



# The UN & You

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## Is the UN fit for its purpose?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine began on Feb. 24, 2022 as a “special military operation” to “demilitarize and de-Nazify” Ukraine. In spite of all the troop and weapons build-up on Ukraine borders, there was a sense of disbelief when missiles and airstrikes hit across Ukraine. In fact, the war began during the emergency meeting of the UN Security Council called by Ukraine on the evening of Feb. 23 in New York. The invasion received widespread international condemnation as an act of aggression, and many countries imposed sanctions on Russia. The UN criticized the invasion as being unjustified and without precedent.



**Why has the UN failed to end the war on Ukraine by Russia,** given the stated purpose of the UN is to “maintain peace and security”? According to article 24 of the UN Charter, the primary responsibility of the Security Councils is “the maintenance of international peace and security,” and, as per article 25, all Members “agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the Charter.” Moreover, the Council “shall determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of peace, or act of aggression and shall make recommendations, or decide what measures shall be taken... to maintain or restore international peace and security.” The Council has the power to “call upon the parties concerned to comply with the provisional measures proposed by the council, without prejudice to the rights, claims, or position of parties concerned.” When parties in question fail to comply with the provisional measures, the SC, (not involving the use of armed forces) may call upon the Members of the UN to apply measures such as “complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio, and other means of communications, and the sever-

ance of diplomatic relations.” When such measures have proved inadequate, as per article 41, the Council “may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security.”

The United Nations, born out of war to end wars, has not lived up to its objective “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” The UN, shaped by the victors of World War II, placed the axiom, “winners take it all” to hold on to their power and military might in the post-war world. To that end, they called themselves Permanent Members of the Security Council, with privilege and power to veto any resolution that went against their interests or sphere of influence. According to [Passblue](#) reports, “since 2010, there have been 38 vetoes blocking 27 draft resolutions: 23 by Russia, 11 by China and 4 by the U.S.,” paralyzing the work of the Council. In this context, the UN is a flawed/failed body with no power to protect us from war.

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Daily we see the horrors of this war unfold on our screens and airwaves; we are pained, distressed, and moved to pray for it to end soon. Diplomacy, sanctions, voices of reason and advocacy from Pope Francis, world leaders and the UN Secretary General have not provided a ray of hope at present. The day Russia invaded Ukraine, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged Russia: “In the name of humanity, bring your troops back to Russia. Do not allow to start in Europe what could be the worst war since the beginning of the century.” A month later he told them, “It is time to end this absurd war.”



## **The United Nations, born out of war to end wars, has not lived up to its objective “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”**

Numerous emergency sessions of the UN Security Council, strong statements and condemnations have not yielded any concrete action to end the war or a ceasefire. To all the impassioned speeches and requests, Russian Ambassador Vasily Nebenzya’s response was, “We did not start this war; we want to end it.” Russia used its veto power at the Security Council to stop a legally binding resolution demanding that Moscow immediately stop the war on Ukraine and withdraw all troops. In fact, in the wake of the invasion Russia has used the Council to spread misinformation.

### **Does the UN Secretary-General have any power?**

According to Article 99 of the Charter, the SG “may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.” This article is interpreted as providing the SG with an independent political role on issues before the Security Council. But in reality, the SG has no real powers to help carry out decisions. The SG can still shape the engagement of the UN system and call on countries to pressure Russia to end the war.

Given the inability of the UN to effect any change in the ongoing war, Guterres, who is “extremely interested in finding ways in order to create the conditions for effective dialogue, create conditions for ceasefire as soon

as possible,” recently met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. President Putin has agreed “in principle” to Guterres’ request to create humanitarian corridors to get civilians out of besieged cities and to distribute food, medicine and other basic goods. The SG has “proposed the establishment of a Humanitarian Contact Group, bringing together the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the UN.” The response of the Foreign Minister to this proposal was, “ready to cooperate with our colleagues from the UN to alleviate the plight of the civilian population.” Kyiv,

the capital of Ukraine was bombed by Russia while the Secretary-General was meeting with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, flouting international norms. The Secretary-General is deeply concerned about the repeated violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws and suspected war crimes, and is calling for an independent investigation for effective accountability. He supports the involvement of the International Criminal Court, and is calling on Russia to cooperate with the International Criminal Court.

