# THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN AN ERA OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TRANSFORMATION: AN INTERNATIONAL LEGAL PERSPECTIVE FROM UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. This article examines the transformation of the role of the United Nations under the global processes of the twenty-first century, including climate change, digitalization, geopolitical conflicts, and threats to global health. The research relies on an international legal approach and pays particular attention to the position of the Republic of Uzbekistan as an active participant in the multilateral system. It reviews the institutional and legal mechanisms of the UN and their evolution from classical instruments of maintaining international peace and security toward an expanded set of functions encompassing sustainable development, cybersecurity, human rights protection, and climate-risk governance. Special emphasis is placed on the Global Digital Compact and the climate agenda, which illustrate the UN's adaptation to the technological and environmental challenges of contemporary international relations.

The analysis of Uzbekistan's contribution shows that the country actively integrates international norms into its national legal system, participates in regional initiatives on sustainable development and water security, and contributes to UN reform. Based on comparative and normative-legal analysis, the article proposes recommendations for improving the UN institutional structure, strengthening regional mechanisms in Central Asia, and integrating international experience into Uzbekistan's national strategies. The study demonstrates the importance of UN modernization to enhance its effectiveness amid global transformations and highlights Uzbekistan's role as a constructive partner in shaping a new international legal order.

**Keywords:** United Nations, international law, global transformation, Uzbekistan, Central Asia, sustainable development, climate policy, digital governance, Global Digital Compact, institutional reform, international security, multilateral diplomacy.

#### Introduction

The United Nations was founded in 1945 as a global mechanism for maintaining peace and security after the Second World War, as articulated in the Preamble to its Charter: "We the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war... and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained." [1] However, in an era marked by global transformations—from the climate crisis and digitalization to geopolitical conflicts and pandemics—the UN's role has undergone an evolution that requires institutional adaptation to new challenges [2]. These transformations, conceptualized within theories of globalization and postmodern international law, emphasize the need to transition from traditional interstate diplomacy to multilateral partnerships, where non-state actors (INGOs, corporations) play an increasingly important role [3].

Amid anthropogenic climate impacts, as noted in the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the UN serves as a catalyst for international cooperation through the 2015 Paris Agreement, which aims to limit greenhouse gas emissions to a 1.5°C threshold [4].

The digital revolution—characterized by the rise of cyber threats and artificial intelligence—requires the UN to develop norms governing cybersecurity, as reflected in UN General Assembly resolutions [5]. Geopolitical shifts, including conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, reveal the limitations of the UN Security Council due to the veto mechanism of major powers, resulting in decision-making "paralysis" [6]. Pandemics such as COVID-19 have demonstrated the role of the World Health Organization (WHO), as part of the UN system, in coordinating global responses, including vaccine distribution to 70% of the world's population [7].

A perspective from the Republic of Uzbekistan enriches this analysis, enabling an evaluation of the UN's contribution to regional development and the identification of challenges related to sovereignty, economic integration, and security. Uzbekistan, which joined the UN in 1992 after the dissolution of the USSR, actively integrates into global processes, but faces challenges associated with its arid climate (notably water scarcity in the Aral Sea basin) and geopolitical risks (extremism from Afghanistan) [8]. According to UNDP data, the UN has implemented projects worth over USD 500 million in Uzbekistan since 2017, contributing to sustainable development and reducing poverty by 20% [9].

The aim of this article is to analyze the transformation of the UN's role through an institutional-theory lens and to propose recommendations for adapting the organization to global challenges, taking into account the perspective of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

The methodology is based on qualitative analysis of primary UN sources (UN Charter, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UN General Assembly resolutions), academic works by national and international scholars (including Ulrich Beck's concepts of globalization and regional studies by Central Asian researchers), as well as empirical data on UN activities in Central Asia, including UNDP and UNICEF reports. The analysis relies on a comparative approach—juxtaposing the UN's historical role with contemporary transformations—supported by quantitative indicators (e.g., Uzbekistan's Human Development Index, which rose from 0.65 in 2010 to 0.740 in 2025—ranking 107th) [10]. This ensures objectivity and supports a scientific understanding of the UN as a dynamic institution amid global uncertainty.

