

When Global Governance Wins: The Role of the United Nations in Decolonization

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Abstract:

The field of history is often criticized for not developing enough policy implications to be set forth and govern the future. I too once felt this way. However, upon exploring the complexities of the history of decolonization, I quickly realized that history is filled with political implications. The policy we implement now derives from past experience. Without history, we would have no direction forward. My exploration of the history of decolonization led me to a very interesting crossroad. I began closely examining the relationship that global governance had in regards to the establishment and dismantling of colonial states. Upon further research, I concluded that following the atrocities and destruction of the Second World War, the international community was in great need of an overarching governance architecture, a system which would play a pivotal role in the coming Cold War. Upon the inception of the United Nations, a new world order came to be and international relations was forever changed. This new global governance, though still soft in power, began to aid nations which had been historically

oppressed by exploitative colonizers. The United Nations began playing a crucial role in the implementation of decolonization. I utilize three case studies to prove the importance of the role of the United Nations: India, the Congo, and the Portuguese Colonies. Through my examination of their respective decolonization processes, I highlight the role which the United Nations played in each instance and the effects that such a role had on the former colony. My findings underscore the fact that, though the United Nations is not without flaws, ultimately its involvement proved beneficial and furthered its growth as an intergovernmental organization. The implication of these findings was the demonstration that, though the United Nations will make mistakes, its existence represents years of relentless work towards a brighter future.

Background:

The year 1945 witnessed two definitive moments in modern history. After decades of turmoil and six long years of war, World War II came to an end. Shortly after, on October 24, the United Nations

emerged from the ashes of destruction. This organization, born from the ideals of Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations, established the framework for modern international law and the principles of self-determination. The principle of self-determination, the concept that a country can determine its own statehood and form its own government, as an international norm established by the United Nations echoed across the world in nationalism movements of colonials. Nationalism, marked by strong advocacy for political independence, was a powerful force which fueled the Allied forces during the war and had been building since the First World War and the interwar years. In the wake of World War II a wave of nationalism swept across Asia and Africa, empowering historically oppressed people to seek independence from their colonial masters. With the intent of promoting international cooperation, the United Nations played a pivotal and constructive role in decolonization. Despite the challenges that it faces, fifty years after its inception it continues to advocate the ideals of self-determination and global community.

The decolonization process is directly interrelated with the impact of WWII on the international political system. The outbreak of the Second World War greatly undermined the colonial system by upsetting the balance of power that the imperial powers had enjoyed for so long. "During the war, several of the imperial powers of Europe were either overrun by Nazi Germany, as were France and the Netherlands, or were fighting

desperately for survival, as was Great Britain"(McWilliams, 111). In Asia, the colonial powers were unable to defend their colonies once Japan established its own colonial compass. Though the Japanese did exercise their own form of colonial control over the former European colonies, they ultimately fueled the nationalist movements in Southeast Asia, This shift of dominion demonstrated to the colonies that power was not a permanent state and that, with the strength of educated and worldly leaders such as Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh, independence was a reality that was within reach and worth being fought for (Dukier, 1890). In Africa, however, the rise to nationalism was a slower process. The main obstacle that African independence movements faced was the ethnic divides between peoples of one colonial state. "The inhabitants of any given colony were not all of the same ethnic group, and in some cases one ethnic group was spread over more than one colony"(McWilliams, 128). The growth of national consciousness in Africa required a sense of political unity to develop. Detachment between various ethnic groups resulted in a slower and more difficult movement towards independence, often causing violence and civil warfare to breakout amongst newly independent states. Nevertheless, the United Nations could not ignore these nationalist movements and therefore, through the establishment of the UN Charter, officially began its efforts to aid in the transitioning of these former colonies.

The United Nations and International Law:

To better gauge the importance of the United Nations and its role in decolonization, we must first establish an understanding of international law. The philosophical origins of international law date as far as the 16th century. However, modern international law bases itself upon the idea of normative international standards that are, in their nature, non-binding, having no true legal force. This idea of non-binding norms is derived from the concept of state sovereignty, establishing that there can be no power higher than the state (Crawford, 62). Though sovereignty is fundamental in the realm of international relations and can be a constructive standard, it often times creates daunting challenges for international cooperation. The United Nations, as an international organization established to create international law, faces the challenge of lacking enforcement mechanisms because of this norm of state sovereignty. Its establishment was a powerful step towards enhancing the framework for the practice of stable and organized international relations, the primary goal of international law (Slomanson, 4-5). With the understanding of these cooperation challenges in mind, we can better analyze the role that the United Nations has played in decolonization and the promotion of international peace and security. In 1960, as the Cold War was underway and the global struggle for power and influence

intensified, the United Nations established the Declaration for the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples and the Special Committee on Decolonization (Committee of 24) (Ulam, 405). Because decolonization is based upon and motivated by the concept of the right to self-determination, the United Nations innately plays an essential role in the promotion of these movements and the promotion of an international system based on cooperation rather than exploitation.

