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## **THE UN AND WORLD GOVERNANCE**

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Seeking new proposals in the area of:

- the state's position and role
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**A forum was created—the United Nations—where all nations could join forces to affirm the dignity and worth of every person, and to secure peace and development for all peoples. Here states could unite to strengthen the rule of law, recognize and address the needs of the poor, restrain man’s brutality and greed, conserve the resources and beauty of Nature, sustain the equal rights of men and women, and provide for the safety of future generations.**

Kofi Annan’s acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, 2001

**For the United Nations, it is not indispensable to solve problems. We have to try, of course. But for us, the point is less to solve problems than to outlast them. Our ultimate aim is survival. If, without solving any problems, we simply manage to outlive them, 50 years later people will start saying that the United Nations accomplished great things.**

Roman Gary, *L’Homme à la colombe*, 1958 (not translated into English)

## **Introduction**

Ever since it was established in the wake of World War II, the UN has asserted itself as one of the pillars of postwar world governance. It could even be said that at the institutional level, the United Nations constitutes *the* pillar of world governance: no other international organization comes anywhere near it in terms of size, legitimacy, and ambitions. Today, more than 60 years after it was set up, now that the long Cold War period is starting to become a distant memory and there is dire need to design a new geopolitical architecture, **what role can the UN play?** This question, both simple and complex, is at the core of debates on new world governance recurrently. In this short essay, we shall try to offer elements of an answer to it.

Our critique of the UN will necessarily include a measure of subjectivity, all the more so that the subject implies that we make a number of assumptions on the future, which, as

we all know, remains to be written. In fact, the aim of this discussion paper is not so much to provide a definitive solution to the UN issue as to trigger a debate that we hope will be fruitful.

This essay comes with a file put together by Stéphanie Ah Tchou in the form of info sheets and interviews on specific UN-related subjects including its modus operandi and its financing. The info sheets are intended to give readers quick access to information and thinking on the United Nations and to provide links for them to deepen their knowledge if they wish to do so (<http://www.world-governance.org/spip.php?article436&lang=en>).

### **High expectations**

Our intention here is not to try the United Nations, summarily and *in absentia*. Nonetheless, it is indispensable to take stock before attempting to determine the type of role that the UN might be able, or ought to play in the future.

Taking stock is of course no simple matter and the idea is not to draw up two lists, one for UN objectives that were reached in the past 60 years and another for those it failed to reach. First of all, those objectives have evolved as the world has changed. Then, in our political or geopolitical world, perpetual gaps are allowed, or should be, between the stated aims of high political bodies and the harsh realities of their implementation. From time immemorial, political leaders in their vast majority have pronounced in favor of lasting peace, which their actions have also never ceased to make impossible. It would be unfair to measure the success of the UN with a different yardstick, all the more so that the United Nations is above all—we tend to forget—a political institution. To start with, its claims seem sincere and obviously, a body expected to represent the whole of the planet will be determined to achieve a world peace and stability that only the interests of a very few will sometimes challenge. The aim of “collective security” is that most people’s common sense prevail over the passing madness of the odd person who for one reason or another is proving selfish, excessively ambitious, or even paranoid. Contrary to the principles of traditional *realpolitik*, which produces a portrait of the world marked by a perpetual power struggle, the idea behind collective security is that international policy is definitely not a zero-sum game.

But—and this is a fundamental question—is collective security even possible if some—or even a majority—of the system’s members are playing both sides? This is clearly the case of the most powerful countries, whose power status also makes them permanent members of the UN Security Council. In this situation, how could other countries not be expected to take advantage of their tribune to intervene—sometimes perversely but also often fruitfully—in the complex negotiations taking place in the different UN agencies? The UN, like all other political organizations, is first and foremost a place where power is the main bargaining chip. The ideal of collective security is in a way the member countries’ renouncement of power—more precisely, it is pooling the power of states in order to bring about and maintain lasting peace so as to generate development, fairness, and wellbeing. In short, it is to turn into reality, at the world scale, the ideals developed by Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Kant in the eighteenth century, which the architects of twentieth-century collective security claimed as their source.<sup>1</sup> From theory to practice, there is a step that the UN has been unable to take, like the League of Nations before it. Can in fact the United Nations be truly said to operate according to the principles of collective security? Nothing is less certain.

From the start, the UN has been plagued by a structural ambiguity that has become ever more evident over the years, to the point that it has practically become ludicrous by now. Nonetheless, this aspect of things is not as much due to an intrinsic regression of the UN as to the fact that its structural shortcomings have grown increasingly sharper with time. We all know the famous “law” of Alexis de Tocqueville (*The Old Regime and the Revolution*): it is not because France’s situation was deteriorating under the former regime that the 1789 Revolution came about but because improved conditions made

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<sup>1</sup> This kind of approach is found elsewhere than in Europe and before the eighteenth century—among the Iroquois, for instance, who in the sixteenth century had constituted their own league of Five (later, Six) Nations. The “League of Peace and Power” included the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, then Tuscarora nations, gathered as the Hodenosaunee; the word “Iroquois” is a French distortion of “*hiro kone*,” which means “I have spoken in truth,” with which the Hodenosaunee often end their oratory. Nonetheless, Woodrow Wilson, Aristide Briand, and like-minded thinkers claimed their inspiration from the European Enlightenment, even though the Iroquois example, to mention only this one, was quite well-known by Europeans and even more so by Americans. In fact, this unacknowledged episode is fascinating and rich in teachings, as are definitely also the various visions and organizations of collective-security systems in the history of peoples of all regions, visions and organizations that did not make it into the “official history” of global governance.

inequalities show even more by contrast, making them unacceptable in the eyes of the majority. It could be argued that the UN's advances, along with its reforms, are what in the end have been making its deficiencies more visible and more unacceptable.