#### Methodology

The methodology is based on qualitative analysis of primary UN documents, including the UN Charter, General Assembly resolutions, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and multilateral conventions. Academic literature by both international and Central Asian scholars is also examined.

A comparative approach is applied to analyze differences between the UN's historical functions and its contemporary transformations. Empirical data from UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, IPCC, and regional statistical reports are incorporated.

International legal analysis is used to evaluate compliance mechanisms, institutional limitations, and proposed reforms.

### Historical Role of the UN and Its Evolution

The United Nations was originally established as a legal mechanism for preventing wars and ensuring collective security, as outlined in Articles 1 and 2 of the UN Charter: "To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace..." [1]. This foundational document, adopted in 1945, created a system in which sovereign states delegate part of their authority to the UN for jointly managing global risks, embodying the principles of legal positivism and internationalism [1].

The principal organs—the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the International Court of Justice—played crucial roles in resolving conflicts such as the Korean War (1950–1953), where the Security Council sanctioned military intervention under UN auspices [11], and the Congo Crisis (1960–1964), where the UN operation demonstrated the implementation of the "collective security" principle under Article 42 of the Charter [12]. These cases illustrate the evolution of the UN from a passive observer into an active participant, although its effectiveness was limited by geopolitical disagreements among major powers.

Since the 1990s, in the context of globalization and the post-bipolar world, the UN's focus has shifted from traditional security toward a broader spectrum of issues, including sustainable development and human rights. This shift was codified in General Assembly resolutions such as *Agenda 21* (1992), which introduced the concept of "sustainable development" as the integration of economic growth, social justice, and environmental protection [13]. Human rights, previously marginalized, became central due to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and subsequent covenants (e.g., the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966), which later evolved into monitoring mechanisms through the UN Human Rights Council [14]. This transition reflects a framework of legal pluralism, where national legislation is harmonized with international norms, promoting the globalization of legal standards [15].

In the face of modern transformations, the UN is confronted with challenges requiring adaptation of its legal frameworks. Climate change is addressed through the Paris Agreement (2015), adopted under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 1992), where states commit to reducing greenhouse gas emissions with review and reporting mechanisms to ensure compliance [16]. The agreement's evolution—from voluntary commitments to more binding targets—strengthened the UN's role as an arbiter in climate diplomacy, though its effectiveness is constrained by the absence of sanctions for non-compliance [17].

Digital transformation requires legal regulation of cybersecurity, as reflected in General Assembly resolution A/RES/74/247 (2019), which establishes norms for preventing cyberattacks and protecting digital rights [21]. Pandemics such as COVID-19 highlighted the role of the WHO, governed by the International Health Regulations (2005, revised 2022), which oblige states to ensure transparent information sharing and coordination [1]. These acts illustrate the UN's transition from traditional interstate diplomacy to multistakeholder engagement, including cooperation with non-state actors (NGOs, the private sector), as envisioned in Article 71 of the UN Charter [1].

## The perspective from Uzbekistan:

After joining the UN in 1992, Uzbekistan has actively engaged with its legal mechanisms, adapting national legislation to international standards. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in his address to the 76th UN General Assembly (2021), emphasized: "The United Nations remains a key instrument for maintaining peace in Central Asia, especially in the face of threats emanating from Afghanistan." [24] This reflects Uzbekistan's contribution to UN-led security initiatives, including participation in peacekeeping operations and harmonization of national laws with the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), which Uzbekistan ratified in 2019 to combat war crimes [25].

UN SDG participation helped Uzbekistan reduce poverty by 15% between 2017 and 2022, according to UNDP reports [26], though challenges persist in adapting to climate risks in the Aral Sea basin through UN-supported water-security projects [27].

