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OCCASIONAL PAPER

A Transformed United Nations is Needed More than Ever to Address 21st Century Challenges

KAMAL MALHOTRA

**Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations
Chanakya University, Bengaluru**

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by

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Table of Contents

Abstract	9
History and Context	1
The UN's Main Achievements.....	2
The UN is Needed More than Ever	3
Trump 2.0 and its Multiplier Effects	4
Transforming the Crisis into an Opportunity to achieve Peace and Security, Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030	6
Redefining the UN's Development Pillar to focus on Global Public Goods and Global and Intra-Country Inequalities	7
How can the UN's Peace and Security Architecture be both Integrated and Reinvigorated?	8
Increasing the UN's Political Legitimacy through an expanded UNSC Permanent Member Composition.....	9
UN Security Council Paralysis and Crisis	10
What about the Exercise of the P5 Veto Power in the UN Security Council?	11
On the UN's Human Rights Architecture	12
The Continuing and Accelerating Resource Crunch	12
Possible Ways Forward.....	13
Acknowledgement.....	15
Endnotes	16
About the Author	17
About the Chair	19

Abstract

This paper starts with a proposition: while the United Nations may be at its weakest since its founding in 1945, it is still the most enduring, all-encompassing Global Public Good in world history. It then demonstrates by outlining its history, achievements and the formidable challenges facing the world today that a transformed United Nations is needed more than ever because no other institution has the political legitimacy to effectively address these transnational challenges and because none of them can be addressed unilaterally, bilaterally or even regionally.

While arguing that Trump 2.0 poses an existential threat to the post-World War II global liberal order anchored in the United Nations, it suggests that the crisis should be turned into opportunity, elaborating what this could and should mean for the three indivisible pillars of the United Nations. It argues for a strengthened United Nations, building on five existing UN initiatives: the 2019 UN Development System Reform initiative, the Political and Peacekeeping Reform Initiative, the UN80 initiative, the 2022 “veto” initiative and the 1950 “Uniting for Peace” initiative as well as new additional ones and presents paths forward for a renewed, revitalized and transformed United Nations made fit-for-purpose to address 21st century challenges.

History and Context

It is timely and useful to reflect on the following proposition: the United Nations (UN), although perhaps at its weakest since its founding in 1945 because of the undermining of both its Charter and functioning by some of the Organization's most powerful founding Member States and some other member states, is arguably still the greatest and most enduring, all encompassing, Global Public Good created in world history.

As Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN's second Secretary General famously once said "The United Nations was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell."¹ Created literally from the hellish ashes of the Second World War, the UN did this quite well in the immediate aftermath of World War II and during the Cold War and arguably even till the UN Sustainable Development Goals were proclaimed in 2015, but even the relatively modest global governance aspiration embodied in Dag Hammarskjöld's words is now in doubt in today's toxic geopolitical and geo-economic world largely if not totally bereft of statesmen or stateswomen of any stature or integrity, let alone the vision and foresight of the UN's founders.

There is, therefore, no doubt, that the Organization needs to be reformed – indeed transformed – if it is to address the formidable global public goods and transnational challenges of the 21st century. But it also simultaneously needs to be strengthened, not continuously undermined both in practice and rhetoric by its most important Member States, if this is to happen. The UN Charter's principles, values and the Organization's purpose and pillars need to be reaffirmed by consistent action, not only through meaningless and hollow words as at present.

While the UN's purpose and global governance centrality were last unanimously reaffirmed in September 2024, when the UN's Pact for the Future was agreed by consensus of all its 193 Member States, unprecedented geopolitical and geo-economic events since Trump 2.0 commenced on 20 January 2025 required their reaffirmation at the 80th UN General Assembly in September 2025 and continue to require reinforcement at every appropriate occasion.

The current UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres warned the UN General Assembly on 26 June 2025, on the 80th Anniversary of UN Charter Day, that the foundational UN document and its principles, written as a "declaration of hope" is suffering "assaults.... like never before," with countries following "an all too familiar pattern: Follow when the Charter suits and ignore when it does not." Guterres added that the Charter "is not optional, and it is not a la carte menu.... We cannot and must not normalize violations of its most basic principles."²

It needs to be recognised by all that if the UN did not exist, it would have to be reinvented and a new Charter and Organization, if created in the illiberal world we live in today, would be far worse than the inspiring UN Charter and Organization which were first agreed, created and unanimously endorsed by the UN's 51 founding members a little over eight decades ago and subsequently endorsed by all its current 193 Member States and 2 Observers. The current UN, for all its largely Member State (and not staff) created limitations and imperfections,



remains of enduring value as the only universal forum where all Member States can address their shared challenges. While no one doubts that the UN has flaws, mainly mirroring flaws in its Member States, no other entity comes close to filling its role and promises to bring broad peace and security to the world community.

