



CHAPTER ONE

THE UNITED NATIONS

Representatives participating in the American Model United Nations Conference should be familiar with the history of the United Nations, as well as the changing role the organization plays in international affairs. This section provides a brief background on the UN system and some of the issues it faces today.

ORIGINS OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations came into existence on 24 October 1945. On that day, the United Nations Charter became operative, having been ratified by the fifty-one original Members. The concept of all nations uniting together in one organization designed to settle disputes peacefully was born of the desire of civilized nations to avoid the horrors of and produced by the First and Second World Wars. The United Nations developed as a successor to the League of Nations, which represented the first attempt by nations to achieve this unity.

In 1942, American President Franklin D. Roosevelt first coined the term “United Nations,” when forty-seven nations signed the Declaration of the United Nations in support of the Atlantic Charter. In 1944, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and China met in Washington, DC at the Dumbarton Oaks Conference, where the first blueprint of the United Nations was prepared. In 1945, the final details for the United Nations were worked out at the Yalta Conference. Fifty-one nations gathered from 24 April through 26 June in San Francisco to draft the Charter of the United Nations, which was signed on 26 June 1945.

PURPOSE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The primary purposes for which the United Nations was founded are detailed in Chapter I, Article 1 of the Charter.

1. “To maintain international peace and security;”
2. “To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;”
3. “To achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinctions as to race, sex, language or religion;” and
4. “To be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends.”

HOW THE UNITED NATIONS SEEKS TO ACHIEVE ITS PURPOSE

Since 1945, the United Nations has established itself as a forum for discussing international disputes. Also, Member States recognize that the United Nations has an established machinery which can be utilized to solve international problems. The United Nations seeks, both through its principal organs and various subsidiary bodies, to settle disputes through peaceful means without resorting to the threat or use of force. It should be recognized that the United Nations is not a world government, nor does it “legislate.” Rather, the actions of the

United Nations, as evidenced by resolutions passed by its bodies, have a strong moral persuasive effect. The Member States frequently find it within their own best interests to follow UN recommendations.

STRUCTURE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations has six primary bodies:

The General Assembly (GA): The GA is the central organ of the United Nations. The GA has been described as the nearest thing to a “parliament of mankind,” as all Member States are Members of the GA, and each Member has one vote. The GA makes recommendations on international issues, oversees all other UN bodies which must report to the GA annually, approves the UN budget and apportions UN expenses. On the recommendation of the Security Council, the GA elects the Secretary-General and holds the authority to admit and expel Member States. Voting in the GA is ordinarily by simple majority, but a majority of the body’s work is adopted by consensus.

The Security Council (SC): The Security Council is charged with the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. It has the power to employ United Nations forces and direct action against threats to the peace. Fifteen Members sit on the Security Council, including five Permanent Members (China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States) and ten at-large Member States, which the General Assembly elects for two-year terms. A majority in the Security Council consists of nine Members voting “yes;” however, a “no” vote by any of the Permanent Members has the effect of vetoing or blocking motions.

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC): ECOSOC is the primary body dealing with economic, social, humanitarian and cultural work of the United Nations system. It also has a mandate to coordinate the activities of UN technical and specialized agencies and programs. ECOSOC oversees five regional economic commissions and nine functional, or “subject-matter,” commissions. ECOSOC is composed of fifty-four Member States, elected by the GA for three-year, renewable terms.

The Trusteeship Council (TC): In 1945 there were eleven Trust Territories, which were regions without their own governments. These eleven regions were placed under the TC, which helped them prepare for and achieve independence. With the admittance of Palau as a UN Member State in 1994, the TC has now completed its original mandate. Today, the TC is inactive, but is formally composed of the permanent Security Council Members.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ): The International Court of Justice, or World Court, is the primary judicial organ of the UN and decides international legal disputes. All UN Members are automatically able to bring matters before the ICJ; however, States must agree to accept the jurisdiction of the ICJ before it can decide a dispute involving that State. Fifteen judges serving nine-year terms sit on the Court.



