

National Sovereignty and Superpower Domination: Implications for the United Nations' Role in Collective Security

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Abstract

Since the United Nations was established in 1945, world attention has focused on its effectiveness in achieving its key objective of maintaining peace and security. Although in its early years, the world body made efforts to justify the confidence placed in it by its founders and the world at large, the Cold War between the United States of America (USA) and the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was a serious challenge to its legitimacy and power. With the five permanent members of the Security Council, especially the USA and USSR, exercising their veto power, achieving international peace and security became more difficult. This development triggered a worldwide call for sweeping reforms in the organisation. This paper focuses on whether calls to revise its Charter to remove the lopsided representation in the Security Council and to address the principle of national sovereignty which currently impacts Council's decisions, are justified, especially regarding collective security. This reform agenda is relatively understudied, particularly with reference to the performance of its superpower-dominated Security Council before and after the Cold War.

Key Words: United Nations, World War, Collective Security, Peace, Sovereignty

Introduction

The United Nations was created in 1945 by the victors of World War Two with the primary aim of maintaining global peace and security. The United Nations Charter, an international treaty to which the United States is a state party, is the founding document of the United Nations (Blanchfield 2021). Importantly, Article 1 of the Charter, according to Blanchfield, unambiguously states that the purposes of the organisation are to maintain international peace and security; to develop friendly inter-state relations; address economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian problems; and promote human rights. Tompkins (1972) specifically mentions that the fundamental purpose of the United Nations is the preservation of peace and international security. It is not surprising, therefore, that globally the UN is recognised for its ability to address these issues through global cooperation, dialogue and collective responses to security threats (Krasno, 2004).

In this article, we offer some reflections on the uneven success of the UN to meet these aims. We do so by focusing on whether calls to revise its Charter to remove the lopsided representation in the Security Council and to address the principle of national sovereignty which currently impacts Council's decisions, are justified, especially regarding collective security. This reform agenda is relatively understudied, particularly with reference to the performance of its superpower-dominated Security Council before and after the Cold War. To achieve this aim, a qualitative research method was utilised focusing on secondary sources of data and archival materials. They included UN official reports, academic journals, textbooks, and other credible internet sources.

Seventy-eight years down the track, peace and security across the globe remain largely elusive. Conflicts in the Ukraine, Palestine, Kashmir, Syria, Sudan and Yemen, are ongoing, although only the first lies on the doorstep of nations in the Global North, including important UN Charter signatories. Nadin (2019) argues that given persistent global conflicts since 1945, the mission of the United Nations has not been met. This sentiment is common among nations in the global south. For some, the UN serves the interests of its creators primarily; the maintenance of a Westphalian global order in which they can pursue their economic, political and strategic interests to the detriment of lesser powers. With the signing of the U.N. Charter in 1945, the Five Powers, which included China, France, Great Britain, Russia and the United States, became the five Permanent Members of the Security Council, and were bestowed with enormous power (Fitzgerald, 2000). Against this backdrop, Gordon (1994) argues that the capacity of the Security Council to maintain peace is compromised by the ability of its most powerful members, whether Russia or other geopolitically isolated states, to legally frustrate decisions that they deem not to be in their interests. In other words, if the great power is itself the aggressor, it can protect itself by the use of the veto (Gordon, 1994). Simons (1995) agree that the early shaping of the United Nations, even before the end

of the Second World War, supported American strategic and commercial interests. With its military power, it has always been the dominant player on the Security Council.

Former UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar believed that without the United Nations, the world would be a much more dangerous and disorderly place (Carrol, 1985). But the world is full of atrocities, exploitation, marginalisation and incessant strife, created in part by a colonial past that did not end for decades after the UN was created (Sornarajah, 2006). Questions have been raised as to whether the world was ready for the United Nations at the time it was founded. Based on this, Whittaker (1997), Roberts and Kingsbury (1990), and Gorman (2001), concluded that the creators of the UN pushed the world too hard to accept the ideology of collective security. It is to the historical formulation of the global security institutions that we now turn.

THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Analysing the structure of the United Nations with reference to the performance of its superpower-dominated Security Council before and after the Cold War requires an assessment of the events that ultimately culminated in the establishment of the world body in January 1920, and which held its last meeting in April 1946, given that this was a tempestuous period in history (Northedge, 1986). Consequently, the League of Nations, which preceded the United Nations had the primary aim of preventing war throughout the world and promote interstate cooperation. The chief architect of the League was the United States President Woodrow Wilson who, in 1918, saw it as a sort of parliament of mankind in which each of the nations of the world would contribute its wisdom, creating a genial consensus that would promote international harmony and banish the spectre of war forever (Bell 1994). As expected, with many of the European countries emerging from the trauma of war, Woodrow Wilson's idea was enthusiastically applauded by allied leaders who acceded to his demands that the League be created as an integral part of the peace treaty (The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2021). Importantly, Crozier (1863) noted, that more than seven million men were killed, more than ten million crippled or incapacitated and countless other millions, men, women and children, starved, impoverished or terrorized during World War I. This calamity precipitated his warning that there must be a League of Nations to avoid popular protest precipitation, wrecking the nation state or tearing the whole world into pieces.

However, the League's daunting task, which became insurmountable, was to maintain international peace and stability (Bayar, 2020). In this case, each state undertook to preserve against external aggression, protecting the territorial integrity and the existing political independence of all members (Riggs and Plano, 1988). In pursuance of this noble objective, three permanent organs, the Assembly, the Council and the Secretariat were created while the concept of collective security was central to the League as member nations were to cooperate in taking common action against any nation that threatened the security of another nation (Kuźniak and Zeman, 2021). Despite all the efforts and sacrifices, the League of Nations failed to achieve peaceful sovereignty in the world and was unable to prevent the emergence of the Second World War. As succinctly stated by Yurtsever and Hmaidan (2019), it remained ineffective in intervention and resolution of regional conflicts that took place in the process up to the Second World War. The failure was also attributed to its inability to restrain the big powers, such as Germany, Japan and Italy from their aggression during the 1930s (Riggs and Plano, 1988).

This failure is often used as evidence that a collective security system does not or cannot keep the peace (Dorr, 2021). Even those who initiated the concept of collective security knew that most sovereign nations would see this as a major threat to their *own* security. As an early example, the International Diplomatic Conferences followed epidemics of cholera in Europe between 1851 and 1892 (Adams and Joslin 2002). Adams and Joslin explain how five successive Conferences, convened in haste and dread, adjourned without action. Each nation was afraid to delegate any power to another, lest their national sovereignty was impaired. This experience should, ordinarily, have been a lesson for the establishment of the League in 1920. Nevertheless, the United Nations adopted most of these problems intact and believed the world was already cooperating for collective security.

Collective Security

As explained, the League of Nations and the United Nations were both founded on the principle of collective security which mandates member nations to undertake collective action against any country that threatens the security and peace of another nation. According to Sarooshi (2000), collective security is instituting a system where a collective measure is taken against a member of a community of States that has violated certain community-defined values. This is a failed project, because in general, states are more interested in their own national security rather than world security. The effectiveness of a collective security system in practice, despite being a legal obligation, will depend on the degree to which States are committed to providing an automatic response to a violation of a community value and to taking whatever action may be required to restore the status quo within the community (Sarooshi, 2000). Given the conflicting interests of members, collective security has proven impractical. This is because the UN Charter is strictly based on the principle that

states have full sovereignty over their own affairs. Collective security is less likely in an environment where member nations have a strong commitment to national peacekeeping (Dorr, 2021). A good example was the inability of the United Nations to save innocent lives in several developing countries, where the cause of conflict is nothing, but the legacy of colonialism as expressed by Yurtsever and Hmaidan (2019). This is precisely what ignited our passion to write this paper. The unimaginable complacency exhibited by the supposed world police (the United Nations) towards saving the lives of approximately 800,000 Rwandan men, women and children who were brutally murdered during the 1994 genocide still haunts our existence. That genocide, as has been described by various individuals and organisations around the globe, will be remembered as one of the most abhorrent events of the twentieth century (Refworld, 2002, Maynard 2021).

