, calling for a reevaluation of the UN's structure and method of operation.

Definition of Key Terms

Balance of power

The theoretical concept which states that in international relations peace and stability is achieved when the strongest opposing powers maintain relatively equal strength. As a result, they would deter each other's ambitions, keeping each other in check. In a multipolar system, the dynamics of balancing[1] and bandwagoning[2] become more intricate and complex.

Global South

The Global South is a broad term which refers to a group of countries, primarily located in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania. They are often characterized by lower levels of economic development, historical experiences with colonialism, and varying degrees of political and social marginalization. They are one of the main groups pushing for reform in the Security Council to make it more representative of contemporary politics and power dynamics.

P5 Nations

The P5 nations are the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, in which they hold the veto right. The P5 nations consist of China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US.

Major powers

Sovereign states that are recognized as having significant military, economic, and diplomatic influence on a global scale. In the context of the United Nations, the P5 members of the security council have historically been seen as the world's major powers. However, the concept of multipolarity suggests an expansion of this group.

Multilateralism

The principle of coordinating relations among three of more states in accordance with certain general principles or rules. The United Nations is the prime example of a multilateral institution. Multipolarity presents challenges and opportunities for multilateralism, as it requires more actors to agree on common solutions to global issues. The opposite of multilateralism is unilateralism, which is when a nation refuses to work with other nations, and instead chooses to work independently

Polarity

The number of 'poles' or dominant power centers in the international system. Unipolarity – or hegemony – refers to a system dominated by a single major power, such as was the case with the United States in the post-Cold War era. Bipolarity refers to a system with two dominant major powers, such as the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War. Multipolarity refers to a system with three or more powers capable of influencing global affairs. This is the shift currently being discussed, with the rise of new powers beyond the traditional Western ones.

Polarization

Simply put, polarization refers to the divergence of attitudes, positions, and interests towards ideological extremes. A common result of polarization is the formation of distinct, antagonistic blocs that struggle to find common ground and cooperate on global issues. Polarization often involves an emotional dislike and distrust of other ideologies, which can severely complicate negotiation and genuine cooperation.

[1] In a political context, the forming of alliances against a rising threat
[2] Aligning with the dominant power

Rising powers

Sovereign states that are experiencing rapid economic growth and increasing political and military influence on the international stage. The ascent of these states is a core driver of the shift towards multipolarity and the expansion of the recognized group of major powers. These states are also many of those calling for reforms and reevaluations of the United Nations. Due to their newfound power, they can challenge the existing international order.

Security Council

The United Nations Security Council (SC) is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations, and holds the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. It is the most powerful body within the UN system, as its decisions are legally binding on all UN Member States. This is a unique trait of the SC, as no other committee has the power to issue legally binding decisions. The SC is also unique due to its ad hoc[3] debate style, and the veto right held by certain permanent members.

UN Charter

The UN Charter is the foundational treaty of the United Nations. It outlines the organization's purposes, principles, membership, and structure. It was signed in 1945 and is a binding international agreement for all Member States. The Charter establishes the UN's main organs, such as the General Assembly and Security Council, and defines their respective roles, responsibilities, and procedures. For any UN reform to occur, the UN Charter must be amended, approved by a two-thirds majority vote of the General Assembly, and ratified by the permanent five members of the Security Council.

Veto Right

The right of the five permanent (P5) members of the UN Security Council to reject any substantial proposal without further discussion, regardless of how much support it receives from other nations. The P5 members of the Security Council are the United States of America, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, the Republic of France, and the United Kingdom. This power is a major point in discussions regarding Security Council reform, as many rising powers feel unrepresented by the selection of nations that are granted the veto power.

Western Nations

The Western nations, sometimes referred to simply as "the West", generally refers to countries with historical and cultural ties to Western Europe, including North America, Australia, and New Zealand. The Western nations are also generally considered to be amongst the victors of WWII, the other victors being the comintern, and have since then occupied a powerful role on the world stage. Three of the P5 members of the Security Council are considered to be Western nations.

[3] The unique debate style of the Security Council. Where in other committees a debate can only be started with a draft resolution submitted by a nation in the committee, the Security Council resolutions all start from blank and are built up as nations add their own clauses to form a joint resolution.

General Overview

Origins of the United Nations

Following the end of World War I, the League of Nations was formed to promote international cooperation in the hope to prevent future conflicts. Ultimately, it failed to stop the outbreak of World War II, a failure which highlighted the need for a more effective international organization. This organization emerged as the end of World War II approached in 1945. Many nations were in ruins and the world was clamoring for peace. This prompted representatives of 50 countries to gather in San Francisco for the United Nations Conference on International Organization. For two months they drafted the Charter of the United Nations and the Statue of the new International Court of Justice (ICJ). The UN Charter was signed on the 26th of June 1945 by representatives of the 50 countries attending the conference in San Francisco.

