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## THE UNITED NATIONS AT FIFTY

*Nicholas Rostow\**

Our first order of business is to congratulate the United Nations on reaching its fiftieth birthday. In fact, since the United Nations came into being in 1942 as the alliance against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, we are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the U.N. Charter. Its predecessor lived only twenty-six years and, in reality, fewer than that.

The purpose is not just celebratory, rather, it is to examine the role of the United Nations in its first fifty years and the prospects for its second fifty. The U.N. Charter itself provides our theme: international peace and security as the necessary condition for social progress.

### I

Just as the Cold War defined most of our lives, so it defined the United Nations' first fifty years. For us, the Cold War dictated our assumptions about international politics, America's role in the world, and America's interests. Because of the Cold War, we established for the first time in our history a peacetime network of defensive alliances, maintained an enormous standing, peacetime military establishment, and developed extraordinary intelligence capabilities. Cold War threats influenced internal affairs as well — the development and maintenance of what has been called, exaggeratedly, the national security state. Even at the height of the controversies over Korea and Vietnam, most Americans shared a conviction about who wore the white hats and who wore the black hats in the international arena and the need for international leadership by the United States. Now, Cold War assumptions and perspectives have dissipated. Today, we are searching for new understanding and new certainty concerning international affairs.

During this same period, the United Nations was giving meaning to its Charter through practice. The frequent generalization that the Cold War

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paralyzed the United Nations and prevented it from fulfilling its potential is too sweeping. From the Berlin airlift to the war in Afghanistan, of course, the U.N. Security Council too often was too divided to discharge its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Yet this fact did not mean the United Nations was inactive.

The United Nations' first decade saw the development of international cooperation in peacekeeping and nation-building from Korea to the Middle East to the Congo. The actions were neither cost-free nor non-controversial and often involved substantial violence. In spite of the costs, the United Nations as an institution played a significant role.

During the Cold War, the United Nations also undertook or oversaw substantial international humanitarian efforts. U.N. agencies were created to alleviate the suffering of those driven from pillar to post by war and other calamities of the twentieth century, and to encourage international cooperation in areas as diverse as public health, environmental protection, and the safeguarding of artifacts and natural formations. Secretary General Hammarskjold made his office an independent voice, which most of his successors have used to the world's advantage. One result has been a United Nations that has facilitated the development of a truly global process, in which international law is created through the efforts of all the actors in the world arena — states, individuals, corporations, non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations.

At the same time — indeed throughout the Cold War — the United Nations remained what it could not escape being: a political institution to which certain powers and responsibilities had been delegated under the U.N. Charter. The United Nations Organization is superimposed upon a functioning international system of independent or nominally independent states. These states have acquired habits of action, frames of reference, and conceptions of national interest and international right and wrong over centuries of bitter experience. In 1945, these states did not intend to make a world government out of the United Nations, and so far at least, the United Nations has not become one. Secretary General Boutros-Ghali meant to refer to this reality when he wrote in his 1992 Agenda for Peace that the "foundation-stone" for the work of maintaining international peace and security — peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding — is the independent state.

In building peace, the United Nations in some respects is more than the sum of its parts. More than just a silent bureaucrat, the Secretary General enjoys a Bully Pulpit. Mr. Boutros-Ghali has not hesitated to be a catalyst for international action. His voice was extremely important in mobilizing the international community into action with respect to Somalia's starving millions in 1992.

In addition, as Secretary General Hammarskjold showed long ago, the United Nations Secretariat can play a helpful, mediating role in internal as well as international conflict. In Cambodia, El Salvador, and numerous other countries, Secretary General Boutros-Ghali has built on that example, sometimes irritating world capitals in the process. These efforts are evidence that the United Nations as an institution is acting on the first priority of the U.N. Charter, to maintain international peace and security through effective measures of collective security.

However much initiative the Secretary General undertakes, he nevertheless must act with the acquiescence, or at the behest, of individual states. U.N. institutions — notably, the Security Council, the General Assembly, and the International Court of Justice — occasionally exhibit capacities more frequently associated with governments than with intergovernmental organizations. But, they have not replaced individual Member initiative and action, particularly with respect to matters of war and peace. Given some positions adopted over the years by majorities of the General Assembly, this reality is hardly surprising. In light of this fact, the United Nations is also less than the sum of its parts.

The most important provision of the U.N. Charter prohibits the international threat or use of force. The Charter envisions two mechanisms for enforcing this prohibition. One contemplates Security Council action, including the use of military forces. In this scheme, the Security Council is the world's policeman. The second involves actions by states exercising what the Charter calls the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense against an armed attack. Both sides of the Iron Curtain argued that their actions complied with this provision of the U.N. Charter. Only twice have military actions occurred explicitly in a U.N. framework: the Korean and Persian Gulf Wars. While they were undeniably U.N. operations in a U.N. context, they were not the kind of action explicitly mentioned in the Charter. Rather, they were exercises of the right of collective self-defense in a U.N. context.

