The United Nations Organization was founded during the final phase of World War II, when representatives of 50 states that had been adversaries of the German Reich and its allies met at a conference in San Francisco in spring 1945 (Poland joined later as the 51st founding member) to draw up and sign the United Nations Charter. The dimensions of the war and, most of all, the genocide of European Jews at the hands of the German Reich as well as the other massive crimes against humanity committed by it in Poland, the Soviet Union and Southern Europe made the nations of the world realize just how urgently a system was needed which would prevent states from using force, and which would put a powerful international organization in charge of world peace. “To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” is therefore the first and foremost objective laid down in the preamble of the charter. The charter entered into force on 24 October 1945, obliging all member states to settle their disputes by peaceful means (art. 2, 3) and to refrain from the use of force (art. 2, 4). According to chapters V-VII the Security Council is responsible for ensuring compliance with these norms. So to this day the UN charter represents the basis of the modern international legal system (see also objectives and principles in art. 1 and 2 of the charter as well as further specifications in the following chapters).

More than 65 years after its founding, the United Nations (also United Nations Organization UNO) looks back at a history full of ups and downs. It is an institution on which opinions continue to differ widely. Its advocates see it as the vital centerpiece of an international system in need of more cooperation, and wish to increase its range of tasks to include the safeguarding of global collective goods such as peace, human rights, or the protection of the environment.

Skeptics on the other hand complain about its lengthy decision making processes and accuse the organization of a permanent inability to act and an almost total dependence on the interests of the great powers. It is, however, beyond debate that the United Nations with all of its strengths and weaknesses is a unique institution with an enormous impact on international relations.

The United Nations has currently 193 member states (May 2013). The last country to join was South Sudan in the summer of 2011, so now the organization includes all states of the world with the exception of the Vatican State and (to this day) Kosovo. The quasi-state of Taiwan does not have the chance of becoming a member in its own right due to the People’s Republic of China powerfully advocated and almost universally accepted “One-China-Principle”, according to which Taiwan is part of China. So the United Nations is the only international organization which may claim that its objectives, its norms, and its principles as well as the member states’ compliance with them are universally valid.

Over the decades of its existence the United Nations has been able to almost quadruple the number of its members. After the first obstacles due to the antagonism between the super powers United States and Soviet Union in the Cold War were overcome (up to the mid-1950s only nine states had joined), it was mostly the decolonization process from the 1950s to the 1970s as well as the new international order after the end of the East-West conflict that led to a continuous increase in members. Since only sovereign states can become UN members, newly emerged nations have tended to look at UN membership as a particularly strong symbol of international recognition and have tried to join the organization as soon as possible.

However, in order for new members to be admitted, a recommendation by the Security Council and a subsequent decision by the General Assembly are required (art. 4, 2 of the charter). In both organs there have been controversies as to which conditions must be met so that a country qualifies for UN membership, or which entities have the right to be represented in the organization. Up to 1971 for instance, the “Republic of China”, as it says in article 23 (1), was represented by the government of Taiwan; then the People’s Republic of China took over. Also, the former GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany could only join in 1973 after both German states had accepted each other’s existence in the Basic Treaty. At present, a Security Council’s recommendation to admit Kosovo has failed because China and Russia have not accepted Kosovo’s secession from Serbia in 2008. But in spite of such recurring difficulties, the United Nations managed to meet its own standards to almost a hundred percent and became the global organization in charge of securing world peace.

The Failed Predecessor: The League of Nations

So eventually the UN managed to successfully establish itself as a global and – as we will see in the following chapters – as quite a capable organization of states with the objective of promoting world peace. In order to better understand how the organization became what it is today, it is well worth casting a glance at its predecessor, the League of Nations, which was founded in 1920, located in Geneva, and which had tried to set up a new world peace order. Comparative analyses usually come to the conclusion that the United Nations had to overcome the normative and institutional weaknesses of the League of Nations. Although this conclusion is correct, it overlooks that the League of Nations created the fundamental normative and organizational conditions which the United Nations was able to build upon. This applies in particular to the actually rather revolutionary idea of depriving states of their sovereign right to declare war (liberum ius ad bellum) - a reaction to the disaster of World War I - and put an intergovernmental organization based on international legal norms in charge of maintaining world peace. The right to declare war whenever it served a state’s political interests was, after all, of essential significance for a state’s sovereignty; a right which peer states claimed for themselves after concluding the Westphalian Treaty of Münster and Osnabrück in 1648. The Westphalian System shaped international politics for nearly 300 years. War and peace alternated and were seen as morally indifferent legal situations characterizing the relations between states. The scope of World War I and the global devastation it caused inevitably led to the failure of an international order based on the principle of unlimited state sovereignty.

