

The insidious Catch-22 of the United Nations charter

Phil Egan - May 2022

In a highly-entertaining book published in 1961, novelist Joseph Heller describes the dilemma facing air force bombardier Captain John Yossarian. Stationed on a Mediterranean island during the Second World War, Yossarian has become convinced that the entire conflict is designed principally to shorten his lifespan.

His schemes to find a way to escape continued military service appear thwarted by a paradoxical catch in air force regulations -- Catch 22.

The problem lies in the fact that continuing to fly dangerous combat missions is a sign of insanity. However, attempting to resign from the service for that very reason proves that Yossarian isn't insane after all. He is sane enough to try to escape harm's way.

Now it is becoming dreadfully apparent that the United Nations as presently constructed contains a fatal Catch-22 of its own.

As the world continues to watch the repugnant and monstrous war crimes being committed by the Russian army invading Ukraine, a firestorm of revulsion has washed across the West in a way that Putin's 2014 annexation of Crimea never did.

Repulsed by the brutality and pure naked aggression of the invasion against the peaceful Ukrainians, the disgusted nations of the West have rained down a storm of sanctions against Russia, and against Putin and his gang of sycophantic henchman personally.

Last month, the United Nations removed Russia from its seat on the organization's human rights committee -- an absurd position for them to have held, in any event, in light of Putin's continued crushing of press freedom and political opposition.

But many feel that this isn't enough of a rod for Russia's back. There is a growing number of voices calling for the complete expulsion of the Russian nation from the United Nations altogether.

And therein lies the Catch-22.

When the United Nations was founded in October of 1945 in San Francisco, five permanent member nations were assigned to the important Security Council.

The Security Council has the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, for the admission of new members to the U.N. General assembly -- currently numbering 193 -- and for making any future changes to the U.N. Charter.

Each of the five permanent Security Council members -- the United Kingdom, the United States, France, China and the Soviet Union -- was given a veto. This effectively required their decisions to be unanimous.

The U.N. Charter permits the expulsion of a nation that has consistently violated the principles of the U.N. Charter -- as Russia has done consistently since the mid-1950s -- but only from the General Assembly; and only on the recommendation of the Security Council.

No provision was made in the founding document for the expulsion of a violating member of the Security Council itself.

A true Catch-22, as Russia is unlikely to ever suggest or agree to its own expulsion.

In this sense, the United Nations is truly broken.

Nonetheless, if seen only as a symbolic gesture, the General Assembly should vote to expel Russia from the United Nations.

Since Putin doesn't seem to mind being isolated in disgrace and revulsion on the world stage, perhaps he'll collect his perennially-lying ambassador and slink away on his own accord.