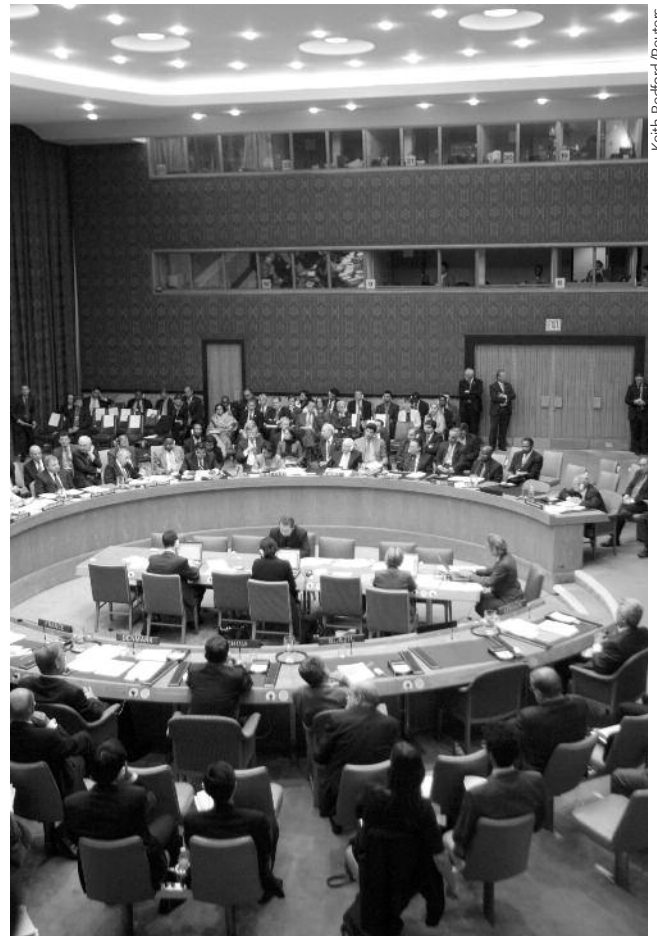


Mexico and the United Nations

Walter Astié-Burgos*



The United Nations had its sixtieth anniversary in 2005, offering us the opportunity of briefly analyzing three important topics: its successes and failures, Mexico's participation and the current process of reform.

SUCCESSSES AND FAILURES

To objectively and fairly examine the UN's achievements in its first 60 years, we must sit-

* Ambassador in Mexico's foreign service, university professor and writer.

uate it in the context of world politics since its efforts have been very governed by power issues that have both favored and hindered its actions. The first thing to point out is that this organization, created in 1945 by the San Francisco Charter, has been one of the most important initiatives in the history of international relations. The UN, preceded by the flawed League of Nations, has fundamentally pursued the laudable aim of being where member states—mainly the large powers who have caused the biggest wars—can peacefully solve their differences, avoiding a new world war. However, even though a third world war has never bro-

ken out, an infinite number of conflicts could not be avoided over the last 60 years, and therefore, world peace continues to be fragile. This has often been used to criticize and illustrate the UN's lack of effectiveness, but critics often overlook the fact that the UN is only a mirror faithfully reflecting the realities of world politics and that its capacity for action is limited by them.

We should remember that despite the San Francisco Charter stipulating that one of the UN's most important goals is to preserve future generations from war, at the same time, in 1945, the planet was restructured into two camps: the allies (the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union), who during World War II fought the Axis (Germany, Japan and Italy) and then created the UN, became irreconcilable enemies. As a result, the post-war order began to operate on two levels: on the first level, there was cooperation among the victorious powers and the rest of the world's nations inside the UN, while on another level, everything operated according to the antagonism between the two rival blocs that divided the world ideologically, politically, economically and militarily.

This dramatic circumstance determined UN functioning and its capability to act for most of the rest of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, the hope of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the UN's main architect, of contributing to the creation of a new world order in which the new organization could mediate to eliminate traditional practices of unilateralism, spheres of influence, colonialism, imbalances of power and war, failed to materialize because Stalin's Soviet Union expanded throughout its vast area of influence and another, similar

The UN was not designed to be an autonomous body with supranational powers, but a mechanism for negotiation that depended on the decisions of its members.

area of interest had to be counterposed to it. At the same time that the UN was dedicated to achieving universalism and multilateralism, a rigid regionalism arose with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 and the Warsaw Pact in 1955. Between these two there emerged what journalist Walter Lippman called "a state of neither war nor peace between the Western and Eastern blocs after the Second World War," that is, the Cold War.¹

