UNITED NATIONS
NEW LIFE FOR AN AGING INSTITUTION?

After decades of declining influence and growing skepticism among its member countries, the United Nations has once again been thrust into the center stage of international relations. A string of conflict-resolution and peacekeeping successes, as well as the sustained efforts and accomplishments of some of its specialized agencies, has given the UN new respectability and recognition. As Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar has noted, there seems to have been “a return to the earlier hope that greeted the birth of the world organization.”

The UN’s list of achievements over the past two years is indeed impressive. The UN in 1988 alone:
- brokered a cease-fire in the 10-year war between Iran and Iraq;
- oversaw agreements between South Africa, Cuba and Angola that provided for the independence of Namibia and the removal of Cuban troops from the region;
- launched a peace initiative to end the war for control of the Western Sahara fought by Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario guerrilla movement;
- brought Greece and Turkey to the bargaining table on the question of unifying the island of Cyprus; and,
- received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of its peacekeeping efforts in some of the world’s most troubled areas.

For longtime UN-watchers, the organization’s recent successes come as no surprise. To them, these accomplishments represent the culmination of years of quiet but determined diplomacy. As Edward C. Luck, president of the United Nations Association of the United States of America (UNA-USA), points out, the opening of peace negotiations or the final signing of an armistice are not the organization’s major achievements. “People say that the UN is working better and therefore it’s doing good things,” says Luck. “But we should not overrate the changes by pretending that it was a bad UN before and now all of a sudden it’s good. The secretary-general has been doing the same kind of work through all those lean years when everyone said the UN wasn’t doing anything.”

New York City: UN member flags with General Assembly and glass façade of Secretariat in background.
Renewed superpower interest

At the beginning of the 44th General Assembly in September 1989, President George Bush—himself a former U.S. permanent representative to the UN—said that the organization is an international forum with the potential to do great things. “The UN,” said the President, “is moving closer to that ideal.”

Bush’s remarks echoed similar sentiments expressed earlier by both former U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev. In 1988, Reagan said the U.S. was “determined that the UN should succeed and serve the cause of peace for humankind.” At the 1988 Communist party conference in Moscow, Gorbachev predicted that “a universal system of international security will take shape, primarily through enhancing the role and effectiveness of the UN.”

The renewed superpower interest in the UN reflects a growing realization that finding solutions for today’s problems will require greater international cooperation. According to Richard N. Gardner, a professor of international law at Columbia University, a former deputy assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs under the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations and ambassador to Italy, the superpower leaders are moving toward a policy of multilateral cooperation because of a common realization that it is the best means for resolving certain regional conflicts and such “transborder” problems as global warming and weapons proliferation.

“There is a new spirit in Moscow and Washington,” claims Gardner. “Multilateralism is now realpolitik.”

“You need multilateral solutions for today’s problems,” agrees the UNA’s Luck. “It’s a pragmatic, not an ideological point of view.”

It is widely accepted that without the support of the superpowers none of the UN’s recent successes would have been possible. The new cooperative spirit now evident in both the U.S. and the Soviet Union is a dramatic reversal from a trend toward unilateral action that had been growing since the early 1970s.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the UN was primarily a Western-led organization. As the decolonization process, which began in the early 1950s and was strongly supported by the U.S., gathered momentum, newly independent Third World nations soon constituted a majority in the General Assembly. These countries tended to use the UN as a forum for airing grievances against the industrialized West, especially the U.S., making it increasingly difficult for Americans to view the institution in a favorable light. By the early 1980s, most American policymakers had come to see the UN as an impediment to U.S. policy goals.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, long played the role of a “spoiler” at the UN, taking frequent advantage of its veto power to block U.S. and Western initiatives and disrupting orderly procedure in a variety of ways. Many Americans can vividly recall the 1960 address to the General Assembly of then Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, during which he hammered on a table with his shoe. Though the Soviet Union has never dominated the General Assembly in the way the U.S. once did, by aligning with the more-radical Third World nations it was often able to use their anti-U.S. sentiments to its advantage.

