



Committee History and Structure
General Assembly Plenary¹

September 19, 2011

The United Nations General Assembly (GA) was established in 1945 by the Charter of the United Nations.² Each member state has a permanent seat on this committee. Thus, the GA is the congress or parliament of the United Nations. It “occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations.”³

In the GA, each UN member state has one vote. No matter how different in military or economic power, all are equal. Thus the United States’ vote counts the same as Egypt’s, and Bolivia has the same voice as China. This is different from some other UN committees, such as the Security Council, which have limited membership or special voting rules. This feature gives the General Assembly a great deal of legitimacy on the world stage. It is a place where world public opinion can be expressed.

The GA covers all issues of global importance. Article 14 of the United Nations Charter gives the GA the power to “recommend measures for the peaceable adjustment of any situation, regardless of origin, which it deems likely to impair the general welfare or friendly relations among nations.” According to the Charter, the GA “may discuss any questions or any matters within the scope of the present Charter or relating to the powers and functions of any organs” except “any matters relative to the maintenance of international peace and security which are being dealt with by the Security Council.” Specifically, the GA can

- initiate studies and make recommendations to promote: disarmament, international political cooperation, the development and codification of international law, the realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and international collaboration in the economic, social, humanitarian, cultural, educational and health fields;
- consider and approve the United Nations budget and establish the financial assessments of Member States;
- elect the non-permanent members of the Security Council and the members of other United Nations councils and organs and, on the recommendation of the Security Council, appoint the Secretary-General.⁴

The General Assembly convenes annually from the third Tuesday of September until a pre-determined date in December. The first several days of each session are known as the “high-level plenary meeting,” or world summit. During plenary sessions, each member state’s head of state, foreign minister, or UN ambassador addresses the General Assembly. During its 65th session (2010-2011), the General Assembly held 118 plenary sessions and

¹ This background guide was written by Karen Ruth Adams, faculty advisor, with contributions from Trevor Hunter (2007) and Samantha Stephens (2010). Copyright 2011 by Karen Ruth Adams.

² “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV, available at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter>.

³ “Functions and Powers of the United Nations General Assembly,” United Nations General Assembly website, <http://www.un.org/ga/about/background.shtml>. This quotation is from the General Assembly’s 2000 Millennium Declaration, Resolution A/res/55/2, Chapter VIII, Article 30, available at <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>.

⁴ “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV.

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passed 316 resolutions.⁵ All GA sessions are held at in the General Assembly chambers at UN headquarters in New York.

Special sessions and world summits can be called by a majority of the General Assembly. Such high-level meetings address important new or recurring themes. The 2000 Millennium Summit, for example, articulated the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which redefined the worldwide approach to promoting and measuring economic development.⁶ Since then, there have been two follow-up conferences on the MDGs in 2005⁷ and 2010.⁸ In June 2009, the GA held a three-day summit on the international economic crisis.⁹ In September 2011, high-level meetings will be held on three topics: (1) the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases; (2) desertification and poverty; and (3) strengthening commitment to the 2001 Durban conference against racism.¹⁰

The majority of GA resolutions originate in one of the GA's many subcommittees, such as GA-1 (disarmament and security), GA-2 (economic and financial), GA-3 (social, humanitarian, and cultural), or ECOSOC (economic and social). Thus, the relationship between the GA and its subcommittees is akin to that between the US Senate and its subcommittees. Resolutions passed by subcommittees are simply working papers. Only when the GA passes a resolution does it go into effect.

In general, GA resolutions are not binding on member states. They are simply recommendations. In this respect, the GA has less authority than the Security Council, whose resolutions are binding. However, because the GA includes all UN member states, the GA is often seen as the voice of world public opinion. In addition, GA resolutions often inspire treaties and conventions that are binding on the states that sign them.¹¹

The only GA resolutions that are binding on member states pertain to the UN budget, over which the GA exercises full control. In practice, however, many UN members do not pay their UN dues in full or on time.¹²

⁵ For the full text of all 2010-2011 GA resolutions, as well as meeting summaries and press releases summarizing their debate, see United Nations General Assembly, "Resolutions, 65th Session," available at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/65/resolutions.shtml>

⁶ United Nations, "The Millennium Assembly of the United Nations: 6-8 September 2000," available at <http://www.un.org/millennium/>.

⁷ United Nations, "The 2005 World Summit: High-Level Plenary Meeting of the 60th Session of the General Assembly, 14-16 September 2005," available at <http://www.un.org/summit2005/>.

⁸ United Nations, "UN Summit on Millennium Development Goals," 10 Mar. 2010 available at www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/mdg_summit_factsheet.pdf.