Similarly, the Bosnia's civil war saw some 9,000 innocent Muslim men and boys massacred by Serbian forces in Srebrenica in 1995. Several years after these tragedies, innocent men, women and children are again being slaughtered, this time by Russian bombs and tanks in Ukraine. The day Russia launched its military invasion of Ukraine (24 February 2022) marked the beginning of the most difficult period in the history of the modern Ukrainian state and its people (Kuźniak and Zeman 2022). Despite all this, the Security Council is yet to take any decisive action to bring the conflict in Ukraine to an end. The irony is that the UN often plays a restricted role when any one of the five permanent members is involved in a conflict, essentially because of the veto power. In the case of Rwanda, the Security Council attempted to send in and finance African peacekeepers, but it was the USA, with the power of veto, that thwarted the effort to do so (The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2022). The USA President Bill Clinton did not hide this as he told graduating naval cadets in Indiannapolis that Rwanda was not relevant to the USA's national interest (Roberts 1995). The international community, or even the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) did not attempt to stop the atrocities at the time, despite their awareness of the seriousness of the events (Jørgenson, 2012). Similarly, there is no doubt that any resolution passed by the Security Council to condemn or bring the war in Ukraine to an end has little chance of success, since Russia, directly involved in the conflict, will automatically exercise its veto power against such a resolution. Russia is aggressively strengthening alliance with China, another veto carrying member. Currently, Russia's presence in the Security Council as a permanent member, endowed with the privilege of vetoing resolutions, has paralysed the United Nations (Kuźniak and Zeman, 2022). This is evidently and morally repugnant, where members can vote against each other in a crisis, thereby defeating the purpose of draft resolutions.

With the UN still facing multifaceted problems, and after several decades of its presence, the world remains a dangerous place (Riggs and Plano, 1998, Nadin, 2019). Yet Roberts (1995) offered a much more frustrated view of the UN, saying that it was division, not unity, which has been the more conspicuous feature of the world since 1945, following the hope expressed by the foundation of the League of Nations in the interwar years.

The Security Council

The United Nations Charter makes the maintenance of international peace and security the overriding purpose of the United Nations and this all-important task was primarily assigned to the United Nations Security Council, one of the six principal organs of the world body (Okeke, 2022). The victory and structure of the organization necessitated the Security Council which is the most powerful organ because of power wielded by its members from the time of its creation (Nwalie, 2022). The five permanent members dominate the fifteen-member council with the power of veto. Accordingly, the UN Security Council plays a pivotal governance role in the international system including the power to establish peacekeeping and special political mission, impose sanctions on member states or refer matters to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and authorize the use of military force (Security Council Report, 2020). The power of veto, which has become the focal point of a strong complaint for the reform of the UN system, was a compromise for membership of the five permanent members (Security Council Report, 2020). Without the provision of the veto, there would have been no UN at all. From a critical perspective, the five great powers put the veto in place as a protection against any collective measure or sanction, and to exercise the veto when necessary to render impotent any draft resolutions seen as detrimental to their economic, political and strategic interest (Kuźniak and Zeman, 2022), Delahunty, 2007). Historically, the veto power originates in article 27(3) of the United Nations Charter, which establishes that all substantive decisions of the Security Council must be made with the concurring votes of the permanent members (Wenaweser and Alavi, 2020). For many years after the UN was founded, however, the Security Council failed to live up to the hopes and aspirations of its creators, which assumed that the great powers would somehow sacrifice their national interests for the interests of the world community (Delahunty, 2007). They failed to learn from the experience of the League which White (1998) describes as an abortive attempt to translate the collective security system into a working system. It will be difficult, if not impossible, to give collective interests supremacy over national interests, as many sovereign nations are likely to see that as an attempt to put in place a world government which may be considered a serious threat to their very existence (Kelly, 2020). This is one of the plethora of reasons why the controversial veto often negatively impacts on the work and functioning of the Security Council as it has prevented it from exercising its functions with respect to some of the gravest threats to international

peace and security – often in clear contravention of the purposes and principles of the UN Charter (Wenaweser and Alavi, 2020).