Most analysts agree that the shift in superpower policies toward the UN dates from Gorbachev’s “new thinking” in foreign policy. In a 1987 article in the official Communist party newspaper, Pravda, Gorbachev called for the UN to become more active on a wide range of issues, including regional conflict resolution and other areas in which the Soviet Union had traditionally opposed UN involvement.

Limitations

Of course, the success or failure of the UN does not rest solely on the attitudes of the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The organization now includes 159 countries, over 80% of them developing nations that consider themselves to be nonaligned. All are represented in the General Assembly, where each nation has one vote.

The Security Council, which has primary responsibility within the UN for maintaining international peace and security, is comprised of five permanent members (Britain, China, France, the Soviet Union and the U.S.), each of which has veto power over all substantive decisions, and 10 nonpermanent members elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms.

Because of its structure, the UN’s ability to achieve the goals of international peace and security, respect for human rights and economic and social progress as expressed in its Charter has met with limited success. No permanent member of the Security Council, for example, would hesitate to veto a resolution that it believed was contrary to its own policy goals. At the same time, the resolutions passed by the General Assembly may be approved by a large majority but they are nonbinding. Without the approval of the five permanent members they are unlikely to be translated into action. Thus, because the UN works best when there is a consensus, the organization sometimes has difficulty responding effectively, especially in crisis situations.

Even when a consensus for action is reached, the UN is hobbled by the lack of an enforcement mechanism. For example, if a country refuses to allow peacekeeping forces on its territory or persists in human-rights violations, there is little the secretary-general or any other UN official can do to force compliance. As Seymour M. Finger, a senior fellow at the Ralph Bunche Institute and a former ambassador with the U.S. permanent mission to the UN, pointed out, the secretary-general has no troops and a budget that is only about one thousandth the size of that of the U.S. government, about $885 million a year.

“So,” says Finger, “the success of the UN depends on the attitudes of governments. When governments are
willing to cooperate, the UN can be very successful."

Despite its limitations, the UN has managed to function for 45 years. Not only has it brokered peace agreements and stationed peacekeeping forces around the globe, but it has also adopted declarations on a wide variety of issues, ranging from apartheid to decolonization, disarmament and human rights, and held conferences on such diverse subjects as the law of the sea, the human environment, food, population and the status of women.

**From the ashes of war**

During the 20th century, fear of the destructiveness of modern warfare and the desire for peace through collective security have tempered international relations. Following World War I, in which 11 million people died and 21 million were wounded, the League of Nations was established at the initiative of President Woodrow Wilson.

The League represented a multilateral attempt to create a mechanism to promote the peaceful settlement of disputes between nations. Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, the League’s structure was similar to that of the UN, with an assembly, composed of representatives of all member states; a council of representatives from the leading Allied powers; a secretariat or executive body presided over by a secretary-general; and the Permanent Court of International Justice. One of the League’s main purposes was to enforce the terms of the Treaty of Versailles (1919).

The U.S. Senate—bowing to isolationist sentiments of the day—refused to ratify U.S. membership, seriously weakening the League. Though it continued to function throughout the 1920s and most of the 1930s, the outbreak of World War II in 1939 brought an end to the League’s activities. The war, which took 60 million lives, proved to be the most expensive and destructive conflict in human history. In 1944, as the war began to wind down, President Franklin D. Roosevelt hosted a meeting of the Big Four powers (Britain, China, the Soviet Union, and the U.S.) at Dumbarton Oaks, an estate in Washington, D.C., to lay the foundation for a postwar international order.

Despite differences that existed even then between the Soviet Union and the other three countries, the Dumbarton Oaks proposals formed the basis of the UN Charter, adopted at the San Francisco Conference on June 26, 1945. The Charter was signed by 50 nations. Poland was not present at the conference but was allowed to join as the 51st founding member.

Unlike the League of Nations, the UN, headquartered in New York City, enjoyed wide support in the U.S. and its Charter was quickly ratified by the Senate. The preamble to the UN Charter encompassed many of the ideals that Americans believe in and for which they had fought. Reflecting the postwar division of power, the Charter gave a power of veto to the Big Four nations plus France.

