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PREVAILING CRISIS IN UN-GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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Why in news: As the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) convenes for its 80th session, the institution is confronted with a significant challenge, further complicated by the United States' increased initiatives to reduce the United Nations' influence in global governance.

Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), envisioned in 1945 as the world's most representative deliberative forum, is currently grappling with a crisis of credibility and effectiveness. While it embodies the principle of "one nation, one vote," its resolutions remain non-binding, often reducing its influence on pressing global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, conflicts, and sustainable development.

Deep divisions among member states, growing geopolitical rivalries, the dominance of the Security Council in enforcement matters, and the inability of the UNGA to push through meaningful reforms have intensified concerns about its relevance in today's multipolar world.

This has created a perception that the UNGA risks becoming more symbolic than substantive, undermining its legitimacy as the voice of the global community.

80th Session of UNGA (UNGA80)

- **Theme: 'Better Together: 80 Years and More for Peace, Development and Human Rights'**

Annalena Baerbock, former German foreign minister and only the fifth woman in UN history to hold this office, presides. The meeting takes place amid global challenges including conflict, climate change, inequality, and technological disruption.

Challenges of the UNGA

1 Non-Binding Nature of Resolutions

o UNGA resolutions are recommendatory, not enforceable, reducing their practical impact.

o **Example:** The 2022 UNGA resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine was passed with majority support, but had no effect on stopping the war.

2 Geopolitical Polarisation

o Increasing rivalry between major powers (U.S., China, Russia) weakens consensus-building.

o **Example:** Sharp divides in UNGA voting patterns on issues like Gaza conflict (2023–24) reflect deep polarisation.

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3Marginalisation by the UN Security Council (UNSC)

oThe Security Council dominates decision-making on peace and security, overshadowing UNGA's role.

o**Example:** On Ukraine, key enforcement powers rested with UNSC, where Russia used its veto, sidelining UNGA.

4Ineffective Response to Global Crises

oThe UNGA lacks timely mechanisms to respond to emergencies.

o**Example:** During COVID-19, the World Health Organization (WHO) led the response, while UNGA's declarations had little operational effect.

5North–South Divide

oDeveloping nations demand reforms in global governance, but developed nations resist structural changes.

o**Example:** Calls for climate finance and vaccine equity in UNGA debates have faced limited action from developed countries.

6Overcrowded Agenda

oWith 193 members, discussions often become symbolic, with little follow-up.

o**Example:** Annual debates see dozens of issues—from nuclear disarmament to AI governance—yet actionable progress remains minimal.

7Lack of Reform in Representation

oSmaller states feel under-represented in real decision-making despite having equal votes.

o**Example:** African and small island states consistently raise concerns about exclusion from global financial and security decision-making.

8Resource and Budget Constraints

oThe UN system depends heavily on contributions from major donors, making UNGA vulnerable to funding pressures.

o**Example:** U.S. funding cuts to UN bodies (2018, partially restored later) crippled certain UN programs.

9Human Rights Selectivity

oResolutions often reflect political alignments rather than universal human rights concerns.

o**Example:** UNGA debates on Xinjiang (China) or Palestine reveal selective criticism depending on political interests.

10Limited Role in Emerging Global Issues

oUNGA lags behind in addressing new challenges like artificial intelligence, cyber security, and space governance.

o**Example:** In 2023–24, despite discussions on AI ethics, there is still no binding UNGA framework.

How the USA influences the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)?

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1. Financial Leverage

- The USA is the single largest contributor to the UN budget (about **22% of the regular budget** and **~25% of peacekeeping budget**).
- This financial dominance gives Washington significant influence in shaping UN priorities and operations.
- *Example:* In 2018, the Trump administration cut U.S. funding to UNRWA (Palestinian refugee agency), which severely affected its functioning.

2. Political and Diplomatic Pressure

- The U.S. uses its diplomatic weight to lobby countries ahead of UNGA votes, particularly on issues linked to Israel, Iran, and human rights.
- *Example:* In December 2017, UNGA voted against the U.S. decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Washington threatened to cut aid to countries voting against it.

