

Zombie, collapse, phoenix, or dragon:

What will the UN be in 5 years' time?

Transcript

Jane Kinninmont

thank you very much. And just to briefly introduce the UN Association. We are an independent charity that was formed in 1945 as part of a grassroots British people's movement to call for the establishment of the United Nations and to call for a system of international cooperation to build peace in the aftermath of the Second World War. We continue to be a grassroots movement. We have groups around the country, including one here in Oxford. And right now, in the moment that we're in, we're very keen to really build and re-energize that grassroots infrastructure because we believe that the surviving of the UN system really will depend on having strong grassroots support. a sense that it is relevant to the daily lives of ordinary people around the world, and connectivity to the local levels at which so many decisions, whether about peace or about the future of the environment, will be made and implemented. And if you're wondering, why I seem to have an abstract scribble behind me, and it's because I'm going to start with a video. While we're talking about the picture, I also want to take you back in time a little bit, because earlier this year, as Liz mentioned, it was the 80th anniversary of the first ever UN General Assembly, which was held in London at Methodist Central Hall. And we gathered 2,000 people of all ages and backgrounds there in January, along with faith leaders, the leaders of the UN, scientists, politicians, all sorts of people, to talk about what the UN had achieved and to look towards its future. And we felt that it was useful to to use the power of being in that same place where people first convened to really try to remember the spirit behind a boundary of the UN. If people think Britain is broken down, at that time, London was physically devastated. The delegates who came from 51 countries had to be given ration cards a far cry from the UN conferences of today. And women volunteers took them to see bomb sites in South London, the women volunteers who had, until just a few months before, been showing people how to get to airline shelters when bombings started. And we felt it was really important to try to remind people of how, even at that time of time when everything was smashed to bits, there was a movement to see another future is possible. So let me share our video with you.

Speaker 2

That choice is not what the many can. Rightly I have done a war of God and untold sorrow, the nations of the world met the safe succeeding generations from this quadrant war. 2025 was a profound and challenging year for international cooperation and the values of the US. A was clashed, equality wiped, climate scale accelerated, international law was trampled. How many blows and international order have our United Nations and Europe? From his heart. The darkest moments. This, is not a moment to turn away for loyalty of that reason.

Jane Kinninmont

We are here because each person in this room took a decision to get on and do something linked to a vision of a better world.

Speaker 2

This planet is the only place where some place find other things. This, the only place where meaning current meetings. What is the new global social contact that we use for this day?

Jane Kinninmont

Women's explosion is not about culture, it's about power. We can channel the problems into anger, or we can find a way inspired by the decision makers of the past. The tremendous gains we have made over the past 18 years cannot be understated.

Speaker 2

This part of us still stink. I do not stand here as the print is overly aware. I stand here as someone who believes deeply in its potential. The general Senate, which we celebrate today, exists because of the single truth. Today, it is strongest when we stand as well. United Nations needs you. I remind all of us that the principles of the United Nations Charter are our common life insurance. We all need civil society movements that are fearless and persistent, that make it impossible for leaders to deploy. Thank you to the United Nations Association UK for standing up for multilateralism and international law, especially for the most powerful into us.

Jane Kinninmont

To violent change the world. So, now I'll share some slides with you, but I wanted to... This is how you tie it looks. Hold on, I need to turn off YouTube because we're going to... And now to our regular scheduled programming. So we talked briefly, we heard from Malcolm earlier about the kind of grandeur of the ambitions behind the UN and maybe the preamble to the UN Charter does set the world an impossible task. But I always like to start my presentations with it because I think that for those of us in civil society who want to defend the UN, it's not about defending a specific institutional setup, it is fundamentally about defending the purpose that is still as relevant as ever. To think

