

A new North/South Dialogue ?

Introduction

The 1986 Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations concluded with the adoption of a resolution on the "reform" of the Organization with which the American Ambassador to the United Nations, General Vernon Walters, declared himself satisfied. It had given him "an effective argument" with which to convince the Congress of the United States to "soften its position". As the financial crisis of the United Nations was due essentially to amendments adopted by the Congress which had had the effect of reducing by more than one half the American contribution to the budget of the Organization, one might have thought that the crisis was at an end.¹

The various analyses provided by the press gave the impression, moreover, that the reform which had been approved was important and that the UN budget would henceforth be adopted by consensus"; if this optimism had been justified, the quarrels which for years had brought the "main contributors" that is to say the rich countries both Western and Socialist-into conflict with the poor countries of the Group of 77, would have been at an end.

The year 1987, however, showed that nothing had changed. The Congress of the United States continued to oppose the vote of the credits which would have allowed the Reagan Administration to pay the whole of its UN contribution. By December 1987 the United States had contributed \$90 million under this head in the current year instead of \$210 million, and gave no grounds for hoping that the country would now adopt an attitude more in conformity with international law during 1988. No one any longer believes that it is a case merely of a "financial crisis".

A Deeper Crisis- The Problem of the Method of Representation of States

There are, on the contrary, various reasons for thinking that we are now in the presence of the first manifestations of an important crisis which goes well beyond the framework of the United Nations itself and which corresponds in its essentials with the opening of a new North/South dialogue.

What is now in question in effect is the direction of the Organization. The first "amendment" which provoked a crisis, the Kassebaum Amendment, was adopted by the US Congress in August 1985. This laid down as a condition for the payment of the whole of the US contribution to the United Nations the adoption by the General Assembly of a system of "weighted voting", that is, the replacement of the present system which gives each State one vote (regardless of its importance) by a method which would relate the number of votes to the economic power of each State (as is the case with the World Bank and with the International Monetary Fund). The author of the Amendment, Senator Nancy Kassebaum, knew full well that in the circumstances this was an unacceptable demand, but the sense was clear to all: the United States-and behind them (happy, cautious and satisfied even if they pretended to be disapproving) all the rich countries-thought that it was time to finish with that "automatic majority", made up of the small contributors and micro-states, which consistently adopted UN resolutions contrary to the ideas and to the policies of the large countries.

¹ On the financial crisis and the attitude of the American Congress, see in particular "Cut down in the Cross Fire" by Arthur Kilgore. *International Relations*, Vol. VIII No.6 of November 1986. The theme maintained in this article, according to which it is solely a question of a crisis between the US and the UN, is opposed to the one maintained here, according to which the "financial crisis" is only a symptom of a more general crisis which concerns the whole system of world organizations and their role for East, West and South. See also Chaps. VII and VIII of *The Specialized Agencies and the United Nations*. by Douglas Williams (Hurst & Co 1987).

The first point which should be made is that the problem had never before been posed so unambiguously. The second is that the UN resolution adopted at the end of December 1986 brought with it no solution.

"One State One Vote" Called in Question

What now has to be resolved is how to devise a method of representation of member States within a world organization which would be acceptable to all. The opening of negotiations on this subject would mean that while the principle of the "sovereign equality of States" may be sacrosanct, the inference to be drawn from it of "One State One Vote" is not.

Such taboos are not broken without great circumspection.

The rich States-Western and Socialist-had previously confined themselves to criticising the Organization on the grounds of cost, excessive salary levels, poor administration, and the overriding need to maintain "zero real growth" in budgetary levels. The debate has taken on such a stereotyped form that the diplomats who made these speeches finished by believing them themselves.

This form of indirect talking, however, even if it brought about some reduction of expenses and put an end to the proliferation of new organizations within the UN system, led nowhere. Not only did it not bring into the open the real grievances of the richer countries but it overshot its target. It tended in fact to damage the institution of the UN itself, thereby putting in jeopardy the hope of peace which it incarnates and the principles which it espouses. The offensive, therefore, placed the governments of the Northern countries in an uncomfortable situation and failed to promote any new dialogue.

