United Nations Essay, Research Paper

INTRODUCTION

THE ISSUES

The United Nations turns fifty-five this year and, like many individuals facing middle age, it worries about the future. Created as a bold experiment in collective security amid the ruins of World War II, the U.N. has many accomplishes to its credit, from successfully mediating numerous peace accords to the countless ways it has improved economic and living conditions in less developed countries.

When the leaders toasted the U.N.’s past accomplishes in 1995, the primary topic behind the scenes was what was to be done about the U.N.’s current travails in the former Yugoslavia. As they celebrate this year, might the topic be on how they failed and had to have the North Atlantic Treaty Organization take over the peacekeeping forces and bombing raids?

The civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina is now over, but the U.N. peacekeepers were powerless to stop the aggression of Bosnian Serbs against the majority Muslim population. Images of blue-helmeted U.N. solders taken hostage by Serb forces have cast a pall on the world body’s anniversary events.

The failure of the U.N. peacekeeping mission to Bosnia has called into question the very heart of the organization’s mandate. It also had precipitated a political crisis in Washington.

Neither Congress nor the White House wanted to send U.S. ground troops to Bosnia. But Congress had approved legislation requiring that the president unilaterally end U.S. participation in a U.N.-imposed arms embargo against all parties to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. (1) Congressional supporters said that the policy sift was needed to permit the beleaguered Muslims to defend themselves against the well-armed Serbs. President Clinton vetoed the legislation on August 11, 1995, saying it “would intensify the fighting, jeopardize diplomacy and make the war in Bosnia an American responsibility.”

The Bosnian crisis had reinvigorated a longstanding debate in the United States about using the United Nations to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals. The Clinton administration, through its policy of assertive multilateralism,” has tried to increase American participation in the U.N. Clinton argued that the U.S., as the world’s sole remaining superpower, cannot afford to assume the role of global cop and must act in concert with other powers in the multilateral body to keep the peace. (2)

Supporters of a strong U.N. agree with this assessment. “You may not like the U.N., but the truth is that some kind of organization of this kind is absolutely vital,” says Brian Urquhart, a British scholar at the Ford Foundation in New York who began his forty-year career as chief aide to U.N. secretaries-general at the organization’s founding in 1945. “We really don’t need a third world war the prove that.”

Supporters say the crisis in Bosnia should not detract from the U.N.’s successes. “There is a lot of shared embarrassment in the mess that is the dormer Yugoslavia,” says Edward C. Luck, president of the United Nations Association of the United States, a New York-based research and educational organization. “But no one is paying attention to the new U.N. peacekeeping operations in Angola and Haiti, which are unfolding on a very businesslike basis.”

For U.N. peacekeeping to work, Luck says, “you have to have consent and cooperation” from all parties, which is the case in Angola and Haiti. In Bosnia, however, “everyone thinks they have more to gain on the battlefield, and no one is really ready for peace, so [peacekeeping is] just not going to work.”

Even some of the U.N.’s harshest critics think the international body is being blamed unfairly for the failure to bring peace to Bosnia. “In some ways, the strongest supporters of the United Nations have been the organization’s worst enemy,” says Ted Galen Carpenter, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington. “They’ve tried to have it do too much. They’ve tried to have the organization perform functions for which it was never designed.”

“There is a curious attempt to use the United Nations as a scapegoat,” Carpenter adds, “as though it were truly an independent actor, as though the U.N. were responsible for what has occurred in Bosnia. In truth, it’s mainly the five permament members of the Security Council and what they are asking the United Nations to do.”

“If Bosnia proves anything,” Urquhart says, “it has proved that the Western allies don’t have the stomach for fighting. But what else is new? Of course they don’t”

Where friends and critics of the U.N. part ways is over the organization’s proper role in world affairs. Critics say the crisis in Bosnia is only the latest failure among many. “If you look at the ups and downs at the U.N. over the past fifty years, it started with very high promise, but got locked into the Cold War gridlock very early,” says John Bolton, assistant secretary of State for international organizations in the Bush administration and now president of the National Policy Forum, a Republican think tank in Washington.

In Bolton’s view, the U.N. can point to only one great military success—the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when the Security Council supported the U.S.-led military coalition that successfully repelled Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. That victory, Bolton says, led to unwarranted expectations of what the U.N. could accomplish in the post-Clod War era. “Now,” he says, “there was a sort of sour, moody environment at the fiftieth anniversary that was a result of earlier, misplaced euphoria.”

For the U.N. to work effectively, experts agree, it must undergo reforms to strengthen its power to influence events given the new political realities. With the world no longer divided into two blocs supporting the United States or the Soviet Union, conflicts are breaking out between rival ethnic and religious groups. Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia are but a few examples of what many experts predict will be the scourge of coming years—highly lethal, localized civil wars between groups bent on their rivals’ extinction.

