

TRANSCRIPT

John Torpey 00:00

Hi, my name is John Torpey, and I'm Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute to bring scholarly expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. Today we consider the United Nations on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of its founding in 1945. We're fortunate to have with us today Professor Carrie Walling, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Albion College in Michigan, where she directs the Prentiss M. Brown Honors Program. Professor Walling is author of *All Necessary Measures, the United Nations and Humanitarian Intervention* published by University of Pennsylvania press, and she recently contributed an article on the Security Council's complex, complicated relationship with human rights enforcement, titled *The United Nations Security Council and Human Rights*, and that appeared in a special issue of the Journal of Global Governance on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the UN. Her current book project, *Human Rights and Dignity for All*, explores how advocates use international human rights to promote social and political change in the United States and around the world. Professor Walling is a member of the Academic Council for the Study of the UN System as a security fellow with the Truman National Security Project. Thanks so much for joining us today, Carrie Walling.

Carrie Walling 01:40

Thank you. It's really great to be here. And I can't think of a better way to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the UN than a conversation with you today.

John Torpey 2:03

Oh, thank you so much. We're very glad to have you with us. So, let's start with a little bit of history. Given the fate of its predecessor effort at global governance, the League of Nations, it's a little bit hard to believe that the United Nations has now been in existence for three quarters of a century. Why do you think it lasted this long? And what has changed in the world to make that happen?

Carrie Walling 02:20

Yeah, that's a great question, and I think a great place to start. And while there's a lot of ways to answer this, I think of three interconnected reasons. And I'd say the first is that the United Nations has proven useful. With its near universal membership, it's become an effective forum for states to peacefully be able to air their grievances, and also to organize to address common problems. I also think its usefulness is shown through the lifesaving work of its family of specialized agencies, organizations like UNICEF, the World Food Program, UNHCR, the World Health Organization. I think these UN agencies are really helping people meet their basic needs around education, health care, food. And so it's working for a number of people.

I think the second piece has to do with its enforcement power. The UN does have some meaningful enforcement power and authority through the UN Security Council. I'd say the Security Council is the preeminent institution of international politics, because it has this ability to regulate the use of force in international affairs. And because its decisions are intended to be binding on UN members, when the members of the Security Council have political will and agree on the need to comply with charter principles. They can take effective action to maintain international security.

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And then I guess the third reason for me what really stands out is the normative impact of the organization. If we think about issues of sustainable development, justice and accountability, human rights, these all speak to the aspirations of the world's peoples. And they have fundamentally changed people's expectations of state behavior, and redefined the very meaning of state sovereignty, even at the United Nations so that it's become less about states' rights and a little bit more balance toward state responsibilities to its people. So what I think this has meant in practice, is that it's a place for like the US to go back to the UN Security Council. Yes, we regularly see power on display by permanent members there. But global norms have also fundamentally altered their institutional practice.

I think the greatest power that the Security Council really has is the ability to define the parameters of its own competence. So, when charter actually gives the Security Council that authority to define the meaning of a security threat, and, over time, we've seen that shift from this fundamental exclusive focus on state security, to a more human security approach. I guess the point that I'm trying to make is that the UN has shown an ability to evolve. It has struck a balance between maintaining fidelity to founding principles, and also shown at least a sufficient ability to adapt to changing circumstances, particularly over the last 30 years.

John Torpey 06:05

Interesting. So it has many achievements to claim for itself. But notwithstanding its relative longevity, and those achievements, the UN has come in for a lot of criticism of late, it seems, around issues such as its budget, the representation of the different countries that are represented in the Security Council, the behavior of some of its peacekeeping forces, and the rectitude or otherwise, of the Human Rights Council. How would you respond to those criticisms or others that you think are serious?

Carrie Walling 06:44

Yeah, I think those are absolutely legitimate and well-founded criticisms. I think that the UN often falls short of our expectations. When it does, the consequences can be devastating. I guess what hurts the UN the most is when the gap between its rhetoric and its practice is exposed. Just thinking of today, and tomorrow, the opening of the UN General Assembly, the UN has really been putting gender equality at the forefront of its work. But, at last check, I think there's only about a dozen female speakers out of about 200 in the general debate.

