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The Role of the United Nations in Conflict Resolution: Successes and Failures

Mr. Paban Borah
Assistant Professor, Kalabari College, Kalabari, Biswanath, Assam

Abstract: *This paper critically examines the United Nations (UN) as a global institution for conflict resolution, tracing its evolution from a post-World War II security framework to a complex multilateral body confronting twenty-first-century challenges. Through a systematic analysis of historical and contemporary case studies, the paper evaluates the mechanisms through which the UN engages in peacekeeping, mediation, and preventive diplomacy. It identifies notable successes, including the stabilization of Namibia, Cambodia, and Sierra Leone, alongside stark failures, such as the genocide in Rwanda and the protracted conflicts in Syria and Yemen. The study argues that while the UN has made indispensable contributions to international peace and security, persistent structural deficiencies, particularly the veto power of the five permanent Security Council members, chronic underfunding, and the subordination of UN authority to the sovereign interests of powerful states, continue to undermine its effectiveness. The paper concludes with recommendations for institutional reform to enhance the UN's conflict resolution capacity in an increasingly multipolar world.*

Keywords: *United Nations, conflict resolution, peacekeeping, Security Council, multilateralism, humanitarian intervention, veto power, international peace and security.*

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Introduction

The United Nations, established in 1945 in the aftermath of the Second World War, was conceived as humanity's foremost instrument for the maintenance of international peace and security. Emerging from the ashes of the League of Nations, which had proven incapable of preventing global conflict, the UN represented an ambitious new vision for collective security, one grounded in the principles of sovereign equality, non-interference in internal affairs, and the peaceful settlement of disputes (United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations"). Seventy-five years since its founding, the institution has grown from its original 51 member states to encompass 193 nations, making it the most representative international body in human history.

Yet, despite its near-universal membership and ambitious mandate, the UN's record in conflict resolution remains deeply contested. Scholars of international relations and practitioners of diplomacy alike are divided on the fundamental question of whether the UN has fulfilled its founding promise or whether it has served primarily as a stage for the performance of multilateralism without the substance of effective peacemaking. The institution has brokered dozens of ceasefires, deployed peacekeeping missions across every inhabited continent, and established international norms of humanitarian intervention that have undeniably altered the behavior of states.

At the same time, it has stood by as genocides unfolded, failed to prevent or stop major wars, and proved paralyzed in the face of great-power competition (Bellamy and Williams 2).

This paper seeks to provide a rigorous and balanced assessment of the UN's role in conflict resolution by examining both its institutional architecture and its practical track record. Section two outlines the theoretical and legal framework underpinning UN conflict resolution efforts. Sections three and four offer case studies of notable successes and failures, respectively. Section five analyzes the structural constraints that impede the UN's effectiveness, and section six advances recommendations for reform. The paper draws on primary UN documents, Security Council resolutions, and a substantial body of secondary scholarship to advance the argument that the UN, despite its considerable achievements, requires fundamental structural reform if it is to remain relevant in an era of rising authoritarianism, great-power rivalry, and increasingly complex intrastate conflicts.

The UN Framework for Conflict Resolution: Mandate, Mechanisms, and Legal Architecture

The legal basis for UN involvement in conflict resolution is enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, particularly in Chapters VI, VII, and VIII. Chapter VI empowers the Security Council to investigate disputes, recommend procedures for peaceful settlement, and call upon parties to resolve their differences through negotiation, inquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, or judicial settlement (United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Art. 33). Chapter VII grants the Security Council far broader authority, allowing it to determine the existence of a threat to peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression, and to authorize measures including economic sanctions and the use of armed force (Art. 39-42). Chapter VIII, somewhat less frequently invoked, recognizes the role of regional arrangements in the maintenance of international peace and security, provided their activities are consistent with the purposes and principles of the UN.

Within this legal framework, the UN has developed an array of conflict resolution instruments. Preventive diplomacy, conceptualized by former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold and elaborated by Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his landmark 1992 document "An Agenda for Peace," involves early action to prevent disputes from escalating into armed conflict. Peacekeeping operations, which have no explicit basis in the Charter but evolved as a practical innovation during the Cold War, deploy military and civilian personnel to monitor ceasefires and support peace processes. Peace enforcement, authorized under Chapter VII, allows for the use of coercive measures against parties that threaten or breach international peace. Finally, peacebuilding encompasses post-conflict activities designed to address the structural causes of violence and build the foundations for durable peace (Boutros-Ghali 11).

