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The Academic Council on the United Nations System

THINKING ABOUT THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

by

Leon Gordenker

The John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture

Reports and Papers
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The John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture Series

The Academic Council on the United Nations System inaugurated the John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture Series in 1989 in honor of a founding member of the Council. Mr. Holmes had served on the planning committee for the founding conference of ACUNS and the provisional committee in 1987-88. The talk he prepared for the first ACUNS annual meeting in 1988, *Looking Backwards and Forwards*, was the first publication in the Council's series of Reports and Papers.

John Holmes joined the Canadian Department of External Affairs in 1943 and participated in the planning of the United Nations. He attended the Preparatory Commission in 1945 and the first session of the General Assembly and later served as head of UN Affairs in Ottawa and as Under Secretary of the Department of External Affairs. In 1960, he left public service for a second career in teaching and scholarship, basing himself at the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and the University of Toronto.

Mr. Holmes brought to the Academic Council a lifetime of experience and reflection on the international politics and the role of the United Nations. He also brought a marvelous mix of idealism and realism, a mix that showed up clearly in the paper, *Looking Backwards and Forwards*. In the conclusion, he spoke of the need for reexamining the role of the UN in a way that captures the basic purposes of the Academic Council. "It is an ideal time," he said, "to launch in all our countries that renewed examination of past experience of the UN, to discover on what we can build and where not to venture, how we can use the growing threat to the globe itself to create the will for international self-discipline which is what international institutions are all about."

Reports and Papers are published and distributed by the Academic Council on the United Nations System as part of its program to expand our understanding of the problems of international cooperation and the role of international institutions. The individual authors, however, remain responsible for the content of the work that is presented.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leon Gordenker was Chair of the Academic Council from 1988 to 1990. He has taught at Princeton University, the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva and the City University of New York, and is presently associated with the Center of International Studies at Princeton. Professor Gordenker was a press officer with the United Nations from its early years until 1953, serving in Korea and Europe, as well as at headquarters. He studied at the University of Michigan and the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris and received his Ph.D. from Columbia University.

Professor Gordenker's publications include: *The United Nations and the Peaceful Unification of Korea: the Politics of Field Operations 1947-1950*; *The UN Secretary-General and the Maintenance of Peace*; *International Aid and National Decisions*; *The UN in International Politics* (ed.); *The United Nations: Ideal and Reality* (co-author); and *Refugees in International Politics*. A series of essays by colleagues and former students in Professor Gordenker's honor was recently published in David Forsythe (ed.) *The United Nations in the World Political Economy*.

Professor Gordenker's lecture was offered at the ACUNS annual meeting in New York on June 21, 1990. It has been established by the Executive Committee that, every other year, the out-going Chair of the Council should be invited to present the Holmes Lecture and use that opportunity to reflect on the state of the field. Professor Gordenker has done just that, looking back over the evolution of thinking about international organizations as one who has actively contributed to the ideas on which we now build our understanding of their role in world politics. He has also been a practitioner, serving with the United Nations early in its inception and maintaining close contacts with the Secretariat over the years. In his person, he reflects a major aim of ACUNS in linking theory and practice, the scholar and the practitioner and, in terms of the book he wrote with Peter Baehr, the "reality" and the "ideal".

THINKING ABOUT THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

Introduction

After watching the turbulent fortunes of the United Nations System for 45 years, an observer may tend to dramatize hopeful signs. If so, this weakness perhaps can be excused. The UN system was always intended as a center for realizing the hope of a peaceful world whose people could lead dignified lives. In this monument to soaring aspirations, an optimistic normative toga comes with the workaday tunic.

That I should be asked to give this third John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture can be taken as one hopeful sign. The honor comes to me *ex-officio*, as the retiring chairman of the Executive Committee of the Academic Council. It proclaims that the new organization, just beginning its third year, has developed confidence enough to offer a retiring officer its most honorable podium. Let me take that as a signal that both ACUNS and the UN system were buoyed by a growing response during the last three years.

