

Unmet Expectations

United States, United Nations & Global Governance

By Constantine PAGEDAS



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In February 1993, Bill Clinton, the new US president, received United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali for discussions regarding the shelling of Sarajevo and the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in war-torn former Yugoslavia. Of the meeting, Clinton later complained to historian Taylor Branch that the UN leader “conveyed an annoying sense that all national leaders worked for Boutros-Ghali and should rise above their parochial concerns.”

Clinton’s statement accurately encapsulates the long-held skepticism of US leaders about the possibility of ever achieving effective global governance through the UN system. While US thinking about the United Nations and global governance was very supportive immediately after World War II, over time US leaders viewed the United Nations as an inherently limited institution in the types of issues and missions it could handle effectively. The Korean War and the 1991 Gulf War stand out as notable exceptions to the overall US pessimism concerning the United Nations as a guarantor of international peace and stability on the basis of collective security.

Born Out of War

In many ways, global governance through a multilateral organization dedicated to the maintenance of international peace and stability is relatively new to the United States. President Woodrow Wilson certainly provided the impetus to create the League of Nations after World War I.

Photo: United Nations Photo



Prime Minister Winston Churchill standing with President Franklin Roosevelt during the Atlantic Charter Conference aboard the HMS Prince of Wales, August 14, 1941. Roosevelt, the primary US architect of the UN, died before he could see his vision for global governance become a reality.

However, the United States (and other major powers such as the Soviet Union) ultimately did not join, rendering the league inadequate to defeat aggressive challenges to the postwar order during the 1930s.

Even before the United States became an active participant in World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt secretly met his British counterpart, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, off the coast of Newfoundland in August 1941. This meeting produced the so-called Atlantic Charter, a joint declaration outlining a shared vision for the post-World War II world. Key principles of the charter included the right to national self-determination, global economic cooperation and advancement of social welfare; freedom of the seas; the disarmament of aggressor nations; and, ultimately, international disarmament.

Roosevelt developed the term “United Nations” to broadly describe those countries that had joined the Allied war effort against the Axis powers. Thinking beyond the end of the war, he strongly supported and actively sought to build an effective international mechanism for global governance to maintain the anticipated peace.

International conferences at Dumbarton Oaks (August-October 1944) and Yalta (February 1945) added “flesh” to the UN concept, addressing vital organizational and procedural issues such as how the United Nations would be organized and which nations would be invited to become members, the formation of the UN Security Council, and the right of veto that would be given to the five permanent members of the Security Council. Roosevelt recognized early on that a Security Council was essential because the League of Nations, which lacked an effective political mechanism, reacted slowly to international crises.

In the final days of World War II after the unexpected death of Roosevelt, the United States hosted the United Nations Conference on International Organization in San Francisco, California (April – June 1945). For over two months, delegates from 50 nations participated in the drafting of the United Nations’ Charter, which incorporated Roosevelt’s principles for postwar global governance.

At the opening of the San Francisco Conference on April 25, 1945, President Harry Truman stated: “The essence of our problem here is to provide sensible machinery for the settlement of disputes among nations. Without this, peace cannot exist. We can no longer permit any nation, or group of nations, to attempt to settle their arguments with bombs and bayonets...If we do not want to die together in war, we must learn to live together in peace.”

The UN Charter, ratified on October 24, 1945, excited new hopes that interstate aggression and the use of military force to resolve disputes would become things of the past.

The emerging “Cold War,” with the United States and its European and Asian allies on one side, and the Soviet Union, and later China, on the other, would soon dash these hopes, fundamentally altering the US perspective on the United Nations’ usefulness as a guarantor of international peace and stability.

Indeed, initial US optimism concerning the United Nations barely



The San Francisco Conference: The United States signs the United Nations Charter. At left is President Harry Truman.

survived the Truman presidency, after being overwhelmed by the new, harsh and unexpected political and military realities of the new global conflict.

First Major Test for Global Governance

The five permanent members of the untested Security Council were the United States and the Soviet Union, the only two world powers with any significant military capabilities, as well as Britain and France (European colonial powers financially exhausted by the war), and the Republic of China, which, under the leadership of General Chiang Kai-shek, retreated to Taiwan in 1949 after losing the civil war to the communist forces under Mao Zedong.