Thus the United States, by embarking on the discussion of the way the budget is adopted and by proposing the change in the methods of voting, has provided an opportunity to begin discussing the fundamentals of the problem.

The Reaction of the General Assembly

At the end of 1985 the General Assembly agreed to set up a group of experts – "The Group of 18" – charged with "determining measures to be taken to continue to improve the efficiency of the administrative and general functioning of the Organization". In all the financial crises of the past the United Nations has always created groups of this kind which have all made proposals for economies and re-structuring, generally with little result. The Group of 18 has proved no exception to the rule². It made recommendations on personnel policy, on the structure of the Secretariat, and on reductions of personnel (15 percent over 3 years and 25 percent for the upper echelons); these the General Assembly adopted with various reservations. There is nothing very new in all that What is new is that it also attempted to deal with the question of methods of budgetary decision-making.

The manner in which the subsequent negotiations evolved no doubt appears somewhat esoteric. The United Nations is a complex organization; the methods of balancing its budget which is a biennial "programme budget" – are complex. To the uninitiated the fact that the negotiations within The Group of 18 and within the General Assembly concentrated on devising a committee whose object was to try to reach a consensus on the contents of the programme and on the level of budget before the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly tackled the issue, can appear of limited interest. It was, however, the only way of seeking a solution.

As it is not possible to touch the Charter, there could be no question of examining directly the problem of "weighted voting" as this would have demanded the modification of Articles 17 and 18 ("One State One Vote" and a majority of two-thirds for the adoption of the budget). Therefore before taking the final decision in the General Assembly it was necessary

² Official documents of UN General Assembly 41st session Supplement No. 49 (N41/49).

to establish a mechanism which would permit preliminary negotiations on the content of the programme and the level of the budget, and to relate the two.

The Group of 18 did not succeed in agreeing on any single solution: it proposed three different ones. The General Assembly eventually chose a fourth which consists of not modifying the structure of the subsidiary committees, and of re-affirming the principles of the Charter on the present methods of decision making, but yet entrusting the Committee on Programmes and Coordination, when examining the draft summary of the budget one year in advance, with trying to establish a "consensus" on the subject of both programme content and budget level and with transmitting its opinion to the Assembly which will deal with it as it sees fit.

The Limitations of the General Assembly Solution

The "solution" thus adopted contains such reservations, and insists so much on the inviolability of the present decision-making process that we can be certain that it will hardly improve the possibilities of reaching agreement within the United Nations.

Even if the US Administration were to insist today that budgetary decisions should henceforth be taken by "consensus", everyone knows that the political problems will not be resolved simply by clarifying the terms of reference of a consultative committee on the questions of programme and budget. The elements of wider negotiation are already established, though with uneven degrees of clarity in their formulation.

A Wider Negotiation Needed

The basis of the problem is the rejection by Western countries in general, and not only by the United States, of the philosophy which served as the basis for the earlier North/South dialogue and which was the fundamental cause of its breakdown.

The main element in the change is that the rich countries are all irritated by the way the developing countries have used the United Nations; by their ideological propaganda-accusatory, demanding, anti-liberal-that the "Group of 77" with its three quarters majority (about 120 countries against 40) iterates in the course of many speeches and resolutions; by the manner in which, on all occasions, Western countries are condemned; in general by the moralising attitude adopted by governments of poorer countries which are moreover more often than not dictatorial and little burdened by scruple in their domestic policy.

For three decades since Bandung in 1955, but especially since the beginning of independence from the early 1960s to the 1980s, the representatives of Third World countries have taken the offensive in the dialogue with the rich countries.