**Shattered hopes**

The expectations raised in San Francisco were soon disappointed. Almost from the onset, East-West conflicts dominated and divided the UN, beginning with the presence of Soviet troops in northern Iran in 1946. During the next few years tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union erupted elsewhere—Greece, Eastern Europe, Berlin, Korea and China, where in 1949 Soviet-backed Communists defeated U.S.-backed Nationalists, who fled to Taiwan.

By 1950, the cold war—as the East-West ideological confrontation came to be called—was raging. When Communist North Korea attacked South Korea, the UN was able to take collective action only because the Soviet Union was boycotting the Security Council because of its failure to seat the Chinese Communists. The UN’s expeditionary force of troops from 16 nations, led by the U.S., was soon engulfed in a full-scale war that lasted three years. The cold war, with varying intensity, went on for decades. The hopes for a forceful and independent world body that could resolve conflicts and defuse tensions were shattered by the recriminations and superpower maneuvering of the 1950s and 1960s. In many instances, such as the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and the U.S. involvement in Vietnam from 1964 to 1975, the UN played little or no part in shaping events.

**The Third World**

Prior to World War II, much of what is now called the Third World (a designation for poor, developing countries, mostly located in the southern hemisphere) remained in the hands of a few major European powers, principally Britain and France. Both countries controlled colonies in Asia, the Middle East, northern and sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean. The war and the cost of rebuilding their economies after the war made it difficult for the Europeans to continue administering their colonies. This, coupled with growing nationalist sentiments throughout the world, sparked a broad-based movement toward decolonization. It reached its peak in the early 1960s, when many countries, especially in Africa, achieved independence.

**Refugees in Ethiopia, a founding member of the UN, receive assistance from Unicef and other international agencies.**
The decolonization process had a profound effect on UN membership. From 1946 through 1950, the UN added only nine new members. In 1955, however, an additional 16 members were added. In 1960, 17 new countries, 16 of them African, became members. By 1964, total membership had reached 115.

The burgeoning Third World membership altered the agenda and the voting patterns of the General Assembly. In 1960, the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, over the stiff opposition of the main colonial powers. After 1960, it concentrated heavily on issues such as black-majority rule in southern Africa, the Arab-Israeli conflict and economic disparities between the developing South and the industrial North.

In the Middle East, the secretary-general and the Security Council took an early lead in the search for a peaceful solution to regional conflict by proposing terms for the partition of Palestine in 1947. In 1949 the General Assembly established the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East.

Since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the majority in the General Assembly has tended to be stridently anti-Israel. In 1975, for example, the General Assembly passed a resolution equating Zionism with racism, a move which deeply offended the U.S. and most of the other Western powers. Every year since 1982 the General Assembly has voted on a procedural motion to include on the agenda the lifting of Israel’s credentials for participating in the General Assembly. (In 1989, only 37 countries voted in favor—down from 41 in 1988—while 95 voted against.)

New economic order

Since 1960, economic discussions at the UN have centered on strategies and programs to promote Third World development. In the early years, North-South economic debates concentrated on economic and technical aid. The focus shifted in 1964 to trade with the convening of the first UN Conference on Trade and Development (Unctad). At the meeting a group of developing countries formed the so-called Group of 77 (which now has 127 members).

Their purpose was to present a unified bargaining position in the face of the richer countries of the North.

With the prodding of the Group of 77, the General Assembly attempted to address the disparity in wealth between the rich and poor nations. In 1974, the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO), based on "equity, sovereign equality, interdependence, common interest and cooperation among all states...," and a program of action with which the developing countries hoped to achieve greater control over their natural resources and, ultimately, a greater share of the economic pie.

Many analysts thought that faster Third World economic growth would help create new markets and thus lead to greater economic activity on a global scale. It was also believed that improving living standards in developing countries would ease such problems as population growth and political unrest. Nonetheless, the U.S. and several European nations opposed the NIEO’s call for expropriation of foreign investment without compensation in accordance with international law, the approval of commodity cartels, price indexing and other measures viewed as restricting international economic activity.