The US government's reluctance to support the continuation of European colonial power in Africa and Asia made the United States a popular country in the UN General Assembly among the newly independent countries of the so-called "Third World."

UN membership increased rapidly after 1945 and generally filled the ranks of strong supporters when the United States brought issues for debate to the organization, especially in the 1950s and 1960s when the European powers increasingly realized that they could no longer afford, much less defend, claims to their colonial possessions. (In 1945, there were 51 original members of the United Nations. By 1975, that number had swelled to 135.)

The first major test for the United Nations, and US interest in global governance, occurred on June 25, 1950, when communist North Korean forces crossed the "38th Parallel" and invaded South Korea. Due to the absence of the Soviet delegation, the Security Council, guided by firm US leadership, passed a series of resolutions condemning the invasion and authorizing the United Nations to repel the attack and restore peace with UN member states providing military forces and other assistance to South Korea under UN auspices, though under the direction of US military commanders.

The UN forces, the bulk of which were provided by the United States and South Korea, ultimately repelled the North Korean invasion only to confront communist China's surprise entry into the conflict on the side of North Korea. After a prolonged stalemate on the battlefield, the United Nations Command, supported by the United States, and the military forces representing North Korea and China signed an armistice agreement on July 27, 1953, which ended the fighting (an actual peace treaty has yet to be signed).

Had the Soviet Union not boycotted the Security Council at the time over an unrelated issue, the United Nations likely would not



General Douglas MacArthur, commander in chief of UN Forces, observes the shelling of Incheon, South Korea, from the USS Mt. McKinley on September 15, 1950.

have responded as quickly or as decisively as it did to North Korea's aggression.

After the Korean War, the US government increasingly viewed the United Nations in far more limited terms, chiefly as a forum for international discussion of "soft" issues such as peacekeeping, disarmament, human rights and childhood poverty.

Realities of US Thinking About Global Governance

Although the United States was able to organize a substantial UN response to the North Korean invasion of South Korea, Cold War realities prompted US presidents to circumvent, and even ignore, the mandate of the United Nations. Beginning with the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower in 1953, US interest in global governance through the United Nations declined sharply.

In 1953 and 1954, for example, Eisenhower approved two covert Central Intelligence Agency operations to overthrow the democratically elected governments in Iran and Guatemala – a clear contradiction to the basic UN principles of global governance.

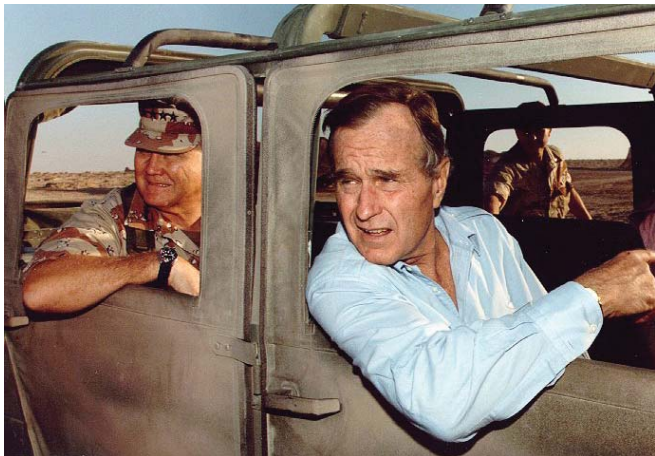
The exigencies of the Cold War and the perceived Soviet threat to US interests continued under Presidents John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Despite strong rhetoric by these three US leaders who supported the decolonization process and the United Nations as an institution for global governance, the United States frequently used military means to achieve its political ends, both covertly (through assassination or support for a military coup) and overtly (US military action or through US proxies), usually because of a foreign government's perceived alignment with the Communist bloc.

