

CHAPTER 20

The UN General Assembly

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CONTENTS

- [The General Assembly in IR theory](#)
- [Institutional design and evolution](#)
- [Current role and impact](#)
- [The General Assembly in a world of global governance](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

In 1945, the UN was firmly anchored in the world of intergovernmental relations. Although the Preamble to the UN Charter begins with an affirmation that “We the Peoples of the United Nations” are determined to create a better world, the active role is shifted at the end to “our respective Governments,” which agree to the Charter and establish the United Nations. While most of its substantive and organizational provisions are fitted to an international system in which autonomous states are the primary actors, the Charter also contains intimations of a world in which relations among states coexist with webs of transnational activity by individuals, groups, business firms, and private organizations. Article 41 suggests that suspension or reduction of economic transactions, travel to or from, and communications to or from a state threatening international peace will help curb aggression; Article 71 creates the possibility of direct consultations between the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and “non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which are concerned with matters within its competence”; and Article 87 establishes direct contact between the Trusteeship Council and the inhabitants of a Trust Territory as part of the scheme for UN supervision of state administration.

Contacts between various parts of the UN system and non-state actors have expanded considerably over the years, but the General Assembly remains relatively aloof. Representatives of non-state actors appear frequently in the assembly's subsidiary bodies or at high-level meetings" and "interactive dialogues," and there are public demonstrations on the street just outside, but the assembly's plenary and main committee meetings remain firmly intergovernmental. This is also reflected in the composition of most delegations. Each member state may send a delegation consisting of up to five "Representatives" and any number of "experts" and "advisers" to assist them. A few states have appointed national-level politicians, officials from outside the diplomatic service, or other prominent persons having no government position as representatives, but the typical representative is a career diplomat with prior experience in the UN or other multilateral forums.

Its persisting intergovernmental character indicates why many proposals to transform the United Nations into a world government feature either replacing the General Assembly with a unicameral world legislature of popularly elected members, or making it an "Assembly of States" paired with

an “Assembly of Peoples” in a bicameral world legislature.

This chapter begins with a brief summary of how the General Assembly has figured in international relations (IR) theory. The second outlines its institutional design and evolution. The third examines its role and impact within the current UN structure. The fourth addresses the ongoing debates about how the General Assembly might fit into efforts to make the United Nations more relevant in contemporary global governance.¹ The conclusion addresses the future of the General Assembly and the principal political dynamics that are likely to prevail therein.

The General Assembly in IR theory

IR theorists have paid very little attention to the General Assembly because few of them regard it as having any important effects on world politics. Realists and Marxists, emphasizing the political dynamics of competition between great powers or the pressures created by what became a fully global economy after 1991, have regarded it as reflecting rather than influencing contemporary

developments. The post-World War II functionalists expected multilateral cooperation to begin with technical matters, then spread into broader economic and social fields, and only at the end of a long process spread to political questions; other intergovernmental bodies were thus more immediately important. World Federalists and other advocates of world government looked past the General Assembly to a future world parliament.

Institutionalist and rationalist theorists, including those applying principal-agent analysis of intergovernmental organizations, have focused mainly on the organizations used to manage particular international regimes. Constructivists and feminists are more attuned to Inis Claude's arguments that UN bodies provide major forums for collective affirmation of shared aspirations, identification of shared aversions, and collective endorsement or condemnation of particular states' positions or actions,² but pay only scattered attention to the UN General Assembly. While analysts of global governance might pay attention to it when tracing how new problems are identified and get added to the international agenda, their interest quickly shifts to whatever intergovernmental or private bodies

become most closely engaged with implementing any agreements about addressing the problem.

Most academic studies mentioning the General Assembly use its proceedings as source material for other inquiries. Some focus on understanding how general diplomatic practice or hierarchies among states affect individual states' ability to secure foreign policy goals.³ Others analyze its formal votes to assess the degree of political affinity among pairs of states or track the cohesion within coalitions of states.⁴

Institutional design and evolution

A hybrid of traditional European diplomatic practices and the parliamentary procedure was worked out for multilateral diplomacy in the late nineteenth century and extended to economic insecurity issues by the League of Nations Assembly between 1920 and 1939. In 1946 the UN General Assembly took up where the League Assembly left off, so uninspiring discussions of “parliamentary diplomacy” or “conference diplomacy” as a distinct form of interstate negotiations.⁵

The traditional diplomatic side of General Assembly procedures manifests in its authority, composition, and distribution of votes. It makes binding decisions only on matters of internal organization and operation; otherwise, its resolutions are recommendations. The individuals participating in meetings are delegates chosen by the governments of their states. The principle of sovereign equality asserted in diplomatic practice supports the rule that each national delegation has one vote. Yet in a major departure from the traditional diplomatic practice of unanimity, Charter Article 18 takes the General Assembly in a parliamentary direction by specifying that agreement by a simple majority of delegations “present and voting” is sufficient to adopt resolutions on most questions, and a two-thirds majority sufficient for anything defined as an “important question.” This combination of one-state one-vote and majoritarian decision establishes the General Assembly as an “egalitarian” balance of the Security Council with its explicit acknowledgment of great power importance in rules about membership and veto rights. However, this egalitarianism remains one of the states, not of people because the boundaries of

states do not partition the global population into equal-sized groupings.