The first of these lectures was written by John Holmes, whose passing we deeply mourn, and the series then was titled in his honor. In his witty way, he reminded us that the UN system bears the marks of middle-power thinking as well as great power concerns. John's countryman, J. Alan Beesley, gave the second of these lectures. He sketched for us the rapid expansion of multilateralism to new frontiers. I take up their briefs and accept the advice implicit in their middle-power perspective to try to avoid doctrinaire views as well as the parochialism defined by the Beltway.

Five Political Generations

Reckoning a political generation as 10 years, the fifth one since the founding of the United Nations now is making the decisions. In accordance with the human cycle, the company of observers whose personal memories go back 45 years this month, when the San Francisco Conference was meeting, now diminishes rapidly. As I read the views of this cohort, their successors in the halls of government, as in academe, too often lack an accurate sense of what was begun in San Francisco or was rebuilt on earlier foundations. But this is no reason, as John Holmes reminded us, to leave our hearts with the reputed saints of the Golden Gate. Rather the world of 45 years ago, when a few lights were coming on again in Europe, while East Asia was still a battleground, can serve as one base point for asking whether we have come to understand international organization and how we have done so. In posing those questions, it is perhaps useful quickly to recall a few conspicuous political and social changes presided over by the five generations since the end of the Second World War.

World population in 1950 was estimated at approximately 2.5 billion. Twenty years later it was nearly 3.7 billion. In 1987, the estimate was more than 5 billion.¹ In 1970, more than 2.1 million students studied in universities. Sixteen years later, the number had more than doubled.² The number of book titles published in 1955 was some 269,000, in 1986, more than 800,000.³ The number of television transmitters grew from a handful in 1945 to 8,550 in 1965. By 1980, that number had increased by more than seven fold.⁴ The number of telephones in less developed countries increased nearly ten-fold between 1970 and 1980 and not quite so much in developed countries.⁵ This means of communication now grows faster than ever. Obviously, more people in the world can easily encounter each other's images and words.

International air travellers flew more every year. For example, passengers flew 206,000 million kilometers in 1972, nearly 500,000 in 1981 and 680,540 million kilometers in 1987.⁶ Some of these travellers were fleeing danger into the ranks of refugees whose numbers grew rather sharply, reaching some 15 million

people now. Most of them had little to do with aircraft and in their millions walked to Malawi, Pakistan, Sudan, Somalia, to name some of the hosts of large refugee populations. Beyond these, how many were the forced migrants is anybody's guess, but it is certain that people were on the move as never before. And to that should be added a much larger, but uncounted, number of transnational migrants who relocate for an assortment of reasons.

Escalating numbers apply also to world trade and to the growth of international debt and a large number of other categories of transactions. There is evidence enough in the scholarly journals of international relations, where articles on these and related facets of international political economy seem to crowd out other topics.

The five generations since 1945 lived in the relative tranquility of no global war. Attended by inflammatory rhetoric and stuffing of arsenals, this nervous peace encompassed a time of extraordinary political change, threat and stress. Some main markers were:

Nuclear weapons—Their presence a constant menace—perhaps a stabilizing one, but inescapably dangerous. How dangerous became obvious during the near-catastrophe of the Cuban missile crisis..

Local wars—Bloody, devastating regional wars that took place mainly in the Third World mercifully did not engulf the rest, but they nevertheless upset or took the lives of millions of people. They included such heavy encounters as that in Korea under the UN emblem, the series of wars in Indo-China, combat between India and Pakistan, the Israeli-Arab struggles, upheavals and invasion in Cyprus, regional and civil wars in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere on that bleeding continent, the Falklands War and a chain of American interventions in the Caribbean and Central America.

Conventional weapons—A vast buildup in quality and quantity of so-called conventional weapons spread the potential for mass killing far and wide. A dismally successful learning curve put ever more destructive weapons at the disposal of more fight-

ers, many of them irregulars. As never before civilian lives could be snuffed out with little effort by cheap projectiles and poison gas. Military expenditure grew more rapidly in the poorer countries than in the rich.⁷

Colonialism—It declined rapidly and by now only flecks of the once-great empires remain. Nationalist aspirations and slogans flourished in the new capitals.

