Introduction: the United Nations after a Decade

Historians, with reason, deplore the tendency to organize the past into convenient segments – whether they be reigns, centuries or millennia – pointing out that the important trends in human history are far too gradual and irregular to be divided up into these convenient quanta. In real life there are no exact thresholds, turning-points or terminations.

The United Nations, like other human institutions, changes only slowly and imperceptibly. There are no clear dividing lines. To recount its history decade by decade thus risks imposing a pattern on its development which events themselves may not justify.

It is none the less tempting to see 1955, just ten years after the organization’s foundation, as a significant year in its evolution. Its first decade, as we saw in the previous volume, was above all a period of cold war. That conflict set its imprint on every action of the organization and every debate which took place within it. After ten years this slowly began to change. The Geneva Conference of 1955, the first serious manifestation of détente, though it did not yet mark the end of the confrontation, was an indication that at least its intensity was beginning to decline. Coming in the wake of the Korean armistice of 1953 and the conference on Indo-China the following year, it was taken by many to herald a new and somewhat less acerbic era in East–West relations. A change in the international climate of that kind could not fail to be reflected within an organization that has at all times shown itself a faithful mirror of the outside world.

1955 was an important year for the UN for another reason, only marginally related. It saw the settlement, after seven or eight years of bitter conflict, of the long-standing dispute about the admission of new members (Volume I, Chapter 19). That dispute
had been resolved by a compromise providing for the admission of almost all the potential applicants. The objections against them which had been so passionately raised before, concerning their system of government or the means by which they had acquired independence, were now tactfully dropped. That agreement too may have reflected the new spirit of détente: the ‘spirit of Geneva’. It was certainly an important event for the organization, for two reasons. It acknowledged, or rather reaffirmed (since it had been at least implicit in the terms of the Charter), the universal character of the organization: the one qualification which the Charter laid down – that a member-state should be ‘peace loving’ – was no longer used as a means of blackballing potential entrants. But it was mainly significant for another reason. In releasing the log-jam, it paved the way for a large number of admissions over the coming years: admissions which were to bring about a fundamental alteration in the balance among the membership as a whole.

Of the fifty-one original members of the organization only three (India, Lebanon and Syria) had emerged relatively recently from colonial rule or were about to do so; though Egypt and Iraq, and arguably other countries (such as China and Iran), had enjoyed a ‘semi-colonial’ status. The twenty Latin-American members, though colonies 150 years before, were no longer motivated by any strong anti-colonial sentiment. But in the package deal of 1955 four more ex-colonies (Ceylon, Cambodia, Laos and Libya) and a semi-colony (Jordan) became members. By 1960 a further twenty-three former colonies had joined them; and by 1965 nineteen more. By that time, therefore, out of 119 members altogether, almost fifty had emerged only recently from colonial rule; while another twenty had been colonies in a former age, and at least half a dozen more had been under a form of foreign tutelage which was little different from colonial rule. A change of this order could not fail to influence the direction of the organization’s attention, and the character of its activities.

The altered balance in the membership was associated with a further change which affected the organization from this time. From the middle of the 1950s the great majority of conflicts which the organization considered related, directly or indirectly, to the ending of the colonial era. The type of cold-war issue which had