Any objective assessment would conclude that the UN's three main pillars: peace and security, human rights, and development, have stood the test of time. These three pillars are integrally linked: you cannot have peace and security without development or development without peace and security, and neither will be possible without human rights. Many of the world's current seemingly intractable problems exist because of a lack of appreciation by both policy makers and ordinary citizens about the importance and interconnectedness of these three pillars.

The UN's Main Achievements

Any independent, objective assessment of the Organization will probably conclude that it has made an enormous, largely measurable, overall positive and constructive contribution to the world and its citizens over the last almost 81 years. The list of UN accomplishments is long and impressive and cannot be done adequate justice to in this short paper. Only a few “big picture” ones can be enumerated here. At the top of the success list is overseeing decolonization which is, indeed, one of this world body's early historic achievements. Its other major achievements include, but are not limited to, helping end conflicts such as the Cuban missile crisis, the Korean War, the Suez Canal crisis, civil wars in Guatemala, Angola, Nepal and other states, overseeing and ensuring Timor Leste's peaceful transition to independence from Indonesia at the turn of the 21st century and making significant contributions towards preventing a third world war between the major powers so far; the adoption of universal human rights normative standards and institutions around much of the world; saving millions of lives during humanitarian crises; eradicating life-threatening diseases, and significantly facilitating the fastest pace of genuine global, regional, and national developmental progress in world history as well as achieving an unprecedented global consensus by all its 193 Member States on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030, by far the most ambitious global development agenda ever agreed in world history.

In terms of its continuing contributions at a more practical level and on a day-to-day basis, the world and its people should not forget that in 2025 alone, UNHCR sought to protect a total population of 129.4 million forcibly displaced and stateless individuals. UNICEF helps vaccinate 45 percent of the world's children under the age of five; the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) provided food assistance to 121 million people worldwide despite facing severe funding shortfalls; while in 2025, United Nations Peacekeeping operated 11 active missions worldwide with over 100,000 men and women in uniform providing peacekeeping duties. These are only a few of the UN's wide-ranging and multi-faceted daily roles in the context of the world's growing challenges.

The UN is Needed More than Ever

Why is this true? It is because of the unprecedented global challenges facing all of us collectively, none of which can be adequately addressed unilaterally, bilaterally or even regionally.

A major concern for the peace and security pillar is the increase in the number and intensity of large-scale crises. Since 2008, the number of conflicts in the world has tripled with the UN no longer central to diffusing the most recent transnational ones starting with Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Israel's illegal invasion of and ongoing genocide in Gaza proclaimed twice now by the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory including East Jerusalem.

The even more recent 28 February 2026, joint attacks by Israel and the United States on Iran in clear violation of both the UN Charter and the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) have served to further sideline and undermine both the UN Security Council itself and the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), its monitoring role and NPT protocols. Trump 2.0 had also earlier given Israel under Netanyahu carte blanche permission to extend its genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, including by publicly and unashamedly using starvation as a weapon of war against the more than two million Gazans.

Yet, none of these conflicts are solvable in a politically just and legitimate manner without the UN playing a key role. Iran has repeatedly indicated that, to be legitimate, any final, now increasingly elusive, peace agreement with the US would need the endorsement and ratification of the full UN Security Council.

The list of ongoing conflicts is long and unfortunately growing. Some of these conflicts are intra-state, not inter-state in nature while others are transnational. Together, they indicate that the nature of conflict has changed considerably since World War II. Any Trumpian announced ceasefires or peace agreements are either non-existent, extremely fragile or subject to breakdowns without notice.

Transnational violent extremism has also emerged as a universal preoccupation and concern over the last few decades. Terrorism is not new, but its geographical reach, financial resources and the ability to attract minds is unsurpassed today.

In addition, climate related natural disasters are becoming more existential and frequent and their destructive impacts more intense. Every year, we continue to achieve the wrong set of records, whether on pollution, rising sea levels or on greenhouse gas concentrations. In terms of the development pillar, addressing climate change and growing inequalities as well as the threat of future pandemics remain the world's most urgent and existential crises but the governance of Artificial Intelligence in the public interest for the global public good is fast emerging as equally important.

