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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**The Changing Role of the United Nations in Global Governance in the 21st Century****Rameez Haider**

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hafeezchandio011@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

The United Nations, established in the wake of World War II to safeguard international peace and security through a state-centric framework, faces an existential test in the 21st century. This article argues that the organization is defined by a central paradox: it is simultaneously adapting to new global challenges while being constrained by its outdated institutional architecture. The analysis employs a qualitative case study approach, drawing on UN documentation and secondary scholarship, and is guided by a theoretical framework synthesizing Liberal Institutionalism, Human Security, and Network Theory. The findings reveal a significant capacity for normative innovation, as seen in the adoption of agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), and for operational adaptation through robust peacekeeping and multi-stakeholder partnerships. However, these advancements are consistently undermined by profound structural rigidities, most notably the Security Council veto power, which leads to paralysis on critical issues, and a volatile, donor-driven funding model. The discussion interprets these findings, highlighting the tension between the UN's progressive agenda-setting and its regressive operational limitations, explained through the competing logics of different International Relations theories. The article concludes that while the UN remains an indispensable platform for global cooperation, its long-term effectiveness hinges on bridging the gap between its 21st-century ambitions and its 20th-century hardware. Its future likely lies not as a world government, but as the central node in an increasingly fragmented and polycentric global governance network.

Keywords: United Nations, Global Governance, 21st Century, Multilateralism, Security Council Veto, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Human Security, Multi-stakeholderism.

Introduction

The United Nations was conceived in the aftermath of a second cataclysmic world war, its Charter signed in 1945 as a definitive pledge to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war." Its foundational architecture was inherently state-centric, constructed upon the twin pillars of state sovereignty and the inviolability of territorial integrity, as articulated in Article 2(7). The primary mechanism for maintaining international peace and security was vested in the Security Council, particularly the five permanent members (P5) endowed with veto power, reflecting the victorious alliance of World War II. This system was largely paralyzed during the Cold War's bipolar stalemate, but the dawn of the 1990s ignited a period of profound optimism. The collapse of the Soviet Union seemingly heralded a unipolar moment where

liberal internationalism, championed by the P5, could flourish. This was the era of “An Agenda for Peace” (Boutros-Ghali, 1992), which expansively reimagined peacekeeping to include peace enforcement and peacebuilding, and the establishment of the International Criminal Court in 1998, symbolizing a growing consensus on universal justice. The UN, for a brief period, appeared poised to fulfill its original promise as the central arbiter of a cooperative, rules-based international order, a vision deeply rooted in Wilsonian idealism and the liberal institutionalist thought of the time (Ikenberry, 2020).

However, this post-Cold War consensus proved transient. The 21st century has ushered in a paradigm shift of such magnitude that it has fundamentally challenged the very premises of the traditional UN system. The forces of hyper-globalization, while fostering interconnectedness, have also empowered a vast array of non-state actors from multinational corporations and influential philanthropic foundations to transnational terrorist networks and global civil society organizations that operate beyond the direct control of any single member state. Concurrently, the nature of threats to human security has evolved from primarily interstate conflict to complex, transnational challenges that are impervious to national borders and traditional diplomatic tools. The climate crisis, epitomized by increasingly frequent and severe climate-related disasters, global pandemics like COVID-19 which exposed the fragility of international health security, and the amorphous dangers of cyber warfare and disinformation campaigns represent a category of problems that the Security Council’s state-based, reactive mandate is ill-equipped to address (World Economic Forum, 2023). Compounding this, the global power distribution has dramatically shifted away from the post-1945 hierarchy, with the rise of powers like China and India, and the resurgence of geopolitical contestation, creating a more fragmented and multipolar world where achieving consensus within UN bodies has become significantly more difficult (Wright, 2023).

