

SUBSCRIBE

DONATE

BLUE SMOKE: A monthly column, from PassBlue and UNA–UK, spotlighting senior appointments at the UN

OPINIONS

UN Reform? Think ‘Alice in Wonderland’

Opinion by Thomas G. Weiss • September 26, 2023

LEAVE A COMMENT



United States President Joe Biden walking through the United Nations diplomats' entry, Sept. 19, 2023. Although he and many other delegations are talking up a storm about the possibility of reforming the Security Council, "this will never happen," the essayist writes. JOHN PENNEY/PASSBLUE

Parachuting into the frenzy of Manhattan's East Side last week exposed the usual traffic snarls and not-so diplomatic cacophony about the United Nations. The noise included hackneyed pleas to alter the Security Council, often mixed with calls to draft a new Charter. Yet with current toxic politics, reform is a nonstarter.

Conversations on First Avenue, like others this spring and scheduled for 2024 and 2025, can be interpreted as ambitious efforts to pursue reports from the secretary-general in 2021 and his high-level advisory board for effective multilateralism, in addition to civil society reports, as analytical grist for the SDG Summit a week ago, next year's Summit of the Future and the World Social Summit in 2025. Even UN cheerleaders, however, have been heard to utter “death by summit.”

The inadequacy of current global problem-solving provides the drumbeat. What could be more obvious?

Equally obvious is the abysmal political climate for international cooperation, with deep rifts and mistrust, certainly the worst in my lifetime. The biggest war in Europe in decades is now mired in its 19th devastating month.

In 1945, consensus existed about the world organization's scope and priorities. Today, there is no agreement. Changes to the Charter follow, not precede, consensus. Optimists anticipating major changes ignore the polarized political reality displayed everywhere: growing rivalry among major powers; increasing disagreements within UN intergovernmental bodies; and backsliding on key normative and legal commitments.

Let's mention recent illustrations of the confused and confusing reactions that result: the coups in Niger and Gabon this summer, the violent eruption in Sudan this spring, the full collapse of Sahelian stability right now, the membership of the BRICS and G20 and no-shows at the annual General Assembly session by four of the five permanent members (Joe Biden arrived from D.C.). Let's not forget, too, the diffuse responses to economic inequalities, climate change, gender equality goals and the pandemic.

To understate my case, now is not the ideal moment for a second Charter. A revision agreed by two-thirds of the membership and their parliaments would be weaker than the current one. Would we really wish the growing throng of authoritarian leaders to lead the way?

I am puzzled by two topics that routinely go nowhere but are always prominent: Security Council reform and Charter Article 109. These remain articles of faith for many and stay omnipresent, especially before major five-year anniversaries. “We have reached a fork in the road,” Secretary-General Kofi Annan told the General Assembly in 2003. In the lead-up to the 60th anniversary, he hoped for a grand bargain, another “San Francisco moment,” which is no closer today than it was two decades ago.

That year, Washington Quarterly published an essay that colleagues have periodically asked me to update. I have declined because the main change would be to the title — from “The Illusion” to “The Delusion of Security Council Reform.” That 95 percent of diplomatic energy is spent on this muddle baffles.

Less unsurprising was Biden's tease [this year at the UN General Assembly](#), repeating as he did in 2022 that “the United States would support expanding the Security Council,” while knowing perfectly well this will never happen.

Everyone agrees that the world has changed since 1945, though there's not much else in consensus. All proposals — including Volodymyr Zelensky's [attempt to eliminate Russia's permanent membership and veto](#) — are not only impossible but also raise as many problems as they solve. We can count on more hope for the kinds of changes that occasionally raise the authority of the General Assembly, too long a backwater, and that finesse geopolitics. That is, there's room to explore non-Charter changes.

My late friend Ed Luck and I disagreed on occasion, but on UN reform we both lamented that proponents are mesmerized by one “p,” namely process, but ignore another “p” — “product.” If only the process is improved, the logic goes, the product will too. It ain't necessarily so. Moreover, the incessant wrangling and fad analysis eliminate space to explore practical solutions. Adding permanent and elected members and fiddling with the veto could improve legitimacy. But would a mini-GA be more useful? Would even fewer decisions not result?

