

STRENGTHENING THE UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations (UN) came into being in 1945 at the end of World War II with the aim of ensuring pacific resolution to disputes between nations, to prevent disputes from escalating into war, to persuade opposing parties to use the negotiating table rather than the force of arms, and to help restore peace when conflict breaks out. The memory of the horrendous consequences of the Second World War were fresh when the UN Charter was drawn up, hence the preamble to the UN Charter was a fitting document whose opening paragraph read:

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and 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, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.¹

President Obama also emphasized this aspect during his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 22, 2009 when he quoted President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the chief architect of the United Nations, “The structure of world peace cannot be the work of one man, or one party, or one nation... It cannot be a peace of large nations—or of small nations. It must be a peace which rests on cooperative effort of the whole world.”² The main purpose of the United Nations is to maintain peace and security around the world. Each member nation must play its part, working with and through the United Nations, to promote its ideals and to strengthen it further.

Since its inception, the United Nations has lived up to its Charter and fulfilled its mandate to a great extent; in the first six decades of its existence the UN, with the help of its different organizations, has carried out a very useful service to mankind and advanced freedom and human rights around the world. It has also made a tremendous impact on the lives of millions in poorer parts of the world by providing shelter, basic education, and critical health care and disease control.

The UN has participated in numerous peacekeeping operations right from the time of its creation, a role it continues to play even today. It has not only helped in preventing and resolving disputes and in peacekeeping between warring parties, but has also met many other challenges of global magnitude confronting the world. These include alleviating hunger and poverty; providing assistance in pandemics like HIV/AIDS and various other forms of diseases; resolving social, economic, and political injustices, and political exclusion on matters of cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity; resolving human rights abuses and the failure of nation-states to provide security and livelihood to its people; and providing succor at the time of natural calamities like cyclones, earthquakes, floods, droughts, and famines.

The United Nations member nations, conscious of their obligations and in their collective wisdom, drafted the Millennium Development Goals in September 2000.³ There are eight goals of pressing development challenges that have been identified to be implemented by 2015. These include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, ensuring environmental sustainability, combating HIV/AIDS, controlling malaria and other diseases, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and creating a global partnership for development.⁴ All these challenges need global cooperation, with a central coordinating, controlling, and monitoring organization; the United Nations, obviously, is best suited to fulfill this role. It is also obvious that the UN requires the support of all the member nations to fulfill these tasks.

The security paradigm has altered very significantly since the end of the Cold War, and more so after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which has unleashed a new type of war, namely “terrorism and the fourth generation warfare” in which nonstate actors have created mayhem all around the world by their brutal and inhuman acts. In many cases their home government is unable to rein them in and at times it may even be complicit with them. Under such conditions of turmoil and insecurity the role and active involvement of the United Nations has

become all the more important. This is because the United Nations enjoys a modicum of confidence of the member states, and also because no other nation or group of nations can meet the myriad challenges confronting the world. However, the stature of the UN is fast diminishing due to various reasons, particularly because in the recent past many nations have violated its statutes for their personal gains.

The “war on terror” launched by the United States, both in Afghanistan and Iraq, subsequent to the 9/11 attacks, has clearly illustrated that no nation can fight terrorism by itself; terrorism is afflicting many nations across the globe in varying degrees of magnitude and intensity. Terrorist organizations and groups have their tentacles all over the world, and are interlinked in many ways, and combating them requires a joint effort by all nations. Besides combating the terrorists in the countries concerned, it has been made amply clear by the events in Iraq and Afghanistan that it is even more important (along with combat operations) to rehabilitate the country into a normal and functioning state (preferably a functioning democracy), with the establishment of effective governance, rule of law, provision of basic amenities, jobs and means of livelihood, and various other dimensions which go into ensuring normalcy in the governance of a country. Everyone knows how difficult it is proving to be both in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Besides the scourge of terrorism, there are many other challenges that are confronting the world, the most important among them being “global warming and climate change,” as discussed in the previous chapter. In addition there is the question of nuclear proliferation which may eventually even lead to terrorists getting hold of nuclear material, even a small quantity of which will have catastrophic consequences for the entire world, and thus needs to be prevented. The question of lateral expansion and acquisition of nuclear weapons by states other than the original five, namely, the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China, plus the two new entrants, India and Pakistan, has to be resolved. In the latter category of lateral expansion are states that are known to possess nuclear weapons, that is, North Korea⁵ and Israel,⁶ or those that are on the threshold of development, that is, Iran.⁷ Israel, it is believed, already possesses nuclear weapons, even though it does not acknowledge it.

Despite the important role of the United Nations in international affairs, during the past decade the standing of the United Nations suffered greatly due to the actions of the United States, the founder and the chief architect of its conception and creation. The main

cause for the strained relations was the invasion of Iraq, which did not receive support from the UN Security Council, as had been the wish and desire of the Bush administration. Fearing a veto from France and disapproval from Germany, who were derisively called “Old Europe”⁸ by the then United States Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, the United States invaded Iraq without the mandate of the Security Council. The other actions of the United States, after the 9/11 attacks, in sidelining the United Nations and declaring it an irrelevant organization, calling it “a toothless high-powered debating society,” damaged relations and brought them to their lowest ebb during the Bush administration. The torture of prisoners of war and other human rights abuses not only harmed the United States but also weakened the United Nations protocols and conventions, and international law.

