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TOWARD A MORE REALISTIC EVALUATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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Four months removed from India's conquest of the Portuguese enclaves, it is now possible to realistically—and perhaps objectively—evaluate the impact of this event on the United Nations. The doomsday prophecies have not been fulfilled, viz., war over Dutch West New Guinea, British Honduras, and Guantanamo has not occurred. Now that the death knells for the United Nations rung so frequently in December have subsided the international politician should embark on a sober evaluation of the role of international organization in American foreign policy.

Two Developments

The Goan invasion of December 16, 1961, sculptured in relief two developments which necessitate a more realistic evaluation of the United Nations.

(1) Multiplication of membership.

The first of these developments is the oft-referred-to multiplication of United Nations membership, which may be divided into three stages.

The earliest period spanned the beginning five years of United Nations' existence, during which the United States employed the U.N. as an effective instrument of foreign policy. The United States, with the approval of its N.A.T.O. allies, with an almost unanimous support from Latin American countries, and a smattering of votes from the Afro-Asian nations, controlled the majority on substantive measures brought before the General Assembly.1 As the Cold War began and worsened after the founding of the United Nations, the United States relied on the U.N. for a host of international problems ranging from Russian troops in Iran to Communist aggression in Korea.2 During this period, the American and Soviet delegates experienced difficulty agreeing on new members for the United Nations; therefore, only eight nations were added.3

1Of the original 51 members of the United Nations, 14 were European, 22 Western Hemisphere, and 15 Afro-Asian nations.
2In the case of Korea, the United Nations legitimized a policy of intervention, which the United States would have followed anyway.
3Two European (Iceland and Sweden) and six Afro-Asian (Afghanistan, Thailand, Pakistan, Yemen, Burma, and Israel) nations were the eight.
The second period of U.N. history is a transition stage. Chronologically, it began with the Korean War and was characterized by a noticeable lack of induction of new members, and by further increase in the power of the General Assembly through the "Uniting for Peace" resolution. The authority of the Security Council continued to wane vis-a-vis the General Assembly.

The birth of the third period of United Nations history is precisely dated—December 14, 1955—when East-West approval of sixteen new members broke the membership dikes. This trend has continued down to the present day until the geographical distribution of the United Nations' 104 members shows 26 European, 22 Western Hemisphere, and 56 Afro-Asian nations. Under these conditions, the statement of a Portuguese diplomat aptly describes the American position:

I am afraid your delegation in the United Nations no longer organizes and creates majorities. It seems reduced now to merely joining them.

While these words were spoken out of Portugal's bitterness over the United States' lack of diplomatic action in the Goan invasion, they have been increasingly true since 1955. The U. S. successfully organized and created majorities only when the Communist empire blundered (e.g., Russian suppression of Hungary and Chinese conquest of Tibet) and on a subject clearly defined as a matter of national security (admission of Communist China). On other occasions, such as the General Assembly resolution on Angola, the smaller nations flexed their voting muscles. In regard to Goa, formidable opposition by minor powers to action against India's aggression discouraged a United States' plan to transfer the dispute from the Security Council to the General Assembly after the Soviet veto.

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4 The nation that joined the U.N. during this period was Indonesia on September 28, 1950. For a description of the "Uniting for Peace" resolution, see Everyman's United Nations, 6th ed., (New York: United Nations Office of Public Information, 1959), pp. 75-77.


The General Assembly resolution on Angola was adopted January 30, 1962, by a vote of 90 in favor, 2 opposed (Spain and the Union of South Africa) and one abstention (France). Portugal boycotted the debate. This resolution urged Portugal "to undertake, without further delay, extensive political, economic and social reforms and measures and in particular to set up freely elected and representative political institutions with a view to transfer power to the people of Angola." This was a stronger resolution than the one approved by the Security Council six months earlier, June 9, 1961.
Evaluation of the United Nations

Disputes between minor powers.

The Goan incident also points up a second—and much newer—development in the U.N. evolution: the inability of collective security to solve disputes between minor powers.

