The UN during the Cold War: "A tool of superpower influence stymied by superpower conflict"?

The purpose of the UN is not to get us to heaven but to save us from hell.
– Dag Hammarskjöld (cited in Weiss and Kalbacher, 2008: 342)

After the failure of the League of Nations, the establishment of the United Nations was the second attempt at creating a collective security system within only a few decades. Yet, during the Cold War collective security was going to fail once again, as most of the world was divided into two blocs. Due to the rigid structure of the UN that was intended to maintain the *status quo* of the international world order, the Security Council (SC) often found itself in a stalemate situation, unable to act efficiently. Indeed, on several occasions it can be said that the SC was used as a tool of superpower influence. It would, however, be inaccurate to say that all of the UN's actions throughout the Cold War were merely caused by superpower leverage. This essay argues that while the UN did not achieve its ultimate goal of maintaining peace and security throughout the Cold War (and still has not done so until today), it was more successful in fields such as decolonization and human rights. A brief general overview of the UN System is given, followed by a more focused analysis of cases in which the UN was said to have been used as a superpower tool, such as Korea and the Congo. This essay acknowledges, however, that not all UN failures during the Cold War were caused by the East-West division but also by other deep divisions between states, such as between Israel and its neighbouring countries. Furthermore, it then discusses UN achievements that were not stymied by superpower influence, such as diminishing colonialism, supporting the right to self-determination, serving as a platform for the 'developing world' and endorsing human rights.

While it was hoped that the UN would be more successful than its predecessor, both organizations were challenged by very similar issues. Both the League of Nations and the UN were built upon two fundamentally opposed approaches to international relations: the tradition of the 'Concert of Europe' and the 'Peace Project' tradition (Brown, Ainley, 2009: 144). According to the Concert of Europe, the Great Powers were to have great responsibility and manage and coordinate policies on matters of common concern, so maintaining a balance of power among states (ibid: 145). Of course, 'common interest' was usually interpreted through the lens of the Great Powers' interests (ibid.). The Peace Project, on the other hand, that was very much influenced by Kant's 'Perpetual Peace', rested upon the assumption that eventually war could be made obsolete through the regional and international cooperation of states (ibid.).

Hence, the UN was created with liberal idealist intentions primarily to avoid a third destructive world war and preserve world peace and security (Article 1.1), as well as to recognize the sovereignty of states and give a voice to each state in the General Assembly (GA). Stalin remarked at Yalta in 1945 that "the main thing was to prevent quarrels in the future of the three Great Powers [USA, Britain, and the USSR] and the task, therefore, was to secure their unity for the future" (FRUS, 1955: 666). His view was shared by President Roosevelt (ibid: 667). Thus, from the beginning the UN also reflected a realist Great Power chain of command, as the main decision-making organ of the UN, the Security Council, included only five permanent members: the US, the UK, the USSR, France and China (Cassese, 2005: 317). These five Great Powers agreed to maintain peace and security for the common good, but especially, of course, when it was in their own interests. According to Articles 2.3 and 2.4, states should peacefully settle disputes and the use of force is prohibited. Under Article 39, the SC may decide on the use of force if there is a

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threat to peace, a breach of the same, or an act of aggression (Higgins, 1995: 446). Each of the Big-Five received a veto power, which could stop SC decisions from being made. To this date, the liberal and realist elements of the UN System remain one of its greatest paradoxes. The UN still reflects the era of 1945, as its structure does not easily allow for reform (Luck, 2004: 361).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, most of the world soon split in to two camps, either under US or Soviet influence. Roosevelt's vision of the Security Council as "a board of directors of the world" with the responsibility to enforce "the peace against any potential miscreant" collapsed (Kissinger, 1995: 395). Each of the two superpowers focused on preserving order and stability in its own sphere of influence, while respecting the other's bloc (Cassese, 2005: 323). Superpower competition mainly came to surface in relation to spheres of influence in the developing world, as well as in strategic areas, and often led to proxy-war type conflicts in these regions (ibid.). This competition was, of course, reflected in the SC and the P-5's veto power would often serve as a tool to create a stalemate, such as in the 1956 Suez Crisis, the situation in Vietnam from 1946-75, the Sino-Vietnamese conflict in 1979 and Afghanistan from 1979 (Roberts, Kingsbury, 1993: 6).