How, in fact, can the UN be judged? Is it a matter of measuring, as some have done with precision, its successes and its failures in terms of the conflicts that have fraught the second part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first?<sup>2</sup> Ought a more general approach be adopted to see in what ways the UN has reached the goals that it had set at the start, i.e. the purposes underscored in Article 1 of the UN Charter? Or would the idea be rather to compare how the UN has fulfilled its goals as against other historical international systems, such as the Westphalian order and other systems of checks and balances among powers? Or else should other possible options be considered and compared to the UN option, to determine, in short, whether like democracy, the UN is simply “the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”? Each of these approaches is valuable in itself. Insofar as possible, we will try to integrate each of these dimensions into our analysis.

More to the point, a reminder of the **UN's first goals** is far from useless. Here, in substance, is how the UN Charter is organized, as set out in Article 1:

*The purposes of the United Nations are:*

1. *To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;*
2. *To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;*
3. *To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and*

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance M. Brecher and J. Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

- encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and*
4. *To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends.*

There is no need for long speeches or detailed analyses to understand that the UN is far from having matched its first expectations. Or, more precisely, its displayed purposes. Each of these points could of course be scrutinized and most of them are so fuzzy and even ambiguous that there could be endless dithering about what they really mean (what, exactly, does “develop friendly relations among nations” involve?). What is clear, is that neither peace, nor security, nor international cooperation is what actually characterizes today’s world, no more than it does yesterday’s.

It would however be pointless to reject the UN for the sole reason that it has not, or might not (yet?) have reached these goals, which in fact add up more to an ideal than a roadmap. We should note in passing that no time frame is set by the Charter: if we followed the projections of Emmanuel Kant, one of the great philosophical inspirations for the League of Nations and the UN, it would take centuries marked with ups and downs to reach these ends and this end (“of history”).

Although the UN has not accomplished, far from it, any of the four great missions set out in its Charter—the fourth is perhaps the one to which it has come closest—this does not mean it is useless, and even less that it is dangerous: there are really very few people, even among its detractors, who think that the UN is a negative instability factor.

### **Sixty years of United Nations**

Rather than simply taking stock of the UN, something that would probably prove sterile, it might be more judicious to start with a historical overview of the past 60 years, which would provide a better picture of how the world, in a way, has been shaped by the UN, among other factors. This should allow us to put the UN into a certain historical

perspective, something that tends to be overlooked other than constantly repeating that the world has changed considerably since 1945, which is obvious.

To grasp the period previous to the founding of the UN, we need to go back to at least 1914, and even to 1789, or even to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which instituted the modern rules of international relations, or more precisely, of *interstate* relations. The dramatic finish of World War II put an end to the two global conflicts started in 1914. It also put an end to the “long nineteenth century” (1789-1914), which, following the first major modern revolution, was the setting of a series of successive political and geopolitical cataclysms that were to put a stop to the Ancien Régime, to the great historical empires, and to Europe’s supremacy. In addition, 1945 terminated the homogeneous and multipolar balance-of-powers system that had come into existence in 1648 to consolidate the European zone but had not been able to resist the many shifts that ended up transforming the face of Europe and of the world. Top leaders were therefore dealing with a triple breakdown when they met in Yalta and in Bretton Woods, in Dumbarton Oaks (Washington), and in San Francisco, where the conference that gave birth to the United Nations was held.

As soon as the next day’s world was (re)defined, new factors appeared that would disrupt its implementation. The new confrontation between the two remaining superpowers, the USA and the USSR, completely reshaped the world’s chessboard with a sort of heterogeneous balance weighed by a strong ideological rivalry reminiscent of the interwar opposition between fascism and democracy that had engulfed the best intentions of the architects of the League of Nations, a prefiguration of the UN.

A second revolutionary factor was the atomic weapon. There was no clear perception in 1945 of just how much the A-bomb would upset all strategic perspectives, nor that it would be in the middle of this battle of titans, both generating a “balance of terror” and, paradoxically, maintaining the stability of the world system and limiting the violence of conflicts (we should remember that this was in particular the theme on which the first debates at the UN were focused). In short, this perpetual masked war in which the world

was threatened with extinction at all times helped to stabilize, artificially and almost accidentally, practically the entire planet. In their majority, Cold War conflicts were above all a residual effect of colonization or its indirect consequence (such as the Vietnam war and the war in Angola). When all is said and done, the postwar era was a relatively peaceful period compared with previous ones, albeit politically and diplomatically extremely tense. During this whole period, the Korean war was the one major traditional conflict involving the great powers of the moment, even though the Cuban missiles crisis put the whole world a breath away from absolute disaster, paradoxically without a single shot having been fired.

What role could the UN play in this context? First we need to be clear about the fact that starting in 1945, the international system that settled in was defined first by the rivalry between the two blocs, then by the imminent nuclear threat that would weigh heavily on the world's destiny. We were no longer under an international multipolar-balance regime, and the advent of a system based on "collective security" embodied by the UN was not what was really governing international conduct. As a matter of fact, from 1945 on, the UN began playing a significant role on the international stage, a role that the League of Nations had never been able to play and that no supranational body had ever held in all of history. The UN had promised a "positive" peace that in the end was immediately replaced by the negative, imperfect peace of the Cold War.

The lead cloak that maintained the precarious stability of the system, i.e. the geopolitical status quo, was completely unsuitable to the transformations that were making deep changes in a world that for centuries had been marching—often by brute force, but not exclusively—to the European tune. On the periphery of the hegemonic concerns of the two superpowers, a number of major issues were to require attention, issues over which the USSR and the United States did not have direct power (which did not stop them from interfering in them): decolonization, (Europe's) reconstruction, democratization, modernization, and finally globalization—all areas of great potential conflict. How were these important issues to be addressed? Above all, how could the most powerful countries be prevented from exploiting these issues to their own ends? American aid did allow

Europe to re-emerge in a new form while the power struggle between the USA and the USSR fueled the wave of decolonization, from which each of the two countries stood to gain directly (from the ousting of the colonial empires) and indirectly (for strategic exploitation of the new independent states). Regardless, it was the UN that, through its General Assembly, facilitated the geopolitical integration of the 142 countries that would join the ranks of member countries and, more to the point, would move into a foremost position on the new geopolitical chessboard. It is no small achievement to have been able to attract all, or almost all the world's states into the UN. We should remember that the United States, following a decision of Congress, had not joined the League of Nations even though US President Woodrow Wilson had been its main architect.