With all the highlighted developments in the Security Council, it becomes difficult for the UN to make any meaningful progress in terms of securing the much-needed world peace, as consensus often eludes the great powers. If these problems have been taken into consideration after the collapse of the League of Nations, the world would have, no doubt, been in a better position to accept a world body like the UN (White, 1998). Moreover, the dominance of the superpowers in the Security Council, has inevitably triggered anxiety and discussion in various quarters over whether the United Nations can live up to the expectation of preventing another World War which may likely necessitate the establishment of yet another world body (Our Global Neighbourhood, 1995). This is one of the reasons why many countries in the world, particularly smaller powers, are calling for reforms of the organisation. Interestingly, as White further argues, the United Nations appears to be the only forum now where governments of various countries across the globe come together on a regular basis while trying to solve the world's most pressing problems.

National Sovereignty and Human Rights

Sovereignty is a critical element of the State and without it, a State cannot exist. Therefore, the enthusiasm that greeted the formation of the United Nations in 1945 made it possible for member nations to view the concept of national sovereignty positively, as it was straight forward and widely accepted (Bell, 1994). However, the attitude of sovereignty has changed quite dramatically today as a result of globalisation. This is because, according to Shen (2020), Goldstein (1999), the highly regarded principle of non-interference is fast becoming a thing of the past as nations, organisations and individuals around the globe are not only curious, but also expressing concerns over how fellow human beings are treated by their respective governments. The principle of non-interference, which requires that a State refrains from interference in the internal or external affairs of another State, no doubt has impacted negatively on the UN collective security system, because aggressors and human rights violators are citing national sovereignty to defend their illegal actions (Shen, 2020). Major conflicts and events in the last decade of the 20th century - from the Gulf War and its aftermath to atrocities in Bosnia, from Rwanda to Somalia, and from Kosovo to East Timor and recently to Ukraine, have raised serious questions about humanity and the foundational blocks of international law (Shen, 2020). These, according to the author, have led to revived debates in the United Nations General Assembly about the principle of national sovereignty and the prevention of humanitarian disasters. Although the power of veto is one problem, the national sovereignty of states, which remains the bedrock of the international organisation could be seen as another. Against this backdrop, it can be deduced that national sovereignty means different thing to all five permanent members of the UN and members from developing countries. As Roberts and Kingsbury (1993) postulate, all parties tend to interpret national sovereignty differently in different situations. Riggs and Plano (1988) also describe sovereignty as a distinctive status that opens the door for government to engage lawfully in certain political activities, domestic and international. In this case, a state is free of any foreign intervention in its domestic affairs. In other words, the government has the authority to collect taxes from its citizens, pass laws which govern the conduct of its citizens, and even occasionally kill its citizens without any interference whatsoever from other governments, organisations, or people outside the country (Roberts and Kingsbury, 1993).