In 1946 when representatives of the 51 original UN member states met in London for its first session, it was clear that the General Assembly would have to divide up the work to get through its agenda of global issues and supervision of UN organization, budget, and staffing. Thus, it emulated national legislatures by working mainly through committees and having rules of procedure designed to balance individual rights of expression with methods for moving the work along strongly resembling national-level parliamentary procedure.⁶ Yet even in its deliberation, General Assembly practice maintained certain diplomatic traditions. Speaking time is allocated chronologically, in the order delegations sign up on the speakers list. This generally limits delegates' ability to respond directly to different viewpoints and has inspired some efforts to develop other discussion formats.

Historical accident, since coalesced into well-established practice, accounts for another reversion to "traditional" diplomatic technique. Although allied against the Axis powers, political alignments among UN member states on other issues were unclear in 1944–1946. This encouraged use of ge-

ographically defined regional groupings of states for allocating committee leadership positions and seats on the assembly's limited membership subsidiary bodies. Although stable voting coalitions did appear shortly afterward—first in the Cold War divisions of East and West, and then the level of economic development divisions into South and North—they never displaced the regional groupings as the device for allocating seats. The apparent need to do so was low because the Cold War-induced division of Europe into Eastern and Western groups and the general assumption that Russia and Eastern Europe were industrialized meant that the regional groups could also be seen as consistent enough with the basic political coalitional divides to serve for allocating seats.

Delegates also shifted the balance between the parliamentary and the diplomatic through practice. After a few years of acting out the Cold War stalemate through highly formalized use of the parliamentary procedures, member governments began to converge on more flexible methods of work. For different reasons, both the Soviet bloc—interested in getting out of isolation—and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)—needing to maintain a sprawling coalition of developing countries—

supported replacing formal voting with greater adoption of resolutions by consensus. In the late 1950s, 20–30 percent of resolutions were adopted by consensus. The proportion reached 50–60 percent by the mid-1980s, 70–75 percent in the early 1990s, close to 80 percent in the 2000s, though fell back to 70–75 percent in the late 2010s.⁷ Consensus-seeking reinforced the shift toward pursuing detailed discussions of draft resolutions in various subsidiary bodies, working groups, ad hoc “friends of the chair” groups, or other informal gatherings. Most formal plenary and main committee meetings became occasions for putting the government’s view on the record and adopting the sole draft resolution put forward. General Assembly work is a confusing mix of a visible formal “tip of the iceberg” and a much larger set of less visible informal negotiations. The intertwining is best presented visually, as in [Figure 20.1](#).