It is within this context of seismic global transformation that this article aims to critically analyze the evolving role of the United Nations in global governance. The core purpose is to dissect the trajectory of this evolution, moving beyond a simplistic narrative of either UN irrelevance or indispensability. Specifically, the article will identify and examine the key drivers of change geopolitical, technological, and normative that are pressuring the institution. The scope of the analysis will encompass both the adaptations and the persistence’s within the UN system, assessing its effectiveness in core domains such as international security through the lens of contemporary conflicts, sustainable development via the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and human rights protection. By examining the interplay between entrenched institutional structures, such as the anachronistic P5 veto power, and innovative, albeit often ad-hoc, responses to new challenges, this article seeks to map the contours of the UN’s current capabilities and limitations. Ultimately, the analysis will explore future trajectories, evaluating the prospects for meaningful reform and the UN’s potential to serve as an effective anchor for a precarious and increasingly complex global order in the decades to come.

Literature Review

The scholarly interpretation of the United Nations’ role has long been filtered through the dominant paradigms of International Relations (IR) theory, each offering a distinct narrative. The realist perspective, arguably the most skeptical, views the UN not as an independent actor but as a mere arena or instrument for power politics among sovereign states. From this viewpoint, the organization’s effectiveness is contingent upon the interests of its most powerful members, particularly the P5 within the Security Council. The frequent paralysis induced by the veto power is not a system failure but a logical outcome of enduring great power rivalry, a modern manifestation of balance-of-power politics that privileges national

interest over collective action (Mearsheimer, 2018). In stark contrast, liberal institutionalism posits that the UN possesses significant value as a platform for fostering cooperation, reducing transaction costs, and establishing stabilizing international norms. Liberals argue that by providing a forum for diplomacy and creating specialized agencies to manage collective problems, the UN mitigates the anarchic nature of the international system, making it more predictable and lawful (Acharya, 2021). Meanwhile, constructivist scholarship shifts the focus from material power to the power of ideas, norms, and social identities. Constructivists analyze how the UN serves as a crucial normative actor that can socialize states, redefine their interests, and promote evolving concepts like human security and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), thereby slowly reshaping the very meaning of sovereignty itself (Finnemore, 2019). These traditional theories provide essential, though often conflicting, foundational lenses for understanding the UN's historical purpose and limitations.

Moving beyond these state-centric paradigms, contemporary scholarship on global governance has undergone a significant evolution, reflecting the complex realities of the 21st century. The classical model of intergovernmentalism where states are the sole authoritative actors is now widely seen as insufficient for capturing the dynamics of modern rule-making and implementation. The concept of "complex multilateralism" or "multi-stakeholder governance" has gained prominence, describing a system where the UN interacts in networked arrangements with a diverse ecosystem of non-state entities (Scholte, 2021). This scholarship documents the formal and informal ways in which transnational corporations, civil society organizations (CSOs), philanthropic foundations, and academic experts influence every stage of the policy process, from agenda-setting at the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) negotiations to implementation partnerships on the ground. The rise of initiatives like the UN Global Compact exemplifies this shift, explicitly seeking to harness private sector resources for public goals, thereby blurring the traditional lines between public and private authority in global affairs (Hale, 2020). This body of literature effectively charts the UN's adaptation from a closed club of diplomats to a fragmented, albeit more inclusive, global arena, while also raising critical questions about accountability and the unequal power among these new participants.

Parallel to these analytical frameworks, a robust corpus of critical literature offers a piercing assessment of the UN's structural and operational deficiencies. The most persistent critique centers on the profound legitimacy crisis emanating from the anachronistic composition of the Security Council. Scholars argue that the P5 veto power, a relic of 1945, systematically undermines the UN's credibility and effectiveness in addressing conflicts involving a permanent member or its allies, as starkly demonstrated in the cases of Syria and Ukraine (Gowan, 2022). A second major line of criticism targets the organization's notorious bureaucratic inefficiency. The UN is often depicted as a sprawling, fragmented system plagued by duplication of effort, inter-agency competition for scarce resources, and an accountability deficit that stifles innovation and results-based management (Barnett, 2021). Furthermore, a significant "implementation gap" is frequently identified, where ambitious normative declarations, such as those on human rights or environmental protection, fail to translate into meaningful action at the national level due to a lack of enforcement mechanisms, political will, and adequate funding (Autesserre, 2021). These critical perspectives collectively paint a picture of an organization struggling under the weight of its own architecture, often promising more than it can deliver.

