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INSIGHTS

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The 78th General Assembly of the UN, from 19 to 26 September 2023: thematic review and critical perspectives

Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)¹ is the main deliberative, policy-making and representative body of the United Nations (UN). As a system of international organizations created by States for States, the UN was founded on 26 June 1945 in San Francisco in the United States, following the disenchantment of World War II², to safeguard international peace and security in place of its predecessor, the disbanded League of Nations (League). Having accomplished its task, the

League of Nations offered the UN a glimmer of hope and set out a path to follow, a path that was certainly strewn with pitfalls, but that led to a single goal: the pacification of the world. Since its creation, the UNGA has been the high point of international diplomacy, meeting every year in New York for its ordinary session in September. The 78th session (1945-2023), which has just ended, was held from 19 to 26 September 2023. This year's discussions focused on the following theme: *"Rebuilding trust and reigniting global solidarity: Accelerating action on the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals towards peace, prosperity, progress and sustainability for all."* But what made this session so special? The aim of this analysis is to provide a summary of the proceedings, with subtle commentary, by taking a close look at the key issues and some of the key speeches made at the UN (I), in order to highlight, from a critical African perspective, the urgent challenges facing the world organization (II).

I- Overview of international issues addressed at the 78th UNGA

¹ The term "United Nations" (UN), coined by the 32nd President of the United States Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945), first appeared in history during the Second World War in the "Declaration of the United Nations" of 1 January 1942, in which the representatives of 26 countries pledged to pursue the war against the Axis powers together. Since then, it has been used as a synonym for the United Nations Organisation, UNO.

² The aim was to avert the major factor which, for three centuries, had been the cause of international disorder: armed confrontation between States, which could lead to a general conflagration. Through a combination of preventive and coercive measures - Chapter VI on the peaceful settlement of disputes and Chapter VII on action in the event of a threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression - the United Nations Charter established a system of collective security designed to dissuade or repress warring States.

Originally made up of representatives of the 51 States (50 plus Poland) that signed the San Francisco Charter creating the UN, the General Assembly was gradually enlarged following a number of geopolitical upheavals in the twilight of the 20th century: the decolonization of Africa and Asia and the collapse of certain States, notably the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia in the Balkans. Since 1945, UN members have been invited to place armed forces at the disposal of the Security Council and to conclude special agreements with the Organization for this purpose. These forces were intended to guarantee international peace and security by giving the Council the means to prevent and punish the actions of an aggressor State. What is the state of the world in 2023, seventy-eight years later?

The UN General Assembly, which lasts for one year, from September to September, is the world's most important platform for dialogue. Representatives of the 193 member countries of the United Nations meet to discuss and find solutions to issues that affect the entire planet, such as poverty alleviation and underdevelopment, the reduction of socio-economic inequalities, respect for human rights, sustainable development, conflict resolution and the fight against climate change.

During this final session chaired by His Excellency Dennis Francis, Permanent Representative of Trinidad and Tobago to the United Nations elected on 1 June 2023, special attention was paid to preparations for the Summit of the Future, scheduled for September 2024, the international financial architecture, implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, international law and UN reforms.

Each year, as usual, the annual session of the UNGA open with the High-Level Week, attended by more than a hundred Heads of State and Government, as well as member

States' Foreign Ministers. This annual event is a unique opportunity to exchange views and meet a large number of different actors and political leaders.

As part of the preparations for the Summit of the Future, the UN Secretary General's proposals for reform of the international financial architecture will be put up for debate. These concern public debt and the creation of new indicators of prosperity. In fact, international tax cooperation is a theme that has increasingly featured in discussions at the UN General Assembly.

What's more, the 78th UNGA took place at a time when implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was at its halfway point. A mid-term progress review was planned for the Summit on Sustainable Development Goals, to be held on the sidelines of the High-Level Week. This mid-term review should explicitly mention the areas in which greater efforts are needed and give new impetus to the implementation of the seventeen (17) development goals. Other issues discussed included migration flows, natural resource management and global warming.

Throughout the General Assembly, dialogues and high-level meetings were devoted to various aspects of the 2030 Agenda, such as financing for development and pandemics (prevention and response, etc.).

On the final day of the Summit launched the day before to save the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres gave the General Assembly a gloomy assessment of a world where divisions are deepening, inequalities increasing, hate speech multiplying, authoritarianism on the march and democracy under threat. Following his address, several delegations emphasized the divisions that are causing instability in the

world. They called for solidarity, reform of the international financial system, the emergence of multilateralism, and even a new moral order for the world, expressing alarm at the depravity of international law and the fragmentation of global governance, of which Ukraine is a symptom.