Moreover, while the Soviet Union and the Socialist countries succeeded in making intelligent use of this offensive by sustaining it and directing it against the West without themselves making the least effort to provide serious economic assistance, the Western countries were forced to give ground on several points. For example, they agreed to give some specially favourable terms to poorer countries in international trade, to open one or two "windows" ³ in the International Monetary Fund, to accept the need to increase progressively the levels of their public aid to development and to approve, with many reservations, the main resolutions of the General Assembly on international economic strategy and on the New Economic Order. But finally, with increasing ill humour, they resisted the ideological offensive which declared them guilty by the affirmation that underdevelopment was the result of colonial oppression. They therefore went back on the defensive pushed into the uncomfortable position of having to reject claims that seemed to be justified by the poverty and misery of the Third World, because to do otherwise would have meant accepting a general ideology which was more "dirigiste" and socialist than liberal.

³ Special Facilities accorded to certain countries by the IMF.

Now, here are these same countries, led by the most powerful among them, going over to the offensive by proposing to modify the UN decision-making process, while at the same time making good use of the Bretton Woods institutions, where they retain the majority, in order to impose on debtor countries adjustment policies which seem desirable to them. At the same time they have begun to set up outside the United Nations a system of collective management of the world economy from which the Third World is excluded.

In other words, Western positions have now evolved in a decisive fashion; the discovery of the constraints of interdependence has created a need for a world-wide system of economic and political co-ordination which the rich countries have begun to establish, outside the United Nations. To this end, they have used not only the world financial organizations but also the possibilities offered by the progressive integration at the regional level of countries in Western Europe in the EEC and at the intercontinental level by the OECD and, above all, by the institution of regular summits between America, Europe and Japan. This pattern has been completed by the summits between the two Superpowers which deal with the control of armaments and certain other common problems.

The System in Competition with the United Nations

The experiment (made only once at Cancun in 1978) of including in Western summits some representatives of the principal developing countries, has shown in what direction the West could eventually permit this system of consultation to be extended in future-by holding meetings at the highest level which could include representation of a few big countries from the South, admitted to the discussions because of their importance; the others would be excluded.

The progressive construction of this system, in competition with the United Nations and built upon quite different principles, is facilitated by the hardening of a Western "conscience" which no longer hesitates to emphasize the faults of Third World governments. Western governments are now much readier to speak of the absence of democracy or the presence of corruption, to lay more stress on the fight against poverty and on development rather than on the volume of resources transferred, and to invoke the rights of man rather than the rights of peoples or of states.

The Wests Changed Perception in the Third World

To public opinion in rich countries, as a result of the composite and confused image provided by the media, the Third World means disorder and abuses. It means the absence of democracy, and the violations of human rights. It also means population growth, the slow invasion of migrant workers and illegal immigrants into the rich countries, religious fundamentalism and the dangers created by local wars and by marxist and revolutionary regimes.

While there is some difference of emphasis here between America and Europe, overall, the poor countries of the South tend to appear nowadays more and more as a source of instability and as a threat to the North, thus creating a desire for protection against them and for the acquisition of means of subjecting them to what are perceived as necessary controls.

The policies of Western governments reflect these preoccupations and this explains why the idea of regaining control of the United Nations is one of the elements of their collective strategy. Not surprisingly, the governments of developing countries feel somewhat perplexed in the face of this offensive. While the American right is the spearhead of the movement, even moderates in Europe and America do not disapprove of it, and the socialist countries are in agreement with its basic aims. Some time needs to elapse, however, before the diplomats of the Group of 77 will be able to distinguish the real problems underlying this attitude from the bad reasons given to excuse it; to admit that things have changed, and to question the comfortable positions and the ideas on which they have lived for several decades.

It is therefore not to be wondered at that one of the most distinctive phenomena in the internal crisis of the United Nations as shown in 1987 should be precisely the break-up of the Group of 77. On the one hand there are the countries of Asia and Latin America, which (in the discussion on the report of the Group of 18) accepted in general the Western and Soviet proposals for the creation of a committee for programme and budget. On the other hand, there is the group of African countries (supported for reasons of principle by China) which refused en bloc any significant change and justified its attitude by a refusal to submit to "American blackmail".⁴

This divergence of attitude, which was manifested clearly in the Group of 18 and which was maintained with some variations in the General Assembly, has been extended into differences of perception of how in future the North/South dialogue might be focussed. Some time therefore must pass before the conditions for a new dialogue can emerge from the present confusion. In all camps a change in received ideas at diverse levels has become necessary. But certain essential elements can already be perceived.

