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The U.N. in East-West Confrontation

ROBERT E. RIGGS*

ABSTRACT—As an instrument of foreign policy, the United Nations performs three functions: it legitimizes particular national policies, it facilitates international negotiations, and it provides material support for policy by allocating manpower and other resources. In dealings with the Soviet bloc during the past two decades, the United States has used the United Nations primarily to confer legitimacy on anti-communist policies. Since the mid-1950's, however, the increasing unreliability of U.N. majorities and improved Soviet-American relations have brought a relative de-emphasis of the legitimization function. Correspondingly, a somewhat enlarged U.N. role as a forum for East-West negotiations has emerged. Except for the Korean war, the material support function of the U.N. has not been significant in East-West relations.

The United Nations performs three broad classes of functions as an instrument of national policy. It can facilitate diplomatic negotiation; it can confer international approval, and therefore legitimacy, upon the behavior and policies of states; and it can provide material support—in the form of personnel and other resources—to implement particular national policies. Of the three functions—diplomacy, legitimization, and material support—diplomacy is generally regarded as the central function of the United Nations and the chief justification for its existence.

The day-to-day interchange that takes place among representatives to the United Nations has become an invaluable supplement to traditional diplomacy, while many negotiated agreements of considerable importance to the United States have emerged from the formal processes of the organization. The limitation of nuclear testing, banning of nuclear weapons from outer space, and agreement on nuclear non-proliferation are all products—at least in part—of U.N. processes of debate and negotiation. Discovery and exploration in outer space, the promotion of human rights, trade and economic development are other areas of interest to the United States in which agreements have been achieved. Still another aspect of the U.N. Negotiating function is the mediatorial service frequently performed by the Secretary-General and his associates in international disputes.

Legitimization is a second function performed by the United Nations. As used here, the term refers to the attitudes of other governments toward the foreign policies of the United States. If other governments approve what we say or do, or at least acquiesce in it, our behavior has legitimacy. Under such a definition, legitimacy must be regarded as a variable quality that may exist in greater or lesser degree according to the state of diplomatic opinion. However intangible and difficult of measurement, legitimacy is important to the United States, or to any country, because it can enhance a state's prestige, reduce the prestige of countries pursuing a contrary pol-

icy, and induce support for desired policies and programs.

The United Nations affects legitimacy in several ways. The most obvious is the adoption of a resolution that expresses collective approval or disapproval of particular "claims, policies, and behavior."¹ General Assembly resolutions supported by a large majority of the membership would confer substantial legitimacy, as we have defined the term. Even without the adoption of a resolution, the United Nations offers a forum in which to court the approval of other governments; and the process of explaining, defending, and building support for policies in the United Nations may itself contribute to legitimization. The very fact of membership in the organization tends to legitimize intervention by one state in the affairs of another. As a member of the United Nations and a permanent member of the Security Council, for example, the United States can legitimately attempt to influence the outcome of any dispute anywhere that threatens international peace and security.

The third U.N. function—providing material support for American objectives—can be readily explained by illustrations. During the Korean war the United Nations provided military as well as moral support, and thus served the American objective of resisting communist expansion. The Congo operation 1960-1964 is another good example. By supplying troops, technical assistance and administrative personnel, the United Nations brought a degree of political stability to the Congo, minimized the chances of a direct Soviet-American military confrontation, and helped to prevent Soviet penetration of the Congo. On a smaller scale, U.N. observer teams in Greece, Lebanon, Pakistan, and elsewhere have helped bring a kind of stability to troubled areas, an accomplishment clearly in the interest of the United States.

¹Inis L. Claude, Jr., refers to this function as "collective legitimization," explained as a development by which "the political organs of the United Nations, most notably the General Assembly, have come to be regarded and utilized by Member States as dispensers of impressively valuable international approval and disapproval of the claims, policies, and behavior of states." See Claude, "Implications and Questions for the Future," *International Organization*, Summer, 1965, p. 843; and Claude, *The Changing United Nations* (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 73-103.

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Much the same can be said of U.N. economic assistance. Bilateral aid programs are undoubtedly more responsive to American control than the U.N. programs. But if American national interests are served by economic development *per se*, and not merely by the political strings attached, multilateral aid can be regarded as a form of material support for American objectives.

