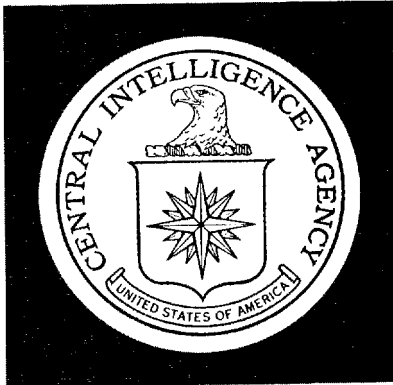


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UN: The 23rd General Assembly

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UN: THE 23rd GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The United Nations' 23rd General Assembly, which adjourned on 21 December, pointed up what has happened to the UN in the two-plus decades since the Charter was signed. None of the major issues of world peace was effectively acted upon by the assembly; much of the assembly's time was taken up with issues on which it has been hopelessly deadlocked for years; debates on more important matters were warped by resentments against defunct colonialism and imperialism; and the assembly wrestled ineffectively once more with its perennial problem--the budget. Nevertheless, the 23rd session again provided an arena for world leaders to get together without formal invitations or agendas; the resolutions passed on such questions as disarmament gave a certain--if unmeasurable--force to "world opinion"; and the consideration given to questions of outer space and ocean resources may indicate areas in which the UN may be able to act effectively in the future.

Threats to Peace

The occupation of Czechoslovakia, the Vietnam war, and tensions in the Middle East dominated the session and intruded upon consideration of nearly every issue, despite the fact that neither Czechoslovakia nor Vietnam was on the assembly's agenda. Before the session opened there was some talk about a possible Czechoslovak agenda item. The Western powers, however, dropped the idea when they realized that no strongly worded resolution would command an impressive majority, and when the Czech delegation intimated that it would have to condemn a debate on Czechoslovakia as interference in domestic matters,

something it did not want to do. The invasion was mentioned during the general debate by over thirty countries, and came up periodically at other times; but the polemics heard in the Security Council session called to consider the invasion were not repeated in the assembly.

Before the assembly session got under way, Secretary General Thant publicly compared the Czech situation with US bombing in North Vietnam. He hinted that he would like to see Vietnam on the agenda. The statement provoked the first public protest made by a US ambassador to the UN in all the time Thant has been speaking out on Vietnam, and the matter was not taken up by the assembly.

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SECRET

25X1

The session also avoided dealing with the Middle East, although the parties to the Arab-Israeli dispute rarely missed an opportunity to air their views. The UN's future influence in this area, where heretofore its role had been large, hinges primarily on the dubious outcome of the Jarring mission and on the enforcement measures required by an eventual settlement. In these and other potentially explosive areas, such as Biafra, the assembly has become gun-shy, adapting to political realities while its residual peacekeeping powers diminish.

Progress in Disarmament

Of the major issues debated by the assembly, the most important was disarmament. The assembly has always believed that one of its functions is to spur the big powers to further disarmament efforts. It has traditionally scrutinized their proposals closely, and new ideas are frequently floated--often by the smaller countries--for example, Sweden.

Several disarmament resolutions were endorsed by the 23rd General Assembly--approval of nuclear free zones, deferment of discussion of peaceful uses of nuclear energy and security assurances until next year, and a call to the US and USSR to begin talks on strategic arms limitation. Of some concern to the nuclear powers was a resolution requesting a UN report on the supervision of peaceful nuclear explosions, a matter that the

nuclear powers contend is the exclusive jurisdiction of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The assembly debates on disarmament tended to underscore the trend toward a sharper division between the nuclear and non-nuclear countries, a growing resistance by smaller countries to arms control measures that do not also affect the big powers, and the insistence of the smaller countries on a voice in disarmament matters. These sentiments were particularly evident in the pressures to increase the size of the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee and in the persistent efforts to give some kind of permanent status to the Non-Nuclear Conference that preceded the 23rd session. The lack of enthusiasm with which some of the smaller countries continue to approach the nonproliferation treaty (NPT) is another sign of their disaffection.

Unless the demands of the nonnuclear nations for a "balanced approach" to disarmament can be satisfied, there is some risk that the UN's role in disarmament may be further impaired. That role could still be an important one, even though the initial hard bargaining will undoubtedly continue to be the prerogatives of the superpowers. The UN's IAEA must administer the safeguards clauses of the NPT; the UN might well be called upon to perform a similar administrative role should any progress be made toward the registration of arms deliveries and sales,

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SECRET

25X1

and it must presumably make some contribution to achieving the climate of security essential to any progress toward general disarmament.

Colonialism and Racism

Questions of colonialism and racial discrimination consumed, in the view of some, an inordinate proportion of the assembly's energies. Spain sought support for its claim to Gibraltar by publicizing its intentions to relinquish Ifni and Spanish Sahara. Over London's objections, the assembly called on Britain to negotiate "the Rock's" return and even set a deadline for the transfer of sovereignty to Spain--1 October 1969. The African bloc again pushed through resolutions condemning South Africa's suzerainty over Southwest Africa and its apartheid policies, and scoring the white regime in Rhodesia and the Portuguese overseas administrations.

To the black Africans, particularly, colonialism and racism are inseparable and are implicitly linked to nearly every issue taken up at the UN. Their increasingly militant pursuit of their cause during the session brought on a crisis in interpretation of the charter. The African-led move to oust South Africa from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) because of apartheid was the first attempt in the UN's history to eject a member from a subsidiary organ open to the entire UN membership.