For example, when nine human rights campaigners were sentenced to death in Nigeria in 1995 for being accessories to murder, the whole world was outraged. Despite the plea from the Queen of England and the world community, the military junta under Sanni Abacha defiantly executed the men and told the world to respect the sovereignty of Nigeria (McIntyre, 1996, Cambell, 2002). In neighbouring Ghana, the former president, Jerry Rawlings, was a military head of State in 1983. In that year, he executed three former presidents of his country and nine cabinet ministers in just one day for corruption (Halfond, 2021). He also told the world that Ghana was a sovereign nation. What happened when Saddam Hussein used poison gas to kill most of the inhabitants of some Kurdish villages? He claimed that he was merely exercising national sovereignty. Quite clearly, the premise of national sovereignty is open to abuse (Brennan et al, 2004). How does the concept of collective security fit into this dangerous situation when the UN Charter clearly forbids interference in the domestic affairs of other nations? Was it an error that the founders of the UN put this clause in the Charter while at the same time trying to mobilise multilateral cooperation to keep the peace (Jørgenson, 2012, Shen 2020)? Only the founders of the United Nations can answer those questions and explain how a sovereign nation will knowingly allow a multilateral force on its soil when they themselves will not allow this to happen.

The Cold War Era

When the United Nations was founded in 1945, the primary aim of its founders was to prevent another world war and to preserve peace and security. However, the Cold War was a period of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union beginning from 1945 to 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. Moreover, the United States prevailed over the

United Nations General Assembly during the assembly's earliest years but progressively lost its control as membership of the organization increased. According to Claude (1995), the United Nations of the 1990's was not free to function in the manner contemplated by its creators because its activities will be determined by the sons and daughters of its founders, who are having to react to global conditions differently from those of 1945. True to this assertion, shortly after World War II, political cooperation among the superpowers, in particular, between the USA and the USSR, reached an all-time low and brought the world into the period of the Cold War (Fitzgerald, 2000). As the struggle for military supremacy and the interests of the USA and the USSR clashed, the UN became less effective in maintaining world peace. More interestingly, those who thought the UN could bring the world together and use the organisation as a forum to settle their conflicts amicably without necessarily going to war are the very same who have been at war with each other (Haag and Conrad, 1987).

Although many factors have been adduced as the causes of the Cold War between the USA and the USSR which dominated the international political stage for many years, the fundamental point is that the Cold War was characterised by mutual distrust, suspicion and misunderstanding between these nations and their allies (Goldstein 1999). With each of the superpowers having its own ideological mission, the USA accused the USSR of making desperate efforts to expand communism throughout the world while the USSR, on the other hand, accused the USA of practising imperialism and attempting to stop revolutionary activity in other countries (Goldstein 1999). The way each of the superpowers perceived the world also contributed to the unhealthy rivalry and tension between East and West. For instance, the USA wanted a world of independent nations based on democratic principles, the USSR, on the other hand, attempted to tightly control areas it considered vital to its national interest, including much of Eastern Europe. Despite the hostility of East and West relations during the Cold War, a relatively stable framework of relations emerged, and conflicts never escalated to all-out war. However, they prevented the UN from responding to major crises, particularly in vulnerable developing countries (Claude, 1995). This was contrary to the aim of the organisation whose founders assumed that the world was ready for a collective effort to maintain peace and security. Quite clearly, the lukewarm and selfish attitude of the superpowers demonstrated that the UN was, in reality, not able to function as a world body. This explains why many countries in the world, particularly smaller powers, are calling for reforms. If the events of the pre-Cold War continue to resurface, the credibility as well as the relevance of the UN will continue to be in doubt.

The UN after the Cold War

The United Nations appeared to have immediately re-traced its steps following the end of the Cold War as the major powers put aside their ideological differences and resumed some degree of cooperation (Trent and Schnurr, 2018). As espoused by Lebovic (2004), the United Nations security structure faced new challenges. There was ethnic bloodletting in the Balkans, political turmoil in Central America and the Caribbean, and the African continent was ravaged by famine and war. The UN was soon engaged worldwide in a variety of roles, from election monitor, truce observer, and civil police officer to active participant in aggressive peace operations (Lebovic, 2004). For instance, during the Gulf War, the USA and Russia joined forces to reverse Iraq occupation of Kuwait in 1990. According to Goldstein (1999), without this cooperation, Kuwait could have lost its sovereignty and territorial integrity to Iraq. The cooperation was also extended to arms reduction as Russia and the USA agreed to major reductions in their nuclear weapons to be carried out in the 1990s (Goldstein, 1999).