Although this three-fold classification of functions could be applied to the entire range of national interests affected by the United Nations, this discussion is concerned only with relations between the United States and the Soviet bloc. Specifically, cases to be cited are those in which the principal parties to the issue were communist on one side and non-communist on the other. Within the delimited subject area, however, the entire period 1946-1967 will be examined in order to evaluate the usefulness of the United Nations as an instrument for dealing with communist states.

Review of Relevant Cases

A detailed survey of United States cold war initiatives in the United Nations is precluded by space limitation, but a summary of the relevant cases is presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3. The tables represent an essentially exhaustive list of cases discussed by the United Nations from 1946 to 1967 in which the following conditions were met; 1) the countries most directly concerned were

TABLE 1. Cold War Issues Involving U.N. Legitimization Function

Issue	U.N. Organ	When Discussed	Item Initiated by U.S.
Disarmament	GA, SC	1946-1967	Yes
Iran	SC	1946	No
Greece	SC	1946	No
	GA	1947-1953	Yes
Korea, unification	GA	1947-1967	Yes
Czech Coup	SC	1948	No
Berlin Blockade	SC	1948	Yes
Soviet Wives	GA	1948	No
Human Rights in Eastern Europe	GA	1949-1950	No
Soviet Treaty Violation	GA	1949-1951	No
Forced Labor	ECOSOC, GA	1949-1951	Yes
		1953-1954	Yes
Radio Jamming	ECOSOC, GA	1950	Yes
Prisoners of War			
Repatriation	GA	1950, 1953	Yes
Korea, military action	SC, GA	1950-1953	Yes
Formosa	GA	1950	Yes
German Reunification	GA	1951	Yes
Imprisonment of William Oatis	ECOSOC, GA	1951-1952	Yes
Germ Warfare Investigation	SC, GA	1952-1953	Yes
Korean Atrocities	GA	1953	Yes
Attack on U.S. Bomber	SC	1954	Yes
American Airmen	GA	1954	Yes
Formosa Straits	SC	1955	No
Hungary	SC, GA	1956-1962	Yes
Laos	SC	1959	No
Tibet	GA	1959-1961, 1965	No
Cuba	SC	1962	Yes
Gulf of Tonkin Incident	SC	1964	Yes
Vietnam War	SC	1966	Yes

TABLE 2. East-West Issues Involving the U.N. Negotiation Function

Issue	U.N. Organ	When Discussed	Item Initiated by U.S.
Disarmament	GA, SC	1946-1967	Yes
American Airmen	GA	1954	Yes
Formosa Straits	SC	1955	No
Peaceful Uses of Outer Space	GA	1958-1967	Yes
Cuban Missile Crisis	SC	1962	Yes
Vietnam War	SC	1966	Yes

TABLE 3. East-West Issues Involving the U.N. Material Support Function

Issue	U.N. Organ	When Discussed	Item Initiated by U.S.
Greece	GA	1947-1953	Yes
Korea, unification	GA	1947-1967	Yes
Korea, military action	SC, GA	1950-1953	Yes

TABLE 4. Frequency of East-West Issues Involving the U.N. Legitimization Function

Years	Number of Issues*
1946-1947	6
1948-1949	12
1950-1951	18
1952-1953	14
1954-1955	8
1956-1957	6
1958-1959	8
1960-1961	8
1962-1963	6
1964-1965	6
1966-1967	5

communist on one side and non-communist on the other, and 2) the United States strongly supported UN consideration of the issue.² An examination of the three tables suggests that The United States has used the United Nations in the East-West confrontation primarily as a means of legitimizing anti-communist policies and postures and only secondarily as a forum for negotiation or a source of material support. Table 1 also indicates, however, that use of the United Nations to legitimize anti-communist positions has declined markedly since the middle 1950's.

As Table 4 shows, the legitimization of cold war policies reached a peak during the years 1948-1953 when the cold war was at its height. Given the imperatives of American foreign policy during that period, the United States had every incentive to use the United Nations in the cold war. And, given the large pro-Western majority in the General Assembly, the United States had every expectation that its anti-communist positions would be endorsed. Since the mid-1950's, however, both of these conditions have changed. This also is reflected in Table 4. Expanded membership and the growth of neutralism

² Some of the issues listed in Table 1, such as disarmament and the Korean War, embraced numerous sub-issues that are not listed. Some issues that appeared to serve two functions are listed in more than one table.

in the United Nations have made the world organization less responsive to American leadership. The new states of Africa and Asia are far more interested in economic development and eradicating colonialism than in cold war controversies. Voting on the Hungarian question, shown in Table 5, illustrates from another perspective the growing reluctance of many UN members to support anti-communist resolutions in the Assembly.

