

THE UN AFTER SIXTY YEARS: PROGRESS OR RECURRENCE?

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Introduction

The passing of the sixtieth anniversary of the United Nations (UN) offers a timely opportunity to consider the historical trajectory of the most important world organization. Formed at the end of World War II, the UN has been through numerous ups and downs, major changes, and crises. In some ways it is a different creature than existed in 1945. In other ways it is all too similar. A multitude of contingencies, events and conjunctures have shaped its history. Can we nonetheless discern whether there is a general shape to the UN's history? Is the UN on an overall path? Is it, for example, on a path of progress? As the only worldwide body with explicit responsibility, and considerable powers, for maintaining international peace and security, students of international affairs have often wondered whether it is on a path from Divided Nations to United World.

This paper analyzes the overall direction of the UN over its six decades. It is not a history of the United Nations;¹ it is an interpretation of that history. To use a piece of technical jargon, I am concerned with the directionality of the UN. Is it on a path of progress? Or, is it perhaps on the evolutionary path of growth? Is its path instead marked by rupture and discontinuity? Or, has it followed a cyclical path of repetition and

¹ A very readable history of the UN is by Rosemary Righter, a veteran correspondent at UN headquarters, *Utopia Lost: The United Nations and World Order* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995). A textbook is Amos Yoder, *The Evolution of the United Nations System* Third Edition (Washington D.C.: Taylor and Francis, 1997).

recurrence? I shall be considering and debating these alternatives. I shall argue that the latter is the most promising way of understanding the UN's trajectory.

My approach owes something to narrative historiography and something to philosophical history. Macro-history is a useful name to describe this perspective. In this case, the purpose of macro-history is to provide a synoptic or synthetic account of the evolution of the United Nations. But it is at the same time analytic inasmuch as it relies on distinguishing differing conceptions of UN directionality and appraising their adequacy. At its optimum, macro-history may be able to combine the best of theoretical and narrative understanding.

A decade ago the fiftieth anniversary of the UN prompted a fair amount of writing.² Much of it was concerned with the UN's current predicament and future prospects. Inevitably, it is now outdated. Unfortunately, there was little attempt to theorize in a synoptic way UN history and the UN's overall direction. It would be surprising if the sixtieth anniversary prompted the same volume of writings. In any case, the occasion has not (so far) led to a macro-history of the UN. The present paper aims to make a preliminary contribution towards a macro-history of the UN.

A word of clarification is needed on what is meant by "the United Nations." During the Second World War, the United Nations was a name for the Grand Alliance against the Axis. Afterwards, it sometimes referred to what is loosely called "the UN system" of the UN and the other main world organizations concerned with cooperation in public finance (the World Bank, IMF), culture (UNESCO), food and agriculture (FAO), health (WHO), labour (ILO), and civil aviation (ICAO). The UN is partly a regime of rules

enunciated in the Charter. It is partly a bureaucratic organization, embodied in the Secretariat and in a host of subsidiary agencies. It is partly a forum for diplomatic conferences. But it is mainly the General Assembly of all the member states and the Security Council dominated by the five big veto-wielding powers. Where necessary in what follows distinctions will have to be made to clarify which piece of the UN constellation is at issue.

This paper is organized as follows. There is an initial theoretical section called "Toward a Theory of UN History." It identifies different perspectives on macrohistory and begins a conversation among them on the subject of the UN. The remaining four sections are devoted to critical junctures over the course of UN history. Section two, "Wartime to Postwar," considers the path of the UN in its original and initial years. Section three is about the UN's pathway through the crucial middle decades of the 1960s and 1970s. That section is entitled "Decolonization and Development to North-South Conflict." The fourth section, "Winding Down the Cold War to the Late 1990s," addresses the direction of the UN in that remarkable recent juncture. A fifth section brings the discussion into the 21st century. Entitled "2001 to 2003", it looks at the UN's path in its most recent major episode. The Conclusion briefly considers future prospects.

Toward a Theory of UN History

What general perspectives can help us to understand the UN's trajectory? In this section I identify four differing paradigms of macro-history. A different term to describe

² Ramesh Thakur (ed.), *Past Imperfect, Future UNCertain: The United Nations at Fifty* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Thomas Weiss, "The United Nations at Fifty: Recent Lessons" *Current History* Vol. 94 (1995), pp. 223-228; Stanley Hoffmann, "Thoughts

them would be models of directionality.³ They can be used to formulate four alternative ways of interpreting the direction of the UN over the span of its history.

One possibility is progress. Ideas of progress have come and gone, risen and fallen, in numerous guises. All revolve around the notion of improvement over time, advancement to a goal, or achievement of a future golden age. All combine a view of the past with a prophecy of the future. Several useful guides and histories of the idea of progress have sought to chart its many manifestations as well as its ups and downs.⁴ But this is not the place to try to recap this story. We are interested in what progress may mean specifically in relation to the UN. What does it mean to say that the UN is on a path of progress?

At a general level, the answer is that the UN is part of a movement towards the improvement of the world order or the achievement of a golden age of world order. But in what would such an improvement or golden age consist? This question admits of many answers. There are many visions of future golden ages. The world is pluralist and people's goals are many and diverse. There are many kinds of progress. Hence, one is tempted to say, with the Romans, that it is all a matter of taste; *de gustibus non est disputandum*. Still, that would be unsatisfactory. There is, despite the diversity, a common meaning of progress for the UN: it is inscribed in the very name of the United Nations. It is the notion of movement towards the goal of a worldwide unity or union. The golden age would be a united age.

on the UN at Fifty" *European Journal of International Law* Vol. 6 No. 3 (1995), pp. 321-330.

³ Two general works on the philosophy of history pertinent to this theme I have found useful are Gordon Graham, *The Shape of the Past: A Philosophical Approach to History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

⁴ I draw on Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

In relation to the UN, then, and indeed to international organization more generally, progress does have a specific meaning. It is about a long-term shift from division to union, or from Divided Nations to United World. This notion of progressive union is not just built into the name of the UN. It is also there in the titles of other ambitious, and explicitly progressive, multinational political creations. The USSR once claimed to be in the vanguard of progress. The name "USSR" or "Soviet Union" became so familiar that we can easily forget that it simply meant "Union of Council-Communist Nations," or "United Council-Socialist States." As with the UN, the USSR had no geographical limit in its name, unlike the otherwise similarly titled polities of "United States of America" or "European Union." This implies potential universality. Today, the EU claims to be in the vanguard of progress: the most innovative, most advanced, most highly evolved political formation in the world. At the root of that claim is also the idea of progressive union.

World union may come in several different forms. There may be, firstly, political union. World union would consist of a universal republic, international government, a world state, cosmopolitan democracy, world law, a universal constitution, or global governance. Or, there may be, secondly, cultural union. World union would consist of common values, a cosmopolitan outlook, a global civic ethic, a universal language, a sense of internationalism, a humanitarian sensibility, a worldwide dialogue, a general consensus, a global civil society, a sense of global justice and human rights, or a world community. Or, thirdly, there may be economic union. World union would be evident not

just with a world economy but in a common economic condition, or a worldwide economic management.⁵

In addition, there may be different degrees of world union. There is a spectrum of possible world unions: from the united-in-diversity to the completely homogenous. It is probably true to say that over time visions of world union have moved from stressing strong homogeneity (as with a world state) to those that envisage something less taxing.