An additional related major set of challenges we face are the multiple crises of governance fueling disruption and violence. Today's violent conflicts are often rooted in poor governance, corruption, oppression, mismanagement of natural resources, exclusion and inequality.



Systematic discrimination against minorities is widespread. This has been sadly true in many parts of the world for some time and is increasingly true in South Asia, in Pakistan and Sri Lanka from earlier decades, and more recently, sadly in India, Bangladesh and Nepal as well.

Covid-19 served to compound the world's challenges and make matters even more dire. The world has barely escaped the worst of this pandemic at a time when 40 percent of its population now live in countries paying more on debt service payments than education or health.

The world cannot even begin to hope that these multiple and often interlinked crises will be adequately addressed or overcome without a reaffirmed, renewed, transformed and revitalized United Nations for the 21st century.

Trump 2.0 and its Multiplier Effects

The lead and most important founding Member State of the United Nations in 1945, the United States of America (USA), has become its most significant threat from within under Trump 2.0. Indeed, many experts and long-time observers of global geopolitics regard Trump 2.0 as an existential threat to the post World-War II global liberal order.

Trump's re-election has pushed a world order, which was already tethering, and had shown visible signs of tilting in an illiberal direction, into a decisive far-right illiberal corner. His second Presidency also has the real potential to obliterate many of the tangible peace and security, human rights and development gains resulting from eight decades of world-wide liberal idealism embodied and led by the United Nations. Even George W Bush's unilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003 under false pretenses, willfully violating both the international rule of law and the UN Charter, did not fundamentally question or irretrievably undermine the existing UN based global liberal world order like Trump's actions are doing today.

Trump 2.0, predictably, unilaterally, once again, like he did during Trump 1.0, gave notice of withdrawal from both the Paris Climate Accord and the WHO, bypassing the US Congress which is the only US institution which has the legal authority to withdraw after the US pays all its outstanding dues to the organization in question.

Subsequently, President Trump also withdrew the US from the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the UN Framework Convention on Tax Cooperation currently being negotiated.

On 7 January 2026, the US White House went even further by announcing its withdrawal from an additional 66 international organizations and treaties, including 31 UN-affiliated entities targeting the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women, and once again from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

It is now impossible to swing the pendulum back to the status quo ante. It's more useful to think of how this crisis can be converted into an opportunity for the transformative reforms

the UN in any case needed to make it more relevant to 21st Century challenges. There is a way forward which can help keep the global world order liberal and not, by default, hand disproportionate power and political influence to China, another illiberal Member State, like the US is under Trump 2.0.

But this will only be possible, if collectively, a group of around 40–50 middle powers such as most if not all 27 European Union (EU) members, the UK, Norway, Switzerland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Japan, the Republic of Korea and key countries in the Global South (e.g. most if not all Global South BRICS members, Türkiye, ASEAN members), join together in a North–South UN Member State coalition and prioritize filling the yawning financial and other gaps left by the US in support of an appropriately adapted and reformed One UN which is made fit–for–purpose once again, this time to address the huge transnational and multilateral challenges of the 21st century staring the world in its face.

The current illiberal conjuncture and financial gap in core funding to the UN leaves a vacuum which an even more illiberal China can and may well fill across the UN and the multilateral system if the EU and the other countries mentioned above do not come together and deliver and prove that they are up to the challenge of protecting the liberal, democratic, global world order which has been underpinned by the UN since World War II.

China's core contribution now amounts to almost the same as the US' at around 20 percent of the UN's core budget. Unlike the US, especially but not only under President Trump's two presidencies, it has, so far, been a more responsible UN Member State in many ways since it remains committed to paying its full core "assessed" contributions to the UN Secretariat and UN Peacekeeping, even if part of its payments are often late.

As a result of everything that has been said so far, it should be evident that the Organization has a continuing relevance despite Trump 2.0 disruptions and its many naysayers and detractors who are disproportionately from the extreme right of the political spectrum.

While parts of the UN Charter clearly need to be modernized to account for the considerable changes which have taken place from the time it was written and agreed a little over 80 years ago, any attempt to start an entirely new process of building a new international organization to replace the current United Nations would be a mistake and result in mayhem.

The 2024 UN Pact for the Future and its two related documents, the Global Digital Compact and the Declaration on Future Generations agreed at the UN Summit for the Future in New York by consensus of all its 193 Member States in September 2024 are a testimony to the fact that the United Nations will remain at center stage in terms of the world's current and future global, regional and national governance architecture. This is regardless of what Trump 2.0 does to undermine and even destroy some of the best examples of multilateralism.