about the interests of succeeding generation and to find a system for cooperation that will never 100% prevent war, but can limit war as much as possible by making it a taboo and illegitimate thing and by building alternative ways to resolve differences and to build peace. Now, just a snapshot of the problem. And there will be a new Global Peace Index released in June. It's a great kind of data-driven look at world peace. But we can see from the current index that was published last year that this analysis of the state of conflict in the world shows that there are 59 active state-based conflicts. Conflicts are becoming more internationalised with 78 countries involved in conflicts outside their borders in 2024 and they judge that the conditions that suggest conflict is coming are the worst since World War II and that we see that global peacefulness has been deteriorating since 2014. So this is not a new phenomenon of Trump. This is a kind of steady worsening that seems now to be accelerating. I wanted also to share a snapshot of those costs of conflict that is put together by the UN Office on Disarmament Affairs, that a 1% increase in military spending equals a 1% cut in publicly financed health services. We're looking at the 2.7 trillion current annual military spending, which is currently rising and is set to increase again next year. For a tiny fraction of that amount, the world could eliminate extreme poverty and global hunger. You may have heard recently a remarkable speech by the UN Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs, Tom Fletcher, who was speaking at Chatham House and talked about how to try to encourage countries to give to humanitarian aid, he has set out an outcome based plan for this year to show how the donations that he's asking for could save 87 million lives. And all of that money that would be taken to save 87 million lives, the equivalent of that was spent already by the US in the Iran war. which really is one way to put this into perspective. So we heard already from Paul about the kind of implications of resources becoming more and more concentrated in the hands of a few. And when we're looking at the global picture, we're seeing more of the world economy's resources being put into military spending. Now, especially in the countries that until recently were enjoying quite a long term peace dividend after the Cold War. So if you look back at the data maybe five years ago, the big rises in military spending were coming in the Middle East, particularly with the Gulf countries, India as well to some extent. But now the rises in military spending are being driven by the US and by Europe. with the impact of Putin's invasion of Ukraine and European fear of American abandonment. And this seems like a trend that will be a long-term trend. And yet somehow, at the same time, we can all see the rising levels of conflict, but there is a major disinvestment in tools for peace. Now we've seen that here in the UK with the decision to say that money for defence spending could come out of the international development budget, much of which in fact was geared towards conflict prevention and helping fragile states build up their own security capabilities. But it's not just the UK. We are now seeing the UN carrying out budget parts across the board of 20 to 25%. And as Malcolm alluded to, of course there is waste and there is duplication and there are things that could be cut. But this is all happening so fast that it's not, the cuts are not necessarily producing a more efficient

United Nations. We've seen global development rates cut by 9% in 2004 and at least as much again in 2025. And in the middle of all this, the Foreign Office here in the UK is cutting its budget by 1/3. over 2 years. So at this time when probably we need some diplomacy, a lot of diplomats are having to look to their own job security and what they're going to be doing with their teams. And the UN peacekeeping budget has been reduced by one third over 10 years. That is partly because of the closure of several major missions that haven't been followed by as many new ones. That's the financial side. But there's also a kind of wider disinvestment in diplomacy. We see in many countries a kind of sidelining of foreign ministries and professional diplomats in favour of a stronger executive role in international relations. And we're seeing at the level of the UN an extreme risk aversion by the current senior leadership when it comes to taking on a very direct role in peace and security. That is partly because of the changing nature of international conflicts that the UN has developed many tools to deal with civil wars, to deal with fragile states. But increasingly we are seeing conflicts in which major powers are directly involved under return of interstate competition, often involving countries that have got a veto on the Security Council. So on one hand, you might say it's very difficult for the UN to get involved. On the other hand, you might say the UN is the only place where China, Russia and the US sit down regularly and talk to one another. So there should be something that can be done here. But the recent trend has really been to take a back seat and to avoid extreme controversy. So there's a growing view that you'll see in people who are writing about the UN and its leadership that perhaps the UN needs to think in different ways and to consider that irrelevance is also a large risk. Meanwhile, among some of the major powers, we are seeing a kind of new attitude towards peace. Now to me it's really fascinating that for Donald Trump, the most powerful man in the world, he's someone who really aspires in theory to be a peacemaker. And indeed the Nobel Peace Prize is something that the most powerful man in the world wants but cannot get. And it does show us that there is a big constituency for peace, including among the younger generation in the US and the disaffected people who make up a lot of the MAGA movement. There is a big trend of being fed up with foreign intervention and forever wars, which is interesting and quite significant. But because we're also in a time in Western countries, including in our country, where there's a huge swing away from the establishment, there has been this reaction against traditional diplomacy. And so we've seen the US try to deploy a kind of big man diplomacy, where a small number of men who are close associates of the president are involved in shuttle diplomacy, going to meet leaders from countries that they have never visited in some cases to thrash out agreements. And they are really reacting against a kind of liberal vision of peace that involves inclusive peacemaking, involvement of society, involvement of women. I find this board of peace picture quite interesting because you'll see just two women in there. But because of a sense, a perhaps superficial sense that peacemaking isn't working, there is this reversion to a kind of transactional peacemaking. And it comes on top of an already existing