The weeping and gnashing of diplomatic teeth over several decades have not and will not enable new Charter amendments, but they have contributed to a permissive environment that has generated pragmatic modifications, such as the regular use of the Arria formula and embarrassing the veto wielders through the [Liechtenstein initiative](#).

Member state flexibility has also led to adaptations and expansion of the UN system. If any founders from 1945 arrived in New York City now, they would not recognize the organization they created. I thus welcome exploring all ideas that exploit that permissive environment but shunt any thoughts about amending the Charter.

Will the inability to move ahead with dramatic Security Council reforms or Article 109 compromise UN credibility? No, or at least not more than in the past.

To return to my opening thought, it is foolish to discuss reforming the UN while ignoring the brutal contemporary political realities. Instead, we should be strengthening the UN's comparative advantages. Operationally, that involves better humanitarian action and fostering ideas surrounding global norms, principles and standards. Specifically, what about consolidating and centralizing the sprawling so-called “system”?

Member states have added a lot to the bureaucracy but rarely subtract or close entities, although two large peacekeeping missions are being shut down faster than the administrators can manage.

The highest priority for the UN should be to reinforce the crumbling foundations of the UN system, not to speculate about the one we wished we had. The 2023, 2024 and 2025 summits will not solve bigger geopolitical problems. While unexciting, would it not be more sensible to brainstorm about worst-case rather than best-case scenarios? What about hardheaded contingency plans for what should remain in the system or even be expanded as well as what should be eliminated or consolidated if the organization were to have 10 to 25 percent fewer resources? That would sharpen the pencils.

I am not yet ready to give up on the UN. However, rather than composing wish lists, we should be identifying the UN's comparative advantages and building on what has succeeded. Otherwise, how long will the UN be standing in Turtle Bay?

For those who judge me overly dramatic and apocalyptic, I would like to recall that the League of Nations continued in rump form from 1939 to April 1946. Is that, in fact, a pertinent image for today's UN? It is hard not to have ringing in my ears the words from Lord Robert Cecil at the final session: “The League is dead, long live the United Nations.”

This is an opinion essay.

We welcome your [comments on this article](#). What are your thoughts on Security Council reform?

Thomas G. Weiss is Presidential Professor of Political Science at the CUNY Graduate Center; Distinguished Fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs; and Global Eminent Scholar at Korea's Kyung Hee University. His recent books include "The 'Third' United Nations" (with Tatiana Carayannis).

Categories: [General Assembly](#), [OPINIONS](#), [Security Council](#), [Ukraine-Russia War](#)

Tags: [António Guterres](#), [gender equality](#), [Russia-Ukraine war](#), [SDGs](#), [UN Charter](#), [UN General Assembly](#), [UN reform](#), [UN Security Council](#)

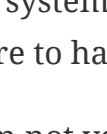
We would love your thoughts. Please comment:

UN Reform? Think ‘Alice in Wonderland’

[BACK TO TOP](#)

✉ Subscribe

➔ Login



Name*

Email*

Website

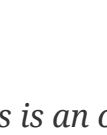


Post Comment

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

1 COMMENT

Newest



Kirk Boyd · 1 day ago

Yes, there is fragmentation today, but this does not mean that it is impossible to achieve linkage and collaboration within the UN, and global civil society as well. One way to do so, as the Secretary General has suggested, is his Common Agenda report, to focus on the strengthening and expansion of law, both at the civil level through the Regional Courts, and at the criminal level, by adding Ecocide to the ICC. We need a Legal Pact for the Future: <http://www.legalpact.org>

0 0 0 Reply

Related Posts

Russia's Bid to Rejoin the Human Rights Council Draws Heaps of Scorn

Special Report: We Joined NATO to Protect Ourselves From 'Aggressive' Russia, Finland's Foreign Minister Says

It Happened at the UN: Week Ending Sept. 23

Special Report: Burkina Faso Hits Out at France, Ecowas, the UN and Homosexuality

