

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 7
Number 1 *Parameters* 1977

Article 31

7-4-1977

THE UNITED NATIONS: GOING ON 32

James S. Sutterlin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

James S. Sutterlin, "THE UNITED NATIONS: GOING ON 32," *Parameters* 7, no. 1 (1977), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1124.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

THE UNITED NATIONS: GOING ON 32

by

JAMES S. SUTTERLIN

In nearly 32 years of existence, the United Nations has never been less than controversial, nor has it ceased to provide elements of hope and idealism in a contentious world. As one who joined the United Nations staff at a time when controversy seemed on the verge of snuffing out both the hope and the idealism, it was, for me, essential to come to some personal conclusions concerning the value of the United Nations in terms of its original objectives and the potential it offers for the future.

To understand both the problems and promise of the United Nations, I found that it was first necessary to appreciate two essential differences between it and its predecessor, the League of Nations. The first is the veto right of the five permanent members of the Security Council, a provision totally absent in the League Covenant. In the 1940's and 50's, the frequent resort to the veto by the Soviet Union raised serious questions concerning the organization's viability and utility. Now it is used more frequently by the United States. Unquestionably, it has tended to confine United Nations effectiveness in the maintenance of international security to areas where the interests of the major powers are not in direct conflict. But only after being part of the United Nations did I fully realize that without the veto the United Nations might well have gone the way of the League of Nations or might not offer today a real, if limited, capacity to deal with political crises and economic challenges.

The drafters of the UN Charter were, in the first instance, mostly Americans with the work centered in the Department of State.

There was an acute consciousness that one major reason for the failure of the League was the absence of any provision which would equate responsibility with power. A major country which was unwilling to see its position in the world dependent on the unweighted vote of the other members of the League had no alternative but to refrain from membership, as in the case of the United States, or to withdraw. The United Nations Charter foresees that the principal responsibility for maintaining peace in the world will rest with the five permanent members of the Security Council. It was considered unrealistic to expect that the permanent members would accept this responsibility unless they had the means to protect their own interests. As a result no permanent member (or other member state, for that matter) has withdrawn permanently from the organization. And as a result of detente, conflicts between US and Soviet views have become less of an impediment to Security Council action.

A second essential way in which the United Nations differs from the League precedent is through the inclusion of the achievement of economic and social cooperation among its purposes. Just as the veto right seemed sometimes to threaten the very existence of the United Nations in the earlier days, so now on occasion the confrontation between the developing and the developed states within the United Nations, because of economic and social differences, has raised questions as to the viability of the organization. Yet surely the foresight of the drafters of the Charter has been confirmed. No organization which hopes to contribute to lasting stability could, at the

present stage of history, ignore the economic areas as a source of conflict. So, in a sense, the United Nations came into existence with a limitation on its powers and a breadth of responsibility which have at times threatened its credibility. But without the first, it might not exist at all; without the second, it would offer small hope for a better world.

THE FLOWERS AND THE VASE

In assessing what the United Nations does and potentially can do, one must also understand what the United Nations cannot and was never intended to do. The United Nations as an organization has no power except as an instrument of the member states. The Charter provides for no supranational governmental authority. The United Nations is founded on the ideals and principles defined in the Charter, but there can be a United Nations "policy" only to the extent that there is a consensus or majority view among member states which the organization can follow. The Secretary-General is not authorized to define a "UN policy" beyond the broad tenets of the Charter. If war breaks out, the United Nations as an organization cannot simply declare that the war should stop. Only its member states can do this through the Security Council. The United Nations cannot intervene in the domestic affairs of any state. In a sense, the United Nations is like a vase. Without a vase there can be no lasting bouquet of flowers; but the aroma—or perfume—depends on the flowers, not on the vase. That is why it seems beside the mark when commentators suggest, for example, that the General Assembly is a corrupt or useless organization.

So, without power or policy, what purposes can and does the United Nations serve? The following have impressed me, although they are by no means all-inclusive:

- *An Ever-present Option*—It has been popular in recent years in Washington to approach foreign policy decisions on the basis of options, some quite real and some less so. Certainly there is a greater element of flexibility and, therefore, a lesser degree of

danger when more than one real option exists for resolving a crisis. In many crises, the United Nations as an institution offers a potential option, even though it may seldom be chosen. In looking toward an eventual Middle East solution, for example, it has been suggested that should a decision be reached for the establishment of a Palestinian state, the United Nations might be called upon to administer the areas concerned for the period necessary to prepare for eventual self-determination. In the end this option probably will not be followed, but the mere fact that it exists provides potential maneuverability in negotiations which are certain to be uncommonly difficult.

- *The Essential Third Force*—Regional crises arise fairly often involving two or more states where national policy and pride would almost certainly lead to armed conflict if there were not a third force which could be brought into the picture. The third force may not actually be able to resolve the issue which caused the crisis in the first place, as in the recent case of the Western Sahara, but it can assume responsibility for seeking such a solution at the time when tension is highest and thus avoid irreversible violence. What may

James S. Sutterlin is Chief, Political Affairs Division, United Nations Secretariat. A graduate of Haverford College in Pennsylvania, he has also studied at the University of Kentucky and at Middleburg College in Vermont. In 1968 he began a year as a Fellow at the Harvard Center for International Affairs, concentrating largely on American relations with Western Europe. Mr. Sutterlin became a career Foreign Service Officer in the Department of State in 1946 following military service in World War II. In addition to his first posting as Vice Consul in Berlin, he has also served abroad in Tel Aviv, Tokyo, and Bonn, as well as in the State Department in Washington. From 1969 to 1973 he served as Director of the Office of Central European Affairs in the State Department. In 1973 he was named Director of the Planning and Coordination Staff and was subsequently appointed Inspector General of the Foreign Service. Mr. Sutterlin left the Foreign Service in September 1974 and assumed his present position with the United Nations Secretariat.



seem like ineffectiveness may in fact be an essential element in moving a crisis beyond the flash point.

