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University, Ado-Ekiti (ABUAD), Nigeria

E-mail: [jcirdabuad@gmail.com](mailto:jcirdabuad@gmail.com)

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## **The United Nations at 80 Years of Existence: The Achievements and Challenges in Global Peace and Security in the 21st Century**

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Lecture Delivered by Ambassador Usman Sarki, Former Deputy Permanent  
Representative of Nigeria to the United Nations, New York.

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## Introduction and Overview:

Let me in keeping with time honoured tradition, begin by thanking the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti (ABUAD), for inviting me to deliver today's lecture on the topic "*The United Nations at 80 Years of Existence: The Achievements and Challenges in Global Peace and Security in the 21st Century*". I would like also, to congratulate ABUAD for the remarkable progress that it has made in the area of academics since its founding in 2009. True to its motto: "*Labour for Service and Integrity*", the university has demonstrated a well-founded sense of community affiliation and service to the nation and to humanity as a whole. A manifestation of this sense of mission and service, is the convening of today's meeting, to reflect on the state of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and discuss the successes and failures of the United Nations at eighty. The lecture presumes that the members of the audience know as much or even more than the lecturer about the history, structures, working methods and operations of the United Nations. Therefore, I shall spare you all the unnecessary details and go straight into our topic of today.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is really no different from the 20<sup>th</sup>, the 19<sup>th</sup>, the 18<sup>th</sup> or any others. It is still beset and characterised by wars, conflicts, natural and man-made disasters, miseries of grand proportions for some, unequal wealth and privileges for others, and of course, unmet expectations and dashed hopes for most of mankind. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is particularly beset with wars, conflicts and violence of extreme and unprecedented dimensions. A report issued by the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, noted that there are 110 ongoing armed conflicts around the world varying in their intensity, duration and scope. According to the report, some of these conflicts made it to the headlines and some did not, and that some have lasted more than 50 years while others are of more recent vintage.

The Academy grouped the occurrences of the conflicts as follows: 45 in the Middle East, 35 in Africa, 21 in Asia, 7 in Europe and 6 in Latin America. Although not all these conflicts are inter-state conflicts, they nevertheless contribute to the instability of countries and regions in which they are taking place, and ultimately pose grave threats to international peace and security. Whatever poses a threat to international peace and security should merit the attention of the United Nations, a global body established to foster peace and harmony, and to create the conditions that are necessary for the advancement of global security, sustainable development and promotion and protection of human rights and dignity.

According to another report by the World Population Review, several armed conflicts with varying degrees of intensity and casualty rates are taking place in different parts of the world, including West Africa and the Sahel region. Nigeria

happened to be at the top of the table of countries with the highest casualty rates in the 10,000 bracket, thus placing us at the top of that table of misfortune and misery.

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), in its “2024 Year in Review” report, provided a disaggregated data on conflicts going on around the world. It also placed Nigeria at number 5 in the global list of countries undergoing extreme violence as of 2024. ACLED also recorded 50 countries that ranked in the index categories of extreme, high, or turbulent in their levels of conflict and violence. Nigeria happened to be in the top 5-bracket. With 50 countries experiencing different forms of conflict out of 193, one-third of the membership of the United Nations is involved in this tragedy.

According to the 18<sup>th</sup> edition of the Global Peace Index (GPI) of 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2024, the world is experiencing the highest number of conflicts since WW II, and that there are currently 56 conflicts going on that have become international, with 92 countries involved in conflicts outside their borders. Inevitably, these conflicts will mean countless numbers of people killed, maimed and forcefully displaced, and the destruction of homes, villages, cities and entire communities. One dire consequence of these numerous conflicts is the prevalence of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) across countries and regions of the world.

According to the International Organisation for Migration’s (IOM) “World Migration Report” of 2022, an estimated 62.5 million people were displaced by conflict and violence in 65 countries and territories as of 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2022. The report further asserted that the total number of persons internally displaced by conflict and violence has more than doubled since 2012. Most of the unfortunate victims of these conflicts are from Africa and the Middle East region. Out of the top 20 countries on the global chart of displaced persons at the end of 2022, 10 are in Africa and Nigeria was listed as number 9 on the chart.

Now, all these statistics should warrant us asking the questions – where is the United Nations? What is the United Nations doing to stop all these vexatious situations? Why is it not living up to its Charter responsibilities and to mankind’s expectations? Is the United Nations relevant at all under these circumstances of continuing and spreading violence and miseries? Can we reasonably speak of achievements of the United Nations with these narratives of failed peace and sustained instability everywhere?

Well, if mankind has existed on the face of this earth for over 200,000 years as scientists inform us, and if human societies organised around states have existed since ancient times, it would be unrealistic to expect the United Nations which is just 80 years old this year, to solve the dilemma of conflicts among nations and peoples or bring into fruition a situation of universal peace and felicity that has remained elusive since the dawn of civilization. If a note of pessimistic detachment is detected in this assertion, it is pessimism borne out of the observable realities

before our very eyes as we live from one day to another, and from one epoch to the next. Discussing peace and security in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in essence, is the continuation of the discussions around these two factors in past centuries to which no permanent solutions or remedies have been found. Perhaps it is in the nature of mankind that it does not aspire to achieve universal peace because that does not conform with its nature and temperament.

### **Global Inequalities and Poverty as Threats to Global Peace and Security**

Rising levels of inequalities around the world are symptomatic of the unequal global economic system, that stresses profits more than social responsibility. The unbridled exploitation of resources especially in Africa has left deep cleavages in many countries that could become the seeds of conflicts and severe stresses in future, if they are not addressed constructively with great perception and sensitivity. Inequalities such as in wealth, gender, age group and social and economic standings, as well as among regions or states in a country, are usually the precursors of conflicts, instability and social dislocation. The deployment of all tools to address them and adoption of relevant implementation strategies globally and nationally to mitigate their impacts, must be seen as existential issues that would have to be taken seriously.