Since 1945, enforcement of United Nations decisions has resulted in a dichotomy. On one hand, the U.N. successfully enforced its will in disputes involving small nations; while, on the other, it failed in the all-important area of Cold War disagreements between the two superstates—the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America. Is Goa a straw in the wind portending a break-down of enforcement machinery on problems which heretofore have been solved? This is a sobering question for the friends of international organization to honestly answer.

Goa is not a clear-cut case of U.N. failure to solve a minor dispute because the Soviet veto blocked Security Council action and complicated the issue. The U.S.S.R.'s attempt to make political hay in the sunshine of colonialism injected the Goan question into the Cold War, where it is largely out of place. Goa may or may not represent a new trend in United Nations' evolution, a trend which heralds the decline of international organization as an effective instrument for world peace. At a minimum, United Nations' efficiency is impaired and its prestige damaged by India's action.

In a more optimistic vein, Ambassador Stevenson analyzed the Portuguese-Indian dispute recently and recalled that

in December came the alarming military action against Goa, in which armed force was used, in the name of anti-colonialism but contrary to the Charter—yet without any action on the part of the United Nations. I spoke at the time of the very grave consequences for peace if this most ill-considered step should be taken as a precedent by others. Let us hope that it proves no more than an aberration.7

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7Adlai Stevenson, speech delivered February 22, 1962, before the Woman's National Press Club, Washington, D. C. (Mimeographed copy released by the United States Delegation to the United Nations.) This statement is far removed from the pessimism of Mr. Stevenson after the Russian veto on December 18, 1961, which prevented U.N. action on Goa: "I am the only delegate, I think, at this table who was present at the birth of this organization. Tonight we are witnessing the first act in the drama which could end with its death." New York Times, December 19, 1961, p. 14.
Consequently, two developments make it imperative that a fresh look be given the United Nations. First, the machinery created by the United States to use in the Cold War is now in the hands of the non-aligned countries. Our post-World War II strategy of increasing the power of the General Assembly created a weapon which the United States can no longer aim when fired. Second, the ability of the U.N. to solve disputes involving minor powers is seriously questioned.

A Possible Alternative

As if anticipating the Goan invasion by several months, Senator J. William Fulbright opened the door for reconsideration of the United Nations' role in American foreign policy. Senator Fulbright's thesis is, simply, that the United Nations has failed primarily because it was founded on the assumption of unanimity among the major powers following World War II. The "formidable threat of aggressive imperialistic Communism" dictates that the West forge a new unity—a Concert of Free Nations. Mr. Fulbright was not alone in raising these doubts before India's aggression, for Commentator Sulzberger echoed the same theme when he penned the warning:

... by giving (the) U.N. more authority and at the same time watching our own authority diminish in (the) U.N. we edge toward an uncomfortable position. A few years hence we may desperately try to extricate ourselves.\

While attention should be given to the major contentions of Senator Fulbright, it is also important to note his omissions. For example, he does not believe that the United States should abdicate its responsibilities toward the underdeveloped countries of the world, for he envisions an "inner community" composed of our N.A.T.O. allies and an "outer community" open to any non-Communist nation. He does not advocate United States' withdrawal from the United Nations, nor does he attack international organization as a threat to American sovereignty. And, finally, his Concert of Free Nations cannot be interpreted as a "fortress America" concept in modern dress.

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As a result, the more ardent disciples of international organization find the Concert of Free Nations palatable. If the United Nations could be de-emphasized as an arena for East-West disputes—a role which has given the U.N. its failures and grounds for criticism—then it would receive the respite necessary for evolving toward a more effective organization. Supporters of the United Nations should guard against overestimating the U.N. as the sole elixir for the deep-seated differences that divide the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Overestimating United Nations’ capabilities will lead to overloading, and as Assistant Secretary of State Cleveland pointed out, “overloading can be dangerous.”

The Domestic Setting

Unfortunately, the re-evaluation of United Nations' usefulness to the United States in the Cold War must take place at an inopportune time, from a domestic point-of-view, because of the resurgence of ultraconservative sentiment. Currently an assortment of criticisms which run the gauntlet from concern over loss of sovereignty to the contention that the charter was inspired by the Soviet constitution are hurled at the United Nations. However, as David Riesman has observed, domestic distrust of the U.N. is not “merely isolationist jealousy of our sovereignty; rather, it is based on the belief that any mediator tends to persuade the reasonable fellow to give in to the truculent one.”