The United Nations was created in 1945 under four foundational purposes established in the UN Charter, Chapter I, Article 1. The purpose read as follows:

1. To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;
2. To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;
3. To achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and

in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and

4. To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends. (United Nations Charter)

Though the Declaration for the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples was not established until 1960, the language in the first article of the UN Charter established a precedence for the promotion of self-determination for all peoples without discrimination. The UN was established as a reaction to the atrocities committed during WWII and to create a preemptive and preventative body to avoid another such global conflict. Inherent in that preemption is the abolition of colonialism, a disruptive, exploitative system that degraded the value of the individual and created a sense of discrimination and mistrust throughout the international community. The UN Charter Chapter XII established the International Trusteeship System “for the supervision of Trust Territories placed under it by individual agreements with the States administering them” (United Nations Charter). The Trusteeship Council was to oversee the transition of Trust Territories, which were non self-governed territories that had been placed under the supervision of the Council for a variety of reasons. The task that the United Nations had just delegated itself was daunting – aiding the transition of former colonies to self-governing states

in an environment where the balance of power had just been upset by World War II and the two emerging superpowers were about to enter into the most definitive and polarized period of the 20th century, the Cold War.

Case Studies:

The role of the United Nations in the early, and decisive, decolonization phase can be better understood through specific instances of action and the implementation of UN decolonization resolutions, and I focus on three cases of such process. The first is the case of Great Britain granting India and Pakistan their independence. The resistance to British colonialism began far earlier than most other nationalist independent movements, in the 19th century. The decolonization of India and Pakistan demonstrated to other colonial nations seeking independence the power of peaceful resistance. The UN played a pivotal role in the diplomatic and military attempts to pacify the tension between Indian and Pakistan over the disputed territories between the two newly sovereign states. The involvement of the UN in this task force created the precedence for future peace-keeping missions. Secondly we examine the case of the Belgian Congo, a region with an incredibly violent colonial history. The case of the Belgian Congo, now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo, demonstrated the potential the UN military forces had in stabilizing a transitioning colony. However, the case became controversial in nature

considering the events that followed UN involvement in the former colony, exhibiting the dangers of enforcing international law and resulting in the need to reduce UN military capabilities. The third and final case we analyze is that of the Portuguese colonies. This case is also notable in that Portugal was historically reluctant to relinquish control over its colonies. Because Portugal did not recognize the legitimacy of the UN's Decolonization Committee, the UN, in turn, decided to aid decolonization through supporting the national liberation movements within the colonies themselves rather than attempting to gain recognition.

India:

India's relationship with the United Nations represents the dichotomy of international law and the struggle between bilateral cooperation versus Great Power politics. As one of the first non-sovereign territories to be a founding member of the UN in 1945, "India brought to the UN its ideals of anti-colonialism, opposition to racial discrimination and non-alignment in the nascent Cold War, and tried to obtain a leadership position within the organization by appealing to the universal morals enshrined in the UN Charter" (Chaulia, 278). After stripping itself of "the Crown Jewel of the British Empire" title and gaining its independence in 1947, India placed itself on the international stage as a proponent for soft international power and diplomacy. Its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, immersed India in UN

activities and peacekeeping operations in the hopes of gaining greater international power through diplomacy. However, newly independent India quickly found itself facing a global atmosphere of Great Power politics, an arena in which Nehru did not want to align himself to either ideological camp. The role of the UN in the decolonization process of India was complex in that it demonstrated to the newly sovereign territory that, in order to succeed in world politics and the post-war era, it needed to align itself with the Great Powers and acquiesce, in some regards, to the agenda of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. With this understanding in mind, Nehru blundered twice in securing India a seat on the P-5. These blunders, however, were not from poor political leadership, but from refusing to give in to the alignment climate of the Cold War era. India, with its history of passive resistance, represents the dichotomy between hard power and soft power, never wishing to take part in power politics and hoping to pursue bilateral cooperation (such as in the case of the disputed territory of Kashmir), but ultimately being beaten back by the world's thickest governance architecture. The relationship between the United Nations and India demonstrates both the checks that international law and global governance have on non-compliant nations but also the challenges they create for international cooperation.