However, the foundation of the United Nations was in the works well before the San Francisco conference in 1945. In June of 1941, representative of the Allied nations[4] met in London and signed the Declaration of St. James' Palace, in which they expressed a vision for a post-war order based on cooperation and peace. In August of that same year, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill published the Atlantic Charter, outlining shared goals for a peaceful world. These goals included the right to self-determination and greater economic cooperation between nations. In January of 1942, 26 Allied nations signed the Declaration by United Nations, in which they pledged to defeat the Axis powers, using the term "United Nations" to describe their alliance.

The idea of this new international institution was further worked out at the Dumbarton Oaks Conference (1944). The former discussed which nations would be invited to become members, the formation of the Security Council, and the veto right that would be given to its permanent members. Following the previously mentioned San Francisco Conference and the creation of the UN Charter, the United Nations officially came into existence on October 24th, 1945, when the Charter was ratified[5] by most signatories, including the five permanent members of the Security Council.

History of the United Nations: a brief overview

Following its creation, the United Nations quickly became a forum to address issues such as colonial independence, humanitarian rights, and conflict resolution, as well as the creation of important agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

When the Cold War broke out, the world became starkly bipolar, split between the US and its allies and the USSR and its bloc. This rivalry deeply affected the UN's operations in many ways. The Security Council was often at an impasse on key issues due to both the United States and the Soviet Union holding the veto right. Despite this, the UN played crucial roles in peacekeeping and overseeing decolonization, helping dozens of new nations gain independence. The UN continued to expand, with membership increasing as former colonies became sovereign nations.

Following the end of the Cold War, the UN became primarily unipolar. With the US emerging as the temporary global hegemon, the UN became more active in peacekeeping, conflict prevention,

[4] The Allied nations were the countries that opposed the Axis powers – primarily Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan – during World War II. This group of nations included the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and China, as well as France, Australia, Canada, and more.

[5] The action of signing or giving formal consent to a treaty, contract, or agreement, making it officially valid (Oxford dictionary). This usually involves passing the terms of the agreements into a nation's legislature.

and development. It launched major initiatives like the Millenium Development Goals, a series of eight international goals that all 193 members of the UN – as well as at least 23 international organizations – agreed to achieve by 2015. These goals were designed to tackle crucial issues such as poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, gender inequality, and environmental degradation. The Security Council became generally more cohesive, however the UN did face criticism about its method of handling crises such as Rwanda and Srebrenica.

Since the early 2000s, the world has seen power diffuse to new actors, including both nations (for e.g. China and India) and regional blocs (like the EU and ASEAN). The United States' position as global hegemon has slowly been eroded, and many different nations with distinct interests have raised their voices to express their interests. This shift from a unipolar to multi-polar world order means the UN has had to navigate more divergent and competing interests, making it hard to find consensus in the Security Council and General Assemblies. There has been an increase in reform efforts – such as the establishment of the Human Rights Council in 2006 – and many nations are clamoring for Security Council reform to better reflect modern power dynamics. Additionally, the creation of specialized agencies (such as UN Women, UNODC, etc.) and global agreements (for example the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement) have exposed shifting global challenges and a need for more inclusive governance.

Calls for reforms

In this new multi-polar world order, the UN has been deemed by many in dire need of reforms. The UN Secretary-General and Senior Leadership, Member States, and civil society and policy experts have all expressed their wishes for reforms within the United Nations. The issue lies in the technicality that they do not agree on which reforms are required and therefore oppose each other when trying to pursue their own goals, resulting in a kind of paralysis when it comes to any actual change.

The UN Secretary-General is one of the actors involved who would like to see change in the organization. He has proposed the UN80 Initiative, a three-pronged approach to improve three main areas of the UN. Firstly, he would enhance operational efficiency by streamlining processes through the identification of redundancies and improved coordination across UN agencies, funds, and programs. Guterres also wishes to assess how existing mandates are being implemented, and whether these are still relevant and effective, with hopes of being able to reduce the large bureaucracy required to process the vast number of mandates. Finally, he would like to explore changes to the UN's organizational structure, with the aim of creating a more agile and responsive system.

Western donors and countries facing budget pressures have called for efficiency, cost-cutting and proof of effectiveness regarding the UN's usage of its funds, as these are acquired from its member nations. Developing countries and the Global South have prioritized reforms regarding democratization, participation in decision-making, and better representation – especially in the Security Council. Emerging economies are asking for an increased representation and influence within the organization, particularly in the Security Council (much like the developing countries and the Global South). They also seek a more equitable distribution of power and resources and wish to challenge the dominance of the established powers.

