The United Nations, has it been a success or a failure? The answer to that question must depend, of course, on what was, and is, expected from it. Certainly we expected much—too much—at San Francisco.

The national delegates of sovereign states who met there in 1945 had no intention of setting up anything that would destroy the absolute supremacy of the sovereign nation-state. When the strength of traditional nationalism and sovereignty, and in particular when the realities of the Cold War and a bipolar world, made it clear beyond any doubt that the United Nations could not have anything even approaching the authority of government, it might easily have collapsed in futility and disappeared. That it did not was largely due to the insistence by the little people in all countries that we must not go back to the bloody anarchy of 1914-1945; it was also a recognition of the growing economic and political interdependence of all states. Recurring reports of its death always turned out—as Mark Twain said of his own—to be exaggerations. Indeed the United Nations has become a kind of international life force—even though this force is often unorganised and undisciplined. In its 24 years of life the United Nations has shown a very real capacity to adapt itself to exigencies and changing conditions. This has enabled it not only to survive but to become essential for the conduct of international relations.

The United Nations has settled more than one dispute which might have led to war; and it has prevented minor wars becoming major ones. It has groped towards the development of functions of a kind not contemplated when the Charter was signed: conventions have evolved which have modified the law of its constitution. Take the role of Secretary-General. At first, it was expected to be that of a functionary, an official. That changed, especially under Dag Hammarskjöld, when the Secretary-General became a very important power on his own.

There was another evolution. When the Security Council found itself impotent, because of the veto, to intervene in conflicts with enforcement machinery behind its decisions, the United Nations Assembly—where there is no veto—was brought into the picture. The Uniting for Peace resolutions were passed to provide the constitutional basis—though the Soviet Union and some other members have always claimed it was illegal and invalid—for action to preserve peace, in time of trouble, through the Assembly.

Again, the function of the Assembly as the ‘town meeting of the world’ has developed in a way that I suspect the big powers at San Francisco did not visualise. Originally the Soviet Union was anxious to extend the veto to discussion as well as decision. I recall very vividly the fight at San Francisco to force the big powers, the permanent members of the Council, to accept the unrestricted right of every member to talk.
about anything he wanted, even if any decision in the Security Council arising from that talk could be vetoed by the permanent members. And this has resulted in some very vigorous talk indeed. Perhaps the last despairing effort of the Soviet Union—though it didn’t seem despairing at the time—to exercise in practice this kind of veto on talk was when Mr Khrushchev banged his shoe on his desk in the Assembly, hoping that by this modern version of sabre-rattling he would be able to bring an unpalatable discussion to an end. He wasn’t.

Having served as President of the Assembly, I know that it can be pretty difficult to keep before one this ideal of a developing world public opinion, of a developing world conscience, while listening to endless and at times acrimonious debates at two o’clock in the morning. Sitting there on the President’s rostrum hour after hour, I became a compulsive doodler, which resulted in a note once being handed to me from a Canadian delegate which read: ‘The TV camera is on your hand. Stick to those geometrical patterns.’ He must have been worried that as the debate became even less absorbing I might move on to mermaids.

Nonetheless, these endless voices did represent the emergence and growth of world opinion. In this expression of views—as in the making of decisions—the individual and sovereign equality of each of the United Nation’s members was recognised on the one-state one-vote principle. In the United Nations Assembly, the USA and the USSR, each with power to destroy the world, have the same voting rights as member states with less resources than the General Motors Corporation; fewer people than any one of half a dozen Soviet cities; less revenue than an American university; or less economic power than a British trade union. But they all have sovereign equality in law, however meaningless that may be at times in practice. Of course the veto given in the Charter to each of the five permanent members in the Security Council was a constitutional modification of the equality principle. And voting patterns are developing based on ideological, racial, geographic or strategic considerations that tend in practice to modify equal rights in voting. The situation is not unlike the relationship to his party of the individual member in a legislative assembly. He can vote as he likes and his own vote counts for as much as the prime minister’s. But party affiliation, party loyalty, party pressure limits his freedom or will to assume this equality. There is unequal power within equal status.

Nevertheless, because of the principle of sovereign equality, the fact remains that a decision can be taken at the United Nations against the opposition of a minority of members who include all, or almost all, of those that have the resources to carry it out, and without whose participation, the decision is meaningless in practice. This has at times resulted in irresponsible votes: over the Congo, for example, and in the censure of Britain over Gibraltar. But there have been fewer of them than was expected by those who strenuously opposed the addition of so many new members—several of them small and weak. The present total is 126. If the United Nations is to grow in effectiveness to the point where its decisions can become binding, with authority behind them, one day there will have to be some further modification of the one-state one-vote principle: some system of weighted voting, as is already the case in certain international institutions such as the World Bank and the Monetary Fund.