That enormous contradiction was widely recognized in the capitals of the super-powers: in 1949, U.S. Senator Robert A. Taft opposed the NATO treaty saying, "I think the pact carries with it an obligation to assist in arming, at our expense, the nations of Western Europe, because with that obligation I believe it will promote war in the world rather than peace, and because I think that with the arms pact plan it is wholly contrary to the spirit of the obligations we assumed in the United Nations Charter... From the point of view of an international organization, it is a step backward."²

This situation was necessarily reflected inside the UN itself since, even though all its members were equally represented in the General Assembly, its Security Council was structured and operated according to the antagonism between the United States and

the Soviet Union. Their right to veto in the council was what determined its capacity to act throughout the very long Cold War. Both the UN and nuclear arms were decisive in averting a new world war, and even though in the more than 40 years of Cold War not a single shot was fired between the armies of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, East-West differences ended up being resolved in many wars fought in the Third World. As a result, the failures and defects frequently ascribed to the UN in the always difficult field of keeping the peace and international security should not first of all be attributed to it, but to the great powers who defined the *modus operandi* of the world order and of the UN itself. The UN was not designed to be an autonomous, independent body with supranational powers, but to be a mechanism for negotiation that depended on the decisions of its member states.

We should emphasize here that, regardless of the always thorny and controversial issue of international security that often captures the public eye, in its 60 years, the UN has played a meritorious role in innumerable other areas that are very often ignored. We should remember that the organization is a complex system of specialized bodies and affiliated agencies with activities in almost every area in which states are capable of acting. It is made up of more than 30 international institutions which, in addition to the activities of UN troops, played a key role in a goodly number of nations' moving from colonial regimes to independence. Equally, these institutions have played an outstanding role in fostering underdeveloped nations' economic and social development, dedicating 70 percent of its efforts to that end³ and spending more than U.S.\$30 billion for this praise-

worthy purpose.⁴ Through the UN Program for Development (UNPD) and the other specialized bodies, innumerable projects for technical assistance in agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, food, health, industry, intellectual property, statistics, education, science and technology, communications, transportation, deforestation, desertification, etc. have been carried out, turning the UN into the main multilateral source of funding for progress. It has also contributed to promoting respect for human rights, transparency in elections, greater democratization of the world, protection of the environment and the improvement of the world's climate. It has facilitated humanitarian aid in cases of natural disasters and wars; it has fought hunger and poverty and attended to the needs of refugees, displaced persons and defenseless children; it has been the ideal vehicle for confronting worldwide pandemics and for fighting other global problems like drug use, drug trafficking, organized crime and terrorism. It has promoted world trade, the transfer of science and technology, workers' rights and women's rights; contributed to the preservation of our cultural heritage; fostered the codification of international law, the strengthening and development of international law, disarmament and the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons; aided in solving many conflicts between its member states; promoted negotiations for resolving civil and military conflicts; become involved in important matters such as the population explosion, the exploration of outer space, contamination of the oceans and maritime law, among many other issues.⁵

In sum, there is hardly any human activity that the UN is not involved in. For this reason it has become an indis-

pensable part of international life. The necessary conclusion is that if the United Nations had not existed, it would have been necessary to invent something like it, capable of dealing with the fast-paced interaction among countries as well as the infinite problems of a globalized world.

MEXICO IN THE UNITED NATIONS

At the end of World War II, the Latin American countries made efforts to ensure that the hemisphere-wide solidarity forged with the United States of President Roosevelt during his term of office translated into cooperation for the region's economic and social development. However, post-war Washington lost the interest it had had in its neighbors because its priority became the rivalry with the USSR, and it centered its efforts on recovering Europe. Given that situation, Mexico called for the 1945 Inter-American Conference on Problems of War and Peace, held in Chapultepec Castle. Here, the new reality of world politics was made even clearer, with Latin America on the back burner. This meant that Washington defined its policy toward these countries in terms of the struggle against communism. Given Mexican diplomacy's insistence on reinforcing solidarity

Since the creation of the UN, Mexico's presence has been constant and there has hardly been any important issue in which its government has not participated.