• *Distiller of National Policies*—Anyone who spends very much time in the United Nations will discover that the endless speeches in the Assembly and in the committees are frequently extraordinarily dull, particularly to the uninitiated. One wonders at first what possible purpose so many words can have. Some, in truth, have very little. But the process is important. The speeches generally reflect instructions from governments. In issuing such instructions, governments take into account statements made by the representatives of other governments which have been communicated by telegram. In this way, a subtle process of mutual influence takes place. It is seldom that positions of member states remain precisely the same at the end of a debate as they were at the beginning. This does not mean that agreement is often reached through exchanges in the General Assembly, but areas of difference become better understood and, to a certain extent, refined.

• *Peacekeeper of the World*—The peacekeeping forces of the United Nations, which have developed on an ad hoc basis as an essential element in maintaining peace in areas of conflict until a lasting solution can be found, are quite different from the military force foreseen under the Charter for the prevention of aggression. Peacekeeping operations depend in principle on the assent of the countries in which they are placed. They have been important mainly during the period after a conflict has been temporarily quelled. Within this limitation, the availability of UN peacekeeping forces for interposition between hostile armies has been and remains of critical importance to international security.

• *Instrument of Development Assistance*—Through the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations is the major nonnational source of development assistance. The program amounted to \$1.5

billion over the past five years and is targeted at \$2.5 billion for the next five. The effectiveness of this aid is generally assessed quite highly, and it is welcomed by many governments precisely because it does not involve bilateral obligations to specific countries. It is being increasingly concentrated on the poorest countries. The United Nations also provides humanitarian assistance when disasters occur and care and placement for various categories of refugees.

• *A Pressure Group for Certain Causes*—The United Nations as an organization pursues certain causes, such as the struggle against *apartheid*, through the dissemination of information and other activities which constitute an effective form of international pressure. Some Americans may have doubts about this function, depending on their attitudes toward the causes pursued. Two things must be said, however: (1) the action on the part of the United Nations is real, and (2) it invariably is in accordance with the sentiment of the majority of member states.

• *Potential Coordinator of National Policies*—There are numerous problems in our increasingly interdependent world which cannot be dealt with in isolation by one country or regional grouping. The environment is a good example. The effects of atomic waste disposal cannot be limited to one region. In the best interests of both the present and future generations, a coordinated approach among all the producers and possible recipients of such waste is essential. The United Nations provides a useful forum as well as the potential instruments for global coordination and eventual global management.

One might ask whether it is logical to maintain that the United Nations, as an organization, can only reflect the policies of member states and then to give it credit for the kind of useful functions which have just been listed. To revert to the earlier simile, how can a vase be responsible for effective action? The answer, I believe, is that these

functions are those which individual countries either cannot carry out acting alone or cannot perform as effectively as in broad combination with other states. They require a multinational framework, and within such a framework they take on a different dimension. The United Nations is the only global organization which can provide this framework.

FROM RELEVANCE TO ESSENTIALITY?

Since the end of World War II, perhaps the two broad political developments of greatest importance have been the decolonization movement, in which the United Nations has from the beginning been directly involved, and the stabilization and acceptance of the results of the Second World War in Europe and in Asia, with which the United Nations has been only tangentially concerned. This latter process—which included the emergence and recognition of two German states, the acceptance of the People's Republic of China as the legitimate government of that country, the stabilization of NATO and the Warsaw Pact as instruments of balance in Europe, and most recently the completion of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe at Helsinki—sometimes implied a certain irrelevance on the part of the United Nations. With the major exceptions of Korea and Taiwan, this process now seems to be more or less complete.

The political decolonization process is also nearing completion. But it is closely related to what is now frequently called economic decolonization, which means, in the broadest terms, a more equitable enjoyment of the growth potential afforded by the world's resources than has heretofore been the case. This is the so-called new international economic order which, through the United

Nations, has been placed at the top of the world's agenda.

Accompanying the objective of a major change in the world's economic structure are other global requirements, such as a reasonable and productive management of the sea's resources, the protection of the global environment, and the wise utilization of the earth's fresh water supplies. By their very nature, these great problems of the last quarter of the twentieth century demand transnational negotiation, transnational agreement, and eventually transnational management. It is by no means certain that the United Nations, reflecting as it does the collective will of member states, will be able to lead the world toward happy solutions in one or all of these areas. There can be no doubt, however, that an effective international organization is required for this purpose—that there would be far less hope for solutions if no international organization of the United Nations' potential existed.

The United States and the Soviet Union, together with their allies, have in the past successfully dealt with crises and achieved—not without some extremely perilous times—a relatively stable power balance in the areas closest to their bilateral interests without directly involving the United Nations. They are not likely to be able to do this, however, in solving many of the immense and far-ranging problems which in the future will influence the prospects of global stability and peace. This virtually assures the relevance of the United Nations in the coming years to a degree not known thus far in its existence. Indeed, the challenge now, rather than lack of relevance, could become an ever-increasing relevance, even to the extent of exceeding the yet untaxed capabilities of the United Nations.

