

An Invisible Surrender:
The UN and the Disappearance of the European Formal Empires
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Asahiko Hanzawa, Hokkaido University

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An Invisible Surrender: the UN and the disappearance of the European Formal Empires

Asahiko Hanzawa (Hokkaido University)

Introduction

The impact of the UN on the dissolution of the great European empires is a point of contention among scholars of international relations and of national/international history. In order to clarify the argument that I will put forward today at this conference, I would like to start with a summary of varied interpretations in those two disciplines on the relevance of the UN in European decolonisation.

Among IR scholars, liberal institutionalists acknowledge the UN's 'norm setting' role in a variety of issue-areas, especially environmental politics and such seemingly more or less out-of-the-way questions as the use of Antarctica, the Arctic region, ocean sea bed and outer space. It is said, quite plausibly, that 'international regimes' are set up around a set of internationally agreed norms and standards and that it is often the case that even very powerful governments and trans-national corporations (TNCs) do not necessarily enjoy unhindered freedom of action outside the given regime.¹ The UN is a natural focus in this argument and the case of decolonisation was indeed the first outstanding example taken up by the scholars of this orientation. Inis Claude, the author of *Swords into Ploughshares*, in 1966 wrote an article entitled 'Collective Legitimation as a Political Function of the United Nations' for the newly founded journal, *International Organisations*.² In this and other works, he appreciated that the UN, which had just become a historically unprecedented 'universal' organisation after its first organisational expansion from the mid-1950s onwards, played a central role in accelerating the pace of decolonisation and making the process irreversible in the 1960s by establishing new international norms against colonialism, which, even in the

¹ For instance, Young, Oran R., *Creating Regimes: Arctic Accords and International Governance* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988).

² Claude, Inis. 'Collective Legitimation as a Political Function of the United Nations'. *International Organisations*, Vol.20 (1966).

previous decade, was not totally unacceptable internationally provided that the rule was reasonably well-managed.

Historians generally remain either dismissive of the UN or at least are slow to appreciate the UN's effects in the field of decolonisation. Interestingly, scholars of French and Spanish decolonisation are more appreciative than those of (particularly) British decolonisation, of the UN's role in thwarting these countries governments' will to hang on to formal colonies. Many agree that General de Gaulle's precipitous decision to concede independence to as many as 14 sub-Saharan colonies in the single year of 1960 had much to do with the French desire to avoid too serious a confrontation with the anti-colonial majority at the UN concerning the Algerian question, which was their priority at the time.³ A recent article on Spanish decolonisation in Central Africa in the 1960s explicitly concludes that 'the role of the UN is fundamental to the understanding of the timing, actors' strategies and the results'.⁴

The reason why British imperial historians are dismissive of the UN factor seems to be attributable to a compound historiographical context as well as to what may be called the lingering 'imperial mentality' of the British people and of conservative sections of British academia in particular. I do not wish to go into the details here as to the reasons themselves. I simply would like to point out now that especially as Britain had quickly shrunk into a middle power, the British public probably needed a national story of a 'successful decolonisation' symbolised in the phrase the 'Wind of Change' coined in 1960 by Harold Macmillan, the Conservative Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963 who was responsible for the sweeping decolonisation of the period. The inadequacy of the word 'successful' can easily be seen if we think about examples such as Ireland, Palestine (Israel), South Africa, Rhodesia, Cyprus, and (in fact also) Nigeria and India (Kashmir). Clearly, the positive image of British retreat from Empire only derives from the specific kind of 'jettisoning' of colonies between the Suez Crisis and the mid-1960s, which they certainly carried out mostly without tragic colonial wars, unlike the French and Portuguese. It is in this context that the British have come to consider their imperial withdrawal essentially as a voluntary policy in response to the rise of nationalism.

³ For instance, Panter-Brick, Keith, 'Independence, French Style' in Gifford, Prosser and Louis, Wm Roger, *Decolonisation and African Independence: The Transfers of Power, 1960-1980* (Yale UP, 1988), pp.92-100.

⁴ Campos, Alicia, 'The Decolonisation of Equatorial Guinea: The Relevance of the International

My presentation, therefore, will mainly focus on the dissolution of the British Empire after 1956. By way of revisiting a couple of major landmarks of the end of Britain's formal Empire, I would also like to suggest a tentative answer to the question why such lesser colonial powers as Portugal and South Africa successfully defied the majority of international opinion and why their troubled empires persisted until decades later. Was the UN ineffective and meaningless after all if it did not succeed in changing the minds of the controllers of these intransigent empires? My answer is, 'No'. In fact, the comparison of the two different patterns is the key to understanding the way 'pressure' from the UN generally works. As I outlined in my introductory remarks, if we are to understand the extent and the nature of the political dynamics the UN creates, we need to look at the perceptions of the member governments where the pressure is felt, in this case, the British government. The framework of the British political elite did not allow a defying of the majority opinion expressed at the UN as a practical policy option.

