

**MAINS iMPACT 2025****08-10-2025**

UN REFORMS

SYLLABUS:

GS 2 > International relations > International Institutions > United Nations and its agencies

REFERENCE NEWS:

- Recently, in his address to the **80th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)**, India's External Affairs Minister **S. Jaishankar** warned that the **United Nations is "gridlocked" and in urgent need of reform**, urging expansion of both **permanent and non-permanent seats in the UN Security Council**. He affirmed that **India is ready to assume greater responsibilities** in the international system.

MORE ON NEWS:

- **UN's Credibility Crisis:** Jaishankar said the UN's inability to address **conflicts, terrorism, and resource shortages** has weakened trust in multilateralism. The system, he noted, is paralysed by old structures and veto politics.
- **Reform Demand:** He urged correction of "**historical wrongs**" against Africa and inclusion of emerging powers like India in a **reformed UNSC**.
- **India's Role:** Highlighted India's record in **peacekeeping, anti-piracy operations**, and promotion of **digital public infrastructure** for development.
- **Guiding Principles:** Outlined **Atmanirbharata (self-reliance), Atma Raksha (self-defence), and Atma Vishwas (self-confidence)** as pillars of India's foreign policy.
- **Terrorism:** Without naming Pakistan, he called it an "**epicentre of terrorism**" and urged global action to **choke terror financing**.
- **Conflicts:** On **Gaza and Ukraine**, he appealed for an **end to hostilities** and renewed diplomatic engagement.
- **Economic Concerns:** Cited **tariff volatility, supply-chain dependence, and slow SDG progress** as key global challenges.
- **Global South Leadership:** Asserted that "**Bharat will maintain its freedom of choice**" and continue to be a **voice for the Global South**, pushing for equitable global order.

UNITED NATIONS (UN):

- The United Nations is an international organization founded in **1945**.
- In 1945, **representatives of 50 countries met in San Francisco** at the United Nations Conference on International Organization to draw up the United Nations Charter.

- The UN officially came into existence on **24 October 1945**.
- Currently, it is made up of **193 Member States**.
- The UN is **headquartered on international territory in New York City**, with its other main offices in Geneva, Nairobi, Vienna and The Hague.

Objectives of the UN	Maintain international peace and security
	Develop friendly relations amongst the nations
	Achieve international cooperation to solve international issues of social, economic, cultural or humanitarian nature
	Be a centre to harmonize the actions of the state to accomplish these common goals

MAIN BODIES:



SIGNIFICANCE OF THE UNITED NATIONS (UN):

- **Global Problem-Solving:**
 - The United Nations plays a crucial role in addressing worldwide challenges, including **peacekeeping operations, conflict prevention, and mediation**. It sends **troops and special envoys** to areas of conflict to help negotiate peace and prevent further violence.
 - For example, **UN Peacekeeping in Mali (MINUSMA – United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali)** and **UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan)** have helped protect civilians and restore order in post-conflict regions.
- **Aid and Development Initiatives:**
 - The UN provides **essential humanitarian aid and long-term development support** to populations impacted by natural disasters, wars, and displacement.
 - For instance, the **COVAX initiative (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access)**, led by WHO, Gavi, and UNICEF, ensured equitable vaccine distribution during the pandemic. Similarly, the **World Food Programme (WFP)** and **UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)** continue to deliver food and shelter to millions affected by the conflicts in **Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine**.
- **Environmental and Climate Action:**
 - The UN spearheads global efforts to tackle **climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution**, promoting international cooperation through agreements and summits.

- For example, the **Paris Agreement (2015)** under the **UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change)** is a landmark in global climate diplomacy. More recently, **COP28 (Conference of the Parties, 2023)** advanced commitments on renewable energy transition, while the **UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme)** launched the **Beat Plastic Pollution** campaign.
- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030:**
 - The UN's **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, with its **17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, sets a global framework for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable progress.
 - For instance, UNESCO's **Global Education Coalition** and UNDP's **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** initiatives help promote quality education, digital inclusion, and gender equality across developing nations.
- **Monitoring Progress Towards SDGs:**
 - The UN plays a key role in **tracking and assessing global progress** toward the SDGs through its annual reports and data platforms.
 - For example, the **UN SDG Progress Report 2024** shows that only **17% of SDG targets are on track**, highlighting challenges like climate finance gaps, inequality, and debt burdens. It helps identify policy bottlenecks and mobilise global action for mid-course corrections.