Coming to the United Nations’ practical achievements, some of the most important have been in the field of mediation and conciliation. In this role, as indeed in the
development of the United Nations generally, the middle powers—committed or uncommitted—have been of essential and increasing importance. I believe that if the United Nations is going to become really effective, with its decisions becoming more and more authoritative, the lead to this end will have to be given by these middle and smaller members of the organisation. It is important, therefore, that they should work more and more closely together in New York as middle powers. They have enough sense of responsibility to make their participation in UN activities of real importance; but they are not so strong as to create suspicion and uneasiness. They will have an increasingly important role to play and I hope will take increasing responsibility in playing it.

India (in many ways more than a middle power) has contributed invaluably to the UN because of her position, uncommitted to either of the blocs, and because of the special authority she enjoys among the newly independent nations of the world. It has been interesting to see how the Irish, a nation whose people have long had the reputation—however unwarranted—of preferring a fight to a peaceful settlement, have emerged in the United Nations as eloquent and skilful conciliators. They are a European nation of ancient civilisation, but because of their history they can associate easily with the anti-colonial states and be accepted by them as understanding friends. Because of her neutral and uncommitted position, Sweden has often been acceptable for international duties to both blocs at the UN. She has often been among the first to be called in wherever various interests have to be balanced. Brazil and Colombia and other Latin American countries have played important roles. They’re on good terms with nearly all countries and have a high sense of international responsibility.

Even middle powers formally committed to one side or the other have a part to play. Poland, for example, although she’s unable, or unwilling, to differ with the Soviet Union on any important point of policy, has shown a disposition toward impartiality and independence in special situations. If I may be permitted to mention my own country, Canada, we have gained some reputation for objectivity in the United Nations, and though a loyal member of Nato we have differed on occasion with major Western powers. We have been asked to serve on a great many UN commissions, and have contributed contingents to every UN peace or police force.

This middle-power role, of course, will always be complementary to that of the larger powers, not a substitute for it. In the present state of the world it is often, and regrettably, only the ‘big-power’ threat of force in the background which induces the parties to a dispute to accept the good offices of the UN. It will be a happy day when we can secure a settlement by appealing simply to the nations’ love of peace, and of fair play and abstract justice, but that day will be a long time coming.

We must not take too tragically the fact that some work for peace has to be done outside the world organisation. This is inevitable so long as important countries like Germany and above all Communist China remain non-members. One of the strongest arguments in favour of the admission of Communist China to the Chinese seat in the United Nations is that, until this takes place, peace-making activities involving the Far East may have to be dealt with outside regular UN procedure. In the case of the armistice settlement after the Korean War, there was no particular difficulty with Peking, because the communist government there had no objections to dealing with the United Nations as an antagonist—especially as this enabled Peking to weaken the
concept of international peace action in Korea. But in the case of the Indo-China settlement at Geneva, if you can call it that, the Communist Chinese would not enter into any discussion under UN auspices; nor will they today concerning Vietnam.

This brings me to the peace-keeping role of the United Nations, exercised through peace-keeping machinery, and here I may be in danger of overemphasis. I used to be depressed when I was at the United Nations at the amount of publicity and attention that was given to any meeting where there was likely to be a row between the Soviet and American delegates, or indeed any kind of a row. The public gallery would be crowded, every man who represented any newspaper in any part of the world, who could get in, would be there. The television cameras were all ready. There would be an air of excitement. Down the hall a commission would be discussing how to grow two blades of wheat where only one blade grew before, in order to help people in some part of the world who were underfed or even starving, and there would be nobody present but the members of the Commission and the experts. Yet perhaps this disparity of interest is not so unreasonable as it may seem, because the United Nations will be judged—and it will continue or disappear—in accordance with its success or failure in solving political disputes and avoiding war.

Korea was the most important instance of UN intervention, if not to keep the peace, at least to restore it and repel aggression. Because of the fortuitous absence of the Soviet delegate in the Security Council, which is not likely to be repeated, and on the initiative of the other superpower, the United States—not on the initiative of a small power or a middle power—the United Nations was able to intervene when North Korean forces attacked South Korea. North Korea’s aggression was supported both by the Soviet Union and Communist China. The United Nations was able to move with speed and power to counter this aggression. Why? Because the government that took the initiative was the United States and it had the power near at hand. This was something unprecedented and something that hasn’t been repeated. At the time UN intervention surprised those who said the organisation was incapable of this kind of swift and effective action: action which was not war in the traditional sense at all, but international police action.