Contrary to other historical periods of major geostrategic breaks, the sudden end of the Cold War, because it was a latent and indirect conflict, did not entail the overhaul warranted by the new situation, even though in many of its aspects, the international system had undergone an upheaval that no one had anticipated. There was neither a post-Cold War peace conference nor a post-Cold War agreement. A "global governance" regime collapsed and was succeeded by none other. And yet the United Nations was there. Curtly pushed into the sidelines during the Cold War by the two superpowers and by the dynamics of a bipolar balance, now it was being held responsible for the stability of the world! And to boot, without giving it the resources to match those expectations. Fortunately, the leaders of the two superpowers, Boris Yeltsin for Russia, and George H. Bush and Bill Clinton for the United States, were able to manage the brutal turn smoothly. Yeltsin did not try to hang on to his crumbling empire. Bush Senior and Clinton did not try to exploit the situation to the benefit of "hyperpower," something that would bring bitter reproach from the neocons who, after 2001, would be in control of American foreign policy.

Meanwhile, toward the late eighties and the early nineties, the world underwent major changes. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked a historical turning point. Capitalistic globalization became the undisputed dominant system ... some people even thought we had reached "the end of history."

With the ineluctable disintegration of Soviet society and its satellites, citizens were facing capitalism subsequently free of ideological or economic competition. New globalization of the financial and trade markets, a rampant information society pushed on by the Internet, and an ever growing expansion of capitalistic modernization led to deep transformations in the economy, society, and culture.

As the eighties and the early nineties drew on, a new, heterogeneous but real world-scale civil society emerged. New, because it sought to rid itself of former ideological models and of old methods of social and political organization, of the weight of labor unions or nonprofit organizations, of obsolescent watchwords, etc. and began to break open new paths to face capitalistic globalization. Exploring new paradigms, new gender relations, new relations between the young and the old, optimizing cross-cultural dynamics and diversity, demanding new Human Rights, and seeking a new relationship with the Earth: this was what constituted the fertile land for the emergence of a new, increasingly multicultural world civil society.

In those days, the UN was organizing world conferences on these major themes. The Secretary-General and UN agencies would set up an official event, and NGOs would organize one on the side. These could have been the beginnings of a more social, more participatory regulation body, of a new multilateralism that would lay the foundations a new world governance. It was instead an attempt at intergovernmental regulation with the (subordinate) participation of civil society.

The UN, directed during this pivotal period by the former foreign minister of Egypt, Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992-96) and, above all, by Kofi Annan (1997-2006), found itself at the core of the new conflicts that were shaking the world after the geostrategic post-Cold War thaw (in Yugoslavia and Rwanda in particular). Boutros-Ghali's (preventive) Agenda for Peace experienced setbacks and the Secretary-General came under pressure from the United States. Kofi Annan was the first Secretary-General to come out of the ranks of the UN, which he had joined in 1962. His term would be one of the most memorable in the history of the organization. With his perfect knowledge of the

workings of the UN and his lucidity regarding the limits of the UN system, he also took advantage of his aura to establish an ambitious reform plan, which unfortunately would end down the drain due to those who ultimately bore the greatest responsibility: the Member States.

As a matter of fact, during the post-Cold War period the role of the UN increased, mainly because no other body could regulate a system characterized by instability. Against all odds and despite the media froth, the post-Cold War period was marked by a certain peace, with interstate conflicts practically disappearing off the face of the planet to the exception of those in the Middle East and in the Indian Subcontinent while internal conflicts, though always extremely violent, also receded, contrary, once again, to appearances. The Balkan crisis that followed Yugoslavia's dismantling nevertheless showed that rising to extremes of violence was also still possible in Europe. The war, marked by NATO bombings and ethnic purification, grabbed attention and demonstrated the helplessness of the bodies assumed to be responsible for peace keeping, starting with the United Nations. The "new" post-Cold War conflicts mainly affected Africa, from then on considered by the great powers to be a strategically and economically "uninteresting" zone, a hasty appraisal that would change in the nineties after the fall of Apartheid and Nelson Mandela's election as president of South Africa in 1994, the same year genocide was rife in Rwanda. Otherwise, it would take an unfortunate coincidence featuring the September 11, 2001 attacks and accession to power in the US by a small clique determined to change the course of history, and a succession of bad decisions made by this same small group, for the United States to enter into two anachronistic wars in Afghanistan, and especially in Iraq, against which they were believed to have been vaccinated by the Vietnam experience.

Regardless, the rare current conflicts of the moment have still demonstrated the inability of the UN to prevent (all) wars and an even greater one to settle a war once it has been started. The UN was just as unable to stop the American coalition from invading Iraq, in the most fragile region of the planet, as it is today to do anything in the zone around

Pakistan, where all the conditions are gathered for a huge conflict to break out. The financial crisis in 2008 has also demonstrated, if need be, just how much the UN is non-existent in this dimension so crucial for global stability. As for the terrorist plague and the concomitant fight against terrorism, which could be assumed to muster unanimous support, they are a painful revelation of the weaknesses of the organization, which cannot even agree on a definition of terrorism (contrary, by the way, to the League of Nations)!

Notwithstanding, the UN, especially under the leadership of Kofi Annan, has proven valuable in other fields, those related to development in particular. The Millennium Development Goals, although many of their aspects, notably their implementation, can be criticized, have trained the spotlight back on the world's inequalities and the suffering endured by a majority of the world's population, right to where the creed of all-saving capitalism praised by the champions of the victory of freedom and democracy has been ripped open by daily realities that are difficult to hide. The specialized agencies (of the UN) accomplish work that produces important results (vaccination campaigns, for example). At the cultural level, UNESCO has been committed for decades in an area of strong universal symbolism: natural and cultural World Heritage. Otherwise, the UN has also been quick to react to awareness developing since the late eighties of the importance of the threat to the environment and the need to protect our most valuable good, planet Earth, collectively. Previously, only states had been deemed to be able either to jeopardize all of humankind, by waging wars or using the atomic bomb, or, should the case arise, to save it. Now it is individuals who are at the heart of the issue.