The institutional machinery charged with implementing this mandate is primarily the Security Council, composed of fifteen members, five of which hold permanent seats with veto power: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China. The General Assembly provides a forum for debate and norm-setting but lacks enforcement authority. The Secretariat, led by the Secretary-General, plays a crucial role in mediation and good offices. Specialized bodies such as the Department of Peace Operations, the Peacebuilding Commission, and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs further support the UN's conflict resolution efforts (Weiss et al. 45).

An important conceptual development in the UN's approach to conflict resolution has been the evolution of the norm of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), endorsed by the 2005 World Summit. R2P holds that states have a primary responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, and that the international community, through the UN, has a residual responsibility to intervene when states manifestly fail to provide such protection (Evans 3). While R2P has advanced the normative landscape of international peace

and security, its implementation has been highly uneven, reflecting the political dynamics of the Security Council rather than a principled commitment to civilian protection.

Notable Successes: Where the UN Has Made a Difference

Despite frequent criticism, the UN can point to a number of significant conflict resolution successes. These cases demonstrate that when member states provide the institution with adequate resources and political will, and when the geopolitical environment is conducive to multilateral action, the UN can play a decisive role in bringing conflicts to an end and helping societies transition to peace.

Namibia (1989-1990)

The UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia is widely regarded as a landmark success in UN peacekeeping. Following decades of South African occupation and a protracted liberation struggle led by the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), the Security Council authorized UNTAG to oversee Namibia's transition to independence, including the supervision of elections and the monitoring of the ceasefire between SWAPO and South African forces. Operating in a complex environment, UNTAG successfully facilitated the repatriation of refugees, the demobilization of armed groups, and the conduct of free and fair elections in November 1989, which led to Namibia's independence in March 1990 (Howard 89). The Namibia operation demonstrated that UN peacekeeping could succeed when the parties to a conflict had reached a genuine political settlement and were prepared to honor it, and when the major powers provided sustained support.

Cambodia (1992-1993)

The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) represented the most ambitious peacekeeping operation of its era, involving the temporary administration of a sovereign territory by the UN. Following decades of conflict, including the Khmer Rouge genocide and the Vietnamese occupation, the Paris Peace Agreements of 1991 charged UNTAC with supervising the ceasefire, disarming and cantoning the factions, repatriating refugees, and organizing elections. Despite the refusal of the Khmer Rouge to comply fully with the peace agreement, UNTAC succeeded in organizing internationally recognized elections in May 1993, in which more than 89 percent of registered voters participated, and in establishing a new constitutional framework for Cambodia (Doyle 30). The Cambodia operation underscored the UN's capacity to manage complex multidimensional peace processes, albeit with significant limitations when one party chooses to defect from an agreement.

Sierra Leone and Liberia

The UN's engagement in Sierra Leone and Liberia during the late 1990s and 2000s provides further evidence of the institution's capacity for effective conflict resolution. The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), deployed in 1999, initially suffered a catastrophic setback when Revolutionary United Front (RUF) fighters captured hundreds of its peacekeepers. However, following a robust British military intervention that stabilized the security situation, a strengthened and better-resourced UNAMSIL was able to oversee the disarmament of some 75,000 combatants, the restoration of government authority throughout the country, and the holding of peaceful elections. The Sierra Leone Special Court, established jointly by the UN and the Sierra Leone government, prosecuted key perpetrators of atrocities, including former Liberian President Charles Taylor, thereby contributing to accountability and deterrence (Fortna 165).

East Timor

The UN's role in East Timor represents another qualified success. Following the violence that erupted after the 1999 independence referendum, the Security Council authorized the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET), which rapidly restored order. The subsequent United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) then governed the territory and oversaw its transition to independence as Timor-Leste in May 2002. While post-independence instability required further UN engagement in 2006, the overall trajectory of the international community's response to the East Timor crisis demonstrated that timely, well-resourced intervention authorized by the Security Council could protect civilian lives and facilitate the emergence of a new state (Chesterman 82).

Notable Failures: The Limits of UN Conflict Resolution

The UN's failures in conflict resolution are at least as instructive as its successes. These cases reveal the depth of the structural and political constraints that limit the institution's effectiveness and that have, in the most egregious instances, resulted in mass atrocities that the UN was positioned to prevent or mitigate but did not.

Rwanda (1994)

The Rwandan genocide of 1994, in which an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered in approximately 100 days, represents the most catastrophic failure in UN conflict resolution history. Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire, the commander of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), repeatedly warned UN headquarters of the impending genocide and requested authorization to neutralize the extremist militias and protect civilians. His requests were denied. The Security Council, under pressure from the United States and others still traumatized by the experience in Somalia, actually reduced the size of UNAMIR at the height of the killing. The international community's abandonment of Rwanda was not the result of ignorance; it was the result of political will failure at the highest levels of the UN system (Dallaire 6).