Human Rights—More than 90 governments solemnly engaged themselves to protect human rights and to answer internationally for their conduct. Popular revolts against repressive government—so dramatic in Eastern Europe—sought application of this standard. Meanwhile, political leaders that did not claim fealty to the standard became a diminishing rarity.

Accelerated Change and the Contemporary UN

To say that all of these changes and especially those in the basket of bombs we call the Cold War affected the potential, growth and operation of the UN system restates the obvious. Some combination of these changes has set off an unexpected surge of life in the UN system. I need hardly rehearse the details of a suddenly cooperative Soviet Union; a galvanized Security Council; a Secretary-General who successfully concludes negotiations on some of the nastiest violent conflicts in the world; an agenda that seriously includes topics such as AIDS, the environment, the future of economic development and human rights. Alan Beesley remarked a year ago that institutional construction, various lines of international cooperation and a clutch of new concepts have woven a vast multilateral mesh over international relations. Most of that existed before one hand of Ronald Reagan's government rediscovered some of the potential of the UN system while the other was strangling specific organizations. Where friction, obstinacy and even blood-letting in one area prevented growth of multilateralism, it proceeded in another. A close knowledge of this complex of organizations and programs, however gained, could have lead to more skepticism about the rather simplistically-conceived crisis of multilateralism that was common four or five years ago. But who had that close knowledge and how was it gained? Was the change in spirit forecast? Was the present, perhaps momentary success foreseen?

The Participants' View

UN documents written in memorable language have been so rare as to be celebrated. Sir Robert Jackson's capacity study⁸ was an example of two decades ago. Its list of works cited includes exactly two books, one by an American Secretary of State and the other by a President of the World Bank. The closest his acknowledgements go to professional academics was the then executive vice president of the Ford Foundation. One documentary citation referred to a draft paper by Maurice Bertrand, an official of the UN Joint Inspection unit.

A decade-and-a-half later, on the eve of his retirement, Bertrand himself produced another of those rare, sharp, critical documents.⁹ It was titled "Some Reflections on Reform of the United Nations" and formed the basis of a trade book published later in both French and English. It came just in time to add to the outcry about the crisis of multilateralism. Bertrand refers directly to academic writing, some of it from the classical category. This is not the moment to review Bertrand's central argument which advocates a revolutionary structural reform of the UN system and emphasizes management. It is germane to mention his view of academic writing.

Bertrand devotes three paragraphs of some 80 pages of type-written text to a review of academic writing.¹⁰ He asserts that it reflects a general debate between idealism and realism, words which as usual are then used in various ways. He quotes Robert Keohane's *After Hegemony*¹¹ to the effect that this writing has no influence anyway. He concludes: "In short, it would be difficult to maintain that we have available today an instrument for theoretical analysis making it possible to comprehend the trend in ideas and practices in the field of international relations, particularly in regard to the problems of peace and security." He also remarks that the contributions from world organizations remain very slight in finding common political ground, "because of shortcomings which are both theoretical and structural."¹² As the tough newspaper editors of four generations ago were wont to say to the eager reporters: "Interesting, if true!"

My intention is not to lament that academics have not been called upon to send down from their heights the concepts that

the diplomats and international civil servants neatly write up in their talking points. It is not even to decry the attention that quick journalism enjoys while profounder scholarship remains untapped. Suppose rather that we want to disprove Bertrand's claim that our efforts provide no body of theory that could help guide the reform of international organization—or for that matter accurately formulate the issues. Offerings enough there are: are they known among those who make decisions and how do we know they are known? Could we call attention to surveys of attitudes and reading among decision-makers in international relations so that we would know that they tasted the offerings and spat them out? Do we know who attends which informal discussions outside the house and how often? Do we know what portion of decision-makers have been introduced to the relevant writing?

One clue to finding answers to these questions can be found in the ACUNS-sponsored enquiry by John Groom and his associates into the study of international organization in the United Kingdom. Our colleagues report that "roughly ten percent of the members of the British International Studies Association... are active in teaching or research in the area of International Organization, broadly defined."¹³ The number is estimated at about 50 full-time professionals. Our British colleagues also report that courses in international organization now are an integral part of almost all international relations programs and hold their own with foreign policy analysis and strategic studies.