for progress, the Inter-American Economic and Social Council of the then Pan-American Union wrote an economic cooperation project to be discussed in the 1948 Bogota conference. But, since in 1947 a meeting was held in Rio de Janeiro that approved the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance,⁶ regional cooperation was formally subordinated to the U.S. desire to forge an alliance against the USSR and incorporate Latin America into the East-West conflict. Since that orientation vigorously made itself felt at the Bogota Conference that approved the charter of the Organization of American States, Mexico preferred to stay relatively isolated inside the regional body and put a high priority on its participation in the UN System, not only because it had been one of its 51 founding countries, but mainly because it considered that its interests would be better safeguarded there. After that, Mexico carried out an intense program of activities inside the world organization and its specialized bodies; this was not only because it was seen as the ideal means to promote national interests and contribute to creating a more peaceful, equitable world, but also because the United Nations' basic premises jibed completely with the main traditions of Mexican foreign policy. In addition, and since many of the UN system's tasks were also compatible with the country's development projects, Mexico relied on the international body as an additional lever to advance them, and has benefitted enormously from a large number of technical assistance programs. Mexico's multilateral activity and the external assistance for development was so important to the country that when in the 1980s the government decided to incorporate our

historic principles of foreign policy into Article 89, Section X of the Constitution, not only did it include traditional principles like self-determination, non-intervention and the peaceful solution of controversies, but also relatively new ones related to multi-lateralism: banning the threat or the use of force in international relations, the legal equality of states, international cooperation for development and the struggle for international peace and security.

In summary since the creation of the UN, Mexico's presence has been constant and there has hardly been any important issue, debate or international meeting in which its government has not participated. It has also hosted many UN-sponsored conferences, and, of course, has punctually paid its dues. Mexico's association with the United Nations has undoubtedly been mutually beneficial given that our country has found it to be the ideal forum for making its voice heard and for contributing to resolving the challenges of international affairs and the growing problems of an interdependent world. So, we can conclude that Mexico's adherence and loyalty to the UN has become a real "state policy" given that, regardless of who occupies the executive branch or the political party he is from, our commitment to the UN has remained constant for 60 years.

THE REFORM OF THE UN

In recent years, the world has gone through a profound, revolutionary transformation reflected mainly in the international scene, which has become more convulsive, unstable, insecure and unpredictable. Just as an example, suffice it to mention that since the end

of the Cold War, 23 new or modified states with 170 million inhabitants have become independent, mainly in the vast Eurasian region. The rivalry unleashed between countries—more economic than political—has become more aggressive. And since the 1990s, more than 95 wars have been waged costing humanity 5 million fatalities. Given this disquieting panorama, it is obvious that the UN, created for a Cold War world, has not adapted to the changing situation since that Cold War ended, and that it urgently requires a reform to adjust to the twenty-first century's unprecedented circumstances.

The UN Secretary General's office itself has been carrying out a series of important reforms to bring the institution up to date to meet the challenges of the new millennium. Among them are those undertaken by previous secretary generals and those of Kofi Annan, the current secretary general. Since 1997, a wide variety of initiatives aimed at consolidating the system's broad, diffuse structure have been taken to reduce duplication and spending, to improve coordination and to more precisely define the responsibilities and functions of the institution's many components. About 30 departments, funds and programs have been grouped together in four priority areas: peace and security, humanitarian affairs, development and

economic and social affairs. Also, Annan created a group of experts to rationalize the performance of the UN's numerous, valuable staff, eliminating 1,000 vacant positions. He has sought to forge better coordination among all the agencies that operate in around 134 countries creating the "UN Houses" that quarter them all to share costs, and he has strengthened the role of UN Resident Coordinators both to improve coordination and to more efficiently integrate their activities into the plans and priorities of the governments of host nations. Also, considerable effort has been expended to improve peacekeeping operations, and new forms of relations with civil society and the private sector have been sought. As part of this and many other actions, in September 2000 the Millennium Summit was held with the participation of 147 heads of state and government. The summit approved the Millennium Declaration, which established a series of goals and principles for future action regarding peace and security, protection of the environment, respect for human rights and good government, placing special emphasis on attending to the urgent needs of Africa. Specific time lines were established for diminishing poverty levels, disease, hunger, illiteracy and gender discrimination, proposing the goal of reaching these objectives before the year 2015.

Independently of this, however, it is obvious that the main responsibility for the reform falls to the member states. Unfortunately, they have not yet come to an agreement about it. While they are convinced that the reforms are urgent, it has not been possible for the 191 member states, of all possible levels of development and political weight, to come to the necessary consensus.

It is obvious that the UN, created for a Cold War world, has not adapted to the changing situation and it urgently requires a reform.

