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Echoes of Failure: Is the United Nations Following the League of Nations?[1]

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Once upon a time there was an international organization entrusted with an ambitious and noble mission: To foster cooperation and understanding among nations, to maintain peace and security, to promote friendly relations, and to advance social progress, human rights, and better standards of living. Yet it failed at the most fundamental test of all, preventing war among its members. Having lost its credibility, it gradually became irrelevant and slipped into obscurity. In its place, states reverted to alliances, rivalries, and power politics.

This is not a speculative warning from a future historian looking back at our time. It is a reminder of the fate of the League of Nations and of the catastrophe that followed its failure.

Today, one cannot escape the uneasy parallel. If the United Nations continues to be sidelined, it risks following the same trajectory as its predecessor. The UN has become trapped in the structural constraints of its own design: A Security Council paralysed by the veto power of major states, each able to block action when its own interests are at stake. As a result, the organization has repeatedly failed to act decisively in the face of major conflicts. It could not prevent Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008, nor its annexation of Crimea in 2014, nor the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. That war continues with no end in sight.

A similar paralysis is evident in the Middle East. The ongoing tensions involving Israel, Iran, and the United States risk escalating into a broader regional conflict. Yet the Security Council remains gridlocked, unable to move beyond statements and symbolic gestures. In such circumstances, the United Nations should not be reduced to silence. Even when formal decisions are blocked, there remains space for political initiative, mediation, and moral leadership.

Here, the role of the Secretary-General becomes critical. The office was never meant to be merely administrative; it carries an inherent political responsibility. Yet what we have seen is caution where urgency is required. The Secretary-General has not meaningfully inserted himself into active mediation efforts aimed at even a ceasefire, let

[1] You can access the version of the article published on Substack here.

alone a broader political settlement. Others, such as Pakistan, supported by a number of middle powers have stepped in to facilitate dialogue where the UN has hesitated.

To be sure, the United Nations has made significant contributions in development, humanitarian assistance, and norm-setting. But when measured against its primary mandate, peace and security, it has fallen short. Some may argue that today's leaders, whether in Washington, Moscow, or elsewhere, are not inclined to listen. There is truth in that. Yet the United Nations was never meant to operate only when convenient. Its authority also rests on its moral standing, embodied in the voice and actions of the Secretary-General. That authority must be exercised, not merely invoked through carefully worded statements.

Diplomacy requires visibility, persistence, and risk. It means engaging publicly and privately, travelling to capitals, mobilizing coalitions, and shaping international opinion. It requires the Secretary-General to act not as a bystander but as an active political actor. Visiting Moscow once, at the outset of the invasion, cannot be considered sufficient engagement in a conflict of such magnitude and duration.

We are, increasingly, witnessing a return to an international system driven by hard power. As this trend deepens, international organizations risk becoming marginal. And the more they are sidelined, the more states will seek alternative mechanisms, ad hoc coalitions, regional alignments, or unilateral action to manage crises. This is a dangerous feedback loop.

The tragic irony is that many of these wars have proven futile in achieving their stated objectives, yet they persist. Years into the war in Ukraine, the human and economic costs continue to mount with no clear resolution. In the Middle East, escalation cycles repeat themselves with alarming regularity. If this pattern continues unchecked, we risk drifting back toward a 19th-century model of international relations one defined by spheres of influence, shifting alliances, and the absence of effective multilateral restraint.

This is precisely why middle powers have a critical role to play. If major powers are unwilling or unable to act responsibly within the existing system, others must step forward to defend it. However, this is easier said than done. The experience of the 1990s, particularly the collective response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, was ultimately underpinned by clear leadership, above all from the United States. It was this leadership that enabled the formation and cohesion of a broad coalition.

The question today is therefore unavoidable: Who can play such a role now? Middle powers, by definition, lack the weight of a superpower acting alone. Their strength lies in coordination, legitimacy, and collective action but this requires leadership, political will, and a readiness to assume risk. No obvious candidate has yet emerged to organize and sustain such an effort. Without a focal point for leadership, calls for collective action risk remaining rhetorical.

Consistency is also essential. It is not enough to condemn aggression selectively. The reluctance of many countries in the so-called Global South to condemn Russia reflects, in part, a broader dissatisfaction with perceived double standards, particularly in relation to Israel's actions in Gaza. These perceptions, whether justified or not, weaken the possibility of building a unified response to violations of international law.

If there is no shared understanding of what constitutes aggression, if principles are applied unevenly depending on geography or political alignment, then the very foundation of collective security erodes. And without that foundation, neither the United Nations nor any alternative framework will be able to prevent or stop conflicts effectively.

The lesson of history is clear: Institutions do not fail overnight. They are gradually hollowed out by inaction, inconsistency, and loss of credibility. The League of Nations was not abandoned in a single moment; it was rendered irrelevant over time. The United Nations still has the capacity to avoid that fate, but only if it is used as it was intended: As an active instrument of peace, not a passive observer of conflict.