I also think you mentioned the UN Security Council. We lose faith in the UN Security Council when permanent members violate charter principles with impunity. Whether it's Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, China's repression and possible genocide against Uighur Muslims, or blatant US hypocrisy on human rights, as has been recently demonstrated by unlawful police killings of black Americans and brutal repression of peaceful protests. The other the other thing that I think hurts the UN, harms its mission and its brand, is when it promotes accountability for its member states that falls short of taking real institutional responsibility for its own failures to protect populations that it's meant to serve, especially through Peace Operations.

So, I think you're right. While there is much to celebrate, there's also a fair amount to criticize. And I will be talking 25 years from now celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the UN, it's going to be because

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the UN get serious about reforming the Security Council so that it no longer disproportionately represents Europe over Africa and Asia, tackling institutionalized forms of discrimination, and also shifting this balance to make the UN more accountable to people than it is to states.

The last point that I'd make on this, though, is, while I agree there's much to criticize, I also think that it's very much the case that the UN often provides a convenient punching bag. For states, the UN only has as much political will, legitimacy, and capacity as its members truly want to give it. And many of the failures of the UN are actually failures of member states: failures of their solidarity and political will. And sometimes members inflict their own damage by making the UN the scapegoat. And I think that's been really clear. We can all express some disappointment in the World Health Organization, but at the same time, if you don't fund or share crucial information with the organization, it's going to be ill equipped to deal with a problem like our current global pandemic.

John Torpey 10:01

Right, it's a little bit like the Churchill line about democracy that it's better than all the other systems - that it's the worst, except it's better than all the other ones that are available. And basically, the United Nations has provided certain opportunities for states to work out problems that wouldn't have existed in its absence. But as you say it can also be a punching bag when it when it seems to misbehave, or when it seems not to be solving problems that's meant to solve.

So, your comments lead me to a couple of questions. One is about the way in which the United States is treated in the in the UN, and maybe the way in which it is perceived. I mean, it has recently reacted rather negatively to the possibility of prosecution of its representatives abroad and military people by the International Criminal Court. And there's been this tendency to suggest that we're not really subject to these kinds of criticisms or constraints. You mentioned the killing of black men by the police in the United States, which obviously has set off a lot of a lot of unrest in our cities and throughout the country really over the last few months. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that. And then I'll get into the other question that I had in mind. But how's it for the United States, which, obviously in many ways, was responsible for creating this post World War Two security and humanitarian architecture, but of late, it seems not particularly enthusiastic about that architecture.

Carrie Walling 12:03

Yeah, I think this is consistent US behavior. But it's certainly been more pronounced under the Trump administration. The United States seems to have always had these mixed feelings about multilateral action. As you stated, the United States has been at the forefront of creating institutions like the United Nations, and in promoting many of its core values, and a particularly complicated relationship around human rights, both promoting human rights, but yet showing an unwillingness to be held to those same standards, domestically. And part of this has to do with its domestic political culture in the United States, as well, as is the division of powers in our in our government.

I think one of the real challenges for the United Nations, though, is that the United States, as it steps back and continues to withdraw from the organization, that there has become a political vacuum there. And we have seen that there are other states like China, in particular, more than willing to step in and

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fill that gap. So while the United States is withdrawing, I think there's also a lot of frustration being expressed with the United States for failing to live up to that vision of leadership that many other countries in the world want and expect from the United States.

And it's particularly jarring when the US falls short. I'd have to say, I was really struck this summer by the fact that the emergency meeting of the Human Rights Council was held in the wake of the George Floyd murder. And even though it was not directed exclusively, or specifically at the United States, it was very clear that the United States' domestic human rights practices were very much on the minds of the international community, and that those were not dissimilar from the kinds of xenophobia and racism that we see happening within countries and between countries around the world. And so while one could look at that event and say, the United States walked away, with only being somewhat shamed, but not effective punishment.

I would say the fact that the United States really got called to the carpet in the international community, in and of itself was a very powerful statement about the power of the United Nations to have it impact and shift the conversation, even against powerful states, even if the form of that kind of punishment looks very different against some of the most powerful states like our permanent five members than it does for those with less economic and military power. Nonetheless, when the international community comes together, they can speak with a relatively united voice.