⁹ United Nations, "United Nations Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development, 24-26 June 2009," available at <http://www.un.org/ga/econcrisissummit/>.

¹⁰ United Nations General Assembly, "High-Level Meetings of the 66th Session," available at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/66/meetings/index.shtml>

¹¹ Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, 3rd edition (Boulder: Westview, 2007), p. 33.

¹² Budgetary resolutions are binding in that member states that fail to pay their dues shall, at the discretion of the GA, "have no vote in the General Assembly if the amount of its arrears equals or exceeds the amount of the contributions due from it for the preceding two full years." "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter IV, Article 19. For a list of countries currently in this situation, see "Countries in Arrears in the Payment of Their Financial Contributions Under the Terms of Article 19 of the UN Charter," United Nations General Assembly website, <http://www.un.org/ga/art19.shtml>

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Membership, Voting, and Leadership

The membership of the General Assembly includes all 193 UN Member States. The most recent state to join was South Sudan in 2011. Non-member states and other entities recognized by the UN as permanent observers may attend and participate in meetings, but they cannot vote. At present, permanent observers include Palestine and the Holy See (Vatican City), as well as a number of international organizations.¹³ One of the issues that may arise in this year's General Assembly plenary session is the admission of Palestine as a full member of the UN.¹⁴

Most votes conducted within the GA require only a simple majority to pass. The only exceptions are budgetary matters and other issues designated "important," such as recommendations on peace and security, admission of new members, and the election of Security Council members, which require a two-thirds majority.¹⁵

According to the official GA website, "in recent years, a special effort has been made to achieve consensus on issues, rather than deciding by a formal vote, thus strengthening support for the Assembly's decisions. The President, after having consulted and reached agreement with delegations, can propose that a resolution be adopted without a vote."¹⁶

Regional blocs and other alliances play an important role in building consensus. Blocs consist of both countries in the same region and countries from different regions that face similar problems. For example, the Group of 77 is a group of less-developed countries that often vote together.¹⁷

The President of the General Assembly chairs the meetings and corrects any procedural mistakes. The president and 21 vice-presidents representing all world regions are elected annually by the members of the GA. Elections are held at least three months before the beginning of the annual session.¹⁸ The president of the 66th session (2011-2012) is Ambassador Nassir Abdulaziz al-Nasser, from Qatar.¹⁹

History and Challenges

The General Assembly's primary challenges pertain to its relationship to the Security Council. There are two main issues: first, which of the two committees gets "first dibs" on security issues, and second, whether and how the GA can reform the UN. In addition, the GA bears the burden of addressing the wide variety of other issues of global concern not addressed by the Security Council.

¹³ United Nations, "Permanent Observers: Non-Member States and Entities," available at <http://www.un.org/en/members/nonmembers.shtml> and "Permanent Observers: International Organizations," available at <http://www.un.org/en/members/intergovorg.shtml>.

¹⁴ Joel Greenberg, "Abbas formally announces U.N. membership bid," *Washington Post*, 16 September 2011, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/abbas-formally-announces-un-membership-bid/2011/09/16/gIQAuJpfXK_story.html

¹⁵ For a complete list of these items, see "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter IV, Article 18, available at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/>.

¹⁶ "Functions and Powers of the United Nations General Assembly."

¹⁷ "The Group of 77 at the United Nations," available at <http://www.g77.org/>. For more information on voting blocs, see Soo Yeon Kim and Bruce Russett, "The new politics of voting alignments in the United Nations General Assembly," *International Organization*, Vol. 50, No 4 (1996), 629-652.

¹⁸ United Nations General Assembly, "Rules of Procedure," Section V, Rule 30, available at http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_prez.shtml.

¹⁹ United Nations General Assembly, "Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser of Qatar Elected President of General Assembly's Sixty-Sixth Session," Press Release GA/11105, 22 June 2011, available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/ga11105.doc.htm>

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According to the UN Charter, the General Assembly can act on matters related to peace and security only when the Security Council (the committee charged with maintaining peace and security) has failed to act.²⁰ In principle, this provision would seem to enable the Security Council to completely dominate the UN's deliberations on security matters. In fact, however, disagreements between P-5 members mean that the Security Council is often stymied. For example, the Security Council has never reached agreement on how to respond to North Korea's November 2010 shelling of a South Korean island.²¹

In 1950, during the Korean War, the US led an effort to clarify this power in General Assembly Resolution 377. This resolution, known as the "Uniting for Peace" resolution, states that:

if the Security Council, because of lack of unanimity of the permanent members, fails to exercise its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security in any case where there appears to be a threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression, the General Assembly shall consider the matter immediately with a view to making appropriate recommendations to Members for collective measures, including in the case of a breach of the peace or act of aggression the use of armed force when necessary, to maintain or restore international peace and security.²²