Civil society and policy experts have often demanded more inclusive governance, more transparency, and a greater role for non-state actors in the UN's processes. As it is generally only member nations of the UN that are permitted to vote on issues or speak on them, it makes sense that these non-state actors have asked for a greater role in the organization's role in international governance.

Obstacles for reforms

Achieving the reform that many nations desire is far from easy. The most prominent issue is the competition and power struggles that exist among major powers. The proposed reform to the Security Council, for example, would require the redistribution of power among countries, a process fraught with conflicting interest. As global power competitions intensified, mutual trust among major powers has eroded, making it difficult to reach consensus on specific reforms or even the broader direction of change to be enacted.

Furthermore, the design of the UN as an organization requires the current P5 members of the Security Council to willingly agree to reforms, which they are unlikely to do. There are two crucial elements to this dilemma. Firstly, the veto right granted to these P5 nations in the Security Council allows them a de facto right to block proposals that threaten their privileged status, meaning that any substantial proposals for reform are usually rejected early on. Secondly, the structure of the UN Charter explicitly states that any changes made to it must be ratified by the P5 nations (and two-third of the General Assembly) for them to come into effect. This requirement means that even if amendments were to be made to the UN Charter, a P5 nation's refusal to ratify those amendments would declare them null and void, as the new UN Charter would not come into force for the entire organization. The UN Charter has been amended thrice since its initial adoption in 1945, with the last change having been made on December 20, 1971.

However, a recent fragmentation of multilateralism paired with a recent increase in unilateralist views within member states of the UN has made it even harder to reach consensus regarding reforms. Intensified international rivalry – such as the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the recent bombings that were part of the Iran-Israel War – has undermined the spirit of multilateralism that forms the bedrock on which the UN rests. This is not aided by the recent rise in unilateralist policies adopted within some Member States. A prime example of this is the unilateralist policies adopted by the newest United States government, such as "America First", which has led to the US withdrawing support (and even funding) from the UN system. All this sets a precedent that challenges the UN's authority and complicates cooperation on reforms.

Next steps

Generally, all parties involved with the United Nations have some wishes for the reforms they would enact. However, the issue lies in the lack of a shared vision due to a modern multi-polar world order and a rising trend of unilateralism in member nations. The UN largely rests on the idea of multilateral governance, and the willingness of its Member States to engage with it. Tackling this issue will require expert negotiation between parties and a willingness to compromise from all nations. Every member state of the UN has its own views and interests, yet this issue requires these nations to look past their own needs and consider how they can cooperate with others to reach a consensus that benefits everyone.

Major Parties Involved

Africa Group

The Africa Group at the United Nations is made up of 54 African Union Member States. As it is entirely unrepresented on the Security Council, it wants greater representation for the African continent, pushing for at least two permanent and five non-permanent seats for Africa on the Security Council.

French Republic

The French Republic – more commonly known as France – is a strong supporter of United Nations reform and deems it urgent to update and strengthen the organization to meet contemporary challenges. It has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to multilateralism, respect for international law, and cooperative international relations. It warns against the dangers of unilateralism, which is seen as a threat to global stability. As a P5 nation, France advocates for "ambitious reform" of the Security Council, showing support for proposals to enlarge both the permanent and non-permanent membership categories. It has shown firm support of the G4 nations and has called for the inclusion of at least two African states as permanent members. France is also in favor of the regulation of the veto, leading an initiative that urges the P5 to voluntarily suspend their veto in cases of mass atrocities.

People's Republic of China

The People's Republic of China emphasizes that any UN reform must uphold true multilateralism, reinforce the central role of the UN in international affairs, and be conducted through broad consultation and consensus. It is firmly against unilateralism and "hegemonism", arguing for a global order where no single nation dominates. It also stresses the importance of membership-driven consultation to build broad consensus and avoid divisive or hasty decisions. China supports continuing intergovernmental negotiations as the main reform channel and insists on package solutions that address all key issues in a balanced way.

Russian Federation

The Russian Federation's views on UN reforms are shaped by its desire to preserve its influence, promote a multi-polar global order, and strengthen the representation of developing countries without undermining the effectiveness or authority of the United Nations, especially the Security Council. It maintains that UN reforms should broaden representation – particularly in the Security Council – but must not come at the cost of the Council's effectiveness. Regarding the Security Council expansion, Russia is highly opposed to any expansion of the permanent members to include more Western or wealthy nations. Instead, it favors strengthening the voices of the "world majority", or in other words emerging and developing nations.

United States of America

The United States of America maintains an intricate policy regarding UN reform and multilateralism. Concerning the UN Security Council, it is in favor of its expansion to be more representative of current world politics, however it is opposed to granting new permanent nations veto rights. The United States has become especially controversial since the beginning of President Donald J. Trump's term. While having strongly advocated for the creation of the UN and being one of its founding member states, it has recently adopted a more unilateralist approach to foreign policy. This is part of his "America First" agenda, which includes the withdrawal from international agreements and institutions, the use of economic pressure and tariffs, an increased emphasis on national sovereignty and interests, and reduced support for international aid and diplomacy.

