

Mayer, Otto G.

Article — Digitized Version

United Nations: The final curtain?

Intereconomics

Suggested Citation: Mayer, Otto G. (1985) : United Nations: The final curtain?, Intereconomics, ISSN 0020-5346, Verlag Weltarchiv, Hamburg, Vol. 20, Iss. 6, pp. 253-254, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02925464>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/139995>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.

United Nations: The Final Curtain?

On the 40th anniversary of the United Nations of all occasions a French member of the UN Joint Inspection Unit, Maurice Bertrand, claimed that only radical reform of this international institution could guarantee its future existence. His report refers *inter alia* to the inadequate qualifications of UN staff, the exceeding of competences by various UN agencies, the duplication of work and insufficient collaboration. Bertrand suggests establishing an "international organisation of the third generation" to succeed the League of Nations and the United Nations. The central point of this reform should be the setting up of an economic United Nations to complement the political organisation.

Whereas Bertrand's criticism is primarily levelled against the institutional compartmentalisation of economic, and in particular development-policy, activities within the UN, most of the criticism expressed before and on the occasion of the UN's 40th anniversary, particularly in the United States, focused on a different aspect. To cite an extreme but by no means seldom verdict: "The organization that we are celebrating is not the United Nations of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Vandenberg and Dulles. Respect for the noble vision of that United Nations demands that we recognize today's version as a corrupt impostor, inimical to America's (and its own) ideals and unworthy of American support" (Charles Krauthammer). Against this background it came as no surprise that the US Congress intends reducing the United States' share of the UN budget – the USA is the UN's largest single financier – from its current level of 25 % to 20 % in 1987 if the UN has not by that time abandoned the hitherto existing principle of "one state, one vote" (one might add: at least) in budgetary matters and replaced it by a voting procedure characterised by votes which are weighted in accordance with the shares of individual countries in the UN budget.

The same occasion – the UN's 40th anniversary – prompted a warning by the President of the Deutscher Bundestag, Philipp Jenninger, against overemphasising the interests of individual nation states, since this could weaken the United Nations, lead to resignation, and a "Who cares?" attitude. Despite all the disappointments and disillusionment the United Nations remains a symbol of hope for people throughout the world, an instrument via which "the small, the helpless, the powerless and the humiliated" can voice their needs. Or as the foreign minister of the Federal Republic of Germany, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, put it: although the UN is in need of reform it remains indispensable.

Were this not the case, it would be difficult to explain why roughly 90 heads of state and 137 foreign ministers made their way to New York to attend this year's UN General Assembly. Also worth mentioning in this context is the praise expressed by the People's Republic of China for the UN's contribution towards maintaining peace, supporting decolonisation and promoting international economic cooperation. Admittedly, hopes were also expressed that the UN would oppose any attempts by a minority of countries, above all the two superpowers, to exert their influence.

This rather eclectic rundown of the critical statements made on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the United Nations should suffice to show that the various critical remarks

relate to fundamental political questions, to problems of power politics as well as to considerations concerning the cost efficiency of international bureaucracies and that they often confuse these problems with one another.

One of the major reasons for the considerable scepticism recently expressed by the USA regarding the United Nations as a whole and individual UN agencies in particular is the success of the nationalist-conservative policies pursued by the Reagan administration since 1980. By recollecting the USA's "own values" these policies have attempted to overcome the doubts which emerged in the nation's self-esteem following the actual and supposed collective humiliations suffered during the 1970s (Vietnam, Watergate, the oil shock, the hostage drama in Teheran, etc.). The regaining of economic and military strength was accompanied by a renewed claim to the role of international political leadership, if not for the world as a whole then for the "threatened minority of the western community of values". The voting majorities secured above all in the General Assembly, but also in certain UN agencies, by generally less developed, undemocratic and often small or very small states against the USA's own political intentions were soon criticised as a "symbol of the institutionalised perversion" of the political procedures, goals and hopes of the early years of the United Nations.

Admittedly, many international agreements do not comply with the manifest interests of the USA and its western partners, i.e. the afore-mentioned western community of values. However, it is all too easily forgotten that this state of affairs is the result of the success of a world order whose establishment 40 years ago owed a great deal to the efforts of the United States, a country which now appears to be seriously contemplating renouncing that order.

Although the United Nations has not been able in every respect to achieve its overriding objective of ensuring a lasting peace via collective security, the organisation has sustained the idea of formal rules for relations between states, establishing new rules in many fields. Those who view international relations primarily as the pursuance of the interests of the parties involved can hardly be surprised if these interests are also pursued with the help of rules which manifest themselves in the organisation of the UN and in particular in the procedures of the General Assembly.

Up until the 1960s, for example, the General Assembly was regarded as the "voting machinery" of the USA, which at that time, via predictable voting majorities, could isolate the Soviet Union and its allies. This period was followed by a gradual shift in majorities in favour of the growing number of independent Third World countries – itself one result of the principle of self-determination established by the founders of the UN in the United Nations Charter. The associated changes in voting patterns must be assessed differently if the UN General Assembly is not only regarded as an instrument for pursuing self-interests, but as an expression of the "universality of membership", in which agreement and mutual interests in many fields should not be completely overshadowed by dissension in other fields.

If this is the case, the question (which has not only been posed by China in connection with the role of the superpowers) arises whether medium-sized countries ought not assume greater political and financial responsibility within the UN framework. The alternative to the current situation, namely a world with less or no formal rules for international relations or even several politically more sharply delimited blocs, can hardly be in their interest.

The question as to whether the Parkinsonianism of the over one hundred legally autonomous institutions with their comet-like tail of by-and-large independently operating departments can and should be reduced and reformed must be distinguished from the problem of the "universality of membership" and the varied vested interests of individual states. The current puffed-up system of conferences and bureaucratic practices often regards its huge output of paper and resolutions as a productive achievement in itself. Maurice Bertrand's critical analysis of this system at least provides useful food for thought. Although all the afore-mentioned problems which individual countries may have with the United Nations are no cause for jubilation, there is certainly no cause to bury the United Nations altogether.

Otto G. Mayer