

# The United Nations at 75: Is It Old and Tired?

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In the school year of 1956-7, when I was 10 years old and in the fifth grade at Harrison Hill Elementary School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, my social studies teacher assigned the class an extended project. We were to pick a topic from the current events of the day and prepare a notebook of magazine articles, pictures, opinion pieces, and whatever other pertinent information we could cull from media coverage of the day. I chose to focus on the United Nations, which like me, had just turned 10 years old. The Suez Crisis was raging, and U.N. peace-keeping forces were stationed in the Middle East. An article appeared in a national magazine titled *Is the U.N. Old and Tired?* I decided that I would investigate the question and set about looking in magazines of the day for pictures, articles, etc. I even had started collecting stamps and included several United Nations stamps as part of my notebook. I'm now 75 and sometimes feel old and tired myself; so, in light of recent criticism of the U.N., I'd like to revisit the topic.

One of the first things I discovered was the number of Soviet Bloc countries who were members. It didn't seem fair to include Soviet satellite countries with names like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan with other legitimate countries with functioning independent governments. Why couldn't democratic countries nominate California or Idaho for membership and even the odds?

Also, discussions about the United Nations was dominated, apparently, by the Security Council, whose five leading nations had permanent membership and veto power. This gave inordinate power to the U.S., the U.S.S.R., China, the U.K., and France. I learned that the United Nations was much more than just the Security Council, the U.N. being comprised of five separate functioning organs:

**The General Assembly** - Headquartered in New York, it is the deliberative body of the U.N. All 193 member nations are represented. It sets the budget, admits new members, and elects the judges to the Court of Justice and the Secretary General of the U.N.

**The Secretariat** - Headquartered in New York, it is the Administration Organization of the U.N. and is chaired by the Secretary General.

**The International Court of Justice** - Headquartered at The Hague (Netherlands), it hears and decides cases (by a simple majority) but only has jurisdiction over states which recognizes its jurisdiction. 15 judges serve a 9-year term.

**The Security Council** - Headquartered in New York, it's charged with maintaining the peace and security among member nations. It can issue compulsory resolutions, but its five permanent members have veto power. Another ten members are elected for two year terms, but have no veto power.

**The Economic and Social Council** - Headquartered in New York and Geneva, it oversees global and economic affairs. There are 54 members.

A sixth organ, **The U.N. Territories Council**, is non-functioning since the last territory, Palau, gained its independence in 1994.

Various other entities function under U.N. auspices, including UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Health Organization (WHO), any many more.

Aside from the recent criticism of the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic by the WHO, most criticism comes from those unhappy with the Security Council. Although it undertakes to bring peaceful resolution of disputes and maintains an international peacekeeping force comprised of many nations' soldiers and funding, there are notable failures, and not just among rogue states that refuse to recognize U.N. authority. Among those who've spoken critically of the SC's failures, these are a few:

1. British historian [Paul Kennedy](#) concludes that "glaring failures had not only accompanied the UN's many achievements, they overshadowed them", identifying the lack of will to prevent ethnic massacres in Bosnia and Rwanda as particular failures. Kennedy attributes the failures to the UN's habit of announcing (through a Security Council resolution) a new peacekeeping mission without ensuring that sufficient armed forces are in place.

2. Scholar Sudhir Chella Rajan argued in 2006 that the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, who are all nuclear powers, have created an exclusive [nuclear club](#) that predominately addresses the strategic interests and political motives of the permanent members – for example, protecting the oil-rich Kuwaitis in 1991 but poorly protecting resource-poor Rwandans in 1994.

3. The Security Council's effectiveness and relevance is questioned by some because, in most high-profile cases, there are essentially no consequences for violating a Security Council resolution. During the [Darfur crisis](#), [Janjaweed](#) militias, allowed by elements of the Sudanese government, committed violence against an indigenous population, killing thousands of civilians. In the [Srebrenica massacre](#), Serbian troops committed genocide against [Bosniaks](#), although [Srebrenica](#) had been declared a UN [safe area](#), protected by 400 armed Dutch peacekeepers.
4. The Security Council has been criticized for failure in resolving many conflicts, including Cyprus, Sri Lanka, Syria, Kosovo and the [Israeli–Palestinian conflict](#), reflecting the wider short-comings of the UN. For example; at the 68th Session of the UN General Assembly, New Zealand Prime Minister [John Key](#) heavily criticized the UN's inaction on [Syria](#), more than two years after the [Syrian civil war](#) began.
5. There is evidence of [bribery](#) on the UNSC. Countries that are elected to the Security Council see a large increase in foreign aid from the US, averaging 59%. They also see an 8% increase in aid from the United Nations, mainly from [UNICEF](#). The increase most strongly correlates to years in which the Security Council addresses issues relevant to the US. There is also evidence of increased foreign aid to elected countries from Japan and Germany.

On the other hand, a post which was last updated on February 8, 2019 presented a list of accomplishments, among them:

1. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the first document to detail the fundamental human rights that must be protected. The declaration was proclaimed by the General Assembly in 1948. Securing human rights is a key pillar of the UN's work.
2. The annual UN Peacekeeping budget is less than 0.5% of global military spending. The UN currently has more than 100,000 peacekeepers in 14 operations on four continents.
3. The UN's World Food Program (WFP) provides food and assistance to some 91 million people in 83 countries. Additionally, WFP is planning for the future by developing programs to ensure a more stable food environment.
4. The UN and its agencies help over 1 million women a month overcome pregnancy complications. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) works to make motherhood safer, among other responsibilities.

5. The UN and its agencies supply vaccines to 45% of the world's children. For example, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are core partners of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, which has helped reduce polio cases by over 99% since 1988.
6. The UN supports about 67 countries a year with their elections. The UN also uses diplomacy to prevent conflict.
7. The UN assists people displaced by violence, conflict, and persecution. The UN and its agencies provide life-saving help to refugees and forcibly displaced people.
8. The Paris Agreement on climate change was signed by the largest amount of countries ever in a single day. On Earth Day 2016, 174 world leaders signed the agreement at the UN headquarters in New York. The UN is committed to fighting climate change, and the agreement builds on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.
9. The UN brought countries together in 2015 to launch a plan to end poverty, reduce inequalities, and protect the planet by 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals provide a common blueprint for countries to reach a world of dignity for all by 2030.
10. A majority of Americans believe in the importance of the UN. According to a bipartisan poll released by the Better World Campaign, 79% of U.S. voters believe the UN is needed today.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the U.N.?
2. What changes would you like to see in the organization or administration of the U.N.?
3. Does the veto power invested in five Security Council members hinder the effectiveness of the SC, or keep it from over-reaching?
4. Does the United States have too much money and influence invested in the U.N.?
5. If the U.N. didn't exist, what would happen to the programs it oversees?
6. Finally, the U.S. is often criticized for being "the world's policeman." Is this a fair criticism, and does it downplay or undermine the role of the U.N.?