Thus the Covenant of the League of Nations, largely based on the “14 points” presented by US-president Woodrow Wilson on the occasion of the US entry into the war in 1917, stated that every war was a matter of concern to the whole League and that the League “shall take any action that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations” (art. 11). In a next step it presents rules for the prevention of wars through the peaceful settlement of disputes (art. 12-15) and sanctions to put an end to wars started in disregard of the covenants (art. 16).

Basically the Covenant of the League of Nations places all of its members under the obligation to participate in a cooling-off process, a kind of de-escalation mechanism in case of disputes which might lead to a war. According to article 12 such cases were to be submitted either to enquiry by the Council or to arbitration or judicial settlement (or, after it was set up, to the Permanent Court of International Justice) for investigation and a final report. During this phase as well as for a period of three months after the award by the arbitrators or the report by the Council, countries agreed not to resort to war. When a party to the dispute accepted the arbitration or the unanimous decision of the Council (in which the parties concerned were not allowed to participate) according to art. 15, the ban on war persisted. If the Council failed to reach a unanimous decision, it was up to the parties to the conflict “to take such action as they considered necessary for the maintenance of right and justice”, which included the option of going to war.

But no matter how important and groundbreaking this partial ban on war in the Covenant of the
League of Nations may have been as an idea, in practical terms it remained vague and, in the end, ineffective. It did not take into account the use of violence below the level of war, which made it difficult to differentiate between the legitimate use of force and illegal war. As a result, it remained unclear when collective coercive measures were to be imposed. Eventually they were applied only once (against Italy in 1937 because of the attack on Abyssinia, now Ethiopia). Structural weaknesses became noticeable: the link between the Covenant and the peace treaties of Versailles, Neuilly, Trianon and St. Germain, which, from the defeated countries’ point of view, imposed harsh and unfair conditions, made the League of Nations a target of revisionist efforts, particularly in the German Reich from 1933 on. More importantly, however, the League of Nations failed to make the great powers join forces in taking over shared responsibility for peace. After the US senate had refused to ratify the Versailles treaty in a power struggle with president Wilson, the US stayed out of the League from the very beginning, the German Reich and Japan left in 1933, and the Soviet Union only joined in 1934. Thus the League of Nations was never able to become a universal organization and was never able to prevent World War II. On 18 April 1946 the League of Nations dissolved at its 21st session in Paris. Still, it would be wrong to regard the League of Nations as a complete failure. Its fundamental norms and mechanisms did not become null and void because of World War II, on the contrary: this global catastrophe showed most dramatically how sorely an effective and inclusive global security system was needed. With the United Nations Charter, the world gave it a second try.

The Charter of the United Nations

The historical context of the UN’s establishment, of World War II, and the lessons learned from the League of Nations’ failure all characterize the structures and procedures of the UN to this very day, because back then commitments and compromises, which under any other political circumstances would have been unthinkable, had became possible.

The first notions and drafts for a new world order date back to the early years of the war, such as the Atlantic Charter presented by US president Franklin D. Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston Churchill. These drafts started taking shape when the Soviet Union was included in the efforts at the conferences of Moscow and Teheran (1943), Dumbarton Oaks (1944) and finally Yalta (February 1945). So in concept and structure, the charter of the emerging world organization was based on ideas of the US, the USSR, and the United Kingdom. They had decided to create an organization representing the great powers, including China and France, which had rather been victims than victors in the war. Those five powers agreed to take over responsibility for peace (the element so painfully lacking in the League of Nations) on condition that they would enjoy a privileged position in the new organization: the charter would grant them permanent membership and a right of veto in the Security Council as well as further exclusive rights to control all important decisions made within the UN system. Therefore the charter’s basic principle of the sovereign equality of all members (art. 2, 1) was formally restricted from the very beginning – a fact which the other founding members in San Francisco accepted grudgingly so as not to endanger the establishment of the long-awaited effective global organization. As it turned out, however, the “Great Five” were very selective in their approach to maintaining world peace and used their right of veto mainly to protect or promote their own interests and initiatives. As a result, the existing security system is caught in a contradiction: states are supposed to submit to a global peace securing system, but the great powers refuse to play by the rules.