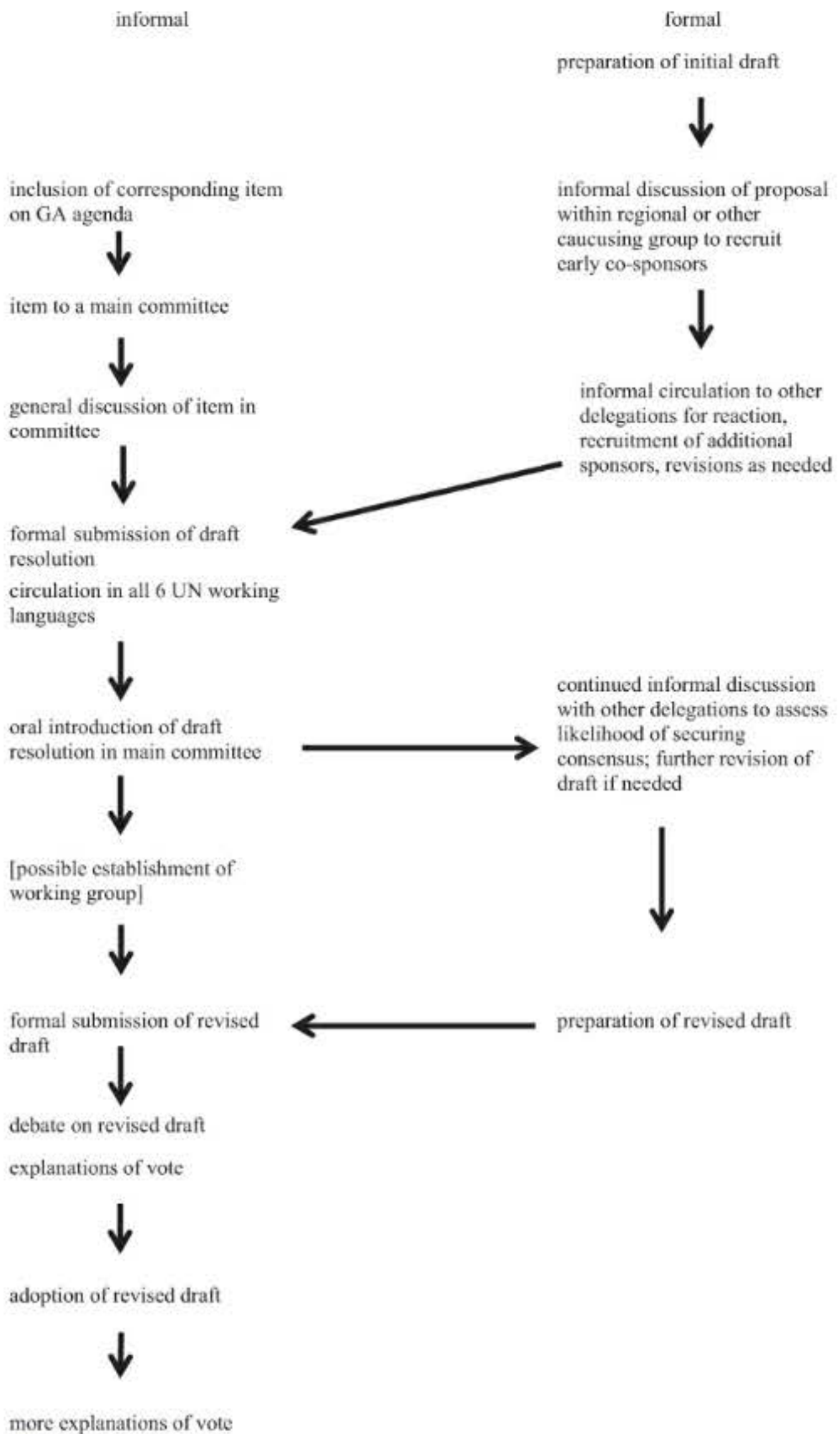


Figure 20.1 Flow chart of General Assembly discussions

A decision to request a vote rather than pursue consensus occurs in three distinct situations: a large supporting coalition wants to adopt a particular text now rather than continue negotiating with other members; one or more member states wants its own or others' individual rule views placed on the record; or an overwhelmingly large coalition wants to demonstrate that opponents are few and isolated. Only the first reliably indicates that supporters have decided against further efforts to seek consensus; the second and third occur when it is absent or very widespread.

When consensus does not yet exist, the likelihood of reaching it the following year depends on the type of issue. Table 20.1 summarizes the extent of voting in the six main committees and the plenary during the 64th through 71st sessions.⁸ With matters first debated in the main committee, how the committee reports typically set whether the plenary adopts by consensus or vote. The high proportion of voted drafts in the First Committee (Disarmament) reflects a stalemate on nuclear weapons issues. There is less contention in the Second (Economic) and Third (Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural) Committees, with most of the contention in the Third Committee inspired

by proposals to condemn particular governments for human rights abuses because most abusers have supporters reluctant to see them condemned. Dissension is also high in the Fourth (Political and Decolonization) Committee because it handles the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. The Fifth (Administrative and Budgetary) Committee has long coped with the strong divergence between who has most of the votes and who provides most of the money by using consensus on budget-related matters, particularly when dealing with the discretionary part of the budget because pressing for a vote “might lead to a reduction in financial contributions.”⁹ Delegates in the Sixth (Legal) Committee regard consensus as essential for success in their work on refining international law. The issues handled exclusively in plenary meetings are either very hot political items or very routine matters, meaning the plenary record shows a proportion of adoptions by consensus lower than in the Second and Sixth Committees but well above the level in the First and Fourth Committees.

The politics of voting in the General Assembly is perplexing to the general public. Although in most contexts voting “abstain” suggests having no strong opinion either way, diplomatic traditions

meant it became almost as negative a signal as voting “no” early in the General Assembly’s history. All delegates are aware that whatever the total of negatives plus abstentions rises above one-third of the membership (65 of 193 members), support for the proposition under consideration is too weak to allow starting along the path of advancing a new idea by securing the adoption of a mild initial expression and then securing incrementally stronger statements in future resolutions.

Conclusions about individual countries’ shifts between abstention and opposition depend on their attitudes toward abstaining. Initially, the United States was like most members in preferring to avoid deep isolation by abstaining rather than voting “no” if it would be alone or nearly alone in opposition. In the mid-1970s a stream of US elite opinion believing that it was better to vote against unacceptable texts became more influential.^{[10](#)} This confrontational approach resonated strongly with the administrations of Ronald Reagan, George W Bush, and Donald Trump, but has also influenced others. Some other governments are also willing to cast a solo “no” vote; in recent sessions, these have included Bolivia, India, Turkey, and Zimbabwe. Yet these remain exceptional.

