

The Role of the UN in the International Arena

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Keywords: UN, The functions of UN, The role of the UN, The limitations of UN

Abstract: Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, mentioned in a speech he delivered in May 1954: "The United Nations (UN) was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell". Based on Dag Hammarskjöld's words, this article attempts to analyse the meaning behind the words from the main functions and challenges of the UN. In addition, an attempt is made to view the context and institutional functions of the UN from a dialectical perspective. As an intergovernmental international organization composed of sovereign states, the development of the UN is usually accompanied by changes in the international environment. Although it cannot intervene in every country's problems and solve every voice, some cases in this article prove that it can provide some moral support, deterrence and material support for the international community.

1. Introduction

In a 2021 revision of Oxford dictionary, 'heaven' represents the dwelling place of God (or the gods) where perfect happiness can be enjoyed; whereas 'hell' is considered as a very unpleasant or difficult place, situation, or experience. By extension, this article defines the proposition 'deliverance of mankind from hell' as a universal function of the UN and the motivation behind the outcome of its operations (for the benefit of the people). In addition, 'The United Nations was not created to lead mankind to heaven' refers to the obstacles, limitations, and challenges encountered by the UN in fulfilling its operational mission. In other words, in its humanitarian intervention involving various groups and widespread phenomena, the UN confronts limitations and corruption. For example, the UN recently launched a global campaign to support the call for equitable access to vaccines, to create more jobs to combat poverty, etc. [1]. Indeed, the UN is often misunderstood as a simple actor; yet in reality, its roles and functions in international relations are diverse, in which some are successfully implemented, while others remain shrouded in controversy [2].

Assuming the validity of the above argument, the analogy, although abstract and broad, is appropriate. This article therefore argues in favour of the view, as it is somewhat more objective and provides a dialectical view of the value of the UN. It is also based on an understanding of the topic and its bibliography. The structure is divided into three main parts: The first part identifies in depth the functions and results of the UN's actions. The second part demonstrates the limitations of the UN through case studies. The last one presents a dialectical and critical-thinking argument that analyses the UN in its essence.

2. Functions of the UN

The UN was founded in 1945 after. It is the world's largest and most internationally-representative intergovernmental organisation. The UN has five main functions, namely:

- a. Maintain International Peace and Security;
- b. Protect Human Rights;
- c. Deliver Humanitarian Aid;
- d. Support Sustainable Development and Climate Action;
- e. Uphold International Law [1].

Since 1945, the United Nations has evolved into an international organisation comprising 193 member states. It exerts a dominant role in resolving global problems that transcend national boundaries, which no single country can handle alone. In fact, Dag Hammarskjöld declared at a press conference in February 1954: "In the long run, no government can act as the United Nations does. No other international organisation or group of organisations can do exactly the same job." [3]

2.1. Maintenance and Reconstruction of Peace

One of the key responsibilities of the United Nations is the maintenance of peace and the reconstruction of peace. The organisation was created in the United States in the aftermath of World War II, with the important aim of reducing war and conflict and maintaining peace. The proposal to review the members of the Security Council can be seen in the fact that there have been no wars on the scale of World War I or II since the establishment of the United Nations. Therefore, to a large extent, the Security Council has been effective, to date [3]. However, while the number of wars between states has declined under the UN's surveillance and oversight in the 21st century, intra-state armed conflicts rose sharply from the mid-1950s to the mid-1990s. Thus, Resolution 1000 of 5 November 1956 authorised the establishment of the United Nations Emergency Force, which provided a model for constructing the basic principles of peacekeeping as it is known today. Since then, the UN has continued to expand its operations after the 1956 Suez Canal crisis, when it developed peacekeeping operations in the form of impartial interventions with warring parties. In a way, it may be asserted that multifunctional peace operations have become an indispensable part of the international community. In fact, these operations are now one of the main regimes for regulating international relations, with the UN as the main protagonist of such operations. The United Nations plays a major but evolving role in peacekeeping and peacemaking [3,4].

The UN has traditionally defined peacekeeping as "an operation involving military personnel, but without executive authority, undertaken by the UN to help maintain or restore international peace and security in conflict areas." Thus, most UN resolutions on peace operations now invoke United Nations Chapter VII, not only to provide legal basis for a range of actions, but also to demonstrate the Council's political resolve and to remind Member States of their obligations under Article 25 in implementing Council decisions. Moreover, as some civil wars have become internationalised, with other states intervening in the matter to support governments or opposition groups, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (1996-2001) and Nigeria (2015-). Many contemporary conflicts including those in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Nigeria, have witnessed the cross-border proliferation of armed conflict and the involvement of regional actors. From a regional perspective, the Middle East as well as parts of Africa have noted an increase in the incidence of violence. However, research has also indicated an encouraging decline in the rate of new conflict outbreaks and a significant decline in the number of war deaths [5].