Secretariat: The Secretariat is composed of the Secretary-General and the United Nations staff. Approximately 16,000 people are employed as the staff of the UN, one-third of whom work at the UN headquarters in New York City. The other two-thirds work for various subsidiary bodies of the United Nations. The Secretary-General serves a five-year renewable term.

In addition to the six main bodies, the United Nations system includes a number of autonomous technical and specialized agencies and programs. Examples include the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). While most of these agencies and programs have independent governance structures, their activities are coordinated by ECOSOC.

BLOC POLITICS

Historically, nations with mutual interests have used a system of bloc politics to organize their efforts within the UN. These blocs tend to be made up of nations with similar political, historical or cultural backgrounds. They were often formed on a geographical basis, but this is not exclusively the case. By organizing themselves with other nations that hold similar interests, bloc members hope to increase their influence above the level that they would have as a single nation in the General Assembly.

Regional groups were formally established at the UN in 1957, with an endorsement by the General Assembly. As the number of Member States increased, the groups were realigned to form today's five groups: Latin America and the Caribbean group (known as GRULAC), the Asia-Pacific group, the Africa Group, the Eastern European group and the Western Europe and Others group (WEOG). These regional groups are still used today to manage elections. Security Council seats are allocated by regional group, and the Vice Presidents of the General Assembly are chosen by regional groups, with the actual election mostly a formality. Other, smaller regional blocs, such as the Nordic countries or the JUSCANZ group, also exist, though they lack the formal recognition granted to the five regional groups.

Regional groups are not the only blocs active at the UN. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), founded in 1961 as a group seeking a middle course between the Western and Eastern blocs of the Cold War, the NAM rapidly became an active body for the coordination of action at the UN for developing countries. While its importance has diminished since the end of the Cold War, it is still active on numerous issues at the UN. The Group of 77 (G-77) was founded in 1964 as a coordinating body to protect the economic interests of small and developing countries. With 132 members, it is the largest UN bloc, though coordination among members is fairly loose.

Blocs usually attempt to form a consensus among members, allowing them to act as a cohesive group. The effectiveness of any given bloc in exerting its positions in the General Assembly depends upon its ability to form a consensus among its own members, and then get their members to vote accordingly. These acts of compromise form the basis of UN politics, and often occur within the various caucusing groups before they can begin to apply to the UN as a whole. The consensus position that comes out of the bloc is often the starting point for debate in the larger UN body.

Bloc politics have changed considerably over time. Some regional blocs are still coherent, like the Nordic countries, while others, like the Western European and Others group, lack continuing cohesion. In general, their viability as a political tool is diminishing, and blocs are falling out of use as a predictable measure of votes. Often today, blocs get together to draft resolutions that begin the discussion, but when it comes time to vote, each member will almost certainly vote in its own interest, regardless of its bloc membership. Additionally, members may be part of multiple blocs, with diverging or competing interests.

However, blocs are not completely irrelevant; often they are used to get an initial proposal to the floor when consensus cannot be found quickly in the larger body. Today, the most common blocs are small, temporary negotiating groups that gather around one issue to try to overcome stalemate in the larger membership bodies. Additionally, Member States in the Global South often bind together to maximize their power, especially in the face of a relative lack of economic power. Some blocs have their own secretariat staff whose job it is to draft proposals and find solutions that the larger body is unable to find. Some of the more well-funded and organized blocs have a formally recognized role as permanent observers with permanent observer missions at the UN headquarters. Examples include the African Union, the Caribbean Community, the European Union, the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. These blocs are a powerful example of Member States coming together to advance goals that may be independent of the regions they represent.

At AMUN, blocs will not be treated as official bodies. Representatives are encouraged to caucus in their bloc groups only when appropriate. Representatives should be aware that the Member State they represent may no longer actively participate in bloc politics, or may vote outside of its traditional bloc based on the circumstances. Above all, remember that you represent your country and your country's interests, regardless of your participation in a bloc while caucusing and drafting.