The General Assembly has grown from a body composed of 51 delegations adopting 113 resolutions on about that many agenda items in 1946–1947 to a body composed of 193 delegations adopting 309 resolutions plus 154 decisions addressing 173 agenda items in 2015–2016. The time pressure created by this expansion of work is forcing changes in General Assembly practice. Agenda-pruning measures, including the grouping of related items and taking up some longstanding issues every other or every third year, have yielded only modest gains. Some issues are raised every year because enough members insist, and this generally reflects coalition maintenance needs within the NAM and G-77 (Group of 77 developing countries).[11](#)

Delegation sizes impose limits on how far the General Assembly can go in holding multiple simultaneous meetings. The tiniest delegations, numbering four or fewer, and the small delegations numbering 10–15 are stretched thin. Yet even with the established practice that only three of the main committees meet at the same hour on any given day, the greater reliance on subsidiary bodies reporting to the main committees, and informal discussions outside formal meetings maintain

the time pressure. This works to the advantage of member governments able to maintain larger delegations and assign delegates to meetings according to their individual areas of expertise. Smaller delegations typically cope by selecting a limited number of issues for constant attention while taking cues from their regional or caucusing group on others.

Creating more meeting time has had more effect. In the 1970s, the General Assembly retrieved time within the 13-week regular session by returning to the simple rule, lost in early sessions, that meetings start promptly. Even before that, it was expanding meeting time by adding days to the regular sessions convening “special sessions,” allowed in Article 20 of the Charter, or Emergency Special Sessions, defined in resolution 377 (V). Until the Security Council called an Emergency Special Session on 27 February 2022 to debate the Russian war in Ukraine, the last previous one was 1982 was the 10th Emergency Special Session on Israeli actions in occupied Palestinian Territory. Special Sessions are still called,^{[12](#)} but the General Assembly now favors sponsoring “high-level meetings” or “global summits.” These coincide either with the approximately two weeks of plenary general debate that

start a regular session in mid-to-late September when many heads of state, heads of government, and foreign ministers come to New York, or during the resumed sessions that have existed since 2003. Resumed sessions began as organizational meetings in June to elect the General Assembly president, vice president, and main committee chairs for the next regular session. In 2005, General Assembly resolution 59/313 expanded resumed sessions to include completion of the Fifth Committee's work, a few plenary meetings to deal with matters left unaddressed at the end of the main sessions in late December, the election of General Assembly officers for the next session, and election of states to the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council.

Any stable coalition of member states holding two-thirds of the votes can control the General Assembly and use it to shape global discourse or influence the course of particular events by supporting or condemning participants. Two such coalitions have existed in the Assembly's history: the US-led coalition from 1947 through 1960, and the Third World coalition prevailing since the mid-1960s influx of new member states following decolonization. The US-led coalition (at its outset including

Latin American states) did not experience a dramatic falling out; it was gradually superseded as the newly independent states swelled the ranks of the NAM (focused originally on political issues) and coalesced with the Latin Americans in the G-77 (focused on economic issues) that together formed what is now called “the Global South.” The Soviet bloc was able to escape isolation in the General Assembly by siding with the NAM and G-77 against the West. However Soviet optimism about the prospects of world revolution in the 1970s was replaced by a loss of confidence in the 1980s as its economy stagnated and it was mired in a war in Afghanistan as unsuccessful as the Vietnam War was for the United States. The collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989–1991 meant that the South-North divide became the primary cleavage in the General Assembly.

Even before what is now called the Global South coalition acquired the two-thirds majority to control it, the Cold War had affected the General Assembly’s position relative to the Security Council. In the original Charter design, the Security Council was the central body for coordinating responses to particular threats to international peace and security, while the General Assembly was the central

forum for developing broad rules on the conduct of world politics. However, the veto rule ensured that the Cold War meant a stalemate in the Security Council. The US-led coalition pioneered using the General Assembly to provide a UN mandate for member action in a crisis with Resolution 377 (V), “Uniting for Peace,” the Soviets were equally willing to use the Assembly in 1956 when British and French vetoes would have stymied Security Council action in the Suez crisis. Those were exceptional moments, on the whole both East and West preferred maintaining Security Council primacy, including in the authorization of peacekeeping operations. Continuing disagreement among the five permanent members (P-5)—which became even more complex when the People’s Republic of China replaced the Republic of China in 1971—limited Security Council approval to neutral truce observation and mediation missions.

The end of the Cold War changed the dynamics in the Security Council. The unanimity with which Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait was condemned and joint action to force Iraqi withdrawal endorsed in 1990 began an era when the leading powers were readier to use the Security Council as a forum for agreeing on how to deal with crises.

This inspired considerable commentary about reviving collective security or expanding neutral peacekeeping to more active conflict management. Events in the mid-to-late 1990s eroded the post-Kuwait euphoria; by 2015 disagreement among the P-5 was great enough that they focused primarily on internal wars in smaller countries, often settled on doing nothing, and issued condemnations when one or more member states bypassed the UN altogether. This new version of stalemate intensified developing countries' desire to make the General Assembly more prominent, although not to the point of G-77 or NAM use of resolution 377 (V) to take charge of any situation involving armed conflict.

