

# Introduction: Looking Back to Look Forward

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The seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations in 1945 invites us to look back at the achievement of creating this new organization even before the guns had fallen silent in World War II. It also prompts us to ask: Where is the organization today? How well has it fulfilled and is it still fulfilling the high ideals of its Charter? Even more importantly, how confident can we be that what has grown into the complex UN system will not just survive but also provide its member states and the peoples of the world with the organizational structures, resources, and tools needed to address twenty-first century challenges?

I was honored in Spring 2019 to be invited to edit this special issue of *Ethics & International Affairs*. Knowing that other academic journals are publishing similar special issues for this important anniversary and that there are various conferences and gatherings devoted to the occasion, the challenge has been one of recruiting an appropriately diverse set of authors to provide a series of essays that look back as well as forward to consider the organization's record and relevance. For me personally, there is also an opportunity to pay tribute to my father, Norman J. Padelford, who was one of a number of academics recruited as consultants by the U.S. Department of State during World War II to work on the preparation of the UN and other issues. After participating in the 1944 Dumbarton Oaks Conference and the April 1945 meetings of the UN Committee of Jurists in Washington, D.C., my father served as executive officer for Commission IV of the UN San Francisco Conference Secretariat, which dealt with all arrangements concerning the International Court of Justice and such other legal matters as referred to in the draft Charter. In the closing days of the conference, he was made secretary of the jurists committee, which directed the work of drafting the

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Charter itself. In 1946, he moved from the Fletcher School at Tufts University to MIT to develop courses in international relations. He was a founding editorial board member and later the chairman (from 1960 to 1973) of the journal *International Organization*.

To set the stage, then, for looking back, I quote the following comments by my father after the Charter was signed on June 25, 1945:

One of the most significant features was the demonstration of the large area of agreement which existed from the start among the 50 nations. . . . Everyone exhibited a serious minded determination to reach agreement on an organization which would be more effective than the League of Nations. . . . Not a single reservation was made to the Charter when it was adopted. . . . The conference will long stand as one of the landmarks in international diplomacy. . . . [Nonetheless] one wonders—will the conversations of men prove powerful enough to curb the might of military power or to harness it to more orderly uses?<sup>1</sup>

We are, indeed, at a pivotal moment not just in the UN's history but in global governance itself. We can answer my father's question in the affirmative to some extent, but not entirely, for the last seventy-five years. In some ways, we are at another dangerous moment in international relations. Tensions among major powers are again on the rise, with the risks of new arms races and the potential for conflicts still very much present. Yet, we must also affirm that the UN has provided both a forum and a means for addressing many of the threats involving military power since its founding. What my father's comments do not capture is that the UN and its affiliated agencies, programs, and funds have played important roles in addressing a wide range of issues and problems around the world over the last seventy-five years that go far beyond preventing armed conflict. At the same time, I suspect every reader of this issue can join me in making a long list of the emerging issues and problems that we must wonder whether the UN is equipped to address, including the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. That is the challenge in looking forward.

To craft an interesting set of essays, I looked for a mix of both senior and younger scholars, including a number of people who have been practitioners in some way within the UN system. I also wanted to tap authors in both the Global North and Global South. For the most part, I wanted this collection to avoid focusing on parts of the UN structure and to cover instead a range of issue areas—although I knew the space constraints precluded including all that one might want to for a special issue of this sort. Hence, while there is no essay on the Security Council

per se, former Canadian ambassador David Malone—who has written and published extensively on the Council in the past—incorporates some reflection on the Council in his essay coauthored with Adam Day, while taking a long view on the UN as a whole. That essay, along with one by the distinguished Indian economist Devaki Jain, contains remarks on the bureaucratic “sprawl” of the UN—that is, the proliferation of agencies, funds, and programs within the broader UN system over its seventy-five years. Ellen Ravndal’s essay on the UN secretaries-general (UNSGs) provides an excellent perspective on the evolution of their role as “guardian of the Charter.”

It is pure coincidence that the roster of authors includes both the current rector and a former vice rector of the United Nations University. Though Ramesh Thakur and David Malone come from the Global South and North, respectively, both have taken somewhat long views on the UN’s history and both are somewhat pessimistic about its future.