TABLE 5. General Assembly Voting on the Hungarian Question

Year	Yes	No	Abstain	% Voting Yes
1956*	55	8	13	72
1957	60	10	10	75
1958	54	10	15	68
1959	53	10	17	66
1960		No Vote Taken		
1961	49	17	32	50
1962	50	13	43	47

*Several votes were taken in 1956. This one is selected as best representing the basic division of forces.

The disarmament question provides an equally striking illustration of the change. Before 1958 the United States always voted on the winning side of disarmament questions, and the Soviet Union never did except on the few occasions when the two superpowers were in agreement. From 1959 through 1965, however, the United States voted with the majority less often than the Soviet Union. Of thirty-four disarmament resolutions adopted by the General Assembly during this period, the United States supported only twenty-one while the Soviet Union voted for twenty-six. The two superpowers were in agreement on seventeen of the thirty-four resolutions.

Changed Conditions and Policies

Conditions that made Soviet-American relations so hostile at an earlier period also have undergone change. The death of Stalin brought a new flexibility to Soviet policy; and the growth of a substantial industrial base and a managerial middle class with access to centers of political power have tempered the revolutionary zeal. The acquisition of a powerful nuclear arsenal and missile delivery systems has reduced somewhat the paranoid fears of capitalist encirclement which in past years contributed to Soviet truculence in foreign affairs. East European satellite regimes have grown more independent (despite the 1968 setback in Czechoslovakia), while the rise of Communist China has forced the Soviet Union to bargain with other communist regimes for their support and opened the question of building bridges to the West to balance Chinese power.

With the superpowers moving grudgingly toward détente, the incentive to bring cold war issues to the United Nations decreased. Thus, from 1955 to 1967, the United States proposed for U.N. discussion only four new East-West issues involving the legitimization function (Hungary, Cuba, the Tonkin Gulf incident, and the Vietnam war). All of these cases were placed before the Security Council rather than the General Assembly.³ Two per-

³ The Hungarian question was taken to the Assembly when the Soviet veto thwarted action in the Security Council.

ennials—disarmament and Korean unification—were carried over from the pre-1955 period; and three other East-West controversies (Formosa Straits, Tibet, and Laos) were brought to the United Nations upon the initiative of other interested countries, although with the support of the United States. Of these nine issues, moreover, only the Tibetan question fits the pattern of calculated harassment characteristic of many initiatives of the earlier period. This issue was not proposed by the United States, and it was directed at China rather than the Soviet Union.

Use in East West Negotiation

In contrast to the frequent if declining American use of the legitimization function, the United Nations has never been heavily used by the United States to achieve a negotiated settlement of East-West questions. Of the hundreds of issues discussed by the Assembly or the Security Council from 1946 through 1967, only six may be regarded as serious attempts by the United States to reach accommodation with the Soviet bloc.⁴ The results of these efforts have varied. In the case of American airmen held prisoner from the Korean war, Dag Hammarskjöld's intercession with the Chinese government was widely acknowledged as an important factor in securing their release.⁵ Likewise, U Thant's role as an intermediary in the Cuban missile crisis of October, 1962, was helpful if not indispensable in facilitating communication, and his call for mutual restraint gave Premier Khrushchev a face-saving excuse to stop Soviet vessels steaming toward Cuba with new missile shipments.

In the field of arms control, U.N. processes have contributed to Soviet-American agreement on a partial nuclear test-ban treaty, the establishment of a direct link ("hot line") between Washington and Moscow, the banning of weapons of mass destruction from outer space, and a treaty to retard the proliferation of nuclear weapons. A number of achievements in outer space cooperation and the formulation of treaty law for outer space are also the product of U.N. negotiation.