International trade is once more threatened by reciprocal imposition of tariffs and restriction of privileges accorded by countries to one other, in preferential trade arrangements. The United States delivered the opening salvo in these trade wars against China mainly, but also extended to other trading partners. Although the impacts of these developments are yet to be felt globally, they nevertheless present threatening prospects towards a global recession and constriction of the open and free trade opportunities that would most likely impact on developing countries like Nigeria, that depend largely on imported finished products and export of unprocessed natural resources.

Under the circumstances, diversifying their economies would become a hugely costly endeavour, especially if capital flows by way of investments become restricted and difficult to access. Trade wars in their nature are blunt weapons that cause more harm to all sides involved and have the potential of veering off in all directions, inflicting pain on innocent bystanders as well. The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) adopted under the auspices of the African Union (AU) at the Niamey Summit, will mature only in the fullness of time, and will become evident in the way the African Union structures trade initiatives across the continent.

The continued existence of the separate trading and economic blocs in the continent notably ECOWAS and SADC and other similar groupings, will have to be reconciled with the new order, since the aim of the AfCFTA is to achieve

seamless trading relations in the entire continent. Although details are still being thrashed out, time would be required to finalize structural adjustments as well as the formulation of appropriate policies that would reconcile the disparate national and regional interests in the continent, such as convertibility of different currencies, fixing prices of goods and elimination of customs duties and excise etc.

Financing for development is a critical concept and aspiration that is yet to be concretely expressed in terms of implementation and faithful reflection in the framework of global trade and investment. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) that was the outcome of the Third United Nations Conference on Financing for Development (FfD) adopted in July 2015, has still to be implemented fully in all its relevant dimensions. Issues like global taxation measures, financing of health care, accelerated industrialisation, sustainable development, reasonable actions in the extractive industries, scaling up of investments and funding of projects in developing countries, infrastructure financing, stemming illicit capital flows especially out of Africa, and a host of other issues have been left in abeyance and are not being seriously considered.

The Third Conference on Financing for Development is time bound and if its recommendations are not faithfully implemented in good time, it would be meaningless to enter into the fourth phase and to commit to new sets of agreements that would in turn not be honoured.

### **Climate Change and Globalization:**

Climate change has been much talked about as an existential issue that cuts across regions and poses threats to the entire humanity. Global initiatives aimed at understanding its ramifications, and addressing its immediate and long-term impacts, have been held at different propitious occasions, resulting in the adoption of various measures since the 2000 conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The emergence of various mechanisms including the Kyoto Protocols and related initiatives under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are the results of the global action towards addressing climate change. The various Conferences of Parties (COP) have defined and elaborated measures to be taken towards mitigation, adaptation and establishment of national benchmarks towards addressing climate related challenges.

National implementation strategies are also being elaborated with critical roles assigned to financing and technological adaptation methods. Renewable energy use and phasing out of technologies that are heavily reliant on the use of fossil fuels for instance, are among the contemplated actions towards the reduction of emissions of harmful substances into the atmosphere, that have led to the depletion of the ozone layer and subsequent acceleration in global warming. Loss and damages methodologies and frameworks are still being discussed with a view

to establishing concrete measures towards financial disbursements to address these features. While all these policy and normative frameworks are being diligently discussed, the inexorable march of changes in our climate and environment are taking place, with untold and sometimes unforeseen consequences to the entire humankind and the planet earth.

### **The Wars in Ukraine and Palestine and International Peace and Security**

According to the Roman lawyer and philosopher, Marcus Tullius Cicero *“Laws are silent amidst the clash of arms”*. The larger strategic objectives of the West in igniting the Russia-Ukraine war are discernible from the outcomes of the meetings of the G-7 countries and the NATO Alliance that were held one after the other in Germany and Spain in 2023. The two important strategic objectives of the West are to reinvigorate an ailing and seemingly moribund military alliance by defining its foes for their larger populations to accept, and secondly, to expand the alliance beyond its thirty-strong members by admitting other states into its fold thus expanding its geographical space.

Within these larger objectives also, NATO has been able to achieve other long-standing aims. The fact that there has been a dramatic increase in the defence budgets of European countries is a major accomplishment for the alliance especially from the viewpoint of the United States of America. This has now revitalised the defence industries across Europe, America and Canada to the point of unprecedented expansion of manufacture of weapons systems and ammunition and other offensive platforms for use of their militaries.

The decision to expand NATO's standing military force from 30,000 personnel to 400,000 is also a long planned offensive objective whose realisation has now been triggered off by the conflict in the Ukraine. By admitting Finland and Sweden and bringing its membership to thirty-two as of today, means additional scope for a regional war and even a global military confrontation. The further integration of the little Baltic States and Poland into the offensive structures of NATO is another longstanding objective of the Alliance in terms of taking it closer to the Russian borders.

Now that Finland and Sweden have been virtually brought into its folds, NATO can complete its objectives of establishing its presence from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, thereby bringing the whole of European Russia within striking range of its tactical or theatre nuclear weapons and other advanced conventional weapons. The reactivation or creation of other military alliances between the United States, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, as well as the alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) testify to the global aims of the Western strategic thinkers who now have China and Russia in particular in their sights as their dominant global foes.



The \$600 billion infrastructure fund and \$5 billion food security budget that the G7 announced in one of its meetings, are actually far less than the total amounts that the West would collectively spend on weapons production and procurement. Therefore, the principal aim of restarting a new global arms race is a practical aspect of the NATO Alliance strategy. Beyond that, there is the significant dimension of international law whose invocation and selective application by the Western countries have for long undermined its practical utility and eroded respect towards its integral observation both in spirit and in substance.