The Elements of a New Dialogue

a) Recognition of the question of interdependence between North and South

The first matter to be taken into account is that, in a world becoming more and more interdependent, the problem posed by the coexistence of post-industrial countries getting ever richer, and of agro-pastoral areas which are very poor and overpopulated, cannot be avoided. It is not just a question of the moral problem posed by subjecting hundreds of millions of people to intolerable conditions; it is a question of the political problems inevitably posed to the rich world by the evolution of this "proletariat" which, treated by the West up till now as "external", is becoming more and more "internal" as a result of its integration, along with all its problems, into world society.

b) Representation of States in the United Nations

The second element is the question of the representation of States within the United Nations; a matter which can no longer be ignored. What is in question throughout the present discussions on the methods of budgetary decision-making is the compatibility of respect for "equality of States" (translated by the equation of "One State One Vote" in the General Assembly) and the need to take reasonable account of the respective importance of each state by some other method of representation.

This classic problem of constitutional law has been addressed in the constitutions of Federal States, which have responded by organizing balanced systems which take account both of the existence of State entities and of their relative importance as well as the populations of Federations with democratic governments—for example by bicameral systems.⁵ This problem poses itself today on a world scale because the Charter has produced no answer to it, notably on the economic level, and it now has to be resolved.

⁴ Of the three different solutions proposed by the Group, the first was supported by the experts from the West, ASia and Latin America, the second by the African, Chinese and Yugoslav experts and the third (a stronger version of the first) by the Soviet and Argentinian experts.

⁵ In the US Constitution, for example, the representation of the States in the Senate is ensured by two Senators for each State. Whereas in the House of Representatives, Congressmen are directly elected according to population.

c) Changed perception of problems in the South

The third element is the change in the perception of problems posed by the South. In the general framework of world interdependence there is a growing recognition of the specific quality of North/South interdependence. Up till now the relationship was between countries making demands and countries satisfied with the status quo. There is now a growing recognition that the problems involve all States so that their solutions demand active co-operation between partners working together on agreed common policies.

This is evident in the treatment of Third World debt. Today no important creditor can accept the bankruptcy of an important debtor. The Baker Plan and the bilateral measures adopted along the same lines show the application of this principle. The approach taken at the Special Conference on the critical situation in Africa in May 1986, was a step in the same direction; there was a general recognition of the wider world interest presented by local situations and that action on the problems thus presented calls for international solidarity. The evolution of ideas on the subjects of population or the environment also demonstrates a common purpose in seeking solutions, although the various States involved all have different interests at stake.

Why it does not make sense to suggest that the United Nations should take control

These new elements present both the North and the South with questions to which answers must be found. The first is that of determining whether such problems can be solved by UN control and at the UN's direction. The recognition that such is not the case would constitute an important step towards setting up a useful dialogue. The idea that a world organization such as the United Nations could "take decisions" is certainly not yet completely dissipated but daily experience teaches that the Resolutions of the General Assembly or of the Security Council produce no results; that the UN Organization (unlike the IMF, for example.) never takes decisions which have direct effects and which are binding on the policy of countries; and that, ultimately, a world political organization can in reality only serve to organize discussions and negotiations on world problems; it cannot give directions for their solution.

No one body, however, can take control of a set of negotiations on those subjects. On the contrary, if the United Nations is to function usefully, it needs to be organized in such a way that States make a real contribution to its deliberations namely by taking decisions which they will consider binding. This is not the case at present, since all the big countries negotiate problems of any importance outside the United Nations. But it is in no one's interest that this state of affairs should continue.