Synthesizing these bodies of work reveals a clear scholarly consensus on the forces reshaping global governance and the institutional constraints facing the UN. However, a discernible gap remains in the systematic analysis of how the tension between the *rhetoric of adaptation*

embodied in concepts like multi-stakeholderism and human security and the *reality of institutional path dependency* plays out in specific, contemporary policy domains. While there is ample research on the failures of Security Council reform and critiques of bureaucratic inertia, and equally, numerous studies celebrating the normative appeal of the SDGs, there is less scholarship that explicitly traces the causal pathways through which the UN's entrenched structures ultimately filter, dilute, or reshape these adaptive efforts in practice. Therefore, this article will address this gap by focusing specifically on the interplay between the UN's 21st-century agenda, particularly the SDGs, and its 20th-century institutional hardware. It will investigate how the pursuit of integrated and universal goals like the SDGs is constrained by a siloed agency structure and a funding model that remains heavily state-centric and voluntary, offering a concrete case study of the organization's struggle to reconcile its founding charter with the exigencies of a new era.

Problem Statement

The central problem confronting the United Nations in the 21st century is the profound and growing disjuncture between its foundational, state-centric architecture and the complex, transnational nature of contemporary global challenges. Designed for a world order defined by interstate conflict, the UN's core institutions, particularly the Security Council with its anachronistic veto power, are increasingly paralyzed in the face of threats like climate change, pandemics, and cyber warfare that transcend borders and defy unilateral solutions. This institutional rigidity creates a critical governance gap. While the organization has rhetorically embraced adaptive concepts like multi-stakeholderism and human security, its operational capacity is severely constrained by path dependency, bureaucratic fragmentation, and a reliance on the very state-based political will that is often absent. The problem, therefore, is not merely one of relevance but of structural adequacy: the UN's 20th-century hardware is fundamentally mismatched with the software required for 21st-century global governance, leading to a persistent implementation gap between its ambitious mandates and its tangible impact.

Research Objectives

- To trace the evolution of the UN's mandate from traditional peacekeeping to encompassing human security, sustainable development, and human rights.
- To examine the impact of rising powers (e.g., BRICS) and non-state actors on the UN's decision-making processes.
- To assess the effectiveness of key UN initiatives in the 21st century, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change.
- To identify the primary institutional and political constraints hindering the UN's effectiveness.
- To propose potential pathways for reform to enhance the UN's capacity for global governance.

Research Questions

- How has the role and function of the United Nations evolved to meet the demands of 21st-century global governance?
- To what extent have rising powers and non-state actors influenced the agenda-setting and implementation capabilities of the UN?
- What are the key factors that explain the gap between the UN's ambitious mandates (e.g., SDGs) and its operational outcomes on the ground?
- What are the plausible futures for the UN's role, considering persistent calls for reform and growing skepticism towards multilateralism?

Methodology

Research Design

This article employs a qualitative research design, utilizing a comparative case study analysis supplemented by an in-depth documentary analysis. This approach is selected for its strength in investigating complex real-world phenomena within their contextual settings, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the "how" and "why" behind the UN's evolving role. The qualitative nature of the inquiry is essential to interpret the meanings, processes, and constraints that define the organization's adaptation to 21st-century challenges, moving beyond quantitative metrics to grasp the substantive significance of institutional change.

Data Collection

The analysis will be grounded in a comprehensive review of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data will be drawn from official United Nations documentation, including Security Council resolutions and meeting records, General Assembly debates, reports of the Secretary-General, and annual performance reports of key agencies such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Department of Peace Operations. Foundational treaty texts, like the UN Charter and the Paris Agreement, will also constitute critical primary material. Secondary sources will include seminal academic books, peer-reviewed articles from leading international relations and global governance journals, and analytical reports from reputable think tanks like the International Crisis Group and the Brookings Institution, which provide expert interpretation and context.

Case Studies

To provide empirical depth and facilitate a balanced assessment, the article will focus on two illustrative case studies selected for their contrasting characteristics. The first case examines the UN's response to the Syrian Civil War, a protracted conflict that starkly highlights the organization's structural constraints, particularly the crippling effect of the Security Council veto on coercive action and the limitations of humanitarian diplomacy in the face of great power rivalry. The second case analyzes the negotiation and initial implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs). This case serves to illustrate the UN's adaptive capacity in agenda-setting, showcasing its role as a platform for complex multi-stakeholder engagement and normative innovation, while also allowing for an examination of the implementation challenges inherent in such voluntary frameworks.