Some might want to question the basic suppositions behind progress as the path to world union. One line of questioning is skeptical: is it really the case that there actually has been in the past and is in the present such a sustained trend towards global union? If not, how likely is it in the future? Another line of questioning evinces less belief in the value of moving to world union. Such a unification may bring some good, but would it not also bring some ills, many unanticipated consequences, and the possibility of great harm if it turned out wrong? Yet a further line of questioning could be labeled pessimistic: if a world union is on the way, then would not that be a sign of regress, or degeneration, or even decay? Would it not mean a world that is leveled and homogenized, a world in which the best is diluted by the rest? Was not the golden age, or golden ages, in the past?

Progress implies not just a goal — in this instance world union in some form — but also a means or mechanism. Is it possible to identify a general or widely applicable source of progress? I would suggest that it is: put in most general terms, the means of progress is innovation. Belief in progress often goes along with belief in innovation:

⁵ This paragraph has just summarized an enormous literature. But I am not aware of any work which provides a comprehensive and critical overview.

improvement arises from innovation. More innovation leads to more improvement. Particular innovations may be bad or good; but innovation in general and on balance is progressive. The more innovative an era world order is, the more likely it is to be advancing. The new and improved is generally better than the old and outmoded. New world orders are potentially better than old world orders. New institutions, new forces, new social movements, new social classes, new actors, new organizations: all can be expected to be sources of progress. A new multilateralism would be more progressive than the old.

On the one hand, the idea of innovation appears to endorse the progressive credentials of the UN. For a considerable time, international organization was described as a process. At the most general level, it was held to be a process, one process, of innovation leading to more unified governing of the international system. International organizations in general and the UN in particular could be seen as innovations in world politics. International organizations were new creations of the late 19th century.⁶ The League of Nations and then the United Nations were new on the scene in the early and mid 20th century.

On the other hand, the importance of innovation puts the progressive credentials of the UN into question. International organizations have existed for a century and a half; the UN is sixty years old. Progressive-minded individuals are less likely to enthuse about something that is just a little old hat. Perhaps, then, the UN is part of the old order, not the new. Perhaps the path of progress has taken a new turn, discarded the UN, and moved on the newer entities? A major school of avowedly progressive thought

⁶ The first were the International Telegraphic Union and the Universal Postal Union, formed in 1865 and 1874, and both still in existence.

today looks more favourably on NGO's: are they not newer, more innovative, and more progressive than the hidebound old UN?⁷

In short, this would be the UN's path of progress: the road of innovation leading to a future golden age of world union.⁸

A second possibility is that the UN is on a track of evolutionary growth. By this I mean an historical trajectory that is evolutionary in the sense of slow but steady, unspectacular but cumulative, and growth in the sense of the expansion or strengthening of some important feature or property on the UN.

To take one example, it could be maintained that the UN, and indeed international organizations in general, is part and parcel of the steady, cumulative growth in humankind's mastery over its circumstances, both natural and social. Humanity has gradually come to expand its technology, its productive capacities, its learning abilities, its organizational competencies, its collective social powers, and its knowledges. The UN, on this account, serves to channel and enhance this evolution.

Some credence is lent to this idea by the fact that there has been an overall expansion of the UN's functions over its sixty years. The organization has added numerous activities to its roster over the years. In the Charter, the function that looms largest is maintaining international peace and security. But subsequently that has been supplemented by many others. Probably the most important is development, which was

⁷ Reflecting this interest, there is a large and growing literature on the role, and the progressive promise, of NGO's as harbingers of a world unity in the form of "global civil society." See *inter alia* John Boli and George M. Thomas (eds.), *Constructing World Culture: International Nongovernmental Organizations since 1875* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁸ Among older works informed by a progressive understanding of the UN is Gerard J. Mangone, *A Short History of International Organization* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1954). A recent work of progressive cast is Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). A more general work is Emanuel Adler and Beverley Crawford (eds.), *Progress in Postwar International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

added in the late 1950s and 60s. Development is of course a catchall term that itself encompasses a plethora of activities and functions.

This path of the UN is perhaps best represented or encapsulated in the diagrams and graphs that appear in many textbooks on international organization. They show graphically the expansion in membership, multiplying numbers of world conferences, increasing staff employed, growing activities attempted.

Still, there are a number of questions raised by this understanding of the UN's pathway. Supposing that there has been a gradual and cumulative expansion in humanity's learning, collective social powers and the rest, why should this have any necessary, special, or privileged connection to the UN? Is it not more closely connected to the overall growth in the powers and functions of individual states? Can it not just as well be detected in the increasing destructive capacities of military power? Why invest one's emerging capacities in the UN?

In addition, one might question whether growing capacities is the main track that the UN has been on these six decades or whether it is instead a side road. Is the expansion of functions, for example, important though it is, the central experience on the UN's trajectory? It might be pointed out that the UN has its fingers in more and more pies, and has spawned a constellation of new programs and agencies in its orbit, much of this activity remains more nominal than real, often largely powerless, frequently underfunded, sometimes poorly run, and to some at least pointless.

Such is the path of evolutionary growth. There is some overlap between this path and the path of progress. If growing capacities led in the direction of world union, it

would be a mechanism of progress. But it nonetheless deserves to be considered on its own.

A third possibility, to set beside the paradigms of progress and evolutionary growth, is that the UN is not on one continuous “path” at all; instead, it is discontinuous. That is to say, a product of, and marked by, discontinuities or abrupt changes of direction. If so, we must be on the lookout for two kinds of phenomenon: on the one hand, ruptures, or breaks, or transformations, and on the other hand, the distinct and separate epochs which the former by definition create.

Supposing this to be the case, there would be one or more episodes that fundamentally alter what had been before, segregating UN history into discrete segments. This notion of UN history is likely to be attractive to those who are fascinated by innovation of the most radical sort, innovations that completely erase the old and erect something utterly new. It is likely to be attractive to those for whom the only real change comes through a transformative experience; those, that is, for whom incremental change or adaptation, by contrast, is not change at all but is no more than a variation on stasis or a way of preventing real change.

Several potential discontinuities may be suggested. An initial one was the formative moment for the UN itself. Was the creation of the UN in 1945 a thoroughgoing change of direction in world politics? Does it make sense to speak of a “pre-UN epoch” supplanted by a “UN epoch” — and perhaps in time itself replaced a “post-UN epoch”? Some might be inclined to regard decolonization as a major transformation. It brought a shift from a western-dominated UN to a Third-World dominated General Assembly. Another candidate for a potential epoch-making break was the 1970s. International

capitalism began to change gears at that time from a managerial and national to a more free-market and globalized format. If, as historical materialism teaches, capitalism is the infrastructure of the world order, then it must by necessity have wrought a new direction to the political superstructure of international institutions.⁹ A more recent potential break was the end of the Cold War. The idea of a “new world order,” which was fashionable in the early 1990s, implies a significant discontinuity and a distinct new epoch. In this case, a major part of the new epoch was taken to be the re-emergence of the UN as a factor in world affairs having been sidelined in the “old world order.”

