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Book review  
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## **The United Nations: An Introduction**

**Sven Bernhard Gareis and Johannes Varwick, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 284 pages, Paperback £ 21.99, Hardback £ 60, ISBN-13:978-1-4039-3539-7.**

For students of international relations, the knowledge of the role of the United Nations (UN) in international politics is vital. However getting to grips with such a complex and wide-ranging organisation is a daunting task. This book provides a solid overview of the UN, its institutions and their relevance to the stability of the international system. The need for a reform of the UN to handle new threats to international peace and security is also explored.

This volume was written for the benefit of students of international relations, human rights and international development. Other beneficiaries include international organisations, academics, diplomats, international law practitioners, policy makers and anyone interested in the study of international organisations.

The authors give an informative history and principles of the UN charter, precisely to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the organs and specialised agencies, and analyse the programs and financing of the UN. They then examine the UN from a theoretical perspective based on realist, idealist and institutionalist theories. The work also assesses the UN in the context of the globalising world and criticises the impact of globalisation on the primary tasks of the UN. Thereafter the book explores the principle of collective security and gives an assessment of chapters 6, 7 and 8 of the UN charter. It also analyses the concept and practice of peacekeeping and other concepts like sanctions as instruments of peace-maintenance and disarmament, and critically examines the UN and international terrorism.

The work also gives an appraisal of the human rights concept and analyses the practice of human rights protection and the treaty bodies. The authors also discuss the concepts of humanitarian intervention and the international criminal justice. Likewise, the authors examine the concepts of international development and environmental protection. They then pull all the different chapters together through an analysis of global governance and multi-lateral cooperation as opposed to unilateralism. The work concludes with an assessment of the UN and considers its prospects in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

This is a finely written, informative and well-structured book with a precise narrative that gives a bold critique of the UN and the need for reform. The underlying argument is that, although the UN is expected to handle almost all international issues ranging from conflict resolution to environmental protection, quite often the organisation appears to have no foundation, thus justifying the call for reform. The nature of threats to international peace and security are constantly changing and the UN

needs to be flexible in order to combat those changing threats by reforming its structure, organs and agenda.

The authors quote Kofi Anan's call for reforms to address development, security and the environment (p.214). However, as the authors admit, the charter is rigid and difficult to amend, plus certain proposals of reform may need States to give up some of their sovereignty, but they are not willing to do so. Reforming the General Assembly to institute a parliament would strengthen the move towards multilateralism, though it is debatable whether States would agree to it.

Concerning the proposal to review the Security Council membership, it can be argued that since its inception, there has not been a major war on the scale of World War I and II. Therefore the current Security Council is effective to a large extent. However, an emerging challenge concerns regional organisations like the European Union clamouring for seats on the Security Council. With its impressive record in peacekeeping and financial support to the UN, the EU is in a strong bargaining position. However, if successful, other regional organisations may also demand seats on the Security Council, a complicated situation that States are eager to avoid.

The authors offer some thought-provoking ideas about how to bring the UN in line with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, especially in light of new threats to international peace and security like terrorism and climate change. The view that peacekeeping can be privatised is appealing, though the authors may need to explore further how regional organisations can get more involved in it.

Other reform matters that needed mention involve the administration and management of the UN. These, according to Boutros Boutros Ghali (2005), may be secondary to the overarching policy concerns, but are vital to the running, functioning and control of the organisation. Rampant corruption, according to Paul Volcker (2005), has only been given lip service by UN officials. According to the Opinion Journal, the secrecy in the UN - especially enhanced by diplomatic immunity - is a contradiction to the modern day free and open political systems which are a beacon of peace and prosperity, which the UN is supposed to promote.

Overall the book gives an excellent analysis of the organs, strengths and weaknesses of the UN. It suggests different ideas to reform the institution in order to address new threats to peace and security. The authors explicitly reinforce the contradiction that, although the UN is seen as the right forum to address a variety of issues in the international system, its powers are limited due to the fact that a stronger UN would mean less sovereignty enjoyed by the member States, which presents a dilemma for these States. Should sovereignty be sacrificed for the sake of greater multilateralism within the UN structures?

## **References**

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