The UN: After 25 Sessions

The Assembly’s legal committee, under Japanese prodding and with a helping hand from the Russians, whipped out a resolution calling for the first time for punishment or extradition of skyscrapers by nations in which they find. This and other principles adopted by the Assembly were swiftly incorporated into an international convention by a UN affliate—the International Civil Aviation Organization—at a conference in The Hague just this week. The Assembly set the Middle East as its first order of business—by a majority vote, and for the first time, at the United Nations, the action of the Arabs moderates in the wake of the Israeli-Arab border conflict. The resolution condemning the U.S. actions and the UN’s failure to act has cost the United States dearly in the eyes of the world. The most significant actions of the 1970 UN General Assembly involved, in the view of most diplomats alert to non-political developments, the strengthening of existing UN agencies and steps toward the creation of new ones.

This year’s giant step came on the last day of the Assembly—Thursday. It was a package of resolutions establishing legal principles for international regulation of the sea, and convening a 1973 conference to draft a treaty that would divide national jurisdiction and the International Seabed area, and establish an international authority to administer the outer continental shelf. The most likely outcome is a new UN agency, with power to levy and collect royalties from nations exploiting the oil and minerals of the seabed, and to ensure the royalties “for the benefit of all mankind.” For the rich nations, the important part of the package is the definition of where national sovereignty ends and the seabed begins. They fear that some nations may unilaterally claim portions of the seabed and then sell the rights to states that would not otherwise have access to those resources. The next step will be difficult, as the assembly moved toward a new round of negotiations to define the seabed beyond national jurisdiction. The risk, however, is that the assembly may fail to reach an agreement that would not be dominated by the interests of the major powers.

The final resolution split the militant Arab states from the moderate ones, by supporting a peace settlement, and the use of blockade against the United States. The resolution also included a provision for UN peacekeeping operations and new mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes.

The former pass resolutions—but get no action—only the ineffectiveness of colonialism and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Arab states gain diplomatic mileage by pushing resolutions critical of Israel—but having not found the resolution they seek, all of them are in retreat.

In any event, the Assembly has decided to continue the United Nations as the forum for UN peacekeeping operations and new mechanisms for the peace settlement of disputes.