

If any single activity is associated with the United Nations it is peacekeeping — yet it is not even mentioned in the UN Charter. The Security Council thought it would be able to act together to bring peace and security to the world. It did not work out that way.

The rivalry between the West, under U.S. leadership, and the East, under the Soviet Union, spoiled the ideal of harmony. When the Security Council tried to take action, one of the five permanent members, most often the Soviet Union, would block it through the use of its veto power. However, despite the rivalry, some early peacekeeping attempts were made.

The first UN peacekeepers were unarmed individual military observers along ceasefire lines in Kashmir, and the Middle East. Formed units did not become involved until 1956, when a Canadian came up with the idea of using peacekeepers to separate warring parties in the Suez Crisis after they had agreed to a ceasefire.

Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, as leader of Egypt, nationalized the Suez Canal despite protest from the United Kingdom and France. They then took their dispute to the United Nations. However, before anything could be decided, Israel, with British and French encouragement, attacked Egypt. The United Kingdom and France then had an excuse to send in their troops to "guarantee the safety of the Canal." At the time, Lester B. Pearson was Canada's External Affairs Minister. He suggested that a way to settle the dispute was to send in a United Nations emergency force (UNEF) to monitor a ceasefire if all parties would agree. The Suez Crisis set the precedent for the next major problem, which took place in the Congo. In many respects the UN peacekeeping response emulated the example of the ongoing operation of UNEF in the Sinai. The Congo Crisis was complicated by the fact that it threatened to draw in the two major-power rivals. It was just this sort of Cold War tension that set the mould for Canada's policy on peacekeeping in the period from 1949 to 1989.

Cold War Experience and Policy Development

During the Cold War, Canada worked for international stability and order and tried to reduce the likelihood of superpower confrontation. Wherever possible it did this through multilateral organizations. Canada pursued these goals in part by joining UN peacekeeping forces, which were seen to be useful in limiting the likelihood of the United States and the Soviet Union coming to blows.

During the Cold War, certain aspects of peacekeeping became apparent:

- peacekeeping had its limitations and should always go hand-in-hand with peacemaking — the attempt to deal with the underlying causes of a conflict;
- UN members realized that peacekeeping missions could only be carried on in areas where both great powers perceived mutual advantages;
- peacekeeping forces could not be put into the field without the consent of the receiving country;
- the use of armed force had to be avoided; and
- the great powers would not contribute forces to peacekeeping operations.

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