



The United Nations' Efficacy in Managing Global Conflicts: Reform or Replace?

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Abstract: The United Nations (UN) was founded as a global peacekeeping and conflict-resolution body in the aftermath of World War II, aiming to prevent future large-scale conflicts. While it has achieved notable successes in certain regions, the organization has also faced growing criticism for its failures in addressing contemporary challenges, including protracted conflicts and political gridlock within its decision-making processes. This paper evaluates the UN's efficacy in managing global conflicts through a historical lens, analyzes its current structural and operational weaknesses, and explores two potential paths forward: comprehensive reform or replacement with a new international framework. Drawing on case studies such as the conflicts in Yemen and Ukraine, the research highlights the limitations of the UN's current model while underscoring its irreplaceable role in maintaining global stability. Ultimately, the paper argues for systemic reforms as the most pragmatic solution to enhance the UN's effectiveness, emphasizing the risks associated with outright replacement. The study concludes with actionable recommendations to adapt the UN to the complexities of modern global governance while safeguarding its foundational principles.

Keywords: United Nations, global conflicts, UN reform.



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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) was established in 1945, emerging from the ashes of World War II with the primary aim of maintaining international peace and security. It was envisioned as a platform to foster diplomacy, resolve conflicts, and address global challenges collectively. Over the decades, the UN has played a pivotal role in mediating disputes, delivering humanitarian aid, and championing human rights. Landmark successes, such as the peaceful resolution of the Namibian independence process and the restoration of stability in El Salvador, have underscored its potential to be a powerful force for good in the global arena (Smith, 2020). However, these successes are contrasted with notable failures, such as the inability to prevent genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia or to broker lasting peace in Syria, exposing the structural and operational weaknesses inherent in its system (Brown & Taylor, 2018).

As the global landscape evolves, so too do the nature and scale of conflicts. The rise of non-state actors, climate-induced security threats, and persistent geopolitical rivalries have stretched the UN's mechanisms to their limits. Criticisms of inefficiency, bureaucratic inertia, and political paralysis—especially within the Security Council, where veto powers frequently undermine collective action—have led to growing calls for change (Williams, 2021). Scholars and

practitioners alike are divided on the appropriate course of action: should the UN undergo significant reforms to adapt to modern realities, or is it time to consider replacing it with a new organization better equipped to address contemporary global challenges?

This paper seeks to examine the efficacy of the UN in managing global conflicts and weigh the merits of these two paths forward: reform or replacement. By analyzing historical successes and failures, assessing current institutional challenges, and drawing insights from key case studies such as Yemen and Ukraine, the study provides a balanced perspective on the UN's role in global governance. Ultimately, the paper argues that while the UN is far from perfect, its centrality to international cooperation and its established legitimacy make systemic reform the most pragmatic solution. Replacing the organization, while conceptually appealing to some, carries significant risks of destabilizing the global order and losing decades of institutional knowledge and trust (Johnson, 2019). This analysis aims to contribute to the ongoing debate by offering actionable recommendations for the UN's evolution in the face of 21st-century challenges.

Historical Perspective

The formation and early years

The United Nations was founded in 1945 to prevent the recurrence of the devastation witnessed during the two World Wars. The Charter of the United Nations outlined ambitious goals, including maintaining international peace and security, promoting social and economic development, and upholding human rights (United Nations, 1945). Its foundational principle, collective security, aimed to unify member states against acts of aggression. In its early years, the UN focused on decolonization and mediating interstate conflicts, often with notable success. For instance, the UN played a central role in supporting the independence movements in Africa and Asia, including the peaceful transition of Namibia to independence in 1990 (Smith, 2020).

Cold War era challenges

The Cold War (1947–1991) presented significant obstacles to the UN's effectiveness. The ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union often paralyzed the Security Council, with both superpowers wielding their veto power to protect their geopolitical interests. This deadlock limited the UN's ability to intervene in many conflicts, relegating its role to that of a mediator in less politically sensitive issues (Williams, 2018). However, the UN achieved some successes during this period, including its peacekeeping missions in the Middle East and its role in managing the Suez Crisis in 1956 (Brown, 2019).