The 56 commitments agreed in the 2024 UN Pact for the Future also underscored and reconfirmed that the UN's three pillars of peace and security, sustainable development and human rights are both interwoven and indivisible.



Transforming the Crisis into an Opportunity to achieve Peace and Security, Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030

Today, given the global peace and security and human rights crises and as the consequences of climate change become ever clearer, the UN pillar of sustainable development is vital – particularly as only 16 percent of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remain on track.

To achieve the SDGs, reform for an effective and efficient One UN architecture – spanning global, regional and country levels – should be one of the UN's highest transformational priorities.

The most important elements of a transformed UN for the 21st century are outlined below.

1. Add Humanitarian as a fourth inter-linked but distinct pillar to the three already existing, separating it from the development pillar, given both the unprecedented scale and dimensions of the global crisis in this area, most recently made visible by the genocide in Gaza and the use by Israel of starvation as a weapon of war on the residents of Gaza and other parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territory.
2. Fully Implement the One UN which was agreed as part of the UN Development System Reform Agenda,³ implemented at country level since January 2019 and expand it to the regional and global levels as well.

Expanding the One UN to the global level will require merging institutional mandates, agencies, boards, policies, and committees as well as reducing and merging staff. Some of the work and recommendations of the UN80 Initiative of the Secretary General as a system-wide effort to streamline operations, sharpen impact and reaffirm the UN's relevance is useful, but it needed to be bolder, more strategic, more consultative and prioritize cultural change among staff and institutions and not become entangled in bureaucratic approaches and compromises.

As part of this initiative, there is a strong prima facie case to look at global level institutional mergers between several UN agencies, beyond the low-hanging fruit. The two Bretton Woods institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which are specialized agencies of the United Nations, no different from the WHO or the International Labour Organization (ILO), have had a life of their own with little or no accountability to the UN. Such accountability needs to be prioritized through a strengthened UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) which should jointly address economic, environmental, social peace and security issues like climate change together with the UN Security Council.

At the regional level, there must be an urgent, thorough, objective review of the UN Regional Economic Commissions with the objective of enabling them to provide sharpened and more strategic value added on regional public goods in support of country level programs and policies.

At country level, Vietnam provides both a relatively advanced One UN example to build on and highlights the limits to what is possible without the expansion of the One UN approach to encompass both the regional and global levels as well.

Too often, when talking about UN reform, only the UN Security Council is focused upon, and the country level is forgotten. Yet, arguably, the country level, supported by the regional level, is where transformative action is most important, if the world has any chance of achieving the SDGs. Indeed, no level is more important than the national level for the delivery of the SDGs. Many agencies work and engage at the country level in the same mandate area but from different vantage points. For example, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, the IMF and many others work on challenges presented by climate change. A One UN approach will inevitably help create positive multiplier effects because of synergistic implementation of these institutions' different mandates and the cooperation, coordination and pooling together of technical and policy expertise which will be required under such an approach. On the other, it will help avoid or even eliminate inconsistencies, bureaucratic inefficiencies and duplication. This will also allow the increasingly limited financial and human resources of the UN to be used much more effectively and efficiently.

A key lesson from Vietnam's experience is the importance of the government leading the One UN on the ground. Without this leadership, progress on achieving the SDGs will be slower than what it would otherwise have been. This remains a challenge in many developing countries.

In addition, the One UN cannot be effective, and Agenda 2030 cannot be achieved at the country level unless it is comprehensive and includes the implementation of programs under all three indivisible UN pillars (as well as the proposed fourth humanitarian pillar).

Redefining the UN's Development Pillar to focus on Global Public Goods and Global and Intra-Country Inequalities

The UN should declare success in terms of its support for traditional development areas such as poverty reduction, basic health and education over the last eight decades since the vast majority of countries, (with Vietnam again being a prime example since it has recently graduated to upper middle income status according to World Bank classifications), now able to finish the last mile work in these areas through their national budgets without UN support (a few Least Developed Countries – LDCs and Land Locked Developing Countries – LLDCs may require some continuing support in these areas but they are a relatively small number).