Current role and impact

The perceived gap between what the General Assembly might be and what it is has inspired a longstanding concern with “revitalizing” the General Assembly, a concern addressed by five separate ad hoc committees since the early 1950s.¹³ Discussions in the fifth of them, the ad hoc Working Group on Revitalization, are now well into their

second decade. Most of the current suggestions address familiar suggestions like reducing the agenda by focusing on fewer issues, adopting fewer resolutions, and pruning the verbiage of those adopted. These have had little effect. Some newer ideas, like providing the General Assembly's president with a more adequate support staff, organizing meetings in different formats to permit more interactive exchanges,^{[14](#)} or finding ways to help the smallest delegations cope with simultaneous meetings, are useful but do not address the core question facing UN member states—what should be the General Assembly's role in the UN and the world.

The NAM, the G-77, and the Global Governance Group^{[15](#)} routinely assert that the General Assembly, as the most inclusive intergovernmental forum with the broadest agenda, is the proper place to determine the basic terms of world order. One prominent developing country diplomat went further and argued that General Assembly resolutions adopted under the current one-state, one-vote rule should be regarded as legally binding.^{[16](#)} Other proposals to enhance the role of the whole UN membership (the “G-193”) in global governance involve creating new bodies—either a Global Economic Coordination Council or an Economic

Security Council—rather than using the General Assembly.^{[17](#)}

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, global summits were perceived as overshadowing the General Assembly's regular sessions. Efforts by some members to change that by having the assembly sponsor studies of and meetings about how to respond to the global financial crisis in 2008–2009 were complicated not only by serious substantial disagreements among member governments but also by strong reactions against the General Assembly president's effort to steer the discussions himself by organizing a special global summit (which few heads of state or government attended even after a postponement from the original dates) and circulating his own proposal to create new global bodies to deal with economic and financial issues.^{[18](#)} Nor did the General Assembly succeed in its self-assumed task of acting as the preparatory committee producing the preliminary conference document for the June 2012 Rio + 20 conference; ultimately the Brazilian government provided it through the Brazilian diplomat chosen to serve as conference chair.^{[19](#)}

Yet in 2014 the Assembly's Open-Ended Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

was able to formulate a set of 17 broad goals and establish general parameters within which states will define national performance targets in 169 areas of economic development, social development, and environmental protection for the period 2015–2030 that were endorsed in resolution 70/1.²⁰ This effort has elicited mixed reactions—some praising it for setting out a common vision of the future with a planning process for attaining the goals²¹ and others regarding it as an overlong muddle²²—but the scheme has been incorporated into UN organizations’ work as the successor to the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). More recent General Assembly presidents have had greater success in making connections to implementation processes by augmenting the periodic briefings provided by the president of the Security Council with briefings by senior Secretariat members on current UN operations.²³

Some General Assembly decisions about the UN’s organizational structure reveal the continuing centrality of South-North differences to politics at the UN. The UN Human Rights Council (HRC)—established in 2006 following the 2005 World Summit decision to make a new start on human rights issues—has disappointed its strongest sup-

porters by resembling the supplanted Commission on Human Rights. Hopes that having the General Assembly rather than ECOSOC select the members and specifying that selection should take candidate states' human rights records into account were dashed because the seats were divided up among regions in the usual manner. Regional groups further frustrated hopes of a competitive election by putting forward only as many candidates as they were allocated seats.

The 2010 creation of UN Women, another result of the 2005 summit that consolidated UN activity on the position of women in society by replacing four smaller units, reflected the ongoing tensions between control of votes and possession of resources. Developing countries pressed to constrain the influence of industrialized countries over the agency by limiting them to less than 20 percent of the seats on the governing board.²⁴ After long negotiations, General Assembly resolution 64/289 approved a two-sided structure in September 2009. "Normative support functions" are coordinated through the existing 45-member UN Commission on Women an ECOSOC subsidiary body with all seats allocated by regional group, while "operations" are supervised by an Executive Board of 41

members, with 35 seats divided among the regional groups and the other six reserved to four industrialized and two developing “contributing countries.”

The General Assembly in a world of global governance

Although diplomats instructed to reach an agreement necessarily regard attaining consensus as success, many outside regard the General Assembly’s reliance on consensus as a sign of failure to move beyond lowest common denominators masked by weak or ambiguous language. The length of the agenda is creeping up again, the pattern of multiple resolutions on certain “hardy perennial issues” persists, and voting on some issues is stuck in familiar patterns because of continued engagement in symbolic politics, particularly on such bellwethers as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and elimination of racism.^{[25](#)}

Some commentators suggest that agreement to define General Assembly resolutions as legally binding commitments would encourage more focused debate and clearer resolutions. Yet in the

political conditions prevailing today, a string of votes along the South-North divide would harden divisions, increase the tendency of industrialized states to cooperate elsewhere, and reduce prospects for effective implementation. Some proponents of increasing General Assembly authority over UN member states have sought to avoid these problems by proposing that it adopt a weighted voting system in which UN membership, share of world population, and share of UN assessment would be combined to give member states differing numbers of votes.^{[26](#)} However, the agreement to accept General Assembly resolutions as binding seems likely only as part of a more general and currently very unlikely move toward world government.