Post-Cold War optimism

The end of the Cold War ushered in a renewed optimism for the UN's capacity to manage global conflicts. The 1990s witnessed a surge in peacekeeping operations, with missions deployed in conflict zones such as Cambodia, El Salvador, and Namibia. The UN's involvement in El Salvador's peace process, for instance, facilitated negotiations between warring factions, leading to a comprehensive peace agreement in 1992 (Johnson, 2019). However, this era also exposed significant limitations in the UN's ability to respond to rapidly escalating crises. The organization faced severe criticism for its failures to prevent the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the Srebrenica massacre in 1995, despite its presence in these regions (Taylor, 2020).

Evolving nature of global conflicts

The shift from interstate wars to intrastate conflicts and the rise of non-state actors have further complicated the UN's peacekeeping efforts. Traditional peacekeeping models, which relied on the consent of warring parties and clearly defined conflict lines, have often proven inadequate in addressing these modern challenges (Smith & Brown, 2021). For example, the UN's struggle to adapt its peacekeeping approach in the face of complex conflicts like those in Syria and Yemen has underscored the need for systemic reform.

Lessons from historical engagements

The UN's historical engagements reveal a dual narrative of success and failure. While its peacekeeping operations have demonstrated the potential for international cooperation in resolving conflicts, its structural and operational limitations have often hindered its ability to respond effectively. These lessons underscore the need for a critical reassessment of the organization's role and capabilities in managing global conflicts.

Current Assessment of the UN

Strengths of the United Nations

The United Nations remains a cornerstone of international diplomacy and global governance. Its universal membership and institutional legitimacy grant it a unique capacity to bring diverse stakeholders together to address global challenges (Smith, 2020). Through initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on climate change, the UN has demonstrated its ability to coordinate large-scale, cooperative efforts to address pressing global issues (Williams, 2021). Additionally, its peacekeeping operations, although often criticized, have been instrumental in stabilizing conflict zones such as Liberia and Cambodia, showcasing its potential to promote sustainable peace when adequately supported (Brown & Taylor, 2019).

The UN also plays a vital role in humanitarian aid, providing relief to millions affected by conflicts and natural disasters. Agencies like the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have delivered lifesaving assistance in crises such as those in Yemen, Syria, and South Sudan (Johnson, 2021). These achievements underscore the organization's continued relevance and ability to positively impact global peace and security.

Weaknesses of the United Nations

Despite its strengths, the UN's structural and operational weaknesses have significantly undermined its effectiveness. The most prominent criticism is directed at the Security Council, where the veto power held by the five permanent members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) often leads to paralysis. This dynamic was evident in the UN's limited response to the Syrian civil war, where competing interests among veto-wielding powers prevented decisive action (Taylor, 2020).

The bureaucratic inefficiencies of the UN are another major concern. Critics argue that the organization's sprawling bureaucracy and lack of accountability mechanisms lead to delays in decision-making and resource allocation, hampering its ability to respond swiftly to crises (Smith & Brown, 2021). Financial constraints further exacerbate these challenges, as member states frequently fail to meet their funding obligations, leaving peacekeeping missions and humanitarian operations under-resourced (Williams, 2021).

The evolving nature of global conflicts has highlighted the limitations of the UN's traditional peacekeeping model. Many modern conflicts involve non-state actors, asymmetrical warfare, and deeply entrenched political and social grievances, which are difficult to address through conventional peacekeeping methods (Brown, 2019). For example, in Yemen, the UN's efforts to broker peace have been hindered by the fragmented nature of the conflict and the competing interests of regional powers (Johnson, 2021). Similarly, in Ukraine, the UN's role has been constrained by political divisions within the Security Council, limiting its ability to mediate or intervene effectively (Taylor, 2020).