### Uzbekistan's Perspective and the 80th Session of the UN General Assembly

In addition to the abovementioned considerations, the address delivered by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the 80th session of the UN General Assembly presented a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to the pressing issues of the global agenda, reflecting both the country's internal transformations and its foreign-policy priorities. The President identified the crisis of trust in international institutions as one of the key challenges of contemporary geopolitics. The intensification of global fragmentation, the growing number of armed conflicts, the deepening of social and technological inequality, and large-scale humanitarian crises clearly demonstrate the declining effectiveness of the existing system of global governance.

Against this backdrop, the President of Uzbekistan emphasized the relevance of rethinking the role of the United Nations as a universal instrument of international cooperation. Support for the "UN-80" initiative and reaffirmation of commitment to the *Pact for the Future* were presented as expressions of Uzbekistan's readiness to participate in the institutional modernization of the UN.

Special attention was devoted to the need for reforming the UN Security Council. According to Uzbekistan's position, expanding its membership by including states of the Global South would contribute to more equitable and representative decision-making that takes into account the interests of developing countries. This proposal reflects the broader trend toward strengthening the role of regional and middle powers in shaping a new international architecture.

Thus, Uzbekistan's stated position demonstrates not only its intention to adapt to the changing world order, but also its aspiration to take an active part in rethinking it—by promoting the principles of inclusiveness, equality, and genuine multilateral dialogue.

### **Contemporary Challenges and Transformations**

The contemporary challenges and transformations faced by the UN reflect the complexity and multidimensional character of the global order of the twenty-first century. The following section examines the key areas of these transformations on the basis of international legal documents, empirical data, and Uzbekistan's specific experience.

#### 1. Climate Change

The United Nations plays a central role in fostering international cooperation to combat climate change, primarily through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

(UNFCCC, 1992), which establishes the legal foundation for collective state action. As stated in the Preamble to the Convention, "change in the Earth's climate and its adverse effects are a common concern of humankind and constitute one of the most serious threats to sustainable development." [28]

A major milestone was the 2015 Paris Agreement, in which states committed to limiting global warming to "well below 2°C" and pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5°C [29].

Uzbekistan, characterized by an arid climate and vulnerability to droughts and desertification, faces severe environmental challenges. According to UNDP data, more than 80% of the country's territory is affected by land degradation, while water scarcity exacerbates socioeconomic risks [30]. In response, the UN has initiated and supported sustainable development projects in the Aral Sea basin aimed at restoring ecosystems and improving the quality of life of local populations [31]. As emphasized in IPCC reports, regional initiatives must go hand in hand with global efforts to ensure both adaptation and mitigation [32].

# Uzbekistan's climate agenda at the 80th UNGA session

Environmental issues occupied a prominent place in the President of Uzbekistan's address at the 80th session of the General Assembly, reflecting the recognition of the interconnections between climate risks, sustainable development, and security. The President outlined concrete initiatives targeting both regional and global ecological challenges.

Special emphasis was placed on the catastrophic consequences of the Aral Sea's desiccation—one of the largest environmental disasters in modern history. The disruption of the water-ecological balance, expanding desertification, and environmental pollution have caused profound impacts on public health, biodiversity, and the economy of the Aral region. Despite international efforts, the problem remains acute and requires long-term interstate cooperation.

### Uzbekistan's response measures

Uzbekistan is implementing a large-scale program to restore regional ecosystems. In recent years, more than 2 million hectares of the dried seabed have been planted with salt-resistant desert vegetation, and by 2030 the government aims to green up to 80% of the exposed territory. This is the largest ecological rehabilitation initiative in Central Asia and a model of sustainable landscape adaptation for arid climates.