“One of the major obstacles to successful operation of the U.N. in the 1990s is the rapid, almost overnight, change in its responsibilities that occurred with the end of Cold War,” says Dick Thornburgh, a former governor of Pennsylvania (1979-87) and former U.S. attorney general (1988-91) who served as U.N. under secretary-general for administration and management in 1992-93.

“For the first forty-five years of its existence, the U.N.’s operational responsibilities were very much limited by the confrontation of the two superpowers,” Thornburgh says. “Then, almost overnight, it was asked to become operational in a wide variety of situations around the world, becoming a kind of worldwide 911 emergency number, and it was simply not geared up for that kind of activity either in terms of resources or in terms of mindset. Those growing pains are still evident.”

To deal with the changing international realities, reformers say, the United Nations must become more efficient, shedding redundant and marginal agencies. It also must face up to its increasingly vocal critics, who say the organization squanders its 185 members’ contributions through corruption and mismanagement of its vast bureaucracy.

“Purely and simply,” Thornburgh says, “people are not as much interested in supporting an organization that doesn’t have a capability to deal with allegations of fraud, waste, and abuse as they would be if that were in place.”

But for all the talk about reform, little has been done. Luck of the United Nations Association attributes this paralysis to inaction by the member states, including the United States. “People talk about reforming the U.N., but in terms of really putting forward a concerted program and working at it the way you have to work to make things happen here, the United States hasn’t done much,” he says. “It’s been mostly talk and a couple of gestures here and there.”

Before the United Nations can become the efficient organization its supporters what it to be, its members must agree on what role they want it to play. “They’ve got to ask themselves whether the governments are their brothers’ keepers or not,” Urquhart says. “My view is that they are, because the people won’t let them not be. But the trouble is, nobody wants to really put the capacity in the United Nations to make it real.”

As policy-makers look back over the past half-century of U.N. activities and debate the future of American involvement in the organization, they will consider the following issues:

Does the United Nations have a role to play in the post-Cold War era?

For most of its history, the U.N.’s peacekeeping role was restricted by the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Allies in World War II, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. became rival superpowers on the strength of their growing nuclear arsenals and created alliances that divided most of the world into opposing camps. While regional conflicts raged throughout the postwar period, it was the dread of tripping a nuclear holocaust, rather than the peacekeeping authority of the U.N., that prevented the outbreak of a third world war.

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the nuclear competition came to an end –as did the global order imposed by the Cold War. No longer constrained by alliances with one or the other superpower, ethnic and religious tensions flared into open combat from the republics of the former Soviet Union to Africa, while regional powers lashed out against their neighbors. At the same time, the United States was eager to shed its Cold War defense burden and tend to its worsening budget deficit.

Under these circumstances, hopes ran high that the United Nations could finally assume the central role its founders had defined for it in 1945—to be the world’s preeminent peacekeeper and a mediator by giving all members a forum for airing their grievances. (3) When Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the U.N. found an ideal opportunity to fulfill its mission. Led by the United States, a U.N.- sanctioned multinational force repelled the invaders in early 1991 and oversaw the cease-fire and the restoration of Kuwait’s boundaries.

Some critics of the United Nations say the Gulf War represents a rare example of effective U.N. action. “The U.N. had almost no role whatever [in world affairs] until about 1988, and its role lasted until about 1992,” Bolton says. “So it’s not like the organization had a real history of effectively doing what it was intended to do.”

Subsequent U.N. efforts, notably the peacekeeping missions to Somalia and Bosnia, have reaffirmed longstanding doubts about the organization’s ability to play a critical role in world affairs. “I would argue that the U.N. foes serve a useful purpose, but in a limited context,” says Carpenter of the Cato Institute. “It’s worthwhile as a forum for airing grievances and disputes, and it’s useful for the traditional peacekeeping operations, that is to say to police existing cease-fires. It can serve a useful purpose as well as a kind of mediation service to head off conflicts. But it’s not well-equipped or well-designed to engage in nation building projects, as in Somalia, or—even worse—to try to manage civil wars, which it is trying to do in Bosnia. Overreaching in that way discredits the organization.”

Peacekeeping is not the only role for which some experts say the U.N. is less suited than many once predicted. The organization includes fifteen agencies working to improve health care, nutrition, human rights, and other social and economic goals. With the Cold War’s end, it was hoped that the U.N. would be free to concentrate more of its member states’ resources on improving living conditions in the poorest areas of the world. But critics say that the U.N. agencies are too politicized, poorly managed, and wasteful to carry out their mandates. “Whenever possible, I think the U.N. ought to utilize nongovernmental organizations more than it has in the past,” Carpenter says.

U.N. supporters say that such diminished expectations for the world body are misplaced. “Clearly, the roles of the U.N. should be changed from time to time, depending on what the international community needs done that require multilateral solutions,” says Luck of the United Nations Association. “But in general terms, the U.N. should be more needed at a time when there is a multipolar world without a bilateral competition that tends to freeze so much in the security area. There are many, many functional, technical problems in the economic, environmental, humanitarian, and social realms that require very broad international cooperation. The U.N. in that sense should have a major role to play.”

