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UN's relevance

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THE present world order was conceived in the wake of the unprecedented destruction caused by the Second World War. The principles underpinning the world order were encapsulated in the Charter of the United Nations that was established in 1945. The UN member states made a solemn commitment to respect

each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, not to interfere in each other's internal affairs, and to resolve their disputes through peaceful means. These principles served the world well for over 50 years. The UN emerged as the universal, most representative, and most respected international organisation.

Things began to change, however, with the advent of the 21st century. Major powers started violating the Charter principles with impunity. When the US decided to invade Iraq on suspicions of weapons of mass destruction, the UN Security Council did not agree as there was not enough evidence justifying the violation of the territorial integrity of a fellow UN member state. The US formed a 'coalition of the willing' and went ahead with the invasion. That was the start of unilateralism trumping multilateralism. Ever since, there have been numerous instances of major powers opting for unilateral approaches to secure their perceived national interests.

With unilateralism on the ascendent and multilateralism on the retreat, is the UN becoming redundant to international peace and security? It may not be redundant, but has certainly been marginalised in many of the conflict situations. The US-led Nato presence in Afghanistan had only a limited role for the UN. Russia invaded Ukraine to occupy Crimea in 2014 without a care for UN principles. Several powers waged a nasty proxy war in Syria. Long-standing conflicts on the UN's books, such as Palestine and Kashmir, remain unresolved. For decades, the UN has operated peacekeeping missions in several parts of Africa, obtaining at best limited results.

If the UN is so marginalised and major powers do whatever they wish, without much regard for international law, is the UN then on course to becoming irrelevant to interstate conduct? Certainly not. The UN is, and will, remain relevant as long as it is viewed as a platform where all nations come together to discuss and resolve their issues. It is not a world government nor is it a world police. It is a useful venue to forge a consensus on how to keep, and then build, peace, address issues of common interest such as environmental degradation and pandemics, and to provide advocacy and expertise to pursue development goals like the MDGs and SDGs.

Major global powers have opted for unilateral actions.

So, is it then just a forum for talking shop? Well, on human rights and development issues, the UN has much to show, like putting together a global socioeconomic normative framework. However, in matters of peace and security, it is, sadly, turning out to be a talking shop. The UN Security Council, the principal UN organ responsible for international peace and security, is dominated by five permanent members — the US, UK, France, China and Russia — who possess veto power to

block any decision of the Security Council. Efforts have been made to reform the Council to make it more representative. However, a stalemate persists because four major powers, namely Germany, Japan, India and Brazil, are more interested in getting into the Council as permanent members than in the larger objective of making the Council more effective and relevant to today's world.

With rapid global changes, the US firmly locked in rivalry with China and Russia, and the Russia-Ukraine war germinating energy, commodities and other crises, the world today is deeply polarised and chaotic. The world order underpinned by the UN Charter principles is in disarray. The US-China competition could morph into a second Cold War. Do we need a new balance of power to accommodate an emerging multipolar world and provide a more stable world order? Will the rules of the UN be rewritten to accommodate new ground realities? Answers to these questions are fuzzy because the world is still in transition and flux. The major powers need to realise that in this age of unprecedented weaponisation and nuclear arsenals, any kinetic confrontation will exact such a heavy toll on humanity that the destruction caused by the two world wars would pale into insignificance.

It is to the credit of Pakistan that it has always conducted its foreign policy based on respect for UN Charter principles. Pakistan has neither interfered nor aggressed against any state. A few like-minded nations (like Pakistan), which bear faith in the UN Charter, should work together to protect the world from the deadly future that it could face if major power rivalry goes unchecked.

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