

Story: Multilateral organisations

Page 2 – War and conflict

(Alley, R., 2012a)

Among multilateral activity's most significant goals is rule-governed collective peace and security, supported by peaceful dispute settlement. The absence of peaceful dispute settlement caused the human calamity of the First World War, which cost New Zealand dearly.

League of Nations

Like other countries, New Zealand joined the League of Nations, formed in the ashes of the First World War to prevent a repetition of such collective failure. This occurred despite Prime Minister William Massey's reluctance in 1919 to see New Zealand join the league. Massey believed that the country's best strategy for protection remained with Britain and the ties of the British Empire.

New Zealand supported the terms of the covenant on which the league was based, while stronger members sabotaged its objectives – allowing Japan's 1931 invasion of Manchuria and north-east China, and Italy's 1935 aggression against Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Alarmed by the league's impotence, New Zealand officials circulated recommendations in 1936 for a stronger system of collective security enforcement. New Zealand was 'prepared to the extent of our power, to join in the collective application of force against any future aggressor'.¹ This proved too little, too late.

Victor's choice

After the League of Nations was formed in 1919, New Zealand's young and radical Labour Party condemned it as a victor's organisation. Instead they argued for 'a Union of Peoples, unfettered by class privilege and secret methods', which would provide 'the machinery for the settlement of international differences in a civilized manner'.² Later, the first Labour government would affirm its commitment to the league.

United Nations

The aspiration for a robust system of collective security enforcement was revived in 1945 in San Francisco during formulation of the United Nations Charter. New Zealand and Australia argued for a system of collective security and peacekeeping involving the new organisation's full membership. This would have excluded the planned Security Council veto provision, which could be used by any one of its five permanent members (the United States, the Soviet Union, France, the United Kingdom and China).

However, these hopes were dashed. The veto remained, allowing any one of the major powers to block draft resolutions, however strongly supported by smaller countries. A deepening Cold War polarised the UN membership, essential peace and settlement functions were compromised, and hopes for nuclear disarmament diminished. New Zealand continued to oppose the use and abuse of the veto system.

UN Security Council

New Zealand served on the UN Security Council as an elected non-permanent member in 1954–55, 1966 and 1993–94. Within the council, New Zealand tended to vote as part of the western anti-communist bloc. Its sympathy for white minority governments in Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe) and South Africa resulted in New Zealand's 1982 attempt to join the Security Council being voted down by the UN General Assembly.

1954–55 term

As a member of the Security Council in 1954–55, New Zealand asserted the council's primary responsibility for deliberating post-coup developments in Guatemala and opposed American attempts to have the crisis handled regionally by the Organisation of American States. The coup had been a result of a covert operation by the United States.

Encouraged by the British, New Zealand proposed to some effect council initiatives designed to defuse the Taiwan offshore islands crisis that seriously inflamed US–China relations in early 1955. China had attacked the islands of Quemoy (now known as Kinmen) and Matsu at a time when sensitivity was heightened by the Korean War.

1966 term

Enlargement of the Security Council's non-permanent membership allowed New Zealand to serve a one-year term on the council in 1966. This was the height of the Vietnam War, but superpower veto power left the Security Council impotent over the conflict. It was also a time of increasing African and Asian assertion. New Zealand supported the white minority in Rhodesia opposing the use of force by the British following Rhodesia's 1965 unilateral declaration of independence.

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New Zealand's position as a small state, Pacific interests and independence (exemplified by its anti-nuclear policy), as well as solid UN standing as a reliable and constructive international citizen, helped it win election to the Security Council in 1992.

New Zealand was a lonely voice on the council in supporting resolute international preventive action and an expanded UN presence to halt the 1994 Rwandan genocide. New Zealand used its Security Council membership to assist in the establishment of war-crimes tribunals for Rwanda.

During the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, New Zealand supported Macedonia's admission to UN membership, and setting up a war-crimes tribunal. Verbal support from New Zealand was matched by a substantial military commitment to the UN Protection Force for Bosnia. New Zealand also backed a UN presence in Haiti following the United States' overthrowing of that country's military-led government, and chaired the Iraq sanctions committee.

Iraq, 2003

The unwillingness of the UN Security Council to provide an unambiguous mandate for the use of force against Iraq in 2003 was instrumental in New Zealand's refusal to commit forces to that conflict.

Footnotes:

1. Quoted in Clyde Egleton, 'Reform of the covenant of the League of Nations.' *American Political Science Review* 31, no. 3 (1937), p. 465.
2. 'Labour Party's attitude.' *Evening Post*, 10 August 1921, p. 3.

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