

Muhammad Shamsul Huq

THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE CHANGING INTERNATIONAL SCENE*

Introductory

The United Nations completes the 40th year of her eventful life on 24 October, 1985. This is, indeed, a historic occasion and will, no doubt, be befittingly observed throughout the world. This is also an occasion for deep reflection. The goals and ideals which inspired the founding fathers of the United Nations in their vision of a united world and enduring peace remain enshrined in the UN Charter. Its preamble states in inimitable and indelible words :

"We the peoples of the UNITED NATIONS determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure.....that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest,.....to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.....have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims."¹

* Based on the First Osmany Memorial Lecture at the Presentation Ceremony of the BCS (Foreign Affairs) Officers (1984 Batch) on 19 August 1985, sponsored by the Foreign Affairs Training Institute, Dhaka.

1. The UN Charter.

The Charter still remains a historic document, a springhead of inspiration and an embodiment of the hopes and aspirations of mankind. But, as rightly stressed by the present Secretary General of the United Nations Javier Perez de Cuellar "In the nearly four decades since the United Nations was founded, the world has changed greatly and with it the United Nations itself".² As a matter of fact, the last four decades encompass two different generations and a constellation of international developments of crucial importance to the world and the United Nations. The phenomenal changes in their many ramifications including the advent of the atomic and space age have had a momentous impact on the entire gamut of the dynamics of international relations.

Trends of Change : A Third World Perspective

In the everchanging world, a historically proven datum relevant equally to biological and social life is that adjustment to the changing environment is an imperative for survival and progress. A proper comprehension of these changes and their implications is, therefore, of paramount importance. The scope of this short paper is, however, limited to the time-frame of the last four decades and selected international developments during this period. The focus is on some of the major trends in the changing political environment of the contemporary world and their implications for the international community. The perspective is essentially that of the Third World. Such a nomenclature is, of course, not based on any logical criteria. Widely different in size, population, ethnicity, language, culture, natural endowment and social, economic and political systems, and in different stages of development, the Third World countries constitute a complex and diverse universe. Yet, the name has stuck and the Third World has acquired a distinct identity within the international political system.

The World War II, the most devastating in terms of loss of life and property, was also the most shattering in its impact on the existing

2. Foreword to "Basic Facts About the UN" United Nations, New York, 1984, p.v.

political structures and their underlying doctrines and values. The forces unleashed by it led to waves of changes in the form of a chain reaction. One of the most phenomenal changes was the transformation of the political map of the world through the emergence of new independent sovereign states with its far-reaching impact on the international system and the dynamics of international relations, both political and economic.

Growingly Significant Role of the Third World

With decolonization high on the agenda of the newly founded United Nations what were mostly erstwhile colonies in some form or other, began to emerge as independent sovereign states. These nation-states acquired a growingly significant role as an actor within the United Nations and outside out of all proportion to their economic and military power. The cause seems to lie not so much in the strength of their number, however important, as in their creative response to the new international environment. The most important visible impact of this changing political scene was the increase in the number of UN member states from 51 in 1945 to 159 in 1984 (i.e the tripling of the original number).

Some of the consequences of this enlargement were :

(i) the United Nations was now in a more real sense representative of the world community. This representative character was further enhanced by the admission of the People's Republic of China as a member in place of Taiwan.

(ii) The developing Third World countries now constituted the overwhelming majority in the General Assembly. *Ipsa facto*, this implied a redefinition of the role of the original members vis-a-vis the new and enlarged United Nations General Assembly.

