

The UN and the world order (1945-1992)

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The history of the United Nations Organization is the best guide to the deep-going transformations the world has undergone over the past 47 years. Since the end of WWII this forum for international understanding has mirrored the confrontations, chills and thaws between the superpowers.

No other arena or stage better reflected these ups and downs of politics and international relations. For more than four decades the UN was at the center of disputes and, therefore, of the sterile and immoderate rhetoric that characterized the confrontation between East and West. This turbulent past bequeathed the UN a legacy of crises, which were often considered heralds of its demise.

Yet the great plenary hall in the Organization's main building testifies to the incorporation of new countries that won independence as a result of the good offices of the UN, which over the course of 30 years promoted the process of decolonization which has changed the map of the world.

In addition to the hundreds of millions who gained full enjoyment of their rights to sovereignty and self-determination are the millions who over the past two years broke the dikes of authoritarianism and won freedom. Many of the new nations have taken the places befitting them within the General Assembly.

The new world in which we are beginning to live urgently requires the

creation of an order which will replace the obsolete balance of terror and the threat of nuclear conflagration. The checks and balances of the Cold War came apart, leaving in their wake institutions which must be transformed and adapted to new needs.

Among them is the United Nations, which has undertaken tasks essential to guaranteeing international peace and security. The rebirth of the UN Charter's original principles is most clearly shown in the role that the Security Council has begun to play.

For 43 years the Council stagnated. Now, the new international atmosphere has allowed it to carry out concrete, effective actions aimed at establishing peace, through good offices, special missions or silent diplomacy, the mobilization of peace-keeping forces and international cooperation for consolidating peaceful solutions to conflicts.

It is important to note that the advances in conflict resolution have been made possible by the atmosphere of collaboration between the five permanent members of the Security Council. This distinctive trait of the new era, while facilitating and expediting the Council's agreements, also invariably involves the exclusion of the ten non-permanent members whose participation in decisions of world importance is marginal and often merely symbolic.

This lies behind the demand, raised by Mexico and other nations, for democratizing the Council and revitalizing the General Assembly

—the UN's highest body, whose operating mechanisms require substantial changes so it may reflect the realities of the present rather than those of 1945.

This is the reason for the insistence on changing the inequality represented by the five permanent members' right of veto, the resulting disparity in the specific weight of the various Council members, the very category of permanent member, the Europeanization of membership in the Council and the secrecy of its workings. These changes must be carried out in a calm, mature way lest haste impede serious analysis and consideration of the best measures that can be taken.

The starting point should be the positive aspects of the Council's expeditious actions, which have proven effective in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In these areas firm steps have been taken to put an end to long-standing antagonisms, promote national reconciliation and reduce sources of regional and global tension.

In this regard, the balance-sheet of recent years is impressive: independence for Namibia, resolution of conflicts in Central America, a ceasefire and negotiated settlement in the Iran-Iraq war, the end of hostilities in Angola and Ethiopia, the beginning of democratization in Cambodia and recent mediation in Yugoslavia.

While the idea of peace is not difficult to understand, the concept of international security is more complex, posing a veritable mosaic of

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contradictions. While the nuclear powers have begun to negotiate arms reduction agreements, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction threatens to increase, and in many parts of the world conventional arms continue to accumulate.

Just when apartheid seems to be on its last legs, new expressions of racial tension have come to the fore. Xenophobia, fanatical nationalism, religious fundamentalism, ethnic and linguistic demands are the most worrisome symptoms in the new panorama facing humanity. It is indispensable to create the necessary balances so that fragmentation will not make it more difficult to achieve peace, security and economic well-being for all.

Paradoxically —as palpably shown during the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, held in June 1992— a new risk to stability is posed by the combination of developmental excesses and the shortfalls involved in underdevelopment. Ecological damage, which in many cases is irreversible, threatens life on this planet.

Even more worrisome are the devastating and constant problems of population growth, the crushing burden of debt, barriers to trade, drug trafficking and the growing gap between rich and poor.

Extreme poverty is on the rise; an estimated 1.2 billion people live below basic subsistence levels. In other words, one fifth of humanity lives in a daily situation of prostration, with their basic needs for food, health, education and housing unsatisfied.

Disease, hunger, oppression and desperation are on the rise, translating into 17 million refugees, 20 million displaced persons, migrations within and beyond national borders. These problems are both causes and effects of conflicts which demand constant attention and a higher level of priority on the UN's agenda.

The struggle against poverty is one of the great challenges facing the United Nations. Just as it has proven possible to restore the UN's role as a catalyst for peace and security, it is indispensable to recognize the essential functions it must fulfill in promoting development in the countries of the South.

While the existing structure can be used, it requires changes and modifications allowing for more effective responses. Programs such as those undertaken by UNICEF, the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, the UN Development Program and the World Food Program can be extremely useful if they are provided with the resources needed for working in the "field" —that is, beyond bureaucratic offices, through Regional Commissions.

The United Nations cannot be a world police agency, nor can its scope be limited to problems of world peace and security. Since 1945, the year WWII came to an end and the UN was founded, approximately 20 million people have died in more than 100 significant conflicts, which have taken place primarily in developing countries. Almost all of these conflicts originated in economic problems, which generated social and political unrest. The fact that at the end of the 20th century 40,000 children die each day illustrates the serious imbalances in this world.

A more just world must base itself on the strengthening of multilateral institutions, particularly the most important of these: the United Nations. The UN's member countries bear the responsibility for making sure that this occurs. They created the United Nations and owe it their loyalty 

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