

THE UNITED NATIONS AND NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

By David L Williams, in collaboration with the THIMUN Foundation

THIMUN: Preparation
and Practice –
Booklet 2

The United Nations was conceived and created at a very different time in history from the one we live in today. The League of Nations, founded after World War I, had failed to prevent a second World War. Thus, in 1945, the so-called Great Powers, namely the victors of World War II, realised that a stronger international forum was required to preserve the peace.

A primary purpose of the United Nations was for the leaders and legislatures of the nations of the world to accept the need to work together both to prevent a third world war and to tackle the great needs of humanity as a whole. This was to be done by creating diplomatic channels to break down the divisions among nations: a huge task, given the fact that all agreements would be conditional upon the acceptance of and respect for national sovereignty.

When we evaluate and measure both the successes and failures of the UN, we have to bear in mind that the strength of any success or failure has been dependent on the willingness and the capacity of the Member States involved to work together for the common good.

Any failure by the United Nations is merely an indication of the inability, and in some cases refusal, of a state or states to join in the struggle for a common good. Diplomats and leaders of nations are trained to accept their roles as representatives and defenders of their nations. Foremost in their minds is this national interest, often above and beyond the common good.

The power of the nation state has reigned supreme over issues which often required some sacrifice of national interest for the greater good. In recent years this self-interest has been challenged by events and circumstances beyond the control of any individual nation state e.g., climate change and other threats to the environment, the revolution in communications and the development of social media, as well as the actions of non-national and transnational groups ready and willing to engage in acts of terrorism, war and abuse of human rights.

The principle of national sovereignty, which allowed the United Nations Organisation to be acceptable to so many nations in the first place, is being undermined by such forces. This should move the world community away from reliance on powerful independent states and towards acceptance of the need for interdependence and cooperation.

In the Outcome Document of the World Summit in 2005 the Member States declared:

We recognize that we are facing a whole range of threats that require our urgent, collective and more determined response.

We also recognize that, in accordance with the Charter, addressing such threats requires cooperation among all the principal organs of the United Nations within their respective mandates.

We acknowledge that we are living in an interdependent and global world and that many of today's threats recognize no national boundaries, are interlinked and must be tackled at the global, regional and national levels in accordance with the Charter and international law.

The international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, ... to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. In this context, we are prepared to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council, ... should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

In recent years, there has been an increased awareness of what constitutes basic human rights and needs. Progress has been made in achieving agreement on many international issues and there has been a realisation by all governments that even greater efforts are needed if we are to protect ourselves and our environment.

As the United Nations calls for greater commitment and cooperation from Member States and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in exercising constructive diplomacy, students who are engaged in Model United Nations can play their part by living up to the goals expressed in the Preamble to the UN Charter. MUN participants can transform local custom and attitude into a global awareness and, in the process, agree on terms for action intended for the betterment of mankind. Through discussion and debate, MUN students can evaluate issues and formulate resolutions beyond national perspectives, balancing the many different national views with the greater good of a common humanity.

Seeing so many young people here from different countries coming together in support of our United Nations is really heartening to me. First, because the United Nations is your United Nations. It was created more than 50 years ago for the peoples of the world, whose future you are here to represent and serve. Second, because it is very encouraging to see that so many of you, the leaders of tomorrow, are actively engaged in our work.

Coming together and assuming the positions of different Member States, by walking in their shoes, as it were, you will gain new insights and understand that a diversity of points of view is what we have to live with in this world. This is good preparation for leadership of the twenty-first century.

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, addressing the delegates at the 34th Annual Session of THIMUN 2002