

# The United Nations role in America's foreign policy during the Cold War

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## ABSTRACT

One of the main areas of UN success was decolonization, 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 decolonization 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 Britton 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; Felicia, 1990: 595). Among others, these documents also contributed to the codification and further development of international law. Furthermore, UN specialized agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Food Programmed were set up and achieved much in their fields of expertise.

**KEYWORDS:** United Nations role- Cold War- foreign policy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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).

## 2. The Cold War and Containment

Containment was a United States policy using numerous strategies to prevent the spread of communism abroad. A component of the Cold War, this policy was a response to a series of moves by the Soviet Union to enlarge its communist sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, China, Korea, and Vietnam. It represented a middle-ground position between détente and rollback. The basis of the doctrine was articulated in a 1946 cable by United States diplomat, George F. Kennan. As a description of United States foreign policy, the word originated in a report Kennan submitted to the U.S. defense secretary in 1947—a report that was later used in a magazine article. The word containment is associated most strongly with the policies of United States President Harry Truman (1945–53), including the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a mutual defense pact. Although President Dwight Eisenhower (1953–61) toyed with the rival doctrine of rollback, he refused to intervene in the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. President Lyndon Johnson (1963–69) cited containment as a justification for his policies in Vietnam. President Richard Nixon (1969–74), working with his top advisor Henry Kissinger, rejected containment in favor of friendly relations with the Soviet Union and China; this détente, or relaxation of tensions, involved expanded trade and cultural contacts.

President Jimmy Carter (1976–81) emphasized human rights rather than anti-communism, but dropped détente and returned to containment when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. President Ronald Reagan (1981–89), denouncing the Soviet state as an "evil empire", escalated the Cold War and promoted rollback in Nicaragua and Afghanistan. Central programs begun under containment, including NATO and nuclear deterrence, remained in effect even after the end of the war.

## 3. Domestic Politics and US Uses of Force

During the past fifteen years the notion that domestic economic and political Performance has a substantial impact on conflictual US foreign policy behavior has become a widely reported finding, beginning with Ostrom and Job (1986). What is most noteworthy about their study is the finding that the international dimension of the environment is not the

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most important determinant of the president's decision to use force. The domestic environment, especially economic performance and the president's standing in the polls, has the largest substantive impact on the probability that the president will use force in any given quarter. A number of scholars have replicated this basic result (e.g., James and Oneal 1991), and a number of studies have sought to refine the specific impact of domestic politics on conflictual US foreign policy behavior (e.g., Nincic 1990; Gaubatz 1991; Morgan and Bickers 1992; James and Hristoulas 1994, DeRouen 1995, 2000; Hess and Orphanides 1995, 2001; Wang 1996; and Fordham 1998a, 1998b; see also Morgan and Anderson 1999, for a related discussion of the British case). There is, to be sure, some debate: Meernik (1994), Gowa (1998), and Entwistle and Gleditsch (2000) take exception. But considerably more studies have reported this finding than have disputed it.

#### 4. 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, focusing 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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