The Congo:

The case of the independence movement in the Congo represented the

vulnerability of newly sovereign territories in the Cold War era in relation to receiving UN recognition and finding a place in the bipolar post-war atmosphere. Once Belgium ratified article 73 of the UN Charter, which, in particular, established the need “to develop self-government, to take due account of the political aspirations of the peoples, and to assist them in the progressive development of their free political institutions, according to the particular circumstances of each territory and its peoples and their varying stages of advancement”, the UN began to put pressure on Belgium to radically modify its colonial policies in the Congo (Charter of the United Nations). Ultimately, the movement for independence came from within the Congo. The Congo became independent in June of 1960, followed by the election of Patrice Lumumba as Prime Minister and Joseph Kasavubu as Head of State. The events that followed resulted in political struggle, a tragic war, and “foreign intervention [that] could only contribute to what became an extraordinarily violent war that lasted over two years and left tens of thousands dead”(McWilliams, 142). The state of Congo fell into mutiny following the declaration of secession by the western region of Katanga. Lumumba, in the face of chaos, requested aid from the UN Security Council. However, due to the polarization of the UNSC during the Cold War, the member states proved unable to come to a consensus and impotent in providing assistance to a desperate Lumumba, who ultimately turned to the Soviet

Union for assistance (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/congo-decolonization>). Fearful of increasing Soviet influence in the Congo, western powers aided Kasavubu and Colonel Joseph Mobutu in the overthrowing and ultimate assassination of Lumumba. The Congo ultimately landed in the hands of Joseph Mobutu, who practically reverted to colonial rule (McWilliams, 143). The crisis of the Congo could have been greatly alleviated had the UN not been so polarized and been able to make a decisive move in preventing the widespread violence and mutiny which Lumumba faced. The event that followed the Congo’s independence demonstrated to the international community and to the decolonizing states that, despite the established norm of self-determination, success in the world they were entertaining was now defined by Great Power politics and bipolar ideological alignments and, in this instance, the UN had failed to exercise global governance free of these ideologies.

Portuguese Colonies:

Portugal presents an interesting case in its refusal not only to decolonize but to recognize it had colonies all together. Under the fascist dictatorship of Antonio Salazar, independence was out of the question. These non-self-governing territories were considered “overseas provinces” (Schmidt, 79). Because of Portugal’s refusal to recognize its colonies as non-self-governing territories, the Special Committee charged with settling a definition of these territories

created Resolution 1542, in which “all Portuguese colonies were qualified as non-self-governing territories” granting the UN legal capacity to study them as non-self-governing territories (Santo, 250). Once the UN had established a definition for these colonies as non-self-governing territories, they were able to provide aid to various national liberation movements within the colonies of Angola and Mozambique. This aid, however, did not come easily. Because of the polarization of the UN Security Council at the time, passing resolutions to fund aid to these liberation movements proved difficult. NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), provided “hundreds of millions of dollars in military and economic aid that enabled Portugal to finance three simultaneous wars and bolster its failing economy” (Schmidt, 81). In opposition to NATO’s support were primarily the Nordic countries, such as Finland, Sweden, and Norway, and the Soviet Union, which “urged the adoption of a strong support to the national liberation movements” (Santo, 254). The opposition that the UNSC and the UN Decolonization Committee faced in legitimizing the various national liberation movements were overcome in the early seventies with the withdrawal of Australia, the US, and UK from the Committee in 1971 and greater global recognition of the liberation movements from organizations like the Organization of African Unity. In September of that same year, the Committee granted the colonies “observer status” which enabled them to more actively participate in the

Committee’s discussions and gain further international recognition (General Assembly of the United Nations). The Decolonization Committee’s involvement in the liberation of the Portuguese colonies was considerably difficult because of Portugal’s total refusal to comply with the norm of self-determination and to recognize the Committee’s legitimacy. This lack of cooperation, however, did not deter the Committee from pursuing the liberation of the Portuguese colonies and, in 1975, the colonies finally attained independence. The case of Portugal and its colonies demonstrated to an incredibly polarized international community that, as an international organization, the UN can create change even in the face non-compliance.

Conclusion:

The topic of the United Nation’s involvement in decolonization is incredibly broad and multifaceted. As an organization, the UN faced, and continues to face, incredible challenges in engaging nations in international cooperation towards a brighter future. However, the obstacles are not insurmountable. The cases I have examined are examples of the power of the United Nations. International cooperation is not impossible, the international community just needs to make room for global governance to establish a framework that nations should abide by. Though some fear that global governance detracts from state sovereignty, sacrifice is always necessary for the sake of change. Decolonization,

as paralleled with the Cold War, demonstrated to the global community the importance of harboring respect, not just for state autonomy, but for an individual's right to self-determination. The UN's efforts in aiding the transition from non-self-governing territories to fully autonomous nation-states were constructive and further promoted the idea of global equality and international relations. In the face of the Cold War, the UN continuously attempted, and, for the most part, succeeded in overcoming the East-West dichotomy and harboring a sense of global community. Though the zenith of decolonization is behind us, its legacy still defines international relations and, in the post-Cold War era, we look to a future of better foreign policy practices and greater respect for the wellbeing of the individual, the state, and global community at both the societal and political levels.

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