The politico-military, economic, and cultural Cold War frequently necessitated action outside the United Nations. Due to the Cold War, U.N. Members did not share more than nominal adherence to common principles or even a nominally common confidence that they could rely on others, particularly a global institution of universal or near-universal membership, to protect their security interests. Individual states were loathe to give up rights of self-defense, including the right to judge when and if a threat or armed attack existed, especially in times of substantial advances in military technologies.

The end of the Cold War has raised expectations for the United Nations' role with respect to the maintenance of peace. It has also brought greater uniformity of perspective to the international community. As a result, actions that might have been taken before the end of the Cold War in the name of collective self-defense now are taken in the name of collective security and U.N. enforcement, even though U.N. armies do not exist. Almost three hundred Security Council resolutions passed since the demise of the USSR in 1991 reflect shared purposes. In the preceding forty-six years, the Council had passed only 678 resolutions. American ascendancy does not account for this productivity. Rather, of supreme importance is the ostensible development of a common Security Council viewpoint of its duties with respect to the maintenance of international peace and security.

Elevated expectations generate greater than warranted disappointments when they are not realized. The post-Cold War United Nations has produced its share of disappointments already. The Somalia operation did not prove to be so successful as was expected; indeed, it was widely regarded as a failure. Widespread pessimism greeted the Haiti operation as well. U.N. operations in the former Yugoslavia are calamitous. The United Nations remains doggedly

neutral even when such neutrality assists those who contravene U.N. Charter principles and commit aggression.

## II

As we look ahead to the United Nations' second fifty years, caution is a becoming posture. The rapid and profound changes of the last few years came unexpectedly, even to those who had analyzed the Soviet Union and concluded it could not survive forever. The past provides insight, but no sure guide. Who can be confident, for example, that the nuclear peace will be kept for another fifty years? Despite uncertainty, it is possible to evaluate some of the current proposals for changing the United Nations and estimate the likelihood of their becoming reality.

Probably the easiest to address is the question of Security Council membership. The United States supports granting Permanent Member status to Germany and Japan. The logic of power eventually will override the shadows of history.

This change, however, will not be achieved quickly. Existing Permanent Members fear such a change might lead to a complete overhaul of the Security Council, including loss of their status. For a number of years, the non-aligned have chafed at the Permanent Members' veto and argued that Security Council Membership should reflect the demography of the United Nations. If these issues are commingled with the question of Japan and Germany (or a European seat if European integration advances in the foreign policy area), then Tokyo and Bonn (or Berlin) had best be patient. In any event, it is unlikely that the existing Permanent Five will relinquish their power voluntarily.

The second great issue concerns a potential U.N. armed force and intelligence service — in short, infrastructure to support Mr. Boutros-Ghali's agenda and to implement the Charter's visions. Almost fifty years after adoption of the U.N. Charter, no country has executed a special agreement with the Security Council to make available armed forces at the Council's call. While one may argue that more time is needed to evaluate U.N. capabilities in the military area and all the questions concerning the role of national military contingents in Security Council operations, enough time has passed and enough crises have been confronted since the end of the Cold War to see that confidence in a U.N. shield is not high. Perhaps if the Yugoslav situation had been handled otherwise, states would not be so reluctant to trust the United Nations to guard their security. Already, the solidarity among the great powers of the immediate post-Cold War period cannot be counted on. In addition, U.N. management is not yet so developed as to fill countries with confidence that military operations will be properly conducted. Finally, there is the absence of international precedent. Lack of government interest suggests comfort with conducting necessary operations as exercises in collective self-defense under the aegis of, but not dependent on, the United Nations. States thus far have not been willing to give up or limit their right of self-defense beyond what the U.N. Charter and customary law already provide. In addition, different perspectives on such international crises as Rwanda and Haiti suggest that the world has yet to accept that peace is indivisible.

As we look to the next fifty years, we can be sure of few signposts. World government will likely not emerge. In the mid-1790s, Emmanuel Kant wrote that states do not want to give up the freedom world government would require. Accordingly, the best he could foresee was “a union of nations which maintains itself, prevents wars, and steadily expands.” This was the animating idea of the League of Nations and it is the animating idea of the United Nations. Though war often has brought new wealth to new quarters, a sure peace is the best environment for pursuing the Charter’s goal of improved living standards in larger freedom.

#### CONCLUSION

The absence of Cold War certainties offers opportunities as well as challenges. The opportunities are easy to state, but difficult to seize: they are the same that existed in 1919, when the international landscape similarly was transformed almost beyond recognition. The world confronts opportunities to strengthen the institutions of peace and extend the rule of law in international affairs.

On an occasion such as this, it would be appropriate to close by quoting John Donne, reminding us all that no one is an island entire of itself. The United Nations is based upon that insight. In the turbulent world of today, it is equally, if not more appropriate, to end by recalling what we have accomplished in bringing the Cold War to a successful end and the cost of that accomplishment. In doing so, we shall remind ourselves that the outcome was not preordained and the consequences of a different outcome likely would have been most unpleasant. Thus, we need to heed the cautionary theme of the last volume of Winston Churchill’s history of the Second World War: “How the Great Democracies Triumphed, and So Were Able to Resume the Follies Which Had So Nearly Cost Them Their Life.” We need to recognize and accept that maintaining peace and freedom requires unceasing effort and vigilance.

