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The United Nations: Fifty Years of Keeping the Peace

In 1995, representatives from 185 countries gathered at the United Nations in New York to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its founding. Fifty years earlier, much of the world lay in ruins. Millions of people (including 406,000 Americans) had lost their lives in the most destructive war in human history. The hope for an international organization to effectively enforce the peace in the postwar world was mainly an American idea. President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) believed the peace could be kept by the major allied powers of the war, the "Big Five"—the United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and China. In Roosevelt's vision, they would become the world's "policemen."

Fifty nations meeting in San Francisco in June 1945 unanimously approved the [U.N. Charter](#). The preamble of the charter set down the most important purpose of the world organization: "We the peoples of the United Nations are determined to save the generations of people yet to come from the horrors of war." After the charter was approved, the delegates rose spontaneously from their seats and cheered.

How well has the United Nations kept the peace? Does it deserve our cheers today? Or do we need to rely on different organizations to keep the peace in today's world?

The Security Council

Under the U.N. Charter, the [Security Council](#) is granted the power to "take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security." The Security Council today consists of 15 nations including the five wartime allied powers. The "Big Five" are permanent members of the Council, each with veto power. This means that by voting "no," any one of these nations can stop the Security Council from acting. Other U.N. members take turns filling the remaining 10 seats on the Security Council, but do not have veto power.

As a practical matter, the "Big Five" must all agree (or at least not exercise the veto) before the United Nations can act against threats to world peace and security. The assumption in 1945 was that the five major allies in war would continue to work together on the Security Council to enforce the peace. This assumption, however, proved wrong. As the [Cold War](#) developed, most of the nations of the world found themselves divided into two camps: the Western powers, led by the United States; and the communist powers, led by the Soviet Union. Most nations not aligned with either camp were in the Third World, the developing nations of Africa and Asia.

Cold War Limits

The United Nations quickly became a Cold War battleground between communist and non-communist countries. Since both the United States and Soviet Union held vetoes, the Security Council could not act without their joint permission. This limited U.N. peacekeeping efforts to situations where the national interests of the superpowers were not in conflict. Such was the case in 1948 when fighting erupted between Arabs and Jews after the United Nations created the state of Israel. [Ralph Bunche](#), an American working as a U.N. diplomat, negotiated a cease fire, which involved sending the first U.N. peacekeepers to separate the warring sides.

Once, however, the Security Council did act against Soviet interests. After communist North Korea attacked South Korea in June 1950, the Security Council granted President [Truman](#) authority to send American troops to defend South Korea. This happened due to a fluke of history. The Soviet Union was boycotting the Security Council because the permanent seat held by China was then occupied by the anti-communist government on Taiwan rather than the communist mainland government. As a result, the Soviet Union failed to exercise its veto. Although about 15 U.N. member nations participated with the United States in the Korean War (1950—1953), American troops did most of the fighting.

In another instance, the United States and Soviet Union teamed up to thwart two Western powers—France and Great Britain. In July 1956, Egyptian leader [Gamal Abdel Nasser](#) seized the [Suez Canal](#). Although the canal ran through Egyptian territory, it was owned primarily by the British and French. To get the canal back, Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt. Most of the world opposed the retaking of the canal. The United States and Soviet Union, in a rare case of Cold War unity, voted for a Security Council resolution calling for the immediate withdrawal of British, French, and Israeli troops. But Britain and France vetoed this resolution.

The United States then took the unusual step of submitting the withdrawal resolution to the General Assembly where every U.N. member had one vote and no country had the veto power. The resolution passed overwhelmingly. An armed U.N. peacekeeping force, the "Blue Helmets" (peacekeeper helmets have the same color as the U.N. flag), was put together with troops contributed by a number of U.N. member nations. Faced with such massive international opposition, the British, French, and Israelis withdrew their forces from the canal.

Due to Cold War limits on U.N. action, the world organization played an insignificant role in some of the most dangerous threats to world peace. The Security Council took no action in 1962 when the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) occurred. The Security Council also remained stalemated during the [Vietnam War](#).

The New Third World Majority

In 1945, the United States assumed that the United Nations would share its interests and that U.N. members would follow the American lead. This assumption was shaken by the Cold War. But the United States still managed to win important votes in the General Assembly. For example, for years the General Assembly voted to keep communist mainland China out of the United Nations. This changed, however, in 1971. Despite U.S. efforts, the majority of U.N. members voted to replace anti-communist Taiwan with communist China in both the General Assembly and the Security Council.

By this time, U.N. membership had more than doubled. Most of the new member nations were former colonies. They increasingly sided against the United States and its allies. While the United States still had the veto in the Security Council, the General Assembly consistently voted against American positions. Many ambassadors from the new Third World countries literally danced in the aisles of the General Assembly when the U.S. stand against seating communist China was outvoted.

Since the General Assembly controlled the U.N. budget, new programs and agencies aimed at aiding the economies of poor Third World countries greatly increased spending. In the area of human rights, the United Nations constantly attacked [apartheid](#) in white-controlled South Africa, but ignored episodes of genocide in several black African countries.

At this time, the General Assembly majority usually sided with Arab interests over Israel, a longtime U.S. ally. In 1975, the General Assembly passed a resolution condemning [Zionism](#) (the movement for a Jewish nation) as "a form of racism." Stanley Meisler, author of a recent history of the United Nations, concluded that, "Nothing in U.N. history so diminished the organization in the eyes of Americans as the vote for the Zionist resolution." [In 1991 after the [Gulf War](#), the General Assembly voted to revoke this resolution.]

