

Over the past eight decades, and despite its ups and downs, the UN has always been driven by its desire to protect future generations from the scourge of war

### 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SAN FRANCISCO CHARTER

# The United Nations: Backbone of global multilateralism

**Colonel Francisco José Marcos Martín**

Geopolitical Analysis Branch

Coordination Division for Security and Defence Studies

General Secretariat for Defence Policy (SEGENPOL)

**T**HE notion that humanity ought to have an international organization to assist in resolving problems and contributing to peace is not new. Although the League of Nations is arguably the most well-known forerunner of the United Nations, humanity's wish to be ruled by a supranational organization that would foster peace and harmony among peoples is much older. Already in the 16th century, states were described by Francisco de Vitoria as "parts" of the universal human community, which was somehow organised as a single political community. In his Treaty of Perpetual Peace, Kant, for his part, suggested a league of equal and sovereign nations —a sort of "federation of free states"—. Inspired by President Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points, all of these goals were first realised in 1919 when the League of Nations was established under the Treaty of Versailles "to promote international cooperation and to achieve peace and security". The fourteenth point called for the creation of a "general association of nations", intended to safeguard the political independence and territorial integrity of all states. However, this international initiative failed for several reasons: first, the American Senate did not ratify the Treaty of Versailles; Germany and Italy left the League of Nations in the 1930s; and it failed to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War. The League was eventually dissolved in 1946.

The idea of a united nations, a term coined by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, took shape in parallel with the crisis of the League of Nations and on the eve of the Second World War. As early as August 1941, Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill advocated in the Atlantic Charter for "the establishment of a wide-

er and permanent system of general security". Six months later, in January 1942, twenty-six nations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, China and the USSR, signed the Declaration by United Nations, which contained a number of principles enshrined in the Atlantic Charter. The idea developed over the course of several summits, conferences, and committees before making its way to the Yalta Conference in February 1945, when the Western armies were planning to cross the Rhine and the Soviets were 100 kilometres away from Berlin. At Yalta, Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill agreed to establish an international organization to maintain peace and security with the Allies. Finally, the US hosted the United Nations Conference in San Francisco in April 1945, bringing together representatives from 51 countries, with 850 delegates who drafted the San Francisco Charter or UN Charter. The charter, signed in June of that year by the delegates and subsequently ratified by the signatory countries, came into effect on 24 October 1945, creating a new international organization, the United Nations, with the purpose of consolidating international peace and security and avoiding the scourge of war.

**For three months, representatives from 51 countries met to found an organization aimed at consolidating peace and security**



The first session of the General Assembly was held on 10 January 1946 at the Central Hall in Westminster (London) with the participation of 51 nations, while its first resolution, issued two weeks later, dealt with the “Establishment of a Commission to deal with the problems raised by the discovery of atomic energy”. The historic Security Council held its first session in London on 17 January 1946, at which it approved its own Rules of Procedure.

#### **MANY LIGHTS AND SOME SHADOWS**

Like any organization, over the course of its 80-year history, the UN has gone through all kinds of situations and moments, including successes and failures, highs and lows, supporters and detractors, memorable episodes and events to forget, all of which fall within the organization's desire to protect future generations from the scourge of war.

Numerous accomplishments and acknowledgements deserve special attention. The most obvious one is that given that more member states have joined since its establishment, the United Nations might have become the world's only truly universal global organization. After the 51 nations that joined in 1946, Afghanistan, Iceland, Siam, and Sweden started the membership process the following year. Spain joined in 1955 and South Sudan became the last member in 2011, bringing the total number of members to 193.

One of the earliest success stories was the organization's assistance with the decolonisation processes, which made it possible for new members to join. The historic UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries

and Peoples of 1960, also known as the Declaration on Decolonisation, established the right of all peoples to self-determination and called for the end of colonialism. Eighty former colonies gained their independence as a result of this process, while there are still seventeen non-self-governing territories, including Western Sahara and Gibraltar.

The United Nations has worked tirelessly in its quest to reaffirm the fundamental rights and dignity of all human beings. In 1948, the General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Paris—in a nod to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen adopted at the height of the French Revolution—and was expanded in 1959 by the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. In this regard, the efforts of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and its activities to protect children deserve to be acknowledged. Another long-term goal has been to improve the living conditions of women, with particular emphasis on the first World Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975 and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979; a tireless task that continues to be a top priority despite the difficulties.

The United Nations has actively worked to promote development with the ultimate goal of improving the standard of living and health of the world's population by encouraging projects aimed at reducing poverty, alleviating crises, preserving the environment and promoting good governance. In this case, the work of organizations and tools such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the





World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Food Programme (WFP) must be recognised. The eradication of smallpox in 1980 was commemorated as a great success, as in fact this was a joint effort for which the World Health Organization (WHO) should be congratulated.

The United Nations set the Millennium Development Goals, which were revised in 2015 with the Sustainable Development Goals, seeking to encourage social, economic and environmental progress. The promotion of democracy and the fight against all forms of injustice have been an essential part of the United Nations agenda. In this regard, there have also been accomplishments, such as the 1994 elections in South Africa, marking the end of a long and costly process against apartheid in that country.

Additionally, UN military and peacekeeping operations and missions have acquired respect and recognition as a means of promoting stability in conflict-affected and war-torn areas. Since the first peacekeeping operation was established in the Suez Canal in 1956, thousands of blue helmets have been deployed all over the world.