The UN and the following regional intergovernmental organisations have deployed various types of peace operations to maintain ceasefire agreements, stabilise conflict situations, create an

environment conducive to peaceful resolution, foster the implementation of peace agreements, protect civilians at risk in humanitarian crises, and help lay the groundwork for lasting peace:

- Sudan - UN Mission in Sudan March 2005 - present
- Haiti - MINUSTAH June 2004 - present
- Democratic Republic of the Congo - MONUC December 1999 - present
- Syria - Golan Heights - UNDOF June 1974 - present
- Middle East - UNTSO June 1948 to present, etc. [6]

Peacekeeping forces are an innovation in the UN's approach to maintaining world peace, which has evolved through the UN's practice of regional conflict resolution. With over 60 operations since 1948, most of which have been launched since 1990, peacekeeping in its various forms has become "one of the most visible symbols of the UN's role in international peace and security" [5]. Reducing bloodshed is perhaps the quintessential expression of "saving humanity from hell".

2.2. Environment and Health

Another outstanding contribution of the UN is in the area of environment and health. The UN has played a key role in the emergence of an international environmental agenda that includes the following: development of a global framework for decision-making, articulation of new norms, and drafting of environmental conventions through UN-sponsored global conferences [3].

In 1968, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation hosted the first International Conference on the Environment. In the same year, Sweden offered to host a larger UN conference, and the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), or Stockholm Conference, was the first UN-sponsored conference that discussed an issue of global concern [4]. The conference succeeded in raising mankind's awareness of the seriousness of environmental degradation, to the extent that it can lead to conflicts between countries and between groups over access to valuable resources; not to mention threatening human security and causing mass movements among people. Linking environmental issues to development was also an innovation as important as peacekeeping is to the role of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security [5].

However, there are risks and challenges to convening the conference. Developing countries blame developed countries for the world's environmental problems due to the latter's over-use of natural resources and over-consumption (that generates pollution). The former fear that environmental regulations will hinder their economic growth and divert resources away from economic development. Many developing countries were reluctant to attend the Stockholm Conference and had to be convinced that environmental issues were neither an exclusive concern of developed, industrialised countries nor a conspiracy that hinders the economic progress of developing countries [5]. The UN, so to speak, acted as a mediator between developing and developed countries in the tensions created by environmental issues.

Eventually, the Conference gave rise to a new UN body, the United Nations Environment Programme, established by the General Assembly in 1972 to coordinate environmental activities and promote intergovernmental cooperation. Although the idea of integrating environment and development as proposed in the Stockholm Conference continued to be challenged over the next two decades, the UN, in collaboration with other NGOs, developed programmes and committees to support and monitor the status of the environment on a global/international scale. Effective results have been achieved in a number of areas, such as marine pollution protection, guidelines for large dam projects, etc.

3. The Challenges of UN

The issues and challenges that arise for the United Nations are mainly divided into internal and external.

3.1. Internal Causes

Human rights fail. Under Annan's leadership, the UN shamelessly appeased dictators and tyrants from Baghdad to Tehran to Khartoum and showed weakness in the face of genocide and ethnic cleansing. As head of UN peacekeeping operations in the mid-1990s, Annan never apologised to the victims of the Rwandan genocide, which was the result of the UN's failure to intervene, or to the Muslim families who were protected by UN soldiers in Srebrenica. The new UN Human Rights Council, which Annan has called a breakthrough for the UN, is a complete farce, and the UN has largely abandoned the principles of freedom and liberty [6]. **Corruption and mismanagement.** The UN-run Oil-for-Food Program (OFFP) was established in the mid-1990s as a means of providing humanitarian aid to the Iraqi people and was subverted and manipulated by Saddam Hussein's regime, with the complicity of UN officials, to help support the Iraqi dictator. The oil-for-food scandal is undoubtedly the biggest financial scandal in the history of the UN and possibly the biggest fraud of modern times. The scandal has also done enormous damage to the organisation's already shaky credibility. **Peacekeeping abuses.** In the Congo, where MONUC personnel have been accused of at least 150 major human rights violations, the Congo sex abuse scandal makes a mockery of the UN's professed commitment to upholding basic human rights. The exploitation of refugees in a war-torn country is a massive betrayal of trust, and a Gallup poll conducted in the US in March 2006 found that 64% of respondents thought the UN was "doing a poor job", the most negative rating in its history [7].

