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The UN Charter is the West's best option

Oct 22 2020

*Michael von der Schulenburg**

Although almost unnoticed today, 75 years ago, on 24 October 1945, the probably most important international treaty, the United Nations Charter, came into effect. Its aim was not only to end WWII, but to save, once and for all, succeeding generations from the scourge of war. In San Francisco, the victors against Nazi Germany pledged that not military power, but international cooperation and human rights, should govern future world affairs. For a generation that went through two World Wars and unimaginable human suffering and atrocities, the UN Charter brought hope for a lasting peace. Three years later, the Charter was complemented with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Taken together, the global ban to use military force and the universal respect for fundamental human rights were historical breakthroughs for humankind. As of today, 193 countries have signed the UN Charter.

Despite many setbacks, the world has indeed become more peaceful. Over time, wars among UN Member States – the Charter's core concern – have practically ceased to exist. Except for minor local clashes, national armies or military alliances no longer fight each other in battles. Today's violent conflicts are almost exclusively intrastate armed conflicts involving belligerent non-state actors – a type of conflict the UN Charter was not designed for. But even if we include intrastate armed conflicts and the effects of foreign interventions in them, the risk for anyone in the world to be killed in a war or armed conflict today is less than 2% of what it was in the 1950s.

So why, then, has the UN Charter become so discredited in the West? Nowadays, most Western politicians, analysts and even society in general consider the UN Charter as irrelevant and the UN as largely obsolete. Western media generally ignored its 75th anniversary and where it published articles the tone was too often condescending, if not outright hostile. After experiencing 75 years of peace ourselves, are we in the West no longer considering wars a threat to us? Or are we believing that we have alternative mechanisms to deal with wars in other parts of the world and, hence, no longer need the UN?

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The UN is an intergovernmental treaty body and its governing bodies such as its General Assembly and the Security Council simply reflect existing political divisions in the world. To abolish or circumvent the UN would not solve any of those divisions. It would deprive Member States of the only global forum where they can air differences and seek solutions. If we now argue that the UN has failed, this implies that also we have failed. Three of five of the Security Council's Permanent Members are Western powers, and the West holds most senior UN positions. So, before blaming others, we should ask ourselves first what our responsibility is in making the UN – at least in our eyes – so unattractive.

Although the UN was largely paralysed during the Cold War, the relevance of its Charter was then not questioned as it is today; NATO and the Warsaw Pact remained defence alliances. This only changed with the end of Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. The United States became the sole uncontested political, economic and military superpower. Communism was defeated and our system of liberal democracy, rule of law and free market economy had proven to be the better one. It was hence not surprising that we began to aim at creating a liberal world order under our leadership.

Global power was now in Western hands; the world had become unipolar. Russia had descended into anarchy and China was nowhere to be seen. Why then, would we need a UN Charter and a UN system in which weaker states – in particular, non-democracies – would have a say and potentially restrict our decisions? From then on, we spoke about a rules-based system – with which we meant our rules – and no longer about upholding the UN Charter.

But we failed in bringing about a more peaceful and democratic world. For a believer in liberal democracy, it is painful to admit that we wrecked this unique post-Cold War opportunity through a mix of hubris, arrogance, an addiction to military force and the obsession of preventing the emergence of a competing superpower. Instead of bringing global peace, we got caught up in seven US-led military interventions around the world – under the UN Charter, most were illegal. Our justifications to go to war were questionable, if not outright false. Though some military engagements lasted for decades (and still last) and cost trillions of dollars, we could not win them. Instead of bringing liberal democracy and prosperity, we brought mostly destruction and chaos.

Worse, while we accuse others, we bomb major cities and villages with heavy civilian casualties, finance and arm local militia with awful human rights records and ally with undemocratic governments when it suits us. We commit targeted killings, mistreat prisoners, de-stabilise governments and feel justified breaking up sovereign nation-states. Has unilateral power corrupted us?

Probably the most damaging of our post-Cold War mistakes was our effort to reduce Russia, in the words of former President Obama, to a regional power. Russia, due to its huge nuclear arsenal and sheer geographical size, had remained an irritation in a world dominated by us. We refused Russia the same financial support we provided so generously to other East European countries, expanded NATO right to its borders, stationed antiballistic missile batteries directed against them, fomented so-called colour revolutions in the Ukraine and Georgia and tried to block Russian access to the Black Sea. It would backfire!

