The long, sad decline of the United Nations

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By William Maloney

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In a seminal 2015 article in The Guardian, “70 years and half a trillion dollars later: What has the UN achieved?,” Chris McGreal’s opening line captured the deep ambiguities that are revealed in any balanced assessment of the world organization: “The United Nations has saved millions of lives and boosted health and education across the world, but it is bloated, undemocratic — and very expensive.”

Five years later, the political, financial and personnel pathologies described by McGreal have only gotten worse, and all are now starkly illuminated in the burgeoning controversy surrounding the World Health Organization (WHO) and its deplorable handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

No evaluation of the WHO can be understood unless seen in the wider context of the U.N. itself and its evolution from the brave beginnings of 1945 to the problem-plagued institution of today.

The political dysfunction of the U.N. is directly traceable to granting the Soviet Union’s demand that each member of the dominant Security Council should have the absolute power to veto any initiative. Absent this concession, the Soviet Union would not even join the U.N., and with only one of the world’s two Great Powers as a member, the organization would have been reduced to little more than a loose federation of American client-states with no unifying purpose. Franklin Roosevelt’s dream of succeeding with the United Nations where his mentor Woodrow Wilson had failed with the League of Nations would be dead. Such was simply reality in a broken world in the immediate aftermath of a cataclysmic world war, a reality that has haunted the U.N. ever since.

The hope that the Soviet Union — the “Great Ally” of World War II — would evolve progressively and be a reliable partner in making the U.N. a true guarantor of world peace was dashed by the onset of the Cold War, which would become the world’s central political reality for over 40 years. Thus, the U.N. became not a “consequential arbiter” but rather a “weak referee” utilized by the Great Powers when it served their interest and ignored when it did not.

The U.N.’s decline in status and effectiveness worsened in 1964 when 77 of the smaller and weaker member states — a voting majority in the General Assembly — joined together seeking to counterbalance the excessive power wielded by the wealthy Western nations who were the principal financial support of the organization. Dubbed the G-77, but now including 133 of the U.N.’s 195 members, the group rapidly spread its influence throughout the body’s systems, particularly its budgetary committees. Given the prominence of authoritarian governments, including some of the world’s most odious and oppressive regimes — for example, Libya, Zimbabwe, Syria — the group early on showed a strong bias toward inefficient central planning, rather than free-market forces, in the allocation of resources.

The most lamentable damage done by this group was its utter corruption of the U.N.’s personnel practices, transforming them from a merit-based system into a metastasizing patronage scheme that infected every key position from secretary-general on down, with jobs awarded not on the basis of qualifications but through furious behind-the-scenes lobbying and horse trading. There is no better example of this syndrome than the last two WHO directors, both manifestly unfit for this critically important position.

Any effort to impose true accountability on the U.N.’s sprawling aggregation of 17 specialized agencies, i4 funds, a secretariat with 17 departments employing over 40,000 people worldwide is made next to impossible by bureaucratic anachronisms such as having 80 separate locations processing payrolls, using different methodologies, and each agency having its own information technology system.

The last serious effort at reform, in 2005, conducted by a credible panel chaired by the prime ministers of Norway, Mozambique and Pakistan, issued a devastating report and proposed a new approach called “Delivering as One,” but this led only to the usual cascade of goals statements and no subsequent results.

Yet, amid all these disorders, it must be remembered that there still remain thousands of U.N. personnel at the field level — proud, capable and dedicated — who are doing good things for needy peoples in some of the most remote and often most dangerous places on earth. However, it is sad to think how much more could be done if the United Nations as an institution had not fallen so far short of the hopes and dreams of its founders.