Still, the United Nations Charter has turned out to be a document that not only regulates the relations among states and the relations between the members and the organization as well as the competencies of the UN bodies in 19 chapters and 111 articles, it also represents a kind of world constitution, which proved to be sufficiently robust and flexible in view of numerous historical upheavals and changes: from the Cold War, the East-West confrontation, the decolonization, the North South conflict and the end of the bipolar world order up to the age of globalization. It did not only survive those changes, but managed to put them into a generally accepted normative and
institutional framework. The charter is legally binding for all members and has become a reference document for regional alliances and organizations such as NATO, the European Union (EU) or the African Union (AU) as well as many constitutions of states which recognize the basic principles of the United Nations in their state law and contract law.

**Mission: World Peace**

While the Covenant of the League of Nations lacked a clear normative distinction between the legitimate and the illegitimate use of force, enabling countries to pursue their interests through war, the UN Charter obliges the parties to the treaty to settle their disputes generally and in principle by peaceful means (art. 2, 3). The general ban on violence includes not only the use of force, but also the threat to use force with few very narrowly defined exceptions (art. 2, 4). Thus the UN Charter creates the legal foundation for a collective security system with the Security Council at its core, endowed with extensive (potential) powers to implement these rules. Compared to the Covenant of the League of Nations, this represents a cleaner and more effective break with the traditional sovereignty concept of the Westphalian system.

Still, the prohibition of the use of force in article 2 of the charter highlights the conflicting priorities that have characterized United Nations activities from the very beginning: the organization’s claim to collective dispute resolution on the one side and, as also laid out in article 2, the sovereign equality of all members (1) as well as the principle of non-intervention in their domestic matters (7) on the other. And indeed, by joining the United Nations the member states did not give up their sovereignty, although over time they submitted to an increasing number of rules and obligations restricting that sovereignty. To redefine the scope of these rules and the division of competences between the organization and the member states has become both a permanent and a difficult task for the United Nations. This becomes abundantly clear in areas such as the protection of human rights or social development, which are part of the classic *domaines réservés*, the exclusive sphere of competence of the sovereign state. All the more so, since the United Nations has considerably increased the range of its tasks and activities as well as its organizational structure as a result of a more comprehensive notion of “peace” and an increasing number of members. Recently international debates have become more focused on the possibility to restrict national sovereignty in the context of the responsibility to protect. The issue is how the international community can or should react if a country is either not willing or not able to prevent or stop large-scale human rights abuses on its territory.

While it is true that the United Nations Charter does not define its first and foremost goal of maintaining peace in much detail, the comprehensive list of objectives stated in article 1 (see box 1) illustrates that these are based on a widely defined concept of peace which sees the prevention of war as necessary, but certainly not as sufficient. Instead, the charter focuses on human dignity and the rights that derive from that dignity, on the creation of socially just and liberal conditions of living for all people in equal measure. Without this comprehensive concept of peace, many activities and initiatives of the organization ranging from negotiating human rights treaties up to the millennium development goals would never have been developed. The political practice of the organization is consistent with this concept, too. The organization has always tried to eliminate the structural causes of violent conflicts when it set up special committees or targeted programs and funds. Over time this has led to the emergence of a tight network of institutions and cooperative relations that differ according to functions and regions, and which is now commonly known as the UN system.