It is entirely possible that UN history could be both discontinuous and progressive. It could be that the means of moving to world union is one great all-encompassing innovation. Such a vast and momentous event would consign to the dustbin of history the past of division and inaugurate a future of union. No greater contrast between epochs could be imagined for it would amount to a sort of “pre-history” (the era of division) and a “post-history” (the era of unity).

A number of questions must be raised about the adequacy of thinking of UN history as discontinuous. Is there not a tendency to proclaim ordinary or normal changes as major or landmark transformations? Such proclamations serve to draw attention to the phenomenon, but may not accurately assess their weight and scope. But the main question mark concerns continuities; can a preoccupation with discontinuity blind one to continuity? In terms of the UN, is there not much that is continuous over its entire span, notably the Charter and hence the UN’s legal framework, and the make-up of the Security Council?

⁹ This approach is developed in Craig N. Murphy, *International Organization and Industrial Change: Global Governance since 1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

So a trajectory of discontinuity for the UN would be composed of stunning episodes of wrenching transformation which divide UN history into discrete epochs.

A fourth possibility, in addition to the possibilities of progress, evolutionary growth, and discontinuity is that UN history is above all recurrent, repetitious, and cyclical. Perhaps the best image to convey this idea is that of a pendulum: there is change but not wrenching discontinuity; there is movement but it is temporary; there is direction but also reversal. If UN history goes as a pendulum moves, we would expect recurrent golden ages, periods of success, periods approaching world union. But we would also expect recurrent dark ages, periods of failure, periods of return to world division.

A good way of conveying the cyclical paradigm is by way of the idea of golden ages. Progress implies a present or more commonly a future golden age. The past and commonly the present are necessarily dark ages. By contrast, recurrence means that golden ages, or partial golden ages, may appear in past, present, and future. Progress awards an exorbitant privilege to the future; recurrence gives their due to past and present.

It is commonly acknowledged that some important phenomena have followed a cyclical path. Classical or art music has had ups and downs in terms of what are generally accepted to be its greatest achievements. It has not displayed a trend of ever increasing achievement from past to present to future. Otherwise the repertoire would be stocked with 20th century composers rather than the accepted masters of the 18th and 19th centuries. Peace movements, during their existence over the past century, have tended to oscillate between periods of successful mobilization and periods of

quiescence.¹⁰ Great powers have risen and fallen.¹¹ Wars recur. Instances of repetition, recurrence, and cyclicity are not hard to find.

A cogent objection to cyclical analysis is that it admits no substantial change or development over time. Eventually, the status quo ante gets restored. The pendulum ends up where it started. Take the example of civilizations. Suppose that civilizations have risen and fallen in a cyclical manner.¹² Even if there is a kernel of truth to that idea, it is an absurd exaggeration to suppose that life after a civilization has passed on returns to where it started, that the status quo before the civilization existed recurs. The reason is that civilizations leave legacies. So do other kinds of practices and institutions. An extreme cyclical analysis, which leaves no room for continuities and development, is not an adequate way of thinking about UN history or other kinds of history. A more moderate form, however, need suffer no such objection.

Another objection is that cyclical thinking is pessimistic. It pours cold water on optimistic faith in the advent of a future golden age. To defend cyclical thinking, it does not deny the possibility of golden ages. A future golden age is possible, even if the pendulum is liable to make it temporary. It might be said that cyclical thinking thereby charts a via media between excessive optimism and extreme pessimism.

In relation to the UN, the most basic kind of cycle would be an oscillation between unity and division. For the UN, unity would generate a golden age, while division would create a dark age.

¹⁰ See the relevant chapters interrogating peace-movement history in Saul H. Mendlowitz and R.B.J. Walker (eds.), *Towards a Just World Peace* (London: Butterworths, 1987).

¹¹ The best-known account of this subject is Paul Kennedy *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Vintage, 1987).

¹² As argued by Arnold Toynbee *A Study of History* 2 vols. abridgement by D.C. Somervell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946 and 1957).

Several cycles, or swings of the pendulum between unity and division, have been prominent over the course of the UN's past. In the initial years, the wartime unity that gave birth to the UN gave way to postwar division and the momentous split between East and West that affected not just the UN but all of world affairs. In the middle years on the UN, despite the Cold War divide (or perhaps in part because of it) in about 1960 a new focus of unity emerged: decolonization and development. But then this new unity gave way to the heated North-South divide that characterized the 1970s. By the 1980s, the UN was at low ebb, split by both East-West and North-South divisions. Unexpectedly a new unity appeared; suddenly the UN seemed an important part of a post-Cold War "new world order." But by the late 1990s this golden age had passed and divisions had returned. In the early years of the 21st century there was a remarkable uniting in response to the 2001 terrorist attacks which swiftly unraveled into an equally remarkable division over the 2003 attack on Iraq.

Although only a brief review, the foregoing identifies four swings of the pendulum — in the early years, the middle years, the 1990s, and the early 2000s. They appear to encompass the whole span of the UN's history from origins to sixtieth anniversary. They also appear to involve what are by wide agreement its most significant episodes. Here are grounds for thinking the cyclical approach to be promising.

To sum up this section, I have identified four noteworthy possibilities for aiding an understanding of the trajectory of the UN. They are that the UN is on a path of progress, or a path of evolutionary growth, or a path of discontinuity, or a cyclical path. In considering each, I have woven together both philosophical history and empirical history. They all have some pertinence. But the first three appear to have more

questionable aspects than the fourth. If so, that raises doubts, at least provisionally, about their adequacy. The fourth has indications of being more adequate, or at least less inadequate, as an aid to understanding UN history. In any case, it offers some promise of reward if further explored.

Cycle I: Wartime to Postwar

The origins and initial years of the UN were remarkable above all for one thing: a drastic swing from the wartime unity of the Grand Alliance — precursor of the UN — to the postwar, Cold War, division that very largely paralyzed its main activities.¹³

It is useful to try and distinguish the different aspects of the wartime unity of the Allies. First and foremost, there was the common front of the anti-Axis alliance itself. From 1942 it was known as the “United Nations.” There was, in addition, the unity that produced the agreement to turn the United Nations alliance in 1945 into the UN Charter and the United Nations Organization (as it was first known). Also, there was the consensus that the new UNO was to be given, on paper at least, remarkable powers.¹⁴

The unity of the Grand Alliance was by no means instant, automatic, or complete. During the first two years of the war, the future allies followed diametrically opposed strategies. While the British finally stood and fought in 1939, the Soviets sought a deal with Hitler in the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and the United States tried to insulate itself in a blanket of neutrality. Only once the USSR and USA were themselves attacked in 1941 were all three powers in the common position of belligerents.