In fact, the gap between the haves and the have nots is widening—constantly, faster and faster—as a result of demographic and economic growth at completely different rates depending on who and where you are. Facing this enormous problem and its many ramifications, the UN is hugely under-equipped to assume the responsibilities it has taken on in the area of its Millennium Development Goals, mostly assigned to its specialized agencies, with modest resources to say the least.

In fact, the resources the UN has at its disposal are rarely even mentioned, perhaps because the quick assumption is that they must surely be commensurate with the objectives. Yet it is indeed here, in this vital area, that the United Nations has its greatest problems. Richelieu, who invented the famous concept of *Raison d'Etat* (“reason of state,”) said in so many words that money was the “grease” of peace (*Political Testament*). Alas, the money allocated to peace is far from reaching the levels of that devoted to war.

### **With what resources?**

In contemporary collective awareness, the UN is highly regarded. Be it criticized or defended, one thing is certain: the UN exists. It was omnipresent during the entire Cold War and it remains important today, despite its somewhat waning prestige.

Yet, considering the prestige it does enjoy despite countless critiques and gibes, many would be surprised to learn that the UN's resources are a lot closer to those of a micro state than to those of the “super” supranational state with which it is usually associated (wrongly, it turns out). With a yearly (operating) budget lower than (US)\$2 billion and total expenditure under \$15 billion, which includes all UN agencies and programs (FAO, WHO, UNESCO, UNICEF, etc.), the UN has 40 times less financial resources than just the Pentagon (more than \$500 billion, not counting the “war on terror,” which alone has about \$200 billion to spend).

To put things into perspective, total yearly military expenditure for all countries amounts to \$1 trillion, in itself enough to finance the UN for another 67 years at the present rate ... Total US budget is \$2.73 trillion; the Wall Street bailout (2008) came to \$700 billion, the equivalent of what is needed to finance 47 years for the UN ... As for UN expenditure, it is more or less equal to the yearly budget of the New York City Board of Education (\$12.4 billion). These numbers show among others that the countries that finance the UN allow it no more than a minute fraction of their budget, which indicates that member countries are not tremendously willing to give the UN the resources it needs to fulfill its

mandates. We can also see how the richest countries can in effect corrupt the good progress of UN operations by extorting, in a way, its long-term needs. In this area, the United States—its biggest contributor—has always played an ambiguous game with the UN, which it uses when its national interests are at stake.

In other words, the UN has an infinitely smaller budget than a modest-sized country, not to mention the United States, nor even France or Italy. In terms of power, the UN is non-existent. More precisely, its power is not in its resources but in its capacity to influence the course of events. Though it plays Tom Thumb in the land of strategy, the UN is still a front-running diplomatic performer. But even its enormous legitimacy and its grand prestige—albeit waning—does not stop it from stumbling systematically against material realities. The gigantic gap that separates its influence from its real power is thus a large part of the explanation of the limits it inextricably faces. When you add to this lack of resources the inevitable losses associated with running a body comprising 192 countries representing scores of cultural areas and linguistic families, it is easy to understand that the UN is akin to Don Quixote fighting windmills.

And yet, as years go by, the UN is loaded with ever greater quantities of issues to deal with, including critical ones involving nothing less than the survival of the planet. Why? Simply—and we shall return to this point—because the ability of states to take on individually the world's current problems is constantly diminishing. Why then, not provide the UN with the necessary resources and the freedom of action it needs to truly tackle these problems? The simple answer is that, for now, old habits are lingering and “national interest” is resisting awareness of global collective interest. Two obstacles are preventing a change in approach: the inability to understand that national and collective interests are increasingly close and interconnected; and the fact that political leaders do not have the audacity to move into areas that might undermine their power or cost them an election. Perhaps, too, the inability among a majority of leaders to understand the complexity of the contemporary world. This would mean that our political systems, designed in other times, are simply no longer adapted to the complexity of the world. A vast problem that is not the UN's to solve.

Let us take another look at the question of the UN's resources. Given that the UN budget comes essentially from the great powers of the moment, it is these latter, in a way, that control its power, its authority, and its direction. Obviously, the United States—we could mention other countries—allocates no more than a tiny fraction of its national budget to the UN (a share that has continued to dwindle over the decades) because it has no desire to see a supra power emerge that would be able to take its place on the international chessboard.

In light of this harsh reality, UN action only seems more remarkable. With the exception of the Vatican—the role of which, we should recall, was for a long time of fundamental importance in the realm of governance, including international governance—the impact of the UN is historically unprecedented. This impact, however, is mostly restricted to a particular area: in a way, the UN represents the moral and symbolic—we could almost say spiritual—dimension of everything that governs relations among peoples, while states rule over the temporal dimension.

Of course, the UN is on the field. It is even very much so, in particular as represented by its peacekeeping soldiers (currently 70,000 soldiers who, as we know, belong to national armies). But this is not, in the end, where its essence lies. The United States did not need the UN to invade Iraq. Nonetheless, the UN's refusal to endorse the invasion deprived the US of a moral justification, which in the end, is not negligible. In a context (of conflict) where psychological aspects are considerable—due in particular to the fact that when it comes to foreign intervention, public opinion has a long-term hold on its leaders—the moral umbrella of the only body having the legitimacy to provide moral justification or not, is of major importance. The UN's refusal to intervene in Iraq influenced the course of the war even though, in the end, according to the principles of collective security that constitute its foundations, the UN's very *raison d'être* is precisely to prevent this type of situation.

So instead of asking why the UN does no more than it does, let us try for a moment to look at the problem from the other side: how did the UN come to fill such an important position in global governance with such exiguous resources at its disposal?

Basically, the UN's influence in the world is inversely proportional to its actual power, which in turn varies greatly in magnitude depending on the good will of the permanent members of the Security Council. This is not a coincidence and it could even be argued that it is actually written into the UN Charter. In fact, states, in a way, granted the UN this influence by attributing it the role of permanent representative, or ambassador if you prefer, of the international community through one of the three basic UN decision-making bodies, the Secretariat.<sup>3</sup> The UN's job, however, is mostly only representation, as at the same time the states also jealously protected individual national power, which constitutes the only real bargaining chip on the grand chessboard, and the "wealthiest" states are skimpy and circumspect in handing this power over to the Secretary General.

