In Memoriam

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Javier Pérez de Cuéllar
1920–2020
UN Secretary-General
1982–1991

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Javier Pérez de Cuéllar's death on 4 March 2020, weeks after he turned 100 years old, evoked the time of unparalleled peacemaking success that was his decade as UN Secretary-General. There is no room for invidious comparisons; we are not today where we were then. But as we watch the Sisyphean travails of some UN mediators, a modicum of nostalgia is understandable.

In a few months, thirty years will have elapsed since Pérez de Cuéllar left office after an unparalleled string of peacemaking successes as part of the transition out of the Cold War. Other than the first-ever meeting of the Security Council at the summit level, on 31 January 1992, which sang his praise, Pérez de Cuéllar's time in office was somewhat drowned out by the spectacular setbacks (Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda) that marred his successor's five-year term and it remains largely unexamined. Now that we have the necessary remove, I cannot think of a better way to memorialize him than to discuss his imprint on history.

The UN's architects managed to fix many of the flaws of the League Covenant but, in the new organization's Charter, they relied heavily on the willingness of the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5) to work together to maintain international peace and security, acting on behalf of the membership as a whole rather than in their national interests. By the late 1940s, as the Cold War set in, that premise evaporated, largely paralyzing the Security Council and impairing the ability of the first four Secretaries-General to perform the role they might have played.

Détente notwithstanding, the paralysis remained when Pérez de Cuéllar took office in 1982. He came to office as a lifetime observer of the world scene

Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, former UN Secretary-General 1982–1991
UN PHOTO/JOHN ISAAC

with many years of fresh UN experience under his belt, including a two-year stint on the Security Council when Peru was an elected member in 1973–1974 and several years as a senior UN official during which he tackled various issues, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Pérez de Cuéllar did not ask for the job. He told the Peruvian Foreign Ministry to do nothing unless and until the endless deadlock of late 1981 between Kurt Waldheim and Salim Salim was resolved and, when it was, to just let the members of the Security Council know that he was available. Don't ask for their

support. And, by the way, he would not go to New York. His attitude—or perhaps his strategy—was “they know me.”

Arguably, campaigning was unnecessary. He was known and respected. The professionals sought out this diplomat's diplomat for his sound judgement rather than for parliamentary dexterity or oratorical wizardry, which were not his strong suits. He was known to possess that elusive, indefinable, unlearnable set of skills known as “a safe pair of hands.” Sure enough, days after the deadlock was broken, only he had the requisite number of votes and no vetoes.

For most of the world outside UN headquarters, Pérez de Cuéllar was unknown. With his soft voice and reticent manner, he didn't fit the ebullient Latin American stereotype. He made clear from the start that one five-year term would do. He soon put an end to the knee-jerk habit of offering UN good offices whatever the dispute: the byword on the 38th floor was “don't jump into an empty pool.” Political capital is a scarce commodity; let's not waste it. One skeptical journalist, perhaps disappointed at the absence of any trace of the tropics in the new incumbent, commented that he could fall off a boat without making a splash. It was not meant as a compliment, but Pérez de Cuéllar was undisturbed: he didn't see making a splash as useful for the performance of his job.

Pérez de Cuéllar tried, following US Secretary of State Alexander Haig's failure, to defuse the crisis in the South Atlantic after the military junta governing Argentina abruptly seized the Falklands/Malvinas and other islands, and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher surprised them by sending a fleet to recover the islands. Working against the clock, Pérez de Cuéllar didn't succeed either, but he earned much praise and appreciation for his endeavors; the blame lay elsewhere.

That nineteenth-century war—as Pérez de Cuéllar called it—was an anomaly that distracted him from the central, overarching challenge of the time, the Cold War, which pervaded almost every conflict. He knew that it would be futile to launch a frontal assault on that epochal standoff; it would have to await a change in context, which would come in the fullness of time. He quietly went about deconstructing its component parts, tackling various regional conflicts with a clockmaker's tools, having at the ready—as he used to say—a pharmacist's scales, probing, querying, cajoling, gaining confidence, gradually accumulating precious credibility.

As he went along, always avoiding the limelight, he brought Security Council members, permanent and elected, into his confidence, keeping them in the picture about his efforts. He forged with them a complicity that helped to revitalize a dormant, despondent, and fractious Council, developing the indispensable institutional partnership between them into something close to an art form. The context changed with the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev to power in the

USSR, and Perez de Cuéllar pushed forward his peacemaking efforts and those led by others within the UN framework.

On 13 May 1986, a quarter-century after Dag Hammarskjöld, Pérez de Cuéllar delivered the Cyril Foster lecture at Oxford University, speaking about “The Role of the Secretary-General.” His discussion of the good offices of the Secretary-General may be his most notable written legacy. In it, he described impartiality as “the heart and soul” of the Secretary-General’s office. He concluded that “no person should ever be a candidate, declared or undeclared, for this office”, lest that impartiality be compromised. “It is a post that should come *unsought* to a qualified person.”¹ It was an implicit recommendation to the Council—issued seven months before the end of his five-year term—to take the initiative of seeking out a suitable person rather than await bids from Member States.