This is a key power of the General Assembly. Because each of the five permanent members of the Security Council (the US, UK, France, Russia, and China) has only one vote and no veto in the General Assembly, they cannot dominate the GA like they do the Security Council. But the power of the General Assembly to call emergency special sessions has only been used ten times.²³ Historically, these sessions have been most often convened at the request of the US.²⁴ The most recent emergency special session, however, was called by Qatar in 1997 to address the "Illegal Israeli actions in occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory." Unlike previous emergency special sessions, this session has never been adjourned. Instead debate has been repeatedly suspended and reopened.²⁵

The GA has called so few emergency special sessions on security matters because it is rare for security issues to be completely ignored by the Security Council. In addition, it is often difficult for the GA to obtain the two-thirds majority required in Article 18 of the UN Charter to pass resolutions with respect to "the maintenance of international peace and security."²⁶ Even when such resolutions are passed, they are not binding on member states. Unlike Security Council resolutions, GA resolutions are simply recommendations. As a result, it can be difficult for the GA to persuade states with large and capable militaries to carry out enforcement measures to reverse an act of aggression. Thus although both the GA and the Security Council are charged with addressing international peace and security, the Security Council has more authority on particular breaches of the peace.

²⁰ "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter IV, Article 12.

²¹ Louis Charbonneau, "U.N. Security Council deadlocked on Korean crisis," Reuters, 19 December 2010, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/12/20/us-korea-north-un-idUSTRE6BJ08A20101220>

²² United Nations General Assembly Resolution 377 (1950), available at <http://www.un.org/documents/resga.htm>.

²³ For a list of emergency special sessions and related resolutions, see <http://www.un.org/en/ga/sessions/emergency.shtml>

²⁴ Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, 3rd edition (Boulder: Westview, 2007), p. 30.

²⁵ United Nations General Assembly, "Tenth Emergency Special Session," available at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/sessions/emergency10th.shtml>

²⁶ United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter IV, Article 18.

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The issue of UN reform is much the same. To revise the Charter, the GA and the Security Council must together call for a review conference. Amendments go into effect only with a two-thirds vote in the General Assembly and ratification by “two-thirds of the Members of the United Nations, including all the permanent members of the Security Council.”²⁷ This makes it very difficult to address a wide variety of reform issues, from making GA resolutions binding to changing the criteria for admitting new members to the UN.

The General Assembly first convened on the 10th of January in 1946 in London with 51 member states. Since then, the UN and the General Assembly have expanded from 51 to 193 members, but the Security Council remains limited to 15 member states and dominated by the same permanent five member states that set up the organization after World War II. The expansion of UN membership has resulted in many calls to expand the Security Council. Yet, to date, the only significant reform to the Security Council has been to add some non-permanent members and to specify that the 10 non-permanent members should be selected based on geographic representation. These amendments took effect in 1965.²⁸

The expansion of UN membership, the globalization of the world economy, and the rise of transnational challenges such as disease and environmental degradation have expanded the GA’s agenda far beyond what was conceived in 1945.

Recent and Current Events

Since 2000, the General Assembly has been active on three main fronts. First, it created the Millennium Development Goals, which have become the focal point for international discussions about foreign aid to and development in the poorest states in the world. Second, the GA has begun the process of reforming itself. Third, the GA has begun to give more systematic attention to human rights and the environment.

In September 2000, the GA held a high-level plenary session called the United Nations Millennium Summit. At the summit, world leaders met to discuss ways to combat the worldwide dilemmas of poverty, disease, discrimination against women, and environmental degradation. At the end of the summit, member states adopted eight measurable goals now called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with a target date of 2015.²⁹ The goals are to:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDs, malaria, and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. A global partnership for development.³⁰

Since 2000, the General Assembly has demanded and received annual reports quantifying country and regional progress towards the MDGs. In this way, the GA encourages both short- and long-term progress on the goals. The GA has also repeatedly urged all developed member states to commit to donating 0.7 percent of their

²⁷ “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter XVIII, Article 108.

²⁸ “Functions and Powers of the United Nations General Assembly.” See also Mingst and Karns, *United Nations in the 21st Century*, p. 31.

²⁹ “About the MDGs: Basics,” United Nations Development Programme, available at <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>.

³⁰ “About the MDGs: Basics,” United Nations Development Programme.

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country's gross domestic product toward overseas development assistance.³¹ Although progress has been uneven, both in terms of developed country assistance and less-developed country progress, the MDGs have given the world clear goals for its discussions and efforts regarding development.