Limitations

This methodological approach is subject to several limitations. Firstly, reliance on official UN documents may introduce a bias towards the organization's institutional perspective, potentially overlooking critical viewpoints or internal failures. To mitigate this, secondary critiques and reports from independent monitoring bodies will be incorporated. Secondly, the complexity of global governance means that attributing outcomes solely to the UN is inherently difficult; external factors such as national politics, global economic trends, and the actions of other international actors invariably influence results. The case study method, while providing depth, limits the breadth of generalization, and the findings are therefore indicative of trends rather than universally applicable. These limitations are acknowledged and will be carefully considered in the analysis and discussion of findings.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical approach of this article is guided by a synthesized theoretical framework, drawing upon three distinct but complementary lenses to comprehensively interrogate the changing role of the United Nations. First, the principles of Liberal Institutionalism provide the foundational logic for understanding the UN's enduring purpose in an anarchic international

system. This perspective posits that international institutions like the UN are created by states to reduce transaction costs, mitigate the risks of cheating, and foster cooperation around shared interests (Keohane, 2020). Through this lens, the UN is analyzed as a crucial platform for facilitating negotiation, establishing binding and non-binding norms, and providing informational transparency, thereby making state interactions more predictable and efficient. The very existence of the General Assembly, the International Court of Justice, and specialized agencies like the International Maritime Organization exemplifies this institutionalist function. However, while liberal institutionalism effectively explains why states initially create and maintain such bodies, it is less adept at accounting for the profound shifts in the UN's agenda away from purely state-centric concerns or the severe institutional paralysis that occurs when great power interests diverge sharply. It thus offers a necessary, but insufficient, explanation for the UN's contemporary evolution, framing it as a rational response to interdependence but underplaying the transformative power of new ideas and actors.

To account for the substantive reorientation of the UN's mission, this analysis integrates the paradigm of Human Security. Emerging prominently in the post-Cold War era, this concept represents a fundamental normative shift from a narrow focus on state security the protection of territorial integrity and political sovereignty to the security of individuals, encompassing freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the freedom to live in dignity (Tadjbakhsh, 2021). The human security framework provides a critical lens for analyzing how and why the UN's agenda has expanded to prioritize issues such as public health (e.g., UNAIDS), climate-induced displacement, food security, and the protection of civilians in armed conflict. It helps explain the adoption of people-centric doctrines like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the integrated, holistic nature of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which explicitly link peace, justice, and strong institutions with poverty eradication and good health. This theoretical lens is essential for capturing the ideational transformation within the UN, revealing it as an entity that not only serves state interests but also actively promotes a normative redefinition of what constitutes a threat to global peace and well-being, thereby pushing the boundaries of its original Charter.

Finally, to examine the *process* through which these expanded goals are pursued, the framework incorporates Network Theory and the related concept of Multi-stakeholder Governance. This theoretical perspective moves beyond the state-as-sole-actor model to analyze the rise of complex, decentralized networks comprising states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private corporations, and academic experts that collectively shape and implement global policy (Kahler, 2022). This lens is indispensable for understanding the operational reality of 21st-century UN initiatives. It allows for a systematic examination of how the organization now functions as a node within vast networks for instance, in the coordination of humanitarian responses by UNOCHA or the partnership-based structure of the Paris Agreement on climate change. Network Theory helps to operationalize the concept of human security by showing how its implementation relies on non-state actors for expertise, on-the-ground presence, and innovative financing. By synthesizing these three frameworks Liberal Institutionalism's focus on cooperative structures, Human Security's normative compass, and Network Theory's model of collaborative action this article constructs a robust analytical toolset to dissect the complex interplay between the UN's institutional form, its evolving function, and the dynamic processes that now define its role in global governance.