Urquhart agrees. “I don’t think it really makes any sense not to make the U.N. work,” he says. “You have to make it work because there isn’t anything else.”

Should the United States reduce its support of the United Nations?

All members contribute funds to the United Nations, and some of these contributions are mandatory. The amount of each country’s mandatory assessment is based on a formula that reflects national and per capita income.

At the U.N.’s founding in 1945, the United States was by far the richest and most powerful member state. Reflecting this economic reality, the U.S. contributed nearly half – 49.89 percent – of the U.N.’s $24 million 1945-46 budget. That rate was lowered over the years, as other industrial countries benefited from the postwar economic boom and new members were added to the U.N.’s roster.

But the United States remains by far the largest financial contributor to the United Nations, providing twenty-five percent of its $1.3 billion budget for 1995. The four other permanent members of the Security Council contribute far less: France, 6.32 percent; Russia, 5.68 percent; the United Kingdom, 5.27 percent; and China, .72 percent. (4)

The costs of U.N. peacekeeping operations – which are largely unpredictable are often quite high – are assessed separately from the regular budget. As the number of peacekeeping missions grew in the early 1990s, the budget for the operations approached $1 billion, and the United States was expected to pay 32 percent of the costs. With President Clinton’s support, Congress in 1994 unilaterally cut the U.S. share of the peacekeeping budget to 25 percent, the same rate the United States pays for the regular U.N. budget.

Republican lawmakers, who captured the majority in both houses of Congress in 1994’s elections, say American taxpayers still are not getting a fair return on their investment in U.N. operations, and they are leading the call to reduce the United States’ commitment to the organization.

Downplaying the U.N.’s record over the past half-century, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., said, “We have to recognize that we won the Cold War and what kept the peace was Americans’ willingness to lead. If my choice is three U.N. secretaries-general or one aircraft carrier, I can tell you which one I prefer to keep the peace in a dangerous world.” (5)

Bob Dole, R-Kan., offered a similar view. “A strong military is far more important to the nation’s ability to protect its interests and retain its global leadership role than additional foreign aid grants and subsidies for questionable multilateral activities,” he wrote in a recent op-ed column. (6)

Bills now before Congress would further reduce U.S. funding of U.N. operations and condition future payments on the enactment of reforms to improve the U.N.’s accountability and management. (7)

“I think these proposed cuts are fully warranted,” Carpenter says. “In fact, one could make the argument for even deeper cuts. The organization needs to slim down, and it needs to eliminate the pandemic corruption that has occurred in the bureaucracy. It also needs to focus on a small number of reasonable functions and not have delusions of being a de facto world government. It was never meant to be that, it’s not going to become that and even the more vague notions in that direction ought to be discouraged.”

The bottom line for many Republicans is that Americans should work through the United Nations only when it directly serves U.S. interests. “If it suits our interests to make the United Nations effective, then we should do so, and if it doesn’t, then we shouldn’t,” Bolton says. “What we need is a decision [by the administration] in each case whether using [the U.N.] is better for American interests than not using it.”

Supporters of the United Nations say it provides a priceless service by spreading the responsibility for global peacekeeping – a role that in the U.N.’s absence would even fall more heavily on the United States. “Despite the many inefficiencies in the U.N. system, the burden sharing with so many other countries still makes it quite an economic bargain for us,” says Luck. He points out the Americans currently are spending just a little over four dollars per person for the U.N. peacekeeping operations.

“That’s less than one two-hundredth of what we spend on defense,” Luck continues. “Considering that the total costs of one B-2 bomber is $2.2 billion, our total U.N. peacekeeping costs are half of one B-2 bomber. I don’t think that is such an outrageous amount to spend.”

There also is disagreement over how much support the U.S. should give to U.N. agencies specializing in economic and social issues. “There clearly are some that are better than other,” Bolton says. He cites the Universal Postal Union, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the International Maritime Organization, and the International Civil Aviation Organization as examples of U.N. agencies that merit U.S. support. “The ones that are truly specialized and that stick to their knitting can be very useful,” he says. “The problem is that there is a whole alphabet soup of agencies that overlap and duplicate their responsibilities.”

Some experts see the U.N.’s accomplishments in economic and social development as the most convincing case for strong U.S. support of the organization. “U.N. peacekeeping operations have been the center of controversy,” James Gustave Speth, administrator of the U.N. Development Program, said. “But few have mentioned the other U.N. – the U.N. of the developing world. The U.N.’s development work is as important as its peacekeeping work, and is right now under even greater threat in the U.S. Congress. Most importantly, those two U.N. roles are linked – because the U.N. can only be a strong force for peace if it is a strong force for development. (8)

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

ORIGINS IN WAR

The establishment of the United Nations was not the world’s first attempt to coordinate political and military activity in the search for peace. Its predecessor, the League of Nations, was created in 1919 at the close of World War I. But the league had barely opened its doors in Geneva, Switzerland, before its inability to prevent military aggression became apparent.

