

## The UN's Battle for Legitimacy

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The United Nations was created to maintain international peace and security, enforce international law, and coordinate collective action among states. However, its geopolitical authority is increasingly undermined by Security Council deadlock, great-power rivalry, and uneven compliance with its mandates, exposing a growing legitimacy crisis in today's fragmented global order.

One of the UN's principal internal challenges is the growing perception that segments of its leadership no longer operate with consistent political impartiality. Critics increasingly argue that senior officials have moved beyond technical and humanitarian mandates to adopt normative and overtly political positions on matters involving sovereignty, migration, climate governance, and international alignments. This evolution has contributed to perceptions of selective scrutiny; whereby democratic governments are often subjected to stronger public criticism than authoritarian regimes or violent non-state actors.

Such concerns are reinforced by what many observers perceive as an inconsistent application of international law and human rights standards. The organization frequently appears cautious and restrained in its engagement with authoritarian governments while employing harsher political language toward Western or conservative political actors. Whether deliberate or structural, the consequence is the same: the emergence of perceived double standards that erode institutional neutrality and weaken confidence in the UN's credibility as an impartial multilateral actor.

Simultaneously, the organization faces persistent deficiencies in strategic leadership and long-term geopolitical vision. Rather than functioning as a coherent institution capable of addressing contemporary transnational security threats, segments of the UN increasingly appear reactive, fragmented, and dependent on [personal] symbolic diplomacy. Institutional visibility and public messaging often seem to take precedence over measurable outcomes and operational effectiveness. The challenge extends beyond the institution itself.

Externally, the UN now operates within an international environment where symbolic advocacy frequently substitutes for realistic policy implementation. Diplomatic narratives receive substantial global visibility, while the structural realities of territorial violence, organized crime, state fragility, and illicit economies often receive comparatively limited sustained attention.

Colombia illustrates this contradiction with clarity. Despite repeated international recognition for environmental diplomacy and climate cooperation, the country continues to confront severe security crises linked to illegal armed organizations and transnational criminal economies operating across approximately 70 percent of national territory.

International monitoring bodies, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, have documented the expansion of drug trafficking, illegal mining, deforestation, and environmental destruction directly associated with these groups. Illegal gold mining alone has generated widespread mercury contamination, ecosystem degradation, forced displacement, and persistent violence across multiple regions.

At the same time, Colombia is frequently presented internationally as a model of environmental governance and climate leadership. This produces a profound disconnect between diplomatic representation and territorial reality. Environmental diplomacy is elevated within global forums, while the territorial control exercised by criminal organizations and the scale of environmental devastation in the regions and urban centers remain comparatively underemphasized.

This reflects a broader structural weakness within contemporary international discourse. Institutional symbolism and diplomatic narratives are often prioritized above the lived realities of populations trapped between armed actors, illicit economies, and fragile state presence. As a result, the international system risks rewarding performative governance while underestimating the material conditions driving instability and humanitarian deterioration.

This contradiction becomes even more visible during major international summits and UN-backed conferences. Such gatherings are routinely presented as symbols of multilateral cooperation and global progress, yet their practical impact on conflict-affected populations frequently remains untold.

Meanwhile, the UN's prioritization of the security and prestige of high-profile diplomatic events risks undermining the humanitarian protections it claims to uphold under IHL. In Colombia, the conference required additional police forces, military personnel, and supplementary battalions to proceed without disruption, concentrating state protection around diplomatic spectacle while leaving conflict-affected communities increasingly exposed to violence, repression, displacement, and insecurity.

*The result is an increasingly asymmetric system of visibility and accountability in which what receives international attention is not necessarily what produces the greatest human consequences on the ground.*

This legitimacy crisis deepens when senior UN officials appear aligned with politically selective narratives. Frequently cited examples include the treatment of Nicolás Maduro as a legitimate governing authority despite widespread democratic concerns in Venezuela, the tendency to frame major criminal structures in Colombia primarily through social or humanitarian lenses despite their documented participation in killings and illicit economies, and the disproportionate emphasis placed on certain democratic leaders as principal violators of international norms.

The cumulative consequences are significant. The United Nations increasingly is perceived not as a neutral institution guided by universally and consistently applied principles, but rather as a politically selective actor shaped by ideological preferences, diplomatic restraint, institutional inertia, and self-preservation.

Whether entirely justified or not, that perception alone represents one of the most serious long-term threats to the organization's legitimacy, authority, and capacity to function effectively within an increasingly fragmented international order.

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