

By Invitation

The UN at 75: An assessment

It may not be perfect but the civilisation we enjoy today would not be possible without the United Nations and its family of agencies and entities



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World War II killed between 70 million and 80 million people and left many countries in ruin. In the aftermath, the leaders of the victorious allies wanted to build a new world. One of their most important initiatives was to establish the United Nations in 1945.

The UN is commemorating its 75th anniversary this year. Is it an occasion to praise or criticise the UN? Does it have a bright or bleak future?

The UN has a mixed record of successes and failures. I will begin this assessment by discussing its three biggest failures.

FIRST FAILURE

The preamble of the UN Charter states that the UN was founded “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. The UN’s biggest failure is that it has been unable to prevent the occurrence of wars and other armed conflicts.

According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme, there have been 285 armed conflicts since 1945. According to the Dutch think-tank, the Clingendael Institute, these conflicts have killed more than 40 million people.

There are many armed conflicts in the world today, such as those in Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Libya and Syria.

The Syrian civil war has been raging since 2011. To date, it has killed between 400,000 and 500,000 people. The UN estimates that six million Syrians have been displaced and 5.6 million of them have sought refuge abroad. The inability of the UN to bring the civil war to an end, owing to disagreement among the five permanent members of its Security Council (the Big Five), is a disgrace.

SECOND FAILURE

The second failure of the UN is its inability or unwillingness to protect minorities from being killed or oppressed by the majority. This happened in Rwanda in 1994, and in Srebrenica in 1995.

In the case of Rwanda, the Security Council chose not to act because the Big Five did not have a strategic interest in the conflict. In the case of Srebrenica, the UN did not intervene because of disagreement among the Big Five and because the UN did not have the guts to fight the murderers.

The International Court of Justice is currently considering a case against Myanmar for genocide against the country’s Rohingya minority.

THIRD FAILURE

The third failure of the UN is the dysfunctional Security Council. At the San Francisco conference to draft the UN Charter, the five great powers – the United States, Britain, France, the Soviet Union and China – demanded permanent seats in the Security Council and the power to veto or kill any resolution before the council. The other countries were told to accept these demands or there would be no charter.

The council works beautifully when the interests of the Big Five are aligned. However, on most occasions, they have divergent interests. When this happens, the council is paralysed and unable to act. This is why the council is impotent in the face of the daily slaughter and destruction in Syria.

FIRST SUCCESS

The UN can claim many success stories during the past 75 years. Let me mention seven of the most important. The first success is to create a safer world for small countries. The charter confers equal rights on countries big and small. In the General Assembly, every member country has one vote. Singapore is the founding chairman of the Forum of Small States, which has 108 members.

SECOND SUCCESS

The second success is to build a new world order, based on the rule of law and the peaceful settlement of disputes, in accordance with international law. This was a revolutionary change from the old order, which was based on the principle that might is right.

An example of the new order at work was the decision by the UN to defend Kuwait against Iraq.

Iraq had invaded Kuwait and sought to make it part of Iraq. Because of the UN’s intervention, Kuwait was liberated from Iraqi occupation.

We should therefore stop quoting Thucydides, who said it was the



destiny of small countries to suffer the aggression of big countries.

THIRD SUCCESS

The third success of the UN was the proactive and constructive role it played in helping countries and peoples under colonial rule to gain the right to self-determination and independence.

In 1945, when the UN was founded, it had only 51 members. Today, the UN has 193 members.

In 1945, 750 million people, a third of the world’s population, lived under colonial rule. Today, fewer than two million people do.

FOURTH SUCCESS

The fourth success of the UN is in the field of human rights. After the horrors of World War II, it was determined to make a fresh start. The preamble of the UN Charter reaffirms “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and in the equal rights of men and women”.

Over the past 75 years, the UN has adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Social, Cultural and Economic Rights; conventions against

genocide, torture and slavery; conventions to end racial discrimination and discrimination against women; conventions on the rights of the child and the disabled; and much more.

Member states have to appear, periodically, before the UN Human Rights Council and account for their human rights record. However, enforcement is a weakness. This is because the council is highly politicised. Whether a country is censured or not depends less on the merit of the case and more on how many friends it has in the council.

FIFTH SUCCESS

The fifth success is due to the network of UN agencies and other entities which cover every field of human endeavour. Let me give some examples.

The International Maritime Organisation and the International Civil Aviation Organisation make rules to govern international shipping and international civil aviation, respectively. The World Health Organisation is indispensable in protecting the health of the people of the world. The World Meteorological Organisation is playing a leading

role on climate change. And without the International Telecommunication Union, there would be no international mobile calls.

The International Labour Organisation protects the rights of workers, including the right to a minimum wage. The UN Children’s Fund supports child health and nutrition and provided free milk for poor children in Singapore in the 1950s. The Food and Agricultural Organisation, the World Food Programme and the International Atomic Energy Agency have also become indispensable.

Recently, a Singaporean, Mr Daren Tang, was elected as the director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation. He is the first Singaporean to be elected head of a UN agency.

SIXTH SUCCESS

The sixth success of the UN is in the protection of our environment and our global commons, such as the oceans. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea is a comprehensive treaty which governs all aspects of oceans and its resources. It is also to prevent the oceans from being polluted, degraded and over-exploited.

The UN has adopted a treaty to protect our vanishing biological diversity. The UN has also adopted two treaties to protect our climate system against global warming and climate change.

The UN Environment Programme should be upgraded to the status of a UN agency, given its important role. Its mandate is nothing short of ensuring that the earth is in good health and can sustain the human civilisation. Nature is the source of human health.

The UN has convened, every 20 years, a major conference on the environment. These conferences have raised the world’s awareness about the importance of the environment. It has also galvanised the political will to take collective action to protect our biodiversity, climate and oceans.

SEVENTH SUCCESS

The seventh success is the UN’s peacekeeping operations. In recognition of its contributions to peace, it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998.

The first peacekeeping operation was launched in 1948, to separate the forces of Israel and the Arab countries. In 1949, the UN established the second peacekeeping force to separate the forces of India and Pakistan and to monitor the situation.

Since 1945, the UN has completed 57 peacekeeping operations. There are currently 14 such operations, including the two established in 1948 and 1949. Singapore’s soldiers and police officers have participated in 15 such operations in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

CONCLUSION

The UN is not perfect and I have described three of its failures. However, the world body has many more successes than failures. The civilisation we enjoy would not be possible without the UN and its family of agencies and entities.

Going forward, the UN should seek to deliver on its sustainable development goals. It should listen to its loving critics and reform its institutions to improve their relevance and efficiency.

The UN should also be a thought leader on new developments, including the digital economy, smart cities, cyber security, cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, robotics, human genome editing and external interference in elections.

But at the same time, it should work harder at tackling some of the old problems, such as the prevention of armed conflict, the protection of minorities, the persistence of poverty and under-development and growing inequality, both within and between countries.

The UN should also fight against the forces of darkness which are attacking open economies, free trade, international cooperation, regional economic integration and multilateralism. They want to take us back to the pre-1945 world. We must not let them succeed.

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