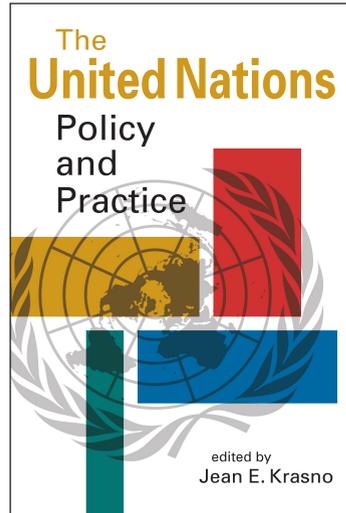


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Jean E. Krasno

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LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314
Boulder, CO 80301 USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

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1

The United Nations in an Uncertain Global Context

Jean E. Krasno

The United Nations, created in 1945 following the end of World War II, plays a pivotal role in the global environment—a role that is compounded if you include the many UN agencies, funds, and programs. Yet this worldwide UN system remains largely unnoticed in the media and, unfortunately, in the curricula of many colleges and universities, even though Model UN clubs are very popular on campuses. The goal of this edited volume is to address this void and offer a useful overview of the key functions, policies, and practices of the United Nations.

In these chapters, the authors examine how the organization has evolved over time beyond its original intended focus on international peace and security. The United Nations as a body has undertaken a gradual shift toward an emphasis on human security, human rights, humanitarian assistance, the creation of global norms, protection of the environment, ways to address climate change, and support of democratization, to name a few of its program areas. Peacekeeping, which was never envisioned in the writing of the UN Charter, has now become one of the most important activities of the United Nations. Troop-contributing countries send hundreds of thousands of soldiers around the world to work toward providing peace and stability to countries emerging from conflict or, at times, caught in the midst of upheaval. These peace operations have become more and more complex and multidimensional as the UN endeavors to address the root causes of these conflicts. The UN Peacebuilding Commission and Fund is an example of member states coming together to assist fragile nations in finding ongoing, long-term stability.

The UN provides a mirror onto the world around us. If what is seen through that looking glass is fractured, the UN will reflect those fissures in its ability to function. At the end of the Cold War, hopes were high that the members of the Security Council would be able to work together to solve threats to the peace, but the Council can be dysfunctional at times, particularly when the interests of the major powers are at stake. The Council represents only one aspect of the UN's work. More needs to be understood about the other vast enterprises that the United Nations undertakes in seeking political and peaceful solutions to disputes through the daily work of the UN system as a whole as it, for example, provides emergency food aid through the World Food Programme (WFP), assists children in need through the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and copes with global health concerns through the World Health Organization (WHO). It is hoped that this book will provide a window into the work of the UN—its policies and practices—by delving into both its productive and its less productive sides. The United Nations is the single universal organization that can take up any issue and bring nations together to solve global problems such as climate change and the growing inequality between rich and poor, thus setting values for our worldwide community.

An edited volume like this one has the advantage of being able to capture the experiences of those who have worked within the UN system while also drawing on the expertise of UN scholars. That advantage is well reflected in the chapters that follow. In Chapters 2 and 3, Jean E. Krasno focuses on how the UN has adapted to the shifting global environment. Chapter 2, "The UN Landscape," presents an overview of the bodies, functions, and practices of the organization and how they have grown and changed. Chapter 3, "Founding the United Nations," discusses the origins of the UN and how and why certain concepts were built into the Charter. For example, many people question why the five permanent members of the UN—China, France, Russia, the UK, and the United States—were given the power to veto any Security Council resolution. How that came about is captured in Chapter 3.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the more human face of the organization. In Chapter 4, "Promoting Human Development," Jacques Fomerand explains the evolving role of the United Nations in human development, including the creation of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in 1965, the launch of the *Human Development Report* in the early 1990s, and the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and then the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. In Chapter 5, "Supporting Human Rights," Bertrand Ramcharan delves into the pro-

gressive attention that the United Nations has given to human rights since the writing of the Charter. This chapter includes a careful analysis of the growth in the number of human rights agreements, as well as the breadth of the issues they address.

Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 examine the UN's changing role in areas related to peace, security, and democratization. In Chapter 6, "The Evolution of Peacekeeping Operations," Krasno addresses the evolution of peace operations from simply creating buffer zones between two warring parties to conducting complex peace operations that must deal with intrastate conflicts where there is no dividing line among competing groups. Peacekeeping has become one of the most important activities of the United Nations, and over the years it has taken on a more expansive multidimensional character. There are at present twelve peacekeeping operations around the world, along with twenty-eight political missions that seek to find peaceful solutions to disputes.

In Chapter 7, "Democratization and Electoral Assistance," Massimo Tommasoli and Therese Pearce Laanela address the fundamentals of democratization through the electoral process, which could only have been placed on the UN's agenda after the end of the Cold War. The UN has been overwhelmed by requests from states for electoral assistance, helping to establish national electoral commissions, supporting voter registration, observing the balloting process, and offering legitimacy by declaring an election free and fair.

In Chapter 8, "Addressing Human Security," Kimberly Gamble-Payne joins Krasno in examining nontraditional concepts of security in the areas of global health, climate change, and migration. While these three issues at first may seem to be disconnected concerns, they are, in fact, intrinsically intermingled. More than 281 million people have been displaced and are on the move, escaping conflict and the effects of climate change, intense weather events, floods, and drought.¹ The devastating Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the plight of migrants, who often find themselves in crowded conditions with no protection from the spread of the virus and discriminated against over fears that they may be sources of infection. These factors all contribute to the loss of human security.

In Chapter 9, "Disarmament and Arms Control," Randy Rydell traces the history of UN efforts to eliminate weapons of mass destruction and regulate conventional arms. This chapter underscores the fact that "the UN's work on disarmament has produced far more than words alone and that it continues to confirm not just the UN's relevance but also its indispensability in fulfilling its core mandate to maintain international peace and security."

Chapters 10 and 11 examine UN politics, processes, and practice, offering insight into the work that the organization carries out as it balances the requests and demands of the member states while simultaneously negotiating within an atmosphere of internal political competition. In Chapter 10, “Financing the United Nations,” Wannes Lint lays out the complexities of how mandates are translated into plans and budgets. How a mandate is implemented, what member states collectively budget for these projects, and ultimately the amount each member state will end up paying are a result of complex political negotiation processes. In Chapter 11, “Confronting the Authority of the Security Council,” Krasno discusses ways to maneuver around the Security Council when it is unable to act. The “Uniting for Peace” resolution, written by the UN General Assembly in 1950 to deal with the outbreak of the Korean War, sets the stage for a process that has enabled the General Assembly to take up an issue when the Security Council has failed to do so or is presumed unwilling to be proactive. This maneuvering process is not well known but has often been used by the General Assembly to circumvent a Security Council that has been thwarted by the veto of a permanent member, as was the case in 2022 regarding the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

In Chapter 12, “Achievements and Challenges,” Krasno describes UN accomplishments, but also looks at the perils and pitfalls that lie ahead. The task facing the United Nations is to remain relevant during a time when major powers may refuse to cooperate for the greater good. Important to remember, the UN is constituted by its member states and reflects the aspirations and willingness of its members to act. As we see in this volume, the Secretariat operationalizes the mandates handed to it but also adds its own normative perspective and implements the practice on the ground, thus becoming an actor within the process. In this book, we offer an inside perspective into the workings of the organization and the UN’s intense engagement in contributing to the peaceful solution of conflict in an increasingly complex international environment.

Note

1. International Organization of Migration, *World Migration Report 2022*, <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2022-interactive>.