The UN is therefore a kind of conglomerate of national interests (of the member countries) operating according to the principles of utilitarian philosophy, i.e. promotion of the wellbeing of most people. Nevertheless, in practice, the interest of most people is only promoted when it does not conflict with that of the most powerful countries, i.e. the UN's "club of five" aristocracy. The spirit of collective security is thus maintained within limits, with the great powers' *realpolitik* throwing its full weight on the United Nations with an invisible and heavy hand—and the tribulations of the General Assembly show that the more modest countries' actions often also have to submit to the intrinsic selfishness underlying each country's national interest, from the biggest to the smallest.

Regardless, compared with the international regime in force previous to the UN and the League of Nations, the balance of powers (which a number of leaders are calling today to re-establish), the "UN regime" constitutes a considerable step forward in that it rejects the pre-eminence of a policy exclusively governed by the correlation of forces and the

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the three pillars—the Assembly, the Security Council, and the Secretariat—three other bodies complete the picture: the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, and the International Court of Justice.

pecking order of the great almighty powers. This is the regime, albeit incomplete since it has to combine with the *realpolitik* of traditional correlations of forces, that made it possible, with the active aid of the UN and its various specialized agencies, to negotiate the turning point of decolonization, including USSR's, and the essentially peaceful transition from a world that comprised 50 states in 1945 to a world with 4 times that many 60 years later.

This metamorphosis of the great geopolitical chessboard was, along with the founding of the European Union, one of the two major political facts of the second half of the twentieth century. By integrating new states into the system, the UN played a front-running role in the maintenance of the world's overall stability, a role that has in fact been largely underestimated. This unifying role was played by the second fundamental decision-making body, the General Assembly. This is the body where the "democratic" dimension of the UN is manifest, given that every nation, from the biggest to the smallest, has an equal vote.

Nevertheless, the UN's founding members also inflicted serious restrictions on the organization. The third pillar of the UN, the Security Council (second in the Charter, after the Assembly), was partly set up as a body to maintain international stability and security, but also and above all, as sometimes argued, as an instrument allowing the great powers that be—mainly those that won World War II plus France, another great historical power—to maintain their hegemony on world affairs. Through the Charter, which wrote into stone the role and composition of the Security Council, the five major permanent powers of the Security Council, what's more armed with veto power, have the UN's destiny in their hands, especially in the area they are most intent on controlling, that of war and peace.<sup>4</sup> The Security Council—15 members (since 1965) including the 5 permanent ones—is independent from the Secretariat and the General Assembly. Through the Security Council, the UN artificially maintains the status quo of the 1945 global chessboard, knowing that it has been a long time since two of the five permanent members, France and Great Britain, had the status of first-rank power, and that a third, Russia, has also lost

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<sup>4</sup> Used about 300 times so far, mainly by the USSR/Russia and the United States.

some of its haughtiness since 1991. For these three countries, relinquishing such a prestigious status and its corresponding influence—remember Dominique de Villepin’s tirade against invading Iraq—is as unthinkable as for the two other permanent members of the Council, China and the United States. At best, France, and even Great Britain, could in a (most unlikely) surge of generosity transfer their vote to the European Union. An enlargement of the permanent members of the Security Council could also be considered—though also unlikely as things stand now—to include India, Japan, Brazil (which had already requested a seat in the League of Nations and was the first to put in the same request when the UN was founded) and South Africa, for example. But beyond the symbolic aspect, would this change things fundamentally? The Security Council constitutes the aristocratic dimension, taken in its original political meaning, of the UN, i.e. a frozen elite, absolutely determined to protect its privileges and maintain the pre-established pecking order. Enlarged or not, it will remain the same.

We can thus see that the UN is a two-headed animal, in which a democratic structure—albeit lame and inadequate—is in conflict with an aristocratic structure (attenuated to some extent by the rotation of the non-permanent members of the Council), with the Secretariat, or more precisely the Secretary General, constituting the showcase of the whole and on occasion its cockpit. All the same, this structure has a specific *modus operandi* since each of these bodies is attributed a specific task that, all things considered, is complementary to the other two. The Assembly was able to achieve the integration of its new members and ease the UN’s growing pains. The Security Council, thanks to its small size and the power of its permanent members, is able to reach quick resolutions and even act with verve as long as everyone is on the same wave length. As for the Secretary General, his role is vital since he is the voice and the face of the United Nations. When capable and visible, like Kofi Annan, his influence is real. Nevertheless, appointment of the Secretary General is too dependent on political negotiations, which can result in a nominee not always up to the task. Usually chosen from the ranks of diplomacy, secretary generals are often relatively unobtrusive. Their profile is quite different from that of the great political leaders and it might be necessary to draw future secretaries from the ranks of former heads of state. Historically, UN secretary generals have paled into

insignificance. Compared, for instance, to American or Soviet leaders of the past 50 years, who remembers Trygve Lie (1946-52) or U Thant (1961-71), contemporaries, respectively, of Stalin, Truman, and Eisenhower, then of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, not to mention Mao Zedong, De Gaulle, or Churchill, who were the chiefs of state of the other permanent member countries of the Security Council? How many people in the world today even know the name of the current Secretary General (Ban Ki-moon)?

As for the Security Council, it is far too locked into the rivalries among its permanent members to actually have a positive incidence on international stability. The General Assembly is often on its side, due to the comprehensible frustration of the countries located at the periphery of the center of gravity of power and who use the UN tribune to push forward their presence or that of their leaders.

Set up in such a way that its possibility of changing is considerably limited, the UN, since its foundation, has been constantly and unfairly reproached for being unable to reform itself on its own. Here again, blame should not be placed, as it is generally, on the institution itself, and even less on the Secretariat, even if they could be managed more efficiently (as Kofi Annan would have liked). As seen above, the UN actually adapted significantly to the transformations that have modified the configuration of the geopolitical world of the past 60 years, more, in fact, than any state has done. In the field of Human Rights, for instance—even if the Human Rights Council (being reformed since it replaced the Commission on Human Rights) can be criticized—in the fields of poverty, health, or children, UN agencies have accomplished remarkable work, all the more so that their resources are so limited.