A quick count of the American Political Science Association directory shows that some 12 percent of listed members volunteer an interest in international law and organization and political economy. Some of those persons, however, are not in the United States or Canada; others have long ago retired. Furthermore, this says nothing about their rate of activity or the topics of their research. Still, even if the estimates are rough, in both countries substantial portions of the student bodies would apparently have an opportunity to learn about international organization.

Yet in the United States at least, every impressionistic report in the last decade about the trend in university teaching of international organization has been gloomy. There are exceptional lo-

cal situations, of course, perhaps even some where satisfactory treatment of international organization is an integral part of studying international relations. But ACUNS itself originated, in part, out of dismay about the trend in knowledge about the UN system. So does its support by philanthropic foundations. We can guess that a declining number of students of the last two generations has been exposed to the teaching of an aging instructional corps. The proportion of decision-makers in the United States who enter their offices with background knowledge may correspondingly have declined.

Nor do we have much reliable information of what decision-makers and executors of policy think about their own understanding of international organization. We cannot give precise answers to the questions implied by Bertrand's comments, but we can make sober guesses from them, from Jackson's bibliography and from the fact that in UN documents the names of professional scholars seem rarely to find their way into footnotes. Perhaps this latter is merely a way of avoiding excessive attention to material published in North America. But there is no hard data to be offered. No one that I know about has done the grubby work of making the tabulations.

From fairly frequent excursions into the offices of the international civil service and the occasional sorties into national government bureaus, I can report the impression that only rarely do the occupants know anything about what academics would describe as mainstream research on international organization, let alone the novel outcroppings. That observation holds even when the subject matter of the officials overlaps with that of the researcher. It applies rather less in offices created to produce certain specialized research, such as on development economics or macro-financial cooperation. No doubt the dominant assumptions in deliberate international cooperation, as in any organizational setting, are defined mainly by its managers, not by researchers on international politics, organization and law. Could it be that the concepts that so entice academic researchers on international organization cannot fit into the mental frameworks that guide international organizations? Could it be that there in the common intellectual baggage, academic thought hardly figures?

A View From Academia

Let us assume for the moment that those persons who accept active responsibility for international cooperation, either from national governmental positions or in intergovernmental organizations, have little knowledge of academic research on international organization. Does that research at least propagate knowledge about international organization, as it is intended to do? ¹⁴ Has it done well in anticipating and tracking the organizational responses to the astounding changes in the basic conditions of world politics during the last four political generations? Did it try out responses to the extinction of the Cold War and the human rights revolutions of eastern Europe? Has it successfully estimated the effect of these changes on cooperative international relations?

Leading academic researchers on international organization, especially during the last three decades, have been preoccupied with theoretical issues. Whether the results of this preoccupation have resulted in progressive growth of knowledge is a question that at once sets off a quarrel within academic circles, although from his point of view Bertrand regards the matter as settled. Certainly I become impatient with the ignorance of even advanced students who assume that an international convention has to do with smoke-filled rooms and TV cameras and who have never worked out the differences among state, nation and government in the context of international organization.

No one who has followed the academic studies on international organization in the United States, from where by far the greatest published output emanates, could doubt the rapid succession of approaches to research. An outline list would contain the following in roughly chronological order of emergence with much overlap in duration: a) normative, legal, contextual and descriptive; b) political realism; c) functionalism; d) international integration; e) neo-functionalism; f) organization theory; g) international systems; h) transnational politics; i) complex interdependence; j) international regimes. Some of this was approached quantitatively, most not. There may be a progressive, or at least logical, connection among these, as some scholars hint. Nevertheless, it looks more like an assortment than a progressive accumulation.

Taking some distance from the North American academic scene may help in setting a perspective. In an aside in her well-known critical article on regimes theory, Susan Strange ¹⁵ suggests that American academics are prone to fads, do not stick long enough to their lasts and incorporate subjective perceptions. The ACUNS report on Great Britain points to an intellectual climate in studying international relations that gives vitality to a world society approach in preference to realism and structuralism. That provides, they say, a more secure base for studying international organization than would be the case in the United States. These comments do not settle the matter, of course. They do suggest that the intellectual history of the study of international organization needs more explaining ¹⁶—more than I undertake here.

