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Reforms continue to elude UN Security Council

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THE preamble to the United Nations Charter states: "... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small."

Despite such lofty ideals, in more than 50 years of existence, the reality is only five UN members have any real power or control.

These are the permanent members of the Security Council or the victors of World War II - Britain, France, Russia, the United States - and China. They are also the only acknowledged nuclear powers.

"The main purpose of the Security Council is to enforce the concept of collective security. Should there be a threat to any country in the world, they should collectively try to solve it.

"Should specific settlement of disputes fail, then military action comes into play," says Jatswan S. Sidhu, a lecturer of International Studies at Universiti Malaya.

However, he says, from its inception in 1945 until the end of the Cold War, the organisation was redundant. The US and Soviet Union were fighting their own wars within that framework.

Notable examples were the Korean War in 1950, when the US wanted to send UN peacekeeping troops and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. The Security Council was ineffective both times.

Since the end of the Cold War, there have been various threats to "collective security" which the UN has either ignored or proved ineffective in resolving. Examples are Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, and Kosovo.

"Most scholars argue that the only time collective security has actually worked was in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Which means that in 50 years of the UN, collective security worked only once," notes Jatswan.

When the Cold War ended, he says, there were suggestions from all over the world, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, that it was time to review the membership of the Security Council to reflect the world as it is today.

As it stands now, the permanent members of the Security Council in no way represent the developing countries which make up two-thirds of the UN. There is no voice for the developing countries of Asia, Africa and South America.

"If we look at the composition of the Security Council and the recent US military action against Iraq, not forgetting its actions against Sudan and Afghanistan, we find that the Security Council does not in any way reflect a universal purpose. It is serving the purpose of one superpower today," says Jatswan.

Professor Zakaria Ahmad, head of Security and Strategic Studies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia agrees. "The reality is that the UN is powerless against the permanent five, and that the US is the most important member of the UN.

"If the US does not want to do something, it does not get done. And so the US has decided to bypass the UN. But that is something other P5 countries have done as well.

"The dilemma thus is that unless the US acts no one else can and this will continue for as long as members are not willing to change. Unless other countries can effectively influence the UN, changes won't happen."

According to Jatswan, it all boils down to how the superpowers who

dominate the Security Council define "threat".

The world has witnessed numerous conflicts in Africa, for example in Rwanda and Burundi, more recently in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo with little intervention.

It took a long time for any action on the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the problems of Israel and Palestine are still ongoing and so is the situation in Kosovo.

"Let's be practical about the whole thing, until and unless the superpowers want to enforce military action, it is difficult for smaller nations to do so.

"Although many small nations participate in peacekeeping missions, little can be done because the mandate of the peacekeepers is not part of the UN Charter. It is based on a resolution passed by the Security Council.

"So it goes back to how they define and look at 'threat'. I believe that to make the Security Council more responsible, more representative of the world, one should look at the serious democratisation of the Security Council," says Jatswan.

In an attempt to make the Security Council more representative, work and discussion on its reform began five years ago.

During that time, Malaysia's then permanent representative to the UN, Tan Sri Razali Ismail, who was also president of the General Assembly had tried to provide impetus to hasten the reforms. Unfortunately, practically no agreement has been reached.

"We should continue to maintain the pressure to change the Security Council so it is constituted in a way that it becomes representative of the international system and reflects the situation as it is, not just the appendage of the power apparatus of the US and other P5 members," says Razali.

He agrees that it is difficult to do. There was a time when it was thought that the US could not continue to pay the major portion of the financial support to the UN and was interested in bringing in Germany and Japan to share the financial burden. Thus allowing smaller countries to lobby for better representation in the Security Council.

"Now (the US) Congress has simply decided not to pay. They throw in anti-abortion clauses and stuff like that. If the US wants to be as bloody-minded and onerous as that, quite frankly there is nothing anyone else can do," Razali says.

However, it is not just the US which is holding up the reforms, explains Razali. The African states themselves have not been able to decide who they would like as their permanent members and Asia is bedevilled by rivalries.

"I don't foresee any changes to the Security Council. The restructuring of the Council is never going to happen, at least not by the superpowers," says Jatswan.

However, he stresses the UN is not totally irrelevant. It does provide opportunities for smaller countries to voice their concerns and has brought about regularisation in international relations.

Despite the constraints within the UN, Jatswan says it is important to note that many countries, particularly the smaller ones have tried to stretch the system as far as possible.

"Take the failure of the Security Council to take action on Bosnia ... We find leaders like Dr Mahathir bringing up the issue over and over again, which led to Nato's involvement and to efforts to find a solution."

Razali says the UN is a convenient flogging horse. It provides an outlet for the political frustrations of many countries because of the asymmetries and injustice of the Security Council.

"In that paradoxical way, the Council serves that purpose, but as an activist, where do we go from here?"

"There are many countries and people who depend on the UN, so the UN will continue. The bottom line is that the UN will become less and less important unless it takes hold of the situation, which is not going to be easy. The goal continues to be elusive," says Razali.

As international relations become more complex, we need a more effective UN. The question remains, how do we make it more effective and fair for the 21st century.

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