**Institutional Structure**

The UN system can be divided into three categories: The principal organs set up by the charter, the subsidiary and specialized organs created by the organization including funds, programs, regional institutions as well as currently 15 specialized agencies.
The system is complemented by numerous more or less formalized relations to various other institutions and actors representing the international civil society (such as about 3,000 nongovernmental organizations accredited by the Economic and Social Council), the economy or academics and science. The special organs and programs maintain their own relations to expert committees or state and private bodies around the world, which makes it difficult to define the limits of this dynamic system.

The term “system” suggests an internal logic and structure, which, however, is sometimes missing in the UN system, which, in real life, is more of a network: difficult to control and to coordinate, also because the numerous actors enjoy a high degree of autonomy. This often leads to duplication, friction losses and waste of resources. But then again, the system is unique: it has universal competence and serves as a forum for analyzing problems and finding solutions for the challenges of an increasingly globalized world - crisis and conflict management, climate protection, sustainable development and the comprehensive issue of human security. Especially for the poorer countries the UN system provides the opportunity to participate at least to some extent as equal partners in the shaping of international relations.

Principal Organs:

According to article 7 of the charter the centerpiece of the UN system is the United Nations Organization with its six principal organs. The charter contains chapters which determine the institutional structures, the tasks and the competences of these organs. Five of them are still active. One of them, the Trusteeship Council, suspended operation at the end of 1994 with the independence of Palau, the last remaining United Nations trust territory, from US trusteeship. Ideas to revive it as an organ responsible for peacekeeping and peace-building were rejected, so the heads of state and government decided at the global summit of the UN’s 60th anniversary in 2005 to eliminate it from the charter. Until ratification, references to the Trusteeship Council will remain as “dead letter” in the charter.

The General Assembly is the core of the organization. All 193 member states are represented according to the principle “one state – one vote”. Since the beginning of the 1960s the five regional groups (Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe as well as Western Europe and other states) have played an important role because depending on their size and composition they are each allocated a proportional number of seats and rights of initiative in other principal organs such as the ECOSOC or the Security Council or in subsidiary organs such as the Human Rights Council. Just like the UN system in general, the regional groups, too, are subject to permanent change. With the decolonization process the number of states in Africa and Asia increased substantially. The same goes for Eastern Europe, where new states emerged after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Many of these countries are now members of organizations of the political West, such as NATO and the EU. Other members of the regional group Western Europe and Other States are Australia, Canada and New Zealand, and, with specific caveats, Israel, Turkey and the US.

The General Assembly is subject to the organizational and financial sovereignty of the United Nations, it elects the members of the other principal organs, decides about the acceptance of new members, and appoints the Secretary General – although in the last two cases its decisions depend on the recommendations of the Security Council. Any political decision made outside these core competencies, such as decisions relating to maintaining peace, merely counts as a recommendation. Also, the General Assembly approves the budget of the United Nations. Its six main committees, in which all member states are represented, prepare all important UN decisions and initiatives in all areas of global politics. The first main committee is concerned with international security questions and disarmament, the second with economic and financial questions, the third with humanitarian and cultural issues, the forth with specific political problems, the fifth with the administration and the budget of the UN and the sixth with updating the rules of international law. Since General
Assembly decisions are only recommendatory, international conventions, such as the ones prepared by the sixth committee and adopted by the assembly, need to be ratified by the member states. So although the General Assembly is the most representative organ of the international community, its decision making powers and, above all, its scope of action remain rather limited.

The Security Council, on the other hand, is much more powerful. In article 24 the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace is conferred to the Security Council. In case of a breach of the peace or a threat to it or in case of an aggression (art. 39), it may take very far-reaching and above all legally binding decisions such as imposing sanctions and taking coercive military measures. Decision making in the Security Council requires a majority of nine out of its fifteen members, with none of the permanent five members voting “no” (right of veto). The ten non-permanent members get elected by the General Assembly for a two-year term taking into account geographical balance. (For more details on the Security Council see chapter 2)

The Economic and Social Council, also called ECOSOC, represents 54 member states elected by the General Assembly. On behalf of the General Assembly, it is responsible for issues of economic, social and humanitarian development and maintains ties to specialized organizations and the international civil society on the basis of special agreements.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) settles legal disputes between member states if they agree to submit them to the Court. The ICJ is the only institution in the world which is allowed to interpret international law through legal opinions, which has a certain impact on international politics. The competences of the Court are laid down in its statute, a document annexed to the Charter of the United Nations, of which it forms an integral part.