The UN's first coercive action took place in Korea. At the time, the Korean peninsula was divided with a Soviet occupied territory in the North and US forces in the South (Weiss, Forsythe, Coate, 1994: 43). When in 1950 North Korean forces attacked the South, backed by the Soviet Union, China and other Communist states, President Truman and Acheson agreed right away that this Communist attack on a non-Communist state called for action, as a domino-effect of Communist interventions was feared (ibid: 44). The USSR had boycotted the SC since January 1950, as it disapproved of the presence of a representative of Taiwan in the Chinese permanent seat (Malkasian, 2001: 16). Hence, the US immediately brought up the Korean situation in the SC, as it was clear there would be no Communist vetoes to a resolution on the topic (Weiss, et al., 1994: 44). Though it is likely that US decisions would have been the same without the UN, the SC resolutions on Korea provided international legitimacy to US actions on the Korean peninsula, as Truman was determined to counter the Communist threat (ibid.). As soon as the USSR returned to the Council any further action was prevented (Howard, 1993: 34). The GA devised the Uniting for Peace Resolution, in order to carry on with international action (ibid.). Truman prolonged the war by taking it to the Chinese border, and it continued until 1953 when the *status quo ante* was restored (Weiss, et al., 1994: 44).

While some observers have described this involvement as a type of collective security engagement, others have considered it a police action and yet others have called the UN's role in Korea a unique phenomenon (ibid: 43). The SC did refer to the Korean situation as one of aggression and had authorized military support for South Korea but this was not mandated (ibid: 45). Moreover, the key strategic and tactical plans concerning the Korea conflict may have held the UN's name, but in fact they were all decided upon in Washington (ibid: 44). The legitimacy of the war was, of course, challenged by the USSR (Keki, 2011). It is thus not accurate to portray the Korean War as a classic example of collective security (Weiss, et al., 1994: 44) – rather in this case it may be argued that the UN was mainly used by the US as a means to achieve an end through an international legal framework.

In 1956, the Suez Canal crisis was rather different from the Korean War. After Egyptian President Nasser had nationalised the Suez Canal, France, Britain and Israel claimed the right to the use of force to re-open the Canal and thus attacked Soviet-backed Egypt against the will of the US. SC action was blocked by the French and British vetoes (ibid: 46). The Uniting for Peace Resolution was called upon to create a peacekeeping mandate directed by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld (ibid; Weiss, Kalbacher, 2008: 336). The UN Emergency Force (UNEF I) was the first ever armed peace mission that supervised the disengagement of forces and acted as a buffer between Egypt and Israel (Weiss, et al., 1994: 46). In actual fact, the USSR and the US were not so far apart in this instance and President Eisenhower was seen as acting in line with collective security, as he stood against his traditional allies, since their actions were regarded as aggression (ibid.). Almost simultaneously to the Suez Canal conflict, the GA created a resolution that was ignored which called upon the USSR to remove its forces from Hungary (Howard, 1993: 35). This indicated that while the UK and France could be persuaded, the Soviet Union could not (ibid.).

Another UN mission, the United Nations Operation in Congo (ONUC) was deployed in the former Belgian Congo (Weiss, et al., 1994: 46). As a result, the UN was almost bankrupted and Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld was mysteriously killed in a plane crash over the Congo (ibid.). When Moise Tshombe declared Katanga independent,

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Belgian troops intervened and several central government ministers approached the US for troops to replace those of the Belgians (Dunbabin, 2007: 463). The US ambassador, however, encouraged action to be taken through the UN to avoid Soviet counter-involvement (ibid.). Hence, again it may be argued that the US was merely using the UN as a tool. 10,000 troops were deployed but their admission to Katanga was refused (ibid.). While the Western powers and the UN supported President Kasavubu, the USSR, its allies and various non-aligned countries backed Prime Minister Lumumba (Weiss, et al., 1994: 46). The UN peacekeepers became an enforcement army created through Western support (ibid.). Thus, the USSR, and later France, paid no contributions. The USSR even tried to replace Hammarskjöld by a 'troika' of one representative each for the West, the East and the non-aligned states but this problem was solved when the Secretary-General died (Dunabin, 2007: 468). After four years of chaos, a unified Congo was the result (Weiss, et al., 1994: 46). Nevertheless, the UN had been blemished by its experiences in the Congo and no more troops were sent to Africa until the End of the Cold War (Namibia) (ibid: 47). The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) faced similar problems as those in Congo (ibid: 54) and is still active to this date. The US used SC influence to create the interim force as a means for Israel to withdraw (ibid.). From 1978 to 1988 there were no more peacekeeping missions, mainly due to the Reagan administration's unwillingness to cooperate with the UN as it was seen as a "bastion of Third World nationalism and procommunism" (ibid: 56).