An Alternative Programme

An in-depth study of the structure of intergovernmental machinery in the economic and social sphere has been recommended by the "Group of 18",⁶ which shows that some are beginning to be conscious of the fact that "the form of the table" and the choice of those called to consider particular issues can have a great influence on the content and the outcome of the negotiations. The idea is gaining acceptance that "an Economic Security Council" with a limited number of members, where the big countries would be represented individually and the smaller countries by representatives chosen by themselves, preferably on a regional basis, could become the central organ for this kind of negotiation. Furthermore, the idea that a

⁶ Recommendation No.8 of the Group of 18. The General Assembly has entrusted the study to the Economic and Social Council which in its turn has created a "Special Committee" charged with the study and open to all member States. The Committee began its work in an atmosphere of scepticism but the dynamics of the negotiation will perhaps lead it to take some steps in the direction of structural reform.

"Commission" of eminent individuals, as is the case in the European Community, could constitute a centre for research for the identification and study of world problems, with the Commission reporting to a "Council", is also developing.

Since the publication in December 1985 of a report outlining such a proposal⁷ – suggesting reform along the lines of the Council/Commission pattern of the EEC – the idea has been taken up in numerous studies.⁸ A recent report by a panel of 22 eminent people assembled by the United Nations Association of the USA under the aegis of the Ford Foundation has endorsed this idea.⁹ The group consisted of Senator Kassebaum and a number of other Americans representing various interest groups and eight distinguished representatives of Third World countries familiar with the workings of international organizations.

Such a profound transformation of the United Nations evidently requires time: no negotiations could begin before the problem has been thoroughly explored. The taboo on any reform of the UN Charter, to which a number of countries are still very attached, hinders the progress of ideas in this area. The political conditions for a serious re-structuring of the United Nations, and of its system, do not yet exist.

The New Soviet Proposals

The situation, however, is undergoing rapid modification.

The proposals made by Mikhail Gorbachev in an article published on 27 September 1987 in Pravda and Isvestia, and which were confirmed and amplified by the Declaration of Soviet representatives at the last Session of the UN General Assembly, are highly significant in that they express a complete reversal of the policy of the Soviet Union towards the United Nations; a reversal, moreover, which has been backed up by a number of concrete gestures.¹⁰ In addition to the proposals concerning peace and security—a greater use of UN peacekeeping forces in maintaining peace, a reinforcement of the International Court of Justice, support for the role of the Secretary-General and the Security Council—the proposals also contain a clear indication of a new Soviet interest in the economic and social role of the United Nations; and a specific proposal for participating in a collective study with a view to the reform of the

⁷ Document of the United Nations N40/988 "Contribution to a Reflection on the Reform of the UN" (November 1985). This report of the Joint Inspection Unit of the UN, signed by the author of this article, presented a critical analysis of the structure and methods of UNO and the UN System, as well as a definition of the tasks entrusted to it and of its basic concepts. It advocates a study with a view to defining "a world organization of the third generation" whose structures would be based on those of the European Community; i.e. a Council of Economic Security and a Commission, and which would entrust aid and development activities to "sub-regional agencies for development". For a critical analysis of this see Douglas Williams op. cit. Chapter XVI, "The Bertrand report".

⁸ In addition to the report of the United States UNA mentioned in the article see Documents of the Parliamentary Forum to the UN of Parliamentary Global Action Association; Third Conference on the UN in the Next Decade. Stanley Foundation (Cape Cod 1987); Conference on Teaching on International Organisations, Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy (Boston 1987): Resilience & Reform; Some Thoughts on the Process of Change in the UN, Antonio Donini; Is Universality in Jeopardy?—1985 Symposium, (publication of United Nations 1987-GFV 86.0.3) articles by Havelock Brewster, Pierre de Senarclens, et al.

⁹ The 22 included notably for the US Elliot Richardson, Nancy Kassebaum, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Robert S. McNamara and Cyrus Vance; among the Europeans, Helmut Schmidt, Jacques Leprette, Brian Urquhart and Otto Borch; for developing countries, Enrique Iglesias, Sadruddin Aga Khan, T. B. Koh, K. B. Lall, Olusegun Obasanjo, Olara Otunnu, Mohamed Shanoun, Salim A. Salim.