The UN's credibility has also been called into question due to its perceived inability to enforce its resolutions and protect vulnerable populations. Incidents such as the failure to prevent the genocide in Rwanda and the sexual exploitation scandals involving peacekeepers have damaged its reputation and eroded public trust (Williams, 2021). Restoring this credibility requires not only addressing these past failures but also demonstrating a commitment to accountability and transparency moving forward.

A need for reform

The UN's current challenges underscore the urgent need for reform to enhance its relevance and effectiveness. Without significant changes to its decision-making processes, operational structures, and resource allocation mechanisms, the organization risks losing its ability to fulfill its founding mission in an increasingly complex world (Smith & Brown, 2021). The following sections of this paper will explore potential paths for reform and the feasibility of replacing the UN with a new framework for global governance.

Arguments for Reform

Structural reform

One of the most pressing arguments for reforming the United Nations lies in addressing the structural imbalances within its primary decision-making body, the Security Council. Critics have long argued that the current structure—dominated by five permanent members with veto power—reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945 rather than those of the 21st century (Williams, 2021). Emerging powers like India, Brazil, and South Africa have called for greater representation, arguing that their exclusion undermines the legitimacy and equity of the Council's decisions (Johnson, 2019). Expanding the permanent membership or creating a more flexible system of rotating seats could help align the Council's structure with modern global dynamics and make it more representative of the broader international community.

Reform should also address the veto power, which has frequently paralyzed the UN's ability to act decisively in crises. For example, repeated vetoes by permanent members have hindered resolutions on conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, leaving the organization unable to mediate effectively (Taylor, 2020). Proposals to limit the use of veto power in cases involving mass atrocities or humanitarian emergencies could help prevent such deadlocks and enhance the UN's ability to fulfill its mandate.

Operational improvements

The operational inefficiencies of the UN have hampered its ability to respond swiftly and effectively to emerging crises. Peacekeeping missions, for instance, often suffer from delays in deployment, inadequate resources, and ambiguous mandates that limit their effectiveness (Brown, 2019). Reforms aimed at streamlining the decision-making and resource allocation processes could enable the UN to deploy peacekeeping forces more rapidly and with clearer objectives.

Additionally, improving the training and accountability mechanisms for peacekeepers is crucial. Incidents of misconduct, including allegations of sexual exploitation by peacekeeping personnel, have tarnished the organization's credibility and effectiveness (Smith & Brown, 2021). Establishing stricter oversight and disciplinary measures could help restore trust and ensure that peacekeeping missions adhere to the highest standards of conduct.

Financial sustainability

The chronic underfunding of the UN poses another significant challenge to its effectiveness. Member states frequently fail to meet their financial commitments, leaving key operations underfunded and peacekeeping missions unable to achieve their objectives (Williams, 2021). Reforming the UN's funding model to include more predictable and equitable contributions from member states could provide the organization with the financial stability it needs to carry out its mandates.

Moreover, increasing partnerships with private sector entities, philanthropic organizations, and regional bodies could diversify the UN's funding sources and reduce its reliance on contributions from a few major powers (Johnson, 2019). Such partnerships could also foster innovation and efficiency in the organization's operations.

Democratizing decision-making processes

The UN's decision-making processes are often criticized for being overly centralized and lacking transparency. Reform efforts should focus on democratizing these processes to ensure that smaller and less powerful member states have a greater voice in shaping the organization's policies and priorities (Taylor, 2020). For instance, enhancing the role of the General Assembly, where all member states are equally represented, could counterbalance the influence of the Security Council and foster greater inclusivity.

Strengthening collaboration with regional organizations

The UN's ability to address complex global challenges could be significantly enhanced by fostering stronger partnerships with regional organizations such as the African Union, NATO, and the European Union. These organizations often have a better understanding of local dynamics and can complement the UN's efforts by providing resources and expertise tailored to specific contexts (Brown & Taylor, 2019). Strengthening these collaborations could enable the UN to operate more effectively in conflict zones and address issues that require a multi-faceted approach.