Since the present trajectory of world politics is toward a continuing decentralization of global governance and less multilateralism in its formulation,^{[27](#)} the immediate future of the General Assembly today depends on finding a role that makes sense in that context.^{[28](#)} This search would not require any significant amendment to the UN Charter. Its provisions anticipated many features of contemporary global governance by defining the General Assembly as an intergovernmental deliberative forum overlaying a system of more

specialized entities—UN specialized agencies and other General Assembly-created UN funds and programs—providing governments with process managers to promote cooperative effort and sources of expert assistance in addressing problems of common concern. Article 10 of the UN Charter gives the General Assembly a broad remit to “discuss any questions or any matters within the scope of the present Charter or relating to the powers and functions of any organs provided for in the present Charter.” Articles 11 and 12 define its relation with the Security Council as a division of work in which the General Assembly defines broad principles while the Security Council deals with particular disputes and armed conflicts. Articles 13 and 55–58 define a similar relationship with the rest of the UN system. Article 13 authorizes the General Assembly to “initiate studies and make recommendations” for “promoting international cooperation” in political-economic social cultural education health and “assisting in the realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.” Articles 55 through 58 indicate that the actual cooperation will be pursued through specialized agencies and other bodies. The Charter also at least partly anticipated the states would organize smaller group cooperative

efforts outside the UN by referring to regional organizations and Articles 33 and 52.

It is now clear that the early references to the General Assembly as “Town Meeting of the World” or “Parliament of Man” were flights of fancy. The Charter provisions suggest four roles that it could perform in a world of global governance, if governments broke established habits and seriously reconfigured their activity. First, the general debate, high-level meetings, and global summits could function more effectively as sounding boards where governments try out new ideas and listen for responses. Those responses might not come immediately; but after some years between an initial mention of an idea and its adoption by governments or UN organizations, it is entirely consistent with multilateral experience.

Second, the General Assembly could continue using its convening power to channel the work of hammering out agreements on new issues into appropriately-structured bodies able to devote the time needed to assess the situation and, when warranted, it could endorse and promote agreements that go beyond the lowest common denominator that existed at the start of discussions.

Third, the General Assembly could shift more attention to reviewing the results and impacts of global governance efforts to identify synergies or interferences among them. Although each distinct entity or network is already monitoring actions and outcomes in the cooperative processes it is managing, their horizons tend to be limited to their areas of immediate concern. Such an approach would be different from the sometimes proposed monitoring of the implementation of General Assembly resolutions, an idea that has only lukewarm support even within the G-77²⁹; rather, it would focus on areas for which states make clearer commitments to action, such as the SDGs. The search for cross-issue spillovers also means that this proposed monitoring function would need to be broader than assessing UN system efforts to provide “global public goods,” a notion popular among advocates of energizing the UN system. Delivering public goods is only one aspect of governance; providing the content of normative and operational frameworks within which actors of various types pursue their own activities is the larger part of global governance.

Fourth, the General Assembly would continue to be the supervisor of the various parts of the UN sys-

tem. The General Assembly leadership was closely involved in the revision of the UN staff discipline system in 2007; it made itself far more prominent than it had been earlier in defining and managing the process of selecting the Secretary-General in 2016 by resolution 69/321.

Conclusion

The political context for redefining the General Assembly's role is not promising.³⁰ The South-North division—increasingly at odds with the global distribution of wealth and power—remains the primary cleavage among the UN's 193 member states. While evolving, the distribution of capability does not yet align control of votes in the General Assembly with capabilities outside. Neither are the NAM and G-77 coherent coalitions. On economic issues, the West remains the primary target, but NAM and G-77 rhetoric is sometimes directed against the G-20 as a whole or the most powerful of the “emerging countries.” The G-77 expelled Mexico and South Korea after they joined the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Chinese leaders have said that they will

not join the OECD, but at least one diplomat from a G-77 country has said that any country participating in the G-20 should also be excluded from the G-77.³¹ Divisions on other issues are more obvious.

Maintaining NAM and G-77 influence depends on keeping the major emerging countries—particularly Brazil, China, and India—siding with the coalition of developing countries; without them, the rest of the Global South lacks sufficient capacity and political-economic importance to have significant weight in the emerging network structure of global governance. Thus, the General Assembly's future depends on whether developing countries continue to accept that the G-20 has become a major venue for discussing global economic issues and maintain ties with it and its individual members. A few developing country governments—most notably those of Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—have called for confronting the G-20 head-on, but others are engaging whenever individual members or the G-20 as a group provide them with opportunities.