Findings

The empirical analysis reveals that the United Nations has demonstrated a significant capacity for adaptation by successfully establishing and promoting comprehensive normative agendas that reframe global priorities. This agenda-setting power is most evident in the near-universal adoption of frameworks like the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement, which have fundamentally reshaped the discourse and targets of international cooperation. The conceptual evolution of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) from a contested idea into a recognized, if imperfectly applied, international norm underscores this function (Welsh & Banda, 2023). Similarly, the systematic integration of the Protection of Civilians (POC) as a central, mandated component of peacekeeping missions, with detailed guidelines issued by the Department of Peace Operations, illustrates how the UN Secretariat operationalizes normative shifts (DPO, 2023). The evidence suggests that the organization retains a unique legitimacy to articulate global objectives, thereby creating focal points for state and non-state action, even in the absence of coercive enforcement mechanisms.

Beyond normative leadership, the UN has pursued tangible operational innovations to address contemporary challenges. The evolution in peacekeeping from traditional ceasefire monitoring to complex missions with robust mandates under Chapter VII of the Charter represents a critical adaptation. These mandates, which authorize the use of force to protect civilians, have been implemented through proactive military tactics and community-focused early warning systems in missions like those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan (Karlsrud, 2023). Institutionally, the consolidation of four distinct gender entities into UN Women in 2010 marked a strategic innovation to enhance coherence and impact on gender equality. These operational shifts indicate a pragmatic, though often slow, response to the recognition that the organization's field presence and internal architecture must evolve to remain relevant and effective in fulfilling its expanding mandates.

Notwithstanding these adaptations, the findings confirm that profound institutional rigidities continue to severely constrain the UN's effectiveness. The most paralyzing rigidity remains the veto power of the five permanent members (P5) of the Security Council. The systematic use of the veto, particularly in contexts like the Syrian civil war, has repeatedly blocked decisive action on major humanitarian crises, demonstrating that the foundational power structure of 1945 remains a primary obstacle to collective security (Security Council Report, 2024). A parallel constraint lies in the organization's financial architecture. The UN's funding model remains heavily reliant on voluntary, earmarked contributions, which creates volatility, fosters competition among agencies, and ties resources to donor priorities rather than strategic, system-wide objectives (UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, 2023). This donor-driven model undermines budgetary predictability and the impartiality of aid, revealing a significant disconnect between ambitious mandates and the resources available for their implementation.

Empirically, a defining feature of 21st-century UN governance is the unequivocal rise of "multi-stakeholderism." This is evidenced by the formal integration of non-state actors including corporations, philanthropic foundations, and civil society organizations into core policy processes. The High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) serves as a primary example, where these actors engage in official dialogues and partnership initiatives (Khan & Pallas, 2024). Research into multi-stakeholder partnerships for the SDGs indicates they aim to leverage diverse resources and expertise for transformative change, though their effectiveness is often contingent on strong governmental backing and sustainable financing (Beisheim et al., 2023). This trend reflects a pragmatic institutional response to the limits of

state-centric governance, effectively ceding some operational space to non-state actors in an attempt to close the implementation gap, even as it raises new challenges regarding accountability and the equitable representation of interests.

Discussion

The empirical findings present a paradox central to understanding the contemporary United Nations: an organization that exhibits remarkable normative ambition yet remains shackled by profound operational constraints. This tension is not incidental but structural, arising from the fundamental disconnect between the demands of 21st-century global challenges and the Westphalian foundations of the UN's institutional design. The robust agenda-setting captured in the SDGs and R2P norms signifies an attempt to address transnational, human-centric threats, yet the implementation of these agendas is invariably filtered through a system predicated on state consent and great power privilege. This analysis reveals that the UN's evolution is not a linear path toward greater effectiveness but a contested arena where adaptation and inertia coexist in a state of persistent tension. The organization's strength lies in its unique ability to legitimize global priorities, but its fatal weakness is the reliance on a political will that is often absent or selectively applied, particularly when core national interests are perceived to be at stake. This explains the glaring gap between the unanimous adoption of the Responsibility to Protect and the repeated inability to enact it in situations involving a P5 member or ally.