NECESSITY FOR REFORMS IN THE UNITED NATIONS (UN):

- **Modernization of Structure and Processes:**
 - The UN's core structure — particularly the **Security Council (UNSC)** — reflects the **post-1945 world order** dominated by five permanent members (P5) with veto power. This system no longer represents current geopolitical realities marked by **multipolarity and the rise of new powers**.
 - For example, **India, Japan, Germany, Brazil, and African nations** remain excluded from permanent membership despite their global contributions. Reforming the UNSC to **expand both permanent and non-permanent seats** and **rationalize veto use** is crucial to restore legitimacy and functionality.
- **Enhancing Representation and Inclusivity:**
 - Decision-making in the UN must become more inclusive to reflect the aspirations of the **Global South**. Regions like **Africa and Latin America** are under-represented, while smaller developing countries often lack influence in shaping resolutions.
 - Reforms must ensure **equitable geographical representation** and enable **broader participation** in global governance — a demand echoed by India's call to redress the "historical wrongs done to Africa."
- **Overcoming Gridlock and Veto Paralysis:**
 - Frequent **veto use by P5 members** has paralysed the UN's response to crises in **Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan**. This "gridlock," as termed by Jaishankar, prevents collective action even during humanitarian emergencies. Reforms could include **voluntary restraint on veto use**, or requiring members with a direct stake in a conflict to **abstain from veto powers**, ensuring decisions serve the global community rather than national interests.
- **Improving Efficiency and Effectiveness:**

- The UN's **bureaucratic structure and slow decision cycles** often impede rapid responses to emergencies such as pandemics or natural disasters.
- Reforms should focus on **streamlining procedures, reducing overlapping mandates**, and improving coordination between agencies like **WHO (World Health Organization), UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund), UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), and WFP (World Food Programme)**. A 2025 internal UN memo proposed merging overlapping operations to cut costs and improve coherence — reflecting the urgency of administrative reform.
- **Coordinating Specialized Agencies:**
 - The UN's specialized agencies have distinct mandates but often **duplicate efforts**, leading to inefficiency.
 - For instance, both **FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization)** and **WFP** operate in food security, while **UNDP (United Nations Development Programme)** and **UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme)** overlap in sustainability programs. Reforms must create **integrated task forces and shared data systems** to ensure synergy, avoid redundancy, and foster inter-agency collaboration.
- **Financial Reforms for Stability and Fairness:**
 - The UN frequently faces **financial shortfalls** due to delayed or incomplete payments from member states.
 - Reforms should include mechanisms for **timely contributions**, stronger **budgetary discipline**, and **penalties for chronic defaulters**.
Additionally, the formula for calculating each nation's contribution — currently based on **Gross National Income (GNI)** with capped limits — needs revision to ensure **fair burden-sharing**.
- **Adapting to New Global Challenges:**
 - The UN must evolve to handle **21st-century threats** such as **climate change, artificial intelligence (AI), cyberwarfare, pandemics, and mass displacement**. Existing frameworks are too rigid to manage cross-sectoral crises effectively. Creating **flexible, specialized mechanisms** for these emerging issues is essential to keep the UN relevant.
- **Restoring Credibility and Preventing Irrelevance:**
 - Without reform, the UN risks being bypassed by **regional blocs (e.g., BRICS, G20)** and **ad hoc coalitions**. Reforms are therefore vital not just for efficiency but for **preserving the UN's central role in global governance**. As experts warn, the UN must “modernize or risk irrelevance.”

CHALLENGES IN REFORMING THE UNITED NATIONS (UN):

- **Reluctance of Existing Permanent Members (P5) to Share Power:**
 - The foremost obstacle to UN reform is the **unwillingness of the five permanent members (P5)** — the U.S., U.K., France, Russia, and China — to dilute their privileged status. Any expansion of the Security Council or limitation on the **veto power** is viewed as a threat to their strategic influence.

- For instance, both **Russia and China** have opposed G4 proposals (India, Japan, Germany, Brazil) for permanent seats, while the **U.S.** supports selective expansion without altering veto rights.
- **Consensus Requirement Among the P5:**
 - Reforms to the UN Charter, particularly concerning the **Security Council composition or veto**, require **unanimous P5 consent** and ratification by two-thirds of the General Assembly — an almost unattainable political threshold. Divergent interests among P5 members on issues such as **Ukraine, Gaza, and Taiwan** make consensus highly improbable.
- **Geopolitical Rivalries and Strategic Distrust:**
 - Intensifying **great-power competition** — between the West and Russia–China bloc — has shifted focus from institutional reform to conflict management.
 - The UN’s paralysis on crises like **Ukraine (since 2022)** and **Gaza (2024–25)** reflects how rivalries spill into multilateral forums, further weakening reform momentum.
- **Competing Regional and Interest-Based Proposals:**
 - Diverse reform coalitions — such as the **G4 (India, Japan, Germany, Brazil)**, the **Uniting for Consensus (UfC) group led by Italy and Pakistan**, and the **African Union’s Ezulwini Consensus** — push mutually conflicting agendas. This fragmentation over **membership criteria, regional representation, and veto rights** prevents a unified reform blueprint from emerging.
- **Bureaucratic and Political Resistance within the UN System:**
 - Institutional inertia and the **bureaucratic complexity** of coordinating over 30 specialized agencies make reform execution difficult. Even limited restructuring proposals — like the **2025 UN Secretariat overhaul plan** to merge overlapping functions amid a funding crisis (Reuters, 2025) — face internal pushback and member-state disagreement.