With the resurgence of Russia and the rapid ascent of China as global players, our dominance of world affairs begun to shrink. Almost seamlessly, we made the U-turn from a victorious to a defensive posture. We now alleged that Russia would militarily threaten Eastern Europe and China would want to attain global power. The leading argument among a new breed of “realist” political analysts became that great-power rivalries – and not any ideological hopes for a liberal world order – was driving geopolitics. Great-power rivalries, they allege, are inevitable and tensions between the West on the one hand and Russia and China on the other was simply a return to a “normal” state of affairs.

Great-power rivalries will bring us back to the harsh realities of sheer power politics in which the winner will no longer be decided by superior liberal ideals but by superior technological and military systems. We see already the results. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) 2020 Yearbook, worldwide military expenditures have risen to over \$1.9 trillion – the highest level since 1990, with 2019 seeing the largest annual increase of 3.6%. Has a new arms race set in? Although we

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like to fault Russia and China for this, much of the responsibility for the militarisation of conflicts lies with the West. After all, according to SIPRI, in 2019 NATO and its Asian allies accounted for about 61% of worldwide military expenditures while China accounted for 14% and Russia for less than 4%.

More worrying is that, while arms control agreements have successively been dismantled, advancements in military technologies have made frightening progress in biotechnology, guided weapon systems, tactical nuclear warheads, and hypersonic rocket systems. We have begun militarising space, once sacrosanct to military use, with so called killer satellites. The most troubling development is, however, the applications of artificial intelligence (AI) in military weapon systems. AI are essentially independent digital systems that calculate, learn and decide infinitely faster than any human being. Will we still be able to control such weapon systems or are we delegating decisions of war and peace to artificial intelligence? In this brave new world, the UN and its Charter would indeed be meaningless. But is this what we want?

We appear to be at the threshold of a new horror scenario in which wars among states as a means of achieving political aims have, once again, become acceptable or even, as some would now argue, inevitable. What had begun in 1999 with NATO's illegal war against Serbia could, in the heated atmosphere of great-power rivalries over issues such as Taiwan and control of the South China Sea, lead to a military confrontation among nuclear powers. Is this the consequence of having given up on the UN Charter?

30 years after the end of the Cold War, the West finds itself in a vastly different world and we must reconsider our options. The dream of a liberal world order is no longer a realistic option; we no longer have the strength to pursue it. Our political influence in the world is waning and we are pulling our military back. Our share in the global economy is declining and our share in world population is dwindling. Moreover, we are increasingly weakened by divisions within the transatlantic alliance as well as by internal political divisions within the US but also within and among European countries.

If we break the UN Charter, others will too – and already do – and we will not be able to prevent this. Under such circumstances, upholding the Charter that is built on equal sovereignty, the ban of use of military force, the promotion of international cooperation and universal human rights – in essence, on our norms and principles – would be our best option. The UN Charter applies to all countries, irrespective of their political systems. And it is breaking with the notion that great power rivalries, and therefore the risk of wars, are inevitable. To believe in the UN Charter is to believe in people's ability across continents and cultures to agree on a peaceful future and not in any inevitability of confrontations among great powers.

Once we leave the barrage of hostile reporting aside, UN Member States – despite all their disagreements – differ much less today in political and economic outlooks than ever since the end of WWII. When the UN Charter was signed, none of the five great powers fulfilled the ideals of the Charter or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ideological differences among them ran deep. Then, the Soviet Union was a ruthless and expanding communist state, China was stuck in 20 years of brutal civil war, the UK and France used military force to maintain their colonial empires and half of the United States was still under a strict apartheid regime.

Such extreme differences no longer exist. Although political systems will continue to differ across the wider UN membership, to argue that the world is divided between democracies and autocratic regimes, between good and bad is a dangerous simplification. All countries adopted market policies, are increasingly integrated into the world economy, and focus on economic and social progress for their societies. Though far from being perfect, there is progress on core demands of the UN Charter in bringing about greater social justice and international cooperation!

Today, the US and, with it, the West in general, must decide if we support a world order that accommodates not only Russia and China but also many other up-coming regional and global powers with a diversity of political systems, or if we are sleepwalking into another militarised global conflict in the hope to ascertain our global supremacy? If we choose cooperation over confrontation, we will need the global inclusiveness of the UN and the universality of its Charter.

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