While several of the above examples clearly show how UN decisions were influenced by the East-West division, which is also generally seen as the main reason for the UN's failure to achieve its ultimate goal during the Cold War, this can be misleading. Indeed, many conflicts were caused by deep divisions between other states that had little direct connection with the superpower division, such as the divisions between India and Pakistan, Israel and its neighbouring states, and Iran and Iraq (Roberts, Kingsbury, 1993: 9). In some ways, these divisions were intensified because of the UN, for example by the advancement of the idea of state sovereignty (ibid.). The USSR and the US were sometimes even found to be backing the same side in Middle Eastern conflicts, as in the Iran-Iraq war (Sluglett, 2005: 54). Moreover, the Second United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF II) in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War was largely successful with a calming effect on the region, as well as keeping Israel and Egypt apart (Weiss, et al., 1994: 47).

True, the UN failed in its ultimate aim of maintaining peace and security. Most SC action was stymied by the superpower conflict. Furthermore, when it did take action, it was often only used as a superpower tool and in many cases it only prolonged the conflict (as in Cyprus, where peacekeepers still remain today). Nevertheless, the UN was not a total failure. It did make important achievements in fields other than the maintenance of peace and security and the settlement of disputes (Cassese, 2005: 323).

One of the main areas of UN success was decolonisation, which was supported by both superpowers, in order to diminish the power of the colonial empires and gain more spheres of influence. In 1960, when decolonisation was already far advanced, the GA affirmed that "all peoples have the right to self determination" (Dunbabin, 2007: 458). New independent states naturally strove to join the UN, as a sign of their sovereignty and thus, legitimacy (ibid.). Gradually, the developing countries began to form a majority within the GA. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) was established by developing countries in 1964, as a means to further their plea for economic justice with a different vision from that of the Bretton Woods institutions (Williams, 1994: 179). While efforts to enforce a New International Economic Order on behalf of the 'Third World' were not very successful, it can be argued that it was already a significant achievement that the UN provided a platform for developing countries to formulate a coherent system of ideas, accepting the principle of sovereign equality (Krasner, 1985: 7). Indeed, the UN was also used as a tool by the 'Third World' for it to gain influence. Moreover, immense progress was made in terms of human rights through the approval of important Declarations and Conventions (Cassese, 2005: 323; Felice, 1990: 595). Among others, these documents also contributed to the codification and further development of international law. Furthermore, UN specialised agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Food Programme were set up and achieved much in their fields of expertise.

In conclusion, efficient UN action was in fact stymied by superpower conflict that was based on both geopolitical and ideological factors. These circumstances led to many brutal proxy wars, such as in Korea, the Congo and Vietnam, which were often even prolonged by superpower divisions. Many peacekeeping missions failed or never left. Atrocious genocides such as in Cambodia and in Guatemala were not prevented by the UN. Rather than acting as a

collective security system, the SC mostly remained divided throughout the Cold War. Hence, 'Divided States' may have indeed been a more accurate term than 'United Nations' (Roberts, Kingsbury, 1993: 10). Yet, the UN was not a complete disaster and undoubtedly the Cold War world was better off with than without it (Weiss, Daws, 2007: 11). Some improvements towards peaceful cooperation were made, largely by simply providing a peaceful platform for global discussion. Throughout the Cold War, the value of the UN developed into one that was different from initially intended, focussing more on aspects such as human rights and self-determination. This is still true to this date and perhaps, it is high time to rethink the role of the UN. Maintaining global peace and security has so far proved impossible; however, it *is* possible to make small steps forward to hopefully gradually make this world a better place.

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