

Gerard Holodak
Western Oregon University '16
MUNFW 68th Session
4th Committee

Decolonization in the Modern Era

The world as we know it today is comprised almost entirely of nation-states, as in they are subject to local self-rule organized in a self-determined structure. Though this is now the general conception of world order, it stands in stark contrast with the status quo just seventy-five years ago. In 1939, just fewer than 40% of the world population lived in some way subject to a foreign government, with the industrialized northern superpowers of the old world occupying and subjugating the Global South¹. The populations of these colonies often lived in a complete state of dependence on foreign authorities, intentionally limited in their ability to develop educational, economic, and military infrastructures necessary for self-governance. This global trend rapidly declined in the wake of the World Wars, as the colonies played a pivotal role in defending against the expansionist powers of Europe, and in many cases stood alone against the invading powers before receiving relief. This bolstered the political willpower of the colonies while colonial empires reeled during the reconstruction. By the late 1950's the total world population living under foreign subjugation in a colony had dropped to under 2%, and new nation-states across the Global South began their slow, determined construction of self-determined government.²

Legal Independence vs. Effective Decolonization

Immense challenges awaited these new states as they gained legal independence. Most

¹ Barber, Hollis W. "Decolonization: The Committee of Twenty-Four." *World Affairs*, vol. 138, no. 2, pp. 128–151.

² *Ibid.*

achieved their sovereignty through popular referendum, which often involved a hand off of the reigns of leadership between the colonial powers and the local elite bourgeoisie, which only lent itself to maintaining the vested interests of the colonial states in their former colonies.³ This held especially true in those states gaining independence in the global south, as the South and Central American, and African colonies largely produced raw materials for manufacturing in the industrial north. Upon gaining independence these trends in international trade were untouched as cash crops continued to be exported along the same international trade routes, placing massive political capital over internal policies in the hands of their former oppressors.⁴

This economic continuation of colonialism affected every aspect of development thereafter. The woefully inadequate or agriculturally tailored education systems that were prevalent in the colonies continued due to a lack of diverse employment and foreign investments. In one staggering example, the Democratic Republic of the Congo had a mere 16 college graduates in their population of over 40 million at the time of their independence.⁵ Without a diverse economy and workforce, control of the production of raw resources became key to the stability of the state. State sponsored isolation and oppression of the economic centers became a key factor contributing to succession efforts across the developing world.

Concurrent to the struggle of state-building, nation-building posed an equally overwhelming obstacle to fledgling states. The internationally recognized borders based off the colonial divisions segregated historically tied populations and cultures between several states, or placed them in a severe ideological contrast to the ruling majority. New leaders had to create national narratives to bind the populations together, often by adopting secular, eastern bloc

³ Mittelman, James H. "Collective Decolonisation and the U.N. Committee of 24." Vol. 14, no. 1, 1976, pp. 41–64., www.jstor.org/stable/159647.

⁴ Hopkins, A. G. "Rethinking Decolonization." *JSTOR*, The Past and Present Society, www.jstor.org/stable/25096724.

⁵ Mittelman, James H. "Collective Decolonisation and the U.N. Committee of 24." Vol. 14, no. 1, 1976, pp. 41–64., www.jstor.org/stable/159647.

ideologies, or by imposing and mandating historical traditions and languages upon all citizens, regardless of their individual history. Additionally, when a former colony gains independence, there are inevitably generations of settled peoples from the administering power, intermingled and entrenched into the colonies political infrastructure and culture. In the endeavor of nation building, many new states took the course of action to forcibly uproot and expel these settled populations, often in a bloody fashion. This lost credibility for the new governments, and ostracized them farther from the international community.

These tactics proved unconvincing in many cases, and left the developing states ripe for foreign entanglement in their internal affairs. With few options, many leaders were forced to associate with major super powers for assistance, escalating regional power struggles in the Cold War. These associations held little long-term merit for the form colonies, as over 60 civil wars broke out since WWII.⁶

So as banners were stitched and raised in proud colors, and national anthems composed with zeal, major obstacles revealed themselves in the form of impractical and occasionally detrimental borders, populations comprised of a multitude of nationalities, generations of settlers of noncontiguous heritage, and a weak socio-economic base ripe for continued exploitation. Effective decolonization therefore, involves a completely independent development plan coupled with a cohesive national identity. Few emerging states achieved this benchmark, but it is a useful mechanism to judge authentic and complete independence.

The Committee of Twenty-Four

It was amidst these tumultuous growing pains that newly independent states began to

⁶ "The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule." *Middle East Policy Council*, www.mepec.org/troubles-syria-spawned-french-divide-and-rule.

trickle into the halls of the UN General Assembly, applying greater pressure for formal recognition of former colonies and a call to action for the immediate independence of other non-self-governing territories. This resulted in the 1960 Decolonization Declaration, A/RES/1514 (XV), which was the first firm international stance against armed or economic repression of dependent peoples and recognition of the right of a nation to self-govern as a fundamental human right to be protected under the Charter of the United Nations.⁷

