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The United Nations and the Return of Interstate War

*Restoring mediation in a fragmented international order***NOUR MOHAMMED RIDA**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mediation is becoming more necessary precisely as the United Nations appears less capable of providing it.

The present crisis of international order is deeper than the erosion of the post-Cold War liberal system. It also threatens the older architecture built after 1945 to prevent total war, regulate relations among major powers and universalise sovereign equality. The United Nations will not recover relevance by claiming competence over every global problem. Its most strategically valuable and least resource-intensive function lies in political mediation, particularly through the Secretary-General's good offices. The historical record of U Thant, especially during the Cuban Missile Crisis, shows how an impartial office can create time, preserve face and open diplomatic space when formal bodies are paralysed. The post-1990 expansion of peace operations, development programmes and internal-conflict management produced real gains, but it also displaced high-level interstate peacemaking. In a more fragmented and potentially multipolar order, the immediate priority is therefore not institutional maximalism. It is to rebuild a small, politically supported mediation capacity around the next Secretary-General, while pursuing broader reform without confusing representational legitimacy with operational effectiveness.

KEY JUDGEMENTS

- The decline of American unipolarity and the possible collapse of the 1945 peace architecture are distinct processes. The second is the more dangerous.
- The Secretary-General's comparative advantage is neither coercion nor administration, but trusted access, timing, discretion and the ability to offer adversaries a politically usable path away from escalation.
- Peacekeeping and peacemaking should be analytically separated. Evidence supports the protective effects of peace operations, but active civil wars and interstate crises require different political instruments.
- Security Council reform is essential to legitimacy, especially for Africa, yet additional seats or vetoes will not by themselves create a more agile crisis-management system.
- Morocco's sustained participation in United Nations peace operations and Francophone training gives it a credible, practical stake in a renewed African coalition for mediation and institutional reform.

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STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

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Restoring mediation in a fragmented international order

Introduction

The United Nations is being judged at the moment when it is least equipped to meet the test for which it was created. War in Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar and the Middle East has exposed the weakness of collective security, while strategic rivalry among nuclear-armed powers has returned to the centre of international politics. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2025 recorded 65 state-based armed conflicts, including eight interstate conflicts, with approximately 244,600 conflict-related deaths. These figures do not prove that a new world war is imminent. They do establish that the post-Cold War assumption of declining interstate violence can no longer guide institutional design (Davies et al., 2026).

The usual diagnosis is that the liberal international order is collapsing. That description captures part of the change, but it risks conflating two different historical arrangements. The first is the order created after 1945 to prevent another total war and to organise relations among sovereign states. The second is the more recent system that developed under American primacy after the Cold War. The retreat of the latter is serious. The erosion of the former would be catastrophic.

The strategic question is therefore not whether the United Nations can recover the breadth of its post-1990 agenda. It is whether states can restore the limited political function that once made the organisation indispensable: creating diplomatic space when great-power rivalry, formal deadlock and domestic political constraints make direct compromise difficult. That function belongs above all to the office of the Secretary-General.

“It has been said that the United Nations was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell.”

DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY, 13 MAY 1954

01 Two international orders

The post-1945 settlement was never a liberal system in the contemporary sense. It was a political bargain among victorious powers, institutionalised through the Security Council and its veto, but framed by the sovereign equality of states and the prohibition on the use of force. Its founding ambition was expressed with unusual clarity in the Charter’s determination to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” (United Nations, 1945). The structure was unequal, yet its normative language proved more universal than its founders initially intended.

Decolonisation transformed that language into political leverage. Newly independent Asian and African states did not merely enter an existing organisation. They changed its purpose by insisting that sovereignty, dignity and non-interference apply beyond Europe and the Americas. The United Nations became part of the process

through which an imperial world was reorganised into a formally universal society of states. This transition was incomplete and often coercive, but it gave weaker states a legal identity, a diplomatic forum and a framework within which national institutions could be built (Getachew, 2019).

The post-Cold War order was different. American military and economic predominance reduced the need for mediation among competing great powers. The United Nations expanded into electoral assistance, multidimensional peace operations, humanitarian coordination, development and rights promotion. Many of these activities were valuable, but they were embedded in a system whose political centre lay outside the United Nations, in Western power, alliances, markets and donor influence.

Confusing these orders produces a strategic error. Middle powers may seek to preserve elements of post-Cold War multilateralism through the G20, BRICS or regional coalitions. Such arrangements can coordinate interests, but they cannot by themselves reproduce the universal legitimacy of the Charter or the Secretary-General's capacity to speak to adversaries without formally joining either camp. Institutional format matters less than the purpose it serves. The first-order objective remains the prevention of total war; multilateral process is an instrument, not an end.

