

The United Nations

Overview

- The **United Nations (UN)** was created at the end of World War II as an international peacekeeping organization and a forum for resolving conflicts between nations.
- The UN replaced the ineffective League of Nations, which had failed to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War.
- The UN was established on October 24, 1945, with headquarters in Manhattan, New York City, and reflected the rise of the United States to global leadership in the postwar period.

Negotiating a Postwar World Order

In 1944, delegations from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the Republic of China—four of the main Allied powers in World War II—met in Washington, DC to negotiate the parameters of the postwar world and to discuss the establishment of the international organization that would become known as the **United Nations (UN)**.

Emblem of the United Nations, featuring a globe surrounded by olive branches. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.



The United Nations replaced the [League of Nations](#), which had been created at the end of the First World War to provide states with an international forum for the peaceful resolution of disputes. Even though US President Woodrow Wilson was one of the key supporters of the League of Nations, the United States never officially joined the organization due to intense opposition from isolationist members of Congress. The League of Nations ultimately proved ineffective in preventing the outbreak of another world war and was formally dissolved in 1946.

The United States played an instrumental role in the founding of the United Nations. The UN Charter, with its emphasis on peace, security, international law, economic development, and human rights, reflected the influence of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who shared a vision for the postwar world. In 1941, the two leaders drafted the **Atlantic Charter**, which declared that there would be no territorial aggrandizement as a result of the war, that postwar international relations would be cooperative, and that disputes between states would be resolved through peaceful negotiation and not the use or threat of force. The Atlantic Charter eventually became the basis for the UN Charter.

Excerpt from the Preamble to the UN Charter

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED

- to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and
- 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, and
- to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and
- to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

AND FOR THESE ENDS

- to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and *to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and
- to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and
- to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

HAVE RESOLVED TO COMBINE OUR EFFORTS TO ACCOMPLISH THESE AIMS

Accordingly, our respective Governments, through representatives assembled in the city of San Francisco, who have exhibited their full powers found to be in good and due form, have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations and do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations.

The extent of US involvement in the creation of the United Nations, as well as the location of its main headquarters in New York City, demonstrates the rise of the United States to global leadership in the postwar period.

The Structure and Function of the United Nations

The United Nations has several main bodies that serve different purposes. The Secretariat is the main administrative organ of the UN. It commissions research and applies the findings of studies to making the UN a more effective and efficient organization.

The **General Assembly** is the main deliberative body of the UN. Every country that is a member of the UN is represented in the General Assembly. The UN General Assembly convenes annually to deliberate and vote on important issues affecting world peace and security. The General Assembly can only make recommendations to member-states; it cannot make binding decisions, nor can it enforce those decisions – only the Security Council has the authority to do that.

The **Security Council** is composed of five permanent members—the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia, and China— which were the five main Allied powers in the Second World War. There are also ten non-permanent seats on the Security Council that rotate between different countries every two years. The purpose of the Security Council is to peacefully resolve international conflicts and prevent the outbreak of war. UN Security Council resolutions are binding and are enforced by UN peacekeepers, which are military forces contributed by member-states.

The **Economic and Social Council** (ECOSOC) was created to promote international economic and social cooperation and development, particularly in the developing world, or what was referred to during the Cold War as the “Third World.”

Finally, the **International Court of Justice** (ICJ) is the judicial organ of the UN. At its headquarters at the Hague, Netherlands, the court hears legal disputes between states and issues opinions on legal matters submitted by members of the General Assembly or other UN agencies.

The United Nations in the Cold War

Because the Soviet Union and the United States both held permanent seats on the UN Security Council, as the [Cold War](#) heated up, disunity between the two great powers interfered with the international organization's basic peacekeeping mission. This was partly due to the dual nature of the UN as a forum for negotiating disputes among states and a platform for influencing international opinion. The Soviet Union and the United States both used the UN as a propaganda platform, to win hearts and minds in the Cold War. Many of the proposals submitted by US and Soviet officials were aimed primarily at criticizing each other, and since each superpower had a veto in the Security Council, disputes could not be resolved unless both Cold War rivals agreed, which was rare. This had the effect of stalling negotiations and prolonging conflict.

The Evolution of the UN

In the 1950s and 1960s, **decolonization**, or the process by which former colonial territories became independent states, transformed the composition and functioning of the UN. During this time period, dozens of newly independent countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East joined the United Nations and sought to redirect the energies of the organization toward easing the transition to independence. As a result of the activism of states referred to during the Cold War as the "Third World," the UN took on additional responsibilities for economic, political, and social development, and the monitoring and enforcement of fundamental human rights.

What do you think?

1. Why was the United Nations founded? What does the UN Charter tell us about its main goals?
2. How did the Cold War affect the functioning and purpose of the United Nations?
3. How did the UN evolve over the course of the twentieth century?