3.2. External Causes

The external problems stemmed mainly from the fact that armed conflicts were more often intra-state following the end of the Cold War, and the changing nature of conflict necessitated the launch of a new era of humanitarian intervention by the UN, some of which conflicted with the concept of sovereignty. However, the UN overstretched its resources and lost much of its political support. Peacekeeping forces were plagued by conceptual and structural problems.

In the past, peacekeeping forces were simply required to separate opposing forces and observe ceasefires. In order for an operation to be successful, all parties to the conflict must provide cooperation and support. However, in recent conflicts, including ethnic disputes, internal political struggles or the collapse of state institutions, the UN has been acting without the explicit consent of the parties to the conflict. The result is that the peacekeeping environment is no longer benign. Peacekeeping or peace enforcement is the primary topic of reflection. New conflicts may require peace enforcement, which means that peacekeepers may increasingly work under arms that do not guarantee respect for their safety or role. Tru Dimitri argues that this new and complex environment, combined with the UN's ambitious goals and growing pressure on scarce resources, makes it more important than ever to think clearly about when and how the UN will engage in peacekeeping operations [6,7].

Limitations on the ability of troops to deliver. Other structural limitations have hampered the effectiveness of certain mandates. Lack of pre-deployment planning, mobility restrictions, limitations on the use of force, lack of military intelligence in member states and, of course, lack of funding have all hindered the ability of troops to carry out their mandates.

4. A Dialectical View of the UN

A dialectical view of the UN should begin with its background. The motivation behind creating the United Nations is partly reflected in the central paradox of modern diplomacy, in which rules are in place but without enforcement [8].

The international issues were severely complicated by the nationalist fervour aroused by the World War I, bursting forth around the world in response to the call for national self-determination. Nonetheless, the creation of the states in a nation often meant assimilation and cleansing, bringing to the fore the contradictions of ethnicity. The United Nations, with regard to this independence and equality, recognises that some authority of global repute needs to play the role of international policeman in international relations and maintain a presence that would be a deterrent. Hence, someone has to maintain a stable political order, from the permanent members, to the Security Council, to the hierarchical set-up of the General Assembly. This essay argues that the history of the UN has not been successful as it has not played the role its founders had envisaged [9]. Nonetheless, the role it has assumed today is worthy of recognition. On one hand, the international institutions or deliberative systems like the United Nations have sprung up in the decades since its emergence, e.g. WTO, GEF and so on. This indicates that there has been a realisation that although the UN cannot achieve its full purpose, this form of international organisation, based on sovereign states, would be worth exploring. On the other hand, the number of UN member states has nearly tripled in the last few decades, from just over 50 to 193 today. It could also be argued that with the UN, a country could at least assert its sovereignty, if not defend it. And while the UN may not be able to protect that country's sovereignty, it should be able to provide some moral support to the international community.

Additionally, the book *The United Nations Crisis and its Reform* was an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the organs of the UN [4]. It presented the different ideas to reform the institution in order to deal with new threats to peace and security. The author clearly highlighted the paradox that although the UN was seen as the right forum for solving problems in the international arena, its power was limited because its strength meant that member states enjoyed lesser sovereignty, which created a dilemma for these states. Should sovereignty be sacrificed for the sake of greater multilateralism within the UN body? [10].

This article shares the basic view of the Boutros Ghali (2005) [4] that, although the UN was expected to deal with almost all international issues from conflict resolution to environmental protection, the organisation often seems to be without a foundation, thus justifying reforms. The changing scenario of the threats to international peace and security - for example, in its 76 years of existence, the UN has added many new challenges to its original objectives, such as AIDS, big data, and climate change. The 2019 outbreak of Covid-19 and the 2021 vaccine rollout were certainly uncommon tests, hence, the UN needed to remain flexible and respond to those changing threats by reforming its structures, and institutions [3]. Therefore, it becomes imperative for the UN to remain flexible and respond to these evolving threats by reforming its structures, institutions, and the agenda.

5. Conclusion

The United Nations conveyed a sense of fraternity for all humanity, and it focused on these particular issues (above) because, if left unaddressed, they could adversely affect the lives of billions of people around the world, slow down the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and halt the progress of humanity in the 21st century.

It could be that the UN did not finally solve the problem, it just did not make things worse. But that was enough to go a certain way in proving the status and authority of the UN. After all, when

conflicts occur between countries, it is the people who suffer. If there is no salvation from someone or something, then the United Nations can play the role of savior to a certain extent, or at least it can alleviate suffering. The UN might have more influence than any other intergovernmental organisation, however, that does not by any means indicate that it has the resources, authority, capacity, and the coordination required to solve the many challenges it faces. Would it not be possible to get a fuller picture of what the UN does if it were understood not as 'we want to change the world' but as 'we want to make a difference in a world'.

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