02 U Thant and the mechanics of de-escalation

Cold War paralysis did not eliminate the United Nations' political role. It shifted initiative from the Security Council to the Secretary-General. Dag Hammarskjöld pioneered an activist use of the office during the Suez Crisis. U Thant subsequently combined that institutional inheritance with the legitimacy of the newly decolonised world. As a Burmese diplomat backed by Afro-Asian and non-aligned states, he could present mediation not as an extension of Western influence, but as the exercise of an independent international responsibility.

The Cuban Missile Crisis illustrates the mechanism. After President John F. Kennedy announced the American naval quarantine on 22 October 1962, U Thant consulted representatives of non-aligned states and appealed to Washington and Moscow to suspend the actions driving the confrontation. He exchanged public and private messages with both governments, helped create time for bargaining and travelled to Havana to engage Fidel Castro. The eventual settlement was negotiated by the superpowers, not imposed by the United Nations. Yet U Thant's intervention supplied a neutral point of reference and a face-saving diplomatic frame at the moment when each side needed to retreat without appearing to capitulate (Thant Myint-U, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 1962).

Four principles emerge from this episode. First, mediation requires presence before positions harden. Second, impartiality does not mean moral equivalence; it means maintaining sufficient trust to communicate with all relevant actors. Third, effective mediation offers politically usable exits, especially when leaders are constrained by audiences, alliances and military credibility. Fourth, the Secretary-General's authority depends on support from states that are not direct parties to the confrontation. U Thant's personal temperament mattered, but it operated within a coalition that supplied legitimacy and political protection.

This model did not depend on a large bureaucracy. A small political team, direct access to leaders and a willingness to accept reputational risk were more important than budgetary scale. The lesson is not that individual courage can replace power. It is that a universal institution can convert limited formal authority into influence when timing, discretion, coalition support and strategic empathy coincide.

03 From peacemaking to multidimensional peace operations

The mediation capacity survived the ideological conflicts of the 1970s. Under Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the United Nations contributed to settlements involving the Iran-Iraq War, Central America, southern Africa and Cambodia. The end of the Cold War then opened space for ambitious peace operations designed to implement agreements, demobilise armed groups, organise elections and rebuild institutions.

This transformation should not be dismissed as bureaucratic drift. Empirical research indicates that adequately deployed peacekeepers can reduce civilian victimisation and lower the risk of renewed violence (Hultman et al., 2014; Clayton & Dorussen, 2022). The organisation also developed indispensable humanitarian and technical capacities. The problem lies elsewhere: peacekeeping after an agreement and peacemaking during an interstate crisis are different functions. Success in the first does not preserve expertise, access or political confidence in the second.

The distinction is equally important in civil wars. External actors still lack a general theory capable of moving complex societies from active conflict to stable peace. International engagement can protect civilians and sustain negotiations, but standardised governance templates may underestimate local political economies, regional interference, arms flows, sanctions effects and the interests that perpetuate violence. The mixed record in Myanmar, Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo warrants analytical modesty. It does not justify disengagement, but it does caution against assuming that technical programming can substitute for a viable political settlement.

A credible reform agenda must therefore separate three questions: which specialised agencies deliver public goods effectively; which peace operations have a realistic political mandate; and how the core United Nations can rebuild a high-level capacity to prevent interstate escalation. Treating all three as a single debate about the organisation's size obscures both achievements and failures.

04 The Secretary-General in a multipolar order

No Secretary-General can order a state to abandon war. The office becomes useful when adversaries want, or may soon need, a channel that allows them to explore compromise without immediately paying the political cost of direct concessions. Its value is thus contingent, but contingency is not irrelevance. In nuclear crises, even a modest probability of creating time or preventing miscalculation carries exceptional strategic weight.

The failure to act early also imposes costs. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, intensive travel to Moscow, Kyiv and Washington might not have changed the Kremlin's decision. That counterfactual cannot be established. A more visible preventive effort could nevertheless have tested proposals, preserved channels and demonstrated that the Charter's chief administrative officer understood the threat as a direct challenge to international peace. Diplomatic failure after a serious attempt can preserve institutional relevance; absence from the decisive phase reinforces the perception of marginality.

A crisis over Taiwan would be still more difficult. Beijing regards the issue as internal and would almost certainly resist Security Council action. Precisely for that reason, the Council could become paralysed while the global demand for de-escalation intensified. There is no ready-made formula. The Secretary-General would need relationships with Chinese, American and regional leaders established before the crisis, a small team capable of discreet shuttle diplomacy and backing from states trusted by more than one side.

