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TAKING STOCK OF THE UN AT 75

HIGHS AND LOWS IN THE SHADOW OF GREAT-POWER COMPETITION

The UN has achieved its aims with variable results. Thus far, the world has been spared another devastating world war, but the UN is now expected to address varied existential threats. Without real commitment to multilateralism on the part of major powers, the organization faces a grim future.

The United Nations (UN) is often unswervingly supported by internationalists and humanitarians for the most part, whereas realpolitik pundits dismiss the organization as a discursive club. In its 75th anniversary year, it is all too easy to be gloomy when the world is plagued by climate change, a pandemic, growing numbers of refugees, the rise of autocracy, economic decline, and longstanding conflicts. Great-power rivalry has returned, causing the Security Council to be ineffective.

Times are certainly hard for the global organization, perhaps more

than ever. Yet the UN must be seen as more than the Security Council, and preferably through a nuanced lens. The UN system includes numerous specialized agencies, funds and programmes. While many are willing to criticize the Security Council for failing to protect Syrians and Yemenis, for example, few are dismissive of the work accomplished for children by UNICEF.

The UN, with its network of international institutions and legal rules, can be claimed to have contributed to preventing another world war – the ultimate purpose for the creation of the organization.

Its successful involvement in other goals mentioned in the UN Charter, such as the self-determination of peoples and human rights, is indisputable. When the UN was established, approximately one-third of the world's population lived under colonial rule, unable to govern their own affairs. The decolonization process brought over 80 new states to the global landscape.

An ambitious human rights system has also been put in place, seeking to guarantee a broad range of rights for every human being. In these pandemic-afflicted times, it is also worth mentioning that the

WHO, with its partners, managed to eradicate smallpox by 1980, and that the fight against polio is ongoing, with large parts of the globe being declared polio-free.

Some of the UN's achievements are more ambiguous, however. While the organization's numerous Nobel Peace Prizes, such as the 2020 prize awarded to the World Food Programme, attest to its work for international peace, nearly fifty armed conflicts around the globe are still awaiting resolution. Similarly, nuclear disarmament under the UN has – with the consensus of the permanent members of the Security Council – somewhat successfully contained the spread of weapons, while failing to totally eliminate them along the lines of the first-ever adopted UN General Assembly Resolution in 1946.

An important lesson learned is the realization that international organizations not only do good – they can also be involved in or cause actual harm. The UN's failures include the notorious genocides in Srebrenica and Rwanda in the first half of the 1990s, where it failed to prevent civilians from being massacred. The UN has also been involved in the cholera outbreak in Haiti, corruption in connection with Iraq's oil-for-food

programme, and sexual offences in peacekeeping. What is more, the UN has often been reluctant to take responsibility for these wrongdoings, and has offered little protection for 'whistleblowers', namely those seeking to reveal misconduct within the organization.

The UN's mixed record has spurred some commentators to claim that the organization's main accomplishment lies in the fact that it has survived for three quarters of a century. More important perhaps than assessing the achievements and failures of the organization during its existence is the need to take a look at what its future holds. Will the UN survive to celebrate its centenary? Not even UN Secretary-General António Guterres has sought to deny the growing global disorder, admitting to the rift between China and the United States.

Indeed, the world is increasingly divided into two distinct worldviews, with different rules and aims regarding specific policy areas, as well as grand geopolitical and military blueprints. While the network of international institutions and norms that have been created under the UN during its entire existence will keep the organization and global governance afloat in the near

future, this will not suffice in the long term. Lukewarm engagement due to global rivalry cannot and will not resolve the set of complex and intertwined global problems that the world is currently facing.

The way ahead for the UN is unclear. In honour of its 75th anniversary, the organization has introduced an anniversary initiative seeking advice through global consultation on what the most important global problems are, and what role international cooperation should play. According to the preliminary results of the global survey, if the UN wants to make it to its centennial (successfully), it should – above all – be able to address and prioritize environmental protection and the protection of human rights, as well as reduce conflict.

Climate and the environment have been identified as the global trend having the greatest impact on people's future, the management of which requires greater international cooperation than other such far-reaching factors. This is the voice of people across the globe, the main constituency of the UN – "We the peoples" – whose future depends on great-power competition not hindering progress on global problems. /