By 1975, both the U.S. and the European Economic Community had, at least in principle, accepted some of the declaration’s concepts. However, attempts to implement the new economic order were frustrated by global events, such as the sharp increase in the price of oil in 1979–80, the second in six years, and the deep worldwide recession of the early 1980s, which greatly reduced the demand for Third World commodities. In the past few years, the NIEO has been shelved as developing nations searched for more pragmatic ways to solve their economic problems.

Structural problems

Apart from the larger, global tensions, UN headquarters has been beset by a number of internal difficulties. One criticism that has frequently been leveled at the UN staff is that its leadership has been weak and often ineffective. When Pérez de Cuéllar became secretary-general in 1981, he inherited from his predecessor, the Austrian Kurt Waldheim, a UN headquarters with over 13,500 staff members. Since 1986, as the result of a budgetary and administrative-reform package pushed by the U.S. and other major donors and approved by the General Assembly, the secretary-general has managed to trim the staff by 13% and strengthened his personal control over UN peacemaking diplomacy and other critical areas.

The Secretariat (as the headquarters staff is known) was meant to be an international civil service. According to Article 100 of the UN Charter, neither the secretary-general nor his staff should "seek or receive instructions from any government or from any other authority external to the organization." In practice, however, the Secretariat soon became politicized at all levels and in nearly every aspect of its work, with member countries openly lobbying for specific jobs and attempting to influence their nationals in the Secretariat in the conduct of their work.

This "politicization" of the Secretariat severely hampered the secretary-general’s ability to develop a staff capable of operating independently of member governments. In addition, member countries have often been ac-
The UN's long agenda

Despite its many shortcomings, the UN as well as its agencies has managed to pursue a broad and fairly successful agenda during its 45 years. Key among its many activities have been peacekeeping, development, disarmament, promotion of human rights and the welfare of children.

**Peacemaking and peacekeeping.** Of the long list of UN objectives, peacemaking and peacekeeping remain preeminent. Peacemaking refers to the providing of a forum for debate and negotiation and a channel for quiet diplomacy to help resolve international conflicts. Peacekeeping refers to the use of observers or military forces to prevent a return to armed hostilities once a cease-fire has been achieved. Article 1 of Chapter I of the UN Charter states that the primary purpose of the UN is:

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\text{To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace.}
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The concept of peacekeeping developed as a means to circumvent the cold-war confrontation among the permanent members of the Security Council, who were reluctant to see another's troops used for coercive actions. Peacekeeping forces are established either by the Security Council or the General Assembly, usually at the recommendation of the secretary-general. They can only be dispatched with the consent of the warring parties, and must not interfere with the internal affairs of the host country or in any way favor one side in a conflict.

Unlike normal military forces, UN troops are only lightly armed and are prohibited from using force except in self-defense. Their role is limited to keeping warring parties separated in order to reduce tensions and create the climate for the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Keeping the peace has proven to be no easy chore. According to a report by World Priorities, a nonprofit research organization based in Washington, D.C., during the past 30 years, 81 major wars have been fought and nearly 13 million people have died in them.

The UN's first involvement in peacekeeping came in 1948, when an international team of observers was sent to monitor events in Palestine. Since then, the UN has organized 15 peacekeeping operations, including six observer missions (which operate unarmed) and eight expeditionary forces. Most recently, in 1989, peacekeeping forces were dispatched to Namibia and Nicaragua.

Notwithstanding the recent successes, peacekeeping can often be a frustrating assignment. During the 1960-64 peacekeeping operation in the Congo (now Zaire), for example, UN forces (though they were ultimately credited with preventing the country's breakup) became embroiled in a civil war. Notes Sir Brian Urquhart, former UN under secretary for special political affairs who was known as Mr. Peacekeeper during his time at the Secretariat, "There have been times when the peacekeeping function was more like that of an attendant in a lunatic asylum, and the soldiers had to accept abuse and harassment without getting into physical conflict or emotional involvement with the inmates."

Some notable peacemaking accomplishments include the UN Emergency Force (UNEF II), that was dispatched to the Suez Canal area during the Egyptian-Israeli conflict of 1973, and the UN Disengagement Observer Force...
(UNDOF), that was sent to monitor a disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria in 1974.