As could be expected given its outstanding participation in the UN since its foundation, Mexico has played an active role with regard to the reforms, both individually and in association with other nations with which it shares points of view. The Mexican position has been based on the conviction that we are faced with a historic opportunity to bring the UN into line with its challenges and that the reform of an institution which is the best alternative for dealing with the complexities of the new, globalized millennium cannot be postponed. Since this position has been echoed by several countries, Mexico has joined different mechanisms like the Group of Friends of the Reform of the United Nations, made up of 15 nations, the Green Tree Group (made up of the permanent representatives of Australia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Singapore and South Africa), the so-called Coffee Club (which also includes Argentina, Colombia, Kenya, Algeria, Italy, Spain, Pakistan and South Korea), which later became the Like Minded Group which sought to promote an overall reform, including one of the Security Council.

Since the reform of the Security Council has been the center of most of the debate, Mexico has insisted that it should not distract attention from the other very important reforms relating to the system as a whole and the UN's other bodies like the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Secretary General's office itself. However, since the Security Council is by definition the main center of power around which the UN's general activities turn, its restructuring has been one of the main sources of controversy. The Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change

Mexico thinks that creating new permanent seats would reaffirm the Security Council's current undemocratic character and continue to concentrate decision-making power in a small group of nations.

was created to contribute to centering the debate on the more substantive issues. This panel has formulated a great many proposals and recommendations, among them the two options that have received the most support for changing the Security Council. The so-called "Option A" involves broadening out the council with six more permanent seats and 13 non-permanent seats, bringing its total membership to 24. This alternative has mainly been promoted by nations that aspire to a permanent seat next to the countries that already have one (the United States, Russia, Great Britain, France and China), such as Germany, Japan, India and Brazil. A large part of the discussion has centered on the transcendental issue of whether these new permanent members would have the right to veto or not, since there is concern—and rightly so—that this could lead to the paralysis of the body if the 11 countries with a veto could not come to an agreement. "Option B" also proposes broadening the council out to 24 seats, but making 19 of those seats non-permanent: eight would have a tenure of four years and 11 would only be for two years. Some of these would be subject to re-election and others not. This second formula would institutionalize a new category in addition to the current 5 permanent members and 10 non-permanent members, based

on the length of the new seats' tenure and the possibility of re-election. Mexico favors the second alternative because it thinks that creating new permanent seats would reaffirm the Security Council's current undemocratic character and would continue to concentrate decision-making power in a small group of nations. To the contrary, increasing the number of non-permanent seats would ensure broader and more democratic participation, representation and rotation of all the members. In addition, the proposed re-election, just like in each country individually, would imply greater accountability of those countries being re-elected and would reinforce the democratic spirit. Mexico, for its part, has made it clear that if "Option B" is not approved, it would revise its position and might well aspire to occupying a permanent seat on the council. In that sense, the regional issue has also been the object of a broad debate, since definitive agreements have not been reached about who would occupy the permanent seats to represent the geographic regions.

Mexico also shares the idea of finding a more up-to-date, broader definition of international security, which includes both the "old" and the "new" threats. It considers that "preventive" action should be given the priority over "reaction" and that the problems of development and poverty should be a substantial part of this new conception. It considers that once and for all a precise, widely accepted definition should be reached about what we understand by "terrorism", that a new internal mechanism should be created inside the UN to coordinate the most urgent actions of its main bodies and that obvious current world issues like migration should occupy a prominent

place on the restructured organization's agenda.

In the last analysis and as happened during the previous 60 years, the final decision to create a more effective, solidarity-based, democratic organization that effectively deals with the problems of an increasingly complicated world will depend fundamentally on the political will of the member countries. Unfortunately, that political will did not exist at the last session of the General Assembly, which was only capable of adopting a partial "light"

reform, leaving many of the important issues to be discussed and debated later. We should emphasize that the United Nations is not only an institution that belongs to the governments, but it is also a heritage of all citizens who, in the twenty-first century, equally share the problems of a globalized world. For that reason and since world peace and the common good are a matter for all the world's inhabitants, world public opinion must insist on and press for the definitive resolution of the slow process of reforms underway. ■■

NOTES

¹ Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newman, *Dictionary of International Relations* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 70.

² Richard Hofstadter and Beatrice K. Hofstadter, *Great Issues in American History: from Reconstruction to the Present Day, 1864-1981* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), p. 422.

³ <http://www.un.org/spanish/aboutun/brief5.html>

⁴ <http://www.un.org/spanish/aboutun/brief7.html>

⁵ More detailed information about the multiple tasks carried out by the UN can be found at <http://www.un.org/spanish/aboutun/achieve.htm>.

⁶ It should be remembered that Mexico denounced this treaty in 2001.