¹³ A useful source for this phase is Evan Luard, *A History of the United Nations Vol. 1 The Years of Western Domination, 1945-1955* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

¹⁴ To avoid anachronism, in this period I use the term “United Nations” to refer to the alliance (1942-45), and “United Nations Organization” to the entity established in 1945.

The wartime alliance owed its name to Winston Churchill. With his gift for phrasemaking, Churchill endowed the new alliance with a most resonant and inspiring name of United Nations.¹⁵ The name had a touch of the romantic in 1942. It could not hide tensions between the three allies. Communist Russia was allied with the world's two foremost capitalist nations. The anti-imperial republic of America was now allied to the world's largest overseas empire. America and Britain were at war with Japan from December 1941. Japan and the Soviets remained at peace.

Nonetheless, the leaders of the three powers did forge a unity of purpose. It is noteworthy that their UN alliance proved to be more united, and far wider in membership, than the enemy Axis. That was one main reason that the Allies beat the Axis — and the principal precondition for the later existence of the UN. Germany, Japan, and to some extent Italy fought separate wars. Italian adventures in the Balkans and North Africa were a sideshow and distraction as far as Hitler was concerned. Japan made no effort to aid Germany by attacking, or even threatening to attack, Russian Siberia.¹⁶ That permitted the Soviets to concentrate their forces in European Russia. By contrast, the Allies agreed early on to a united effort against Germany. To be sure, there continued to be frictions within the UN alliance. The main source of discord concerned a second front against Germany. The Soviet priority was for an early cross-Channel expedition by the Western Allies. For the Western Allies, prudence dictated waiting until later.¹⁷

¹⁵ It may be that the name originated in a Byron poem. Byron imagines future generations saluting the field of Waterloo by saying: "Here, where the sword united nations drew/Our countrymen were warring on that day!" Lord Gordon Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Canto the Third, Verse XXXV, lines 7-8.

¹⁶ The Japanese had clashed with Soviet troops on the Siberia-Manchuria border in 1939 and been worsted.

¹⁷ There were also other lesser suspicions and frictions, for example over aid supplies. The story is told in William H. McNeill, *America, Britain, and Russia: Their Cooperation and Conflict, 1941-1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

The Axis was also a smaller alliance. Few nations joined. The Axis leaders invested little effort in the diplomacy and persuasion needed to forge a large coalition. That is partly because as autocrats they were not inclined to diplomatic and persuasive behaviour; it is also because as revisionist powers they would have had to share the spoils of their conquests. More allies would mean a smaller share of the spoils for each. By contrast, the Allies (especially the British and Americans) consciously wooed friends and allies wherever possible. As liberal democracies, they had a tradition of ally-seeking activity; and as status quo powers, they had no disincentive to having plenty of allies. Towards the end of the war, the evident success of the UN alliance and the impending defeat of the Axis, induced almost all the world's remaining non-belligerents to declare war and join the bandwagon.

The breadth, and by 1945 the near-universality of the UN alliance, paved the way for the universality of the UNO. This is a major difference from the League of Nations. The chief weakness of the League was that it never had universal membership. Among the big powers, the USA never joined, the USSR joined late and eventually was expelled, Germany and Japan withdrew. Among the smaller powers, there was a similar lack of universality. Overall, of the League's members some never joined, several withdrew, one was expelled, and four were conquered so ceasing to exist. One of the successes of the UN is its universality of membership. The origins of that lie in the breadth of the UN alliance.

In addition to the unity of the UN alliance, there was also a consensus on creating a UN Organization. Forging that agreement was one of Roosevelt's main priorities. Roosevelt was the chief progenitor of the UN Organization. Neither Stalin nor

Churchill objected to the UNO. But neither did they have much faith in its ability to provide for collective security. Stalin proceeded to provide for the USSR's own security by dominating Eastern Europe. Churchill sought to encourage balancing against the new increase in Soviet power. Given these circumstances, it was crucial that the UN Charter be finalized before the end of the war and before any differences had a chance to develop. In the event, the San Francisco founding conference took place before final victory. This timing should be accounted the wisest act of diplomacy in the entire process of setting-up the UNO. Had the Allies waited until after the war, it is very likely that there would be today no UN.¹⁸

The challenge of war thus provoked enough unity to create first a solid UN alliance and then at the end of the war a UN Organization. It also induced a third aspect of unity: agreement to endow the new UNO with very considerable powers to enforce international peace and security.¹⁹ As a reaction against the perceived weakness of the League of Nations, the Charter appoints the Security Council as the executive committee of the world's big powers. In combating aggressors, the Security Council may impose sanctions, wage war, and command all the member states to join the sanctions or the war. This executive has no legislature to check its powers and no supreme court to judge the legality of its actions. The only limit (though it is a big one) is that the Council may only act with the "concurring votes," as the Charter puts it,²⁰ of all five permanent members. There must be unanimity. One country took seriously the

¹⁸ Meanwhile, the Allies were also holding founding conferences in 1944 and 1945 of the other main postwar world organizations: the World Bank, IMF, UNESCO, FAO, WHO, ICAO. One was left until after the war: an International Trade Organization held a founding conference in 1947, but it proved abortive.

¹⁹ Chapter VII of the Charter spells out the power of the Security Council to use force against an aggressor. In Article 25, members pledge to "accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council".

²⁰ Article 27, Paragraph 3. In other words, the letter of the Charter does not allow for abstaining. Later it became accepted practice that abstention did not imply lack of concurrence.

Charter and refused to join. The Swiss determined that the Charter would oblige them to abandon their traditional neutrality whenever the Council declared the existence of a threat to the peace.

Thus far we have been discussing aspects of the era of unity that gave rise to the UN. It should not be forgotten, however, that this was not a universal union. On the contrary, it was the kind of unity brought about only by the presence of a deadly enemy. Enmity begat unity. Lest we think this applied only to the wartime alliance, and was done with after 1945, it should be recalled that the Charter includes references to "enemy nations." Once that enemy was defeated, the pendulum began to swing away from unity and toward division.

The short age of unity, 1942-1945, gave way to a long age of division. The Grand Alliance came to an end with victory. That is to be expected. But it was not replaced by what we might call "normal" international division. It was replaced instead by the Cold War. The UNO continued to exist. But the Security Council did not become the powerful executive committee for enforcing international peace. It did not become the directorate, as spelled out in the Charter, for commanding combat against aggressive malefactor states.

There were numerous indications of division. The Military Staff Committee of the Security Council never met.²¹ No follow-up conference to review the Charter was held a decade after San Francisco as originally envisaged. Disarmament never happened.²² Use of the veto became common especially, at first, by the USSR. From 1949 until

²¹ The Military Staff Committee was supposed to be composed of representatives of the major powers' chiefs of staff (Article 47). Its model was the wartime Combined Chiefs of Staff Committee in which representatives from the American and British chiefs of staff met to work out how to implement joint wartime strategy.