As with most military expeditions, peacekeeping operations are also expensive. Maintaining UN forces in Namibia until the country is granted full independence (scheduled for April 1, 1990), for example, is expected to cost from $500 million to $700 million.

**Disarmament.** The first resolution adopted by the General Assembly, just months after the U.S. dropped nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was on disarmament. Over the past four decades, the subject has received continuous attention at the UN, and the original resolution was followed by numerous multilateral treaties limiting the testing and deployment of nuclear weapons. In 1959, for example, the Antarctic Treaty declared the South Pole region a nuclear-weapon-free zone, and in 1967, the treaty on outer space prohibited nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction from being placed in orbit around the earth, on the moon or any of the planets. Between 1967 and 1980, an additional six treaties were signed, ranging from the prohibition of nuclear weapons in Latin America to restrictions on certain conventional weapons.

Despite its concern over disarmament, the General Assembly has often adopted resolutions too sweeping for practical application, such as the 1961 call for "general and complete disarmament." What is more, the superpowers have tended to follow their own agenda regarding arms limitations, test bans and disarmament, making multilateral action difficult to achieve. The recent improvement in relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, especially in the field of arms negotiations, has been warmly applauded at the UN. In the words of Secretary General Pérez de Cuéllar, "Every person on this earth has a stake in disarmament."

**Human rights.** As with disarmament, the promotion of human rights has been a major concern for the UN since its earliest years. In 1947, under the chairmanship of Eleanor Roosevelt, the Commission on Human Rights drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was approved by the General Assembly on December 10, 1948, a date that has since been annually observed as Human Rights Day. The declaration sets forth the basic rights and freedoms to which all men and women are entitled, including the right to life, liberty and security of person. It has served as a model for many of the constitutions drafted by new nations.

In nearly every year since 1948, the General Assembly has adopted resolutions, declarations and conventions concerning specific human-rights issues.

The UN's record in dealing with human-rights issues has also been mixed. The UN Commission on Human Rights, comprised of representatives from 43 governments, has in the past shown a high degree of political selectivity, focusing much of its attention on Israel and South Africa, while complaints against other governments were often not discussed. In recent years, however, the Human Rights Commission has shown a greater willingness to address all complaints. In 1989, for example, in its first action against a permanent member of the Security Council, the commission condemned China for suppressing the pro-democracy rally in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

**Development.** The UN Charter recognized the importance of promoting social progress and better living standards when it established the UN Economic and Social Council (Ecosoc),
Ecosoc, composed of representatives of 54 member states, meets twice a year and is the principal organ to coordinate the economic and social work of the UN with the specialized agencies and other institutions, including the semi-autonomous UN Development Program (UNDP), founded in 1965. With 5,000 projects worth some $7.5 billion currently being carried out in more than 150 countries, the UNDP is the largest multilateral channel for technical and preinvestment aid. Working with some two dozen UN specialized agencies, the program covers virtually the entire spectrum of economic and social development—from agriculture, industry, power production and transport, to health, housing and education. The UNDP has sent teachers to Botswana, engineers to Nepal, trade specialists to Poland and air-traffic control consultants to Ecuador. Funding for UNDP is provided by voluntary contributions from UN member governments.

Another UN agency that has played an important role in development is the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD or World Bank). The World Bank was established in 1944 to promote international investment for the development of productive resources. The bank, which picks up where the UNDP leaves off, offers long-term loans for such major development projects as hydroelectric dams and deep-water ports.

For all the attention devoted to development by the UN and its agencies, progress has been uneven, with the poorest countries in particular lagging far behind. Within the next 40 to 50 years, world population is expected to increase from the present 5 billion to between 8 billion and 14 billion. Most of this increase will be concentrated in already crowded Third World urban areas, which suffer from high levels of disease brought on by contaminated drinking water as well as sewage and waste disposal problems.

Welfare of children. Another area in which the UN early accepted responsibility was that of child welfare. The UN International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) was created in 1946 by unanimous vote in the General Assembly. Its original function was to provide emergency assistance to the destitute young victims of World War II. In 1953, the General Assembly made Unicef's mandate permanent, changing its name to simply the UN Children's Fund (although the acronym Unicef was retained). In 1965, Unicef was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for "the promotion of brotherhood among the nations."