international trend where a lot of negotiations are focused on a ceasefire rather than some kind of comprehensive deal that hopes to address the root causes of conflict. And of course, as we were just hearing about a good enough peace, a ceasefire is very often better than nothing. But right now we're beginning to see ceasefires that stretch the definition. Cease fires, cease fires where 100 people can be killed in one month, and it's still called a cease. and a kind of normalization of a grey zone world where there's neither all-out war or proper peace, where there are already some security experts saying World War III is already happening and we can't agree on whether there is a World War III or not. That's a strange situation to be anyone that defies some analysis. And we're seeing also from the economics point of view that the transactional Trumpian negotiation attempts that we're seeing is very focused on making deals that will silence the guns long enough to get economic extraction going. But that will not build the conditions for inclusive peace, which usually would involve giving people a stake in peace and a peace dividend and having more inclusive political economy. So as the UN thinks about its role in peacemaking in the future, it's dealing with a world where there's a much bigger competition and variety of actors who are claiming to be peacemakers and who are taking very, very different approaches. And now I will come to 5 slightly whimsical pictures of how the UN might look in five years' time so that we can discuss a little bit where the UN is heading. and whether it is heading towards irrelevance or some kind of future thriving. And my first slide is an attempt to capture that irrelevance. That one possibility is that the UN becomes a zombie and that basically people don't take it very seriously. You know, everyone's still showing up and they're speaking. But they are not really trying to solve problems. They issue platitudes. Maybe they get some applause back at home when they come and say something rude to another country and show that they're standing up for their nation. But nothing is really achieved. And in this scenario, there's an internal tussle where those who want to save the UN are torn between 2 camps. One camp says we need radical reform. We need to really change. And the other camp says, If we try to change anything, it will get worse. So we've just got to preserve what we've got. And that means that there's just talk about reform and nothing really happens. When I have shown these slides to other people, because I've been talking to people about them now for about 6 months, I have noticed that a number of people who currently work at the UN have said to me, this is not a very good prediction of the future. This is what we are living through now. So I think that is important. We are in this place already where particularly when it comes to peace and security, there is this sense of paralysis. Now clearly the UN is doing a lot of other things beyond peace and security, climate, humanitarian, human rights. and the broader fabric of international cooperation from the International Telecoms Union to the International Marriage Organisation. But I am focusing here particularly on those peace of security functions, because peace is our topic today. And because going back to the charter, it is what people tend to see as the fundamental founding purpose of the UN. And so when we hear about the crisis of multilateralism, usually people are

thinking about a crisis of multilateralism. lateral peacemaking. So another possibility is that it actually collapses altogether. We cannot rule out the possibility of direct confrontation between the US and China over Taiwan. It could potentially be avoided, but if that is something that happens, how would the Security Council continue to function? One might imagine also scenarios where a nuclear bomb is used for the first time since 1945. There are various possibilities where everything could collapse in disarray. So that is another thing that we might imagine and also looking back to what happened with the League of Nations, maybe the UN could collapse and then what would come next. Another possibility is a Chinese-led UN, because of course as the US hears back its contributions, China will emerge as the biggest single funder of the UN. So it is important for us to understand a bit about how China sees the UN and how China sees UN peacemaking. China is very much a country that wants to be part of multilateralism, but to influence it, and in that it's not really different from the US or from other major powers, but it very much prefers a UN that is a gathering place for sovereign states with less to think about in terms of the agendas that it would see as interference in internal affairs. It would also prefer to give more of the load of peacemaking to regional organisations. So it very much sees it as an intergovernmental platform, not something where you have international civil servants representing global citizens. And just to give you a kind of interesting footnote, this is a graph about Chinese funding to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. So perhaps surprisingly, you see that since 2023, China has given much more money to the High Commissioner for Human Rights. And the reason that there's a big chunk of green in the grass is that refers to donations that are going specifically to fund work on the right to economic development. So this is another interesting example of how China isn't trying to break the system by any means, it's trying to shape the system and to encourage human rights to be thought of more in terms of economic development, the right of housing to a job, etc. And of course, that is something that resonates with many people and many countries around the world who often feel that Europe and the US put too much focus on civil and political rights rather than on people's material quality of life. A 4th possible scenario is that we do get a Phoenix UN and as in a UN that comes out of this zombie movie that it might be in now and re-emerges. And that brings me to Paul Rogers saying every beginning that he thinks that the UN will become more important because we need it. Now one thing that will be an indicator of the prospects for Phoenix is the current leadership contest to find the next Secretary General of the United Nations. Antonio Guterres will finish his term in December of this year. And so currently there are candidates seeking to be the next Secretary General. Back in 2016 when Guterres ran, there were about 14 candidates. Currently this year there are four. Probably some others will enter the contest. Possibly some of those that are there will withdraw. But what we can see is that right now there are fewer people around the world who actually want to take this job and can get backing from a state to nominate them for that role. If you've ever had a difficult job interview, You might feel for these