Special Report: Russia's Lavrov Loves to Blame the West; Why Estonia Wants a Special Court to Try Putin

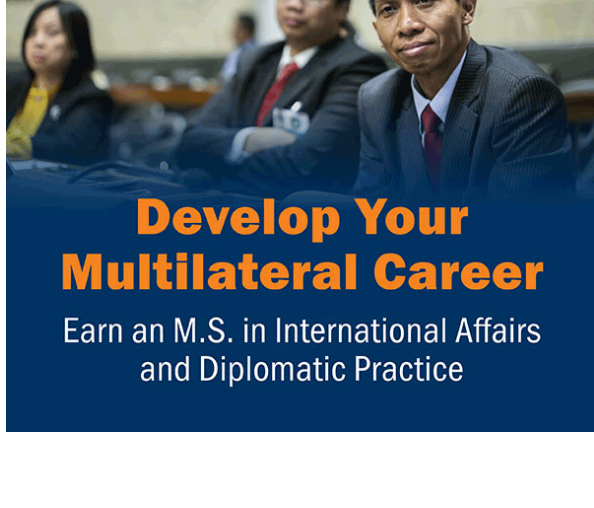
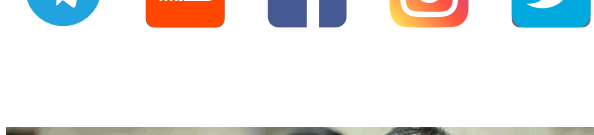
Special Report: Barbados, China and Chad; Prepping for the 2024 Summit of the Future

Special Report: Burkina Faso Hits Out at France, Ecowas, the UN and Homosexuality

Special Report: Russia's Lavrov Loves to Blame the West; Why Estonia Wants a Special Court to Try Putin

Special Report: Barbados, China and Chad; Prepping for the 2024 Summit of the Future

🔍 Search...



THIS WEEK'S MOST POPULAR

UNGA78

Special Report: Russia's Lavrov Loves to Blame the West; Why Estonia Wants a Special Court to Try Putin

Anastasiia Carrier and Dawn Clancy

UNGA78

UN Sends Mixed Signals on Niger, Which Is Unlikely to Speak at the General Assembly

Dulcie Leimbach

UNGA78

Special Report: Burkina Faso Hits Out at France, Ecowas, the UN and Homosexuality

Clair MacDougall

OPINIONS

UN Reform? Think 'Alice in Wonderland'

Thomas G. Weiss

UNGA78

Special Report: Mauritians Protest; Reforming the Global 'Financial Architecture'

Maria Luisa Gambale

UNSCripted and Act of Creation

LISTEN TO THE LATEST EPISODES

September: Tiny Albania stands up to the Russian Bear in UN Security Council

August: How Long Can Biden Keep Putting Up With Israel?

Act of Creation - Hammering out the UN Charter

ALL PODCASTS →

THE ONLY TALK SHOW OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD

GCTV

Global Connections Television with Bill Miller

Exploring international issues that have local impact

GCTV now available as a podcast

Thomas G. Weiss

The CUNY Graduate Center

Thomas G. Weiss is Presidential Professor of Political Science at the CUNY Graduate Center; Distinguished Fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs; and Global Eminent Scholar at Korea's Kyung Hee University. His recent books include "The 'Third' United Nations" (with Tatiana Carayannis).

PassBlue needs your support to stay strong:

DONATE NOW

PassBlue is a nonprofit, independent women-led media company that covers foreign affairs and the United Nations with a focus on women's issues and the impact of major world powers on ordinary citizens. We are strongly committed to high-quality original reporting, and our team strives to ensure that these powers are accountable for their actions and decisions.

About Us

About Us

Our Team

Donors

Advertise With Us

Interns

About Our Policies

Privacy Policy

Praise for PassBlue

HOME

BLUE SMOKE: Tracking UN Appointments

High-Level Topics

UN-Scripted Podcasts

Browse Articles

Features

UN EATS – Restaurant Reviews

Donate to PassBlue

Don't miss a story, Subscribe to PassBlue

Enter your email here

SIGN UP NOW