There is no shadow of a doubt that the United Nations needs to be reformed in depth. Still, so far, no one has been able to do so, even the influential Kofi Annan, who proposed a reform plan in 2005. Beyond the thorny problem of reform, among others of the Security Council, that everyone, or nearly everyone is clamoring for, without indulging in illusions, there is room to wonder if the UN, even if reformed, constitutes today the main answer to the problems the world will be facing in the coming decades.

In other words, three questions are raised today. The first, that of UN reform, is not the most important even if it is the one on everyone's mind, rightfully so. A more important question is that of knowing whether the UN actually embodies the global collective-security system that it is supposed to represent and whether it (still? finally?) will tomorrow. Finally, there is the simple question of collective security, even beyond the UN: is this the answer we expected, are expecting today, and will be expecting tomorrow?

### **The collective-security problem**

Let us start with the third question, which we only touched upon above. For many, the UN embodies the success of a long-standing dream: to replace a dubious—and dangerous in the end—system of balances by a lasting “collective security” regime capable of bringing peace. This dream was entertained by the Enlightenment philosophers, who wished to end, once and for all, the conflicts and schemes of unscrupulous leaders whose ambitions had nothing to do with their subjects' wellbeing.<sup>5</sup> The idea of progress, freedom, and happiness too, is therefore rooted in the theoretical conception of collective security. It was at the instigation of a philosopher-head of state, Woodrow Wilson (he was professor of political philosophy at Princeton), that the concept became a reality with the League of Nations, then later at the instigation of another American, Franklin D. Roosevelt, that the UN would be founded.

What is collective security? It is simply the idea that any country's attacking any other country is tantamount to its attacking all other countries, whose duty is to oppose the attack. The concept of collective security is a sort of social contract among states, whereas the system of balances is a mechanism that in itself, with a measure of *laissez-faire*, is supposed to prevent any state from increasing in power enough to be able to

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<sup>5</sup> This idea is found among a good number of Enlightenment philosophers, such as Castel de Saint-Pierre, Rousseau, d'Holbach, and Kant, among many others. Discussions on “perpetual peace” were extremely popular throughout the entire eighteenth century, as were discussions about various “plans for peace,” for example the one proposed by Jeremy Bentham.

upset the status quo. The collective-security goal is stability and peace, while the system of balance of power is expected to maintain the status quo (especially that of the great powers), if need be by resorting to war—with limited objectives—in order to maintain the geopolitical balance.

Logically, the concept of collective security expresses the European feeling of the eighteenth century, when the idea of progress ruled and the concept of balance of power—which expressed the world view of the seventeenth century—seemed unsatisfactory to the most sagacious observers. The temporal embodiment of collective security, the UN, however, was born just at a time where faith in progress was being shattered by the unprecedented horrors of World War I and World War II. In other words, in 1945 the world set up a system in which it had basically stopped believing, as if, with no real conviction that it would do so, it had wished to ease its conscience.

The structural configuration of the UN, its Security Council in particular, tends to support this statement. We should note that the founding of the UN coincided historically with loss of faith in “rationalistic”—the term commonly used by political experts—systems as embodied by the League of Nations and with the revival of the traditional *realpolitik* principles that had been implemented by the leaders of the great powers that came out of World War II, principles that were in fact dominant in postwar political-science university departments. For example, the strategy of containment that governed US policy through to 1991 was based on a traditional view of the correlation of forces. As a result, the United States, the USSR, and other permanent members of the Security Council practiced realistic politics while serving at the UN, whose *raison d’être* was precisely to put an end to such practices!

This allows us to say without being too far off base that the failings of the UN are not due, as is generally affirmed, to the fact that today’s world is no longer the world of 1945 and the UN has not been able to adapt, but rather that in 1945 the dice were already loaded and the UN’s fate was practically sealed. We could even add that the UN is perhaps better adapted in 2009 to the current context than to the context of the time when

it was founded. Overpowered as it was by the great powers, the UN still and all succeeded in staking out an area of its own and sometimes even in sidestepping the impositions written into its origins. Nonetheless, even though it has adapted, it has seemed at times completely overwhelmed by events, as for example by the 2008 financial crisis, about which the UN has remained dead silent. It is also largely ignored by the Europeans, not to mention the Americans.

Let us return for a moment to collective security. Collective security, as it was perceived theoretically in the eighteenth century and applied in the twentieth, was founded on four principles that today seem anachronistic, even obsolete:

*I. Pre-eminence of the state, a legitimate and rational player*

*II. Inviolability of state sovereignty*

*III. A narrow view of the concept of security*

*IV. A perception of international relations favoring the (geo)political dimension*

These were nonetheless the principles governing the UN's birth and are still those that constitute its *raison d'être*.

Let us briefly examine each of these **propositions** in light of our current context.

### **Pre-eminence of the state**

When in the seventeenth century the imperial system that had dominated the Eurasian zone for centuries disappeared, the state, the modern state, became the key element of the international system. The state obtained a monopoly on organized violence, and from then on it was also to characterize all individuals with a "nationality" defining their rights, privileges, and status in the world. The almighty and legitimate (democratic) state alone is authorized to "manage" not only its own affairs but also those related to the regional, continental, and global community. The state is what stands against the anarchy of a system having no supranational government. To counter the "natural state" of the

system, nation-states, through their representatives, sign peace treaties and define the rules of the international game. States are also those who are self-appointed to sign a social contract that binds them to other states through the UN Charter.