### **UN Diplomacy**

Since Russia could veto any resolution in the Security Council, on March 2, the UN General Assembly voted on a resolution to condemn Russia’s unprovoked war and demand that Russia “immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.” The resolution, sponsored by 90 countries, needed a two-thirds majority in the Assembly to pass. The resolution received 141 votes in favor, 5 against and 35 abstentions. This resolution indicates that the international community strongly supports the core principles of the UN.

Another resolution, entitled “Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine,” drafted by Ukraine and 90 co-sponsors, was passed with 140 votes

on March 24 during an Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly. (140 votes in favor, 5 against and 38 abstentions.) This resolution demanded civilian protection and humanitarian access in Ukraine.

This premeditated war on Ukraine has brought about catastrophic loss of life and untold human suffering. The indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian areas, hospitals and childcare centers have caused more than 11 million people to flee their homes since the conflict began. According to the [International Organization for Migration](#), 5.8 million people have fled to neighboring countries and 7.7 million are internally displaced, more than half of whom are women and other vulnerable people. Around 12 million people are stranded or are unable to leave areas affected by the fighting. The UN is working alongside numerous international organizations to provide humanitarian assistance “wherever necessary and possible.” According to the director of the UN World Food Program, no humanitarian corridors are open to distribute food to the starving people in the besieged cities. Around the world, millions of people will face starvation if Ukraine is not allowed to ship food out through the ports blockaded by Russia.

Prior to this, Russia had the gall to propose a resolution on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, which called for respect for “humanitarian principles,” condemned attacks against civilians, and called for negotiated ceasefire in Ukraine. It did not mention the reason for the crisis in Ukraine, a result of Russian invasion. This resolution could not move forward, since it was backed only by China and all other 13 members of the SC abstained. (Nine votes are required for a resolution to move forward in the UNSC.)

The principle of multilateralism, leading to dialogue is a key to solve global challenges the world faces currently, especially to maintain peace and security in the world. The UN Security Council has failed repeatedly in the past decades to prevent conflicts and invest in genuine peacebuilding. In the absence of any effective action against threats to international peace and security by the UNSC, what role can the General Assembly play?

The veto power exercised in the UNSC has negative impacts on the effectiveness of the UN on matters of international peace and security. Without attempting to reform the UN, Liechtenstein introduced an innovative resolution: “Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council” on April 26, to provide a strong voice to the General Assembly when the Security Council is unable

to act. The General Assembly adopted the resolution by consensus and came into force immediately. The Liechtenstein Ambassador described the resolution “as an expression of our commitment to multilateralism... and to secure the central role and voice of the United Nations.” The General Assembly adopted the resolution by consensus, and it came into force immediately. The resolution requires the president of the General Assembly to convene a meeting every time one or more of the five permanent UNSC members casts a veto. The Assembly would hold a debate on the situation on which the veto was cast, and those who vetoed would be invited to address the Assembly to explain their action. It is not subject to any further intervention or decision, and is open-ended with regards to the outcome.

### **How to remove a UN Member?**

According to Article 6: “A Member of the United Nations which has persistently violated the Principles contained in the present Charter may be expelled from the Organization by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.”

Suspension from Human Rights Council: The UN General Assembly can suspend the rights and privileges of a Council Member that has persistently committed gross and systematic human rights violations during the tenure of its membership. To suspend a member state, two-thirds majority vote is required by the General Assembly.

The United Nations General Assembly voted (93 in favor, 24 against and 58 abstention) to suspend Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and alleged human rights violations.

Reform of the UN – the power structure and the Secretariat/administration - is necessary to make it relevant and fit for our times, as a true multilateral organization. Debates on UN reform demanded by both Member States and Civil Society have been going on for than 30 years without any clarity and consensus. The current structure does not take into account the present geopolitical realities and has no representation from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and South America in the Security Council. For any meaningful discussion on reform, the Security Council has to agree, and there is no consensus to move ahead to make the UN fit for the 21st century.