

An Orwellian Black Hole? Countering the Narrative That the UN Has Failed

Written by Anthony Yazaki

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/04/16/an-orwellian-black-hole-countering-the-narrative-that-the-un-has-failed/>

ANTHONY YAZAKI, APR 16 2016

On March 18, former United Nations Assistant Secretary-General Anthony Banbury wrote a scathing article in the New York Times describing the UN as an “Orwellian” institution that is the victim of “colossal mismanagement” and has become a “black hole into which disappear countless tax dollars and human aspirations, never to be seen again.” Banbury’s specific criticisms ranged from the UN’s drawn-out hiring practices to its lack of accountability for underperforming staff and its politically expedient decision-making processes that lead to calamities like the allegations of widespread sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers in the Central African Republic. With these condemnations coming from a long-time UN insider, the article struck a chord among many readers and was picked up by numerous other news outlets.

Banbury’s criticisms fit neatly into an increasingly popular narrative that the UN is a failed organization that is unfit to deal with mounting crises around the world. This narrative has only been reinforced by the organization’s inability, stemming from disagreements among the UN Security Council’s permanent members, to take effective action on conflicts in places such as Ukraine and Syria, the latter of which has resulted in an unprecedented refugee crisis. At the same time, the UN seems to lack the tools to counter the growing threat of the Islamic State, which has metastasized beyond its territory in the Middle East and has mounted attacks in cities as far-flung as Jakarta and Brussels. As a result, to the casual observer, the UN may appear like nothing more than a bureaucracy that is held captive by antiquated and inefficient procedures and cynical great power politics.

Many of the criticisms levied at the UN by Banbury and others are reasonable. For instance, it is indeed puzzling that it takes an average of 213 days to fill a vacant UN job. It is bizarre that incompetent staff cannot be more easily replaced, especially when the stakes of their jobs are so high. It is beyond shameful that some UN peacekeepers would sexually abuse the vulnerable populations that they are mandated to protect. All of this is fair. But it is premature to come to the conclusion, as Banbury did, that “the United Nations is failing”.

Although the recent track record does reveal some of the UN’s shortcomings, the organization’s highly publicized inability to take action on several ongoing conflicts has more to do with the resurgence of great power rivalry and the consequent inability of permanent Security Council members (P5) to find common ground than the deficiencies of the UN itself. Indeed, these circumstances reveal a crucial fact about the UN: it can only be as effective as its member states allow it to be. When states cooperate, the UN is able to take meaningful action; when they are divided, the organization becomes stagnant. And despite the fact that divisions among the P5 have sidelined the UN from resolving several ongoing conflicts, the organization remains highly relevant as a norm-setting institution that retains an unmatched ability to convene the global community and galvanize action around common goals. In cases where member states’ interests align, the UN has had a number of recent successes in a variety of fields spanning from development to climate change and even peace and security.

Take, for example, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which helped guide global development efforts until 2015. This eight-point agenda was developed by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, universally endorsed at the UN Millennium Summit, and then subsequently implemented by member states. By setting global priorities for development, mobilizing funds, and catalyzing action among member states, the MDGs played a role in bringing

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about notable achievements such as the dramatic worldwide reduction in the number of people living in extreme poverty. Again, it is the UN's member states themselves that achieved such results, but it is also fair to say that no organization besides the UN would have had the credibility and legitimacy set the world's development priorities and help to guide their implementation.

In order to maintain this momentum, last September, the UN adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to guide global efforts until 2030. The negotiations around the SDGs were at times a noisy and frustrating process, but were ultimately successful in creating another global agreement, this time with 17 headline goals, along with 169 specific development targets. While there has been criticism that the number of targets is far too many for any country to realistically achieve, this agenda was the product of open negotiations and accumulative drafting, with a plethora of member states eventually including their own priorities among the goals. But notwithstanding the imperfections both in terms of process and substance, this articulation of common goals, as with the MDGs, should help to concentrate efforts and mobilize resources and would not have been possible without the universally recognized legitimacy of the UN to convene the international community and facilitate such negotiations.

Shortly after the SDG Summit in New York, countries then convened in Paris for final negotiations on a global climate change agreement, which was once again struck under a UN framework. Many have since pointed out that the final deal should have been stronger, but given the highly contentious nature of the issue, the fact that any agreement was adopted by consensus (unlike the Kyoto Protocol of 1992 which had only 83 signatories) was a major accomplishment in and of itself.