Instead, the UN's development pillar should prioritize global public goods such as climate change and AI governance as top priorities. In addition, addressing the multiple, growing inequalities at global, regional, inter-state and intra-state levels should move to the center of the development pillar. According to an Oxfam International report released in January 2026, the number of billionaires has surpassed 3000 for the first time and the level of billionaire



wealth is at a historic high of \$18.3 trillion while millions of people around the world are still forced to stare poverty and vulnerability in the face every hour of their lives – and globally, one in four people, face hunger. Given record global wealth, this situation of marginalization and vulnerability of millions of people should be regarded as both outrageous and unacceptable in the 21st century.

How can the UN's Peace and Security Architecture be both Integrated and Reinvigorated?

Four ongoing aggressive illegal invasions in recent years (Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon, Iran) show that the UN's peace and security, disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation architecture has stopped functioning as it should: it has either been undermined as in the case of Ukraine or both undermined and bypassed in the case of the recent illegal invasions of Gaza, Lebanon and Iran. The UN Charter and the international rule of law have been abused in the 21st century not only by some of the UN Security Council (UNSC) Permanent Five (P5) members (USA, PR China, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, France) – such as the US (Iraq, Afghanistan, now Iran) and the Russian Federation (Crimea in 2014 and all of Ukraine since 2022) but by smaller countries (Israel) armed and backed by bigger powers (e.g. USA, Germany, UK, even India, given its continuing arms exports to Israel even after the latter's illegal invasion of and genocide in Gaza).

Achieving a reinvigorated peace and security architecture will require both the merger and greater coherence between all the UN Agencies that are currently part of the UN's Political, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding architecture.

There is also a need for a strengthened Peace Building Commission (PBC) which can take up some of the UN Security Council's agenda, leaving it to concentrate on the most important “big picture” transnational peace and security issues. In addition, addressing the following longstanding challenges and agreeing and carrying out enforceable reforms which transform their functioning should be an urgent, top priority.

Increasing the UN's Political Legitimacy through an expanded UNSC Permanent Member Composition

While the UN still remains the most politically legitimate inter-governmental organization by far in the world today because of its universality and comprehensive mandates, and no other global multilateral institution can aspire to come even close to it in terms of political legitimacy, it has been suffering from gradually reducing legitimacy for at least three decades, relative to what it enjoyed in its first five decades. This is closely linked to structural design flaws that have existed from its inception in 1945 which became increasingly visible and problematic after the simultaneous fall of the Berlin Wall and Soviet Union and economic and political rise of some of the larger emerging economies in the Global South in the Group of 77 (G77) and Brazil, Russian Federation, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) Groupings, namely India, Brazil and South Africa.

In the P5 Security Council context, the United Kingdom, France and even the Russian Federation are now anomalies, given their significantly reduced 21st century geo-economic and geopolitical weight. They should have been obliged to exit permanent membership long ago, ideally in 1991, when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) dissolved even though as per previous precedent, the Russian Federation automatically inherited the Permanent UNSC seat of the erstwhile USSR. While, admittedly, it would have been difficult to get the Russian Federation in particular to give up the USSR's permanent seat in the Council, and none of the aspiring emerging countries from the Global South (Brazil, India, South Africa) had truly “emerged”, nor had the BRICS Grouping been created then, this can arguably still be viewed as a missed opportunity both to reform and transform the UN Security Council. Such an opportunity is unlikely to present itself in the foreseeable future.

The dire need for a more democratically constituted and 21st century relevant Security Council, nevertheless, remains urgent and essential. Most UN Member States support a comprehensive reform of the Council which means an expansion in both the permanent and non-permanent categories, not a piecemeal reform.

It is now universally agreed that the Permanent Five (P5) members of the UN Security Council—UNSC – do not and cannot represent the changed geo-political, geo-economic, demographic or even the realpolitik realities in a dramatically changed 21st century world.

The P5, visibly and untenably, excludes the political and economic Global South which now comprises a significant percentage of the world's population and economic wealth. While India, Brazil and even South Africa's demands for such inclusion are legitimate in terms of Global South representation, the bar for Permanent Membership of the UNSC should be higher than it was in 1945 at the UN's founding if we want a better future world than what we inhabit today. Each one of the new aspirants needs to demonstrate more consistently and clearly than the current P5 that they can put global and regional interests before their narrowly defined national interest.



UN Security Council Paralysis and Crisis

The crisis of and in the UNSC has been repeatedly and continuously visible from the turn of the century. The P3 (the US, China and the Russian Federation), within the P5 of the Council, have repeatedly undermined both its credibility and effectiveness and that of the UN, through attempts to entirely bypass the Council (e.g. the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the recent US supported unilateral attacks by Israel on Gaza, Syria and Lebanon and by the US and Israel on Iran) or through the exercise of their veto power in an inappropriate and narrowly self-interested manner (e.g. repeated unconscionable US vetoes in favour of Israel as well as the Russian Federation and Chinese vetoes on Syria during the Assad regime and the Russian Federation's blockage of the UNSCs discussion and resolutions on its illegal invasion in Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine since 2022).