<A Case Study> The Anti-Colonial Declaration of 1960

[N.B. This case study section is for reference only and will not be used as it is in my actual presentation in Session 2, in which an updated handout will be distributed.]

The UN Resolution 1514 (XV), commonly known as the Anti-Colonial Declaration, adopted by the General Assembly in December 1960, marked an important watershed in Britain's imperial retreat.⁵ This section, drawing on recently released documents, illuminates how the resolution made an impact on Britain's policy makers. Contrary to the widely held image of an ineffective UN, it is revealed that the British were in private profoundly alarmed by the dramatic decline in the international legitimacy of colonialism. Also, they were deeply disturbed by the imminent prospect of vigorous UN intervention into their remaining colonial problems such as Kenya, and the Central African Federation. The UN's unambiguous institutionalisation of the doctrine of self-determination in the form of complete national

Factor' *Journal of African History* Vol.44 (2003), pp.95-116.

⁵ Beitz, Charles R., *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton U.P., 1979), pp.92-105; Armstrong, D., Lloyd, L. and Redmond, J., *From Versailles to Maastricht, International Organization in the Twentieth Century* (Macmillan, 1996), pp.88-94.

independence (which was not clear in the UN Charter), was a fatal blow to already dwindling British hopes of controlling the pace of decolonisation and contributed to their surprisingly precipitous, yet curiously passive, colonial retreat in the early 1960s.⁶

1) the Rising UN

Already at the time of the Suez Crisis in 1956, the UN's public condemnation of Britain and France clearly demonstrated the rising tide of anti-colonial 'world opinion'. Yet, it was rather *after Suez* that the UN even more actively involved itself in matters relating to the Third World. In the approach to the 'African year' of 1960, the world organisation steadily raised its profile under the dynamic Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld. The outbreak of the Congo Crisis in July 1960, in which the UN played a crucial role, was particularly significant in attracting world attention to the UN and African affairs, in which colonialism was an inevitable subject of debate.⁷

Moreover, due largely to the precipitous French decolonisation, no less than 17 newly independent states joined the world forum in 1960. When the fifteenth session of the UN General Assembly started in September 1960, the British gloomily recognised that the voting balance in the Assembly was drastically altered in favour of anti-colonial opinion. Sir Pierson Dixon, Britain's UN ambassador, reported to London that anti-colonialism was 'likely to be the central problem for us in the UN in the immediate future.'⁸ The Colonial Office echoed the view in Sir Hilton Poynton's (Permanent Under-Secretary for the Colonies) long letter to the colonial governors in September: 'we have entered a period in which the international climate in which we have to deal with the problems of our own territories has changed and has become a more decisive factor in those problems.'⁹

⁶ Historians have generally been cautious in appreciating the UN factor in Britain's decolonisation. Darwin, John, *The End of the British Empire: the Historical Debate* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991), pp.109-110, p.120; Dunbabin, J. P. D., *Post-Imperial Age: The Great Powers and the Wider World* (Longman, 1994), pp.458-459. On the other hand, the UN's role in changing international norms has long attracted the attention of political scientists. For instance, Marin-Bosch, Miguel, *Votes in the UN General Assembly* (The Hague, Kluwer Law International, 1998).

⁷ Luard, Evan, *A History of the United Nations, Vol.2: the Age of Decolonization 1955-1965* (Macmillan, 1989).

⁸ UK Public Record Office (PRO), FO371/153585 (UN2251/17) Dixon to Home, 9 Aug. 1960.

⁹ PRO, CO936/678 Poynton's letter to the governors, 29 Sept. 1960.

2) the UN as a Cold War battlefield

For various reasons, however, the British were quite unprepared for the impending surge of UN anti-colonialism. Above all, their thinking was still governed by the traditional framework; they saw events in New York in the context of the Cold War and great power diplomacy rather than of the growth of anti-colonialism. When the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, unpredictably announced his intention to attend the UN, the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan hastily crossed the Atlantic 'if only to rally the West'. He was certainly aware that the Soviets might well stoke up anti-colonialism among the new nations at the UN. After the breakdown of the Paris Summit in May, the Soviets were anxious to undertake a new propaganda offensive against the West. When Khrushchev did advocate a sweeping declaration demanding independence for all colonies within a year, Macmillan scornfully asserted in the General Assembly that 'words like "colonialism" and "imperialism" are slang about here.'¹⁰ By dismissing anti-colonialism as essentially Cold War propaganda, the British failed to pay due attention to the Afro-Asians' quiet yet independent move to take up the Soviet proposal and draft a comprehensive anti-colonial resolution of their own.