The Vietnam War perhaps represents the grossest violation by the United States of UN principles of global governance during the Cold War. Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon all supported an increase of major military operations in Vietnam to prevent the reunification of Vietnam under a communist regime, with Nixon even approving of a secret bombing campaign in Cambodia and Laos, hoping to bring about a military victory.

From Cold War to Age of Terrorism

The United States often backed brutal dictatorships in the ideological struggle against communism (e.g., in South Vietnam, Brazil and Chile), and with the decolonization process for much of the world coming to an end, US influence with "Third World" countries in the General Assembly declined substantially. US influence was further

Photo: George Bush Presidential Library



Preparing for the Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush rides in a Humvee with General Norman Schwarzkopf in Saudi Arabia on November 22, 1990.

diminished in October 1971, when the United States failed to convince its traditional supporters to prevent the People's Republic of China from replacing the Republic of China (Taiwan) on the Security Council.

Despite this reduced influence, the US government continued to undertake military interventions whenever its national interests were perceived to be under serious threat. The US invasion of Grenada in October 1983, the support of the Contras in Nicaragua using funds from the secret sale of arms to Iran, and the December 1989 invasion of Panama to overthrow Manuel Noriega harkened back to a more "traditional" US response to threats in the Caribbean. The US response to the growing threat of international terrorism in the 1980s, as demonstrated by the 1986 bombing of Libya in retaliation for the murder of two US servicemen at a Berlin disco, was another example of the United States willing to operate outside the Security Council.

However, President George H.W. Bush ultimately did win a UN mandate to counter Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, which generated new hope that the United Nations could function as an effective guarantor of international peace and stability. The Security Council, characterized by an unusual degree of US and Soviet cooperation, quickly passed a series of resolutions condemning Iraq's invasion, imposing economic and diplomatic sanctions on Iraq and ultimately authorizing the use of military force to expel Iraq from Kuwait.

As in Korea, the United States organized and led a large international military coalition that ultimately expelled Iraq from Kuwait in February 1991. Despite this spectacular success, however, Security Council debate over enforcing UN ceasefire requirements on Iraq ultimately bogged down in disagreement during the mid-1990s, again reminding US officials about the United Nations' limited utility for global governance.

United States & Global Governance Today

The wilting of US confidence in the United Nations as a force for global governance has continued in the new century. Although the United Nations and its political machinery for dealing with international crises were inspired by Roosevelt and tested by Truman, US faith in the United Nations as a mechanism for global governance remains low.

The United States continues to view the United Nations as an organization best suited to "soft power" duties, which include peacekeep-

Photo: United Nations Photo



President Barack Obama addresses the United Nations General Assembly on September 23, 2009.

ing, nation-building and humanitarian intervention (e.g., the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo) and even natural disaster mitigation (e.g., the 2010 earthquake in Haiti). Moreover, there have been times when the United States has resisted strong UN pressure to become involved in a crisis not directly in its national interests (e.g. the 1994 Rwandan genocide).

The national interests of the United States since the end of the Cold War and the rise of terrorism increasingly demand swift resolution, with the United Nations called in afterward to assist with peacekeeping. The US government's responses to the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, for example, led to the unilateral invasion of Afghanistan by the United States in the immediate aftermath. The United States organized a "coalition of the willing," after much political debate in the United Nations, to invade Iraq in March 2003 to seize suspected weapons of mass destruction and finally overthrow Saddam Hussein. Indeed, the George W. Bush administration ultimately found UN diplomacy to be a hindrance, rather than helpful, in building international support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Today, President Barack Obama has tried to galvanize US interest in returning to the United Nations' original ideals and bringing the US concept of the United Nations more into line with the rest of the international community. Mentioning Roosevelt no less than three times during his first address to the UN General Assembly in September 2009, Obama stated, "Now, it falls to us. Where this institution will be what we make of it, the United Nations does extraordinary good around the world feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, mending places that have been broken. But it also struggles to enforce its will and to live up to the ideals of its founding." While many global observers may find cause for optimism in Obama's remarks that the United States will take a broader view regarding the UN capability to ensure international peace and stability, it remains to be seen during the next important crisis that affects core US national interests whether the president will be able to break the United States from its deeply held skepticism of global governance. **JS**

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