

AT 75, THE UN NEEDS A REBIRTH

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: UNO and its various Agencies

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October 24 marks the [diamond jubilee of the United Nations](#). But far from joyous celebration, it is an occasion to sombly reflect on why the UN is stagnating at 75 and how it can regain its lost lustre.

Although much has changed in the international system since 1945, the world body continues to see a tussle between 'principle' and 'power'. On the one hand, the UN represents hopes of a peaceful and just world order through multilateral cooperation, abidance by international law, and uplift of the downtrodden. On the other, the institution has been designed to privilege the most powerful states of the post-World War II dispensation by granting them commanding heights over international politics via the undemocratic instruments of veto power and permanent seats in the Security Council (UNSC).

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Arguably, if the great powers of that period were not accommodated with VIP status, we may have seen a repeat of the ill-fated League of Nations. Keeping all the major powers inside the tent and reasonably happy through joint control over the UNSC was intended to be a pragmatic step to avoid another world war. Presumably, the collective command model of big powers built into the UNSC is one of the reasons why there has been no third world war.

But this model has also caused havoc. Almost immediately after the UN's creation, it was pushed to the verge of irrelevance by the Cold War, which left the UN little room to implement noble visions of peace, development and human rights. It was only in the uncontested post-Cold War political milieu, when the liberal sole superpower, the U.S., strode like a colossus, that the UN could spring back to life and embark on a plethora of peacekeeping missions, nation-building interventions and promotion of universal human rights. In the U.S.-led 'new world order' of the 1990s, it appeared as if the problem of 'power' cutting out 'principle' had been resolved under the benign hegemony of a Washington that would be the flag-bearer of UN values.

However, that golden age of the UN was too deceptive to last. We are now past the unipolar moment and the ghosts of the Cold War are returning in complex multi-sided avatars. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has labelled the present peaking of geopolitical tensions as a "great fracture". The phrase 'new Cold War' is in vogue to depict the clash between China and the U.S. Tensions involving other players like Russia, Turkey, Iran and Israel in West Asia, as well as between China and its neighbours in Asia, are at an all-time high.

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The recrudescence of the worst habits of competitive vetoing by P-5 countries has prevented the UNSC from fulfilling its collective security mandate. So dangerous are the divisions and their spillover effects that Mr. Guterres has lamented that "we have essentially failed" to cooperate against the immediate global threat of the pandemic. He has also rekindled the old maxim, "The UN is only as strong as its members' commitment to its ideals."

But apart from rivalries of member states, there is a larger underlying problem. At the core of the paralysis of the UN is the phenomenon of P-5 countries (China, France, Russia, the U.K., and

the U.S.) blocking reforms. Outmoded procedures based on the discriminatory original sin of superior prerogatives to P-5 countries have to be discarded. Why should expansion of the UNSC require consensus of the P-5? In the 21st century, why should there be veto power in anyone's hands? If a simple majority voting method could replace the P-5 consensus method, the obstacles to UNSC reforms would reduce.

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On the 75th anniversary of the UN, there must be a global push against ossifying 'rules' which have privileged 'rule' of the few over the many. That is the only way to restore some balance between 'power' and 'principle' and ensure a renaissance of the UN.

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