The Rwanda catastrophe prompted a fundamental rethinking of UN humanitarian intervention norms, leading directly to the development of the R2P framework. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who had served as Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping during the genocide, later acknowledged that the international community had failed Rwanda and expressed deep personal remorse for the institution's inaction (Annan 35). The Rwanda case remains the most compelling evidence that the UN, as presently constituted, is capable of failing in its most fundamental obligation to protect human life.

Bosnia and the Srebrenica Massacre (1995)

The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the subsequent wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina provided another devastating indictment of the UN's conflict resolution capacity. The UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR), deployed in 1992, operated under a confused and inadequate mandate that left it unable to use force to protect civilians, despite the designation of six UN-protected "safe areas," including Srebrenica. In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces under General Ratko Mladic overran the Srebrenica safe area and systematically murdered approximately 8,000 Bosniak Muslim men and boys in what the International Court of Justice later found to constitute genocide (Srebrenica Commission 14). Dutch peacekeepers under UNPROFOR watched helplessly as the massacre unfolded, having been denied close air support by UN civilian leadership in New York. The Srebrenica massacre exposed the fatal contradiction between UN peacekeeping doctrine, based on the principles of consent, impartiality, and the minimum use of force, and the realities of conflicts in which one party is determined to commit atrocities.

Syria (2011-Present)

The Syrian civil war, which erupted in 2011 and has resulted in more than 500,000 deaths and the displacement of over half the Syrian population, represents the defining failure of UN conflict resolution in the twenty-first century. The Security Council has been paralyzed by the competing interests of its permanent members: Russia and China have vetoed numerous resolutions that would have authorized stronger international responses to the Assad government's systematic violence against civilian populations, including the use of chemical weapons. Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation has deteriorated catastrophically, with UN agencies struggling to deliver aid in the face of deliberate obstruction by the Syrian government and its allies. Multiple peace processes have been attempted under UN auspices, including the Geneva I and Geneva II conferences, but none has come close to producing a political settlement (Lynch 112).

Yemen (2014-Present)

Yemen similarly illustrates the limits of UN conflict resolution in contexts characterized by deep geopolitical divisions among the permanent five. The conflict, which began with the Houthi takeover of the capital Sanaa in 2014 and escalated dramatically with the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in 2015, has produced what UN officials have described as one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. UN Special Envoys have cycled through the conflict with little success, peace negotiations in Stockholm (2018) and elsewhere have produced limited and largely unimplemented agreements, and the Security Council has been unable to impose an arms embargo or take other coercive measures that might reduce the intensity of the conflict, given Western support for Saudi Arabia and the coalition (Winter 88). The Yemen case illustrates how the UN's conflict resolution mechanisms are systematically undermined when powerful states have strategic or economic interests in prolonging conflict.

Structural Constraints on UN Effectiveness in Conflict Resolution

The pattern of successes and failures reviewed above suggests that the UN's effectiveness in conflict resolution is determined not primarily by the skill of its diplomats or the quality of its peacekeepers, but by structural features of the institution that systematically advantage some interests over others and that privilege the sovereignty concerns of powerful states over the protection needs of vulnerable populations.

The Veto Power and Security Council Dysfunction

The veto power of the five permanent members remains the single greatest structural obstacle to effective UN conflict resolution. Designed in 1945 to ensure that the great powers would remain committed to the UN system by giving them the ability to block action they found contrary to their interests, the veto has in practice enabled permanent members to shield their allies from accountability and to prevent Security Council action in conflicts in which they have strategic stakes. Between 1946 and 2022, the veto was exercised more than 300 times, with Russia and the United States accounting for the vast majority of uses (Zifcak 44). In the Syrian crisis alone, Russia used its veto fourteen times to block resolutions that would have imposed accountability measures or humanitarian access requirements. The result is a Security Council that is systematically unable to act in precisely those situations where action is most urgently needed: conflicts involving the interests of major powers or their close allies.

Resource Constraints and Operational Limitations

UN peacekeeping operations are chronically underfunded and understaffed relative to the challenges they face. The UN peacekeeping budget, while substantial in absolute terms at approximately $6.5 billion annually as of 2022, represents a tiny fraction of global military expenditure and is often insufficient to resource missions adequately. Troop-contributing countries,

which provide the vast majority of peacekeeping personnel, are disproportionately developing nations whose soldiers may lack the training, equipment, and operational capacity required for complex peace enforcement tasks. Advanced military powers, which possess the capabilities needed for robust peacekeeping, have been increasingly reluctant to contribute troops to UN operations, preferring instead to conduct military interventions through coalitions of the willing outside the UN framework (Berdal 97).

