



# UN-ENVIABLE RECORD

After decades, the United Nations still falls short on advancing peace, security, human rights and economic development —despite plenty of funding.

by Peter Brookes





If you think the American federal government is bloated, inefficient and ineffective, consider the United Nations, a towering bureaucracy with delusions of being a world government.

Its woeful performance makes the bureaucracy and process in Washington look like a model for modern administration.

This point is perhaps no better made than in a new book aptly titled, “ConUNdrum: The Limits of the United Nations and the Search for Alternatives,” an edited work by Brett Schaefer, a long-time United Nations-watcher at the Heritage Foundation.

The book exposes the truth that, after a lifetime of effort and gazillions of dollars, the world has reaped precious little for peace, security, human rights and economic development from the U.N.

Indeed, despite the fact the United States has been the U.N.’s major benefactor since the organization’s 1945 founding and even in this post-Cold War era, the international body is a bastion of anti-Americanism and socialism—not freedom and prosperity as intended.

While President Obama has acknowledged that the United Nations is “imperfect,” he has still defended it as “indispensable.” The truth is that it is more than imperfect; it is a deeply flawed organization that despite good intentions has failed to meet even minimal expectations time after time. And too often, it has proved to be more an impediment to resolving international problems than an asset.

This is not the hallmark of an “indispensable” body.

The evidence is perhaps nowhere more evident than on the issue of international peace and security, one of its supposed core competencies.

### **SECURITY SHORTCOMINGS**

The maintenance of international security through effective collective action to prevent and remove threats to peace is one of the main purposes of the United Nations, as outlined in its 1945 founding charter.

Yet the U.N. record is not particularly active when it comes to its mandate of dealing with aggression. Despite hundreds of wars during its three-score year existence, the U.N. has authorized



**Left:** These human skulls were discovered in a mass grave in the Kigali, Rwanda, neighborhood of Nyamirambo. A forensic scientist working for the United Nations in Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and Croatia exhumed mass graves and came face-to-face with the horrific realities of genocide. A single grave in Rwanda held 500 bodies. (Reuters/Radu Sigheti JV)

**Top:** A Somali Islamist militant carries his weapon as he patrols the streets of northern Mogadishu, July 2009. Islamic insurgents with alleged links to al Qaeda have looted two United Nations compounds in southern Somalia and announced they will ban three U.N. agencies from operating in areas the militants control. The United Nations confirmed that al-Shabab militants had stolen emergency communication equipment from its compound in Baidoa city, and two cars and some furniture from its compound in the town of Wajid. (AP/Mohamed Sheikh Nor)

the use of force to counter aggression only twice: after North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950 and after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

In the post-Cold War period, many believed the United Nations would be ideally suited to quell conflicts, only to be mugged by the reality that U.N. peacekeepers are not war fighters. Expectations set far too high have had tragic results.

Too often, as "ConUNdrum" points out, the U.N. has taken on security tasks and responsibilities that it was poorly positioned to carry out, with results arguably as bad as if it had done nothing.

For instance, the United Nations failed to stem a civil war in Somalia, prevent genocide in Rwanda and protect civilians from the slaughter at Srebrenica in the former Yugoslavia. Tragically, it also largely failed to prevent the still-ongoing genocide and atrocities in the Darfur region of Sudan.

U.N. peacekeeping has become a growth industry. There are now more

than 110,000 "Blue Helmets" deployed around the world in 16 peacekeeping operations, at an annual cost of nearly \$8 billion. That is a huge global investment in an organization with such a record of disappointment.

Shamefully, U.N. peacekeepers have also been involved in sexual misconduct involving innocent civilians they are supposed to protect in such places as the Democratic Republic of Congo—a situation worsened by internal efforts to cover up the crimes.

The United Nations also comes up short on ending the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons—the responsibility of its supposed watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The IAEA failed to detect Iraq's nuclear program before the first Gulf War; uncover Iran's once-clandestine atomic efforts; or stop North Korea from joining the Mushroom Cloud Club.

But it is not just security that is a problem.

## MONEY MATTERS

The broader U.N. system is in reality a mishmash of organizations. What most people think of as the U.N. is actually its headquarters at "Turtle Bay" in New York City. The regular and peacekeeping budgets together for its headquarters operations total more than \$10 billion annually. When you include the budgets of the many other U.N.-affiliated organizations (such as the World Food Program, the United Nations Development Program, the World Health Organization, and UNESCO), the collective "U.N. budget" swells to more than \$20 billion per year. (This would make the U.N. the world's 100th largest economy, larger than almost half its members.)

Some of these U.N. bodies are funded through voluntary contributions, but most charge member states "dues" based on their "capacity to pay" (e.g., the size of their economies, per capita gross income and the like).