All these actions of the United States emboldened other nations to also treat the various statutes of the United Nations with the same disdain. This is apparent from the actions of Israel, which has not honored the various resolutions passed by the Security Council, and has also used weapons (munitions with white phosphorous)⁹ banned by the United Nations, during its invasion of Gaza in December 2008. North Korea and Iran do not adhere to their treaty obligations, and Sudan has no compunction in treating the UN with total disregard. These are only a few prominent examples among many more such cases. It is essential to carry out a detailed analysis of this disdain and disregard for the world body by almost any and every member state on one pretext or another when it disagrees with the resolutions passed by the UN. It may also be because the smaller and weaker nations feel that when the stronger nations can flout the UN mandate with impunity, can get resolutions passed that are favorable to them, or use the veto when certain resolutions do not suit them, why shouldn't they also exploit the weaknesses of the organization?

It is essential for all the nations of the world to respect their own collective voice, which is expressed on their behalf by the United Nations. It is also a fact that in this endeavor, the United States has to provide the necessary lead, to meet other problem areas and challenges confronting the world. For the United Nations to recover from its difficulties and to regain its prestige, the U.S. leadership is indispensable in effecting the change. The United States being the most preeminent power of present times has the moral responsibility to set the ethical standards of following international law, in letter and in spirit, so as to act as a beacon for others to follow.

The United Nations was founded to bring all the nations on the same platform, which is enshrined in its preamble: “recognition of the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”¹⁰ The United Nations reflects the universal moral conscience and is all-embracing and inclusive as a world forum to effectively deal with the myriad and gigantic problems besetting the world today. The United States must therefore reconcile its differences with the United Nations and strengthen it so as to enable this world body to fulfill its mandate efficiently and effectively.

The United Nations was established at the end of World War II, with the cooperation of the victorious nations, with the United States in the lead, along with other nations, then numbering 51.¹¹ The membership today has grown to 192 countries.¹² The world has changed tremendously over these 64 years. The security paradigm too has changed and shifted from inter-state disputes to intra-state disputes, with the fight against terrorism taking center stage. The economic conditions of various nations have also changed considerably and new economies have emerged as economic power centers in their own right, which entitles them to have a greater say in international affairs.

There is much greater interdependence and interconnectedness not only between nations but also between events around the world. In today’s world, a threat to one is a threat to all; it is not confined to armed threat alone or threat from terrorists, but also the threat of the spread of disease, the latest example of which is the swine flu, caused by H1N1 virus, which originated in Mexico in March 2009,¹³ remained undetected till April 25, and within two to three days spread to all parts of the world. The *Washington Post* reported, “Teenagers in New Zealand, honeymooners in Scotland, high-schoolers in New York and tourists in Israel all are sick from the same bug caught just days ago on trips to Mexico. Their illnesses are the latest example of how diseases, from influenza to tuberculosis to cholera, are spreading ever more quickly in an increasingly globalized world. But so, too, are the tools necessary to combat outbreaks of diseases: expertise, medicine, money and information.”¹⁴ Similar was the earlier case of the spread of avian flu in 2006–2007, and the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003. Following the SARS outbreak, U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, based in Atlanta, opened six centers around the world in Nairobi, Egypt, Thailand, Kazakhstan, China, and Guatemala. Medical professionals work with the local officials in these centers

to detect disease outbreaks in the region and coordinate their responses.¹⁵

In the changed international scenario of “instant communications, instant threat from everything, instant depression and instant recovery,” call it the “Era of Instant Culture”¹⁶ if you will, there is a need to retool the United Nations, to make it more efficient and more responsive to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century and present-day needs. Also like any other organization that, over a period of its existence, develops a certain malignant growth, the United Nations, too, unfortunately has been afflicted with this malaise. The “oil for food” scandal,¹⁷ human rights abuses,¹⁸ sex scandals,¹⁹ and alleged selling of weapons by UN peacekeepers,²⁰ are just a few among many such cases where the UN has defaulted and has come under a cloud. There are other problems pertaining to corruption, bureaucratic delays, and red tape as well. All these ills must be rectified at the earliest.

In his address to the General Assembly in September 2003, former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan warned member states that the United Nations had reached a fork in the road. It could rise to the challenge of meeting new threats or it could risk erosion in the face of mounting discord between states and unilateral action by them.²¹ He created the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change to generate new ideas about the kinds of policies and institutions required for the UN to be effective in the twenty-first century.