The Secretariat is the central administrative body of the United Nations. It employs about 44,000 staff members around the world, most of them in its numerous subsidiary and specialized organs (see below). 6,600 people are employed at the headquarters in New York. The Secretariat has no decision making power, but services the other principal organs, above all the General Assembly and the Security Council, and administers the programs and policies laid down by them. At its head is the Secretary-General (since 2007 Ban Ki-Moon from South Korea), the “face” of the United Nations to the world public. He is supported by the Deputy Secretary-General (since 2012 Jan Eliasson from Sweden) and the Senior Management Group, a high-level body of UN leaders. The Secretary-General is the top administrator of the international community. He has extensive decision making powers within the UN system and assigns duties, determines structures, and appoints staff members. At the same time he is subject to guidance from the member states which have a large influence on the work of the Secretariat, mostly because they allocate funds to the budget and give instructions that are often very detailed. The Secretary-General is also a statesman among heads of state and government. According to article 99 of the Charter, he may draw the Security Council’s attention to any matter which, in his view, might represent a threat to the peace. UN Secretary-Generals have – with varying degrees of commitment and success – always understood to put issues of global importance not only on the Security Council’s, but on the international community’s agenda. It is a difficult job to reconcile duties that are often contradictory, to always strike the right balance between the role of the administrator – the “secretary” – and the initiator of international policies – the “general”. Because of this double role the tasks of the Secretary-General are among the most difficult to be found in international politics and it takes a strong personality and authority to meet the enormous demands of this position.

Four out of five principal organs of the United Nations are located at the headquarters in New York, while the fifth, the International Court of Justice, is located in The Hague (not to be confused with the International Criminal Tribunal or the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia which are also based there). In addition, the Secretariat has three subsidiaries: in Geneva, Nairobi, and Vienna.

Subsidiary and specialized organs, programs, and specialized agencies
Article 7 of the charter allows the principal organs to establish such subsidiary organs as may be found necessary—and they have made active use of that right over the last few years. Apart from the committees and subsidiaries directly subject to the principal organs (in case of the Security Council this includes peace missions as well as the Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and the Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda) there are development and assistance programs such as the United Nations Development Programme UNDP, the United Nations Environment Programme UNEP, the International Children’s Emergency Fund UNICEF or the Conference on Trade and Development UNCTAD as well as the humanitarian institutions such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees UNRWA and the High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR, the World Food Programme WFP and academic institutions such as the United Nations University UNU in Tokyo or the United Nations Institute for Training and Research UNITAR in Geneva.

Most of these specialized agencies do not have their own status under international law. They were established during the decolonization period, when many of the former colonies became independent states. Subsequently, the developing countries started forming the majority in the General Assembly, which they used as an important forum to express their interests. By setting up a large number of development oriented specialized organs they succeeded in making the settlement of the North-South conflict a permanent issue on the United Nations agenda, but in many of these countries and for the larger part of their population there has been no sustainable and structural improvement as a result of these efforts (for details refer to chapter 4 of this publication).

The specialized agencies often focus on the same or similar tasks as the specialized organs. They are autonomous international organizations, legal entities with their own members and their own funding. There are fifteen of them (and since the World Bank Group consists of 5 organizations, they are often referred to as nineteen agencies) which, according to article 63 of the charter, are linked to ECOSOC and thus to the United Nations through special agreements. The specialized agencies cover a wide range of issues and activities. Usually we differentiate between technical organizations (such as the Universal Post Union UPU, the International Labour Organization ILO), social, cultural and humanitarian organization (such as UNESCO and the World Health Organization WHO) as well as financial organizations (such as the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund IMF). In addition, there are several autonomous organizations such the International Atomic Energy Agency IAEA or the World Trade Organization WTO which are loosely connected to the United Nations without any formal agreements.

The specialized organs and specialized agencies work in various areas of responsibility of the United Nations. Their effectiveness as well as their interaction with the principal organs will be highlighted and discussed based on case studies in the following chapters.