### Global initiatives proposed by Uzbekistan

In a broader context, Uzbekistan proposed hosting a **World Water Conservation Forum**—a platform to address freshwater scarcity, which already affects more than two billion people globally. The President also called for developing a global "*roadmap*" for the introduction of innovative and efficient water-management technologies. These initiatives align with SDG 6 ("Clean Water and Sanitation") and aim to reduce the vulnerability of water-stressed states.

Thus, Uzbekistan not only highlights the consequences of climate change and ecological disasters but also advances constructive formats of international cooperation that bring together the scientific community, national governments, and international organizations.

### 2. Geopolitical Shifts and Conflicts

Global geopolitical tensions and the rising number of regional conflicts pose serious challenges to the UN's effectiveness. The limitations of the UN Security Council—particularly the veto power of its permanent members—frequently impede timely decision-making and undermine

the institution's ability to prevent or halt hostilities. Numerous conflicts in recent decades illustrate this structural crisis. Despite these systemic obstacles, Uzbekistan continues to prioritize a peaceful and diplomatic approach to conflict resolution. It advocates strengthening the role of preventive diplomacy and expanding the use of UN conflict-monitoring mechanisms in regions susceptible to instability.

#### **Ukraine: A Call for Just Peace**

In his address to the 80th UN General Assembly, the President of Uzbekistan expressed his concern about the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. He emphasized that Uzbekistan supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and called for a just, comprehensive, and peaceful settlement. The President stressed that only diplomacy, multilateral dialogue, and political negotiation can bring about long-term peace and stability.

### The Middle East: Two States as a Foundation for Regional Peace

The conflict in the Middle East has existential implications for regional and global security. Uzbekistan reaffirmed its firm support for the establishment of two sovereign and independent states—Palestine and Israel—that would coexist in peace and security. This reflects Uzbekistan's consistent position aligned with the UN resolutions that support the two-state solution based on international law.

These statements demonstrate Uzbekistan's commitment to promoting peaceful conflict resolution, adherence to the principles of international law, and the strengthening of the United Nations as an effective platform for diplomacy.

### 3. Digital Technologies and International Security

The digital transformation of the modern world is reshaping the foundations of international relations, national sovereignty, and global security. While digital technologies create new opportunities for development, they also introduce unprecedented risks—from cyberattacks and the weaponization of information to AI-driven manipulation and violations of privacy.

Fragmentation of digital governance and the absence of unified international rules exacerbate these challenges, potentially leading to increased tensions, technological inequality, and erosion of the multilateral system.

### Uzbekistan's Digital Strategy and Contribution to Global Governance

Uzbekistan has made significant strides in digital development. Its **Digital Uzbekistan 2030** strategy aims to modernize public administration, promote digital inclusion, and expand access to communication technologies. As a result of ongoing reforms, Uzbekistan has climbed into the group of countries with **medium levels of e-government development**, according to the UN E-Government Survey.

The rapid digitalization of state institutions shows Uzbekistan's determination to leverage technological innovation for economic growth, social modernization, and improved public services.

#### Uzbekistan's Position at the UN: The Global Digital Compact

During the 80th session of the General Assembly, the President of Uzbekistan emphasized the urgent need to strengthen global digital governance.

He expressed support for the **Global Digital Compact**, an emerging UN framework aimed at establishing universal norms for digital transformation.

The President underscored the importance of integrating the voices of young people into this process. To achieve this, he proposed hosting an **annual international youth forum on digital transformation** in Uzbekistan, a platform that would enhance the involvement of the younger generation in global digital policymaking.

Uzbekistan's approach reflects its belief that inclusive governance and broad participation from civil society, academia, and youth are essential for ensuring that digital transformation remains safe, equitable, and transparent.

### Cybersecurity and AI: The Need for New Global Norms

The rapid development of artificial intelligence and the intensification of cyber threats highlight the urgent need for clear international rules. At the 80th General Assembly, the President of Uzbekistan stressed the importance of creating universal norms for **AI governance** and establishing a robust **cybersecurity framework**.