Even on peace and security, the area in which the UN has faced its most vociferous criticism, the organization actually continues to play an indispensable role around the world. With over 100,000 peacekeepers currently deployed to 16 missions, the UN's footprint is larger and more robust than many realize. Although serious questions were raised about the efficacy of UN peacekeeping during the 1990s following the disastrous failures to prevent mass atrocities in Srebrenica and Rwanda, as well as the "Black Hawk Down" incident in Somalia, the UN's conflict management track record has actually been relatively positive, with mostly successful peacekeeping and post-conflict peacebuilding efforts in countries such as Cambodia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Timor Leste. Indeed, numerous studies of the UN's conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities published over roughly the past decade have found that despite their limitations, UN missions have been successful in reducing violence, shortening conflicts, improving economic growth and governance, and decreasing the probability of a conflict recurring even after a mission has been shut down, all in a relatively cost-effective manner. In short, "the United Nations provides the most suitable institutional framework for most nation-building missions, one with a comparatively low cost structure, a comparatively high success rate, and the greatest degree of international legitimacy."

This last item, legitimacy, is absolutely essential to all of the UN's activities, and strikes at the core of why the UN can oftentimes be a slow-moving organization. Although the principle of "one country, one vote" can be unwieldy when applied to 193 voting member states, and giving veto power to the P5 can lead to cynical political calculations in the Security Council, these structures are precisely the sources of the UN's legitimacy. Universal representation is crucial for self-evident reasons and conferring special privileges upon the P5 was necessary to ensure their enduring membership and active participation in the organization. In other words, the UN is predicated upon a balancing act between legitimacy and the ability to take swift action. Unilateral decision-making can lead to decisive action (as in the 2003 invasion of Iraq), but it lacks the legitimacy that comes with multilateral processes and runs entirely counter to the collective ethos of the UN.

With all of this being said, it is beyond doubt that the UN requires reform. Some of its working methods are odious and cumbersome. Its structure is becoming increasingly outdated as the global balance shifts from established powers to rising powers that are demanding the rights and privileges that they feel are commensurate to their newfound status. But there is no shortage of reform proposals on the table ranging from altering the Security Council's permanent or non-permanent membership to restricting the use of the veto on resolutions aimed at halting mass atrocities or updating the Secretary-General selection process.

And in terms of Banbury's most serious charge regarding inaction and impunity in dealing with abuse allegations

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against UN peacekeepers, the UN has completed an independent investigation pointing to “gross institutional failure” and the Security Council has followed this up by passing a resolution to strengthen accountability mechanisms. However, given that the UN has released similar reports in the past, including the 2015 report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations which outlined a number of policy recommendations to improve accountability, but has not been able to eradicate the problem, it is likely that this issue will require more thorough reforms. Part of the problem has been the recent rapid growth in the number of peacekeepers deployed in the field, which has forced the UN to emphasize the quantity of troop contributions from member states over their quality, while also having to rely on contributing member states to enforce accountability. In order to turn this tide, it will be crucial to expand the base of troop contributing countries (TCCs) and increase the supply of available high-quality troops, in part by ensuring that countries follow through on the troop commitments they made at the 2015 peacekeeping summit. But once again, the UN cannot unilaterally bring this to fruition and the onus for action lies with member states.

Indeed, as the sexual abuse scandal and the other above-mentioned initiatives have shown, the UN can only be reformed and improved if its member states, and the P5 in particular, are willing to do so. It is therefore up to them to decide if they are willing to give the UN the tools and resources it needs to be as effective as possible. Given that the UN is tasked with resolving the issues that no other actors are willing or able to handle, states cannot afford to let the UN fail. And if they do, it will be to their own detriment and a reflection of their own shortcomings.

About the author:

Anthony Yazaki is a Research Fellow at the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research in Tokyo, where he researches issues related to international peace and security as well as international development. He previously worked as a producer for NHK News covering the US State Department and American foreign policy. He is a co-editor and co-author of *Poised for Partnership: Deepening India-Japan Relations in the Asian Century* (Oxford University Press, 2016).