Reciprocal confidence, as noted the English historian, Edward Gibbon, often sustains the conduct of nations both in peace and war. Where the principle of reciprocity is absent or is manifestly thrust to the background to the point of becoming irrelevant, the chances of conflict are brought ever more forward, and the likelihood of war ever more present. Under such circumstances, invoking international law to buttress a point of view; or defend an action becomes a matter of semantics, especially where the principles and pillars on which the law stands are loosened by the practices and interests of big power politics. International law as a construct upon which the conducts and behaviours of states are predicated, and which determines the notion of civilised treatment of each other in their intercourses, is understood to be shaped and guided by certain precepts that are immutable under all circumstances.

This immutability presupposes that they will be respected and in fact; given a sacrosanct status, to enable the establishment of reciprocal treatment that Gibbon so aptly defined. The basis of international law especially those aspects of it that are derived from customs and traditions emanating from the behaviours and interests of states, and from which there can be no derogation, consist of the principles of mutual respect and good neighbourliness between and among states. Where these have been eroded by factors that have been shaped by the internal politics of the states and their external postures, achieving concord and seeing things from the same positions would become impossible or difficult to achieve. In such a situation, invoking international law will be redundant and superfluous, as it has already been violated and vitiated by the discretionary disdain showed to it by the states engaged in conflict, since they have not demonstrated the mutual reciprocity which is the basis of peaceful resolution of their differences.

Conflicts therefore; emanate when interests are divorced from mutual respect, a cooperative disposition toward achieving concord, and the spirit of good neighbourliness where this precept should apply. A sense of general calm seemed to have settled in Europe after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. This *“transient and fallacious calm”*, as Edward Gibbon wrote in respect of another circumstance, has now been shattered by the structural and policy dogmatism that have characterised European security and

political architecture that continued to evolve dramatically and inexorably since the late 1980s.

Europe is the most militarised continent or region in the world and has been the most prone to wars and conflicts of different scales and intensities than anywhere else in the world, going back to the Roman times. Europe is also the continent where two world wars were fought and where the likelihood of a third and final war in human experience could take place. These trends are typified by two objectives namely the expansion of the military establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) eastwards right up to the very borders of Russia, and the unconditional transformation of the whole of Europe into a sort of “democratic continent” ruled by Western values whatever these might mean.

In both tendencies, the West constituted by the dominant European powers and the United States, until recently with the advent of President Donald Trump, have placed themselves in an inexorable collision course with Russia, which they have defined as an object of aversion and contempt and a factor of indeterminate obstruction to their aims and objectives in Europe and the larger global scene. This fact of yielding to the inevitable dictates of power and incompatibility of strengths should have guided the outlook of the powers that be in Kyiv and Brussels, before embarking on a heady adventure of military confrontation no matter how limited the scope of the conflict is envisaged to be. Today, whether the world likes it or not, there is only one camp in the world that is armed to the teeth, which is NATO. The admission of two more countries, Finland and Sweden into its ranks, now brings its total membership to thirty-two states that are sworn to defend their members against all enemies regardless of the disposition or armed strength of such a perceived enemy.

This defined foe could be any African or Middle Eastern country minus Israel. It could mean China in the long run or North Korea if enough justification can be found to mark it out as one. NATO's involvement in regime changes such as in Libya and catastrophic wars have marked it not as a defensive alliance *per se*, but the mailed fist of a group of imperialist powers that still have aims and objectives that are incompatible with the provisions of international law as they are known and accepted by the rest of the world. In NATO's vocabulary, there is no particular respect for the principles that are enshrined in such instruments as the Hague and Geneva Conventions, the Charter of the United Nations, the various covenants on Civil, Political, Cultural, Social and Economic Rights, or the human rights of other peoples and races around the world. A mere glance at what is going on today in Gaza will leave no one in doubt as to the consideration given by the West to issues of human rights of other races.

Its vociferous and almost hysterical condemnations of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and dogmatic assertion of the rights of the Ukrainian people, contrasts



sharply with its mooted responses to the atrocities being committed by Israel against the entire Palestinian people and those in Gaza in particular. The conscious and deliberate abandonment of the principles of good neighbourliness and mutual respect between and among nations as forming the pillars on which international law is predicated, therefore gave rise to situations of conflict and egregious violations of human rights that we are witnessing today all around us.

### **The Chairman,**

Proceeding from the overview of some of the practical and normative aspects of global peace and security and the impediments to their attainment, I would now like to discuss the relevance or the utility of the United Nations in the maintenance of international peace and security. In doing so, certain premises will have to be highlighted to demonstrate the complexity of the tasks before the organisation. These premises actually are contradictions, dichotomies, anomalies and anachronisms that underpin global politics and the activities of states. If these contradictions can be harmonised or if the dichotomies can be ameliorated, then we may have a fit-for-purpose United Nations that will be capable of enforcing its will upon states in maintaining global peace and security.

The contradictions and anomalies that I alluded to, are between the notions of absolute state sovereignty and restricted state sovereignty, between the concentration of power and its dispersal, between nationalism and globalism, between pacifism and militarism, between multilateralism and unilateralism, between the doctrine of force and the spirit of conciliation, between rich nations and poor ones, between strong nations and weak nations, between utilitarianism and enlightened self-interest, between the national interest and universal interests, between competition and cooperation, etc.

If we could achieve harmony between each of these different contradictions and anomalies, I believe we would succeed in having a United Nations that can establish a fairly equitable, strong and successful global order that would ensure the prevalence of peace and the diminution of the state of conflict and war. So long as these contradictions and anomalies remain, then we will have a weak and dysfunctional United Nations that is incapable of enforcing anything and unable to bring about a state of universal peace and security.

