Problems of UN Peacekeepings

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When the founding members were writing the United Nations charter in San Francisco in 1945, the provision for a permanent military capacity was not one of the controversial questions. Agreement on it was easy. The membership totaled 51 states. There were obviously going to be more. The admission of World War II enemy states was still a fairly long way off and Stalin had imposed a requirement that only countries which had declared war on Germany could be admitted. Latin America complied at the last minute. Nobody imagined that the process of decolonization, which became irresistible in the 1960’s, and later the fragmentation of empires including the Soviet Union itself would lead to a UN membership of 189 by now. And the proliferation no doubt isn’t over yet. There are several demands for statehood on the near horizon (Palestine, Kosovo, East Timor for example) and others likely to emerge.

The possibility of wars breaking out between members was nonetheless recognized by everyone. The attempt to prevent, or at any rate, to limit wars, was the central reason for the creation of the world organization. The failure of the League of Nations, and the illusions of utopia at its birth after World War I, were on everybody’s mind. The intensely conscious effort was to avoid repeating the same mistakes, such as requiring unanimity of decision. It was understood that no matter what kind of wise rules and good definitions of law might be achieved, the new organization was not going to have the capacity to prevent war between the major powers if they were determined to collide. That was an important argument for the establishment of the five permanent members of the Security Council each with a veto to escape constraint, which was extremely controversial but which the rest of the members were not able to overrule. At least, then, to the extent that the big powers agreed, the machinery was to be set up to prevent smaller countries from fighting and to stop them if they started.

The charter has a number of provisions for conflict resolution and the search for peaceful settlement, but it was recognized from the start that the use of force might be the only way to halt hostilities. Where cease-fires could be arranged, outside force could provide the reassurance each side required that its foe was not about to cheat on the truce and start up again. And where that was not possible, the charter provided for the UN to impose itself on the belligerents whether or not

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they were ready for peace, as NATO did in Kosovo without UN sanction because the Security Council did not approve.

The diplomatic process of the new peace machinery did have a few successes in the earliest days of the Security Council. The Soviet Union, which had occupied Iran’s northern province of Azerbaijan during the WW II with British agreement, decided to renege on its promise to withdraw within six months afterward. The result was an important international crisis and Moscow relented without anyone’s using force though it was rumored that President Truman made secret threats. France was obliged to pull out of Syria and Lebanon with Security Council intervention. But before details of the planned permanent military establishment could be organized and brought into existence, the cold war had reached a degree of confrontation which made clear that the original idea of an arm of international legality keeping the peace at least among the lesser powers, simply wasn’t going to be possible. Rather than the projected center of efforts for peace, the UN became the hub of argument and diplomatic confrontation. It did have an ostensible role in the Korean War after the northern invasion of the south. But that was only because the Soviet ambassador foolishly staged a walk-out when the Korean resolution came to a vote instead of registering his adamant veto, and after that the United States insisted on using a UN logo. But the US totally ran the war.

Since 1948, there have been 54 UN operations, most of them in the last decade, with 15 currently underway. A total of 37,880 people are now involved, of whom 28,538 are military and the remainder civilians. The number of countries which have contributed forces since the beginning is 88, and the expenditure since 1948 is $20.7 billion, of which $2.6 billion was for July 1, 2000 to June 30, 2001. There have been a total of 1654 fatalities, most of whom were in the Congo, Lebanon and Somalia.

The oldest mission is the one in Cyprus, put in place after the war between the Greek and Turkish communities there in 1964. It is indeed the arch-type of “peace-keeping”. There hasn’t been any fighting there since it was established but neither has any step towards building peace been made. Canada, a major force contributor, pulled out a few years ago in disgust on the grounds that the mission was dead in the water, achieving nothing but frustration. The UN has not been involved in preventing war between Greece and Turkey, which shadows the Cypriot dispute and which has been threatened several times. It is primarily NATO, of which both countries are members (but not Cyprus), that kept them from bumbling into open conflict. Still, Cyprus has been quiet if unreconciled.

The Arab-Israeli wars have given rise to a series of UN interventions, all of them of the observations type after a round of violence and a new set of accords. The Israelis have felt since the 1950’s that the UN missions are biased against them, as