The General Assembly remains an intergovernmental body, and the rising powers clearly want to keep it that way³² as they place greater emphasis on state sovereignty³³ and national choice

regarding action to attain common goals.³⁴ As long as independent states remain the key political units and governments continue to possess the largest measure of administrative and enforcement capacity that design is appropriate. The task facing reformers is finding ways to better structure its activities for global governance in such a world. The General Assembly is better at norm definition, goal-setting, and occasional shaming than at defining details and managing the daily processes of global governance. Governments would do well to shift the assembly's focus toward acting as a global assessor of what concerns require attention and of how well global governance is faring in all of its aspects.

Additional reading

1. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, *A Year at the Helm of the United Nations General Assembly: A Vision for Our Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
2. Diana Panke, *Unequal Actors in Equalising Institutions: Negotiations in the United Na-*

- tions General Assembly* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
3. M.J. Peterson, *The UN General Assembly* (London: Routledge, 2006).
 4. Gert Rosenthal, *Inside the United Nations: Multilateral Diplomacy Up Close* (London: Routledge, 2017).
 5. Joseph E Schwartzberg, *Transforming the United Nations: Designs for a Workable World* (Tokyo: UN University, 2013).
 6. *A Global Agenda, Issues before the General Assembly of the United Nations* was published by the United Nations Association of the USA each summer in 1946–2006 and 2009–2012. The *Annual Review of United Nations Affairs* was published by Oceana Publications in 1961–2004 and since 2005 by Oxford University Press.

Notes

1. [The official](#) records of the General Assembly are available in all six UN official languages; the English language version is at www.un.org/en/

[ga](#). Institutes and think tanks providing some commentary about the General Assembly and its proceedings include the Council on Foreign Relations in New York (www.cfr.org), the journal *Foreign Policy* (www.foreignpolicy.com), the EU-sponsored European Council on Foreign Relations (www.ecfr.eu), the Indian Council on Global Relations (www.gatewayhouse.in), and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (<http://www.cicir.ac.cn>).

2. [Inis](#) L. Claude, Jr., "Collective Legitimization as a Function of the United Nations," *International Organization* 20, no. 3 (1966): 367–379.
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4. [Kisuke](#) Iida, "Third World Solidarity: The G77 in the United Nations General Assembly," *International Organization* 42, no. 2 (1988): 375–395; S.Y. Kim and Bruce Russett, "The New Politics of Voting Alignments in the United Nations General Assembly," *International Orga-*

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5. [Philip](#) Jessup, “Parliamentary Diplomacy,” *Hague Academy of International Law Recueil des cours* 89 (1956): 181–320; and John G. Hadwin and Johann Kaufman, *How United Nations Decisions Are Made* (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1961).
 6. [6](#) *General Assembly Rules of Procedure* (UN document A/520/Rev.19 (2021)), www.un.org/en/ga/about/ropga. The document also includes comments on certain procedural points that have been debated explicitly over the years.
 7. [M.J.](#) Peterson, *The UN General Assembly* (London Routledge, 2006), 75–77; proportion for later sessions calculated from the UN’s lists of resolutions, www.un.org/en/ga [session number]/resolutions.shtml. The decrease began

before the start of the Trump administration in January 2017.

8. [John](#) R Mathiason, “The General Assembly: Addressing Global Problems, Incrementally,” in *Annual Review of United Nations Affairs 2009/2010*, ed. Joachim Müller and Karl P. Sauvant (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.
9. [John](#) R Mathiason, “Commentary on the Sixty-Eighth General Assembly,” *Annual Review of United Nations Affairs* 1 (2015): 5.
10. [First](#) expressed in Daniel P. Moynihan, “The United States in Opposition,” *Commentary* 9, no. 3 (1975): 31–42; and Daniel P. Moynihan and Suzanne Weaver, *A Dangerous Place* (Boston, MA.: Little, Brown, 1978).
11. [Lydia](#) Swart, “The Future of the G-77,” in *The Group of 77: Perspectives on its Role in the United Nations General Assembly*, ed. Lydia Swart and Jacob Lund (New York: Center for UN Reform, 2011), [Chapter 7](#).
12. [Most](#) recently the 32nd in June 2021. See complete list on the UN website, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/sessions/special.shtml>.
13. [As well](#) as a stream of proposals from such outside think tanks as the US-based Center

for UN Reform Education (www.centerforun-reform.org); the German Committee for a Democratic UN (www.unokomitee.de/en/index.php); and the South Center (www.southcentre.org).

14. [Such](#) as the 10-hour informal interactive dialogue on *Mobilizing Collective Action: The Next Decade of Responsibility to Protect, Report of Secretary-General* (A/70/999-S/2016/620) on 6 September 2016.
15. [A group](#) of 30 smaller UN members drawn from Western Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa the Gulf, and Southeast Asia, www.mfa.gov.sg/content/MFA/overseasmission/New_York/NYDMV_statements/global_governance_group.html.
16. [Statement](#) by Miguel De Soto Brockman of Nicaragua to the Opening of the 63rd Session (UN document A/63/PV.1), 16 September 2018.
17. [Report of the Commission of Experts of the President of the United Nations General Assembly on Reforms of the International Monetary and Financial System](#) (Stiglitz Commission), 21 September 2009,

www.un.org/ga/econcrisissummit/docs/FinalReport_CoE.pdf; José Antonio Ocampo, “The United Nations and Global Finance,” *Annual Review of United Nations Affairs* 2008–2009 I: xliv–xlv.