Since the early 1950s, Unicef has concentrated on finding ways to eliminate the widespread malnutrition, disease and illiteracy afflicting millions of children in the developing world. It prides itself on taking a nonpolitical approach to child welfare and has thus managed to gain access to countries where other UN organizations are not allowed to operate. Unicef provides aid in three major ways: through assistance in the planning and design of services for children; delivery of supplies and equipment for these services; and provision of funds for the training of personnel needed to work with and for children (including teachers, nutritionists, health and sanitation workers, social workers and community leaders). As with the UNDP, funding for Unicef is largely provided by voluntary contributions from governments.

According to UN statistics, 40,000 children worldwide die every day, 95% of preventable causes, and another 40,000 are crippled for life through illness. As grim as these figures are, notes Unicef's executive director James P. Grant, there has been significant improvement in child welfare over the past four decades.

"In the 1950s," says Grant, "70,000 children were dying every day, the vast majority of preventable causes. Forty thousand may still be an unacceptable number, but it is clear that we are making progress."

The specialized agencies. Much of the UN's work is carried on by specialized agencies that are independent of the UN, with their own governing bodies, bylaws, budgets, staffs and memberships. These organizations work with the UN and each other through Ecosoc. Some of the agencies, such as the Universal Postal Union (UPU), predate the founding of the UN by a half-century or more.

Other specialized agencies deal with financial development and monetary issues (IBRD, IDA, IFC, IMF); agriculture (FAO); education, science and culture (Unesco), and many other transborder problems. As with the UN in general, they are sometimes subject to political turmoil. During the 1970s and early 1980s, for example, Unesco took actions that were viewed as hostile by many Western powers, causing the U.S. and other countries to withdraw from the organization.

Milk is distributed to refugee children in Somalia; Ecosoc strongly endorsed the secretary-general's appeal for urgent assistance.
Where does the U.S. stand?

During its early, formative years, the U.S. was the undisputed leader at the UN. U.S. taxpayers picked up 40% of the organization's total costs, and the U.S. and its allies formed a powerful majority. Despite cold-war confrontations and the increasing challenge from newly independent states, support for the UN generally ran high among Americans until the late 1960s. The U.S. position at the UN changed during the Nixon and Ford Administrations, when America—reeling from its defeat in Vietnam—often found itself outvoted and outmaneuvered by an increasingly hostile Third World voting bloc. It was in 1974, for example, that the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) chairman, Yasir Arafat—an avowed enemy of Israel, a U.S. ally—received a warm welcome at the UN. It was also during this period that the nonaligned countries began aggressively promoting the NIEO.

In opposition

In its defense, the U.S. adopted a sharper tone. In a speech before the General Assembly, John A. Scali, the U.S. permanent representative to the UN from 1973 to 1975, criticized the organization for passing "one-sided, unrealistic resolutions that cannot be implemented." Under Scali's successor, Daniel P. Moynihan, who served as permanent representative for only eight months (1975-76), the U.S. adopted a policy of confronting the nonaligned bloc. Incensed by the 1975 Zionism-israelism resolution, Moynihan responded with a U.S. resolution calling for the release of political prisoners throughout the world—a move calculated to show the hypocrisy of the majority in its selective approach to human rights.

Though much of the drama of those tumultuous years took place in the General Assembly, it is in the Security Council that the shift in sentiments at the UN can be most accurately measured. Between 1945 and 1970, the Soviet Union cast 105 vetoes in the Security Council, while the U.S. only cast 1. Over the next six years, from 1971 to 1976, the Soviet Union cast 5 vetoes and the U.S., 20. In Moynihan's words, the U.S. was now "in opposition" at the UN.

During Jimmy Carter's presidency (1977-81), the U.S. struck a conciliatory tone at the UN. Carter appointed Andrew Young as his permanent representative to the UN (1977-79). Young was an outspoken critic of racism who had worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s. He quickly gained the confidence of many nonaligned countries, especially the Africans, who saw him as a champion of the anti-partheid battle. In the Security Council in 1977, the U.S. voted with the majority for a mandatory arms embargo against South Africa, a move not dreamed of just a few years before.