1971, China's seat on the Security Council was occupied by the defeated Nationalists residing in Taiwan. Most importantly, numerous wars took place in which the Security Council played no role as peace enforcer whatsoever.

One counter-argument is that the Security Council was united enough, at times, to agree to establish peacekeeping missions. But, peacekeeping operations were (with only one exception) kept limited, small, and marginal. There was no question of any significant role for peacekeeping in one of the frontline conflicts of the Cold War from Korea to Vietnam or from Hungary and Czechoslovakia to Afghanistan. The one exception proves the rule. The secretary-general sought to build a large and active peacekeeping operation in the Congo (1960-1964). It failed both to secure peace and to secure continued backing from the main powers on the Security Council.

Overall, what path was the UN on in its early years? The founding of the UN can be seen as a major step on the path of progress to world union. But the greatest unity came only in wartime, alongside the greatest enmity. And the step forward to unity was immediately followed by a step backwards to division. Alternatively, it can be seen as a part of the gradualist path of evolutionary expansion out of the earlier attempts at international organization notably that of the League. But does this gradual, evolutionary path not overlook the ungradual, unevolutionary cataclysmic upheaval of the war? Or, the early years of the UN could be seen as a discontinuity inaugurating a new era of world politics. But just how different was the era of the UN? Each of these interpretations has flaws and inadequacies. A more adequate interpretation is that in its early years the UN was on a cyclical path as wartime unity turned into postwar division.

²² The Charter allocates responsibility to the General Assembly to recommend (Article 11) and the Security Council to establish (Article 26) a system to regulate disarmament.

Cycle II: Decolonization & Development to North-South Conflict

During the middle years of the UN — roughly the 1960s and 1970s — despite the Cold War split, a new unity arose by about 1960 over decolonization and development.²³ But this unity soon began to crack and, in the 1970s, turned instead into the North-South conflict. Thus the UN suffered a second fracture, pitting South against North, alongside the continuing East-West one.

The new unity had several pillars. One pillar was wide consensus that the overseas empires (but only the empires) had to implement the principle of the “self-determination of peoples” and give way via decolonization to newly independent states. In a rare show of accord, both the United States and the Soviet Union denounced the British and French in the Security Council for their Suez intervention of 1956. In 1960, the General Assembly by a large majority issued a Declaration condemning colonialism.²⁴ The few remaining colonial powers demurred but they were in a small minority. They tried to draw attention to the “blue water fallacy”: London, Paris, and Lisbon were condemned for ruling alien peoples, races, and religions, but not Moscow, Khartoum, Islamabad, and many others. The colonial powers had no success in this argument. From about 1960 they too agreed to liquidate their remaining colonies.

Another pillar of the new unity concerned development. From the late 1950s, the UN became more and more involved in what was first known as technical assistance and then became known as development. That was true also of other world

²³ A useful source is Craig N. Murphy and Enrico Augelli, “International Institutions, Decolonization, and Development” *International Political Science Review* Vol. 14 No. 1 (1993), pp. 71-85. More generally see Evan Luard, *A History of the United Nations* Vol. 2 *The Age of Decolonization, 1955-1965* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

²⁴ Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, 1960.

organizations whose activities came to be more and more oriented to the countries of what was now being called the Third World. All could agree on the need for and value of “development” all the while giving that flexible and capacious word different meanings. In 1960, the General Assembly pronounced the 1960s to be the “Decade of Development.”

Both decolonization and development could be presented as steps on the path to world union. Did not decolonization promise to end the great divide between conqueror and conquered that had existed for nearly five millennia? Did not development promise a great leveling to equalize rich and poor nations, to render all nations at the same level, and so create a common condition across the globe? Yet, in practice, neither promise was entirely fulfilled.

There was a third pillar of the new unity: tacit agreement that new postcolonial states would automatically gain membership of the UN. The principle was that membership would be open to any sovereign state. This was not quite the principle enunciated in the Charter. In that document, there is a strict criterion for membership. To qualify for membership, a state must be willing and able to contribute to maintaining international peace and security.²⁵ The implication is that outlaw states and states that are simply too small and weak to make any contribution to peace enforcement need not apply. In the event, the new unity meant overlooking this section of the Charter. Membership became more of a right than a responsibility. In any case, with the Cold War deadlock, the Security Council was not in the business of peace enforcement. The

²⁵ Article 4, on membership, says members must be “able and willing to carry these [Charter] obligations.” One obligation is to “undertake to make available to the Security Council ... armed forces, assistance, and facilities” (Article 43). Another is to “hold immediately available national air-force contingents for combined international enforcement action” (Article 45). Few realize how

consequences were to expand the membership — eventually fourfold over its original total — and to transfer influence from the old states to the new states of the Third World. The General Assembly, and other organs apart from the Security Council, as well as other world organizations, became home to a Third World voting bloc.

One further pillar of the new unity deserves note. The expanding membership and the new activities related to development brought in train an expansion of the UN's bureaucratic apparatus. Not only did it mean more officials, but also it led to a proliferation of funds, commissions, institutes, agencies, and programs within the orbit of the central UN.²⁶ Since then a recurrent observation by international civil servants is of the difficulty of supervising, coordinating, and making coherent such a scattered archipelago of officialdom. Alongside the bureaucratic expansion was a declaratory expansion. The General Assembly issued more and more resolutions, on more and more topics, arguably with less and less notice being taken.

Whatever unity and consensus that had emerged around decolonization and development circa 1960 did not last long. A decade later, the atmosphere of the UN returned to deadlock, division and dissensus with what became known as the North-South conflict. It was to be the dominant theme in the UN through the 1970s and in many respects North-South divergence continued through the 1980s and 1990s.

onerous are the military obligations of UN membership; only a minority of member states are able, and fewer willing, to meet them. How many nations hold air force squadrons on standby ready for use at the command of the Security Council?

²⁶ The UN's Publications Office publishes a chart of its the many subsidiary organs. Among the more prominent are the Development Programme, Environment Programme, Population Fund, Refugee Commission, Children's Fund, and Food Programme. These are separate from the Secretariat. The so-called "specialized agencies" of the "UN system" such as the IMF or WHO are in reality quite distinct entities. Sixty years ago they were spawned by the same wartime UN alliance but today they are not part of the UN at all.

What was the North-South conflict? It was not one clash. The phrase is merely a convenient label for several similar, overlapping sources of contention. Neither the “North” nor the “South” were coherent entities.

During the 1950s, the Communist world had presented a united front to the outside. But the Sino-Soviet split put an end to Communist world union and brought a kind of North-South divide to the Eastern bloc. In 1969, the divide burst into the open with border skirmishes.²⁷ With China denouncing Russian “hegemonism” in the most vitriolic of terms, Beijing’s Communists partnered with Washington’s capitalists in opposing Moscow’s Communists. The main result for the UN was that a permanent Security Council seat now came into Mao’s possession, finally transferred in 1971 from the defeated Chinese Nationalists. Now the divide between Moscow and Beijing appeared on the Security Council’s table. When in 1980 the Communist nations of Cambodia and Vietnam went to war, and when China launched a punitive attack on Vietnam, the idea of a Communist path to world union was dealt another blow.