18. [General](#) Assembly resolution 63/305, 31 July 2009. The distance between the assembly president’s ideas and what the members adopted can be judged by comparing the conference outcome document given in the Annex to General Assembly resolution 63/303 of 9 July 2009, with a president’s draft dated 18 May 2009, www.un.org/ga/president/63/interactive/financialcrisis/outcomedoc.pdf.
19. [Transition](#) noted in “Rio Plus 20: ‘Encouraging Progress’ Made on Outcomes document,” *UN News Center*, 16 June 2012, www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=42254&CR=sustainable%20development&CR1=.
20. [Report of the Open-Ended Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals](#), UN document A/68/970, 12 August 2014.

21. [John](#) R Mathewson, "Commentary on the 68th General Assembly," *Annual Review of United Nations Affairs* 1, no. 21 (2015): 21.
22. [Bjorn](#) Lomborg, "The UN Chose Way Too Many New Development Goals," 2015, <http://time.com/4052109/UN-sustainable-development-goals>.
23. [Though](#) 66th session President Nassir Abdulaziz al-Nasser (Qatar) had to ride out strong complaints from the Syrian government's backers when he invited the High Commissioner for Human Rights to provide one on the Syrian civil war, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/role-un-general-assembly>.
24. [Jacob](#) Lund, "The G-77's Limited Role in the Third Committee," in *The Group of 77*, ed. Swart and Lund, 113.
25. [Rafael](#) N. Becker Arye Hellman, Nicholas Potrafky, and Alexander H. Schwemmer, "The Preoccupation of the United Nations with Israel: Evidence and Theory," *Review of International Organizations* 10, no. 4 (2015): 413–437.
26. [Richard](#) Hudson, *The World Needs a Way to Make Up Its Mind: The Case for the Binding Triad* (New York, Center for War/Peace Stud-

ies, 1981); Joseph Schwartzberg, *Revitalizing the United Nations Reform through Weighted Voting* (New York and The Hague: Institute for Global Policy, World Federalist Movement, 2005), appendix A, 60–63.

27. [Noted](#) by, among others, Gro Harlem Brundtland, “The UN@75: The Future of Partnership and Multilateralism,” *Global Governance* 66, no. 4 (2020): 545–552; Shivshankar Menon, “League of Nationalists” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2020): 132–139; David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse, “Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization,” *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2020): 225–257. Among the general public, strong currents of opinion on the left and on the right reject the current pattern of multilateralism. See Lisbet Hooghe, Tobias Lenz, and Gary Marks, “Contested World Order: The Delegitimation of International Governance.” *The Review of International Organizations* 14, no. 4 (2019): 731–743.
28. [Wolfgang](#) Reinecke and Francis Dang, *Critical Choices, The United Nations, Networks, and the Future of Global Governance* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2000).

29. [Lydia](#) Swart, “Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly” in *Managing Change at the United Nations*, ed. Jonas von Freiesleben, Lydia Swart, Irene Martin Eddie, and Nanette Yeboah (New York: Center for UN Reform Education, 2008).
30. [Unpromising](#) to the point that a few commentators are suggesting dropping the UN in favor of something else: basing global cooperation on 6 regional organizations (the current five UN ones plus a new Middle East and North Africa region) by Amin R. Yacoub, 2018. “A World Government: A Critical Look into the Present, to Foresee the Future.” *NYU Journal of International Law and Policy*, 10 (2018): 1146–1466; explicit great power management by Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan, “A Concert of Powers for a Global Era,” *Council on Foreign Relations Blogs*, 25 March 2021; or a bottom up reconfiguration by local level governments and global civil society by Antonio Donini, “Crashing Waves and Rising Tides: The Case for UN 2.0.” *Global Governance* 26, no. 2 (2020): 262–275.
31. [Quoted](#) in Swart “The Future of the G-77,” 154.

32. [Bas Hooijmaaijers](#) and Stephen Keukeleire, “Voting Cohesion of the BRICS Countries in the UN General Assembly, 2006–2014: A BRICS Too Far?” *Global Governance* 22, no. 2 (2016): 392.
33. [For instance](#), the details of General Assembly resolution 76/176, “Strengthening the role of the United Nations in the promotion of democratization and enhancing periodic and genuine elections,” <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/76/176> (16 Dec. 2021).
34. [Most](#) visible in the 2015 Paris Agreement scheme of periodically revised Nationally-Defined Contributions to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but also expressed in resolutions on global economic affairs.