The proliferation of cyberattacks—targeting critical infrastructure, financial systems, and government institutions—demonstrates that digital threats are transboundary and require global cooperation. Uzbekistan supports developing a comprehensive digital security architecture that would:

- establish unified international norms and standards,
- ensure responsible use of AI,
- protect citizens from digital manipulation, fraud, and foreign interference.

Uzbekistan's forward-looking stance demonstrates its willingness to contribute to shaping a secure and ethical digital future at the global level.

#### 4. The Efficiency of the UN and the Need for Institutional Reform

In the modern era of global turbulence, the question of the UN's effectiveness is becoming increasingly central to discussions about the future of international governance. The UN was conceived as an institution meant to prevent conflicts, maintain peace, and serve as a platform for collective decision-making. However, the deepening geopolitical fragmentation, the proliferation of armed conflicts, and the aggravation of humanitarian crises have significantly undermined global trust in multilateral institutions.

A major structural problem is the **veto power** of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Although intended to prevent unilateral dominance and protect the interests of great powers, in practice it often leads to **paralysis of decision-making**, even in situations requiring urgent international action. Numerous peacekeeping and humanitarian initiatives have been blocked in recent years, raising broad concerns regarding the Council's representativeness and legitimacy.

Furthermore, the UN's current structure does not adequately reflect the **realities of the twenty-first century**. Regions such as Africa, Latin America, and the Global South as a whole remain **underrepresented** in key decision-making bodies, despite bearing a disproportionate share of global economic, environmental, and humanitarian burdens. This discrepancy weakens the moral authority of the UN and calls for a profound institutional rethinking.

### Uzbekistan's Position on UN Reform

Uzbekistan consistently advocates for strengthening the UN's capacity to respond to modern challenges and increasing its inclusiveness.

At the 80th session of the UN General Assembly, the President of Uzbekistan reaffirmed support for the "UN-80" initiative and the *Pact for the Future*, highlighting the need for comprehensive UN reform.

A key element of Uzbekistan's proposal is the **reform of the Security Council**, including the expansion of its membership to include states from the Global South. This would contribute to a more balanced, just, and transparent system of global governance, capable of addressing the interests and concerns of a wider range of countries.

Uzbekistan emphasizes that legitimacy, accountability, and equal representation must become fundamental principles of the modernized United Nations.

### 5. Regional Security and Afghanistan

Regional security, especially in Central Asia, remains one of the most sensitive and complex issues within the spectrum of global challenges faced by the UN. Due to its geographical location, Central Asia is directly affected by the instability, political crises, and humanitarian emergencies unfolding in neighboring Afghanistan.

For Uzbekistan, the situation in Afghanistan represents not only a regional challenge but also a global concern. Sustainable peace in Afghanistan is essential for regional economic cooperation, security, trade, and long-term development.

### Uzbekistan's Afghanistan Policy

Uzbekistan has consistently advocated for maintaining diplomatic relations and promoting **constructive engagement** with Afghanistan. It insists that any durable settlement must be based on **inclusive political dialogue** that brings together all segments of Afghan society.

At the 80th session of the General Assembly, the President of Uzbekistan underscored the importance of international efforts aimed at establishing lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan.

He noted that isolation and disengagement would only intensify the humanitarian crisis and widen the security vacuum.

#### Protection of Human Rights and Women's Education

Uzbekistan highlights that the future stability of Afghanistan depends fundamentally on safeguarding the rights of all citizens, especially women and girls. Ensuring access to education and participation in socio-economic life is not only a universal human rights obligation but also a prerequisite for the country's sustainable development.

The President stressed that the international community must continue to support Afghan women and girls and ensure that education remains accessible at all levels.

#### **Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan**

Despite its own limitations, Uzbekistan has provided extensive humanitarian support to Afghanistan. This includes food supplies, medical assistance, educational materials, and logistical support through the **Termez humanitarian logistics hub**, a unique regional platform created with UN assistance.

