



By: Richard Haass

# The UN's slide into near-irrelevance continues unabated



Five years ago, I wrote a **commentary** about the United Nations as it turned 75. The title, "The UN's Unhappy Birthday," said it all. The UN is now 80, but my critique back then remains all too valid today. The UN's slide into near-irrelevance continues unabated.

The annual September **gathering** of world leaders in New York, which has just ended, is less important for what the UN does (which is little in the realm of preventing or ending wars) than for what it provides, namely a venue for all sorts of bilateral and multilateral meetings among the high-level visitors. Think of it as Davos for diplomats.

But the UN itself is a victim of chronic malaise, owing above all to the resurgence of great-power rivalry.

The state of international affairs today is a far cry from what it was in 1990 when the world came together through the UN in the aftermath of Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait.

Back then, the Soviet Union and China worked with the United States; today, Russia and China **prevent** the UN from playing a role in ending the war in Ukraine, in which Russia is both the protagonist and the cause.

Major divisions within the UN Security Council prevent the organization from constructively addressing most major issues, from North Korea's expanding nuclear arsenal and Iran's nuclear ambitions to the war in Gaza and other conflicts around the world.

## The UN has failed to evolve

The UN has failed to evolve. I doubt anyone would design the Security Council, the most important UN organ, in a way that resembles its current iteration.

Yes, most would agree that China and the US should **retain** their veto-wielding permanent seats.

But some might question why Russia, with an

economy smaller than that of Brazil or Canada, and which acts in ways inconsistent with the UN charter, deserves one.

Many would also challenge the case for continuing to include the United Kingdom and France. And there would be advocates for Japan, Germany (or the European Union), India, and several others.

All that said, any change would be opposed by at least one of the five current permanent members, which is why no meaningful change is ever likely to materialize.

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Beyond the Security Council, the organization rarely does itself any favors. It puts countries that are abusers of human rights on bodies meant to protect them.

It failed to stand up to China when the Chinese government refused to cooperate and allow a serious investigation into the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

And the organization's bureaucracy too often runs on the basis of a global spoils system rather than merit. Accountability is rare.

And now the US, the driving force behind the UN's creation, its host and biggest funder throughout its existence, has **distanced** itself from the organization.

Under President Donald Trump, the US no longer supports multilateral efforts to deal with issues ranging from global health and trade to climate change and human rights – and indeed questions the value of the very international order it did so much to build.

## The Middle East

The Middle East is a special case of UN shortcomings. There is a long-term bias

against Israel, one that far predates Israeli actions in Gaza and limits the UN's ability to play a central role in efforts to resolve Middle East conflicts.

Events this past week did not help matters, as several countries, including France, the UK, Canada, and Australia, chose to use the annual UN opening as an opportunity to **recognize** a Palestinian state.

Behind this move is deep and understandable frustration with what Israel is doing in Gaza and the West Bank, with their own inability to influence Israeli actions, and with what is seen as US passivity and unwillingness to rein in Israel.

Hence, the recognition of Palestine is the best (or least) these governments felt they could do.

### The decision to recognize a Palestinian state is just a rhetorical shift

But understandable does not necessarily mean wise. One problem is that the decision to recognize a Palestinian state is just a rhetorical shift; it does nothing to improve the prospect of ending the war in Gaza or actually creating a viable Palestinian state.

The bigger problem, though, is that recognition risks making a bad situation worse by reinforcing the feeling among Palestinians that they do not have to earn a state through constructive actions and statements, not to mention negotiation with Israel.

Moreover, further recognition of Palestinian statehood will likely lead this Israeli government to respond in ways that will prove decidedly unhelpful to long-term peace.

## Tremendous potential

Trump's rambling address to the UN was not well received, owing to his attacks on Europe

over immigration and his denial of climate change.



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But some of his other criticisms of the organization were well-founded. He was not wrong when he **said**, "It has such tremendous, tremendous potential, but it's not even coming close to living up to that potential. For the most part, at least for now, all they seem to do is write a really strongly worded letter and then never follow that letter up."

Until the UN is prepared to do more, it will continue to be sidelined, and the gap between the world's challenges and its capacity to meet them is likely to widen.

I concluded my commentary five years ago with the following words: "The case for multilateralism and global governance is stronger than ever. But, for better or worse, it will have to take place largely outside the UN." Unfortunately, I see no reason to revise that conclusion now.

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