In only two of the relevant cases—the 1955 Formosa crisis and the Vietnam war—have U.N. efforts been unsuccessful. The 1955 crisis subsided in the months following the Western appeal to the Security Council, but this had nothing to do with U.N. overtures—which Communist China rejected. As for the Vietnam war, American efforts to promote a dialogue through the United Nations have been fruitless. U Thant's persistent attempts to mediate may bear some causal relationship to

⁴ One may speculate that quiet negotiations behind the scenes have paved the way for Soviet-American agreement on matters that were not at the time the subject of formal U.N. debate. This was true of the Malik-Jessup talks in the spring of 1949 which ultimately led to the lifting of the Berlin Blockade. There is, however, no good evidence that many or indeed any other major East-West disputes have been settled as a result of off-the-record contacts at the United Nations.

⁵ For statements to this effect by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and U.N. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., see *U.S. Participation in the U.N.*, Report by the President to the Congress for the year 1955 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1956), pp. 49-50.

the initiation of current negotiations, but on this score the record is neither clear nor convincing.

In appraising the usefulness of the United Nations as a negotiating forum in East-West controversies, one may distinguish issues like arms control and outer space, which are also of broad multilateral concern, from particular East-West disputes like the Cuban missile crisis. Judging from past experience, the capacity of the United Nations to facilitate agreement on the former is directly related to the general amicability of relations between the two countries. Arms control negotiations continued for many years without any agreement of significance. Only when a softening of attitudes took place, as the two countries moved toward a partial detente in the early 1960's, were limited agreements reached on the test-ban treaty, the hot line, and the banning of nuclear weapons in outer space. Cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space was a product of the same period. The deterioration of Soviet-American relations that accompanied escalation of the Vietnam war in 1964 and 1965 put a temporary halt to progress in both of these areas, but new agreements were forthcoming (the 1966 and 1967 outer space treaties and the 1968 nuclear non-proliferation treaty) when Soviet-American relations recovered from the initial shock of escalation.

Question of Usefulness in Crisis

In appraising U.N. experience with particular East-West disputes, the cases are too few to warrant much generalization. There does not seem to be any positive correlation between the general cordiality of great power relations and U.N. usefulness in facilitating settlement of particular disputes. If anything, the few episodes suggest the contrary—that the United Nations will prove useful mainly in times of crisis when other channels of communication are insufficient. The limited contribution of the organization as a site for negotiations in the 1949 Berlin crisis occurred when Soviet-American relations were tense and embittered by the blockade and other conflicts in Europe. The Cuban missile crisis came on the eve of detente, and perhaps contributed to the subsequent improvement of relations, but the U.N. negotiatory function was brought into play at the height of the crisis, when nuclear war seemed possible. In attempts to deal with three Far Eastern problems—the American airmen, the Formosa Straits, and the Vietnam war—the United States turned to the world organization because other channels of communication with the adversary were not open or had failed.

The Cuban missile crisis suggests that the United Nations also may be useful for East-West negotiations when a U.N. presence is being considered as a means of resolving crisis and negotiation is directed toward agreed U.N. action. Castro's insistence upon his sovereign right to refuse international inspection prevented a U.N. verification system from going into operation in Cuba. But the process of agreeing upon inspection involved the United States and the Soviet Union in extensive negotiations at the United Nations and with U.N. officials.

Material Support in Confrontations

In contrast to legitimization and negotiation, the U.N. material support function has been irrelevant to most aspects of the East-West confrontation. In the entire postwar period the United Nations has given material assistance to the West in just three conflicts directly involving the United States or its allies with members of the Soviet bloc. One was the communist-supported rebellion in Greece; another was the question of Korean unification; the third was the Korean war itself. Each of these episodes originated in the early years of the organization when it still had a relatively small, Western-oriented membership.⁶ The post-Korea years have witnessed several instances of communist military intervention in the territory of neighboring countries, including Vietnam, Laos, Hungary, and Tibet—but not one of them has fit the pattern of the Korean war.

Inspections and Elections

Today there is no shortage of potential uses for U.N. personnel and resources in support of American dealings with the communist world. An inspectorate for disarmament agreements, supervision of a truce in Vietnam, conducting free elections in Korea or Germany, or aiding the war effort in Vietnam are a few of the possibilities. But elections and inspectorates require agreement among the parties concerned, and assistance in Vietnam demands a large U.N. majority willing to back the anti-communist policies of the United States. In the Cuban missile crisis the consensual basis for a U.N. inspectorate seemed about to materialize when Kennedy and Khrushchev agreed upon a role for U.N. monitoring, but U.N. action was frustrated by Castro's refusal to cooperate.