Later that month, feeling unwell, Pérez de Cuéllar was hurried into cardiac surgery and underwent a multiple bypass. After a few weeks he was much better but, come October, the Security Council, not quite believing his oft-repeated vow not to serve a second term, had still not initiated the search for a successor.

Even though his work on regional conflicts had not yet borne tangible fruit, the P5 shared the perception that Pérez de Cuéllar was on the right track. Undeterred by either his bypass surgery or the assertion of independence that jumped off the page of his Oxford lecture, they agreed to press him to stay on. Perhaps expecting some pushback, they did something extra: they went to see him *together* and jointly appealed to him to accept another term. Nothing like that had been seen since the 1940s.

Weighing the significance of the P5’s démarche, Pérez de Cuéllar gave his consent. He wasted no time in capitalizing on his strong new mandate. At the first press conference of his second term, in January 1987, a journalist was easily persuaded to ask a question about arms sales to Iran and Iraq by permanent members of the Security Council, an issue about which the Secretary-General felt strongly.

Iran had written off the Security Council following the tilt in favor of Iraq when Saddam Hussein invaded Iranian territory. Soon after taking office, Pérez de Cuéllar, without losing Iraq’s confidence, privately dissociated himself from the Council and regained the confidence of Iran. He then brokered important agreements between the warring parties, including exchanges of prisoners, a commitment not to bombard purely civilian targets, and a mechanism to quickly deploy a standby team of inspectors to be triggered automatically

1 Pérez de Cuéllar 1986, 133.

by accusations of the use of chemical weapons—long before the creation of Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Responding to the journalist's question at the press conference, Pérez de Cuéllar made a rare public appeal to the P5: instead of selling arms to the parties in conflict, they should sell them ideas for ending their war. The P5 took the point and set about creating, with considerable input from Pérez de Cuéllar, a blueprint for ending the war, which contained a measure of atonement for their mishandling of Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion. Some months later, the Security Council approved the P5's proposal of a blueprint for a negotiated end to the conflict.

It was in the second year of his second term that Pérez de Cuéllar's painstaking efforts and those of others working under the Security Council's umbrella began to pay off, starting with the 1988 UN-mediated agreement under which the USSR was to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. The UN-monitored cease-fire and separation of forces that ended the Iran-Iraq War came shortly after. Working quietly with a new South African leadership and others, he helped bring about a solution to the conflict in Angola, clearing the way for the self-determination of Namibia and its 1989 independence, over which he proudly presided. He also lent a hand to bring about the Paris Accords of October 1991 that ended the war between Cambodia and Vietnam.

For the UN to become involved in solving the Central American crises of the 1980s, the atavistic resistance in the region to a UN political role in Latin America had to be surmounted. When the Contadora Group's efforts waned, Pérez de Cuéllar moved to deploy an unprecedented peace observation mission along the borders between Central American states to verify implementation of their undertakings not to interfere in each other's affairs or permit the use of their territories to that end. The UN played a key role in monitoring early elections in Nicaragua, something that the UN had never done in a Member State, and in disarming and destroying the weapons of the Contras, the US-supported irregular forces that had caused so much destruction.

When the warring parties in the El Salvador civil war each separately realized, during the major offensive launched by a Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) insurgency in November 1989, that they could not win militarily, they asked Pérez de Cuéllar to help them find a way out of their decade-long conflict. The groundbreaking mediation that ensued—the first by the UN of an internal conflict—produced far-reaching reforms and pioneered an entirely new breed of multidimensional ground operations—what Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in *An Agenda for Peace*, called “post-conflict peace-building.”² The peace accord was initialed at midnight on Pérez de Cuéllar's

² Boutros-Ghali, 5.

last day in office. Ongoing efforts to solve long-standing conflicts in Guatemala and Mozambique were successfully completed after he left office.

These accomplishments, individually, were momentous for the nations concerned. Taken together, they were pieces in a broader global narrative: the history of the unwinding of the Cold War and Pérez de Cuéllar's imprint on it.

I say "unwinding" rather than "end" advisedly: I believe the time has come to redefine what we mean when we speak of the Cold War. As an attempt to describe the relationship between the United States and the USSR from the late 1940s to the end of the 1980s, the term *Cold War* is obviously a metaphor, catchy then as now, and it has stuck. Even though they pointed at each other weapons that could destroy civilization many times over, they avoided direct combat for fear of escalation. No fire was exchanged, it wasn't a regular war; hence, the Cold War.

But there was another facet of the complex, multilevel web of phenomena that were part of this Cold War, which seems not to be fully understood and must be highlighted.