The P5 must recognise, in their own self-interest, even if not because this is clearly in the global interest, that they risk throwing the 'baby out with the bath water', if they do not broaden permanent Security Council membership or restrict the use of the P5 veto.

If some fundamental UNSC reform is not agreed or does not take place soon, there is a real risk that rising middle powers and others who were left out of the 1945 UNSC formulation will attempt to circumvent the UN and start using other multilateral and plurilateral bodies such as the BRICS or Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to pursue their much narrower self-interests, (probably unsuccessfully since China and the Russian Federation are members of the P5 as well as these organizations). These organizations are both China led and do not represent the global interest either. While India, Brazil and South Africa may think that this addresses some aspects of the UNSCs perceived vacuum of legitimacy, there is now a real risk that their attempts to use other more Global South friendly plurilateral forums will degenerate into even narrower interests being pursued through multiple narrower groupings, none of which can ever hope to replace the breadth and depth of the UN or its Security Council's political legitimacy, mandates and legitimacy.

What about the Exercise of the P5 Veto Power in the UN Security Council?

The veto power served a useful stabilizing purpose during the Cold War, successfully helping to prevent a Third World War. But it has been an anachronism for at least 34 years now, since the USSR was dissolved. The US had used a total of 93 vetoes, more than 50 percent of which (49 vetoes) were against resolutions condemning one country, Israel.⁴

The Russian Federation has used its veto more than 130 times of the total roughly 300 times it has been used since 1946, including before and after the dissolution of the USSR.⁵ The undisguised purpose was to protect its allies, such as but not limited to Syria, North Korea and Yemen, and more recently to protect itself from sanctions after its illegal invasion of Ukraine.

The People's Republic of China used its veto to deny Bangladesh's admission to the UN in 1972 after it had formally displaced Taiwan, Republic of China to join the UN only a year earlier, in October 1971. It also joined Russia in vetoing resolutions on Syria numerous times after 2011.

While there is a strong case to abolish the UN Security Council P5 veto power because of this glaringly narrow partisan record, as well as to prevent further abuse and misuse, this is unrealistic and unlikely in the short term because current permanent member states (the P5) will not give up the veto very easily or very quickly. The UN Security Council permanent member (P5) veto power, agreed in 1945 as a prerequisite to UN Charter adoption, was built into the system as an insurance that the system itself would work and that the major powers would not act outside it. Despite the serious and numerous abuses, overall, that probably still largely remained true till the Ukraine and Gaza illegal invasions a few years ago.

A strong case can certainly be made for restraint on the use of the veto (e.g. its use only for matters which are central for the absolute national security of a UN Member State). This may also be both more realistic and desirable.

There have already been a few noteworthy initiatives in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to restrict the use of the veto and strengthen the accountability of the Security Council to the UNGA. This was already foreseen and envisaged when the UN Charter was drawn up in 1945, so it does not require any change to the UN Charter.

The most noteworthy of these is Liechtenstein's 2020 'Veto Initiative',⁶ spurred by deadlock at the UNSC on the Syrian war. While the resolution was delayed because of Covid-19, it was adopted in the UNGA by consensus on 26 April 2022. This was quite a remarkable achievement, led by one of the UN's smallest Member States. It was also unprecedented since it "creates a standing mandate for the Assembly to be convened automatically, within ten working days, every time a veto has been cast in the Security Council."

This initiative needs to be urgently reinforced, mainstreamed and built upon. It is significant that three P5 members, Britain, France and the United States (under President Biden) supported the Liechtenstein initiative while France, in addition, initiated a declaration



seeking restrictions on the use of the UNSC veto as far back as 2015.

Much more can be done in the General Assembly, but unfortunately, there is a limitation because any radical reform of its role, for example, giving it the power to pass binding resolutions on matters relating to peace and security, would necessarily require an amendment to the UN Charter. Such an amendment requires the buy-in of the entire P5 in the Security Council, which is not something which will happen very easily.

On the UN's Human Rights Architecture

The 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and a number of UN Conventions and Treaties, especially the nine core UN human rights treaties have been pathbreaking and as inspiring as the UN Charter, and like the latter, there is no need to significantly modify this architecture, but it needs to be much better resourced, implemented, enforced and respected by UN Member States.