3) Britain's inability to manage the UN

Not until November was Britain's complacency suddenly shattered. Sir Patrick Dean, Britain's new UN ambassador, wrote as late as 17 November that 'matters would probably go along much as in previous years'.¹¹ The Afro-Asians were drafting their unprecedentedly sweeping resolution in such secrecy that the UK mission was unable to detect the move. In a regular informal Commonwealth meeting at the UN in October, 'Ghana, Nigeria or the Asians did not volunteer comment', though the Australian permanent representative pressed for prior consultations after having 'heard rumours of fifteen-page "declaration" being drafted for adoption by the Assembly'.¹² There were, to be sure, ominous signs. Especially in the Fourth Committee of the General

¹⁰ Horne, Alistair, *Macmillan 1957-1986* (Macmillan, 1988), pp.278-279.

¹¹ PRO, FO371/153585 (UN2251/32) Dean to Home, 17 Nov. 1960.

¹² Australian National Archives, A451/1, 60/4092, Plimsoll Memo.

Assembly (dealing with colonial affairs), the British found themselves incapable of influencing the increasingly uncompromising Afro-Asians. The development was 'particularly galling' to the British, who 'had managed in previous years to bring about many changes in resolutions through quiet persuasion and active work behind the scenes.'¹³

When the British Cabinet was at last informed of the text of the Afro-Asian draft on 25 November, the ministers found it 'wholly unacceptable', but were also told that anti-colonialism was so strong and prevalent in the UN that there would probably be no modifying, let alone defeating it.¹⁴ Caught in extreme pessimism, the UN ambassador went so far as to suggest that 'circumstances ... could arise in which our future participation in the UN might become open to very serious doubt ... if the UN damages the Western cause, prestige, influence ... we might feel it better to leave the UN altogether.'¹⁵ Presumably, this was the only moment when such an unusual suggestion was ever made by a senior UK policy maker apart from during the Suez Crisis.¹⁶

Britain's post war diplomatic instinct now told her to turn to the United States. As Macmillan feared, however, the US leadership was faltering as the Eisenhower administration drew to an end.¹⁷ The US delegation was left without instructions from Washington and 'the result was a lack of initiative and flexibility, which put the Western powers and their friends at a distinct disadvantage...'¹⁸ Though the Americans had known since October the rough content of the Afro-Asian draft through the Japanese, they apparently did not disclose it to the British.¹⁹ Only at the last moment was Macmillan able to resort to the 'special relationship' at the highest level. He telegraphed to Eisenhower on 9 December and urged him to 'stand together ... at least on a decision to abstain' from the 'monstrous' resolution.²⁰

On 14 December, by a roll-call vote of 89 in favour, none against, and with 9 abstentions (Australia, Belgium, Dominican Republic, France, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, UK, US), the Afro-Asian draft became General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV), a 'Declaration on the Granting

¹³ Canadian National Archives (CNA), RG25, Vol.5143, 5475-DW-70-C-40 pt.1. UNGA 15th Session.

¹⁴ PRO, CAB128 /34, cc(60) 59 (25 Nov. 1959).

¹⁵ PRO, FO371/153585 (UN2251/33) Dean to Home, 23 Nov. 1960.

¹⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957*, XVI (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1990), p.1196.

¹⁷ Harold Macmillan Diary (HMD), Bodleian Library, Oxford, 5 Oct. 1960.

¹⁸ CNA, RG25, Vol.5144, 5475-DW-70-C-40 pt.1. UNGA 15th Session.

¹⁹ The United States National Archives, State Department, Central Files, 306/11-760; 306/11-1860. The US mission even included a Negro member, who stood up and applauded the adoption of Resolution 1514.

of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.' It strongly asserted that 'the subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights', and 'inadequacy of political, economic, social or educational preparedness should never serve as a pretext for delaying independence.'²¹ The British had no illusion about continued American support of the British position. With the advent of Kennedy, it was all too clear that the Americans would adopt 'a more detached view on colonialism' the next year.²²

Significant from the British viewpoint was the last-minute switch of New Zealand, influenced by the Canadians, from abstention to a positive vote. As Australia and New Zealand were the only two supporters at the UN of Britain's Suez invasion in 1956, the shock to the British was tremendous. In the margin of a telegram, Macmillan scribbled that New Zealand's decision was 'terrible ... after all the fuss with the US.'²³ Indeed, many of Britain's close allies were beginning to think twice about helping the British at the UN. Dean reported: 'some of the Western nations are for one reason or another particularly feeble. For instance, the Canadian and Swedish delegations receive their instructions from governments who desire to be all things to all men, and the delegations themselves are extremely anxious to avoid giving any offence whatever to the Africans and Asians.'²⁴ The acute sense of increasing isolation in the UN, a painful reminder of the bitter Suez experience only four years earlier, greatly demoralised the British.