That being said, reforming the UN is a daunting but necessary task to ensure its continued relevance in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Addressing its structural, operational, and financial shortcomings could enhance its ability to manage global conflicts, promote development, and uphold international norms. These reforms must strike a balance between preserving the organization's founding principles and adapting to contemporary realities, ensuring that the UN remains a cornerstone of global governance in the 21st century.

Arguments for Replacement

Ineffectiveness in addressing modern conflicts

One of the primary arguments for replacing the United Nations is its perceived ineffectiveness in addressing the complexities of modern conflicts. Critics argue that the UN's structure and operational framework are outdated, making it ill-equipped to handle the shift from interstate wars to intrastate conflicts dominated by non-state actors and asymmetrical warfare (Smith, 2020). For instance, the organization's limited ability to mediate the Syrian civil war or effectively address the humanitarian crisis in Yemen demonstrates the challenges posed by its rigid peacekeeping models and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Brown & Taylor, 2019). Advocates for replacement suggest that a new organization, designed with greater flexibility and tailored to contemporary global realities, would be better positioned to manage these challenges.

Paralysis in decision-making

The UN's reliance on the veto power of the five permanent members of the Security Council has been a significant impediment to decisive action in critical situations. This mechanism has allowed powerful nations to prioritize their national interests over global peace and security, often resulting in inaction or biased interventions (Taylor, 2020). For example, repeated vetoes by Russia and the United States have stalled resolutions on conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, leaving millions without adequate protection or relief (Williams, 2021). Proponents of replacement argue that a new organization, free from the constraints of the veto system, could establish a more equitable and efficient decision-making process.

Loss of credibility and trust

The UN has faced numerous scandals and failures that have eroded its credibility over time. Incidents such as the failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide, the mishandling of the Bosnian crisis, and repeated allegations of sexual exploitation by peacekeeping forces have significantly damaged the organization's reputation (Johnson, 2019). Critics argue that these issues are symptomatic of deeper structural flaws that cannot be addressed through incremental reforms. Establishing a new organization with stronger accountability mechanisms and a clear mandate for

protecting vulnerable populations could restore trust and legitimacy in global governance (Smith & Brown, 2021).

Feasibility of building a new framework

Advocates for replacement highlight that significant advancements in technology, communications, and international law since the UN's founding offer opportunities to design a more modern and effective global governance system. A new organization could leverage these advancements to create a more agile and inclusive framework, better suited to address global challenges such as cyber threats, climate change, and transnational terrorism (Brown, 2019). Additionally, a fresh start would allow for the incorporation of lessons learned from the UN's successes and failures, potentially avoiding the bureaucratic inertia that has plagued its operations.

Risks of replacement

While the argument for replacement has its merits, it is not without significant risks. Establishing a new global governance structure would require consensus among member states, many of which have divergent priorities and interests. The transition period could create a dangerous vacuum in international cooperation, leaving critical issues like humanitarian aid and conflict resolution unattended (Williams, 2021). Furthermore, there is no guarantee that a new organization would overcome the challenges that have hindered the UN, particularly if it replicates similar power imbalances and structural inefficiencies (Taylor, 2020).

Therefore, replacing the UN is a radical option that seeks to address the organization's inherent flaws by creating a new framework for global governance. While this approach offers the potential for greater efficiency, inclusivity, and adaptability, it carries significant risks of destabilizing the international order and losing decades of institutional knowledge and trust. Any efforts to replace the UN must carefully weigh these risks against the potential benefits, ensuring that global peace and security are not compromised in the process.