(iii) It also had a visible impact on power-sharing. The members of the Security Council,—the most powerful organ of UN, were increased in number in 1965 from 11 to 15 (article 23) and the number of

affirmative votes of the Council on procedural matters was raised from 7 to 9 and on all other matters from 7 to 9 including the concurring votes of the 5 permanent members (article 27). The five permanent members of the Security Council with their veto power still remain the most influential members of the Security Council. However, the role of the Third World in power sharing was significantly increased by four factors among others (a) inclusion of the People's Republic of China, a Third World country, as one of the five permanent members of the Security Council; (b) the "Uniting for Peace" resolution adopted on 3 November 1950 providing inter alia that if the Security Council, because of lack of unanimity of the permanent members, fails to exercise its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, in any case where there appears to be a threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression, "the General Assembly shall consider the matter immediately with a view to making appropriate recommendations to members for collective measures including in the case of a breach of the peace or act of aggression the use of armed force, when necessary, to maintain or restore international peace and security".³ (c) the newly-gained political influence of the oil-rich Third World countries during the decade of the 1970s, though it began to wane afterwards; (d) Fissures in great-power unanimity caused by growing polarization between the two power blocs. An apt example is USA and USSR voting together in recognizing the newly-proclaimed state of Israel on the termination of Palestine Mandate on 14 May 1948 and the same two member-states voting differently on the Palestine issue subsequently.

NAM and the Regional Associations : Most creative Developments

After the founding of the United Nations the most creative and innovative political developments were the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement and the regional and sub-regional associations of

3. M.P. Tandon, *Public International Law* (Allahabad Law Agency, 1981) Rev. 81, p. 373.

nations. A dialectical and dynamic response to the changed political environment, they also in their turn profoundly influenced this environment. An immediate result was the consolidation of the position of the Third World countries with its impact on the structure and functioning of the United Nations. The mainstream of the United Nations was composed of the Third World countries belonging to the Non-Aligned Movement and others who, though not members of the Non-Aligned Movement, did not belong to either power bloc. The victorious allied nations who played the leading role in the founding of the United Nations and also in the decolonization movement now faced in the Third World countries a new political force to reckon with. Notwithstanding the differences in their national interests and the occasional shifts in the foreign policy postures of some of them because of their dependence on great powers, the mainstream members, by and large, were successful in steering clear of the two power blocs. They formed the hard core of the UN membership adhering to its Charter and, therefore, the bulwork of the strength to the United Nations (in moral and political terms). Militarily, of course, the position of the superpowers and the blocs allied to them remained practically unaffected.

The Third World is neither a new bloc nor monolithic in its structure. It is composed of countries widely divergent in their foreign

The victorious allied nations who played the leading role in the founding of the United Nations and also in the decolonization movement now faced in the Third World countries a new political force to reckon with.

policy concerns but in agreement on core international issues inspired by the principles of NAM and UN Charter. The emerging situation was by no means one of confrontation or polarization between the developing and the industrial countries. As a matter of fact, many western industrial countries often joined the mainstream of the international community within the UN system and outside on a number

of major political issues. However, as the cold war between the super-powers deepened, the independent position taken by the Third World countries, though consistent with the UN Charter over issues of strategic sensitivity to the two super-powers proved to be a cause of irritation to one or the other of the two super-powers. The correctness of Bangladesh voting measured in terms of consistency with the UN Charter principles was, however, rated as high as 97% by UN experts.⁴

Another notable and globally significant development during the last four decades was the new dimension added to the United Nations as a world forum in providing stimulus to multilateralism and crystallization and articulation of world opinion on major international issues. This proved to be a check on forces eroding the Charter objectives and principles through bilateral trade-offs to win support. The emergence of the Group of 77 (now comprising over 125 countries) is another important political innovation in informal institution-building devised by the Third World countries in uniting them in their efforts to accelerate the pace of their development through North-South as well as South-South cooperation.

Gradual Erosion of UN Role : a Disturbing Trend

A disturbing change in the political environment was the gradual erosion of the objectives and principles of the UN Charter and, as a consequence, of the very foundations on which the UN system rested. This trend placed in jeopardy the central vision which had inspired the founding fathers of the United Nations. The scenario in which the conceptual frame of the United Nations was developed forty years ago was radically different. Shocked by the horrors of the most devastating war in the history of the world and disenchanted by a victory that cost millions in dead, many more millions seriously wounded and mentally shattered, with many cities and regions in ruins, their goal was to restructure the world order on a new value system in order to ensure enduring peace and spare the future generations of the tragic consequences of a war.