Uzbekistan's proactive role has been widely recognized by the international community, demonstrating the country's commitment to contributing to regional peace and offering practical solutions to long-standing humanitarian challenges.

## 6. Sustainable Development and the UN's Global Agenda

The concept of sustainable development has become one of the central pillars of the UN's activity in the twenty-first century. Adopted in 2015, the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) present a universal framework designed to address global challenges ranging from poverty and inequality to climate change, peace, and justice.

The SDGs represent not only a strategic blueprint but also a legal and institutional basis for cooperation among states, international organizations, and civil society. As emphasized in the UN's official documents, the 2030 Agenda seeks to promote a balanced integration of social, economic, and environmental spheres, ensuring that "no one is left behind."

### Uzbekistan's Progress on the SDGs

Uzbekistan has demonstrated substantial progress toward achieving the SDGs, particularly in the areas of poverty reduction, gender equality, youth empowerment, digital transformation, and environmental sustainability. The government has integrated the SDGs into national strategies and successfully launched numerous initiatives in partnership with UN agencies such as **UNDP**, **UNICEF**, **UNESCO**, **FAO**, **and WHO**.

According to UNDP reports, Uzbekistan has made considerable advancements in developing social services, expanding digital governance, improving healthcare, promoting renewable energy, and enhancing environmental protection.

# Protection of Women's and Children's Rights

A key priority of Uzbekistan's domestic and foreign policy is the protection of the rights of women and children. With support from UNICEF, UN Women, and other UN agencies, Uzbekistan has implemented comprehensive reforms aimed at preventing domestic violence, expanding women's participation in social life, and improving the welfare of families.

Programs to support mothers and children have contributed to lowering child mortality, improving nutrition, expanding access to preschool and primary education, and strengthening systems for child protection and family wellbeing.

#### **Uzbekistan's International Initiatives**

Uzbekistan has also taken significant steps on the global stage by proposing international initiatives aligned with the SDGs. These include:

- the Samarkand Solidarity Initiative,
- the Central Asia Climate Dialogue,
- the Aral Sea Region as a Zone of Environmental Innovations and Technologies,
- the proposal to establish a World Water Conservation Forum,
- and the initiative to host an annual **Youth Forum on Digital Transformation**.

These initiatives demonstrate Uzbekistan's proactive approach to strengthening multilateralism, fostering global cooperation, and addressing key global challenges.

#### Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, the United Nations faces unprecedented global challenges: geopolitical fragmentation, environmental degradation, rapid technological change, humanitarian crises, and deepening socioeconomic inequalities.

These transformations require the UN to reexamine its institutional architecture and adapt its tools to the complex realities of the modern world.

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the role of the UN is not diminishing; instead, it is evolving. The organization is transitioning from traditional conflict-prevention mechanisms toward a more comprehensive model of global governance that integrates sustainable development, digital regulation, environmental protection, and humanitarian cooperation.

From the perspective of Uzbekistan, an active and responsible member of the UN, the organization remains an irreplaceable platform for maintaining peace, strengthening regional security, developing international law, and promoting global stability. Uzbekistan supports the *UN-80* initiative, the *Pact for the Future*, and comprehensive Security Council reform—steps that aim to make the UN more representative, effective, and capable of addressing the needs of the Global South.

Uzbekistan's contributions—ranging from climate initiatives and digital transformation proposals to humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan and gender-rights reforms—highlight the country's growing role in shaping the trajectory of the UN's future development.

The UN's ability to respond effectively to global transformations will depend on its capacity to modernize, adapt, and foster genuine multilateralism. The experience of Uzbekistan shows that even medium-sized states can significantly influence international processes when their actions are anchored in the principles of cooperation, dialogue, and international law.

Thus, the modernization of the United Nations is not only possible but necessary. It is a shared responsibility of all nations—including Uzbekistan—to safeguard global peace and to build a more just, stable, and sustainable world for future generations.

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