

The United Nations at a Crossroads

UN Deputy Secretary-General Louise Fréchette addressing the General Assembly in 2004 / UN

By Louise Fréchette

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In the minds of many, the UN is that of the post-Cold War era: a hyperactive organisation multiplying peacekeeping missions, leading the fight against poverty and HIV/AIDS, and vigorously promoting democracy and human rights.

It was the era of Kofi Annan — a Secretary-General known and admired around the world.

In reality, those few years were an entirely exceptional phase in the organisation's history, a period of unipolarity under the uncontested leadership of the United States and the West. During the fifty years that preceded it, the UN's role in conflict management was, for the most part, marginal, given that agreement between the USSR and the United States was rarely possible.

Let us recall that the right of veto granted to the permanent members of the Council was insisted upon by the powerful founders of the UN and was a condition of their support. It is therefore unsurprising that the UN is powerless whenever a permanent member considers its interests to be at stake.

That said, the Cold War was far from sterile in terms of international cooperation. The Law of the Sea, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the first major environmental conference, as well as support for decolonisation and the creation of new entities such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Food Programme (WFP), all emerged in a context of intense and constant rivalry between the two great powers of the time.

The UN is no stranger to crisis, but the one it faces today is unfolding in an infinitely more complex context. A new superpower, China, now seeks to exert its influence on every issue. One must also take into account the ambitions of middle powers to carve out an independent role — to become “rules-makers” rather than mere “rules-takers.”

The new world order they are calling for aims to erode American supremacy, particularly in the economic sphere. The defence of democracy and human rights does not feature on their agenda. The role these countries envision for the UN remains far from clear.

And then there is Donald Trump's America. For the first time since 1945, America seems to be turning its back squarely on its own creation. The US contribution to the UN has had its ups and downs over the years, but ultimately Washington has always concluded that active engagement served its interests. Americans have paid their dues (albeit often late), contributed generously to various cooperation programmes, and devoted vast amounts of diplomatic energy to advancing their point of view in every UN forum.

In recent months, the United States has announced its withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), UNESCO, and the Human Rights Council. The concepts of international solidarity and collaboration for the common good seem utterly foreign to Trump's vision of international relations.

Deprived of American political and financial support, the United Nations now faces unprecedented challenges.

Cuts to USAID (and also to the aid budgets of other countries) are already drastically reducing the UN's capacity for action, as well as that of its humanitarian agencies. One can also expect severe pressure on the operating budget of the Secretariat and peacekeeping missions.

The Secretary-General has proposed an ambitious programme of reforms aimed at streamlining structures and reducing operational costs. As with any bureaucracy, some pruning at the administrative level would be perfectly acceptable, but cuts to humanitarian and development programmes risk having seriously negative consequences.

The majority of UN member states are developing countries. Their interest in the organisation could diminish significantly if it can no longer respond to their needs.

As for reforming the Security Council — on the agenda since 1994 (!) — it is openly desired by virtually all member states. The UN would certainly gain in representativeness and legitimacy, if not necessarily in effectiveness. But member states must still agree on a formula — how many new members? How many permanent ones? With or without veto power? And the choice of those “happy few” remains deeply divisive.

Reforming the Council would send a powerful signal of renewal. One can only hope that the organisation's current crisis convinces states of the urgency of such reform.

Structural reforms are important, even essential, but they will not suffice to get the UN back on track unless member states agree on what they expect from it. The UN system, despite all its weaknesses, inconsistencies, and imperfections, has nonetheless helped maintain relative peace and a measure of order in international relations for 80 years. Today, it stands at a crossroads.

Changing power dynamics within the organisation is already beginning to erode the common rules painstakingly established over the years.

It is too soon to tell what further measures the Americans might contemplate to weaken the UN or how other member states will respond to this new reality. One thing is certain: even if the United States eventually adopts a more benevolent stance, the UN of the coming years will bear little resemblance to Kofi Annan's UN.

In the best-case scenario, one could imagine a return to the pre-1989 model — with a marginalised Security Council but continued engagement by all UN member states in

deliberation, negotiation, humanitarian aid coordination, and sustainable development cooperation.

The essential goal will be to regulate relations between states through commonly agreed rules. Finding common ground to revise or adapt these rules so that they better reflect current realities will not be easy. Nor will it be any simpler to properly frame technological advances such as artificial intelligence.

As during the Cold War, the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of states will prevail more often than not.

And it is quite possible that the United States or another great power will refuse to commit on certain issues. That should not prevent the rest of the international community from moving forward. It would not be the first time that international law and cooperation have advanced gradually, without the immediate support of the strongest actors.

I am convinced that the great majority of states believe their security and the well-being of their populations are better protected within even an imperfect multilateral system than through bilateral dealings with dominant powers.

Canada and other Western nations can continue to exercise genuine leadership in supporting multilateralism, provided they listen to the countries of the Global South and treat them as true partners, not mere beneficiaries of their generosity and wisdom.

It remains to be seen whether the UN will prove to be the preferred tool to help states guard against the ambitions of the most powerful and maintain a minimal degree of order in international relations. No one can confidently predict what the UN will look like five or ten years from now.

Ultimately, the survival of the institution itself is less important than the concepts and principles it embodies. If humanity decides to close up shop in New York and invent something new, let us ensure that the UN system — which has served humanity well — is not simply replaced by the law of the strongest.

Louise Fréchette served as United Nations Deputy Secretary-General from 1998 to 2006.