4. Bangladesh Foreign Minister's interview published in *Holiday* of 6 September 1985 (pp. 1-3)

Ironically enough, the world scenario underwent a radical change and the same nations (representing the victorious allied powers) began to drift away during the last forty years from the goals and principles to which they had been committed by their far-sighted forebears. Divided in two rival power blocs many of them were gripped once again by a doctrine of power configuration historically associated with global tensions, convulsions and wars and totally antithetical to the sovereign existence of nation-states widely separate in economic, political and military power. Curiously enough, it was the newly-emergent Third World countries who had to assume the role of the founding fathers in upholding the UN Charter and its objectives. This reversal of roles can not be rationally explained by the mere change overtime in the composition of the United Nations. The real cause was rooted in the geo-political "fault" in the inherited structure of shifting balance of power which had historically acted as a force in keeping the European nations divided and subsequently bringing North America in the bipolar power configuration and sparking a new arms race.

Overriding Strategic Concerns

Ideological differences between the two blocs (East and West) acted as the prime force causing the split in the ranks of the victorious allied nations and formation of two military and economic alliances.

Curiously enough, it was the newly emergent Third World countries who had to assume the role of the founding fathers in upholding the UN Charter and its objectives.

They were, however, soon subordinated to the overriding strategic concerns of the two super-powers for extending their spheres of influence. These central strategic concerns also reflected in their over-all external relations accounted for what appeared to be contradictions in their foreign policy directions, such as, the US moving closer to

China, USSR to India, USA denouncing apartheid and racism and yet continuing "constructive engagement" with racist Pretoria Government, USSR denouncing US policy in Central America while continuing military intervention in Afghanistan and supporting that of Vietnam in Kampuchea, USA condemning violation of human rights, yet militarily and economically aiding Israel which continues to perpetrate the most flagrant violation of such rights. These contradictions were also reflected in their voting pattern at the United Nations.⁵

One inevitable consequence of this palpable inconsistency of the super-powers between their profession and action is that the United Nations is deprived of the constructive leadership that these two super-powers and former allies in fighting fascism could provide in making the planet earth a better and safer place for its inhabitants.

North-South Polarization

Another confluent disturbing trend is the north-south polarization. Newly emergent states are sovereign and equal in the political and legal sense. But, in all other respects, they are unequal and as diverse in their historical, ethnic, cultural background as in size, population, resource-endowment and state of development. A striking phenomenon during the early post-World War II era till the decade of the 1960's was the unprecedented prosperity achieved by the industrially developed countries including the war-ravaged Britain, Germany, East Europe and Japan. This was a source of inspiration to the developing and also to developed countries in launching a world-wide movement for development. The expectation was raised that drawing on the wealth of accumulated knowledge, technology and resources in the industrially developed countries, the developing countries could achieve in decades what the former took centuries to accomplish.

But, the cold war gradually changed this climate and will for international cooperation. With mounting expenditure on arms produc-

5. Some examples from 1984 UNGA Resolutions: 39/5 on the situation in Kampuchea, 39/13 on Afghanistan, 39/72 on Apartheid Policies of South Africa, 39/149 on the Middle East,

tion, the official development assistance began to dwindle. Development efforts suffered serious set-back during the second half of the 1970s with the commencement of stagflation apparently sparked by the rise in the cost of energy. The major cause lay in rapidly escalating arms expenditure which exceeded the staggering level of \$1000 billion by 1984 (compared to ODA of under \$50 billion by the DAC countries). The deterioration in the world economic situation hit the developing countries, particularly the LDCs, hardest as a result of a reduced flow of external resources through both bilateral and multilateral channels.

Set-back to Initiatives to Break Deadlock

The political climate stifled the various initiatives taken, for example, through the Brandt Commission, the Cancun Summit, the CIEC and special UNGA sessions, to revive the spirit of international cooperation for development and raise it to a viable level. Despite the sympathetic interest of some industrial countries in these initiatives, the majority dragged their feet. The East virtually refrained from participating in the North-South dialogue, and did not move to take any separate initiative either. A surprising convergence of policy posture of the two power blocs taken as a whole was, thus, observable in their lack of interest in arrangements allowing the Third World a fair access to world resources and market. The military aid from both super-powers to their client-states, however, continued unabated as in the case of Israel from USA and Vietnam from USSR.