INDIA’S EFFORTS IN UN REFORMS:

- **Expansion of the UN Security Council (UNSC):** At the **80th UNGA (2025)**, **S. Jaishankar** called the UN “gridlocked” and urged expansion of **both permanent and non-permanent seats**. India, as part of the **G4 (India, Japan, Germany, Brazil)**, seeks a **permanent seat** and **greater representation for Africa and the Global South**.
- **Equitable Representation:** India advocates a **democratic and inclusive UN**, ensuring developing nations have a voice. Jaishankar stressed correcting “**historical wrongs**” against Africa and making global governance more representative.
- **Efficiency and Transparency:** India supports reforms to **streamline UN functioning**, improve **budget use**, and make **peacekeeping and development programs** more accountable and result-oriented.
- **Counter-Terrorism Focus:** India champions the **Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT)** and urges global action to **block terror financing**, as reiterated after the **Pahalgam terror attack (2025)**.
- **Global Support and Peacekeeping Role:** With backing from the **U.S., France, and Russia**, India leverages its **strong peacekeeping record** to demand a greater say in UN decision-making and reform efforts.

WAY FORWARD:

- **Reform the UNSC Structure:** Expand both permanent and non-permanent seats to reflect current global power realities, ensuring representation for **Africa, Latin America, and the Global South**.
- **Rationalize the Veto System:** Introduce **veto restraint** in cases of mass atrocities or humanitarian crises and promote transparency in its use.

- **Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation:** Encourage coalitions like the G4 and African Union to find common ground and present a unified reform proposal.
- **Enhance Institutional Efficiency:** Streamline UN agencies and programs, reduce duplication, and improve accountability and budget utilization.
- **Secure Sustainable Financing:** Ensure timely contributions from member states and adopt fair burden-sharing mechanisms.
- **Adapt to Emerging Challenges:** Establish specialized frameworks for climate change, artificial intelligence, cyber threats, and pandemics.
- **Empower the Global South:** Integrate the voices of developing nations in global governance to restore the UN’s legitimacy and balance.

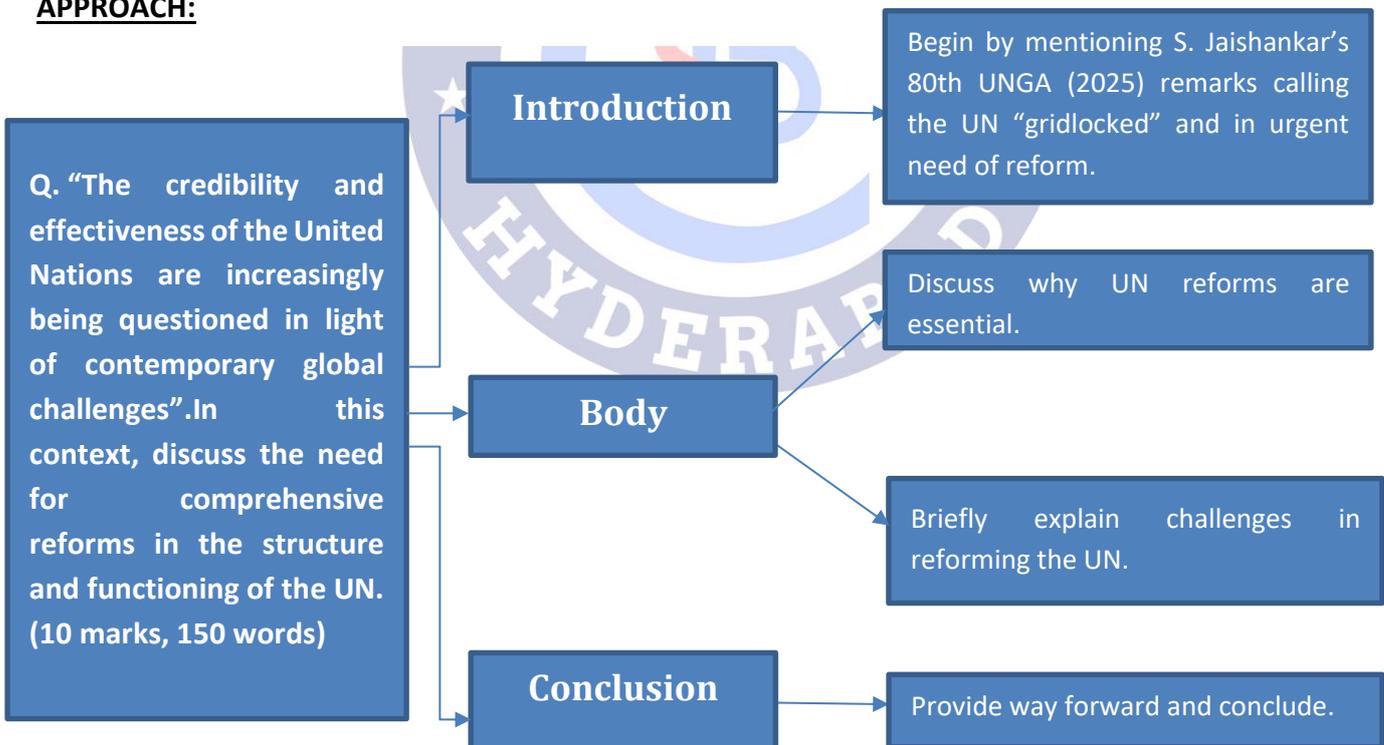
CONCLUSION:

- UN reforms are indispensable for restoring the institution’s **credibility, effectiveness, and representativeness**. Modernizing its structure and processes will ensure the UN remains the **central pillar of a fair and multipolar international order** in the 21st century.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. “The credibility and effectiveness of the United Nations are increasingly being questioned in light of contemporary global challenges”. In this context, discuss the need for comprehensive reforms in the structure and functioning of the UN. (10 marks, 150 words)

APPROACH:



MODEL ANSWER:

In his address to the **80th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2025**, India’s External Affairs Minister **S. Jaishankar** warned that the **United Nations is “gridlocked”** and in dire need of reform. He called for expansion of both **permanent and non-permanent seats** in the **UN Security Council (UNSC)** to make the organisation more credible, representative, and responsive to global challenges. This reflects the growing

concern that the **UN's current structure**, rooted in the post-1945 world order, no longer aligns with 21st-century realities.

Need for Comprehensive UN Reforms:

1. Outdated Structure and Power Imbalance: The UNSC's composition—with five permanent members (P5) holding veto powers—reflects a bygone era. Emerging powers like **India, Japan, Germany, Brazil**, and **African nations** remain excluded from permanent membership despite their global influence. Reforming the Council is essential to reflect **multipolarity and equitable representation**.

2. Erosion of Credibility and Effectiveness: The UN's failure to prevent or resolve crises in **Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan** highlights its diminishing capacity for collective action. As Jaishankar noted, the system is "paralysed by old structures and veto politics," undermining faith in multilateralism.

3. Inclusivity and Representation of the Global South: Developing regions, especially **Africa and Latin America**, remain underrepresented in global decision-making. A reformed UN must amplify the **voice of the Global South** to ensure balanced and democratic governance.

4. Need for Administrative and Financial Efficiency: The UN's bureaucratic delays and **overlapping mandates among agencies** (like WHO, UNICEF, WFP, and UNHCR) weaken its responsiveness. Financial reforms—ensuring **timely contributions and fair burden-sharing**—are vital for operational stability.

5. Adapting to Emerging Challenges: Modern threats such as **climate change, artificial intelligence (AI), cyber warfare, and pandemics** demand new, cross-sectoral mechanisms beyond the UN's traditional frameworks.

Challenges in Reforming the UN:

1. P5 Reluctance to Share Power: The **U.S., U.K., France, Russia, and China** resist changes that may dilute their dominance, particularly over the **veto mechanism**.

2. Consensus Requirement Among P5: Any Charter amendment needs **unanimous approval from P5** and ratification by two-thirds of the General Assembly—an almost impossible threshold.

3. Geopolitical Rivalries: Tensions among major powers—such as **Russia vs. the West**—divert attention from institutional reform to crisis management.

4. Conflicting Regional Proposals: Groups like the **G4, Uniting for Consensus (UfC)**, and **African Union's Ezulwini Consensus** push differing reform models, preventing a unified framework.

Way Forward:

- **Expand the UNSC** to include both permanent and non-permanent members from underrepresented regions.

- **Rationalize the veto system**, introducing voluntary restraint in humanitarian situations.
- **Enhance institutional efficiency** by streamlining agencies and improving accountability.
- **Ensure sustainable financing** through timely payments and equitable contribution mechanisms.
- **Promote unified coalitions** like the **G4–Africa partnership** to present a common reform agenda.
- **Adapt to new global threats** by establishing specialised frameworks for AI governance, climate action, and cyber security.
- **Empower the Global South** to restore balance and legitimacy to the UN system.

The **United Nations stands at a crossroads**—either it reforms to reflect today’s multipolar, interconnected world, or risks fading into irrelevance.

Comprehensive reforms in structure, representation, and functioning are essential to **restore trust, strengthen effectiveness**, and ensure that the UN remains the **central pillar of equitable multilateralism** in the 21st century.