By the time [Ronald Reagan](#) became president in the early 1980s, some American critics of the United Nations were charging that the world organization had become anti-American, anti-West, and anti-free enterprise. The critics also argued that the United Nations was plagued with corruption, out-of-control spending, and a bloated bureaucracy. During the Reagan presidency, the United States began to reduce and delay its annual payments to the United Nations to pressure the organization to change its ways. [Today, the United States owes \$1.5 billion in back payments to the United Nations for its regular budget and its peacekeeping budget.]

Peacekeeping After the Cold War

In 1989, the communist world started crumbling. The [Berlin Wall](#) fell. Soon communist governments began toppling: East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, and Hungary. Finally in 1991 the Soviet Union disbanded. Russia took the Soviet Union's seat on the Security Council. After 45 years, the Cold War had ended.

After years of Cold War paralysis, it seemed the Security Council could now act decisively. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the Security Council passed a dozen strong resolutions against [Saddam Hussein](#)'s violation of the peace. They included an ultimatum to Iraq to either withdraw its troops or face an overwhelming multinational military force authorized by the United Nations and led by the United States. The United States and the Soviet Union voted together on this key resolution along with Britain and France. The fifth permanent Security Council member with veto power, China, abstained from voting.

Shortly after the quick victory in the Gulf War, President [Bush](#) declared that a "new world order" was coming into existence "where the United Nations, freed from Cold War stalemate, is poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders." But this optimism was soon diminished by U.N. peacekeeping interventions in Somalia and Bosnia.

With Security Council backing, President Bush ordered American troops to Somalia at the end of 1992. President Bush saw the purpose of this mission as ensuring the safe delivery of food and relief supplies to the starving Somali people who were terrorized by clashing military factions. But U.N. Secretary General [Boutros Boutros-Ghali](#) insisted that American and other troops sent to Somalia under U.N. authority needed to disarm the fighting factions.

After 24 Pakistani peacekeepers were killed in an ambush in 1993, the Security Council authorized a manhunt for the Somali military leader who was responsible. More violent incidents occurred including one in which 18 American soldiers were killed. This led President [Clinton](#) to order the withdrawal of American troops from Somalia, which crippled the U.N. peacekeeping mission.

In 1992, U.N. peacekeepers (not including U.S. troops) were sent to protect civilian food convoys in the middle of a vicious civil war in Bosnia. Authorized only to defend themselves, these Blue Helmets were powerless to stop violence directed against the civilian population. U.N. peacekeeping in this civil war soon proved to be totally ineffective. Finally, the United States and its NATO allies helped negotiate a peace treaty that called for American troops and soldiers from 30 other countries to supervise its implementation.

The UN has also chosen to intervene in [Kosovo](#), an area currently experiencing an uneasy peace after years of conflict. Since the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation in 1992, the Balkans have been a hotbed of border wars, civil unrest, and the so-called "ethnic cleansing" of the Muslims. In Kosovo, the Kosovo Liberation Army, supported chiefly by Albanians, rebelled against Serbian rule, thus plunging the country into violent civil war in 1998. On 10 June 1999, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution authorizing the [United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo \(UNMIK\)](#) to act as the transitional administration for the region. To pave the way for self-government, civil registration is in progress throughout Kosovo with municipal elections scheduled in the latter part of 2000. All three Kosovo-Albanian political parties have endorsed the UN

Mission in Kosovo and have committed their support for a multi-party democracy in the territory.

Back in 1945, the founders of the U.N. looked upon the Security Council as the mechanism to prevent and stop wars of aggression in which nations attack other nations. After all, this was the way World War II had taken place. But today most threats to peace involve civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and gross violations of human rights within nations. The United Nations has no standing army to suppress these breeches of international peace and security. The U.N.'s Blue Helmet peacekeeping missions are only as effective as the commitment of those countries that contribute troops. Today, there are nearly 70,000 U.N. peacekeepers in about 15 areas of the world.

Some argue that U.N. peacekeeping should be limited to separating armies and monitoring peace agreements after the fighting has stopped. During the last half-century, most of the nearly 40 U.N. peacekeeping missions have taken this form. Such missions have been effective in places like Cambodia and El Salvador where civil conflicts once raged. But should the world stand by while fighting factions slaughter one another and children die from artillery shells and starvation?

From its beginning, the purpose of the United Nations has been to keep the peace. Its effectiveness was hindered at first by the Cold War. Its future depends on the support of member nations, particularly the United States. How much or how little the United States will support U.N. peacekeeping in the future is uncertain. But in the words of [Abba Eban](#), former Israeli foreign minister and U.N. diplomat, "Nothing can happen without the Americans. Everything can happen with them."

For Discussion and Writing

1. How did the Cold War affect the role of the United Nations as world peacekeeper?
2. How did the Third World majority in the General Assembly change the United Nations?
3. Do you think that U.N. peacekeeping missions should only monitor the peace once the fighting has stopped, or, should they also intervene to forcibly end civil conflicts?
4. Do you think that a permanent Blue Helmet army under the control of the Security Council should be established to enforce peace in the world? Why or why not?
5. Do you think the United Nations is an effective organization? Why or why not?

For Further Information

[The United Nations Home Page](#): The official home page of the United Nations headquarters in New York.

[United Nations System of Organizations](#): This web site lists all United Nations Organizations (UNOs) with their abbreviations and city locations of headquarters sites, in addition to other useful information.