Since 1648, only states have been considered worthy to address the major problems of the world. Whether competent (for instance in 1648 for the Peace of Westphalia) or incompetent (in 1919, for the Treaty of Versailles), they have always been more or less capable of settling those problems. Now that the world dynamics have changed completely, states seem unfit to settle a whole range of problems that are beyond their jurisdiction or their willingness to do so, which is exactly where the contemporary world's stumbling blocks lie. The environment, energy, health, water, finance, trade markets, fishing, and terrorism constitute the many complex problems, along with many others, that lie beyond the narrow framework of the state. In a word, due to their very nature—they are designed to defend national, not collective interests—states, even when bound by treaties, are incapable of addressing, and even of identifying today's problems. States simply cannot handle the collective management of the planet. At best, they can jointly solve a few crises here and there, mood of the moment allowing. On no account do they seem able to get truly involved in a collective effort, where many of them believe they have something to lose. So although the UN exists as such thanks to the states that constitute it, today it is prisoner of its "statejacket." Can it transcend its original status? There is no reason to think so. At best, it can define an agenda, as in fact it has done by identifying the major tasks for the twenty-first century. To take action, however, it would have to cross an uncrossable line, no matter what or how many reforms it imagines and implements. How can we move beyond this stage? How can we break out of this "statejacket"? What proposals can we make for a "post-state world"? These questions are at the core of world governance. First, it is high time and of the essence that other players come on stage—in fact, some have already done so. Then, the new players' participation needs to be organized. In other words, it is also necessary to institute a control system for these players—the financial crisis is a cruel reminder in this area. However, the traditional regime of international relations is characterized of course by the absence of a true control system: the UN does not in any way constitute such a system and states

obviously have absolutely no interest in setting norms that might limit their capacities to act.

## **Sovereignty**

The principle of sovereignty is connected to the principle of the modern state. It dates back to same period, the seventeenth century. As a response to the wars of religion that had ravaged Europe, the principle of “*cujus regio, ejus religio*” was instituted: the prince’s religion is the nation’s religion. In order to avoid devastating conflicts, it was then decided (again, in the Treaty of Westphalia) that no country should interfere in the affairs of another state (for instance, to defend persons practicing the potentially interfering country’s religion). This principle has governed international relations ever since—with the exception of conquests outside Europe through to the twentieth century—and is set in the UN Charter. This Eurocentrist vision can legitimately be criticized, but Eurocentrism is definitely what guided the establishment of modern international norms at a time when Europe was at the peak of its power while the countries and civilizations that had dominated the geopolitical chessboard until the sixteenth/seventeenth century had suddenly, at the same time and for various reasons, moved into the background. Nonetheless, the influence of non-European civilizations on these norms was not negligible, as cross-cultural exchanges in this area were more important than it was generally believed.

In the past years, the incompetence of certain governments and their abuse of power, the weakness and the negligence of political machinery here and there, powers struggles, old resentments among populations have provoked major humanitarian disasters that could have been avoided if the international community had been able to weigh intelligently on the affairs of certain countries whose ruling classes have been incapable of managing extremely serious problems or, even worse, have themselves been directly responsible for disasters.

In view of the fact that today, as opposed to yesterday, sources of conflicts and instability come from within countries and that the humanitarian crises that ensue can take a toll of millions of victims, it is imperative that the international community be able to intervene, at least to save populations from death. What international community? Beyond international public opinion, this community actually exists only in people's minds, which is why it does not react. For it to be able to do so, it is therefore necessary to strive to make it real. How? At least to start with, by identifying players likely to have an impact, by becoming aware that the problems at hand require concerted action among these players, and by organizing this action effectively. The UN has a role to play in this area, and so does civil society. For an "international community" to become reality, enduring and sustained efforts will be required in a battle far from being won: the rules of international politics so far have pushed selfishness to its paroxysm, and it will be difficult to let go of this selfishness.

Why not also institute systematic intervention conditions for civil wars, or even for when a state resorts to abuse of power in order to crush its populations (as in the case of Zimbabwe, for instance)? This is obviously a burning subject that is difficult to deal with, knowing how complicated the political situations are of the countries suffering from these difficulties. The duty-of-intervention idea that came forth these past years is no coincidence. Although in the seventeenth century absolute respect of national sovereignty constituted great progress in Human Rights, today the opposite is true. It is high time to put this principle on the floor—as certain people have, such as Bernard Kouchner when he was head of the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières—rather than to remain set in our ways, which today are feeding into a backward-looking, or even criminal attitude when we are dealing with man-made humanitarian cataclysms, or even those subsequent to natural disasters. In this area, UN action is ambiguous because on the one hand, it defends a principle written into its charter, and on the other hand, it parades as the first rampart against Human Rights abuses. To act, it will be necessary either to sidestep the UN or to challenge some of its principles, starting with that of absolute respect of national sovereignty. The members of the Security Council have a considerable role to

play in this area. They will only move, however, under pressure from public opinion. Here, well-orchestrated campaigns could produce significant effects.

### **A narrow view of security**

The UN has done a lot in the past few years to expand the concept of security to a concept of “human security” that involves not only physical security but also includes security against hunger and cold weather, disease and poverty. The UN was established, however, when the concept of security was understood in a narrow and restrictive way. Consequently, the UN’s structures, its charter and its mechanisms were built in terms of this view of security, that of 1945, which made perfect sense after two world wars. The gap between the rhetoric of UN leaders and practical reality is therefore, here too, considerable. In terms of implementation, the UN’s resources simply do not match its ambitions. The first reason for this is the member countries’ absence of will. Security in its traditional sense is easy to grasp and is related to the short run. Human security is a more complex concept, not very well known, which is mostly related to the long run. Politics, we know, is mainly concerned with the short run. This is a flaw in politics in general but mostly, we have to admit, in democracy. Here again, not much can be expected from states.

The UN as an institution (mainly the Secretariat), by promoting this new concept of security, shows that it is a pillar of thinking on new world governance. As a body at the service of its Member States, on the other hand, it often proves to be incapable of implementing its own ideas. There are therefore two solutions to consider: either the UN accepts its limits and refocuses its activities, for instance on the general field of thinking, ideas, and discussion, or it puts its money where its mouth is, which, as we have said, depends on the will of its Member States. By advocating actions it is incapable of carrying out, the UN loses on both counts: the potential impact of its recommendations is basically defeated by its inherent inability to implement them.