The apparent consensus between First and Third World countries around the idea of development in due course exploded into confrontation. After the OPEC oil embargo and price rises of 1973-74, the Third World voting bloc in the General Assembly and in UN conferences issued declarations for a “New International Economic Order.”²⁸ The NIEO bloc pronounced itself in favour of managed exchange rates, automatic and large transfers of aid funds, commodity cartels (like OPEC), and trade preferences for Third World exports into Northern markets. Observers pointed out that

²⁷ One possible explanation is that Moscow was testing whether it would be possible to effect a regime change in Beijing as it had just done in Prague in 1968 and as it would do in Kabul in 1979.

this would mean Third World state elites gaining considerable new powers.²⁹ Subsequently, the NIEO idea inspired UNESCO's Assembly to demand a "New World Information and Communication Order" to give Third World governments more power over news agencies and the world's media.³⁰

Adding to the general atmosphere of North-South tension in the 1970s were a wave of Third World revolutions. The trend had began earlier. Between the victory of the Chinese Communists in 1949 and the triumph of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas in 1979, there were three decades of considerable success for Third World social revolutionaries. The 1970s appeared to be a particularly successful period. A principal reason was the final victory of the Vietnamese Communists over the United States. With America defeated, its enemies elsewhere prospered. In Africa, for instance, a wave of revolutionary regimes managed to seize power in Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia.

How should we interpret the period of North-South conflict in terms of the overall trajectory of the UN?

To begin with, the re-emergence of division appears to confound the expectation of a progressive movement in the direction of world unity. Even the Communist world, which claimed to be the vanguard of progress, the product of the most advanced kind of internationalism, proletarian solidarity, was now at loggerheads. Circa 1960, the development and decolonization consensus appeared to herald the final erasure of the old divide between colonialists and colonies. The new North-South division raised a

²⁸ A helpful guide to the ideological contest of the time is Robert W. Cox, "Ideologies and the New International Economic Order: Reflections on Some Recent Literature" (1979) reprinted in Cox, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁹ Stephen D. Krasner, *Structural Conflict: The Third World Against Global Liberalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

³⁰ The NWICO demands are described in Howard H. Frederick, *Global Communication and International Relations* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993).

question-mark over that optimism. Still, it is always possible to say that the new divide was just a temporary setback, or even a salutary stimulus, on the forward march.

The period also appears to confound any expectation of steady, gradual, evolutionary growth in the UN, or for that matter in international organization more generally. To be sure, this era saw a major expansion in the UN's functions, as it looked South. But turbulence and conflict sit uneasily with cumulative gradualism.

Perhaps instead the North-South conflict marked a fundamental discontinuity in the UN's trajectory? For observers attuned by historical materialism to keep a watch out for such situations, a conjunction seemed to emerge that combined a general economic crisis, conflict between rich (countries) and poor (countries), and ideological polarization. Together, they appeared to indicate a classic revolutionary situation and thus a discontinuity in international institutions.³¹ But does not the idea of world crisis or world revolution over-dramatize the entire episode? In the event, the North-South divide and NIEO controversy was not a revolutionary discontinuity either in the UN or in the world order at large. It was a passing phase.

In the end, the most adequate interpretation of the middle years of the UN's history is the cyclical one. In this instance we witnessed a pendulum swing from a temporary unity, an unexpected golden age, when at the height of the Cold War a development and decolonization consensus emerged in the UN, to a temporary division, a kind of dark age, known as the North-South conflict. It was the second cycle in the UN's history; but it was not the last.

³¹ Craig N. Murphy sees the North-South conflict as part of a "crisis in the Free World Order" in the 1970s and regards it as a turning point in international organization. See Craig N. Murphy, *International Organization and Industrial Change: Global Governance since 1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp. 242-253. Similarly, Robert W. Cox diagnoses a "crisis of

Cycle III: Winding Down the Cold War to the Late 1990s

A state-of-the-UN assessment in the 1980s would have to say that the organization was at a low point. It was paralyzed by both East-West and North-South divisions. Yet, from this low point a new golden age arose, thanks to the winding down of the Cold War. But the golden age of the early 1990s, the “new world order,” did not last. By the late 1990s the pendulum had swung back to a more divided age.

The initial signs of a new era appeared in the late 1980s. The Cold War began to thaw. Mikhail Gorbachev launched a new foreign policy for the USSR: agreeing with a us proposal in 1987 to remove many nuclear missiles from Europe,³² promising in 1988 unilateral military cuts, pledging to withdraw from Afghanistan, and assenting in 1990 to use the UN Security Council’s powers against Iraq. In the same years, Gorbachev gave several speeches calling for a more peaceful approach to world politics and a strengthening of the UN.

Five features of the new golden age are noteworthy in the present context.

First, peacekeeping expanded. It underwent a major increase beginning in the late 1980s in number of missions, their average size, and their role and aims. Hitherto, peacekeeping operations had been strictly limited. At any one time there had been few operations underway, involving few soldiers, with limited mandates.³³ Now

multilateralism” as its chief feature from the 1970s to the time of writing in “Multilateralism and World Order” (1992) in Cox, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 497-501.

³² The INF Treaty of 1987 removed a whole class of missile (i.e. intermediate-range) from Europe.

³³ The one exception, as noted, was Congo, 1960-64.

peacekeeping entered what seemed like a golden age. The Security Council was able to agree to establish more missions, with more soldiers, with more ambitious goals. New peacekeeping operations, mostly in zones of civil war, sprang up in Central America, Southern Africa, ex-Yugoslavia, and Cambodia. The number of soldiers involved reached 80,000 in 1994. As the role of peacekeepers became more demanding, a new terminology of “peacebuilding” and “peacemaking” emerged.

Peacekeeping received unprecedented attention and scrutiny from the media, the academy, and the public. This was due in large measure to the UNPROFOR operation in Bosnia and Croatia, 1992-1995. The world’s media gave extensive coverage to the Bosnian war, especially to the situation in Sarajevo, and so the activities of UNPROFOR commanders and soldiers were frequently in the limelight. The successes and failures of peacekeeping were extensively debated.

A second notable feature on the new golden age was the important role of the UN Security Council in the Gulf War, 1990-91. It was unprecedented: never before had the Security Council undertaken a peace enforcement action of this kind. To some, it seemed as if the original aim of the Council was finally being fulfilled. Thanks to consensus on the Council, it passed a series of tough resolutions against Iraq. Initially, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Security Council imposed sanctions. Then, in November of 1990, it approved the use of force against Iraq. Once the Iraqis had been defeated, the Council ordered Iraq be disarmed of missiles as well as chemical, nuclear, and biological arms and facilities. Never before (and not since) had the Security Council united over such robust measures.