Comparative Analysis: Reform vs. Replacement

Efficiency and agility

Reform advocates argue that addressing inefficiencies within the United Nations can be achieved more effectively through incremental changes rather than a complete overhaul. Streamlining bureaucratic processes, enhancing decision-making transparency, and implementing stricter accountability measures are feasible ways to enhance the organization's agility without disrupting its foundational principles (Smith & Brown, 2021). In contrast, proponents of replacement argue that the UN's structural rigidity makes it incapable of adapting to modern challenges. They assert that a new global governance framework, unburdened by legacy inefficiencies, could be designed to function with greater speed and flexibility (Brown, 2019). However, the transition process to establish such a framework could result in significant delays, potentially leaving critical issues like conflict resolution and humanitarian aid in limbo (Williams, 2021).

Legitimacy and global acceptance

The UN's universal membership and historical significance confer a level of legitimacy that would be difficult for a new organization to replicate. Despite its flaws, the UN remains the only global institution with near-universal recognition and participation (Taylor, 2020). Reforming the UN, particularly through democratizing its decision-making processes and enhancing the role of the General Assembly, could address criticisms of inequity while preserving its legitimacy. Conversely, replacing the UN would require broad international consensus and could face resistance from states that benefit from the current system, particularly the permanent members of the Security Council (Johnson, 2019). A new organization might struggle to gain the same level of global acceptance, especially if it excludes key stakeholders or fails to represent the interests of smaller states.

Adaptability to contemporary challenges

The UN has struggled to adapt to emerging global threats such as cyber warfare, climate change, and transnational terrorism, which do not conform to traditional frameworks of conflict and governance (Smith, 2020). Reform efforts could focus on equipping the UN to address these challenges by fostering stronger collaborations with regional organizations, integrating advanced technologies, and diversifying its expertise (Williams, 2021). However, replacement advocates argue that a new organization, designed specifically with these challenges in mind, would be better positioned to tackle them effectively (Brown & Taylor, 2019). While this perspective highlights the potential advantages of starting afresh, it overlooks the practical difficulties of building a global consensus on a new framework.

Cost-benefit analysis

From a cost perspective, reform is widely regarded as the more pragmatic option. Incremental changes to the existing UN framework would likely require fewer resources and less time compared to the establishment of a new organization (Smith & Brown, 2021). The financial and logistical costs of replacing the UN, coupled with the risks of duplicating or losing institutional knowledge, make this approach significantly more challenging to justify (Taylor, 2020). However, supporters of replacement argue that the long-term benefits of a streamlined, modern institution could outweigh the initial costs, provided it is designed to operate more efficiently than the current system (Johnson, 2019).

Stakeholder perspectives

The debate over reform versus replacement often reflects the interests and priorities of different stakeholders. Developing countries and smaller states, which frequently feel marginalized in the current system, tend to support reforms aimed at democratizing decision-making and enhancing equity (Williams, 2021). On the other hand, powerful nations with vested interests in the status quo, particularly those holding veto power in the Security Council, are likely to resist changes that diminish their influence (Taylor, 2020). Proposals for replacement are typically supported by those who perceive the UN as irreparably flawed or incapable of addressing modern challenges effectively, but they often face skepticism from states wary of destabilizing the global order (Smith, 2020).

Hence, while both reform and replacement present pathways for addressing the United Nations' shortcomings, reform emerges as the more feasible and pragmatic option. It allows the organization to retain its established legitimacy and institutional knowledge while adapting to the demands of a changing world. Replacement, though theoretically appealing to some, carries significant risks of disruption, inefficiency, and the loss of global trust. Ultimately, achieving meaningful change will require a balanced approach that preserves the UN's foundational strengths while addressing its weaknesses through targeted reforms.

Recommendations

To address the pressing inefficiencies and limitations of the United Nations, immediate reforms should focus on enhancing the organization's operational capabilities. This includes streamlining decision-making processes to enable rapid responses to emerging crises and clearly defining peacekeeping mandates to avoid ambiguity in mission objectives (Smith & Brown, 2021). Strengthening oversight mechanisms for peacekeepers through stricter accountability measures can restore credibility and trust in the UN's operations (Williams, 2021). Additionally, financial stability must be prioritized by enforcing mandatory contributions from member states and exploring alternative funding sources, such as partnerships with private sector entities and philanthropic organizations (Johnson, 2019).