The synthesized theoretical framework provides a powerful lens for deconstructing these contradictions. Liberal Institutionalism offers the most compelling explanation for the UN's success in agenda-setting. The organization functions precisely as the theory predicts: as a focal point for reducing transaction costs and fostering cooperation on issues of common interest, such as climate change and public health (Keohane, 2020). The Paris Agreement and the SDGs are quintessential institutionalist achievements voluntary frameworks that create mutual gains. Conversely, Realism provides the sobering answer to why the Security Council remains paralyzed. The veto power is the ultimate manifestation of national interest overriding collective action, a stark reminder that on issues of high politics and security, power trumps institutional logic (Mearsheimer, 2018). Meanwhile, the Human Security paradigm explains the *content* of the new agendas, elucidating the normative shift from state-centric to people-centric concerns (Tadjbakhsh, 2021). Finally, Network Theory illuminates the operational response to this shift, showing how the turn to multi-stakeholderism is a pragmatic workaround for state capacity limitations, leveraging non-state actors to implement human security goals where the intergovernmental system is gridlocked (Kahler, 2022).

This interplay of forces raises a critical question: are the observed adaptations sufficient or merely superficial? The evidence suggests that while innovations like robust peacekeeping and multi-stakeholder partnerships are genuine and necessary responses, they are ultimately insufficient because they fail to address the core power imbalances embedded in the UN's constitutional structure. The adaptations occur at the operational and normative margins, but the central locus of power the Security Council veto remains untouched. This creates a scenario where the UN is often relegated to managing the symptoms of crises (e.g., providing humanitarian aid in Syria) rather than addressing their root causes (e.g., stopping the conflict through political means). The changes, therefore, can be interpreted as the system's way of maintaining its relevance by expanding its functional scope into areas where great power consensus is less critical, thereby avoiding a direct confrontation with its own foundational paralysis.

The implications of this analysis point towards an increasingly fragmented and competitive global order. The UN's institutional rigidities, particularly within the Security Council, have created vacuums that are being filled by alternative governance platforms. Regional organizations like the African Union and the European Union have developed their own security architectures, while informal multilateral groupings like the G20 and BRICS+ gain prominence as forums for economic and political coordination. This fragmentation does not necessarily signal the UN's demise but redefines its role. It is becoming less the exclusive director of global governance and more one node albeit a critically important one within a complex, polycentric network. Its future influence will depend less on its coercive power, which is minimal, and more on its ability to leverage its unparalleled convening power, legitimacy, and normative authority to set the agenda, establish standards, and coordinate action within this crowded and contested landscape.

Conclusion

This analysis leads to the inescapable conclusion that the United Nations in the 21st century is an organization defined by a fundamental paradox. It is simultaneously an indispensable and a deeply inadequate actor in global governance. On one hand, the UN has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation, successfully reframing global priorities through normative agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals and the Responsibility to Protect, which reflect a sophisticated understanding of contemporary transnational threats. Its operational innovations, from robust peacekeeping mandates to the embrace of multi-stakeholder partnerships, reveal an institution pragmatically striving to remain relevant by leveraging its unique convening power and legitimacy. Yet, on the other hand, these adaptations are consistently undermined by the organization's foundational rigidities. The anachronistic structure of the Security Council, with the veto power perpetuating a 1945 balance of power, remains a paralyzing force, systematically preventing coherent action on the most severe peace and security crises. This core contradiction between a progressive, adaptive superstructure and a stagnant, power-political foundation lies at the heart of the UN's current challenges, creating a persistent gap between its aspirational mandates and its often-muted tangible impact.

Ultimately, the future trajectory of the United Nations will not be determined by its ability to craft new norms a task at which it excels but by whether the international community can forge a political consensus to address this constitutional crisis. The findings of this article suggest that incremental, functional adaptation at the margins, while valuable, is insufficient to meet the scale of 21st-century challenges. The growing fragmentation of global governance, with the rise of regional bodies, minilateral groupings, and private sector initiatives, presents both a threat and an opportunity. It threatens to further marginalize the UN if it remains paralyzed, but it also offers a potential model for a more networked, flexible, and polycentric system in which the UN plays a different role. Rather than aspiring to be a world government, a reformed UN's unique value may lie as the central node in this complex network: the primary source of legitimizing global norms, the guardian of international law, and the impartial coordinator of collective action on universal challenges. Navigating this transition from a centralized, state-centric directorate to a nimble, networked facilitator represents the greatest test of the UN's resilience and the collective will of its member states in the decades to come.

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