

Putin's war in Ukraine is the ultimate test for the UN

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Global crises like the one unfolding in Ukraine are moments of truth for the relevance of international institutions. In the 1930s, an increasingly hobbled League of Nations failed to address mounting threats to the peace, including Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia and Hitler's defiant march into the Sudetenland.

Some of our postwar institutions are finally rising to the challenge posed by Vladimir Putin's designs on Ukraine. NATO members are more united than the Russian leader anticipated, and the European Union has not only imposed unprecedented forms of financial punishment, but also promised to purchase and deliver weapons to Ukraine.

Both NATO and the EU, however, are institutions with limited memberships. Solidarity among the (relatively) like-minded is reasonable to expect. But what of the United Nations, the global body created precisely, in the words of the UN Charter preamble, to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war"? The UN's broad membership means that sometimes it seems to reflect the world's divisions, rather than provide solutions to them.

Let's remember that the UN umbrella covers different forms of engagement in conflict. Its various agencies, including the World Food Programme and the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, are already mobilized. The UNHCR, in particular, is facing one of its greatest tests, now that a million Ukrainians are on the move.

By contrast, the key intergovernmental chamber of the UN, its 15-member Security Council, has fallen woefully short of the two goals set for it by the founders of the organization: to manage great power rivalry and to negotiate collective action to meet international security challenges.

Instead, the Council table in New York has witnessed surreal moments during this crisis, solidifying the view of many that it has become incapable of discharging the responsibilities entrusted to it. It was Kenya's envoy in New York who spoke the uncomfortable truth after Russia's predictable veto of a Security Council resolution on Ukraine: "Multilateralism is on its deathbed."

But the story has not ended there. Responding to the deadlock, 11 Security Council members voted Monday to call for an Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly. Under the little-known Uniting for Peace Resolution – passed in 1950 and used in crises like the one in Suez in 1956 – the Assembly can convene in situations where the Security Council, "because of lack of unanimity of the permanent members," fails to fulfill its role.

The Uniting for Peace procedure – used only 10 times in the history of the UN and most recently four decades ago – offered a chance to demonstrate that the conflict in Ukraine is not one of Russia vs. the West, but Russia vs. the world. This was a message only the United Nations General Assembly could deliver. The result was a powerful diplomatic rebuke of Mr. Putin’s actions: 141 states supported an Assembly resolution deploring “the aggression of the Russian Federation,” demanding that Russia “completely and unconditionally withdraw” its forces from Ukraine and to effectively reverse its recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk.

As the skeptics will say, a resolution of the General Assembly is symbolic and – unlike a Security Council resolution – non-binding. It cannot end the war and is no substitute for concrete punishment. But words are not meaningless in international politics, particularly when considering who uttered them. Those voting in favour represented all parts of the world, including close Russian allies such as Serbia and Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil, and powerful countries in Africa such as Kenya, Nigeria and Egypt. The five states voting against constitute a small club of which, as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken remarked, no one should desire to be a member: Russia, Syria, North Korea, Belarus and Eritrea.

The abstentions also spoke volumes, including from key geopolitical players such as India, Pakistan, South Africa and, of course, China, whose top diplomat argued that the UN’s goal should be to promote peace rather than to take sides. An overwhelming majority of states, however, concluded there could be no prevarication when the founding document of the organization had been blatantly violated.

And so the General Assembly largely rose to Mr. Putin’s challenge. But it could have done, and still could do, even more. In the past, the Assembly used Uniting for Peace to call on a wider set of states to impose sanctions on countries in violation of the Charter, as it did in relation to Southern Rhodesia in the 1960s and 1970s. It could also mandate a commission of inquiry into potential atrocity crimes committed in Ukraine and lay the groundwork for future accountability.

More broadly, the General Assembly’s response to the paralysis in the Security Council could intensify efforts to rethink the global architecture we have to manage international security. Writing two decades ago, then UN secretary-general Kofi Annan stated: “If the collective conscience of humanity ... cannot find in the United Nations its greatest tribune, there is a grave danger that it will look elsewhere for peace and for justice.” The council’s recent performance – not just in relation to Ukraine, but also to other crises – suggests we have already entered that dangerous terrain.

Coming out of this crisis, diplomats could resume deliberation on reforming both the membership of the Security Council and its working procedures – including the veto power. Other options include encouraging a new institutional balance between the Security Council and other intergovernmental bodies.

While these efforts will face resistance, not least from China, they could serve as one positive legacy of the tragedy in Ukraine.