Sovereignty Norms and the Non-Interference Principle

A deep tension runs through the UN Charter between the principle of sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs (Art. 2.1 and 2.7) and the commitment to protect human rights and promote human dignity. This tension has become increasingly acute as the nature of conflict has shifted from interstate wars, for which the UN was designed, to intrastate conflicts in which governments themselves are often the primary perpetrators of violence against their populations. The doctrine of sovereignty has been weaponized by authoritarian governments to resist international scrutiny and accountability, and has been invoked by Russia and China, in particular, to block Security Council action on Syria, Myanmar, and other situations where governments are engaged in mass atrocities against their own citizens (Evans 112).

Coordination Failures and Institutional Fragmentation

The UN system is characterized by a high degree of institutional fragmentation, with multiple agencies, funds, programs, and departments engaged in aspects of conflict resolution with overlapping mandates, competing bureaucratic interests, and inadequate coordination mechanisms. The relationship between the Department of Peace Operations, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the UN Development Programme, and the various specialized agencies engaged in post-conflict reconstruction is frequently characterized by turf battles and coordination failures that undermine the coherence of the UN's overall approach to conflict prevention and resolution (Weiss et al. 178).

Toward Reform: Enhancing UN Conflict Resolution Capacity

The analysis presented above suggests several areas in which reform of the UN's conflict resolution architecture is both necessary and potentially achievable. While comprehensive Charter reform remains politically unrealistic in the near term, incremental improvements within the existing framework could significantly enhance the institution's effectiveness.

First, reform of the Security Council veto is urgently needed. The most promising proposal currently under discussion is the Accountability, Coherence, and Transparency (ACT) group's Code of Conduct, which would commit Security Council members to abstain from using the veto in situations involving genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. While voluntary and non-binding, a commitment by permanent members to such a code could reduce, though not eliminate, the most egregious veto abuses (Security Council Report 3). More ambitious proposals for veto reform, including expanding the permanent membership or abolishing the veto altogether, would require Charter amendment and are unlikely to command the necessary support in the foreseeable future.

Second, the UN must develop more robust and reliable funding mechanisms for peacekeeping operations. The current system of assessed contributions, combined with chronic arrears by major contributors, creates a structural fiscal fragility that compromises mission planning and execution. Proposals for a dedicated peacekeeping endowment fund, or for mandatory prepositioning of military assets by member states, merit serious consideration (Berdal 201). Additionally, advanced military powers must be encouraged to contribute more capable personnel to UN operations,

through incentive structures, burden-sharing arrangements, and stronger political commitments to multilateralism.

Third, the UN must invest more systematically in conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy. The evidence strongly suggests that prevention is both more effective and more cost-efficient than post-conflict peacekeeping and reconstruction. Strengthening the early warning capacities of the Secretariat, providing the Secretary-General with greater political independence and resources for quiet diplomacy, and ensuring adequate funding for the Peacebuilding Commission would all contribute to a more prevention-oriented UN conflict resolution architecture (Boutros-Ghali 25).

Fourth, the normative framework for humanitarian intervention needs to be clarified and strengthened. The Responsibility to Protect doctrine has been unevenly applied and has been weaponized in some cases to justify regime change rather than civilian protection. Developing clearer, agreed criteria for Security Council authorization of R2P interventions, and establishing more robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms for the conduct of such interventions, would help to rebuild the political consensus around this important norm.

Conclusion

The United Nations has played an indispensable role in international conflict resolution over the past eight decades. Its successes in Namibia, Cambodia, Sierra Leone, and East Timor demonstrate that, under the right conditions, the institution can help bring conflicts to an end, protect civilian populations, and create the conditions for durable peace. These achievements should not be minimized; they represent the saved lives and restored communities of millions of people who might otherwise have remained trapped in cycles of violence.

Yet the UN's failures, most catastrophically in Rwanda and Bosnia, and most recently in Syria and Yemen, reveal the depth of the structural and political constraints that prevent the institution from fulfilling its founding promise. The veto power of the permanent five, chronic resource constraints, the tension between sovereignty and human rights, and institutional fragmentation all contribute to a pattern of selective and inconsistent conflict resolution that serves the interests of powerful states more reliably than the needs of vulnerable populations.

The UN faces a critical juncture. In an era of rising authoritarianism, intensifying great-power competition, and increasingly complex and protracted intrastate conflicts, the demand for effective multilateral conflict resolution has never been greater. Meeting that demand will require not merely incremental improvements in operational capacity, but a fundamental reimagining of the political compact that underlies the UN system, one that places the protection of human beings, rather than the prerogatives of sovereign states, at the center of international order. Whether the member states of the UN possess the political will to undertake such a reimagining remains, as it has always been, the central question of our collective capacity for peace.

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