Writing about a topical issue affecting international peace and security namely terrorism, Victor D. Comras, highlighted the constraints and limitations of the United Nations as follows:

Looking back over the history of the United Nations' role in combatting terrorism, and before making any judgements thereon, one should reflect on the limitations and expectations that were placed on the organization by its members. Despite its cloak of

idealism and quest for peace and justice for all in a secure world, the United Nations has been, and will likely always be, a heavily politicized international forum – a forum constantly reflecting, absorbing, and reacting to the scattered and often conflicting perceived national interests of its 195 member countries. It is clear that the United Nations’ stated objectives are, and will likely always remain, secondary to this political reality”. (“Flawed Diplomacy: The United Nations & the War on Terrorism”, by Victor D. Comras, Potomac Books, Inc., 2010).

Before judging the United Nations and arbitrarily declaring its success or failure, it has to be borne in mind that the UN is the sum total of its parts, namely of its membership. Therefore, attribution of any perceived success or failure of the organisation should be made judiciously and candidly by looking at its composition and working methods. As a consensus-based organisation, the United Nations has no will or determination of its own outside the will and determination of its member-states especially those that control its budget and determine who ultimately becomes the Secretary-General and direct the course of its actions.

Let me give you one example of how influence and power are exercised in the United Nations, and this relates to its budget. The UN’s budget for 2024 was \$3.59 billion and for 2025 it was \$3.72 billion respectively. The UN’s peacekeeping budget is however much larger at \$5.6 billion in 2024-2025 period to fund fourteen operations around the world. In 2022-2023, the peacekeeping budget was \$6.45 billion. The biggest chunk of the peacekeeping budgets normally went to Africa to support the UN’s presence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) at \$994.54 and Somalia at \$574.41 while it pays for operations in Mali, Liberia, South Sudan, Western Sahara, Abyei in Sudan and other hotspots in the continent.

Most of the expenditures go to issues like peacekeeping and other peace support activities, humanitarian relief, human rights support, sustainable development, international justice and law, etc. The single largest financial contributor to the United Nations has been the United States of America since the founding of the organisation in 1945. It contributed \$18.1 billion to the UN in 2022, representing about 20% of the UN’s total budget and \$13 billion in 2023. The US is followed by China, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, Sweden, The Netherlands, the European Union (EU) with a total contribution of \$3.7 billion in 2022,

It is clear from this evidence that the real powers in the United Nations are those countries that contribute the most to its financing and to essential services like peacekeeping activities. These are the countries that control the UN and dictate its operations. The common denominator of the success or failure of the United Nations should therefore; be sought in the disposition of its member-states

particularly those states that enjoy the privilege of controlling its budget and the veto power in the Security Council.

The organisation works ultimately according to their dictates and there is nothing much any one can do to change that. Where the UN is seen to have failed, it is the member-states that have failed, and where it has recorded any success, it is due to their consent and dispositions to play a positive and constructive role under the given circumstance. As a consensus-based organisation, the United Nations has no will or determination of its own outside the will and determination of its member-states especially those that control its budget and determine who ultimately becomes the Secretary-General and direct the course of its actions.

This is the reality of power and the essential attributes of global governance which have not changed since the emergence of multilateralism as a form of ordering or reordering of the world. Before the United Nations came into being, there was that unlamented organisation the League of Nations, whose woeful or dismal failure foreshadowed the breakdown of the global order in the second decade of the twentieth century, that led to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The League's inability to enforce its will and prevent aggression by Japan against China, by Italy against Abyssinia and the civil war in Spain, created the lacuna that was exploited by authoritarian regimes in Spain, Japan, Italy and Germany, whose actions subsequently threw the world into chaos and disorder of unprecedented scale. Today likewise, what we are witnessing in the United Nations and other bodies like the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, are the manifest failures of the respective members of these bodies to prevent conflicts or arrest them as they arose and establish a relatively general state of tranquillity and felicity everywhere.

ECOWAS could not prevent the breaking away of the trio of Burkina-Faso, Mali and Niger from its fold, to form the Association of Sahelian States (AES). The African Union in its turn, has not been able to provide effective remedies to the myriads of conflicts in the continent, especially those that are raging in the Sudan, Somalia, Eastern DRC, and others. The culpability of member-states or their inability to exercise any modicum of authority to bring about restraint and ensure that conflicts do not flare up or that when they breakout they are speedily brought to an end, means that as multilateral organisations, the United Nations, the African Union and ECOWAS, are limited and circumscribed by the actions or inactions as the case may be, of their respective member-states.

This then, is the challenge faced by all multilateral organisations whose wont is to operate on the basis of the will of their members and to live with the predilection of the countries to disagree at convenient moments on what should constitute peace. Apropos of this observation, I suppose you may not take my word for it, but perhaps the passage that I quoted above in Mr. Comras' book, may better

illustrate my sentiments regarding the culpability of member-states in the dysfunction of the United Nations. This is a candid admission by one of the foremost experts in the work of the United Nations of the supremacy of national positions and outlooks over the collective aspirations of the global community towards the advancement of the purposes and objectives of the United Nations.

Herein also, can be seen the weakness and shortcoming of the organisation in discharging its role and carrying out its mandates as the world's gatekeeper for peace and security. This admission of Mr. Comras also demonstrates the contradiction between nationalism and multilateralism and how the former preponderates over the latter in the work of the United Nations, thus hamstringing it and rendering its work ultimately difficult and frustrating.

### **The Chairman**

A decade ago, it was possible to achieve some measure of consensus on a range of issues of global significance, as evidenced by the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by member-states of the United Nations, in September 2015. Today however, with the ascendancy of nationalistic tendencies in some countries, and the evident rolling back of multilateral diplomacy, achieving consensus on many issues has become a protracted process. Various shades of opinions often competing and conflicting with one another, are being canvassed on matters of global governance that are also central to the work of the United Nations. Challenging and pressing issues of concern abound in the international system, that should warrant concerted action and common approaches from the international community. The maintenance of international peace and security should be topmost in the list of priorities.