Japan withdrew from the league in 1931 after invading Manchuria; Adolph Hitler pulled Germany out in 1933. Although it continued to exist until it was replaced by the United Nations in 1945, the league ceased to exert any influence after Germany’s invasion of Poland in 1939 and the subsequent outbreak of World War II.

The idea of a successor to the league was discussed long before the war ended. Representatives of the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and China, allies in the fighting in Europe and the Pacific, met several times in 1943 and 1944 to draw up proposals for the new international body’s purposes and organization.

The U.N.’s founders had clear ideas about what the new organization was to accomplish. In the preamble of the U.N. Charter adopted in San Francisco on June 26, 1945, they set out four primary goals: “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetimes has brought untold sorrow to mankind…; to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights…; to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained; and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.”

To promote those goals, the founders established distinct bodies within the U.N. system – which came into being when the charter was ratified by the fifty-one original members on October 24, 1945. The Security Council, made up of the five permanent and ten rotating member countries, was given primary responsibility for international peace and security. All member states were to have an equal voice in the General Assembly, which decides budgetary matters and votes on other policy issues in non-binding resolutions. Fifteen specialized agencies carry out operations in the social and economic spheres.

Created at the dawn of the Cold War, the United Nations placed nuclear arms control and disarmament near the top of its agenda. It promoted a number of arms agreements, including the Limited Test Ban Treaty and bans on testing under the seas and in outer space. In 1957, the U.N. created the International Atomic Energy Agency to promote the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. In 1968, the General Assembly drafted the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which it extended indefinitely in May of 1995. (9)

The United Nations also has had an active role in promoting human rights around the world. “Stalin could kill eight million peasants in the Ukraine in the 1930s and nobody raised a whisper,” Urquhart recalls. “Nobody had ever heard of human rights on the international stage, and now they have, thanks in large part to the U.N.”

The General Assembly created the Commission on Human Rights in 1946, and two years later adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On a related issue, the assembly in 1960 called for the independence of colonized countries in Africa and Asia. Following the wars of independence of the 1960s, forty-three newly independent countries joined the U.N. (10)

To promote its goals in the economic and social realms, the U.N. set up specialized agencies focusing on the improvement of the agriculture, health care, communications and economic development. In 1964, it established the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development to facilitate trade with developing countries. The following year saw the creation of the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) to oversee the growing task of coordinating economic assistance programs carried out in the field by U.N. agencies. The UNDP also became a vehicle for developing countries to press their case in the deepening dispute over the allocation of the world’s resources between the industrialized countries of the Northern Hemisphere and the developing nations, found mostly in the South.

U.N. PEACEKEEPING ROLE

Although the term “peacekeeping” does not appear in the U.N. Charter, the goal it envisions – ensuring collective security – has always been the organization’s main priority. (11) U.N. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjod and Under Secretary-General Ralph Bunche, a U.S. diplomat, introduce the term in the 1950s to describe the activities of the first U.N. observer mission, which was dispatched to the Middle East in 1948. The ongoing operation was created to prevent the spread of hostilities between the newly established state of Israel and its Arab neighbors.

While the charter makes no mention of peacekeeping, it does limit the degree of involvement U.N. forces can undertake to ensure collective security. The organization pledges not to interfere in issues that are “essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.” Based on this premise, certain guidelines have evolved governing the deployment of peacekeepers and rules of engagement. The host government, for example, must consent to any U.N. deployment, as must the countries contributing troops to the mission. Countries with vested political interests in the outcome of a dispute are not allowed to contribute troops to a peacekeeping mission. Finally, U.N. troops may use their weapons only in self-defense and must remain neutral if hostilities break out between the parties to the dispute.

The Security Council deployed the first lightly armed peacekeeping mission in 1956 to create a buffer zone along the Suez Canal and to monitor a cease-fire between Israel and Egypt. That “emergency force” involved as many as six thousand soldiers during its eleven-year mission. During the U.N.’s first forty-five years, thirteen peacekeeping missions were deployed. Only one of these – the 1960-64 mission to the former Belgian Congo, which involved 19,800 troops – approached the size of some present-day missions.

A VIEW FROM THE U.S.

With all the criticism of the United Nations heard today, it is easy to forget that the organization – like the League of Nations before it – was largely a product of American initiative. President Franklin D. Roosevelt urged his wartime allies to support the notion that the only way to stop aggression by individual nation was to authorize an international body to keep the peace.

If anything, argues Urquhart at the Ford Foundation, Americans were overly optimistic about the chances of the U.N.’s success. “The thing that surprised me most about the diplomats, and particularly the Americans, was that they were absolutely convinced that this was going to work absolutely as written in the charter,” he recalls.