Timeline of Events

1945 June 26	The United Nations Charter signed in San Francisco
1945 October 24	The UN Charter enters into force, officially establishing the UN and the Security Council. Its first session is on January 17, 1946
1945 – 1970s	Rapid increase in UN members, mainly newly independent states from Africa and Asia. As the number of member states soars, calls begin for greater representation in Security Council decision-making
1963 December 17	The UN General Assembly adopts Resolution 1991 (XVIII) to amend the Charter, increasing non-permanent Security Council seats from 6 to 10. This change enters into force after ratification on August 31, 1956, and is the only substantial Security Council reform to date
1989 – 1991	End of the Cold War, after which the bipolar world order (US vs. USSR) collapses. The US remains as the temporary global hegemon, but new regional and rising powers begin to demand a voice reflecting multi-polar realities
1992 – 1993	The UN officially launches debate on Security Council reform, and this is formally added to its ongoing agenda
Late 1990s – early 2000s	Major emerging powers such as the G4 nations, alongside the African Union and other regional blocs push for permanent seats to match their rising global influence
2005 November 22	World Summit and competing reform models: the UN debates ambitious Security Council expansion proposals led by the G4 and Africa Group. However, a consensus is elusive and the criteria for new members remain unagreed upon
2010s – 2020s	The multi-polar world order becomes even more visible with the rise of China, the greater influence of India, the EU, the African Union, and others. P5 vetoes in situations such as Syria and Ukraine fuel criticism that the Security Council no longer reflects 21st century realities and is often paralyzed by competing national interests
2022 April 26	In direct response to Russia's use of the veto regarding Ukraine, the General Assembly passes a resolution mandating that it convene whenever a Security Council veto is cast, increasing accountability of P5 nations
2024 September 22	The Pact for the Future is adopted at the Summit of the Future. Global leaders, acknowledging multipolarity, adopt a comprehensive program including commitment to Security Council reform to make it more "representative, inclusive, transparent, efficient, effective, democratic, and accountable"
2025 March	The UN Secretary-General presents the UN80 Initiative. It is part of the UN's efforts to strengthen its effectiveness and relevance as it marks its upcoming 80th anniversary

Possible Solutions

The main obstacle in tackling this issue until now has been the resistance form the P5 nations, most of which have been consistently any expansion of permanent membership of the Security Council or of the veto. Though this solution is greatly desired by many nations, it would require strong goodwill from the P5 nations to negotiate and find compromises for the desired Security Council reforms. These P5 nations could be offered clauses for greater transparency regarding funding or be permitted to pay a reduced tax to the UN in exchange for their cooperation, as these are reforms that would be in their interest. It is highly unlikely that this approach will be successful, and it is recommended to look for other alternatives.

One such approach could be to focus on the recent fracturing of multilateralism within the United Nations and building goodwill between rivalling nations. The G4 is constantly opposed by rival nations such as Italy, Pakistan, and Mexico, and solving these rivalries could result in one less obstacle to a Security Council reform. Similarly, though the Africa Group is determined to acquire a Security Council seat, it has yet to reach a consensus as to which African nation should occupy that seat. This further delays progress and makes it hard to present a solid position at the negotiating table. Though the ultimate goal of fair representation in the Security Council may not be reached, these would be steps in the right direction.

Alternatively, a resolution could focus on aiming to heal old rivalries between Member States. Many UN committees often experience paralysis over crucial issues as countries refuse to yield and stick to their own views and positions. This new multi-polar political system that dictates most of international politics requires that (amongst other things) nations be willing to compromise and negotiate, something which is not always the case. Old rivals such as the US and Russia or India and Pakistan could be persuaded to engage in peacebuilding activities to make steps to build trust and goodwill with each other. If done on a large enough scale, the result could be that nations open themselves up to working multilaterally with nations they might not necessarily agree with, which could improve the efficiency of UN debates and decision-making.

Solving this issue will require much negotiation and compromise between nations, especially from the P5 nations. This issue is fraught with complexities, diverse interests, and many stakeholders, making it difficult to tackle the issue as a whole in one go. Instead of attempting a solution that would fix all the previously mentioned issues, it could be prudent to focus on one specific aspect to work out and reach consensus upon. As the old saying goes, Rome wasn't built in a day, and much like Rome a solution to this issue will require much discussion and debate to reach consensus and agreements on how the UN should adapt to operating in this contemporary multi-polar world order. It therefore might be best to tackle it one step at a time.

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