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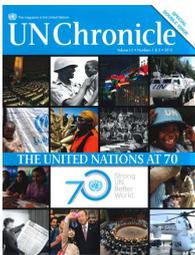
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17 September 2015

Mikhail Gorbachev. Today, much depends on leadership



The editors of the [UN Chronicle](#) asked me to contribute an article for this issue commemorating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. I agreed, since this is an institution unlike any other in terms of its mission, its universality and the hopes vested in it when it was created. Throughout my political career, the United Nations played an important and significant role.

I recall my address to the General Assembly in December 1988, when efforts to overcome global confrontation and end the cold war were yielding the first tangible results. Conditions were now in place for the United Nations to fulfill its intended mission—to become a platform for genuine cooperation among all Member States in their pursuit of lasting peace, conflict prevention and resolution, and solutions to global problems.

For the first time in many years, members of the Security Council were able to reach a consensus and agree on concerted effective actions, which allowed them to counter the aggression of the Iraqi regime against Kuwait. The United Nations was actively involved in settling other regional conflicts, and even the persistent confrontation in the Middle East no longer seemed insoluble. The international community and its universal Organization could now turn their attention to such global challenges as the environmental crisis, poverty and underdevelopment. The survival of hundreds of millions of people and of mankind itself depends upon finding solutions to these problems.



Mikhail Gorbachev addressing the forty-third session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, 7 December 1988.

Today, we must acknowledge that we have fallen far short of fulfilling all the expectations raised back then. There is no doubt, however, that over the years the United Nations has accomplished much and has demonstrated many times how necessary it is to Member States and people worldwide. It was within its walls that the initiative leading to the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was launched in 2000. The Millennium Project has focused Member States' attention on the problems that must be solved if millions of people around the world are to enjoy quality of life, decent livelihoods and a measure of dignity. Importantly, specific targets were set in this regard. Although the outcomes have yet to be analysed and it is already clear that not all the Goals have been achieved, the Project as a whole has been a constructive undertaking. Poverty is gradually declining, and millions of people are gaining access to education, health care, clean water and sanitation. I am glad that Green Cross International, an organization I helped to create and have been actively involved with, has made its own contribution to this vast endeavour, which must be continued and made more effective.

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This does not mean, however, that we can be satisfied with the course of world affairs in the post-cold-war era. Rather, we have good reason to be sharply critical of what has happened and continues to unfold before our eyes. Instead of a truly new world order, which, in the words of the late Pope John Paul II, would be safer, more just and more humane, we have witnessed the escalation of random, often chaotic processes that are beyond the reach of global governance.

This has affected the role and stature of the United Nations. Its influence suffered greatly when it was barred from the process of finding solutions to challenging security threats, particularly in the former Yugoslavia and the Middle East. Unilateral actions by Member States contradict the very essence of the world Organization. Events of recent years have demonstrated that such policy is not only dangerous, but counterproductive for everyone, including its adherents. Instead of solving problems, it makes them worse and creates new, often more severe and perilous complications. Yet it seems that not all countries have learned from this bitter experience.

The last year and a half has proved particularly challenging for the international community. Mutual trust has been lost between leading States, including those upon which the Charter of the United Nations confers a special responsibility to maintain international peace and security.

The fundamental principles that should form the foundation for international relations are being defied. These are the principles of dialogue, respect for mutual interests, compromise, and peaceful approaches to disputes and conflict resolution. Of course, the United Nations cannot be expected to function effectively under such circumstances.

What worries me most is that disagreements between the leading Powers with regard to the Ukrainian crisis have brought their interaction and cooperation on many important global problems to a virtual standstill. High-level contacts are now kept to a minimum, and when they do occur, they often resemble the dialogue of the deaf. The situation is increasingly reminiscent of the state of affairs of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when global leaders avoided meeting with one another, while the world slid towards the abyss. Today it is imperative to demonstrate the political will to break the impasse and begin to restore confidence and normal interaction.

I believe that we must now return to issues of principle, the top priority being the inadmissibility of the use of nuclear weapons. Military doctrines and concepts adopted by nuclear Powers in recent years contain language that represents a step backward in comparison to the Joint Soviet-United States Statement of 1985, which emphasized the inadmissibility of nuclear war. I am convinced that another statement, perhaps at the level of the Security Council, must be issued in order to reaffirm that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought"!

Considering the important role of the Russian Federation and the United States of America in the world, I have called upon the leaders of these two countries to meet in order to discuss the entire global agenda, review all issues and develop a framework for cooperation in order to resolve them. Disagreements over a single regional conflict, albeit a very serious one, cannot be allowed to completely disrupt world affairs. I am confident that the other permanent members of the Security Council could also actively contribute to initiating a meaningful dialogue and identifying mutual interests in order to steer world politics back towards cooperation rather than confrontation.

There is no doubt that today, much depends on leadership. If leaders acknowledge their responsibility and overcome long-standing disagreements, including subjective grievances, it will be possible to find a way out of the impasse. Thirty years ago, we managed to do so under much more difficult circumstances, when the political stand-off seemed insuperable and the stockpiles of nuclear weapons were much larger than now. Today, we must not panic, nor cave in to pessimism. Figuratively speaking, it is possible to clear the skies over the United Nations Headquarters and create conditions for the global Organization to fulfil its mission.

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