The UN has changed a great deal after almost eight decades and stands for the crucial values of peace, freedom, equal rights, peaceful conflict resolution, improved living conditions, tolerance and human rights. It was established to maintain an international system designed by the Great Powers, the anti-Hitler "Free World"³ coalition. After World War II, as they had done in the aftermath of World War I with the League of Nations, it has necessarily adapted to the new situations arising from the Cold War, the process of decolonization, the impoverishment of the Third World and the emergence of internal or regional conflicts. The operating rules set out in the Charter, which are intangible in nature, have been modified in response to changing realities.

In the current context, it is more important than ever that the World Organization continues to work actively for peace. But it must also be capable of responding to current and future challenges. To achieve this, reforms must be undertaken on a regular basis. At the 78th UNGA, discussions also focused on future measures to strengthen the UN's capacities, especially in the areas of data use and innovation.

³ The term "Free World", frequently used during World War II, refers to all the Allied or democratic countries opposed to the fascist Axis powers. During the Cold War (1947-1991), they became members of the liberal capitalist Western bloc against Sino-Soviet communism. With the end of bipolarity and the disintegration of the Communist bloc in 1991, the post-bipolar "Free World" came into being as a result of the triumph of the capitalist model and the opening up of Western civilization, emblazoned with the halo of liberal globalization, on the ruins of the USSR and the Communist world.

II- The 78th UNGA in 2023: regional issues and critical perspectives

The 78th General Assembly of the United Nations was subject to a great deal of controversy and criticism on issues relating to African governance and the multiple crises facing the continent.

It ended with a stormy debate this year, marked by strong warnings and condemnations from Africa's "coup plotters". Choosing first to confirm their mistrust, Guinea, Gabon, Burkina Faso and Mali issued firm warnings about the alleged "epidemic" of coups d'état which, after that of Covid-19, is now sweeping Africa. They vigorously denounced the fact that Niger "has been denied access to the UN" following the coup against the Mohamed Bazoum, the elected President of Niger.

The President of Guinea, Mr Mamadi Doumbouya, was also one of the key speakers at the UN conference. For the Guinean Head of State, Africa is suffering from an imposed and ineffective model of governance that has contributed to the active corruption of predatory or comprador elites, who have been given certificates of democracies on the basis of their docility, their ability to sell off national resources and the ease with which they give in to the injunctions of international institutions at the service of the great powers.

Suspecting a black hand behind all these political upheavals in Africa, the Guinean Statesman declared he felt humiliated and insulted, noting that "putting us under the thumb of such a power shows contempt, even racism, towards a continent of more than 1.3 billion people, with a large number of uninhibited youth. He added that "we are, neither pro- nor anti-American, neither pro- nor anti-Chinese, neither pro- nor anti-French, neither pro- nor anti-Russian, neither pro- nor anti-Turkish [...] we are simply pro-African". "There is no anti-French sentiment in Africa,"

said Burkina Faso's Minister for Civil Service, Bassolma Bazié, not forgetting to draw attention to the "medieval manoeuvres" to block Niger's access to the General Assembly podium.

His Malian counterpart and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdoulaye Diop, categorically opposed coercive measures by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the West African Monetary Union. He also reaffirmed his country's opposition to any military intervention in Niger, which would constitute a direct threat to the region, following the disastrous consequences of the intervention in Libya authorized by the Security Council against the advice of African leaders.

At a time of interdependence and globalization, more and more people and government leaders are aware that multilateralism, despite its shortcomings, is the only way forward. Indeed, a more humane form of globalization can only become a reality if its values are enshrined as principles. This is a strong argument in favor of the UN, which is not without its weaknesses.

With regard to the criticism of its limits, the UN is generally suffering from the anarchic nature of international relations (there is no world government), the hegemonic will to power of certain members (the five permanent members of the Security Council, the famous "P5"), and national egoisms. More clearly, UN multilateralism suffers from the interplay of power, influence and internal rivalry that ultimately paralyses or even inhibits its action. This entrenchment of the world organization has not escaped criticism from statesmen; hence the description of it as a "contraption" by Charles de Gaulle (France) and a "nest of agents of imperialism" by Joseph Stalin (USSR). This situation has not changed since the end of the Cold War. The

UN remains paralyzed to this day because of the veto rights granted to certain major powers since its creation.

In line with Montesquieu, the problem is not so much with the Organization as with the members that make it up. The UN remains an inter-state organization (sovereign equality of states) and not a transnational or supra-state organization. As a result, the relationship between States is not one of command but of relations that can take the form of either a test of strength or dialogue. The former may involve war, while the latter is a matter for diplomacy, which is the proper way to conduct day-to-day relations between States.