While the Kennedy administration restudies U.S. policy toward the United Nations, it is buffeted by groups opposed

10. 'Up to a point, loading more onto the United Nations helps to enhance its capacity to act. Beyond that point, overloading can be dangerous if it makes the machinery creak too badly or exposes the executive to too many different kinds of political attack at one time.' Harlan Cleveland, “The Road Around Stalemate,” Foreign Affairs, v. 40 (October, 1961), p. 36. Mr. Cleveland amplified the ideas contained in this article in a recent speech. See New York Times, February 1, 1962, p. 6.

11. “A part of that (Communist) plan, of course, is to induce the gradual surrender of American sovereignty, piece by piece and step by step, to various international organizations—of which the United Nations is the outstanding but far from the only example—while the Communists are simultaneously and equally gradually getting complete working control of such organizations. . . . Until one day we shall gradually realize that we are already just a part of a world-wide government ruled by the Kremlin, with the police-state features of that government rapidly closing in on ourselves.” The Blue Book of the John Birch Society, 8th printing, (1961), pp. 29-30. For additional comments on the United Nations see W. Cleon Skousen, The Naked Communist, (Salt Lake City, Utah: Ensign Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 265-269.

to international organization altogether. The danger is two-fold: that, first, President Kennedy will react to extremist views and support an organization which no longer constitutes a reliable instrument of American foreign policy, or second, the administration will be tempted to offer the United Nations as a sacrificial lamb, ignoring its effectiveness on non-Cold War issues. Thus far, President Kennedy has been unwavering in his support. “In my opinion,” he said in a January press conference, “the United Nations justifies the effort we put into it substantially.” Later he stated that, “I support the United Nations very strongly and I think the American people do....”

While the American people support the United Nations, various developments during the past year serve to dampen their enthusiasm. The American man-in-the-street is, by and large, a prudent breed and views with suspicion the financial troubles at Lake Success. In addition, the chaotic tug-of-war in the Congo and the misunderstood policy of both the United Nations and the United States are not helping matters. The denial of membership to Communist China represents the only tangible victory for “our side” which Americans can cheer.

Despite the trend toward a realistic evaluation of the United Nations, a thread of idealism remains woven into current thinking to remind the international politician of the ultimate port-of-call of international organization. This segment of the political spectrum holds the opinion that the United Nations is the “only true alternative to war,” to borrow the phraseology of President Kennedy. Walter Lippman chastizes those who

like spoiled children wish to stop playing if they cannot always win the game. But the grown-up view of the United Nations is, I submit, that if the 50 new members do not agree with us inside the U.N., in all probability they would disagree with us even more violently outside the U.N. Those new nations would still exist if there were no United Nations that they could belong to.

15 President Kennedy used these words in his speech before the United Nations General Assembly, September 25, 1961, as reported in the New York Times, September 26, 1961, p. 14.
The Question

American policy-makers face the challenge of preventing World War III. Inis Claude points out that the League of Nations was established to prevent another World War I (that is, war by accident), but was incapable of stopping World War II. Furthermore, the United Nations was conceived as a remedy for future World War II’s (that is, war by design). Dr. Claude observes that the “United Nations could be interpreted as an attempt to equip the world for dealing with Hitlers—after Hitler was already dead.”17 It is outside the capabilities of international organization mirroring imperfections of the political scene around it to prevent a future atomic holocaust.

A realistic evaluation of the United Nations is not synonymous with scuttling it. In spite of Goa, to use the crude but descriptive statement of Professor Stanley Hoffman, “it is too early to throw in the sponge.”18 Nor does re-evaluation signify that the international politician is jettisoning his idealism. It means rather that we must, with a sigh, set aside the technique of world collective security until conditions are more appropriate. This strategy will, in effect, shield the United Nations from a disastrous fate which it does not deserve, but nevertheless is prescribed by the realities of East-West conflict. The possibility exists that, when the Cold War is ended, we will return to the process of international organization as one of the formulas for eradicating war.