Young, however, was forced to resign after it was revealed that he had held an unauthorized meeting with a PLO official. He was replaced by Donald McHenry, a young black American who had already distinguished himself as a career diplomat with long UN experience.

The Reagan years

Under President Reagan, the U.S. again went through a period of confrontation at the UN. As his first permanent representative, Reagan chose Jeane J. Kirkpatrick (1981-85), a neoconservative who quickly showed a willingness to confront both the Soviet bloc and the Third World in a manner that was reminiscent of Moynihan.

During the Reagan Administration's first term (1981-85), the U.S. adopted what appeared to many observers to be a more unilateralist approach to foreign policy. Following a Security Council resolution condemning the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada, for example, President Reagan is reported to have said that the fact that the U.S. was voted down by eight votes "didn't bother his breakfast one bit." One U.S. official was even quoted as remarking that the UN could "go elsewhere" if it did not like Reagan's policies.

In 1983, the U.S. Congress passed Public Law 98-164, setting several conditions on American participation in the UN. One provision of the law states that if Israel is illegally denied its credentials at the UN, the U.S. will "suspend its participation in the General Assembly..." Another provision requires that the secretary of state report to Congress each year on the voting record within the General Assembly of each member country, so that Congress can assess a particular country's support of the U.S. when considering requests for military and economic aid.

In 1985, Congress went a step further by passing the Kassebaum amendment, which called for withholding dues to the UN pending cost-cutting and structural reforms within the Secretariat. Since the U.S. is now responsible for 25% of the UN's regular budget (a percentage roughly equal to its share of the combined gross national product of all UN member countries), failure to pay its dues soon put the UN under severe financial constraints. By 1988, the U.S. owed the UN nearly $500 million in back dues and an additional $250 million in arrears for peacekeeping operations (which is also an obligatory payment), prompting Pérez de Cuéllar to warn that the UN would soon have to begin curtailing its activities.

During his second term in office (1985-89), President Reagan's attitude toward the UN changed. In 1985, Ambassador Kirkpatrick, who had softened her tone considerably, was replaced by Vernon Walters, a retired army general and deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency who was widely admired for his linguistic and diplomatic skills. In September 1988, the President announced that he was releasing $44 million to cover payment of U.S. dues to the UN through the end of that year and pledged to pay off the balance owed.

In 1987, the Soviet Union paid more than $200 million in arrears to the UN, including money promised for past peacekeeping operations. It has an outstanding UN debt of $175 million.

Lost influence

Though many analysts originally viewed the withholding of dues as an effective means of forcing much-needed reforms on the organization, it
is generally agreed that the continued failure to make back payments has hurt U.S. prestige and influence. According to Richard Gardner, "A country that owes over half a billion dollars to the world organization is in a weak position to claim its fair share of key Secretariat posts."

John Washburn, a retired U.S. diplomat who now holds a high-level UN post, believes that withholding dues has upset many U.S. allies and could set an unhealthy precedent. "These payments are international legal obligations, not voluntary contributions," says Washburn. "Withholding them is simply not the kind of game that a real leader plays."

So far, President Bush has offered more praise than criticism to the UN. His choice of Thomas R. Pickering—a respected career diplomat with experience in arms negotiations, the Middle East and Central America—as permanent U.S. representative was seen as an indication that the Administration plans to make the organization a high foreign policy priority. The President has adopted the Reagan formula on dues—full payment of the current year's assessment and installment payment of all U.S. dues in arrears. While Congress is expected to fulfill his first request, it may be years before all back debts are paid.

U.S. policy options

In light of the UN's recent achievements and the Soviet Union's changed attitude toward the world body, is a course change in U.S. policy toward the UN in the coming decade called for? The following are just two of the many U.S. policy options.

1. Make the UN a more important foreign policy priority. Many analysts believe that the U.S. must focus more official attention on the organization that it has in recent years, since many of the most pressing issues on the U.S. and the global agenda (including drugs, the environment and terrorism) require a multilateral approach. The U.S. should also be more willing to attempt to resolve disputes in the Security Council and the General Assembly. It should also pay its back dues in full, propose only the most qualified candidates to fill staff positions at the Secretariat, and become involved in the appointment of leadership posts of all UN agencies. As one UN-watcher put it, "When was the last time anyone at the White House gave two seconds thought to who should be head of the Food and Agriculture Organization or Unesco?"