Peacekeeping and post-conflict peacebuilding are both UN innovations, and constitute some of the UN activities that are most visible to people in many parts of the world. Yet both have compiled a mixed record of successes and failures in addressing conflicts and building the foundations for sustainable peace. For many years, most of the literature on both practices was from the perspective of those who sent the peacekeepers and peacebuilders. Only recently has there been growing attention to the perspective of the “peace-kept” and “peace-built”—the local populations in places such as Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, and Timor-Leste. For that reason, I invited Susanna Campbell—one of the younger scholars who has helped bring attention to this perspective—to write on the subject of peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

For two other issue areas—the environment and human rights—I was delighted that Bertrand Ramcharan and Maria Ivanova accepted my respective invitations. Ramcharan, who at one point in his long career in and out of the UN served as acting UN high commissioner for human rights (replacing Sérgio Vieira de Mello, who died in the 2003 attack on the UN headquarters in Baghdad), looks back at the UN’s record in advancing international human rights norms. Ivanova, who is my colleague in the doctoral program in global governance and human security at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and who served on the Scientific Advisory Board of the United Nations Secretary-General, founded by Ban Ki-moon, and has worked extensively on the United Nations Environment Programme and environmental issues, agreed to write on the UN and the environment.

Last, but not least, I contribute an essay coauthored with UMass Boston doctoral candidate Jean-Pierre Murray and my U.K. colleague Kirsten Haack on the question of the status of women in the UN today, sharing some of our data and analysis on the question of where the women in the UN are now. While there has long been pressure both from within and outside the UN to enhance women's status in the organization, especially among the higher ranks of its professional staff and in key leadership roles, only now do we see glass walls and glass ceilings being broken in many parts of the Secretariat. Looking back, author Devaki Jain is widely credited with the very earliest work on women in (or women *and*) development for the UN and with the creation of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) in the 1980s. Her essay provides an insightful Global South and feminist perspective on the UN.

Space does not permit us to look at the growing problem of migration and the displacement of millions as a result of war, poverty, environmental degradation, and the pull of greater economic opportunities. Nor do either of the essays on peacekeeping and women's current status at the UN look at the issues of sexual assault both within the UN itself and by peacekeepers. In short, there is much more to explore about the UN's past and its capacity to address emerging challenges. We have, however, added a last-minute short essay on COVID-19, the UN, and what the author, Sophie Harman, of Queen Mary University of London, refers to as "dispersed global health security." Harman has written extensively on the World Health Organization (WHO) and global health politics, and her argument that the responsibility for global health security is now dispersed well beyond the WHO illustrates mechanisms of resilience and support for the UN.

A number of the authors in this collection have sharp words about the UN's failures. None are entirely optimistic about the UN's future, even to the extent of repeating the common adage that "if the UN did not exist, we would have to create it or something much like it." Still, over the course of the seventy-five years since the Charter was signed in June 1945 and the organization came into existence in October 1945, the UN has chalked up some notable achievements in a world where cooperation was and is often hard to come by. And, while the United States has often provided important leadership, including substantial funding support, U.S. support has also often been lagging or at times absent, as it is under the Trump administration. Other actors, including coalitions of states, middle powers, and civil society—the latter sometimes referred to as the "third UN"—

have stepped forward to support the organization and provide leadership for various initiatives on peaceful solutions to conflicts, enlarging human rights norms and development, and forging new institutions to address emerging issues, as happened with the environment in the 1970s and 1980s. Looking back, we can see that the UN has fostered a wide array of innovations in global governance, from the concepts of the global commons, sustainable development, and human security to new principles of international law such as “common but differentiated responsibility,” monitoring bodies such as the Counter-Terrorism Committee, and regulatory measures such as quotas on fisheries and penalties for ozone depletion. Although some of the essays in this collection are pessimistic about the UN’s future, they are offered in the spirit of constructive reflection and with the hope of galvanizing creative thinking for both building on the UN’s positive legacies and learning from the failures of its first seventy-five years to create a better future.

#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Norman J. Padelford, letter to family and friends, June 26, 1945.