John Torpey 15:30

Right? It seems as though this is all part of a larger process. And it didn't only start with a Trump administration, but a process of sort of withdrawal from international affairs by the United States. And correspondingly a kind of erosion of the international architecture that was put into place after World War Two, of which the UN is in many ways, of course, the centerpiece.

So this kind of leads to my other question, and that is about the renewed nationalism and skepticism about globalization and global governance that seems to be abroad, not just in the United States, but somewhat more widely. I guess the question is, to what extent, is this, obviously in some ways, what killed the League of Nations? The UN has been around a lot longer, but it seems to be facing some serious headwinds. And I guess I wonder, what you think are the prospects that the UN will be around 25 years from now to serve as the coordinator of global peace, security, and human rights?

Carrie Walling 16:43

Yeah, well, I like to be cautiously optimistic, so I'm trying to remain hopeful. But I do have to admit, this is a very troubling moment. If you care about multilateral cooperation in global governance, I really think that it's unclear. And I think that the decisions that we make today, and how we decide to respond to this particular moment, is going to decide the future of the United Nations and the future of multilateral action. And I really honestly believe at this 75th year, we are at a crossroads. And we, meaning all the members of the United Nations, have to decide whether we want to nurture and maintain this institution, whether we want to fundamentally transform it, or if we're going to simply walk away and abandon it or just allow it to kind of wither through neglect.

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And my hope is that this moment of crisis will emphasize the necessity of an institution like the United Nations. Sometimes, when we can think about this, even domestically, when government is working, we don't know what needs notice. But we notice when it when it starts to fail. And I think that if the UN is going to stick around, it does have to become a more inclusive place where the benefits of cooperation are more widely shared among the world's peoples. This is a period of time where people are hurting and they're fearful, and historically that that hasn't boded well for cooperation. But I'm hoping that, maybe this week, we'll see some reinvigorated in a commitment towards the organization. But I really feel it hangs the balance. I feel like it's really hard to predict at this moment, which way it's going to go.

John Torpey 19:01

Interesting. And I mean, this leads directly into the next question I wanted to ask you, which is about the coronavirus pandemic and the UN's response. Obviously, the pandemic has seriously undermined the wellbeing of populations around the globe. We're on the brink, it seems, of surpassing the million mark in terms of the number of deaths from the from the illness. And obviously, this affects the possibilities for achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals that you mentioned earlier on in your remarks, such as the reduction of extreme poverty of the world. So how well do you think the UN is responding to the challenges generated by the pandemic, which would seem to be crucial to these questions of how it's going to move beyond this crossroads that you've described?

Carrie Walling 19:46

Yeah, I think, unfortunately, there's been a lot of mixed messaging. What I mean is, while I think that the Secretariat and the UN agencies have been very strong in terms of both their messaging of their appeal for global cooperation and certainly some of the actual work and assistance that's happening on the ground in some of the most devastated places. But I was truly devastated, as somebody who was a student of the Security Council – and maybe I shouldn't be surprised because I'm a student as a Security Council – by truly the failure of membership to speak with a unified voice. I mean, it took more than three months for the Security Council to be able to pass a resolution that simply lent their support to the Secretary General's call for a global ceasefire in the midst of the pandemic. So that was pretty distressing.

In terms of the SDGs, it is devastating, because we all were already behind on meeting those goals. And the coronavirus has certainly laid bare and exacerbated existing inequities, both within societies and between societies. We're seeing that those who are least able to cope are going to suffer the most. And we really risk rolling back existing gains in other areas, particularly education and gender equality.

I think all of this though has gone to show the necessity of an institution like the United Nations. I mean, certainly the pandemic is a truly transnational problem. COVID-19 doesn't respect sovereignty, it doesn't respect borders. And it's one of those problems that, only truly by working together, can governments solve it. So, I think it does underscore the value and importance of the UN. But this is the but, right? The political and underfunded UN, whose powerful members are choosing to turn inward and abandon global cooperation and leadership, make it difficult for the UN to meet the challenge of

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this moment. And certainly, this is a challenge that the Secretary General has labeled the most important, right of all of it.