## **Geopolitics**

The UN was founded in a context that favored “geopolitics,” in short, the exclusively political relations that countries could maintain among themselves in the traditional fields of international relations. Geoeconomic and geoenvironmental aspects were either minimized or completely dismissed. Today it is evident that all these dimensions are important in themselves, and also that they are interrelated. The UN was however mostly constructed as a geopolitical building. The various economic, environmental, and other crises that have begun to shake the planet demonstrate that the UN, in these fields, is very poorly equipped to intervene in any way whatsoever to settle crises, not to mention prevent them. Here again, the UN structure is built in such a way that it is difficult to transform it in depth: possible reforms can only be minimal, and in any case insufficient for the United Nations to truly weigh upon these domains. So what can be done? Be content with minimal reforms, which is admittedly better than nothing at all? If the house is flawed and cannot be completely refurbished, it might however be better to build another one (or several others), even if that means keeping the first one but assigning it fewer ambitions.

### **A (provisional) conclusion**

The United Nations has been part of the dynamics of international relations for more than 60 years, during which many things have changed, including the perspective that every individual might have of his or her place in the universe. The UN is present in many fields and is expected to be even more so. Through its many specialized agencies, it sometimes accomplishes miracles and does so with extremely limited resources. The world has changed, and the UN has also managed to adapt and even sometimes to precede and influence the deep structural changes that have altered the course of things and of history. As regards reforms, the UN has also attempted to prime the pump through its Secretary General, sometimes with relative success.

All the same, the UN embodies thinking of another era, and its structures were set from the start in a rigid mold that primarily suited great powers whose mental scope hardly went beyond that of a global governance ruled mainly by the harsh laws of the correlation of forces. Yes, the UN managed to ease this law and even to humanize the rules of game just a bit. But the UN was not founded to be free and independent from the will of the states that constitute it. Today, when the major problems of the world are either due to the failure of the political machinery of states or involve a dimension that goes beyond the framework of interstate relations, a new world-governance architecture is clearly needed.

What would the UN's place be in this new architecture? The UN plainly has an important role to play today in an unstable world that, for better or for worse, has no geopolitical or geoeconomic stabilization system to govern it. By the very fact of its original constitution, it is simply unable to transcend the "state" dimension into which it is necessarily hemmed. Its symbolic action is vital but there is nothing to indicate that it will some day have the material resources to match its ambitions.

Rather than expecting and clamoring that the UN accomplish the impossible while at the same time restraining its actions, to then criticize its lack of results, we feel it is more judicious to restrict its mandates in the future but provide it with real resources in the desired fields, for instance in the fields of health, hunger, and education.

In other sectors, including those that were the basis for founding the United Nations, those of war and peace, evidently other mechanisms are necessary, otherwise we will be perpetually disappointed. In this domain, the UN is very far from having the resources for efficient action and member countries, starting with the five permanent members of the Security Council, do not and will probably never have the will to yield any ground. Besides, the evolution of war and peace requires a complete overhaul of the military apparatus, of strategies, and of the very concept of army. Just in the domain of peacekeeping operations, it is obvious that things must change considerably and that a revolution is in the making, or should be, in this particularly sensitive area. It is hard to imagine, in fact, that states will be willing to abandon their prerogatives here, where more

than anywhere else the ancestral laws of Politics always apply: the laws of the correlation of forces. Regardless, history has demonstrated that the state is capable of changing, and even of transforming itself quickly. A revolution similar to that of 1648 or of 1789 is still a possibility, no matter how difficult that may be to consider—but such is the essence of revolutions: to surprise us. It is therefore not unthinkable that the model of the state could change significantly in the coming years, to the point of giving the United Nations a second life (a third one, if one counts the League of Nations). Neither is it impossible that the scaffolding of a new world governance take states, hence the UN, to higher levels. But nothing concrete, for the moment, corroborates these scenarios.

It might perhaps be wiser to accept the idea that the UN will not be able to do much more in the future than it is able to now, and that its energy could perhaps be put to better use elsewhere. Furthermore, reorienting UN activities seems in practice to be more likely to succeed than in-depth reform.

In other words, the role that the United Nations could play in twenty-first-century world governance would be vital, all the more so as other elements would complete, support, and assist its action. What kinds of elements? For the moment, focus has mostly been directed on models that, for the very large part, involve a more or less institutionalized activity where states are still placed at the core of the solution. Hence the idea of a new “concert” of nations or powers (Michael Lind),<sup>6</sup> that of a league of democracies (John McClintock and Xavier Guigue),<sup>7</sup> that of regional grouping (Pierre Calame),<sup>8</sup> or still yet an enlarged “G8/G20” (Johannes Lynn and Hake Bradford).<sup>9</sup> Yet it seems indispensable that other players—civil society, NGOs/IGOs, companies, etc.—take an active part in world governance. How? With what resources? For what purposes? The answers to these questions are eminently complex and go far beyond the framework of this essay. We do,

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Lind, *The American Way of Strategy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> John McClintock, with the collaboration of Xavier Guigue, *The Uniting of Nations, an Essay on Global Governance*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Calame, *Redefining Global Governance to Meet the Challenges of the Twenty-first Century*, [http://www.alliance21.org/2003/article.php3?id\\_article=455](http://www.alliance21.org/2003/article.php3?id_article=455)

<sup>9</sup> Johannes F. Linn and Colin J. Bradford, “Summit Reform: Toward an L 20”, in C. Brecher and J. Linn, *Global Governance Reform, Breaking the Stalemate*, Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2007, pp. 77-86.

however, feel that a single solution, including the UN solution, is neither possible nor desirable today, as it might have appeared to be not so long ago. The architecture of a new world governance must be decentralized and operational in various areas, flexible and adapted, efficient and sustainable. The days are over when all the problems of the world could in theory be settled under only one umbrella. Less aesthetic, this type of architecture could instead be much more efficient than the UN construction has been thus far. The fact remains that, as for any architectural construction, there are specific problems to solve. The architecture of a new world governance must be just as specific. It must also provide answers to essential questions: For whom? Why? How? For what purposes? Who decides what? In other words, as for any human organization, the problem of legitimacy is raised. So far, states have had a monopoly on political legitimacy. Henceforward, it will be necessary to redefine the norms of a new legitimacy.