Critics argue that despite recent successes, the UN is still a cumbersome vehicle for solving international disputes and the U.S. is often in the minority on issues important to it and its allies. Even if Congress were prepared to come up with funds to pay back dues (given the current U.S. budgetary difficulties, this is unlikely), many—including some members of the Bush Administration—would prefer that the U.S. continue to use its financial leverage to push for further reforms.

2. Use the UN selectively as one of many avenues for achieving U.S. policy goals. This option recognizes that some international problems call for a multilateral approach, others are best dealt with in their regional context and still others require unilateral actions. The issue is not whether or not the U.S. should use the UN as a foreign policy tool, but under what circumstances a multilateral approach is in the U.S. best interest. According to Gardner, "neither dogmatic unilateralsim nor utopian multilateralism is an appropriate policy for a superpower in a complex and dangerous world."

Proponents of this option argue that the UN is best suited for tackling such transborder issues as controlling the spread of AIDS, environmental pollution and the population explosion, and that U.S. policy goals can best be served by addressing these issues within the international forum. On the other hand, on some issues—especially sensitive security matters and those where the U.S. has been traditionally at odds with the General Assembly—little would be gained by seeking a UN consensus.

An argument against the selective approach policy is that it could undermine the growing spirit of cooperation within the UN system at a time when the potential for multilateralism has never been greater. Since the Soviet Union has expressed interest in expanding the UN's role in resolving conflicts, the U.S. should be willing to give multilateralism a chance, without placing preconditions on what it will or will not address within the international organization.

Just how far the U.S. should go in restoring its support for the UN is a question for debate. Should the organization become a priority for the Bush Administration? If so, what results can be reasonably expected? In what circumstances can the UN be used effectively to promote U.S. foreign policy goals? Should it be used? Or is it better to chart an independent course, relying instead on unilateral actions?
FOR DISCUSSION

1. The UN was founded to promote peace, security and cooperation in solving international problems. In your opinion, has it succeeded in its goals? Has the U.S. benefited from its existence? Or has the UN been an impediment to U.S. policy?

2. Some analysts believe that the U.S. should take a selective approach toward the UN, using the organization to deal with some issues, but reserving the right to take independent action on others. Do you share their view? What arguments can you make in favor of or against such an approach?

3. The U.S. is currently responsible for 25% of the UN budget. In your opinion, does the U.S. pay too much or not enough for what it gets from the UN?

4. During the 1980s the U.S. withheld its UN dues in order to force structural changes on the organization. Do you think this was a good or bad policy? Under what, if any, conditions would you recommend withholding U.S. dues in the future?

5. The UN is increasingly being used to address such transborder issues as global warming and international terrorism. Do you think the organization can deal effectively with such problems? How could the UN enforce its decisions in these matters on uncooperative member nations?

6. In what field do you think the UN is most effective: peacekeeping and peacemaking, economic development and the struggle against poverty, human rights, disarmament, or some other?

7. Mikhail Gorbachev has stressed greater cooperation in the UN at a time when the U.S. has been accused of being the organization's "number one deadbeat." How should the U.S. respond to Gorbachev's "new thinking" toward the UN?

8. Some analysts believe that if the UN did not exist it would have to be invented now. Do you agree? What role do you envisage for the UN in the decade that lies ahead?

SUGGESTED READINGS


MacLeod, Scott, "A Very Civil Servant." Time, December 5, 1988, pp. 50-52. Interview with longtime UN diplomat Sir Brian Urquhart, "Mr. Peacekeeper."


"Prospects for a New Era of World Peace." Department of State Bulletin, November 1988, pp. 1-8. Includes the text of President Ronald Reagan's final address to the General Assembly, the White House statement on release of U.S. funds for the UN and a joint communiqué by the permanent members of the Security Council.


For further in-depth reading, write for the Great Decisions 1990 Bibliography (see page 4).