It is most compelling to point out, however, that events in the last few years suggest that the post-Cold War honeymoon is over, as the UN is again demonstrating its ineffectiveness or inability to enforce its decisions in some important situations. Corroborating this is Nakamitsu (2020) who argues that it is far more complicated today and that Cold War tensions have returned between the United States and Russia. The immediate example is the current war between Russia and Ukraine that has led to the near destruction of Ukraine as a sovereign nation. Clearly, the role of China and its increasing competition with the United States is also important (Nakamitsu 2020).

Conclusion

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has been dominated by the geopolitical interests of the superpowers, leading to questions on the UN's role in collective security and the protection of national sovereignty. As Okeke (2021) has rightly argued, the quest for the reform of the UNSC is as old as the United Nations itself. Given the present UN structure, it is evident that the organisation is far from achieving its goals of multilateral cooperation. The veto power granted the Security Council members which involves the world's largest military powers, two of which are authoritarian and unpredictable, means the five members can pursue self-centred national interests, leading to a constant and regressive stand-off. This absolute veto power has been a major hurdle to the council's ability to carry out its mandate from the very beginning (Mbara and Graham, 2021). Moreover, the permanent five has often been split into competing geopolitical

alliances, with a member of either alliances –characteristically the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR; and its current successor, Russia) or the United States – wielding their veto on numerous crucial decisions (Weiss, 2003, Thakur, 2004).

Examples include the current invasion of Palestine by Israel with military support from the US, and Ukraine by Russia as well as the United States' past invasion of Iraq, Panama and several other countries. The brutal assaults on Ukraine and Palestine demonstrate quite convincingly that the Security Council is ineffective especially when the interests of one or more of the 5 permanent members collide with those of the other members. This raises serious questions as to whether the plight of those people who have no direct responsibility for a conflict are considered by the superpowers. Such a behaviour is contrary to the UN Charter, which, according to Roberts and Kingsbury (1993), enshrines the principles of the sovereign equality of states, no matter how small, economically or militarily. These are some of the cogent reasons why the United Nations needs to be reformed now, in the words of Thakur (2004), to make it more democratic and more representative of the diverse peoples and continents of the world. In this case, the reform, which has remained stalemated for years thereby giving the impression that it has been captured by the major powers (Thakur, 2004), should start with the expansion of the Security Council in order to have an equitable distribution of the controversial veto power which permits each of the current five permanent members of the Security Council to unilaterally block Security Council resolutions inimical to its national interests. For example, Russia has used its veto power to block resolutions condemning its deadly invasion of Ukraine while the US has similarly done the same with respect to invasion of Palestine by Israel. The Security Council has grown from 11 members in 1945 to 15 today and its permanent membership remains restricted to five: essentially a self-appointed oligarchy who wrote their own exalted status into the Charter (Thakur, 2004). This is why newer members of the UN who have typically been developing and ex-colonial countries with their own set of priorities and concerns should have a voice in the Security Council. In other words, nations from Latin America, Africa, and Asia should have a seat each in the Council to reflect a balanced geographical distribution. The fact that more countries have opted to join the UN is a clear indication that the organisation still has relevance, despite the lack of an effective security council. It is also a strong message and an endorsement of the important role of the UN in international diplomacy. There are more conflicts today than at any other time in the life of the United Nations and the United Nations' collective security system is perhaps the only option to deal with these problems (Okeke, 2021, Roberts and Kingsbury, 1993). Technological advancement means the world is already globalised, increasing the propensity for conflict, and this is more likely to continue as long as humanity survives and as long as nations with different economic, political and social interests try to operate within a single world body. Finally, and in the words of Zifcak (2009), reform will serve as a vehicle for strengthening the UN's capacity to fulfil its purposes and principles which include saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

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