The United States, as the world's largest economy, pays 22 percent of the "regular" U.N. budget and more than



**Left:** Thousands of refugees fled across front lines from the eastern Bosnian enclave when Serb troops overran the region in 1995. In chilling detail, the United Nations issued a damning report on its actions leading up to the 1995 killings of Bosnian men in Srebrenica, blaming itself and the Security Council for failing to use force and appeasing the Serbs. (Reuters/Wade Goddard)

**Right:** Sudanese children orphaned during attacks by Sudan government troops and the Janjaweed Arabs sit outside their home in Kidingir south of Darfur. The U.N. has failed to prevent genocide and other atrocities in Darfur. (Reuters/STR)

25 percent of its peacekeeping budget. Other U.N. technical and specialized agencies charge the U.S. similar amounts. All told, the U.S. pays roughly \$5 billion each year to the U.N. system.

Uncle Sam forks over more than the combined contributions of the other four permanent members of the Security Council (i.e., China, Russia, France and Britain). Only Japan and Germany, who come in second and third in contributions, are in the vicinity. They pay about 17 percent and 9 percent of the U.N. regular budget, respectively.

Even more egregious, some 130 nations of the 192 U.N. member states collectively pay about 1 percent of the U.N. regular budget. Some pay as little as 0.001 percent. Yet they get a vote equal to the U.S. when it comes to adopting the U.N. budget or other matters before the General Assembly. Under U.N. rules, this group can pass a budget over the objection of the U.S.

In December 2007, the General Assembly did just that, voting 142 to 1 (the United States was the only “no” vote) to adopt a 25 percent increase in its budget—and violating for the first time in 20 years the tradition of approving the budget by consensus.

As former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton points out in the book, this way of doing business has created an

“entitlement mentality”: Member states and the Secretariat approve budgets without even considering program efficiency and effectiveness.

This, of course, means a lack of program oversight and accountability, which has led to fraud and mismanagement—massively demonstrated in the now infamous Iraqi Oil-for-Food program, a “humanitarian” effort that instead sent billions of dollars in kickbacks to line the pockets of Saddam Hussein, his family, U.N. officials and their cronies.

And what about human rights?

### HUMAN RIGHTS HYPOCRISY

As several authors in “ConUNdrum” sadly note, the United Nations also fails in another key charter mission: promoting and encouraging respect for fundamental human rights and freedom. It frequently protects human rights abusers more than it defends the rights of the abused they govern. For instance, the Human Rights Council has largely ignored problems in countries where human rights are a major concern like China, Cuba, North Korea and Zimbabwe.

That should really come as no surprise: The world’s most oppressive governments are U.N. members in good standing.

Over the years, countries with troubling human rights records have

been allowed to play prominent, even leading, roles in the work of U.N. human rights bodies with the specific intent of ensuring that official criticisms against them never surface. All too often they succeed. Many repressive regimes have been elected to seats on the Human Rights Council and other U.N. human rights gatherings, such as Libya’s chairmanship of the 2009 follow-up conference to the anti-Semitic 2001 World Conference Against Racism. Even worse, Iran served as vice chair.

### TURNING AROUND TURTLE BAY

In fairness, much of the work of the U.N.’s specialized agencies has been well-intentioned even if misguided or ineffective. Some agencies have done quite well, especially in the areas of health care (e.g., immunizations), humanitarian assistance (e.g., food aid) and election monitoring.

The U.N. also uniquely serves as the world’s largest multilateral forum for discussing global issues of concern. But there is no question that it can certainly do better—if it is willing to amend its ways.

Multilateral cooperation through international organizations can be useful, but it should be employed to address specific challenges, not as a “feel-good” end in itself.



**Left:** Ethiopian soldiers carry a shoulder-held missile launcher as they display ammunition that they have confiscated during house to house searches in the Somali capital, Mogadishu. Widespread fighting in Somalia prompted the U.N. Security Council to emphasize “the urgent need” for the United Nations to start planning for a possible peacekeeping mission. (AP/Mohamed Sheikh Nor)



**Right:** Internally displaced Somalis receive food being distributed by the United Nation's World Food Program in Abdi Aziz district, north Mogadishu, Somalia. (AP/Farah Abdi Warsameh)

The indisputable fact is that the U.N. as a multilateral organization, as former Assistant Secretary of State Kim Holmes puts it, usually overpromises and underdelivers. While he and the other authors in “ConUNdrum” take warranted shots at the U.N, they also, thankfully, propose ways to reform the 60-plus year old institution.

First and foremost, they argue that Washington must not allow the United Nations to squander taxpayer dollars. They call for a full-court press (including withholding U.S. contributions in some cases) to force change or terminate ineffective programs and to get the U.N. to focus on activities where it can be most useful.

The United States should seek to curb the U.N. bureaucracy's enthusiasm from acting as if it were a world government, while avoiding mission creep in areas where the U.N. agency or program lacks the expertise, authority or capacity to address a problem effectively. And it should continue to work for greater accountability and oversight.

We should lead an effort to shift more programs and offices that fall under the existing mandatory dues system to voluntary funding. This would allow individual countries to finance the programs they believe most efficiently, effectively and transparently serve their interests.

The U.N. is certainly not the only way to tackle international problems, either. In fact, as the book suggests, if the U.N.

will not reform, the United States should not shy away from proposing alternative institutions or partnerships. Fortunately, “ConUNdrum” offers not only a smart analysis of how to think about the U.N. but also fresh ideas for how to help reform it to better advance peace and security, human rights and prosperity—

all core American interests. •

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