The United Nations is an organisation that nobody seems to like, but everybody needs. According to Brian Urquhart, a former Under-Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs, *"The UN is like an insurance policy: you hate paying for it, but it's useful if something goes wrong"*, (*AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THE UN*", by Linda Fasulo, Yale University Press, 2015). According to Madeleine Albright, a former United States Secretary of State, *"So in diplomacy, an instrument like the UN will be useful in some situations, useless in others, and extremely valuable in getting the whole job done"* (Linda Fasulo). The United Nations is everything to everybody. There is no single conception of what it means but everybody at least is familiar with what the organisation stands for. It is also probably because of this reason that the UN has failed to satisfy everybody in its achievements since its creation in 1945. Many issues important in themselves individually or when aggregated together, receive attention daily in over 10,000 sessions of the various organs and bodies of the United Nations taking place in

many locations including Nairobi, Vienna, Geneva, London, Tokyo, and of course, New York, where the UN is headquartered.

Issues like migration, climate change, disarmament, maintenance of global peace and security, poverty eradication, adoption of a rules-based international trading system, terrorism, protection of our habitat and environment, racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia etc., are matters that constantly tax the resolve of member-states of the United Nations over which it has been difficult to reach consensus. There are many other issues also that will require dexterous handling and flexible approach. However, more often than not, failure to arrive at acceptable formulae to treat the issues and agree on outcomes have proved deleterious to the global multilateral process. Climate change, sustainable development, disarmament, regional and international peace and security, financing for development, the fight against terrorism, the spread of epidemic diseases, migration etc., are some of the issues that are discussed at different meetings of the UN's bodies, such as the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Human Rights Council, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and various others.

It is in these processes and proceedings that the idea of the collective responsibility of the UN's member-states is expressed. It is also in these sessions that the roles and resolves of individual member-states in the advancement of the tenets and fundamental principles of the Charter of the organisation, namely the maintenance of international peace and security, the promotion and protection of human rights and dignity, as well as sustainable development and human progress, are demonstrated. These and related issues are intricate aspects of global governance, which has become a by-word for the decisions taken at the various levels of international multilateral diplomacy, the epitome of which is the United Nations. The issue of global governance and its intricacies will always remain a subject of discussion and often of disagreement. However, there is no contesting the fact that the premier international organisation in the world today, the United Nations, remains of tremendous importance and utility to developing countries most especially, such as Nigeria.

The United Nations supplies the deficiencies inherent in the restricted view of the world from the individual national perspective only, that is usually driven by that nebulous and elastic concept called the “national interest”. The United Nations balances individual national interests and the larger global concerns, and in so doing, offers the possibilities for the harmonisation of interests and values leading to the emergence of common perspectives, at least in theory, even if not always in practice, on matters related to global governance. The possibilities that the United Nations offers to the global collective and its individual member-states, as well as the advantages that could be derived from its processes and proceedings, are highlighted during the annual General Assembly meetings of the organisation.



Many important issues related to these dimensions are highlighted and discussed at the High-Level Segment of the General Assembly, while other summit level meetings are also convened to provide the needed gravitas and solemnity to the underpinning issues being considered on the agenda of the Assembly.

The presence and active participation of Heads of State and Government at these high-level meetings demonstrates the role that they can play individually and severally, in advancing the principles of the organisation and the essential tenets of global governance. Nigeria like other countries, has usually been represented at the High-Level Segment and other important summit meetings by the President or Vice-President.

### **The United Nations in a Multiplex World**

The current trend in the world is one of dynamic engagements at different levels in the spaces of governance, political, social, cultural and economic development, as well as interstate activities in the pursuit of their respective goals and objectives within the confines of their identified national interest parameters. This is further accentuated by the facts of globalisation and the rapid increases in the speed and scope of communication aided by massive leaps and bounds in technological advances and innovations, that have transformed the relationships between and among states and governments and made the issues of peace and conflict critical and complex matters of international concern.

It was in recognition of this fact that Mr. Joseph Nye, Jr., wrote thus, *"The problem for all states in today's global information age, is that more things are happening outside the control of even the most powerful states"*. He also pointedly observed that *"One of the dilemmas of multilateral diplomacy is how to get everyone into the act and still get action"* (Linda Fasulo). This, to my mind, sums up the situation in the United Nations and provides a clue to the role of the organisation in the maintenance of peace and security in our world today. It has been suggested that we live in a multiplex world that is constantly changing in its features and dynamics especially around the concepts of states and their roles in the maintenance of the global order and ensuring of international peace and security. This multiplex world is a world without a hegemon, that is culturally and politically diverse yet connected by economic and other transnational forces, where the makers and breakers of order are not just great powers and states, but also non-state actors, corporations, social movements and extremists - interacting at global, regional, national and sub-national levels.

These are then the forces or factors that pose a challenge to the global order today, and shape attitudes towards conflicts and peace, depending on the outlooks of the critical actors in the global game of power and control of resources. A report by Chatham House of London titled *"Competing visions of international order:*

*Responses to US power in a fracturing world"*, published on 27th March, 2025, presented a graphic account of the ebbs and flows of the tides of global politics today, under the auspices of the big powers like the United States and its erstwhile allies. The report indicated that the liberal international order founded in 1945 in the aftermath of WWII is being fractured and rent into pieces by the inordinate ambitions of states and the reorientation of their national security and foreign policy postures, thereby exacerbating global tension and instability.

