Exploring, Overreaching, Giving Up?

The UN and Global Governance in Kashmir, Congo, and East Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper examines the attempts of the UN to become an active 'third force' in Cold War international politics in three case studies: the Kashmir conflict (1948–1950), the Congo Crisis (1960–1965), and the East Pakistan conflict (1971). It demonstrates that in all three crises, the UN sought to expand its political influence but was soon confronted with its own limitations and varying challenges arising from local and wider historical circumstances. The paper argues that by the 1970s, the initially ambitious approach to conflict settlement had given way to a pragmatic focus on the 'humanitarian' aspect of crisis management that shied away from the pursuit of political solutions, with lasting consequences for the UN's role in the international system.

In the Kashmir crisis, UN negotiators initially benefitted from a malleable international environment and sincere support by both India and Pakistan to solve their territorial dispute. Yet as the UN explored its ability in conflict resolution, it soon faced the limits of both its power and its legitimacy to overcome national suspicion and the insistence on state sovereignty. In contrast to Kashmir, the Congo was a case of mission creep and overreach. What had begun as an intervention to assist the Congolese government in ending Belgian interference soon degenerated into an exercise in state building, with the UN taking sides and supporting a largely illegitimate regime. The final case, the East Pakistan crisis of 1971, reveals the extent to which the UN had given up on playing an active role in the political settlement of international crises. As millions of East Pakistanis, accused of separatism, fled a massive military crackdown by the West Pakistani government into neighbouring India, the UN confined its reaction to expressions of concern, offers of mediation, and humanitarian aid.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the ambivalent legacy of the UN's Cold War conflict management in view of the more recent concept of the 'responsibility to protect.'