When Urquhart, then a six-year veteran of the war in Europe, challenged this view before an American diplomat, he “was absolutely furious, told me it was skeptical young men like me who caused wars and stamped away. That was very much the view in the American delegation,” Urquhart adds. “They believed they had hit upon the secret of international peace. Within about six months, it turned out they hadn’t because we went plunging into the Cold War. There was a huge disillusionment when that happened.”

Despite its leading role in creating the United Nations and high initial expectations for its performance, the United States has always viewed the multilateral organization with ambivalence. Fearful that American troops could be forced into service against the will of the U.S. government, Congress in 1945 strictly circumscribed the Security Council’s reach. The U.N. Participation Act authorized the United States to commit military forces to U.N. mission only when approved by Congress. The law requires the president to return to Congress for authorization of any additional forces to an existing U.N. mission.

Just five years after the law went into effect, however, the U.N. Participation Act was undermined when President Harry S Truman committed American troops to the Korean War without congressional approval. The weight of that law has been in question ever since. (12)

POST-COLD WAR UPHEAVAL

In an effort to define the U.N.’s place in this changing environment, Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali began his tenure in 1992 with a call to redefine U.N. peacekeeping goals to include humanitarian relief, economic assistance, the reconstruction of institutions destroyed by conflict and election oversight.

Among the strategies Boutros-Ghali recommended in his report to the General Assembly for future peacekeeping efforts were: preventive diplomacy, aimed at preventing disputes from erupting into conflict; peacemaking, promoting negotiations between hostile parties as envisioned in Chapter VI of the charter; peacekeeping, the presence of U.N. personnel to oversee cease-fires, help resolve conflicts and provide humanitarian relief; peace enforcement, restoring peace, by armed force if necessary, under Chapter VII of the charter; and peace-building, fostering interaction between former enemies to prevent a relapse of hostilities. (13)

With Russia struggling to enter the world marketplace and the Western powers focused on economic issues at home, it has fallen largely to the United Nations to take the lead in mediating these disputes and trying to keep the peace. In 1990, there were eight peacekeeping missions operating with a total of ten thousand troops. By the end of June 1995, the U.N. was running sixteen peacekeeping missions, manned by more than sixty-seven thousand troops at an annual cost of some $3.1 billion. (14)

Before 1991, the Security Council just twice had authorized the use of force, under Chapter VII of the charter, for any purpose other than self-defense – the U.N. mission to the Congo in the 1960s and the U.S.-led defense of South Korea in the 1950s. Since then, the council has authorized the use of force on five occasions – in the Persian Gulf War, Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, And Haiti. (15)

Following the success of the Gulf War, hopes ran high that a more aggressive U.N. could indeed keep the peace. But such optimism was short-lived.

The multi-phase U.N. mission to Somalia (April 1992-March 1995), which at one point included American troops, was aimed at restoring order to an impoverished country devastated by famine and by conflict among Somali warlords. Following a televised nighttime beach invasion by U.S.-led forces, the initiative quickly lost momentum as it became apparent that civil turmoil defied a military solution. Following the killing of eighteen American soldiers in downtown Mogadishu on October 3, 1993, U.S. support for the mission, and for peacekeeping efforts in general plummeted. (16)

Critics of recent U.N. peacekeeping missions cite the events in Somalia to emphasize the need for strong U.S. leadership. “Somalia and Desert Storm are about 180 degrees apart in clarity of definition of both the U.S. role and the function of the United Nations,” says former State Department official Bolton. “Desert Storm was a U.N.-sanctioned but U.S.-commanded military operation. Somalia, by contrast, was not only U.N.-sanctioned, but U.N.-commanded.”

Bolton faults the Clinton administration for failing to adequately define U.S. national interests in participating in the mission to Somalia, which began as a humanitarian gesture (Operation Restore Hope) during the Bush administration but expanded to include “nation-building,” an attempt to restore political institutions in the war torn country. “Somalia demonstrates what happens when there is confusion between a clear direction in U.S. foreign policy on one hand, and mushing it all together with the U.N. on the other,” Bolton says. “A lot of that political confusion was reflected in military confusion on the ground.”

The result of waning American support for the U.N. peacekeeping was painfully evident when violence broke out in Rwanda in 1994 between ethnic Hutu and Tutsi. Although nineteen governments had standby arrangements to provide troops to peacekeeping missions at the time, Urquhart says, none actually provided them in time to prevent the carnage that cost the lives of some 500,000 Rwandans, mostly Tutsi. “Not one government would send troops until it was much too late,” he says. “Five months after it started they sent some people staggering in, but that was hopeless.”