The Continuing and Accelerating Resource Crunch

This takes us to the UN's current resource crunch. The UN is arguably the world's most underfunded multilateral organization given its formidable breadth and depth of global governance and other mandates which continue to increase amidst both the world's old remaining and its growing and increasingly complex new global challenges. While it should be clear to everyone that no other multilateral institution can ever hope to address many of this vast array of challenges, the Organization continues to be forced to attempt to address them despite the visible absence of adequate demonstrated political will or even open obstruction by many of its most powerful Member States. This political will deficit has translated into both inadequate core "assessed contributions" which are now strikingly incommensurate to the UN's long and growing list of mandates and responsibilities as well as late payments oftentimes of even what was agreed by significant P5 member states such as the USA.

This had become a cumulative and growing problem for the UN with negative consequences for the fulfilment of even some of its core mandates such as the 2019 UN Development System Reform and Peacekeeping, even before the arrival of Trump 2.0.

To understand this, one needs only to note that of the total annual budget for the entire UN family of about USD 60 billion, 62 percent are ear-marked funds.⁷ Moreover, 80 percent of the UN's development funds are earmarked. This reflects a retreat from the true spirit of multilateralism. The Organization needs to be given core resources which can be used for what the UN's country analyses and Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks prioritize, not what donors earmark their funds for. Even if their funds are earmarked for certain Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), donors often cherry pick the ones they want

to support.

While none of the above is a substitute for UN administrative reform since there are clear, longstanding, bureaucratic inefficiencies and wastages which need simultaneous and urgent addressing through internal organisational reforms, some of which are currently ongoing, these should not become an excuse for UN Member States not urgently addressing the “bigger picture” resources crunch which the UN currently faces, preventing the fulfilment of many of its mandates which no other Organization can ever hope to fulfil.

Possible Ways Forward

Despite many difficulties, there are lots of possibilities. We should not give up because there is a crying need to make the United Nations fit for purpose for the 21st century. There is no viable alternative. The proposal of India and many other countries in the traditional Global South to convene a UN Charter Review Conference, invoking its Article 109, as a first step towards a pathway for fundamental UNSC Reform, while both contentious and risky because it could lead to attempts to dilute certain aspects of the Charter by illiberal UN Member States, should continue to be pursued under strictly defined boundaries of do's and don'ts. For this to happen, two-thirds of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) members and nine of the fifteen UNSC members need to agree to establish the time and place for such a Charter Review. Luckily, according to the UN Charter, no P5 veto is possible.

In the meanwhile, the 2020 “veto initiative” launched by Liechtenstein which aims to raise the political cost of exercising the veto power by the P5 should be put into practice on a consistent basis. All P5 members are now under pressure to explain their future vetoes to the full UN membership in the UNGA. While still modest, this is a structural reform in the right direction but needs to be fully backed by China and the Russian Federation. The latter has been responsible for the most vetoes since 2011, with China joining it multiple times since then. There is also a need for the role of the UNGA to be strengthened on other issues where the United Nations Security Council has not delivered on peace and security.

Together with the Uniting for Peace mechanism, which allows the UNGA to step into and fill serious security gaps left by the Security Council, this should lead to greater accountability of the Council to the UNGA which is a more democratic body with universal membership, one-country, one-vote and no veto power. The 1950 Uniting for Peace resolution has also been increasingly invoked recently, both in the case of Ukraine and Gaza, including in a UNGA resolution and vote leading to the Russian Federation's expulsion from the UN Human Rights Council.

UN reforms should also lead to the broadening of representation and participation in the UNGA to bring in the private sector, civil society groups, academia and local elected bodies. This would be a step towards fulfilling the promise of both “We the Peoples” in the UN Charter and what is referred to as a “whole of society” approach reflected in Point 55 of the September 2024 UN Pact for the Future.



Such realistically feasible global reforms, if achieved, while admittedly relatively small when measured against the transformative structural reforms really needed, should not be considered modest or unimportant. They can be useful steppingstones in the right direction, as well as a prelude to more profound reforms which will help the UN become truly effective in addressing the multi-faceted, complex challenges the world and the UN currently face and will continue to face in the 21st century.

Trgvie Lie, the first ever UN Secretary General, once called the job “the most impossible in the world” but also said that the harder the task, the greater the reward. This has not changed; if anything, the Secretary General's job has become even more impossible but will be more rewarding if bold, forward-looking leadership and stateswo(man)ship is shown by all in positions of power to undertake all the transformations needed, including those outlined in this paper.