Although proponents of the move argued that the assembly's power to establish subsidiary organs under Article 22 of the Charter implied the power to limit their membership, the legal counsel to the secretary general--with many Western powers in agreement--held that expulsion would violate the Charter's principle of sovereign equality. Moreover, it was argued, unless the provisions on expulsion set out in Articles 5 and 6 of the Charter--which require Security Council action--were followed, a dangerous precedent would be established.

The expulsion move was defeated only by invocation of the Important Question doctrine, and then by a margin of only four votes. The African delegations were encouraged by this near success. At least one African delegate has promised to renew the fight each year as a sort of African equivalent to the issue of China's representation. Pressures of this kind will probably increasingly recur, and legal interpretations, finer distinctions, and principles of effective organization will be sacrificed unless the UN can make a more effective response than in the past to issues that pre-empt the attention of a sizable part of its membership.

The Continuing Financial Crisis

Many of the UN's financial problems stem from the Congo operation of 1960, and are complicated by the continuing disputes surrounding that episode. The Soviet Union and France have

SECRET

SPECIAL REPORT

3 Jan 69

SECRET

25X1

declined to pay their assessments for expenditures that they contend were "illegally" authorized. The attempt to force them to pay by depriving them of their assembly vote led to the cancellation of all voting in the General Assembly's session in 1964.

A bond issue was authorized in 1961 to alleviate the financial crisis but the method of payment of interest and principal on these bonds has been a bone of contention ever since. At the 23rd session, a move to study the establishment of a special account for the repayment of the bonds almost succeeded. Some of those favoring a segregation of bond matters from the general budget evidently hoped that this would permit allocation of a greater share of the bond expense to the countries best able to pay. It was also argued that "isolation" of that part of the UN's financial woes linked to controversies of the past might pave the way for a more fruitful exchange of views on how to finance the UN in the future.

Prospects are not favorable for any early progress toward the solvency that would permit the UN to assume a more effective role. The financing issue remains inextricably linked with the constitutional dispute over the respective roles of the assembly and the council in peacekeeping. The time is prob-

ably still distant when the UN will have its own revenues from, for example, administering the international exploitation of ocean resources.

The Perennial Issues

This year's Chinese representation vote resulted in a slightly greater margin of defeat for the Communists than last year. The outcome was probably the result of Peking's domestic uproar and its continued belligerent attitude toward the UN, factors that overbalanced the principle of universal representation currently popular among the membership. Stale arguments on both sides were replayed without much enthusiasm. Italy's proposal of a study committee to investigate the feasibility of a "two China policy" was also defeated again. No abrupt change in the prospects for Peking's admission seems imminent.

The Soviets used a new tactic in the annual fight over whether or not to invite North Korea to participate alongside South Korea in this year's Korea debate. They tried to resolve the issue at the opening session of the First Committee as an "order of work" matter, before countries friendly to South Korea had marshaled their forces. Although the Soviets lost the bid, they won a two-week delay

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25X1

between the invitation issue and the substantive debate on Korea, a delay Pyongyang's supporters sought in order to give the North Koreans time to decide whether to come to New York. The committee voted again this year merely to express a "willingness to invite" Pyongyang if it conceded UN jurisdiction over Korean affairs. Pyongyang again refused, but was more moderate than usual in its annual attack on the UN.

Comment and Prospect

On balance, the 23rd session did little to sharpen the relevance of the UN to some of the great issues facing the world today. A sizable part of the session was given over to general debate in which a great many of the 126 members restated their national objectives and grievances without noticeable progress toward achieving the one or alleviating the other. Another substantial part was wasted on issues on which the UN can have no hope of finding early resolution--e.g., Chinese representation and Korean reunification. It seems evident that the assembly's role in peacekeeping operations will be minimal because of the UN's financial problems. Only those operations that can be supported by voluntary contributions can be undertaken.

The 23rd session demonstrated anew the chronic conflict among

the principles of universality, responsibility, and efficiency. The effort to expel South Africa from UNCTAD was a dramatic manifestation of the fact that the big powers can resolve issues to their satisfaction only if they can corral majorities from among countries seeing these issues from a parochial perspective. While the issue of ministates seems likely to decline in importance now that the UN has approached its maximum possible membership, the question remains of how the assembly can effectively reconcile voting power with the power realities.

Although the 23rd session embodied all of the UN's deficiencies, it nevertheless shows that in some respects the UN can function effectively, and its prestige is higher than in some periods in the past. This session was clearly more fruitful than the disastrous one of 1964; there is now no country that is seriously considering following Indonesia's example of de facto withdrawal--although the African issues could produce some; and there is no immediate prospect of a renewal of earlier attempts to sabotage the organization--as Moscow intended with its troika proposal. Even in the vexing area of peacekeeping, it is recognized that the UN is not wholly irrelevant. Those who have looked for a way out of the Vietnam dilemma have frequently considered a UN route; and in the Middle East, some kind of supervisory machinery will be required if and when a settlement emerges.

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The 23rd session also suggested that the UN may be on the verge of defining for itself a role in areas that can be considered truly of global concern-- development of underwater resources, control of air and sea pollution, and outer space. The agreement in the closing days of the session to create a 42-member seabed committee and to ask the secretary general to study appropriate international

machinery for promoting the exploration and exploitation of the seabeds is an example of this trend. In addition, in the oceanographic field the delegates adopted a resolution calling for a study of means to minimize the danger of pollution of the marine environment and, as proposed earlier by the US, adopted without objection a resolution calling for a decade of concerted action on ocean floor development.

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