¹⁰ The Soviet Union joined the Common Fund for Raw Materials in July 1987; announced that it was going to pay the whole of its arrears to the UN for the maintenance of Peacekeeping Forces (some SUS 175 million) in October 1987; has facilitated the election of the new Director General of UNESCO (November 1987). and adopted a conciliatory and constructive attitude in the negotiations on the Law of the Sea etc.

United Nations on the basis of studies already made, and the study by the American UNA panel referred to above is expressly cited.¹¹

Without doubt many of these proposals need to be worked out in detail and more precisely.¹² It is also the case that the extent of Russian participation in development assistance remains vague and is subject to problems on the negotiations on disarmament.

*The Re-definition of the Philosophy of North/South Relations:
Will the South Respond?*

Such a modification in the attitude of one of the two Superpowers towards world organizations and multilateralism in general cannot help but have an influence on North/South relations. In this new "Gorbachev Round", on the subject of multilateral concepts and policies, is the South prepared to play its part? Here lies the second fundamental question posed by the evolution now in progress, that of the re-definition of the general philosophy which should guide North/South co-operation. What is accepted today is a mixture of absolute respect for national independence and the sovereignty of each country, and "non-alignment". It seems to have two elements:

(i) (by virtue of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a State), it permits no discussion of the legitimacy of political regimes, the degree of democracy which they tolerate, or the level of their observance of human rights.

(ii) it absolves the rich countries from assuming any responsibility for the social problems faced in the poor countries; while every rich country has its own system of social security, at the international level, the system, under the guise of various 'aid' schemes, works on a basis of charitable hand outs, given at the discretion of the donors.

This philosophy protects too many interests for it easily to be called into question. It is, on the other hand, totally unsuited to the problems of the modern world and any progress on the new North/South dialogue will be impossible as long as it prevails. The problems of the future, in particular those posed by the exponential growth of urban proletariats in poor countries, the development of fundamentalism or other ideologies expressing the claims of those proletariats, and the irresistible growth of migration from South to North, cannot be resolved without the establishment of a system of collective responsibility which permits more control of these phenomena.

Those who have placed the role of the United Nations in question offer the intellectuals and politicians of the South an opportunity to try and open a new type of North/South dialogue. Such a dialogue, instead of being based on the unrealistic ideology of the "sovereign equality of States in all domains", would be founded on:-

(i) a precise inventory of the problems of interdependence between North and South, which are becoming ever more acute: population migration, arms traffic, the social causes of internal conflict and their repercussions on world stability, environment and desertification.

(ii) a renewed examination and analysis of problems tackled without great success hitherto: the development of agropastoral zones, the type and methods of assistance really adapted to the needs of the South, new forms of credit related to the debt situation, problems of trade and raw materials.

¹¹ Statement of V. F. Petrovsky, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the USSR on October 7, 1987:- after quoting the American UNA Report. "The United Nations of Tomorrow": – "Undoubtedly a lot is yet to be done to perfect the multilateral cooperation mechanisms. This is a subject of an ongoing study concerning ways to enhance the efficiency of the UN socio-economic sector. Interesting proposals are also contained in the Report of the Secretary General on the work of the organisation (A42/I). Various ideas on possible reforms are also floated in non-governmental quarters by politicians and scholars in various countries. All the proposals, predicated on concern for the United Nations future, merit a careful collective study. We are ready for that".

¹² The concept of a "comprehensive system of international security" in Gorbachev's article Realities and Guarantees of a Secure World has aroused some questions and some disquiet in Western Chancelleries. A definition of the "fundamental principles of this system" is given in Mikhail Gorbachev "Perestroika, New thinking for our country and the world" p. 231 footnote I. (Harper and Row-New York 1987)

(iii) a realistic approach to the institutional problems and the drawing up of a list of subjects on which the rich countries could agree to negotiate seriously (a very different process from simply passing resolutions to which no one pays attention).

Will the intellectual reconversion which is in process of taking place in the East and which will inevitably provoke reaction in the West in the near future, provoke a response from the South? Without doubt the position of all the countries of the South will depend upon the quality of their responses to the multiple questions posed by the present crisis.

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