The GA's recent efforts to reform itself have come in response to former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's 2005 call for UN reform.³² Annan challenged the GA to simplify and focus its agenda, end its reliance on consensus, and pay more attention to implementation of its resolutions, so that they do not remain, as the Global Policy Forum calls them, "dead-letters of non-compliance."³³ Since then, a number of reports related to GA reform have been published, and some procedural changes have been made. But, according to some observers, "key issues remain unresolved or unimplemented and many delegates now openly complain of revitalization fatigue."³⁴

In recent years, the GA's most path-breaking resolutions have related to human rights and the environment, which are relatively new issues in international politics. In September 2009, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon congratulated the GA adopting its first resolution on the international community's "responsibility to protect" (R2P) civilians from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and other atrocities even if this means violating national sovereignty.³⁵ In March 2011, the Security Council acted on this principle when it authorized "all necessary means" to protect civilians in Libya. After that, several members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assisted Libyan rebels in their fight to depose President Moammar Kadafi. In doing so, they exceeded the Security Council mandate to protect civilians. As a result, some observers, such as Philippe Boloipon of Human Rights Watch, argue that the international consensus behind R2P has weakened.³⁶ According to others, such as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, "The history of atrocity crimes is not one of acting too boldly, but of doing too little, too late. ...[T]hose facing mass rape and violence ... look to us for protection, not comforting words or another five years of debate."³⁷

In March 2010, the GA passed Resolution 64/236 (A/RES/64/236) calling for a high-level conference to follow up on the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Known formally as the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) and informally as Rio+20, the conference will be held in Brazil in June 2012 and will focus on obtaining firm commitments to

³¹ Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Security, Solidarity and Sovereignty: The Grand Themes of UN Reform," *The American Journal of International Law* 99, no. 3 (2005): 630. On the .7% goal, see "The 0.7% target: An in-depth look," Millennium Project website, available at <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/press/07.htm>.

³² Kofi Annan, "In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security, and Human Rights for All," Report of the Secretary General, 21 March 2005, available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/>

³³ Global Policy Forum, "Reform of the General Assembly," retrieved September 28, 2008, <http://www.globalpolicy.org/reform/topics/gaindex.htm>.

³⁴ Lydia Swart, "Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly," in *Managing Change at the United Nations* (New York: Center for UN Reform Education, April 2008) [book online], available at <http://www.centerforunreform.org/node/308> and <http://www.globalpolicy.org/reform/topics/ga/2008/04revitalization.pdf>.

³⁵ "General Assembly agrees to hold more talks on responsibility to protect," UN News Centre, 14 September 2009, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=32047>

³⁶ Philippe Boloipon, "After Libya, the question: To protect or depose?," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 August 2011, available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/aug/25/opinion/la-oe-boloipon-libya-responsibility-t20110825>

³⁷ UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service, "UN General Assembly discusses the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)," 25 July 2011, available at <http://www.un-ngls.org/spip.php?article3521>

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sustainable development, defined as “the balanced integration of economic development, social development and environmental protection.”³⁸

Agenda Topics for the MMUN Conference

At the 2011 Montana Model United Nations Conference, the General Assembly Plenary will address the following topics:

1. Deforestation
2. The Question of Palestine
3. Admission of New Members to the UN

When writing your position papers and resolutions, think broadly about these issues, remembering both the overarching goals of the United Nations General Assembly and the perspective of the country you represent.

Recommended Reading

Amin, Samir. “The Millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South.” *The Monthly Review*. available at <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0306amin.php>.

This is a scholarly critique of the Millennium Development Goals from the perspective of less-developed countries.

Annan, Kofi. “In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security, and Human Rights for All.” Report of the Secretary General. 21 March 2005. Available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/>.

This report by the former Secretary General summarizes some of the problems of the UN in general and of the GA in particular.

“Charter of the United Nations.” Available at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/>.

This document lays out the purposes and procedures of the UN. Delegates should be familiar with this document, especially Chapter IV, which addresses the GA.

United Nations. “Millennium Development Goals Report 2011.” Available from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/reports.shtml>

This report uses graphs and photos to show the work that has been done to meet the MDGs in various countries and regions since 2000. It also provides suggestions for meeting the goals by 2015.

United Nations. “The General Assembly of the United Nations.” Available from <http://www.un.org/ga>.

This is the official website of the General Assembly. It is the best place to start for information on the General Assembly’s duties and history, as well as the agendas and resolutions of its various committees.

³⁸ United Nations General Assembly, “Implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development,” A/RES/64/236, 31 March 2010, operative clause 19d, page 6, available at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/files/OD/ARES64236E.pdf>