As it prepared to withdraw from Rwanda in December of 1995, the six thousand strong U.N. peacekeeping mission was the object of little more than hostility by the Rwandan government, which accused the U.N. of enabling the genocide to occur and of violating the country’s sovereignty by its continued presence. (17)

Nowhere have the U.N. member states encountered a greater challenge to their ability to define peacekeeping goals than in the former Yugoslavia. As successive regions of the country broke away and declared their independence from the Serbian-dominated government in Belgrade, Western countries were quick to recognize the nascent governments of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. But when fighting broke out, first in Croatia, and then in Bosnia, between government forces and well-armed Serbian minorities, the West got cold feet. Instead of intervening militarily to aid the newly independent countries, they opted for a neutral intervention by U.N. peacekeepers in hope of encouraging a negotiated settlement.

“The first mistake was the premature recognition of Croatia and Bosnia, which had the effect of dropping a lighted match into a can of gasoline,” Urquhart says. “The second mistake was to try to whitewash the thing by putting in a U.N. peacekeeping force when there were no conditions for it to function in.”

U.N. SUCCESSES

Amid the finger pointing and the recent disaster in Bosnia, it is easy to lose sight of the U.N.’s considerable achievements, even in recent years. “Though everybody keeps hanging on about Bosnia, which nobody has managed to resolve for the last five hundred years, if you will look at the operations that the U.N. has undertaken since the end of the Cold War,” Urquhart says, “a large majority of them have been rather surprisingly successful.”

Under U.N. monitoring, combatants in Mozambique’s thirty-year civil war have shifted their skirmishes from the battlefield to the legislature. The U.N. mission oversaw the cease-fire between Frelimo, the ruling party, and Renamo, the formal rebel movement, and monitored the country’s first democratic elections, held in October 1994.

The U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia, launched in 1992, helped end hostilities between the government and Khmer Rouge guerrillas in one of the bloodiest civil wars in modern times. Before withdrawing in November 1993, the U.N. mission monitored elections in which ninety percent of the people voted – despite threats by the Khmer Rouge – and handed control over to the elected Cambodian government.

Angola, where a “proxy” civil war between the Soviet-backed government and U.S.-backed UNITA rebels raged for two decades, is the site of another potentially successful U.N. peacekeeping mission. Although UNITA forces, led by Jonas Savimbi, renewed fighting after losing national elections in 1992, they later agreed to a power sharing arrangement with the government that U.N. peacekeeper oversaw.

In July 1994, three years after a military coup in Haiti, the Security Council authorized the use of “all necessary means” to restore democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power, paving the way for the U.S. occupation of the Caribbean nation two months later. Aristide subsequently returned, and in early 1995 a multinational U.N. peacekeeping force began replacing American troops in Haiti.

CHAPTER 2

CURRENT SITUATION

REFORM PROPOSALS

The United Nations has long been criticized for its sprawling bureaucracy and wasteful management practices, generating periodic calls for large-scale reform of the entire system. Since the Cold War’s end, those calls have become more insistent. Without a serious effort to make the U.N. more efficient, reformers say, the organization will be at a loss in the rapidly changing international environment.

Of the seemingly endless list of reform proposals, most fall into one of the following categories:

Security Council

Critics say the five permanent members of the council – the U.S., Russia, Britain, France, and China – no longer fairly represent the holders of wealth and military power in the world. Japan and Germany are the most obvious candidates for inclusion. Third World states also are pushing for representation on the council. India is the most frequently mentioned candidate. A related reform would dilute the overwhelming dominance of the great powers by eliminating absolute veto power by any of the five members.

Volunteer U.N. Army

Many experts see the impasse in Bosnia as further evidence that the U.N. needs a military force at its disposal that is independent of any member government. Supporters of such a force say it should have a mandate not only to keep the peace but also to intervene militarily to stop the kinds of mass murder and genocide seen in recent conflicts. Where would such forces come from? Some recommend using mercenaries from around the world, trained according to U.N. standards and rapidly deployed as the Security Council saw fit.

“The difficulty with the volunteer force is that it changes the nature of the game, because it gives the U.N. for the first time capacity of its own,” says Urquhart, a leading reform proponent. “It will not always be dependent on governments, most of whom chicken out at the last minute, and therefore it will become a different kind of organization with some very minor trappings of sovereign power. But if the U.N. is going to start to try to deal with civil wars and major disturbances of that kind, it’s going to have to have the capacity to do it.”

Secretary-General

Because they may now serve two five-year terms, critics say that secretaries-general tend to spend too much time campaigning for reappointment instead of doing their job. The solution, many reformers suggest, is a single, seven-year term. Urquhart also would like to see an improved selection process that opens up the field to a broader range of talented individuals, especially women, rather than simply settling for someone whose political views do not offend any of the 185 member governments.