Thirdly, ideas reflecting and reinforcing a sense of a golden age appeared. There was the “new world order” idea. It originated in speeches by President Bush in 1991 and soon gained wide currency. Although somewhat vague, it indicated a better, more united world, one with a prominent place for the UN. There was the “end of history” idea.³⁴ A heady combination of an interpretation of current events with a future prophecy gave it immediate appeal. There was also the idea of “global governance.” It gained some prominence when a panel of eminent persons, led by Swedish Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson, called themselves the Commission on Global Governance and published a report in 1995 on the fiftieth anniversary of the UN.³⁵ Global governance came to be used in different ways. Some usages gave more prominence to the UN than others. All implied something above, beyond, or across unifying the divided governance of separate states.³⁶ These ideas were in general optimistic, progressive, and indicative of a positive time for the UN.

Fourth, the Security Council edged close to approving use of force for humanitarian purposes. There was no Cold War precedent for this. Nor was there any clear authority in the Charter. The new trend began in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Following revolt, repression, and exodus in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Security Council agreed to have the Coalition set up a “safe haven” — i.e. a large territory removed from Iraqi control — in the Kurdish area of Northern Iraq. The trend continued when the Council accepted a US offer to send troops to Somalia in 1992 in support of a peacekeeping operation facing difficulties. It reached an apex in 1995 when the Council approved a

³⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

³⁵ Commission on Global Governance, *Our Global Neighborhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³⁶ See further Martin Hewson and Timothy J. Sinclair, “The Emergence of Global Governance Theory” in Hewson and Sinclair (eds.), *Approaches to Global Governance Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

NATO plan to end the Bosnian civil war by an air bombardment of Serb targets followed by an occupation of the entire country by NATO forces.

To be sure, in the early 1990s, although the Security Council edged towards approving humanitarian interventions, it did not actually arrive there. The Northern Iraq safe haven arose from the aftermath of a situation the Security Council was already involved with. It was a part of the overall punishment and supervision already being exercised over Iraq. The Somali exercise by the USA was an adjunct to an existing peacekeeping operation. The Council justified it by proclaiming, somewhat dubiously, a threat to international peace. The Bosnian operation by NATO occurred with the consent of the Bosnian government, so was not strictly speaking an intervention at all. Nonetheless, as the Security Council probed the boundaries of humanitarian intervention, it went further than ever before.

One further indication — fifth on the list — that the early 1990s were a golden age was a major upsurge of interest in proposals for UN reform. For one thing, thanks to the events described above, the UN now seemed worth reforming. For another, the fiftieth anniversary in 1995 naturally stimulated interest in producing reform proposals. Most reform ideas were designed to strengthen the world organization.³⁷ Thus they both depended on and were intended to promote a more united nations.

In sum, this golden age of unity for the UN was manifest in the expansion of peacekeeping, the prominent role of the Security Council in the Gulf War and its aftermath, the advent of golden age ideas, the movement some distance towards approving humanitarian intervention, and the prominence of reform proposals.

³⁷ The pre-eminent reform proposal was the report of the Commission on Global Governance, *Our Global Neighborhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

It is tempting to regard this juncture as strong support that the UN is on a path of progress. Did it not generate at least some substantial progress towards greater world unity, towards an ever better future golden age? It is also tempting to regard it as discontinuous. The end of the Cold War, the new world order — these very phrases imply a considerable break from the past. Or, perhaps such things as expanding peacekeeping and a more activist Security Council pursuing more functions reflect an evolutionary expansion in the role of the UN in general and the Security Council in particular. Are these not instances of a growth trend in functions?

Yet, in the event, the golden age began to reverse. It turned out that the features of the golden age were unsustainable. By the late 1990s, this UN golden age turned to an age of baser metal.

Peacekeeping's expansion did not last. It peaked and then began to contract. Expanded peacekeeping proved difficult to sustain. The number of peacekeepers reached a high-point in 1994, due mainly to the large contingent in Bosnia. Thereafter numbers declined. The ambition of peacemaking and peacebuilding received a major jolt with a series of failures in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. A former commander of UNPROFOR, Maj.-Gen. Lewis MacKenzie, is scathing: "What followed was a series of unmitigated disasters the names of which will forever be associated with the un's lowest point of credibility — Sarajevo, Somalia, Rwanda and Srebrenica being only a partial list."³⁸

Prominence for the UN in the Gulf War proved *sui generis* not the harbinger of things to come. True, no such similar event to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait has occurred since. But Security Council unity began to crack once the war was over. The United

States and Britain pursued a hard line with Iraq through the 1990s. They supported continuing sanctions, doubted the value of weapons inspections, patrolled Iraq's Northern and Southern airspace, and in 1998 launched a brief campaign of punitive airstrikes called "Operation Desert Fox." The other permanent members — France, Russia, and China — pursued a more accommodating line with Iraq. The net result was that neither the hard line nor the soft line was able to prevail. Hence the status quo of 1991, namely sanctions, weapons inspections, air patrols, and a Northern safe haven dragged on for more than a decade. It was a long and less than glorious aftermath to the UN's most notable moment of prominence.

The flowering of golden age ideas began to wilt. Talk of a new world order quickly dissipated. The term became the target of critics. The witty among them pointed out that, with the many civil wars underway, "new world disorder" would be more accurate. In retrospect, the new world order was a fashion that became a fad. The end of history notion had more substance behind it. But it too attracted wide criticism and few outright supporters. Meanwhile, the global governance concept had never achieved such prominence, so never experienced the same reaction. Whether it will prove lasting, only time will tell. Perhaps it will inasmuch as it adds "governance" to the long list of things that are considered "global." In any case, the process of creation and then criticism involved in the circulation of ideas naturally leads to a certain degree of cyclicity as new ideas are first discussed and adopted, then critiqued, modified, or discarded.

Having edged close to approving humanitarian interventions in the early 1990s, the Security Council promptly retreated. It turned out that there was far too little consensus for such a drastic innovation. The Security Council took no action to halt the

³⁸ Maj.-Gen. Lewis MacKenzie, "New Broom, Same UN" *The Globe and Mail*, March 29, 2005 p. A21.

Rwanda genocide in 1994. When NATO decided to launch a war on Serbia in 1999, and then to occupy the province of Kosovo, this humanitarian intervention had no backing from the Security Council. By 2003, in trying to persuade the Security Council to approve a war on Iraq, the British and Americans downplayed humanitarian arguments (ending the rule of a murderous tyranny) in favour of procedural ones (enforcing resolutions on Iraqi disarmament). Beyond the Security Council, among Third World nations, there is considerable opposition to humanitarian intervention. Humanitarian intervention has become one of the more divisive issues of the contemporary world often pitting liberal democratic nations against the rest.