The so-called Cold War did involve plenty of real military conflict of the *hot* variety. People were shooting and killing each other, many of them civilians, many of them displaced within their countries and beyond. Thus, while the major powers avoided engaging their military in the hot wars, they were actively involved, sometimes through regional allies, in the provision of weaponry, finance, and advice to encourage combatants to either start fighting or to continue it. It was part of their competition, both geopolitical and ideological, for spheres of influence. These local wars fueled from outside—broadly known as "proxy wars"—were part of an effort by Moscow and Washington to compartmentalize the world between those who were aligned with them and those who were seen as aligned with the other. The revulsion against alignment with one or the other even spawned the Non-Aligned Movement composed of well over 100 countries.

So, the "Cold War" was not just a metaphor: cold at the pinnacle and hot on the periphery; it was a misnomer. These conflicts were so exacerbated by the Cold War and its overbearing ideological element that they must be considered part and parcel of it. In the same way, the search for solving them through negotiation was an integral part of the gradual dismantling of the Cold War. Each negotiated solution of a Cold War-infused conflict was a landmark in the gradual unwinding of the Cold War.

I have often been puzzled by the self-congratulatory rhetoric of how the Cold War was "won" and who was the victor. Once again, the name "Cold War" misleads some into treating it as if it had really been a war in the sense that Thucydides, Sun Tzu, or Clausewitz might have used the term. Well, no. It was

a broad, pervasive, complex, multilevel phenomenon. As such, its various components unwound gradually. Bringing it to an end was a process rather than an event, and the Cold War wound down piece by piece, each facilitating the next one, including prominently the negotiated end of wars in various theaters and the defusing of dangerous confrontations. Ask scholars at what date it can be said that we were no longer in the Cold War and you are likely to get different answers. Was it the fall of the Berlin Wall? The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? The breakup of the USSR?

On several occasions early in his term of office, Boutros-Ghali, Pérez de Cuéllar's successor, compared the convulsions that followed the Cold War to the junctures at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, and World War II, each of which had been followed by a major conference that essentially laid down the new world order. He suggested a similar reflection to consider what needed to be done in the face of the new challenges exploding right and left.

There are those who dismiss the significance of the negotiated end of the Cold War-infused wars on the periphery as mere by-products of the decision of the United States and the USSR to end their confrontation. They would have us believe that the solution of those conflicts was a mere corollary. I do not dispute the historic importance of the leadership of the superpowers. I take issue, rather, with the notion that the end of their era of confrontation led almost automatically to the solution of the conflicts—details to be sorted out by minions at the appropriate level.

The fact is that each of those conflicts had to be tackled according to its individual specificities, and Pérez de Cuéllar and others worked to that end starting well before the superpowers buried the hatchet. The superpowers had played a decisive role in fueling those conflicts, but they were far from having the level of understanding of the situation and the degree of control over events on the ground that would have been needed to flip the switch on them. In almost all cases, the proxies in the Cold War-infused wars were not contractors that could be sent home: the intervention of external powers was usually grafted onto existing, genuine, low-intensity conflict or, short of conflict, inchoate grievances and identifiable actors that could be shaped and organized into fighting forces by covert means. This gave the external intervenors a margin of deniability regarding their role. But outside intervention frequently exacerbated and expanded the violence, magnified the role of local armed leaders, and, conversely, limited the ability of the external patrons to influence events. Proxies so empowered, like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, were not always inclined to follow the dictates of those patrons when they decided that the time had come for their protégés to disarm or disband. Conflicts and the actors in them have a way of acquiring a life of their own.

An additional set of problems consisted of the fact that those who intervened were not infallible. They misgauged the situation at the start, or incorrectly assessed the legitimacy and reliability of those they supported. The advice they provided to UN mediators was not always sound. The achievement of solutions to the conflicts was difficult and frequently uphill, and it sometimes involved going against the wishes of the erstwhile patrons.

The Cold War needs to be dealt with holistically. To treat its manifestations below the level of the superpowers as if they were housekeeping matters does not help to understand it.

What came about during the last three and a half years of Pérez de Cuéllar's decade in office was a positive synergy between his and the UN's conflict resolution efforts, and the gradual convergence between the United States and the USSR that their confrontation had to end. The local conflicts ended via negotiation; that is, with neither winner nor loser. Pérez de Cuéllar's creative peacemaking was a decisive tool in that joint endeavor, a complement to the superpowers' will to terminate the Cold War. The idea that there was a victor in a so-called war that wasn't one, and which fueled other wars that were ended by negotiation, strikes me as bizarre.

Success has many fathers and mothers. Could the UN's peacemaking have succeeded without the improvement of the climate at the top of the pyramid? Not sure. The real question is whether, without the peacemaking, in which Pérez de Cuéllar played a central role, the Cold War could be considered to have ended.

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