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Endnotes

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About the Author

Kamal Malhotra

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Mr. Malhotra has had a rich career spanning close to five decades as a management consultant, in senior positions in international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as co-founder of a think-tank named FOCUS on the Global South, in the United Nations (UN) and more recently as an international development consultant, professor, senior fellow, writer and public speaker.

After retiring from the UN, effective September 2021, Mr Malhotra continues to provide high-level development policy advice in India and internationally. Between June 2022–May 2025, Mr. Malhotra was a Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Global Economic Governance Initiative at the Boston University Global Development Policy Center. He has been a Distinguished Visiting Professor, NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad, India and Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), Türkiye since 2025. He has also been Guest Public Policy Lecturer at the Kautilya School of Public Policy, Hyderabad and the School of Interwoven Arts and Sciences (SIAS), Krea University in India.

Prior to his retirement, Mr. Malhotra was the Head of the UN (full-time Representative of the Secretary-General) for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam between January 2019 and August 2021. Earlier, he was UN Head and UNDP Representative in Malaysia (also covering Singapore and Brunei Darussalam), Turkey and Vietnam between 2008–2018. Before that, he was based in New York, USA, where he created UNDPs Inclusive Globalization portfolio as its first-ever Senior Adviser on Inclusive Globalization (2002–2008) after creating its first-ever Civil Society portfolio as its first-ever Senior Civil Society Adviser (1999–2002).

Before joining UNDP, Mr. Malhotra was Co-Founder and Co-Director of FOCUS on the Global South, (1995–1999), a global policy research think-tank based at Chulalongkorn University's Social Research Institute in Bangkok, Thailand which was established to critically analyze the interface between globalization, neo-liberalism and the real Global South through policy research and by linking social movements around the world and bringing their experiences and issues to the macro policy level.

Immediately before establishing FOCUS, Mr. Malhotra served as Director of the Overseas and Aboriginal Program of Oxfam Australia between 1988–1995 and was the only founder



member of Oxfam International from the Global South. Prior to this, he was based in the Philippines between 1982–1988 where he spent the last few years as Director, International Extension, International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, with both country-wide and global coverage.

Before beginning to work on development issues in 1982, Mr Malhotra had worked as a Management Consultant with A.F. Ferguson & Co. in India between 1978–1981.

Mr. Malhotra holds an MIPA from the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), Columbia University, USA (1982), a Post-Graduate Diploma in Management from the Indian Institute of Management (1978), and a BA in Economics (Hons.) from the University of Delhi (1976). Mr. Malhotra also completed an Executive Education Program at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, USA on “Leadership for the 21st Century: Chaos, Conflict and Courage” (2013).

He has received many prestigious awards over five decades, including the President of Vietnam’s Order of Friendship in 2021. In recognition of his lifetime commitment to making a better world, the United Nations International School, Vietnam dedicated its Sustainability Center in his name in May 2022. Mr. Malhotra was also recognized in Marques’ Who’s Who in the World in 2000.

Mr. Malhotra is widely published. He has been the initiator, lead, editor or co-author of 6 books including being lead author of UNDP’s “Making Global Trade Work for People” (Earthscan, 2003) and the editor of “Globalization and the Least Developed Countries” (UNDP, in cooperation with the UN-OHRLLS and the Government of Turkey, 2008). He also initiated and led “Virtuous Cycles: The Singapore Public Service and National Development” (UNDP, 2011).

Mr. Malhotra has also contributed chapters to 11 additional books and has authored or co-authored more than 150 journal and other publications on global and regional geopolitical and geo-economic issues, the United Nations, G–20, global trade, debt and finance, the multilateral system and development cooperation.

Since his retirement from the UN, Mr. Malhotra has written for India’s Observer Research Foundation, the India International Center Quarterly Journal, Gateway House Indian Council on Global Relations, United Services Institute Journal, India Forum, The Citizen, the NALSAR University of Law Student Journal and CS Conversations The Bigger Picture in India. He has also published with the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), the Boston University Global Development Policy Centre and Boston Global Forum in the US, Australia’s 360info “Research Reuters”, Global Resilience Publishing and Pipparan Books Cambridge, UK, and the Voice of Vietnam (VoV) internationally. He has also been interviewed by various Vietnamese TV channels and been on a number of panels which are available on YouTube.

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