3. Coalition-Building and Agenda Setting

- The U.S. builds coalitions with allies (EU, Japan, South Korea, etc.) to push through certain agendas at the UNGA.
- *Example:* In 2022–23, U.S.-led lobbying ensured wide support for resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

4. Influence Through Development Assistance

- As a top provider of foreign aid, the U.S. indirectly influences smaller developing nations' voting behaviour in the UNGA.
- *Example:* African and Latin American nations often face U.S. diplomatic persuasion linking aid with voting alignments.

5. Use of “Soft Power” Narratives

- The U.S. leverages its democratic values, human rights discourse, and global leadership image to rally support in UNGA debates.
- *Example:* During the 2023 UNGA, U.S. President Joe Biden highlighted democracy, climate action, and multilateralism to shape global discourse.

6. Strategic Blocking and Selective Support

- The U.S. actively blocks resolutions it opposes by lobbying members, even if it cannot veto them in the UNGA (since veto power lies only in UNSC).
- *Example:* On the Gaza conflict (2023), the U.S. pushed hard to water down UNGA resolutions critical of Israel.

Reforms that can be bought in to strengthen the Institution

1 Strengthening the "Uniting for Peace" Mechanism

oWhen the UN Security Council (UNSC) is paralysed due to vetoes, the UNGA can assume greater responsibility under the “Uniting for Peace” resolution (1950).

o*Example:* This was used during the Russia–Ukraine war (2022–23) to bypass Russia's veto. Expanding this mechanism would make UNGA more relevant.

2 Institutionalising Global Crisis Response

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oCreating a permanent UNGA crisis-response platform for pandemics, climate emergencies, or humanitarian disasters.

o*Suggestion:* A standing “Global Emergency Coordination Mechanism” under UNGA, as suggested post-COVID-19.

3Financial Autonomy and Transparency

oReduce dependency on a few donor countries by diversifying funding sources.

o*Example:* António Guterres (UN Secretary-General) has proposed a “Global Public Finance Mechanism” to ensure stable funding for UN activities.

4Bridging the North–South Divide

oAddress developing nations’ concerns through stronger commitments to climate finance, technology transfer, and development aid.

o*Example:* The 2023 UNGA discussions on Loss and Damage Fund showed momentum, but UNGA could push for binding commitments.

5Digital and Emerging Technology Governance

oUNGA should spearhead global frameworks on Artificial Intelligence, cyber security, and space governance.

o*Example:* The 2023 UNGA High-level Week included debates on AI regulation, but no formal structure emerged—UNGA could institutionalise an “AI Governance Forum.”

6Empowering Smaller States

oCreate special mechanisms where small and vulnerable states (e.g., Small Island Developing States) get a stronger collective voice.

o*Suggestion:* Establish a “Vulnerable Nations Caucus” within UNGA to influence global policies on climate and finance.

7Streamlining Agenda and Implementation

oLimit the number of resolutions and ensure robust monitoring and reporting.

o*Example:* Too many repetitive resolutions on nuclear disarmament dilute focus—UNGA could shift to fewer, high-priority resolutions with follow-up mechanisms.

8Strengthening UNGA’s Role in Human Rights

oMake its human rights debates less selective by introducing independent expert panels that can guide discussions.

o*Example:* UNGA’s debates on Palestine or Xinjiang are politically divided—an independent mechanism would depoliticise human rights issues.

9Revitalising the UNGA Presidency

oEmpower the President of the General Assembly (PGA) with greater authority and continuity.

oExample: Calls by the “Group of Friends on UNGA Revitalization” (2022) recommend enhancing the PGA’s institutional support and coordination powers.

Conclusion

While the United Nations General Assembly was conceived as a democratic forum of equal sovereign voices, the United States’ economic weight, diplomatic clout, and geopolitical reach give it a disproportionate influence over outcomes. Washington’s ability to shape agendas, build coalitions, and exert financial pressure often tilts debates in its favour, especially on issues concerning Israel, global security, and human rights. However, this dominance also fuels criticism that UNGA decisions sometimes reflect great power politics rather than collective global consensus. Thus, the U.S. role illustrates both the strength and the inherent imbalance of multilateral institutions in a multipolar world.