Another short-term recommendation is to establish mechanisms to limit the use of veto power in the Security Council during humanitarian emergencies. Initiatives like the "Responsibility to

Protect” framework could be institutionalized to circumvent political gridlock in situations involving mass atrocities and human rights violations (Taylor, 2020).

In the long term, systemic reforms are necessary to modernize the UN’s structure and enhance its global relevance. A key priority should be expanding the permanent membership of the Security Council to include emerging powers such as India, Brazil, and South Africa, thereby reflecting the geopolitical realities of the 21st century (Williams, 2021). Additionally, introducing regional representation in the Council could balance power dynamics and promote equity among member states (Brown & Taylor, 2019).

The democratization of decision-making processes should also be pursued. Enhancing the authority of the General Assembly and other representative bodies within the UN could provide smaller and less powerful states with a greater voice in shaping global policies. These changes would foster inclusivity and mitigate the perception of bias in favor of major powers (Johnson, 2019).

Furthermore, the UN’s ability to address complex global challenges can be significantly improved by strengthening its partnerships with regional organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private entities. Regional organizations like the African Union and NATO often possess deeper insights into localized conflicts and can complement the UN’s efforts through joint operations and resource sharing (Smith, 2020). Similarly, fostering collaborations with NGOs and leveraging private sector expertise can introduce innovative approaches to conflict resolution, disaster management, and sustainable development (Taylor, 2020).

Expanding partnerships with scientific and technological institutions can also enhance the UN’s capacity to address emerging threats such as cybercrime, climate change, and global pandemics. By integrating advanced tools and data-driven strategies into its operations, the UN can adapt to the complexities of the modern era (Williams, 2021).

Restoring the UN’s credibility requires a renewed focus on transparency and accountability. Implementing independent audits, publishing detailed reports on its activities, and establishing mechanisms for whistleblower protection can ensure that the organization operates with integrity and accountability (Smith & Brown, 2021). Transparency initiatives must also extend to peacekeeping operations and humanitarian missions, ensuring that resources are used effectively and ethically.

Lastly, reforms should not be a one-time effort but rather an ongoing process informed by regular evaluations of the UN’s performance. Establishing a robust monitoring framework, with input from member states, independent experts, and civil society organizations, can help identify emerging challenges and areas for improvement (Johnson, 2019). Adopting a culture of adaptability and innovation will be crucial to ensuring the UN remains relevant and effective in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

The United Nations stands at a critical juncture as it faces mounting challenges in managing global conflicts and addressing the evolving dynamics of international relations. While its historical achievements underscore its importance as a cornerstone of global governance, persistent structural and operational weaknesses have significantly undermined its effectiveness. The debate between reform and replacement reflects the complexity of addressing these shortcomings, with each approach presenting distinct opportunities and risks.

This paper has highlighted that reform represents the most pragmatic path forward. Incremental yet significant changes, such as democratizing decision-making, expanding Security Council representation, and enhancing operational efficiency, can address the UN’s key limitations while preserving its foundational principles and global legitimacy. The risks associated with replacing the UN—disruption of international cooperation, loss of institutional knowledge, and challenges in building consensus—make it a less viable option, especially in the short term.



Furthermore, the need for reform is underscored by the growing urgency to adapt to modern challenges, including climate change, cyber threats, and intrastate conflicts involving non-state actors. By fostering stronger partnerships with regional organizations, diversifying funding sources, and leveraging advanced technologies, the UN can strengthen its ability to address these issues effectively.

Ultimately, the future of the UN depends on the collective will of its member states to implement meaningful reforms. The organization's ability to evolve in response to the demands of the 21st century will determine its relevance and efficacy in maintaining international peace and security. A reformed United Nations, equipped with the tools and frameworks needed to navigate contemporary challenges, can continue to serve as a vital instrument for global cooperation and a beacon of hope for a more peaceful and equitable world.

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