The High Level Panel consisted of 16 members from among veteran diplomats and politicians and was chaired by the former prime minister of Thailand, Anand Panyarachun, and was given the mandate to examine the following important issues:

1. Assess current global threats and provide an analysis of future challenges to international peace and security including connections between them.
2. Identify clearly the contribution that collective action can make in addressing these challenges and assess existing approaches, instruments and mechanisms.
3. Recommend the changes necessary to ensure effective collective action, including but not limited to reviewing the principal organs of the United Nations.²²

The panel submitted its report in December 2004 and put forward 101 important recommendations for reform of the United Nations.²³ The main recommendations pertained to establishing a peace-building commission to monitor potential trouble spots, to offer help

and advice, and to give warning, and to use armed intervention where necessary. The panel also recommended the defining of threats to international security to include poverty, pandemics like HIV/AIDS and environmental disasters, and not just threats from weapons of mass destruction, wars, and failed states.

There is an urgent necessity to carry out reforms within the United Nations system, which should be reflective of present-day geopolitical realities and also take into consideration the economic strength of emerging developing states like India and Brazil. The first and foremost reform should be carried out pertaining to the structure of the Security Council. The UN Security Council, as it is comprised today, was constituted at the time of the creation of the UN to give the Permanent Five (P5: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China) the power of veto, which was in keeping with the balance of power that existed after the end of World War II. However, new powers have emerged like Japan, Germany, India, and Brazil, the so called "G4."²⁴ In addition an African country needs to be included in the Security Council, to add to the current permanent five countries, so as to give the Security Council a balanced structure and balanced representation from all parts of the world. Also the P5 in the past have tried to use the UN platform to advance their own interests at the cost of other nations and not in keeping with global requirements.

There has been a tendency to underplay the role of the General Assembly,²⁵ not giving it due cognizance in the scheme of things, which erodes the UN's representative charter. This drawback also needs to be rectified and factored in, in the reform process. Also the much needed reform process itself should not be used to advance the cause of any one nation or group of nations. It is reported that the size and charter of various organizations, which are on the anvil for reform or inclusion, are being dictated to and manipulated to suit the interests of the P5.²⁶ This must be avoided. The UN cannot be used to serve the interests of the strong, ignoring the needs of the poorer nations.

There are a plethora of other reforms which must be instituted to make the UN a vehicle for addressing the problems confronting the world in an efficient and meaningful manner, which must include improving human resources and management practices, a proper strategy for utilization of information and communication technology, improving development mandates and budgets, and all the other reforms suggested by the High Level Panel. Five years have passed since the High Level Panel submitted its recommendations and it is

time that these are discussed among the member states and implemented expeditiously.

A strong, robust, and all-inclusive United Nations is the requirement of the day, to meet the challenges that have been discussed above. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has rightly said, "Every day we are reminded of the need for a strengthened United Nations, as we face a growing array of new challenges, including humanitarian crises, human rights violations, armed conflicts and important health and environmental concerns. Seldom has the United Nations been called upon to do so much for so many. I am determined to breathe new life and inject renewed confidence into a strengthened United Nations firmly anchored in the twenty-first century, and which is effective, efficient, coherent and accountable."²⁷

Right from the onset of the Obama presidency there has been a paradigm shift in the U.S. policy toward and relationship with the United Nations. When President Obama met with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon on March 10, 2009, he expressed his hope saying, "I think the United Nations can be an extraordinarily constructive, important partner in bringing about peace and stability to people around the world."²⁸ He has followed this policy ever since; he addressed the United Nations Summit on Climate Change on September 22, 2009, followed by his address to the Sixty-fourth General Assembly Session the next day, and thereafter he presided over the UN Security Council meeting on September 23, 2009.

During the course of his speech to the General Assembly,²⁹ besides reiterating the steps he had taken to bring about peace in the world, he emphasized the necessity for all nations to work together since at no other time in history was it more essential than at present when "the interests of nations and people are shared." He said, "In this hall, we come from many places, but we share a common future. No longer do we have the luxury of indulging our difference to the exclusion of the work that we must do together. . . . We must embrace a new era of engagement based on mutual respect, and our work must begin now."

Likewise his theme was similar when he presided over the Security Council meeting on September 23, 2009. A resolution was adopted calling on states with nuclear weapons to continue disarming, to ratify the ban on testing, and to agree to a treaty stopping production of fissile material. In return the nonweapons states should accept stronger safeguards, designed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. President Obama was in fact the first U.S. president to chair a council session; also, it was the first time that the Security Council had met

to focus on the elimination of nuclear weapons. President Obama described the resolution as “historic,” saying it “enshrines our shared commitment to a goal of a world without nuclear weapons.”³⁰

The time is ripe to carry out the necessary reforms so that the United Nations once again regains its lost status and becomes the collective voice of all mankind and also the hub for confronting and resolving the challenges and all the problems currently being faced by humanity. The United States, more than any other country, must strengthen this organization since it has the necessary clout and economic power that can make a difference at the international level. All the member countries, rich and poor, strong and weak, must respect the verdict of the United Nations. To ensure that the credentials of the United Nations as an impartial judge are reestablished, there should be no hint of favoritism or victimization of any individual, group, or nation. While carrying out reforms and restructuring of the United Nations, built-in mechanisms and safeguards need to be incorporated to eradicate all the ills that have been prominent in the recent past.