In 1961 A/RES/1654 (XVI) was adopted, constructing the Committee on Decolonization, (soon to become known as the Committee of Twenty-four after A/RES/1810 (XVII) expanded their mandate), which was largely assembled of former colonies and members of the P5 as a watchdog committee for the implementation of the Decolonization Declaration. Though the 4th (Special Political and Decolonization) Committee typically addresses the issues of Decolonization, it had absorbed many peacekeeping and humanitarian missions unrelated to the topic, overwhelming its capacity. The creation of the Committee of Twenty-Four absolved the 4th Committee of some of their responsibility, and acted as an advisory committee to the 4th Committee and the General Assembly, with many resolutions passed in the halls of the UN finding their roots in the Committee of Twenty-Four. The major efforts of the committee are dedicated towards the identification and evaluation of Trusteeship states and non-self-governing territories, providing visiting missions to verify self-reporting from administering states, and altering the world public opinion to support the financial and humanitarian needs of subjugated peoples seeking independence.

⁷ The United Nations Charter and the Decolonization Declaration

Criticisms of the Committee

The Committee of Twenty-Four quickly became a reflection of the growing pains its nation-states were undergoing. While the committee immediately began producing recommendations and status reports for the UN body, and its work culminated in several resolutions that were passed in the Assembly, non-compliance was the general response to all requests and demands. Text filled with aggressive, demanding verbiage condemned the actions of several colonial powers, but with little international legal precedence to back up their intent. This aggressive stance of the Committee was only exacerbated by its P5 members. The Western and Eastern blocs utilized their allies in the committee to publicly embarrass and chastise each other for their misconducts and demand international action be taken to mitigate each other's influence. Cold War politics eventually drove the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia to rescind their membership in the committee out of protest.

Modern Efforts for Decolonization

Despite the struggles of the Committee, they have had substantial success in the past several decades. Since their creation, over 80 former non-self-governing territories have gained independence, with only 17 remaining, primarily under the administration of the United Kingdom and the United States. As its nation-states have matured politically, so has the Committee of Twenty-Four's tact and influence. Though still comprised of Afro-centric states along with Eastern bloc powers, the Committee has tempered its approach toward Western States, taking to coordinating discussions between administering powers and independence movements, rather than issuing condemnations. For several territories previously published on the as well as weighing options other than full independence as acceptable alternatives.

Additionally, more efforts are focused on the balanced investment in varied areas of development necessary to create viable economies.⁸

On the issue of Revanchism and Retention

As modern economic colonialism has been more widely recognized through world public opinion, and access to the global market has greatly expanded due to foreign aid and targeted development, former colonies are finally achieving full independence. This has in turn spurred a response from some ex colonial powers to disrupt or revert the process of decolonization through economic reprisal and military might. Taking the relationship between the Russian Federation and the ex-Soviet states as an example, when the Russian Federation agreed to dissolve the Soviet Union, it came along with the understanding that the ex-Soviet states would be exclusive trading partners with the Russians over NATO.⁹ Whenever this has been challenged, the Russian Federation has cracked down on the offending state through a variety of means, using control of natural resources and river flow to extort Kazakstan into trade deals on Russian natural gas, or supporting dissident populations in Georgia as retribution for non-cooperation on Russian national security interests, and most recently, annexing the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine after closer alliances with NATO seemed inevitable.

Conclusion

While the Committee of Twenty-Four still exists today, the work of decolonization has been placed back with the 4th Committee. Considering the recent natural disasters, particularly

⁸ Hopkins, A G. "Rethinking Decolonization." *JSTOR*, The Past and Present Society, www.jstor.org/stable/25096724.

⁹ Von Eggert, Konstantin . "All Politics Are Local: Crimea Explained." *JSTOR*, Sage Publications, www.jstor.org/stable/43555255.

surrounding hurricanes, there has been concern that the Non-Self-Governing Territories in the Caribbean region are not receiving sufficient support. In the coming years many of the same challenges face the 4th Committee. Economic monopolies determining the options toward development of former colonies continues to be a major hindrance in the global south, as well as poorly prescribed borders inciting civil war and civil unrest. By examining the overall setbacks that faced the Committee of Twenty-Four, mainly due to lack of international legal enforcement, the international community should determine the most effective solution to decolonization.

Questions to Consider

- Was your State a former colony? If so, how independent is your state politically, economically, and militarily from the former administering power?
- What areas of development are holding your State back from full independence?
- Are portions of your population seeking independence? What factors do they contribute to your state, and is your government willing to respect a referendum for independence?
- Are any territories currently freely associated with your state? What benefit does retaining them have and what obligations does your state have toward the territory?

Bibliography

Barber, Hollis W. "Decolonization: The Committee of Twenty-Four." *World Affairs*, vol. 138, no. 2, pp. 128–151.

Hopkins, A G. "Rethinking Decolonization." *JSTOR*, The Past and Present Society, www.jstor.org/stable/25096724.

Mittelman, James H. "Collective Decolonisation and the U.N. Committee of 24." Vol. 14, no. 1, 1976, pp. 41–64., www.jstor.org/stable/159647.

"The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule." *Middle East Policy Council*, www.mepc.org/troubles-syria-spawned-french-divide-and-rule.

The United Nations and Decolonization

Von Eggert, Konstantin . "All Politics Are Local: Crimea Explained." *JSTOR*, Sage Publications, www.jstor.org/stable/43555255.