

THE RELEVANCE OF THE UN

Can the UN respond and accommodate to the wishes of world opinion? Is it still relevant?

The UN was founded in 1945 after the horrors of world war II to keep the peace and promote security.. It is not a world government but an organization consisting of 192 sovereign states. It does not have an army and is basically ruled by the Security Council. The Secretary General while having a bully pulpit is more secretary than general carries out the mandates of the Security Council. This body consists of ten rotating members plus five permanent members , the victors in world war II , US, Britain, France, Russia and China each having a veto power over any decision.

When the UN was founded most violence was between countries. Now, most violence is within countries. The Security Council with the veto- power-nations as well as the inhibition to intervene makes action difficult. An example is Darfur where China with its oil interest in Sudan made intervention difficult. Reform of the Security Council, and rules as to when and how to intervene when major human rights violations are going on, needs very serious attention.

While public opinion supports the ideals of the UN, there is serious frustration with the UN's performance and ability with major issues. Some of these issues relate to Iran, North Korea and Sudan. There is particular concern with the inability in Darfur and the previous horrors in Cambodia, Bosnia and the unbelievable horror in Rwanda. In this case ,the US , under the Clinton administration, opposed sending more UN peacekeepers. The failure to halt mass atrocities is still being felt today. Lack of political will by UN member states allowed the Rwanda violence to spread and destabilize the Congo next door.

International opinion indicates that the UN should be a vehicle for conflict resolution and international cooperation on a wide variety of pressing issues. and are more open to multilateral action than their individual governments. Such opinions often conflict with the national sovereignty structure of the UN and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of nations.

Surveys of world opinion reflect this emerging awareness; i.e., dramatic steps to strengthen the UN, including the power to have a standing peace keeping force, regulate the international arms trade, investigate human rights abuses and stop genocides.

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One important inhibiting factor limiting UN action is national sovereignty. Surveys over the past decade show that many Americans consider traditional ideas about national sovereignty outdated, no longer appropriate to a world of global challenges. They want the UN to take a lead on international issues such as refugees, peacekeeping, human rights and nuclear proliferation. Almost three-quarters feel that the Security Council has the responsibility to protect people from severe human rights violations such as the genocide in Darfur.

There is an emerging new consciousness of unprecedented global interdependence. More problems cross national boundaries without passports and only collective action can respond to them. Some examples are climate change, terrorism, disease, human trafficking, international crime, and the world weapon trade. Global problems require global solutions. The national self-interest is often better served by cooperation with other nations. This consciousness shift should be welcomed and supported by humanists. The global institution facilitating collective action is the United Nations.

There is also good news. In spite of the shortcomings of the UN, they have negotiated very many peaceful settlements. UN peacekeepers have upheld ceasefires. They have also promoted and conducted free and fair elections. Over 80 percent of the UN's work is humanitarian. For example the world food program, the largest program bringing food in emergencies, providing aid and protection to many millions of refugees and displaced persons worldwide, tracking the spread of disease, saving the lives of millions of children with immunization campaigns and assistance to women and children in war zones. The UN often does not get credit for these programs as many people do not know that these programs are provided by agencies that are part of the UN.

There is an inherent conflict between the will for sovereignty of the nations and the pressing need for international action. There is precedence for nations giving up some sovereignty when it is in their interest. For example, the European Union and the World Trade Organization (WTO). In the case of WTO, countries will abide by the rulings of the WTO on trade practices for the benefit of having an orderly world trading system.

The world's nations are moving toward more cooperation, as increasing necessities arise, and will increasingly turn to regional cooperation as well as the UN.

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It should be remembered, that the UN, is at its best, a mirror of the world. It reflects our divisions and disagreements as well as our hopes and convictions. The UN would not be useful if it did not reflect the world as it is.

There was a story going around the UN about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and it said that Adam, when he found Eve was becoming a bit indifferent to him- Adam said to Eve, " Eve , is there someone else?". You could ask the same question about the UN. Is there any another institution which brings together all the countries of the world to work together for the common objectives of our collective interests? There is not!

Yes, the UN is still relevant.

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