

A democratic UN for the 21st century

By Shamshad Ahmad

IS the United Nations heading the League way or will it survive the latest onslaught on its credibility and authority? A look at the rationale and history of the United Nations and its performance in terms of the charter obligations, since its inception fifty-eight years ago, might facilitate an answer to this two-in-one question.

Born out of the three great upheavals that gripped the world in the first half of the twentieth century—the two great wars and the great depression—the United Nations was meant to save the world from such disasters. It was established to pursue the twin goals of peace and prosperity. For the realization of these goals, it was hailed as “mankind’s last best hope”.

The UN was also meant to provide a moral edifice for the re-ordering of the global system, which would be based on justice and equity and which would be governed by rules, laws, values and cooperation. Unfortunately, the world that ensued was neither just nor equal.

As a universal organization, the UN came to be regarded as an instrument of international legitimacy because of the “belief” in its ideals by the nations of the world.

Hard realities, however, soon intervened to interrupt the rebuilding of the world on a moral edifice. The exigencies of the cold war became new imperatives in the realm of realpolitik. In a polarized world, the UN became another arena for the clash of ideologies and political confrontations.

It was on nuclear weapons. The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was the first effort to build a legal regime that would eventually be used to legitimize possession of these weapons by the five, while denying them to others. In that sense, the NPT was a quasi-moral/political expedient. Nuclear weapons became the corner-stone of the global security architecture.

The seventies were still heady days for the United Nations or for those who actually believed in its vision. The poor and dispossessed nations, emerging from centuries of exploitation of their lands by the colonial powers, sought to assert their stakes in the global economy by demanding a new international economic order.

The resource-rich countries, producers of raw materials and primary products realized the inefficacy of political rhetoric and their claims for justice as virtually nothing came out from the UN’s economic agenda. The debate and the acrimony only proved that pious hopes and ide-

to the all-pervasive politicization of the system.

The end of the cold war had provided an opportunity to revert to the concept of collective security. However, while the Security Council was used to punish Iraq’s aggression against Kuwait, it was unable to effectively deal with aggression and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina and conflicts in Kosovo, Kashmir, Rwanda, Somalia and other places in Africa and Asia.

Besides inter-state conflicts, the recent years have seen intra-state implosions, involving terrible human suffering and dislocation. The Security Council has not been able to respond to these crises and conflicts in an objective manner. The “overriding” vested political and economic interests of the more influential and powerful players limit its role in conflict prevention and resolution.

In the economic and social fields, the UN can claim some credit. It may not have freed the world of poverty and want, but through a series of major international conferences and summits since the 1990s, a significant contribution has been made to promoting greater awareness of the multi-sectoral issues of development and of the need to address them through global partnership. In particular, three major UN conferences of this century, namely, the Millennium summit, the Financing for Development Conference at Monterrey, Mexico and the World summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, have brought the development agenda into a sharper international focus, and given it a new political momentum.

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clash of ideologies and political confrontation between the two hostile military alliances.

In those years of "chilling" confrontation between the US and the USSR, the developing and non-aligned countries bore the torch of the United Nations. The defence of its principles and pursuit of its ideals for the next fifty years were to be in the hands of the newly emergent nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, which were imbued with the idealism that had charged their struggle for deliverance from the dark days of colonialism.

In the early decades of the fifties and sixties, the people of Kashmir, Palestine, South Africa and Namibia and scores of others won legitimacy through political and moral endorsement at the UN for their just causes. Self-determination was the cardinal principle of the UN that shaped the world in those decades. The UN General Assembly and the Trusteeship Council were important bodies that made a deep imprint on the geopolitics of the world.

The Security Council, responsible under the charter for the maintenance of international peace and security, fell victim to the cold war. Political and strategic expediencies of the major powers kept it from taking positions based on principles. Major global issues on which the UN had taken a clear position through Security Council resolutions remained on its agenda without any follow-up action. The unresolved questions of Palestine and Kashmir continue to pose threat to global peace and security. The veto power blocked any meaningful progress towards the implementation of the Security Council's resolutions. For all practical purposes, it was the major powers and not the UN that called shots in matters of peace and security.

Global security order came to be shaped by nuclear weapons, which proliferated vertically and laterally to give the erstwhile imperial powers a sense of "destiny" and "invincibility".

The major powers, however, sought to monopolize the international security order by basing

alism were no substitute for pragmatism and power.

Despite scores of resolutions on global economic inequalities and the need to redress them; on removing the barriers to markets and for transfer of technology; to build a partnership for universalizing affluence and elimination of poverty, hunger and disease, nothing could be done to realize a new egalitarian economic order.

The UN development programmes were poorly funded and in most cases heavily dependent on major donors for their strategic direction, accomplished little in reducing poverty. The UN system developed its own institutional interests that also materially coloured its development programmes.

With the UNDP in the lead, the UN family of agencies, bodies and programmes, made their presence felt in the capitals of the developing countries. In most cases, their capacity in programme delivery remained at levels, which were less than optimum. Their performance was not really reflected at the national or global levels. Bureaucratic procedures and vested institutional interests dictated subservience to donor guidance, encouraged corruption by local functionaries and took out merit and objectivity from the UN's developmental assistance philosophy. At the same time, the UN bodies of great importance to the developing countries continued to face budgetary and resource problems.

The Bretton Woods system had an existence of its own. It had its own philosophy and own logic which had very little to do with the UN. But in recent years, the UN has been able to develop close cooperation with the World Bank and the IMF as major institutional stakeholders in UN's global development pursuits.

In their formative phase, the UN bodies and agencies responsible for humanitarian work accomplished their mandates. The UNHCR, in particular, played an extremely important role in caring for refugees. While the human rights machinery was imbued with idealism, its inter-governmental forums fell victim

No doubt, the UN has not fulfilled its promise of peace and prosperity. The critics of the UN would even say that it has failed to live up to the lofty ambitions enshrined in its Charter. It has resolved no major disputes; nor has it prevented many conflicts. It is no more than a debating club, producing voluminous and repetitive resolutions without concrete results in terms of their implementation or enforceability. Its supporters and defenders, on the other hand, feel that the UN has indeed served the purpose of saving humanity, during the second half of the twentieth century, from the recurrence of the great disasters of the first half.

An objective assessment would support the view that despite its failures and constraints, it may not be fair to blame the UN for what it has not been able to accomplish. The onus for its "empowerment or inability" to carry out its Charter role rests on its membership.

The need for a strong multilateral institution capable of meeting the challenges of the new age has never been greater than it is today.

What is needed most is the reform of the UN that makes it stronger, more representative and more effective inter-governmental organization where one-state-one-vote principle should underpin its democratic and participatory character. This requires restoration of the primacy of the General Assembly as the chief deliberative policy-making organ of the UN through its involvement in all decisions of global relevance and impact, and democratization of the Security Council through rationalization of the veto power and permanent membership and increase in the number of non-permanent members.

The working methods of the UN system should also be reviewed and streamlined to ensure greater efficiency and coordination in implementation of the decisions and internationally agreed goals and commitments.

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