Reform of the UN stalled for want of sufficient consensus.³⁹ While there may have been a rise in reform proposals, no major reform action occurred. Some un reforms attracted a superficial unity. Expanding the Security Council is one such proposal that generated, on the face of it, widespread support.⁴⁰ But such consensus turned out to be brittle. With the prospect of a conference in autumn 2005 to review reform proposals on the UN's sixtieth anniversary, in the spring of 2005 demonstrators in South Korea and China protested against Japan becoming a permanent Security Council member. Actual candidates, such as India or Brazil, for an expanded Security Council also face opposition. Declaratory unity over expansion cannot always mask actual division.

The UN gained a new lease on life in the early 1990s. It was, by general agreement, a golden age. But golden ages rise and fall. Soon this one began to decline.

³⁹ Reforms that require amending the Charter (as the most important ones do) require a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly and the approval of the Security Council.

⁴⁰ There are exceptions. Canadian policy, for instance, has always been opposed to this measure on the not unreasonable grounds that a bigger Security Council would likely be a more ineffective body.

It would be too much of an exaggeration to say that by the late 1990s a new dark age had descended. The fall was by no means complete. Nevertheless, it was significant. It amounted to a third cycle on the UN's path.

Cycle IV: 2001 to 2003

Events in the early years of the 21st century appear to form a critical juncture in the UN's history. Proper perspective is necessarily difficult to achieve with very recent events. Still, we can tentatively discern some items of significance. 2001 saw the terror attacks on the United States. In the UN, there was, in response, a swift expression of unity. 2003 saw the American and British invasion of Iraq. In the UN, there was bitter division. These two events, 9/11 and the Iraq War, have been the most important in world politics during the early 21st century. Responses in the UN appear to replay another swing between unity and division.

Al-Qaeda's attacks in September 2001 provoked many and varied responses around the world. But in the UN the overwhelming response was to stress unity. This new unity expressed itself in three main ways. To begin with, the September 11th attacks themselves were roundly condemned. Then, the General Assembly came together to declare itself opposed to terrorism. Thirdly, the Security Council agreed to endorse an American invasion of Afghanistan to topple the Taliban regime.⁴¹ So the UN appeared to express a world united. In this case, it was unity against an outlaw organization (al-Qaeda), its act of aggression (terrorism), and an outlaw regime (the Taliban) which had harboured it.

⁴¹ The justification was that it would be an act of self-defence. Article 51 of the Charter refers to "the inherent right of self-defence."

But it only took a year from this mini-golden age of unity for the UN to revert to a new division. During the winter of 2001-2002, the United States successfully overthrew the Taliban government of Afghanistan. Swift success was brought by a combination of American airpower, use of special forces on the ground, and reliance on existing anti-Taliban militias and warlords within Afghanistan. Once this was done, in 2002 President Bush along with Prime Minister Blair began to turn their attention toward Iraq. American determination to oust Saddam Hussein from power precipitated a sharp rift in the Security Council and the greatest acrimony among the permanent members since the Cold War.

At first, in November 2002, the Americans and British persuaded the rest of the Security Council to pass a compromise resolution insisting on the return of disarmament inspectors to Iraq.⁴² The text of the resolution threatened “serious consequences” if Iraq failed fully to cooperate with the inspectors.⁴³ The inspectors were in Iraq over the winter of 2002-2003.

The rift in the Security Council opened up in early 2003. The United States and Britain began trying to persuade the Security Council to pass a second resolution. The point of the resolution would have been to declare Iraq in breach of its obligations and to approve the “serious consequences” which the earlier resolution threatened. There was heated debate over this matter in the first months of 2003. On one side, President Bush and Mr. Blair were determined proponents of evicting Saddam from power. On the other side, France and Germany were the most outspoken opponents of war.⁴⁴ Russia and

⁴² They had been withdrawn in 1998 on the eve of the American and British air bombardment of that year.

⁴³ UN Security Council resolution 1441, November 2002.

⁴⁴ Germany held at the time one of the rotating seats on the Security Council.

China also opposed, though more quietly, intervention in Iraq. The result was deadlock on the Security Council.

The division between pro-war and anti-war sides went much wider than the Security Council. The nations of the European Union split into pro- and anti- blocs. In the world at large, some countries lent support to the American effort, allowing it to be said they had joined a “coalition of the willing.” Many countries refused. The West was divided. So too was the NATO alliance. This provoked speculation on whether there was a deeper fissure separating Europe and America. Were they destined to diverge? Would Europe follow a post-military, post-national path, while America followed a neo-militarist, neo-imperialist path? In response to such speculation about pathways, it is worth noting that ages of division melt away just as much as golden ages.

The United States and Great Britain went ahead with their invasion of Iraq in March 2003 notwithstanding the lack of Security Council endorsement. It proved to be a relatively swift and easy operation to topple Saddam and his Ba’ath regime. It was over in a few weeks. But the job of occupying the country, pacifying it, defeating insurgents, and erecting a viable new regime proved to be difficult and protracted.

While the Iraq War was provoking deep division, other apparent points of unity were fraying. After September 11th the General Assembly had issued a declaration denouncing terrorism. General condemnations were possible. But schisms began to materialize once specific definitions of terrorism were attempted and specific offenders identified. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict intruded. Arab states were unwilling to define terrorism to include Palestinians fighting Israel. Within the General Assembly, there

continued to be some truth to the old phrase “one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter.”

So, in the span of a year and half, from autumn 2001 to spring 2003, the world witnessed a very intense, very public, very swift swing of the pendulum from UN unity to UN division. As a result, the events of the early years of the 21st century do not display any notable manifestation of evolutionary growth in the UN; nor any hint that the UN is forging ahead on the road to world unity; nor a sharp break in the UN. They do display a fourth cyclical recurrence.

Conclusions

Is the UN on a path of progress? I have used its sixtieth anniversary as an occasion for raising the question. But such a question could be raised at any time. If the UN were on a path of progress, then the path would thread through past, present, and future. As regards the past, I have raised doubts about the existence of any such path over the course of the UN’s past. Instead, I have interpreted UN history as being on a more cyclical trajectory. In the present, if by that is meant the last few years, I can detect no path of progress. On the contrary, between 2001 and 2003 was witnessed a violent lurch from unity to division. But what of the future? A few concluding remarks about the future are worthwhile.

In the future, the UN could conceivably join a forward march on the road to world union. The idea of progress encompasses both interpretation of the past and prophecy of the future. Thus far in this paper I have been confined to interpretation of the past. I am, however, reluctant to engage in prophecy or prediction. I prefer to leave that to

prophets and seers. For this reason, even if it is true that the path of progress remains not taken in the past and present, the path could still exist. The UN would be on a path of progress if the future is the time for bringing world union. Even if there is no sign of progress in the past, or present, one could still prophesy it for the future. Progressivism is thus hard to confute.

What can be said for certain about the future of the UN is that either it will be like the past or it will not. Probably a mixture of both will eventuate; of which ingredients it is hard to say. If the future is like the past, then the UN is unlikely to join any path to a perpetual golden age. It will continue to oscillate between periods of more or less solid unity and periods of more or less bitter division. If the future is unlike the past, on the other hand, then the best we could say is that the UN might be on a path of progress.