The hard fact is that the United Nations has never been a very effective action body in the East-West confrontation. Since Korea it has not been able to render even marginal assistance in men or material, except in situations like the Congo or the Middle East where the collision between the United States and the Soviet Union was ancillary to other issues.

Evaluation of Purposes

In dealings with communist countries over the past two decades, the United States has utilized the United Nations primarily for the purpose of legitimizing anti-communist policies. Yet, since the mid-1950's, the world organization has become less useful for such a purpose. This is evident in the much less frequent American resort to the United Nations, the decline of Assembly voting support for the Western position on such issues as Hungary and disarmament, and the growing American preference for the Security Council over the Assembly in such matters.

In a broad perspective, if harassment of the Soviet

⁶U.N. peacekeeping forces and observational teams, as well as U.N. discussion processes, have helped to avert potentially dangerous superpower confrontations in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. Such situations have arisen out of conflict between non-communist countries, however, and are beyond the scope of this paper.

Union at the United Nations made negotiation more difficult, the decline of calculated harassment has created a better climate for negotiation and made the organization more capable of functioning as a "center for harmonizing the actions of nations." In this improved climate a limited agreement on arms control and the peaceful uses of outer space have been possible. Moreover, the decline of calculated harassment has been reciprocal. From 1962 through 1964 the Soviet bloc refrained from introducing any of its perennial anti-American peace-mongering proposals for debate by the Assembly. In 1965 this self-imposed moratorium was broken in the wake of United States intervention in the Dominican Republic and escalation of the Vietnam war. The Vietnam war has, indeed, retarded the growth of Soviet-American cooperation both in and out of the United Nations. It is remarkable that negotiation in such areas as arms control and outer space has continued to progress under U.N. auspices despite the war. The decline of legitimization has also helped foster Soviet willingness to identify with a wider range of U.N. programs and activities.

Zero Score for Fifteen Years

U.N. material support of anti-communist policies, even more than legitimization, has gone into eclipse. Never a significant makeweight in the East-West power equation, the United Nations has scored a zero in this function for the past fifteen years and more. This development may also have its brighter side in a long range perspective, however. If the United Nations has lost its capacity to give material support to one superpower against another, a widening area of superpower consensus has permitted the world organization to commit personnel and resources more readily when peace is threatened by disputes among non-communist states.

Developments of the past decade thus have increased the potentiality of the United Nations as an instrument for U.S. dealings with the Soviet bloc in some respects and decreased it in others. On the negative side, the organization has become less useful as a means of exerting political pressure on the Soviet Union. On the positive side, its negotiatory functions have acquired greater significance, particularly in matters of widespread international concern. Considering the rather substantial coer-

cive capabilities of the United States, and the crying need for diplomatic bridges between East and West, the change may in the long run prove to be a very favorable trade-off for the United States.

The future role of the United Nations in American foreign policy will of course hinge upon the willingness of the United States to exploit its real potentialities. There is a danger that developments of the past decade may cause the United States to lose confidence in an organization that no longer automatically takes the American side in the cold war. The "crisis of confidence" of the late 1950's and early 1960's, with its widespread calls for reappraisal of the U.N. role in American policy, indicated that some loss of confidence had occurred in official as well as private circles. Since that time government officials have been more inclined than before to refer openly to the United Nations as an instrument of policy or as one tool among many for accomplishing American objectives. American financial support of U.N. programs has not fallen off, however, and participation in nearly all of its activities remains at a high level. President Kennedy enthusiastically referred to the United Nations as "a framework within which we can pursue the highest goal of American foreign policy: a world community of independent nations living together in free association and at peace with each other."⁷ More recently President Johnson called the United Nations "the best system yet devised for sovereign nations to work together with equality and self respect."⁸ If this official attitude persists, the decline of the United Nations as an anti-communist instrument may ultimately increase the prospect of a U.N. contribution to the larger goals of American policy.

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⁷ President John F. Kennedy, letter of transmittal, in *U.S. Participation in the U.N., 1961*, Report by the President to the Congress for the Year 1961, p. vi.

⁸ President Lyndon B. Johnson, letter of transmittal, dated March 9, 1967, in *U.S. Participation in the U.N., 1965*, Report by the President to the Congress for the Year 1965, p. vi.