It is important to draw attention to environmental protection and to the challenges posed by climate change. The 1987 Montreal Protocol, which restricted the use of substances that could destroy the ozone layer, and the 2015 Paris Agreement, which included measures to reduce carbon emissions, are two notable examples. Today, the UN climate change conferences, known as COPs, seek to over-

see the agreements that have been reached. The most recent COP was held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2024 (CO29).

All these successes have been recognised by the numerous awards and accolades received by the United Nations and its agencies. As early as 1954, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) won the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of its efforts to create a better and more peaceful world. Other UN agencies that have received this honour include UNICEF, the International Labour Organization, UNHCR once more in 1981, and the UN itself in 2001. The blue helmets won the award in 1988 for their work in conflict resolution and peacekeeping, and they also received the Prince of Asturias Award for International Cooperation in 1993 for their humanitarian work in the former Yugoslavia.

However, there have also been dark moments and situations that leave bitter memories. The genocides in Rwanda and Darfur, the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, the wars in Libya and Syria, and Sudan's forgotten war are examples of the many challenges and constraints the United Nations must confront. Allegations of human rights crimes by UN soldiers are also painful episodes that occasionally tarnish the good work of the blue helmets.

These allegations have a lot to do with the veto mechanism in place in the Security Council since its founding. This veto prevents measures that go against the wishes of the Council's five permanent members from being taken. Examples of the Council's paralysis

include its inaction in Syria, its inability to take action against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, or against Israel for its excesses in Gaza. A paralysis that could lead the UN to become a questioned and outdated actor with increasingly marginal weight. It is therefore not surprising that initiatives proposing a review of the Security Council's organization and functioning are starting to emerge.

### SPAIN, COMMITTED TO MULTILATERALISM

Spain, as a peace-loving nation, has relied on effective multilateralism by promoting robust organizations such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United Nations, of which it is a member and a committed and respected partner and ally.

However, Spain's journey in the United Nations had a somewhat complicated beginning. The organization, founded under the auspices of the victorious powers of the Second World War, adopted Resolution 39 (I) in February 1946. This resolution condemned Franco's regime for giving "substantial aid to the enemy powers", and recommended the exclusion of Franco's government from the international organizations established by the United Nations and the immediate withdrawal of the ambassadors accredited in Madrid.

Spanish diplomacy then mobilised to achieve membership, a feat that would take nearly a decade to accomplish. A first success was Resolution 386 (V) of 1950, which declared the lifting of the international sanctions imposed on Spain since 1946. Once its accession to UNESCO was approved in February 1952, Spain sent a Permanent Observer to New York in 1955. However, the reluctance of certain countries, such as Mexico, where the Spanish government in exile was based, persisted until Spain was admitted to the United Nations on 15 December 1955, finally resolving the "Spanish question".

Since then, Spain has proven to be a committed partner of the United Nations, dedicated to international peace and stability. Its commitments and achievements in this endeavour have been numerous. One of the most recent has been its contribution to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) mission, during an extremely difficult time, when General Aroldo Lázaro, its commander, demonstrated widely acclaimed leadership. However, Spain's participation in UN missions actually began as early as 1988, with observers in Angola, which was a prelude to other deployments in different parts of the world: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia, the Central African Republic, Haiti, Central America, Angola, Namibia, etc., and we pay humble tribute here to our blue helmets who died in the line of duty.

Spain's achievements also extend to other areas. Our country has been a member of the Security Council five times, most recently in the 2015-16 term, and is a candidate for the 2031-32 biennium. Additionally, Spain stands out for its comprehensive defence and advancement of human rights, having been elected a member of the

Human Rights Council for the 2025-2027 term. Likewise, Spain is committed to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, in areas such as the fight against poverty, gender equality, climate change and development cooperation. Spain recently hosted the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4), held this year in Seville, where the Seville Platform for Action, a financial tool to support development, was approved.

### THE FUTURE: OPTIMISM AND CHALLENGES

The organization faces the future with enthusiasm and optimism to tackle the countless challenges that still need to be resolved. One of these relates to the functioning of the organization and its adaptation to new realities.

The United Nations came into being in a specific context at the end of the Second World War, where there were "victorious powers", "enemy powers" and a bipolar world with two superpowers, the United States and the USSR. The UN was therefore designed by the victorious nations in that particular international context. Today, the world has changed and, thus, the UN should be updated. Otherwise, as happened to the League of Nations in its time, the organization might stagnate and become a geopolitical relic. The most urgent reform might be that of the Security Council.

The Security Council's potential inaction is not new. As early as 1950, in an environment of permanent blockade during the Korean War, the General Assembly adopted the famous Resolution 377 (V), known as Uniting for Peace, which had very limited practical scope. Currently, various proposals have been put forward to update this organization. Thus, it has been naively proposed that the five major powers renounce their right of veto. Another suggestion has been to increase the number of votes required for permanent members to exercise their veto, in which case perhaps two or three more votes would be necessary.

Other more realistic ideas suggest increasing the number of permanent members of the Council to include nations and organizations that are important today: perhaps India, Germany or the European Union. Although reform will not be easy, it is unquestionably the UN's unfinished business. Otherwise, the organization could fall into irrelevance.

In the meantime, the United Nations faces the challenge of continuing to be the primary forum for global multilateralism, the backbone of the system for coordinating and attempting to resolve global issues such as peace and security, development and human rights. According to the famous statement by Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General from 1953 to 1961, "The UN was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell", to which our ever-optimistic Don Quixote would have added: "Even among demons, some are worse than others, and among many bad men there are usually some good ones".

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