And it's like it's our World War Three, it just came in a different form than what we were expecting, but I guess I'm hopeful that the UN can meet the moment. It is filled with principles and dedicated professionals. And there has been a great deal of solidarity among many of the member states of the UN. And so I hope that that they'll win the day. And that innovation can come out of challenge to cooperate to replace competition and isolation, particularly as we see the pandemic continue. This goes to your Churchill quote earlier; at this point, I think the UN is the best that we've got at the moment. And so we the world's people need it to be successful.

John Torpey 23:25

Right. So, another challenge that's arisen in recent years, this goes back far before the pandemic but is increasingly salient on the world scene, is the changing geopolitical picture, and in particular, the rise of China and its efforts to spread influence and even to secure territory, in a certain sense, at least to have created infrastructure in parts of the world like Africa, Latin America, even in Europe, that I think historically has never really tried to do before. And so there's a great debate going on among foreign policy specialists and diplomats and state leaders about how the West, if you like, and China are going to relate to each other.

And I just wonder whether the UN can play a role in addressing those tensions and trying to sort out some kind of new relationship between China and – especially the US, but increasingly, as Europe kind of goes its own way – as the United States disengages from it. Europe has to decide how it's going to behave relative to China, and it hasn't always decided that question in the same way that the United States has. So, I wonder whether you see the US playing a role in dealing with this new geopolitical scene?

Carrie Walling 25:13

I think this is this is one place where you might get another optimistic answer for me. I guess I would say, absolutely, the UN can do that. And the reason I say that is that, when we think back, one of the defining purposes of the UN was about avoiding great power conflict and defusing tensions among those most powerful states by giving them this non-military way to confront one another. I mean, arguably, one of the criticisms of the UN Security Council is that sometimes it caters too much to great power politics, which, essentially, when you have division among those permanent members, gets in the way of them taking effective action to stop conflict and crisis. But that very thing that we criticize, is in part how and why the UN Security Council was designed the way it was in the first place. And so, in a sense, I think the Security Council was designed pretty well to defuse tensions between those most powerful members now. So I think we owe the UN significant credit for decreasing the risk of reward, for example.

But at the same time, we know it's been most productive and effective when tensions among permanent members are low. And that's why I think there's so much criticism and certainly disappointment in the UN Security Council, particularly in recent years is because we are seeing

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essentially, the Council being held hostage to these permanent member divisions, which is getting in the way of doing the job we need them to do on international peace and security. So, it's kind of double edged, because at the same time, as long as they have that ability to work through those issues peacefully in this forum, it does prevent a hotter conflict emerging between them.

But I do think there there's a risk that we could see a return back to an era of more resembling a Cold War type politics, which would mean significant reversal in what Iran is actually able to do. So, I do think it's a troubling moment. And like you said there's just so much uncertainty right now, will the United States continue to disengage? And will China continue to seek to fill that vacuum?

I think one thing I think is sometimes getting missed in this focus on the geopolitical level is how much China's actually doing inside the organization of the United Nations: how much it's trying to solidify its own kind of institutional power agenda, setting power, if you will, by capturing leadership positions within the organization. I think to when, if China's not winning in stripping references to human rights, or redefining what it means, it's cutting budgets. And it's making sure that human rights components of peace operations are the ones being underfunded. And so I think that by looking at the big confrontation stuff, we might also miss what's going on within the organization, that China is looking to increase its influence internally and use that to its advantage. So it's not just this outward competition that we have to pay attention to.

John Torpey 29:31

Right. Well, thanks very much. This has really been a terrific overview of the crossroads at which as you say, the UN seems to find itself and some of the things that we can expect and look forward to or perhaps at least anticipate in the future. And I think it's very helpful for anybody who wants to understand where the UN is at, so to speak, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of its founding.

So that's it for today's episode of International Horizons. I want to thank Professor Carrie Walling of Albion College in Michigan for taking the time to discuss the history and future prospects of UN on this occasion and I want to thank also Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us again for the next episode of International Horizons.