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The World HandCOV'd: United Nations and International Peace and Security after COVID-19

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Key takeaways

- The UN's capacity to effectively accomplish its mission of maintaining peace and security has almost always been limited by geopolitical confrontation.
- The UN is a global intergovernmental organization; therefore, global challenges to the contemporary system of international relations constitute the main dilemmas faced by the organization.
- The UN's inability to play the consolidating role — even symbolically — amid the pandemic negatively affects the image of the organization.

UN status at the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak

The largest intergovernmental organization that solemnly celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2020 was definitely not in its best shape as it approached the new landmark. The organization was established by the countries that were victorious in WWII and literally immediately found itself divided into two opposed blocks — capitalist and socialist — with the Group of 77 seeking neutrality in between. That confrontation was overcome for a short period in the 1990s after the disintegration of the USSR and the global socialist system.

The only UN body whose decisions are binding is its Security Council (UN SC), which is responsible for preserving and strengthening international peace and security. The New Thinking doctrine, which started to be established in the USSR during the Perestroika,

made it possible to overcome the traditional confrontation among the permanent members of the UN SC. Owing to this, for the first time in five decades since its inception, the UN adopted resolutions that put an end to Iraq's aggression against Kuwait and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which had turned the country into a training ground for international terrorists. Since those breakthrough resolutions, the UN SC has only been able to make consensus-based decisions with regard to those internal and international conflicts, in which the interests of its permanent members were not markedly affected.

On 24 March 1999, Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov turned around his plane bound for Washington over the Atlantic in response to what he believed was NATO's exceeding its authority outlined in the UN SC's resolutions on Yugoslavia. That decision became a symbol of the revival of the era of confrontation in the UN. The UN's only "battle-worthy" agency was once again profoundly split and unable to make decisions on crises that posed the greatest threat to international peace and security in the 21st century: whether in Syria, Ukraine or in the context of the current pandemic.

Key security dilemmas encountered by the UN

Since the UN is a global intergovernmental organization, the global challenges to the contemporary system of international relations constitute the main dilemmas faced by the organization. Unless these challenges are adequately addressed, they will eventually turn into threats to international peace and security. In the early 21st century these include international terrorism, climate change, migration crisis, local armed conflicts involving major powers, and the environmental challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic is already big enough to be included in the list, although its impact on international politics is more sophisticated.

> The UN is a mirror reflecting the main issues and contradictions of the present-day world.

The long, drawn out confrontation between Russia and the West, between the United States and China produce a naturally negative impact on the organization's ability to effectively counter global challenges and threats.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the UN's role in global politics

In the UN's recent history, there have already been examples of its involvement in campaigns to encourage international efforts to combat contagious diseases. In 2000, the SC adopted Resolution 1308, which stated that "the HIV/AIDS pandemic, if unchecked,

may pose a risk to stability and security." The Council also debated the possibility of including the need to fight HIV/AIDS in the mandate of the UN peacekeeping missions to Africa.

The SC adopted no formal resolutions on the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak. However, 192 countries unanimously adopted a resolution at the WHO annual forum on 27 May 2003, which identified the SARS outbreak as "a serious threat to the stability and growth of economies, the livelihood of populations" and called for the full support of all countries to control SARS.

On 18 September 2014, the UN SC adopted Resolution 2177, supported by 130 co-sponsors, an all-time high in the history of the Council. The resolution determined that "the unprecedented extent of the Ebola outbreak in Africa constitutes a threat to international peace and security", which "unless contained, may lead to further instances of civil unrest, social tensions and a deterioration of the political and security climate." It is telling that both the delegates who delivered speeches during the discussion of the resolution and its text recommended that such measures be applied to combat the Ebola outbreak, which were not in line with the totalitarian practice of Beijing to fight COVID-19, eventually copied by some other countries as lockdown arrangements in 2020. For example, back in 2014, U.S. representative Samantha Power referred to isolation as an "utterly counterproductive" move, whereas resolution 2177 instructed member states to "lift general travel and border restrictions, imposed as a result of the Ebola outbreak" and called on "airlines and shipping companies to maintain trade and transport links with the affected countries and the wider region." The UN SC did not disregard the 2018 Ebola outbreak in the DRC: Resolution 2439 was adopted on 30 October.

However, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN appeared to be paralyzed. Attempts by some EU countries to propose draft resolutions at the UN SC and have at least symbolic measures in place to consolidate international efforts in the fight against the coronavirus outbreak have proved to be futile. For various reasons, all of the drafts were rejected. In March 2020, Secretary General António Guterres called on all warring parties across the globe to introduce a ceasefire in order to facilitate combat against COVID-19. However, even that call never resulted in any debate at the UN Security Council, which in March 2020 was led by China's Zhang Jun. Some experts from Africa and Asia emphasized that this "inactivity" of the Council was not accidental: Chinese diplomats were willing to curb any possibility for their country to be accused of unleashing the pandemic that threatened international peace and security.

> The UN's inability to play at least a symbolic consolidating role amid the global pandemic has certainly affected the image of the organization. COVID-19 has been de facto fought by nation states on an every-man-for-himself basis, rather than by "us" (the global community).

The mutual accusations of spreading the coronavirus that Beijing and Washington hurled at each other exposed even more the new axis of confrontation in contemporary international politics — between China and the U.S. Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said at the UN Security Council meeting on 28 May that the coronavirus pandemic "can deepen existing conflicts and generate new geopolitical tensions... At a time of global crisis, we need a Security Council able to take the necessary decisions — and not one that is paralyzed by vetoes and political infighting."

Based upon the principle that with no proper membership there is no responsibility, we can account for the UN SC's attempts to expand its representation. At the start of the 21st century, there were abundant discussions in the diplomatic and expert communities about the need to reform the Security Council. Japan, India, Nigeria, South Africa, Brazil and Germany were most frequently mentioned as prospective new permanent members. However, each candidacy was eventually dismissed due to objections from either China, or the U.S., or the "third world" countries, which were concerned about the over-representation of Europe and the Western world as a whole in the UN SC.

As a compromise, it was proposed to include these countries in the Council without the right of veto. However, this is where some of the candidates disagree. Some experts have made a solid argument that if consensus can rarely be achieved by the five permanent members of the SC, it would be even harder to do so if it were enlarged. The UN reform failure has further damaged its image and credibility.

There are three possible general scenarios for the development of the United Nations throughout the 2020s:

1. *Business as usual at the UN will be maintained*. Peacekeeping operations by Blue Helmets will continue in local conflicts that do not directly affect the interests of global and regional centres of power. Attempts to consolidate the international community in order to respond to global challenges will be thwarted by the confrontation among the world power centres in the SC.
2. *Disillusionment with the activities of the UN will grow*. Initially, this will take the form of delegating security issues to regional actors, and contributions to

peacekeeping and even humanitarian operations will ultimately be curtailed.
3. *The global powerhouses will get tired of the prolonged confrontation and will again turn to the UN capacity*, primarily the UN Security Council, seeking to resolve international conflicts.

In the medium term, it seems likely that the first scenario will prevail. The growing frustration with the activities of the United Nations comes in collision with sustained expectations, especially of smaller and medium-sized states, that the UN mechanisms can protect their interests before the world power centres.

The UN and security in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions

> The overall weakening of the UN's role in international affairs, which has become especially pronounced during the coronavirus pandemic, has an adverse effect on its influence in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions.

The UN SC is increasingly compelled to delegate conflict resolution to regional organizations, which in some cases tend to interpret their mandate very broadly. This was the case with NATO in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, with the African Union in Sudan, and with the EU in Kosovo and Libya.

Security issues in the Euro-Atlantic region are addressed by NATO, not the UN Security Council. The probable resumption of negotiations on the establishment of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership will make it possible to lay a solid economic foundation for the resolution of these issues under the auspices of Washington and Brussels.

In Eurasia, security threats are as a rule addressed without the UN, either (a vivid example is the inability of the SC to deploy a peacekeeping mission to Ukraine). The positions of the four major centres of power are crucial: China, the EU, the United States and Russia. The Eurasian Economic Union and the CSTO are unable to seriously shape the Eurasian space, no matter how much anyone would want this. Moscow's concept of a Greater Eurasian Partnership is underpinned neither by a corresponding political consensus of potential participants nor by financial resources. The only real project designed to ensure Eurasian security through the strengthening of transport and other ties between the countries of the region is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

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