Despite its efforts, the United Nations system is paralyzed by the actions of the major powers and numerous international problems, including the Israeli-Palestinian, Russian-Ukrainian and Sino-Taiwanese conflicts; the most threatening being the Sino-American rivalry in the Pacific, not to mention nuclear issues, disarmament and environmental threats. The irredentist movements and secessionist groups that inhibit the efforts of governments, particularly in the east of the DRC and in the two English-speaking regions (north-west and south-west) of Cameroon, and the untimely tensions between Azeris and Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, are no less geopolitically significant and harmful. The logic of multilateralism does not obliterate the logic of power and State supremacy. International organizations have a complex geopolitical function, yet their priority issues, at least in theory, remain humanitarian: security and development. For those countries that set up international organizations, it is possible to discern a logic of supremacy. For those who join them, there is often a fear of marginalization that forces them to follow, mixed with real interests to be shared, such as collective dividends. Beyond these realistic

considerations, one question remains alive and worrying: do North Korea and Iran constitute a threat to the international community? Or is this a configuration of international relations reflecting the "reversal of the world", or the result of humiliation from a Badian perspective (Bertrand Badie)?

Pillar States, especially the United States (but also its allies), which were in favour of multilateralism at the end of the Second World War, have made the UN an instrument at the service of their realistic international policy (national interest, conflict and power). In any case, the United Nations is increasingly powerless to resolve large-scale conflicts. However, at a time when the world is increasingly faced with complex and far-reaching challenges, such as the hegemonic ambitions of certain States, terrorism, organized crime and climate change, which no State can tackle alone, the UN should assert its role. Indeed, the military or human insecurity resulting from these risks would become a dual threat, both direct and indirect, through the conflicts and tensions it generates.

In 1946, Joseph-Paul Boncour, a French diplomat, predicted that the strength and weakness of the UN lay in the fact that it depended entirely on agreement between the five major powers. After seventy-eight (78) years, the words of this international relations practitioner do not seem outdated or out of touch with reality. To sum up, reforms that include Africa, especially in the Security Council, are needed to bring it into line with the new multipolar order and current developments in international relations.

Extending the UN's reproductive missions, those of "preserving humanity from untold suffering" and "future generations from

the scourge of war"⁴, this reflection on the weaknesses and disparities noted during the last UNGA allows us to draw the alarm bell, in order to attract, like a watchdog, the attention of the entire global system in general to the threats and potential risks of undermining or, at the very least, are likely to jeopardize the progress of the world organization.

As a member of the UN, the international community and "beggar for peace"⁵, Cameroon promotes cooperation. Weakened by security crises (the jihadist group Boko Haram in the North, incursions by Central African rebels in the East, irredentist and separatist movements in the English-speaking areas of the North-West and South-West), Cameroon advocates the inclusion of new global geopolitical balances, synergy of action and a mutually beneficial partnership. Like Victor Hugo prophesied in the 19th century, "the extinction of war and the substitution of arbitration for battle" will lead to lasting peace and international stability. For this dream to come true, reason must master man's murderous instincts, and the waves of peace must overwhelm the warlike impulses. Otherwise, with the new global geopolitical context and the reactivation of the nuclear threat, the human being may be excavating the graveyard of mankind. Having turned its back on cooperation, negotiation and wisdom, mankind is now in the twilight that heralds the end of time. As the Romans would say, "*Vae soli*" (woe betide the lonely man)!

Conclusion

⁴ See the Preamble and Chapter 1: "Purposes and Principles", Article 1 of the United Nations Charter signed in San Francisco on 26 June 1945.

⁵ All countries of the world are "beggars for peace" according to an official statement by Paul Biya, President of the Republic of Cameroon, at the 72nd session of the United Nations General Assembly on 22 September 2017 in New York

Throughout the 78th session of the UNGA, Heads of State and Government and other high-level national representatives met to present their priorities and advance thinking on peace and sustainable development. At a time when the international community is facing a variety of crises and enormous challenges, this major meeting was a way for most States to assert themselves and reaffirm their commitment to strong and effective multilateralism. The UN General Assemblies are also an ideal opportunity for State representatives to hold numerous bilateral talks with their counterparts scattered around the world. In the opinion of many observers, there is an urgent need, with each passing day, for a far-reaching overhaul involving all the representative bodies, especially the Security Council, the world's executive board and the world general staff. In his 1979 Appel aux vivants (A Call to the Living), Roger Garaudy warned organizations, particularly the UN, that: "History never forgives an institution for lagging behind in change" (Garaudy, 1979: 28).

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