Today, the rise of China, Russia's resurgence as a power, the intransigence of North Korea, India's claim to global status, Iran's assertiveness, Saudi Arabia's growing confidence, Qatar's muscle-flexing, Brazil's changing perception of her status, and the discontents voiced by a growing number of countries in the so-called "Global South" about how the world is being run, pose serious dilemmas to the hitherto existing liberal international order in terms of where the centres of gravity of world power is located, and how to treat issues of global dimension that threaten international peace and security and the livelihoods of people's everywhere.

We should see the emergence of the BRICS-plus nations as an expression of this discontent and the search for a balanced, equitable and inclusive global order in which no particular state or power preponderates in importance, but all are seen to be cooperating with each other and sharing the burdens of the global collective. This could admittedly be a tall order and a far-fetched supposition or ambition in a world that is inherently unequal, unjust and arranged around the pursuit of the exclusive interests of states and powerful forces like transnational corporations and other global entities.

In my own personal assessment of the world, I have classed countries into the following categories namely - most developed, developed, developing and least developed, according to their levels of wealth, the development of their productive forces and military might, and the weight that they carry in global affairs. Most conflicts that are going on today are actually fought in the last two categories namely developing and least developed countries, with a few being experienced in the first and second categories such as the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

When the centrality of individual states in these conflicts is considered, and the role that military, security and economic alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the European Union (EU), the G-7, the G-20, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and others play, it becomes self-evident that solutions to global insecurity and conflicts should perforce be looked for, not in the United Nations, but in these groupings whose members are said to bankroll and support wars in far-flung countries like Mali, Libya, Sudan, Ukraine, the DRC,



Central African Republic, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Myanmar, Syria, Yemen,, Palestine, and so forth.

The preponderant power and wealth of these countries mean that without their concurrence and willingness to end conflicts, no amount of moral suasion or indignation voiced by the United Nations can bring about a situation of prolonged peace and stability in the world. It is in this context that the following observation by Mr. Richard Gowan, of the International Crisis Group (ICG) and New York University, should be appreciated: *"It you look at peace and security, I don't think the UN does anything amazingly well. But that isn't why we turn to the UN. We turn to the UN because we want to find politically and operationally sustainable ways of managing crisis when we don't have a better idea"*.

This lack of a "better idea" means that the UN has in essence become a dumping ground of all sorts of views regarding wars, conflicts and challenges, and the incubator of the process of addressing these threats by searching for consensus and collective approaches to their resolution. This also means that the UN has no motives of its own but only those of its respective member-states to work in accordance with. The UN in effect, is the echo chamber of grievances where states come to voice their concerns and dissatisfaction with particular situations or developments, and then demand action towards satisfying their concerns. It is safe to assert that the United Nations is better at managing conflicts than ending them, from the evidence of what is going on around the world today. The deployment of numerous peacekeeping missions has not effectively ended conflict in places like the DRC, Lebanon, Sudan, Mali, Somalia, etc.

### **What the United Nations Stands for?**

The United Nations stands on the tripod of international peace and security, international sustainable development and international human rights and dignity. To achieve the first leg, it addresses issues and threats to international, peace and security such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) such as chemical, bacteriological and biological weapons, global terrorism, wars and conflicts, and other related issues of concern. As regards the second pillar, the UN conducts activities of development nature through its agencies, funds and programmes that give aid and assistance and support as the case may be, to regional groups and national governments towards the achievement of self-reliance in areas like industrialisation, agriculture, education, healthcare, housing, trade and commerce, etc.

In pursuit of the third pillar, the UN established various mechanisms on human rights, and appoints task forces and officials to monitor and report situations of violations of rights whether in conflict situations or in peace time. Its principal mechanisms are the Human Rights Council which succeeded the

Commission on Human Rights, special procedures mandates, as well as international tribunals to try perpetrators of serious human rights abuses that border on ethnic cleansing, genocide etc.

### **What then, is the United Nations?**

To answer this pertinent question, I shall refer you to a report issued by the then Secretary-General of the United Nations the late Kofi Annan, on 14th July, 1997, titled "Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform" (A/51/970). The document may be 28 years old today, but it still remains relevant and indeed critical, to our understanding of the United Nations system and the global order that established the organisation in 1945 in the aftermath of the devastating World War. According to the Secretary-General: "The United Nations is a noble formation in human cooperation. In a world that remains divided by many diverse interests and attributes, the United Nations strives to articulate an inclusive vision: community among nations, common humanity among peoples, the singularity of our only Earth. Indeed, the historic mission of the United Nations is not merely to act upon, but also to expand the elements of common ground that exist among nations - across space to touch and improve more lives and over time to convey to future generations the material and cultural heritage that we hold in trust for them, The Charter of the United Nations, drafted with the searing experience of history's two most destructive wars fresh in mind, embraced each of those aspirations and provided institutional instruments for their pursuit".

These are the principles and objectives that informed the creation of the United Nations. Since its establishment, the Secretary-General further noted some of its achievements that included decolonisation, the promotion of human rights, international peace-keeping, humanitarian missions and meeting the economic aspirations of developing countries. The United Nations brought about a rules-based international order that addressed different human and societal needs and concerns. The provision of healthcare and eradication of diseases on a global scale, development of agricultural practices to feed humanity, extension of literacy and the benefits of education to millions of people across the world, the promotion of the rights of women and children everywhere, are among the achievements that the Secretary-General identified as benefits accruing to nations and peoples through the instrumentality of the United Nations.