Challenges Thrown up by Atomic Age

By far the greatest challenge to existing political institutions, doctrines and strategies has been thrown up by the atomic age. The "controlled splitting" of the atom under "Project Trinity" in a very real sense created a revolution in international politics and diplomacy, military strategy, concept of security structure and the role of science, and knowledge in peace and war. The many implications and ramifications of this revolution are not yet clear and fully grasped. One thing, however, is clear. It has unravelled a new mystery of nature

It has given man the mastery over a power not matched by any other. He can use this new power either to destroy or to create. To the discerning mind, what happened to Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a nightmare not only because of the horrifying destruction but also because of the threat it posed to humanity and its civilization. The war ended; but it set into motion a train of events inexorably leading to a rapid proliferation of this destructive power. The diplomatic and strategic advantage enjoyed by America by virtue of this weapon till the mid-60s proved to be a passing phase. Soviet Russia soon caught up with USA. The escalation of this deadly race by now has passed the threshold where the two powers by their own admission are capable not only of destroying each other but the entire planet earth many times over. Ironically enough, the two super-powers were driven to this frightening situation by mutual agreement reached in 1972 under the ABM Treaty and known as the agreement on "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD) leading to an unceasing race in the production of offensive nuclear weapons. Both are aware, they are held hostage to their new weapon *deadly in destruction but useless in defence*. Both are aware that deterrence through parity is very fragile because parity has historically been found to be highly elusive.

Adverse Effects of Arms Race on the Third World

The nuclear arms race between the two power blocs though apparently of no direct relevance to the Third World countries, did affect their security interests in two critical ways :

i) by reducing the flow of external resources needed for development, and, thus, retarding the pace of development and increasing the threat to their security stemming from the explosive domestic problems; and (ii) by proliferation of the arms race and its underlying doctrines to the developing countries and consequently fuelling the forces of violence, turbulence and destabilization inherent in the very state of their under-development. At least 40 armed conflicts are new in progress in various parts of the Third World. The overall political climate and the security perceptions borrowed from the great powers

are likely to drive most of the developing countries to spend more on arms at the expense of nation-building efforts which are of critical importance to their national security. Despite the constraint of resources, quite a few of them are waiting at the threshold to emerge as nuclear powers. A new dimension is also added to the threat of a nuclear war by the rising wave of international terrorism: It is, thus, evident that the challenge thrown up by the atomic age can not be met in the conventional way and calls for a new creative strategy.

Outlook for the Future

A question that is naturally agitating the minds of all internationally concerned citizens is : What is the outlook for the future of world peace, stability and progress ?

Several scenarios can be visualized from the foregoing analysis on the assumption that peace is a shared goal of all nations.

In scenario one : The super-powers stay on the present strategic course based on the doctrine of power parity with or without freezing the arms level. It is argued that the merit of the strategy of deterrence achieved through such a balance of power was demonstrated by 40 years of peace that the world has enjoyed. In the meantime, efforts be made to develop an adequate and effective defence system against offensive nuclear arms.

In scenario two, a variant of the first: While staying on the present course and without regard to the progress made in developing an anti-nuclear defence system, the super-powers seek to reduce the threat level through mutually agreed reduction in nuclear arms to a lower level of parity with necessary mechanism for verification. Conceptually there can be many other variants built around the core strategy of "deterrence through parity" with a varying mix of offensive and defensive weapons.