“The way they appoint the secretary-general is absolutely ludicrous,” he says. “What’s the point of having a seventy-two year-old Coptic professor of international law as the secretary-general?” he asks, referring to Boutros-Ghali. “He’s a nice guy, but he’s hopeless, a zero leader with no charisma. There’s no organization in the private sector that would dream of appointing its chief executive this way.” More appropriate, Urquhart suggests, would be a leader like Mary Robinson, the president of Ireland. “She’s easily Europe’s best human rights lawyer, she’s been an enormous success as president, she has great charisma, and she’s a bright, tough lady.” (18)

Better Management

Reform advocates say the secretary-general’s diplomatic duties are too demanding to expect him, or her, to also be responsible for managing the vast U.N. system. The solution, says Luck of the United Nations Association, is to appoint someone, second in command only to the secretary-general, to manage the U.N. “We need to have a deputy secretary-general who is the chief operating officer of the system,” Luck says, “and let the secretary-general be the global troubleshooter and the voice of the international community and the peacemaker.”

Personnel

A related issue involves hiring and firing practices at the U.N. In 1992, just after taking office, Boutros-Ghali instituted a hiring freeze and suggested a number of steps to downsize the organization. But Thornburgh, who served in the U.N. Department of Administration and Management in 1992-93, thought the reform process was slow to get off the ground. In a 1993 report to the secretary-general, he listed a number of obstacles to improving the U.N.’s work force, including a glass ceiling preventing the promotion of women, a lengthy appeals process preventing the demotion or firing of non-productive employees and insufficient training.

Thornburgh sees little improvement in the past two years. “There’s just a lot of deadwood there, people who in more placid times might be acceptable,” he says. “The biggest deficiency is that the place is replete with expert diplomats and politicians but very thin in management talent, particularly at the middle-management level.”

Unitary U.N.

This concept, defined by Bolton and promoted by the Bush administration, would encourage member governments to consider the U.N. as a whole, rather than as a conglomerate of separate agencies. Such an approach, Bolton says, would make it easier to eliminate duplication and make the organization work more efficiently.

“If you look at the U.N. as an entire system and not just as a cluster of individual agencies you can assess where there is duplication and overlap,” Bolton says. The World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization, for example, both address the related issues of nutrition and health. “Under a unitary U.N. approach we would have tried to rationalize their operations to reduce the duplication in the work of the two agencies.” With the election of President Clinton, Bolton says, “this policy of looking at the U.N. as a system has now fallen by the wayside.”

CLINTON VS. CONGRESS

As part of his policy of “assertive multilateralism,” President Clinton supports the goal of reforming the United Nations. “Those of us who most respect the U.N. must lead the charge of reform,” he said at a June 26, 1995, ceremony in San Francisco commemorating the signing of the U.N. Charter. “Over the years it has grown too bloated, too often encouraging duplication and spending resources on meetings rather than results.”

But some reform advocates saw the United States under President Clinton has been no more effective than other member governments in pushing for real change at the U.N. “There is a lack of political will on the part of the member states to actually follow through on reform,” Thornburgh says. “They’re all pretty much the same, and the United States is no different.”

Indeed, lawmakers in Washington seem more interested in reducing U.S. commitments to the United Nations than in strengthening its ability to carry out American foreign policy. This attitude is especially apparent among Republicans, who in 1994 won the majority in Congress for the first time in forty years.

“Peacekeeping cannot solve the world’s problems and should not be expected to,” said then Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms, R-N.C. “Some of us have said that all along. American leadership in the world should not be defined by how many U.N. peacekeeping operations we participate in.” (19)

As part of a drive to cut foreign aid spending, Helms has spearheaded proposals to cut U.S. funding if U.N. peacekeeping operations from thirty-two percent to twenty-five percent – the same percentage the United States pays for the rest of the U.N. costs – beginning in fiscal 1994.

Then Sen. Dole introduced a bill that prohibited the participation of U.S. military forces in any U.N. peacekeeping missions that would place them under the command of foreign nationals. The proposed Peace Powers Act not only poses a direct challenge to the president’s authority as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but also would effectively end U.S. military participation in most U.N. missions, as peacekeeping missions typically come under the military command of more than one country.

Another proposal, the National Security Revitalization Act, part of the House Republicans’ “Contract With America,” also would restrict U.S. peacekeeping missions and would withhold U.S. funding of U.N. agencies pending the enactment of reforms. But with attitudes toward the U.N. at a low point, there is little support for reforming the organization to make it more effective.

The underlying premise in all these proposals is that the United States can conduct its foreign policy more effectively on its own or with carefully chosen allies then it can through a multilateral body such as the United Nations. President Clinton and those who support his policy of strengthening multilateral organizations accuse Republicans of launching the United States into a new era of isolationism, similar to that preceding the outbreak of World War II.

“The United States must be prepared to act alone when necessary, but we dare not ignore the benefits that coalitions bring to this nation,” Clinton said at the San Francisco commemoration of the U.N. Charter. “We dare not reject decades of bipartisan support for international cooperation. Those who would do so, these new isolationists, dismiss fifty years of hard evidence.”