China's position creates both a constraint and an opportunity. As a permanent member, it benefits from the institutional hierarchy of the United Nations and repeatedly affirms the centrality of the Charter. It may prefer to shape an existing universal system rather than construct an entirely separate order. That does not make Chinese policy altruistic, nor does it guarantee acceptance of mediation in disputes involving core national interests. It does suggest that the United Nations remains one of the few arenas in which Chinese power, American power and the sovereignty claims of smaller states are already embedded in a common legal vocabulary.

The next Secretary-General should therefore be selected as a potential mediator, not principally as the manager of an extensive administrative system. The essential qualities are political courage, restraint under criticism, empathy without naivety, access to leaders and the capacity to understand several incompatible narratives simultaneously. Character alone is insufficient. A coalition of middle, small and non-aligned states must be prepared to defend the office's independence and invite its engagement before crises become militarised.

05 Reform, Africa and Morocco

Security Council reform remains necessary because a body whose permanent membership reflects 1945 cannot indefinitely claim full political legitimacy in the 2020s. Africa's exclusion from permanent membership is the clearest structural imbalance. The African Union continues to defend the Ezulwini Consensus, which calls for at least two permanent African seats, with the veto for as long as it exists, and five non-permanent seats (African Union, 2026). This demand concerns representation, equality and ownership of decisions that often affect the continent directly.

Representation and effectiveness, however, should not be conflated. Enlarging the Council may improve legitimacy while making agreement more complex. Extending the veto could correct an inequality yet deepen paralysis. These are not arguments against reform; they are reasons to evaluate reforms against two distinct tests: whether they make the institution more representative, and whether they improve its ability to manage imminent threats to peace.

Near-term action should focus on measures that do not require Charter amendment. The selection process for the next Secretary-General should give decisive weight to demonstrated peacemaking ability. A compact political unit should be protected from wider budget cuts. Groups of African, Asian, Latin American and European middle powers should provide advance political backing for preventive missions. The organisation should also develop clearer practices for confidential good offices, including how to preserve impartial access when public diplomacy becomes polarised. These measures are institutionally modest but strategically consequential.

Africa has a particular stake in this restoration. The continent was central to the United Nations' transformation into a universal institution, hosts many of its peace operations and contributes substantial personnel, yet remains structurally underrepresented in the Council. African states can do more than demand seats. They can rebuild the political coalition that once gave the Secretary-General room to act independently of the major powers. Such a coalition would not reproduce the non-aligned movement mechanically; it would organise practical support around de-escalation, sovereign equality and opposition to great-power war.

Morocco occupies a relevant position within this agenda. United Nations data placed the Kingdom ninth among contributors of uniformed personnel in January 2026, with 1,334 personnel deployed. Since 1960, more than 84,000 Moroccan military personnel have served across 15 United Nations operations, while Morocco has also supported Francophone peacekeeping training through the Triangular Partnership Programme (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2026; United Nations Morocco, 2025). These are established contributions, not proof of a distinct mediation doctrine.

The strategic inference is nevertheless credible. Morocco can connect operational experience in peacekeeping with diplomatic investment in preventive mediation, African representation and multilingual training. Its African, Atlantic and Euro-Mediterranean relationships offer channels across regions increasingly affected by the same security pressures, especially in the Sahel and West Africa. The most useful contribution would be practical rather than declaratory: training political officers, supporting discreet dialogue formats and joining a cross-regional coalition committed to protecting the Secretary-General's good offices.

Institutional reform will remain incomplete without cultural renewal. The generations that built the United Nations had direct experience of total war and empire. Their restraint was not automatic idealism; it was a response to catastrophe. That lived memory has weakened. Education, publishing and public culture commemorate military victory more readily than successful mediation, even though crises avoided leave no ruins through which to announce their importance. Reconstructing the political prestige of restraint is therefore part of rebuilding the institution's capacity to act.

Conclusion

The United Nations cannot restore American unipolarity, eliminate great-power rivalry or resolve every civil war. Nor should its future be measured against such impossible standards. Its enduring value lies in a narrower and more urgent proposition: adversaries require a legitimate channel through which escalation can be interrupted before coercive commitments become irreversible.

The central reform is consequently political before it is organisational. Select a Secretary-General capable of mediation. Give the office a small, expert and protected political capacity. Build a coalition of states willing to support early engagement. Continue the longer struggle for representative reform, especially for Africa, while recognising that legitimacy and operational agility are separate objectives.

The decisive test is not whether the United Nations can end every war. It is whether states will preserve a neutral political instrument before the moment arrives when they urgently need one. In a fragmented nuclear order, creating time for diplomacy may again become the organisation's most important contribution to survival.

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