4) the impact of the Anti-Colonial Declaration

Why, still, did the British dislike the Declaration so much? Was it not Macmillan himself who had famously pledged in February that year that Britain was not going to resist the 'wind of change'? In fact, Britain's pressing concern lay in the threatening prospect, now more real than ever, of a UN intervention into 'non-self governing territories', which constituted the bulk of UK colonies. The Anti-Colonial Declaration urged that 'immediate steps shall be taken, in trust and non-self-

²⁰ HMD, 9 Dec. 1960.

²¹ Official Record of the United Nations General Assembly, Fifteenth Session, Resolutions, Supplement No.19, pp.66-67. For Afro-Asian perspectives on the evolution of the Declaration, see El-Ayouty, *The United Nations and Decolonization; The Role of Afro-Asia* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1971); Kay, David, *The New Nations in the United Nations. 1960-1967* (Columbia UP, 1970).

²² PRO, PREM11/5183, Dean's annual report, 22 Jan. 1961.

²³ PRO, PREM11/5183, Wellington to Foreign Office, 14 Dec. 1960.

²⁴ PRO, FO371/153585 (UN/2251/33) Dean to Home, 23 Nov. 1960.

governing territories or all other territories which have not yet attained independence, to transfer all powers to the peoples of those territories, without any conditions or reservations.' Until 1960, the British had 'been able to contain attempts to extend the activities of the UN', but now there was 'full-scale discussion of the political affairs of non-self-governing territories generally.'²⁵ Although not well-recognised in existing scholarship, Britain's basic post war policy of 'orderly decolonisation' heavily depended on her ability to keep UN hands off her colonies. Only as a result of a behind-the-scenes Anglo-American compromise in 1945 was the word 'independence' craftily excluded from Chapter XI of the UN Charter (regarding non-self-governing territories).²⁶ The Anti-Colonial Declaration destroyed this basic prerequisite. A Foreign Office paper summed up Britain's difficulty *vis a vis* the UN as follows:

The essential UK interest which has to be protected in this [last stage of decolonisation] is our authority in our dependencies, particularly in those where there are deep divisions which we are trying to reconcile. This authority would be most seriously damaged by UN action, whether in the form of recommendations or even some more direct attempt at political interference relating to a particular territory. Clearly the greatest dangers lie in East and Central Africa where direct UN intervention could make the task of leading these territories to independence even more complicated than it is already ... If, for example, Nigeria had been under UN supervision it would probably have been impossible to establish a federation, because individual leaders would have been forced by their public opinion to appeal to the UN against any agreement by the majority or any ruling by UK Ministers which they disagreed with. The same sort of dangers exist in Kenya, Uganda and the Rhodesias.²⁷

Macmillan feared that if the UN intruded onto the scene, it would 'encourage the politicians in the [colonial] territories not to accept compromises or UK arbitration' because the UN would function as 'a further court of appeal.'²⁸ Failure to reach a settlement could then well precipitate the territory into turmoil 'like the Congo because of its tribal divisions.'²⁹ In March 1961, Britain's US Ambassador told the Americans that 'we are most anxious to resist political interference [from the

²⁵ PRO, FO371/160903 (UN/15116/19) UK policy on UN, 20 Feb. 1961.

²⁶ Louis, William R., *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1945* (Oxford UP, 1977).

²⁷ PRO, FO371/160903, (UN15116/19) UK policy on UN, 20 Feb. 1960. Nigeria, of course, had become independent outside a UN framework in October 1960.

²⁸ PRO, PREM11/5183, Anglo-American talks, 15 Mar. 1961.

²⁹ PRO, PREM11/4564, Bermuda talks, 12 Dec. 1961.

UN] during the next few years while we grapple with our last remaining major colonial problems.'³⁰ A Congo within the British Empire would surely topple the Conservative government, tear up the Commonwealth, and irrevocably damage Britain's international standing. Facing this highly alarming possibility, the only viable path now left for the British was to inevitably 'jettison' their colonial possessions as quickly as they could.

³⁰ PRO, PREM11/5183, Caccia to Home, 15 Mar. 1961.