Republicans reject these charges. “Neo-isolationism is a scare word that doesn’t capture even somewhat fairly what we’re talking about, which is trying to analyze what concrete U.S. national interests are and how to advance and defend them,” Bolton says. “Simply to say that not being willing to engage in assertive multilateralism is the same as neo-isolationism reflects a profound misunderstanding of what American foreign policy interests are, as well as the shallowness of their own intellectual thinking.”

“Part of the problem in improving the United Nations’ ability to act now is that the majority in Congress sees undermining the organization as a way of going after the president and his weaknesses in foreign policy,” Luck says. “The United Nations has become a vehicle for that.”

CONCLUSION

If the United Nations is to continue to play a role in world affairs, it has to take account of the changes that have occurred in the world over the past half-century.

“Fifty years ago, you didn’t see the Rwanda genocide in your living room while you’re having a drink in the evening,” Urquhart says. “Fifty years ago, there wasn’t this sort of global society with global capital markets and instant electronic circulation of money. There are a whole lot of things which didn’t exist in 1945 when the charter was written. Now we’ve got to really face up to them.”

Whatever new peacekeeping roles the United Nations takes on in the near future, they are likely to be less ambitious than envisioned in the heady days after the Cold War’s collapse. Plans to beef up peacekeeping missions, as outlined in the secretary-general’s 1992 report to the General Assembly, have been sidelined. Following setbacks in Somalia and Bosnia, peacekeeping operations already have been scaled back, as the belated and undermanned mission to Rwanda demonstrates.

“Once an organization’s reputation is badly damaged, as the U.N.’s reputation has been in Somalia and now, even worse, in Bosnia, people begin to question everything about it,” says Carpenter at the Cato Institute. “Even the worthwhile functions it has served, the achievements it has had in Namibia, for instance, are going to be far less impressive than they might otherwise have been.”

With the United States especially reluctant to support efforts to strengthen the U.N., some diplomats are prodding Europe and Japan to pick up the slack. “It’s a foolish idea to assume that every time anything happens the only country that can do anything is the United States,” Urquhart says. “It isn’t like 1945, when the United States was the only country still on its feet. There are some nice, big, grownup countries out there, some of which are quite rich. But there remains this hopelessly defeatist attitude that if the United States doesn’t want it, it won’t happen.”

There is another reason, Urquhart says, why the United Nations’ member governments should not allow the confusion over the U.N.’s role as global peacekeeper to undermine its place in world affairs. “In fifty years’ time, the United Nations won’t be judged on having failed in Bosnia,” he says. “It will be judged on whether it did anything about poverty, economic imbalance, and the environment. Those are the forces that are going to shape the future one way or another, not what happens in Bosnia.”

NOTES

1. Carroll J. Doherty, “Congress’ Foreign Policy Role At Issue in Veto Override,” Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, August 5, 1995, 2386-2387

2. For background see, “Foreign Policy Burden,” The CQ Researcher,

August 20 1993, 721-744

3. For background see, “A Revitalized United Nations in the 1990s,” Editorial Research Reports, July 27, 1990, 429-444

4. For background on the U.N. budget, see Jeffrey Laurenti, National Taxpayers, International Organizations: Sharing the Burden Of Financing the United Nations, United Nations Association of the United States, 1995, 29

5. Speaking at a June 11, 1995, press conference with President Clinton in Clairmont, N.H.

6. Bob Dole, “Who’s an Isolationist?” The New York Times, June 6, 1995

7. For background, see Carroll J. Doherty, “House Approves Overhaul of

Agencies, Policies,” Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, January 28, 1995 291-292

8. Speth spoke June 25, 1995, before the United Nations Association of the United States’ National Convention in San Francisco, Calif.

9. For background, see “Non-Proliferation Treaty at 25,” The CQ Researcher, January 27, 1995, 73-96

10. See the United Nations Association of the United States, The United Nations at

40, April 1985

11. Material in this section is based on Sandrine Teyssonneyre, How to Do Business with the United Nations (1995) 7-10

12. See Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., “Back to the Womb? Isolationism’s Renewed Threat,” Foreign Affairs, July/August 1995, 2-8

13. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, An Agenda for Peace, June 1992

14. Report of the Commission on Global Governance, Our Global Neighborhood

(1995), 236-237

15. Ibid., 237

16. For an analysis of the Somalia missions, see Chester A. Crocker, “The Lessons of Somalia,” Foreign Affairs, May/June 1995, 2-8

17. See “Short Memories,” The Economist, June 17, 1995, 42-47

18. For a more flattering assessment of Boutros-Ghali’s stewardship, see Stanley

Meisler, “Dateline U.N.: A New Hammar-skjold?” Foreign Policy, spring 1995, 180-197

19. Helms spoke March 21, 1995, at his committee’s hearings on legislation affecting the U.N. and other foreign policy issues.

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