A close scrutiny will, however, show that in both the above scenarios peace is held in a tenuous balance by the mutual fear of certain destruction if either attacked the other. The threat to security is not

totally removed by a lower parity level. In any event, one of the precious freedoms, namely, freedom from fear is lost. The development of an adequate defence mechanism, even if theoretically feasible, remains a distant possibility involving an enormous cost. In the meantime any of the following may trigger a nuclear war :

- i) an accident, like for example, by an unexpected fault in the alert, or command mechanism; an accidental though unwanted explosion on other's territory;
- ii) a miscalculation by one super-power of other's intentions;
- iii) a small war with US and USSR in collision path, for example, in a strategic area like the Middle East;
- iv) proliferation of nuclear arms (which is inexorable in the prevailing conditions);
- v) a pre-emptive strike against either or an ally;
- vi) a nuclear strike through an act of international terrorism.

Need for a Creative Global Strategy

In the third scenario : it is recognized that the forces appearing in the wake of the atomic age warrant a radical change in strategy implying a change in the very categories of thinking and security perceptions. It is argued that the present predicament is essentially the product of a dreadful power-fear syndrome created by an anachronistic security doctrine. The new realities call for a new strategy, creative in its approach. The focus should be on the enormous and almost inexhaustible creative potential of the newly-acquired power. It implies a paradigm-shift from the negative concept of an eternally-divided bi-polar world to the positive value of a united and interdependent world ; from the elusive parity in arms to peaceful co-existence; and from ego-centric pursuit of national interest to meaningful international co-operation to maximize the use of resources and technology to the mutual benefit of all nations. In the prevailing political climate, this scenario, however rational, is unlikely to materialize in the immediate future. Besides, the developing nations would still be left with

threats to their security embedded in domestic and regional problems, though better able to tackle them in a climate conducive to regional and international cooperation. However, some of the elements of this scenario are already in a process of gestation.

Welcome Signs on Distant Horizon

There are welcome signs, though on the distant horizon, of a new emerging global trend towards greater stability and faster development through international cooperation. Governments appear to be able to show greater restraint, to hold their tempers better and to depend more on diplomacy. Increasing willingness for peaceful settlement of disputes and greater respect for differences in cultural, political and

What is needed is a will and a strategy based on the cooperation of all nations cutting across all barriers, East-West and North-South, and spurring the nation-building efforts of the Third World.

social systems show a larger degree of maturity and a new spirit of accommodation. Stirrings of a rising consciousness of the challenges of the contemporary world are also visible among the nations belonging to the two rival alliances. While adhering to the treaty obligations, leaders are increasingly making choices on political and economic issues not entirely conforming to the concept of bipolarity and yet without jeopardizing the security of their nations.

Mutually Beneficial Co-operation Across Sovereign Borders

Economic cooperation among nations despite many barriers has assumed an unprecedented dimension leading to a growing interdependence of the nations resulting in increasing benefits to peoples across the sovereign borders. This trend has a multiplier effect in the form of an extension and intensification of cooperation on a regional and international basis. In our region, the prospects of regional

cooperation look much brighter with the launching of the SARC. The countries in the South Asian Region which the advocates of "balance of power" doctrine had predicted "would fall like dominoes" not only survived but experienced an unprecedented prosperity. The rebirth of Hiroshima and Nagasaki literally from the ashes was symbolic of Japan's emergence as a great economic power though still remaining solemnly committed to the renunciation of the use of nuclear arms. China and India, the two largest countries of the world, are moving rapidly along the path of development and modernization.

Common Peril and Common Destiny

There is, thus, a clear global trend away from bipolarity towards international cooperation. There is also a gradual reawakening, however slow, to the reality that all nations are bound by a common destiny in the face of a common peril and common challenges thrown up by the irreversible course of history. This destiny lies in building a world based on durable peace and a life of human dignity, freedom and justice for all mankind. This is not a utopian vision. The nations collectively already command the required resources and technology to achieve this goal. What is needed is a will and a strategy based on the cooperation of all nations cutting across all barriers, East-West and North-South, and spurring the nation-building efforts of the Third World. The countries of the Third World, the mainstream of the United Nations, are now better organized than ever before to play a catalytic role in concert with other like-minded nations in strengthening the United Nations and other institutions and movements committed to building a better, saner and more equitable world-order. This is clearly the only viable path to enduring peace, stability and progress.