Developing concepts and theoretical approaches to such issues as why governments cooperate and what the nature of international cooperation really is, may provoke intense intellectual excitement. It involves abstractions that readily provide material for seminars. It allows the researchers to make intellectually cohesive statements. Yet it is also exciting to go on from there—to test the theories by means of observation, direct contact with the data and with the society that comprises the people who act internationally and the organizations they operate.

The use of the term "process" by regimes theorists suggests a rediscovery of an essential aspect of politics, that is, how decisions are made about the norms or organizations and their programs. At the same time, profound explorations of process, it seems to me, have not been a centerpiece of research. Much writing on regimes has to do with the content of the normative component and of formal agreements among governments about policies. Tracking the formation and change of the normative parts of international regimes usually does require that academic researchers learn about the policies set out by international organizations and substantive issues. The scholars thus know something of the documents that are so laboriously put together but too often not enough about the labor itself. Incidentally, international relations scholars seem rarely to publish critical evaluations of the reports, statistical series and other publications of international organizations.

Far less research deals with the execution of policies. It would be comforting to believe that governments that agree on such complex issues as the treatment of refugees or the way that telecommunications should be managed actually do what they undertake. It would be equally reassuring to know how they go about this, what reaches the ultimate consumers and what understanding finds its way back to the policy process.

My uneasiness grows. Most of the writing on international organization--whether from the official side or the contemplative side--still speaks of governments doing this, that and the other--making agreements, taking decisions, holding positions, representing views. The verbal, as well as the legal, convention is that the state acts.

Aside from the lumpy documents, politicians and government bureaucrats provide physical evidence of the formal membership of international organizations. These people develop or give effect to the normative elements of regimes and act in the process. They have a principal share in executing the programs that derive from approved policies. Unlike the state or the contents of documents and learned articles, these people are anything but abstract. Moreover, they operate within organizations--governments, international organizations, sometimes professional, business or interest groupings. These remarks represent no new discovery.

Old stuff or not, the academic research on international organization generally relies on the assumption that governments make explicit decisions and represent states. These decisions are defined by some system of thought that fixes what they seek and accept from international cooperation through formal organizations. Now this entirely avoids the question as to when state or government is a recognizable category; whether all governments operate in identical or nearly similar ways in issues of international cooperation; whether their formal participation represents the real, conscious decisions; whether execution actually follows; and whether any understanding is gained from all of this. It obscures the possibility--I think the probability--that new transnational groupings of forces, including national bureaucrats and politicians, issue-oriented voluntary organizations, philanthropic foundations and international civil servants constitute the nucle-

us of action that determines what governments are alleged to do and say. It shunts aside mounting, if mainly anecdotal, evidence that in ever more so-called field situations, such as that on the Cambodian border or in southern Sudan, neither national or local government, nor intergovernmental organizations, local private agencies and foreign voluntary groups are quite in charge. And yet all to some degree deliver the results of international policies and their functionalities make decisions of vital importance and long-term consequences for hundreds of thousands of people. In short, conventional concepts of actors tend to leave aside the social aspects of international cooperation.

These social aspects, perhaps in some ways more congruent with the "world society" approach than with a preoccupation with power, hierarchy, American hegemony and rationality, offer vast opportunities for research. They do indeed require further theoretical construction and, above all, attempts to verify and deny hypotheses by close observation of what takes place within transnational social structures. At least, our supply of information about the kaleidoscopic organizational catalog would then increase. If well done, studies reaching into the society of international organization and beyond the abstraction of the state would produce the vivid material that students often hunger for in place of almost exclusively abstract discussion. They would have some sense of how difficult it is, say, first to cope with a refugee emergency and then find some means of giving a future to those assisted. Or they would learn how strenuous were the steps on the way to the election in Namibia. Or they would travel with a jeep-load of frustrated UN peace-keepers in Lebanon and better understand why the Security Council or Washington cannot simply put an end to violence there. The micro level would seem better connected with the macro. This emphasis would certainly broaden the thin fellowship of the active participants and the academic observers. They would necessarily have to talk more to each other. Conceivably, they might even develop understanding that wins admiration beyond the editorial boards of learned journals.