candidates because they need to do 2 things. They need to be recommended by the UN Security Council of 15 countries, including as far as permanent members with a veto, and then they need to be approved by the General Assembly of 193 countries. So the candidate needs to be able to do a campaign in which they do not profoundly alienate any one of the P5s and basically that they will be accepted by Putin, Trump and Xi. But they also need to stand up for UN principles to be accepted by that broader General Assembly. It's never happened that the General Assembly has rejected the choice of the Security Council. But in reality, if the Security Council choose a candidate who is very weak, who is seen not to stand for what the rest of the world wants, who, for example, is a climate denier or refuses to talk about anything the US might seem to be woke, that person will not be able to get a good agenda through the UN system. They will not be able to carry out the kind of reforms that the UN needs. And really to be successful, I would argue, the person needs to have a much better sense of vision for the future of the UN and an ability to connect with people around the world at a human level so that once again the UN has a voice that resonates with the public which could give it some kind of influence in a world where actually it's very difficult for large bureaucratic institutions to communicate in a way that resonates in the social media age. So just to be aware of this also This decision will probably be made by September. Britain has a voice in this. Britain is one of the fetal wounding members of the P5. Currently, we don't have any sense that there is a candidate that the UK prefers. But personally, I think it'd be a good thing for the government to be reminded that the British public still care about the UN and that they want the UN to have a good legitimate, principled leader at this time when it really stands at an inflection point. So it might be something where you might consider writing to your member of Parliament, asking them if they have a position on the issue, asking them to raise it in Parliament. Right now there's very, very little public awareness about this, so I think a bit of public awareness would help. We've also invited all of the candidates to a public debate in London on May the 28th, which will be open to anyone to attend. So Please take a look at our UNA.org.uk website for information about that because it would be great to have the chance to bring people together again in person and we'll be back at Central Hall Westminster. So maybe a great leader could guide the UN to be more of a phoenix and could speak to a hunger that I think does exist around the world for peace and for values and for leaders who are willing to speak up on the basis of principles. I think we're seeing this role now often being taken up by faith leaders more than we're seeing it being taken up by politicians and that's a subject other speakers will come on to. Also to be the phoenix, I think the UN we need to get much, much better at dealing with non-state actors, at dealing with the private sector and with civil society and also at connecting to government bodies below the level of the state. This is a big challenge for the UN, but in a world where it finds itself in a world where, at the same time, nation states seem to be losing power relative to private companies and especially big tech companies, but politically there's also a mood in many countries to assert sovereignty,

even though the sovereignty that they are asserting and seeking may be sort of disintegrating because of structural factors. So that does provide a difficult environment for the UN, but there could be a lot more to make UN bodies and UN conferences more of a platform that does connect private sector, philanthropy, civil society, media, and goes much broader than government. So I would think that would be critical to the Phoenix scenario. And then lastly, the 5th broad picture of what it might look like, there's a patchwork that, the UN is a big messy beast in many ways. There's lots of different parts of it that work in different ways. And we may find that some flourish while some are zombified because all these areas of the UN have different ways of working and different structures. We see, for example, the COP process where the cooperative place in Brazil last year, it was below the expectations of the host government. But at the end of the day, it managed to keep the whole world in consensus behind one, where all countries, except for the US, signed up to an agreement that yes, mandatory climate change is still real and we still need to act to stop it being incredibly dangerous. Obviously, governments are not moving far enough. And what has also come out of COP is a kind of coalition of willing approach that we see more and more within the multilateral system that instead of trying to get every country on the same page, you get groupings of countries that agree to go together, that agree to go further, faster together. And so we've seen many countries come together in Colombia this month to talk about phasing out fossil fuels. because within the COP process itself, because there was this desire to get consensus, diplomats actually agreed to stop using the word fossil fuels because it upsets some countries. So I think we will see a need to navigate in new ways with groups of countries that share a common interest on a particular issue. It won't be like-minded groups that agree on everything, but coalitions that unite around one issue, but increasingly they are going to have to be willing to move without bringing everybody with them, because bringing everybody with you is either impossible or means that you come down to the lowest common denominator. I think the biggest worry in the patchwork scenario is that it really could be the peace and security role of the Security Council that gets left behind, unless there is some action to constrain that use of the veto which both the US and Russia have been using more and more. And there are various suggestions and initiatives for how to do that, but I think part of it is also about norms and taboos. You know, Britain and France basically don't use their security council veto. They exercise voluntary restraint, partly because I think they know that if they were wielding the veto a lot, people would start to ask why these countries are still on the Security Council when the world looks very different than it did in 1945. But it also provides a good model how to try to get other countries to refrain. There is another suggestion that the International Court of Justice might be able to make a ruling to prevent countries from using their veto in conflicts that they are part of. So that's another initiative, but likely to be a somewhat slow one. So now I'd love to hear from you. I've talked for long enough, but I'd love to hear your thoughts about, you know, if the UN of the future is going to work and

work better to address this more conflict ridden world that we face, what should it look like? How can it work? And what are the things that academics, civic society, faith leaders can bring to the table to make it more effective. Or you might not want to answer any of those things. You might want to ask me a question or comment on something that I've said. So please, let's open the floor. And thank you very much for your attention.