The United Nations has been operating in challenging and sometimes difficult environments occasioned by influences and factors beyond its control. Accordingly, the Secretary-General acknowledged that gaps and challenges remained which included growing persistent poverty around the world, imbalances in the world economy and distribution of wealth that posed a threat to international stability and other negative factors like humanity's impacts on planetary life-

support systems. Moreover, according to the Secretary-General, disintegrative forces fuelled by inequities continue to tear nations and peoples apart. He pointed out to virulent conflicts fuelled by prejudice, deprivation and outright anarchy that have defied national borders and international norms that resulted in unprecedented proliferation of lethal weapons and growing humanitarian crisis, massive violations of human rights, mass displacement of people as refugees that have swelled into millions of people today.

These are therefore, the issues and problems that form and influence the global order today, that the United Nations continues to grapple with, and tries to ameliorate or advance in its various frameworks, operations and undertakings at the national, regional and global levels. The rule of law at the international level therefore, underpins global multilateralism, which is translated into action at the national level in the form of adherence to agreements and treaties entered into by a State. It is very pertinent in this regard, to recall the Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations, which stipulates the collective resolve of the member-states “*to establish conditions under which justice and respect for obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained*”. It is important to note that despite its ups and downs, the United Nations has remained indispensable to the functioning of the global system or order, as evidenced by the recognition bestowed upon it by such institutions as the Nobel Committee, that awarded the prestigious Noble Peace Prize to its agencies, funds, programmes and staff on 12 occasions.

The United Nations remains the single most important global institution established to regulate the international space that is referred to as the "Global Order", by means of various mechanisms involving states, civil society, individuals and other relevant actors. Founded in the belief that war is essentially an evil scourge, the United Nations was supposed to be a moral institution that will have a forceful impact on the minds of men and women to induce them to live in greater harmony and peace. The path towards the attainment of this ideal state is of course, to stress the rights of all people to dignified existence, under benevolent system of government that promotes and protects human rights and provides ample scope for the development of individual capacities. These in a nutshell, are the pillars on which the United Nations is supposed to stand. It has not been rosy all along these 80 years of the UN's existence. Challenges and obstacles have been experienced and setbacks recorded in many areas that have left huge dents in the organisation's reputation.

### **The Reform of the United Nations**

The reform of the United Nations system particularly the Security Council is a protracted subject recurring at every General Assembly meeting. This year too,

2025, will not be an exception. Voices will be raised and concerns will be expressed at the slow phase of the reform process, and the evident reluctance by those who wield preponderant power in the Security Council to agree to reforming the system. The meetings of the Intergovernmental Negotiations on the Reform of the Security Council (IGN) have been going through the rigmarole for several years now, without any tangible results by way of moving towards an agreement.

The bifurcation of the process and emergence of different and irreconcilable positions even among the developing countries from all the continents, have made the process protracted and painfully slow. The African position represented by the “Ezulwini Consensus” will need to be revisited in order to advance the process of selecting which countries should represent the continent in the reformed Security Council. Although the document provides for an expansion of the Security Council with two additional seats in the permanent member category to be zoned to Africa, there is no explicit understanding on the countries to be so selected, or the regions from which they should emerge. The linguistic affiliations of the different African countries and their differentiation into Arab, Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone countries etc., has proved an obstacle in adopting a definite formula for selection or election of the likely candidates for the permanent membership of the Security Council.

There is no agreement also on the extension of the power of veto to the new members of the Council. The recommendation that the use of the veto should be abolished has so far been stiffly resisted by those enjoying the privilege at the moment. Nigeria and the rest of Africa should recommend the incremental reform of the Council, looking at its overall mandates and towards making it a more useful tool in the maintenance of international peace and security. The responsible use of the veto power should be advocated so that not every issue that merits serious consideration and urgent treatment should be blocked by veto on the grounds of national interest or other expedience by those holding the veto power. Other aspects of the reform of the Council such as its relationship with other UN organs notably the General Assembly should be highlighted. The reform of the General Assembly and its organs has also become timely.

The working methods of the Assembly and its six Committees for instance, would need to be highlighted, especially in consideration of the enormous financial implications entailed in their meetings and processes. With a view to save cost and cut back on expenses for member-states as well, some of the thematic meetings and processes in the various Committees could be held not annually, but every other year. Likewise, the sponsorship of civil society organisations and nongovernmental organisations by the United Nations to attend its meetings should be re-examined, especially in terms of the parameters that are used to determine

the beneficiaries of such largesse, and the criteria for recommending such organisations for participating in UN conferences and meetings.

The Economic and Social Commission (ECOSOC) should also be reformed. Its roles in coordinating and initiating policies on larger economic and social questions would need to be aligned with the needs and challenges of the member-states, especially in their attempts to implement the various programmes agreed within the UN system. The implementation of the SDGs and benchmarking of progress made using competent data and statistics, as well as evaluation of impacts and sustainability, requires a global approach that could not be executed by an individual country or even a regional organisation. ECOSOC's resources and expertise would be needed to develop such mapping strategies.

Technical and other types of support to implement climate related policies and programmes would also require global inputs and cooperation, and ECOSOC would contribute significantly towards coordination and alignment of approaches.

### **The 2030 Global Development Agenda (SDGs)**

One of the success stories of the United Nations is the adoption of the SDGs. Heads of State and Government gathered at the 70th anniversary of the United Nations in 2015, signed a global compact that established the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals or the SDGs. The initiative was aimed at not only maintaining the momentum provided by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) towards addressing basic and universal development challenges, but also to galvanize global action and commitment towards attaining the further scaling up of achievements in critical areas of sustainable development. The SDGs therefore, for the first time in many decades, offered the possibility of unified and concerted global action towards addressing such issues as extreme and pervasive poverty, diseases and their spread, protection of the environment including marine resources, sustainable exploitation and use of finite resources, and adoption of specific measures towards mitigating climate change induced problems.