Some Conclusions

Did any of us--the scholars or the operators--use our skills to anticipate the astounding changes in the international scene dur-

ing the last five or six years? Did we accurately chart the long-term trends? Were they the foundations of our research? Did they lead to experimental projections of the results on international cooperation? Was the change in Soviet attitude towards the UN system or its results anticipated? A ringing "yes" cannot follow these questions. Perhaps the scholars did reasonably well on some of the long-term trends, but the consequences for international organization have hardly formed the dominant concern of the mainstream. Moreover, as the popularity of research on international political economy mounted in the United States, scholars seem to have lost some of their proficiency with international institutions. A consequence would be even less skill among their students.

The concentration by scholars on untested and unapplied theory provokes some proclaimed disquiet. In his presidential address to the International Studies Association in 1988, Robert Keohane demanded that devotees of both the two theoretical streams into which he divides the researchers on international organization should create "... ways of discovering new facts and developing insightful interpretations of international institutions."¹⁷

Both in the house of international organization and in academia, a sense of uneasiness about the state of knowledge is justified. That can be taken as a challenge to both the active participants and the academic observers to see more of each other, on the planes of both active work and dispassionate analysis. They may have much to teach each other. And it is hardly necessary to insist that they still have far to go in reaching the goals that the inspiration of 1945 left with us.

1. United Nations, *Demographic Yearbook 1987* (UN, New York, 1987), p. 169.
2. UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Statistical Yearbook 1988* (Paris, UNESCO, 1988), pp. 1-12.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-11

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-21

5. UN, General Assembly, 40th Session, "Overall Socio-Economic Perspective of the World Economy to the Year 2000," UN Doc. A/40/519, August 23, 1985, p. 162.

6. International Civil Aviation Organization, *Statistical Yearbook 1981* (Montreal, ICAO, 1982), p. 19 and *Idem*, 1987 (1988), p. 17.

7. UN Doc. A/40/519, *op.cit.*, p. 188.

8. United Nations, *A Study of the Capacity of the United Nations Development System*, 2. vols. (Geneva, United Nations, 1969), UN Doc. DP/5.

9. Maurice Bertrand, *Some Reflections on Reform of the United Nations*, (Geneva, UN Joint Inspection Unit, 1985), UN Doc. JIU/REP/85/9.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

11. Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

13. A.J.R. Groom, Paul Taylor and Andrew Williams, *The Study of International Organisation: British Experiences*, (Hanover, N.H., Academic Council on the United Nations System, 1990), Reports and Papers 1990-1, p. 3.

14. Cf. Herbert Simon's testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Technology, Sept. 29, 1989, as quoted in *P.S.: Political Science and Politics*, XXIII, 1 (March 1990), p. 33: "One important area of research in political science is the study of political institutions: building up a realistic picture of how they actually operate and how they would operate if various structural changes were made in them."

15. Susan Strange, "Caveat hic dragones: a critique of regime analysis," *International Organization*, 36, 2 (Spring 1982), p. 481.

16. Cf. J. Martin Rochester, "The rise, and fall of international organization as a field of study," *International Organization*, 40, 4 (Autumn 1986).

17. Robert O. Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches," *International Studies Quarterly*, 32 (1988), p. 393.

ABOUT THE ACADEMIC COUNCIL ON THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

The Academic Council on the United Nations System was founded at a conference held at Dartmouth College on June 26-28, 1987. The Council is an international association of educational and research institutions and individual scholars, teachers, and practitioners and others who are active in the work and study of international organizations. The Council focuses special attention on the programs and agencies of the UN system and other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations that enhance the capacity of the international community to manage common problems on the global agenda. A major purpose is to support educational and research projects that expand our understanding of the problems of international cooperation and the role of international institutions.

The work of the Council is supported by foundations, members institutions and fees from individual members. This support has enabled the Council to establish working groups on teaching, research and documentation. The Council has its headquarters at the John Sloan Dickey Endowment for International Understanding at Dartmouth College. The Council has also been able to open a liaison office at the Ralph Bunche Institute on the United Nations at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in order to provide a direct link between members and UN Headquarters in New York.