History of the Foundation of the UN

In essence the concept of creating a system of collective security to safeguard the peace and to prevent breaches of peace goes back to the alliance of states against Germany, Italy and Japan in the Second World War. Although the League of Nations – which had been equipped with too few powers and which had not been able to prevent breaches of international law in the form of acts of aggression and war actions in major international conflicts – still existed, the states of the Anti-Axis Powers Coalition showed little inclination to continue the League of Nations after the end of the Second World War.

A new organization was to express the hope for a new “world order” in which world peace should be protected better and more effectively than had been the case so far. Furthermore, the new organization was to differ in an important point from the League of Nations: it was to include the USA, whose absence from the League of Nations on the grounds of its disapproval by the US Senate had decisively weakened that organization. That meant that the new organization had from the very beginning to take the interests of US foreign policy into account, so that there would be sufficient chances of obtaining the approval of the founding agreement in the US Senate.

US President Roosevelt was already at an early point of time, i.e. before the USA entered the war after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, convinced that it would be necessary to create a world organization for keeping world peace. He pleaded for the concept of a world organization under the leadership of the two great powers, USA and the United Kingdom of Great Britain (cf. Russell/Muther 1958, 96).

1. First Outlines of an International Organization: The Atlantic Charter of August 1941

With the intention of coordinating his own concepts of the post-war world order – including the planned world organization – with those of Churchill, President Roosevelt invited Churchill to a meeting on board a warship in the Atlantic near the coast of Newfoundland.

At that time the concepts of both statesmen differed considerably, in particular with regard to the new world organization. Churchill wanted to establish an international organization after the model of the League of Nations, supplemented by the principle of regional representation of states. Roosevelt however advocated an organization with an explicit leadership of the USA and of the United Kingdom, which was to control the disarmament of the former enemy states, the Axis powers and their allies, with the help of a strong British-American military force. Churchill wanted to mention the establishment of an international security organization in the final declaration of the meeting. Roosevelt was against it. He was of the opinion that the US Congress and public opinion in the USA were not ready – at that time, and with influential isolationist trends still being strong – to accept such a concept.
In the final declaration of the meeting of the two statesmen of 14 August 1941, called the “Atlantic Charter”, Roosevelt had prevailed to a large extent over Churchill. The planned world organization is mentioned only in one subordinate clause. In the Atlantic Charter Roosevelt and Churchill define common goals of the national foreign policies of their countries. They speak out against any attempts at territorial expansion, and against “territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned.” They speak out in favor of the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live, and they wish to see restored the sovereign rights and the self-government to those peoples who have been forcibly deprived of them. As for world economy, they plead for access of all states on equal terms to the trade and the raw materials of the world, and for collaboration with the objective of securing improved labor standards, economic progress and social security. Finally they advocate the abandonment of the use of force in foreign politics and disarmament: “… they believe that all of the nations of the world, for realistic as well as spiritual reasons, must come to the abandonment of the use of force. Since no future peace can be maintained if land, sea or air armaments continue to be employed by nations which threaten, or may threaten, aggression outside of their frontiers, they believe, pending the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security, that the disarmament of such nations is essential.” (US Department of State Bulletin, August 16, 1941, 125; reprinted in: UNYB 1946-47, 2).

Although Roosevelt and Churchill define in the Atlantic Charter the principles of the future world organization, they mention the organization – for the above-mentioned reason – only in the subordinate clause above quoted, namely in its function to create a system of general security.

Stalin had not been invited to the meeting of Roosevelt and Churchill, although the German attack on the USSR in June 1941 and the British-Soviet agreement on a common military action against Germany from July 1941 had changed the constellations in world politics decisively (McNeill 1953).

2. The Declaration By United Nations of 1 January 1942

After the USA and the United Kingdom had declared war on Japan on 8 December 1941, in reaction to the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbour, and Germany and Italy had answered this with their declaration of war on the USA, the latter was now interested in a broad coalition of states in a military and political alliance, in order to create a safe foundation for the war against the Axis powers. After a meeting of Roosevelt and Churchill on 22 December 1941 in Washington, where this issue was discussed, such a political alliance was formed in the “Declaration By United Nations,” in which the signatory states explicitly approved the Atlantic Charter, and declared that they intended to work together for the defense of freedom, independence and human rights in the fight against Germany, Japan, Italy and their allies. The 26 signatory states were the USA, the United Kingdom, the USSR, China, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Costa Rica, Czechoslovakia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Luxemburg, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Norway, Panama, Poland, South Africa and Yugoslavia. In the course of the war a further 21 states entered the alliance: Mexico, the Philippines and Ethiopia in 1942, Iraq, Brazil, Bolivia, Iran, Colombia in 1943, Liberia and France in 1944, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Paraguay, Venezuela, Uruguay, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Syria in 1945. (cf. US Department of State 1942, 1; reprinted in: UNYB 1946-47, 1)

The signatory states of the Washington declaration of 1 January 1942 called themselves “United Nations”, a name which – following the explicit desire of President Roosevelt – was transferred