### **Looking for, and Finding the Relevance of the United Nations**

Perhaps we should not look for the successes of the United Nations in the sensational headlines and breaking news of the global media. We could look for them in the quiet and uncelebrated drudgery of the work of the Secretariat, its functional commissions and committees, its agencies, funds and programmes, that are scattered all over the world, providing vital and indispensable services to humanity, often in the most difficult and challenging of circumstances, facing untold dangers and obstacles calmly and bravely, knowing that they are fulfilling a mandate and filling gaps and spaces that have been left unattended by national governments. The UN's achievements should be sought in the fulfilment of its



Charter especially in the areas of international norm-setting and the progressive development of international law and standards. The codification of various elements of humanitarian law and human rights, the addressing of issues like racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia, the establishment of frameworks for the addressing of the rights of women, children and minorities, of migrant workers, refugees and IDPs, of stateless persons, of persons with disabilities and many others whose lot would otherwise have been left in the vacuum of global indifference, testify to the relevance of the United Nations.

The prevention of armed conflict as a matter of principle, and the codification of rules regarding the violations of rights during armed conflict, is also a landmark achievement of the United Nations, whose infringements are the crimes of states and persons, rather than those of the organisation. Human rights could not have been what they are today without the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and its offshoots in the form of the UN's human rights mechanisms and institutions. The UN Covenants on Civil and Political Rights, and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, have elevated the status of all peoples regardless of their race or nationality, to the same levels of integrity, equality and dignity without any distinctions. These rights are now no longer the preserves of national governments alone to respect, protect and promote, but have become universal values upon which any government could act where their violation or denial are deemed egregious and contrary to universally held norms and beliefs.

The UN's Treaty Bodies play a vital role in promoting, protecting and universalising of human rights. They contribute through their vigilance to the maintenance of international peace and security wherever states are willing to cooperate with their mechanisms and appointed independent experts. As a result, mechanisms like the Commission on Human Rights and its successor, the Human Rights Council, came into being to give institutional backing to the principles that the United Nations seeks to promote about human dignity and freedom. The concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and other mechanisms arose from the activities of the United Nations. War crimes and the trials of persons adjudged to have committed egregious violations of human rights amounting to ethnic cleansing, systematic violations of human rights, genocide, etc, have found concrete reflection in the United Nations justice system, in the forms of international tribunals such as those for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, etc. Valuable and indispensable services to humanity are being carried out by the UN and all its agencies, funds and programmes that are too numerous and too wide in their scope and ramifications to mention here. At the risk of being accused of serving as an apologist for the UN, or of eulogising the organisation, I think, in retrospect, looking back at the UN and its achievements, it is important to

acknowledge that many possibilities that it ushered in could not have been registered if it had not existed. In the area of international norm-setting and the progressive development of international law, the UN has no parallel or rival organisation in human history. Its Charter can be likened to a “Universal Peace Charter” in its own right. Its works and exertions are principally and mainly directed towards the edification of the human community and protection of the earth and its vital attributes. The UN has brought more nations, peoples, cultures, religions, and races closer together than any other human arrangement in history.

It has closed vast distances, narrowed down great differences and bridged intricate distinctions among nations and peoples, thereby bringing the world closer to a truly unified human family. Its activities are solely humanitarian and peaceful in nature even in situations of conflict and adversity. Without its prestige, integrity and all-encompassing nature, diversities in outlooks about human rights would be impossible to bridge to produce a universal conception of these rights cutting across cultures, religions, races and nations.

Through its actions and history, the United Nations has become the byword for humanism, and its standing represents the yearnings of mankind for peace, progress and prosperity. Its principles encompass every nation, every people and every location in the world. Through its instrumentality, we can today contextualise the fight against racism and racial discrimination against Black people and people of African descent everywhere, in a universal framework and obtain a universal repudiation and opprobrium towards such acts. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a cherished product of the UN, which it guards jealously and justifiably so. Its peacekeeping mandates have encompassed the entire world and continue to provide succour and assurances of safety and protection to millions of helpless people in dangerous places of the earth.

Through its dogged determination, it freed peoples and nations from the bondage of colonialism and alien domination, thereby restoring their freedoms and dignity. It undertook vast reconstruction and development programmes in war-torn countries and created opportunities for people in many countries to rebuild their lives and restore hope to their existence. More than anything else, the United Nations represents legitimacy which no other organisation or entity could confer upon the entire world. From the foregoing, I am of the view that responsibility for any failures in the maintenance of international peace and security, and the protection of persons in conflict situations, must be laid at the door steps of the Security Council and not the entire United Nations as a body. It is the Security Council that possesses the ultimate power to prevent conflicts from happening and bring them to an end where they are already taking place.



The Security Council is the body that is primarily charged with the responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Yet, the Council is the most undemocratic and dictatorial body in the world today. Its powerful members can arrogate to themselves the imposition of severe and crippling sanctions on any country that they antagonise and declare war on those that they perceive as constituting threats to their interests and safety. The Council is granted extraordinary powers by the UN Charter to make the world a safer place by preventing or ending conflict within, between or among nations. It has the undisputed authority granted it by the Charter to intervene in situations that constitute grave threats to international peace and security, as its nomenclature implies. Since its resolutions are supposed to be legally binding on all member-states of the United Nations, its decisions should therefore be seen to be complied with by all states without exception.

However, in situations where the Council members hardly agree and usually disagree on ending conflicts, it becomes unreasonable of us to expect the United Nations to play any decisive role in the preservation of international peace and the prevention of conflicts. Conflicts are national and territorial in nature; therefore only nations can effectively prevent them by refraining from their conduct and faithfully adhering to the provisions of the United Nations Charter. In this respect, I am inclined towards agreeing with Mr. Comras, that compliance and accountability on the part of members of the United Nations are critical to its success. He wrote thus, “*Compliance and accountability are the areas that should remain the United Nations’ highest priority and greatest focus*”.

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