The United Nations Peacekeeping: A View of the First 50 Years at the Brink of a New Century*

The merits and demerits of United Nations peace-keeping are widely debated in various contexts, in the United Nations itself, in the U.S. Congress and in the press, by the likes of Brian Urquhart, Henry Kissinger, Madeleine Albright, Cyrus Vance, Bill Maynes, and John Bolton to mention just a few. Numerous seminars, symposia and conferences on the subject have been organized at major institutions and universities with a high level of participation. To cite one instance, the latest issue of The Brown Journal of World Affairs¹ is, in large part, dedicated to U.N. Peacekeeping with contributions by the Secretary-General himself, the representatives of most of the members of the Security Council, Brian Urquhart, Yasushi Akashi, and others.

The debate on U.N. peacekeeping is also timely for another reason since it comes at the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. The various events which took place last year and continue this year to mark this anniversary, provide the opportunity for stocktaking, and for examining the new challenges and new opportunities facing the U.N. after half a century of its existence. Peacekeeping is, indeed, one of the focal points of this wide-ranging debate.

Having myself served at the U.N. on and off since 1960, and having studied it for five years before that, let me state my conviction that the U.N. is indispensable and its Charter has stood the test of time. It is based on sound principles and has proven sufficiently flexible to allow, through progressive interpretation, substantial adjustments to meet emerging needs; peacekeeping, the limitations to domestic jurisdiction or sovereignty, especially in the protection of human rights, come readily to mind. While there is considerable room for improvement, restructuring and regeneration in the organization itself, the emphasis should be not on tinkering with the Charter but on organizational reforms. Even more importantly, there must be emphasis

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on implementing effectively and consistently its purposes, principles, and the resolutions of its principal organs; such as the Security Council and the General Assembly.

U.N. peacekeeping has expanded enormously in recent years. Last year, there were 16 instead of the 5 operations in 1989, involving over 62,000 instead of less than 10,000 men, and costing 3.6 billion instead of 230 million dollars. This mushrooming of U.N. peacekeeping operations has paralleled the marked increase in regional and internal conflicts around the world in recent years. As highlighted by the recent U.S. Government report, “Global Humanitarian Emergencies 1996,” there are currently more than 20 active conflicts, compared with 4 in 1985: putting at immediate and grave risk more than 42 million people, a 60 per cent increase from 1985. And this may, in fact, be an underestimate, since the report does not even include some unresolved conflicts where U.N. peacekeeping is involved, such as in Cyprus, where the threat to peace and the risk to people is no less real.

I recently reread the latest Report of the Secretary-General on the work of the organization in order to get updated on the long litany of situations under the heading “Current activities in preventive diplomacy, peace-making and peace-keeping”, ranging, alphabetically, from Afghanistan to former Yugoslavia. It is a mind-boggling set of problems, and one cannot help but admire those who deal with their complexities and vicissitudes on a daily basis and are still able to sleep at night without nightmares. Indeed, we owe a debt of gratitude to Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali for his thoughtful and wide-ranging “Agenda for Peace” of 1992, which may have been somewhat overambitious, but gave rise to a constructive debate and led to several improvements in the field not only of peace-keeping but also of preventive diplomacy, peace-making and peace-building. In the intervening period, there has been a cessation of the U.N. operation in Somalia, which had given rise to much controversy, but new responsibilities were undertaken by the U.N. in Angola and Haiti.

In 1988, the U.N. peacekeeping was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. By contrast, recently there has been much criticism, not so much of peace-keeping in the classical or traditional sense as such, but of failed attempts at “peace enforcement” and “nation-building”. The current and foreseeable U.N. operations deal primarily with situations of civil war caused by ethnic strife.

Henry Kissinger, in the Washington Post, wrote: “What produced a congressional backlash was the shift from ‘peace-keeping’ to ‘peace-making’; that is from protecting an already achieved agreement to using international forces to bring one about. Not to put too fine a point on it, peacemaking spells war.” I am afraid Dr. Kissinger committed a terminological inexactitude, or at least made an inaccurate statement. What he evidently must have meant is not “peace-making,” through the accepted methods of dispute settlement set out in