**Funding**

The UN is largely financed from contributions from member states. Every other year the General Assembly approves a budget to cover its current expenses to be funded by the members on the basis of a scale of assessments for a period of three years. The scale ranges from a minimum contribution of 0.001 percent for the poorest states to up to 22 percent for the US. Germany is the third largest contributor after the US and Japan, its share for the years 2010 to 2012 is 8.02 per cent. For the two-year period 2010-2011, the organization’s regular budget amounted to 5.16 billion US dollars which, however, covers only the smaller part of the actual costs incurred. In addition, there is a budget of more than 7.26 billion US dollars covering the same period and the costs for the currently 16 UN peace missions. The costs of peace missions are allocated according to a similar procedure with poor members states receiving discounts of up to 90% according to the scale of assessments. The resulting deficit is paid for by the permanent five members of the Security Council. While the money for these two budgets comes from the mandatory contributions of the member states, numerous programs and funds are financed largely through voluntary payments. Therefore it is difficult to make predictions about UN funding in times of crisis.
The Role of International Organizations

So far we have seen that the United Nations has been quite successful in its efforts to build a global system of securing peace, but also that it has been hampered by many obstacles and contradictions, some of them rather severe, from the very beginning. The permanent revision and adaption of its structures and instruments to new global developments and constellations go hand in hand with an insufficient ability to act, with obsolete structures, and with a general unwillingness to carry out reforms.

So it should be pointed out that the appreciation of the role and the function of international organizations in general and of the United Nations in particular are subject to different patterns of perception and explanatory models of global politics and international relations. In the academic world these patterns serve as the basis of various theories and schools of thought, but they also shape “world views” (Gerd Krell) of the conduct of states, governments, and their instruments of power and are therefore of direct political relevance.

The concept of the world views explains why international cooperation is so extremely difficult when something which is generally perceived as a public good – world peace, human rights, the environment, the climate – needs to be secured. Taking a look at two important schools of thought – realism and liberalism/ institutionalism – helps to understand where these different perceptions come from and which functions they attribute to international organizations.

The realist school sees the international system as an anarchy in which each state has to fight for its survival and to accumulate as much power as possible to be safe from other actors. According to this perception, political cooperation in international organizations is limited to interaction between states at best. Because then states are able to largely maintain their sovereignty and to pursue their interests even, if necessary, without the interference of any organization. Submitting to any higher level authority, to supranational institutions, would be the equivalent of giving up sovereignty and weakening one’s own position. Consequently multilateral organizations are – from this point of view - best used as instruments to defend one’s own interests, to control other actors, especially the stronger ones, and to establish a balance of power. Preference is given to traditional means of guaranteeing security such as strong armed forces, a superior economy or powerful alliances, i.e. instruments of power subject to (the whims of) individual states or small groups of states – which in turn perpetuates an overall situation of anarchy and uncertainty.

Liberal institutionalists realize that there are threats lurking in the international system, but that permanent multilateral cooperation between states makes good sense, if the parties involved have each something to gain from cooperating (such as economic success due to stability in a region). They prefer this cooperation to take place in formal institutions, if these institutions are able to influence the conduct of their members in a way that agreements are adhered to and the overall predictability and reliability improve as a result. More information about the intent of other actors lowers transaction costs: confidence increases and this unlocks potential. Less money needs to be spent on security and can be put to better use; integration and interdependence have a stabilizing effect. So from the institutionalist point of view international organizations are forums in which states coordinate their policies on the basis of agreements and treaties. At a more advanced stage such organizations may even become actors in their own right and take on supranational functions – such as in the EU” common policies or the United Nations peacekeeping through the Security Council.

Since in the end neither these two nor any of the other theories around can sufficiently explain the complex reality of international relations and the functions of international organizations completely, or shape them in their spirit, the work of the United Nations and the conduct of its member states remain controversial in many aspects. But in order to understand the following chapters it is important to realize that the behavior of the member states towards the UN is shaped by the perceptions of their governments – which, consequently, also shape the United Nations. And so it is easy to see that the United Nations is only as strong or as weak as its members allow it to be.