In our House of Commons in Ottawa I used to be jeered at by some opposition members when I referred—as I always did—to the UN operation in Korea as police action. ‘What’s the difference,’ they would ask, ‘between police action and war, if the soldiers of the two sides are killing each other?’ There is all the difference in the world. The United Nations forces and the North Koreans could not be considered as co-belligerents any more than a policeman and a burglar whom he was trying to arrest would be considered as co-belligerents. However much the cynic may ridicule the distinction, it is valid and immensely important: we had here in embryo the concept of war between any two states as civil war in the international community.

But when this much has been said, we have to admit that the Korean intervention was not the kind of genuine collective action against aggression that was visualised by the Charter—either in participation or in control. One member dominated all aspects of the intervention. Most of the soldiers were American, and the military decisions, in fact if not in theory, were made by a general, General MacArthur, who in the eyes of most of the world—and certainly in the eyes of practically all of his countrymen—was an American officer, though he himself was always very careful to refer to
himself as Commander of the UN Forces. After all, when he got into difficulties which led to his recall, those difficulties were not with the United Nations but with the President of the United States.

I had some reason to know from personal experience to what extent Washington paid the piper in Korea, and to what extent, therefore, Washington called the tune—though others played in the orchestra on instruments of varying degrees of importance. The United States predominance in the military operations helped the Soviet Union and its friends in their calculated campaign to convince the world that the United States was merely using the United Nations to cover up its imperialist designs against Asia, and its particular design against one small Asian country, North Korea. This helped the Communist Chinese, when the time came for peace negotiations, to act not as penitents but as equal participants with the UN, able to castigate the alleged aggressive actions of the United States and its friends, who had ‘invaded’, so they claimed, Korea. It was easier to make this charge after the United Nations forces were authorised—under pressure from the United States—to move across the 38th Parallel into North Korea and right up to the Chinese border.

There were nations in Asia and Africa who were ready to accept this construction, to the point that the original significance of the UN’s action now seems almost to have disappeared, and to have been supplanted by the communist version. In spite of this, the fact remains that the United Nations—having gone to the defence of South Korea against aggression, by virtue of a resolution of the Security Council—cannot argue in future that the Charter provisions on security do not involve an obligation for all members, at the very least, to take note of an aggression by any power great or small. They did so in Korea. In saying this I don’t mean to argue that this kind of moral and political commitment will override strategic or other obstacles in the way of discharging it. In the kind of world we live in today it probably won’t. Nevertheless the obligation, in theory, has been accepted. It not only denies the sovereign right of nation-states to declare war in pursuit of policy, but it also affirms their responsibility to take part in police action against an aggressor so declared by the United Nations.

Experience since 1945—in Korea and in Palestine particularly—has underlined the importance of United Nations peace-keeping activity. It has also exposed the many obstacles in the way of making that activity effective. Progress in building international peace-keeping machinery has been discouragingly slow; nothing has been done for advance planning and organisation. Yet the UN should not be asked to improvise arrangements at the last moment in every crisis; to initiate crash action, as it has had to do. The Secretary-General has stressed the advisability of countries, in their national and military planning, making provision for units that would be available for a permanent UN police and peace force. But little enough progress has been made. The efforts to bring about permanent peace-keeping arrangements have been opposed not only by those in the communist bloc, who claim that only the Security Council—with its veto—has any peacekeeping responsibility at all, but also by other countries, including small and newly independent countries, who should have been the first, one would have thought, to recognise the importance of International machinery for security and peace. Still other states—France is the most important example—do not believe in UN peace-keeping, in principle. They look back, for security, to national policy and national power and the alliance systems of
the past. Others are suspicious that the UN peace-keeping machinery may be used against their interests.

On the other hand, on the positive side, some countries, including Canada, have tried their best to provide for a permanent UN police and peace force, in which men would be trained and equipped and ready to go wherever the UN asked them to go, with the approval of their own governments. It would be a great step forward if the United Nations would officially sanction arrangements under which there would not only be these men trained and equipped and ready in member countries, but also a staff and planning organisation at headquarters in New York. It’s most regrettable that it has not been possible to take this step, in spite of the persistent and sincere efforts of some UN members.

There is one respect, however, in which international peace-keeping can, inadvertently, be almost harmful. The very success of police action in keeping warring factions apart, in stopping the fighting, and then remaining between the parties to the conflict, can remove some of the pressure to bring about a political settlement. This is why the United Nations should never engage in peace-keeping without also trying to remove the sources of conflict which brought about the fighting in the first place. Here we have certainly failed—and particularly in the Middle East.

Finally, if we do ever get a permanent United Nations Police Force, I’d like to see it used not only as a peace force but also as an international aid and disaster force. The world continues to be subject to disasters far beyond the resources of an individual country to cope with. At the time of the earthquake in Iran last August I was in a large American city. One newspaper there carried on its front page a bold headline about a single gruesome murder: the news of the earthquake, with more than 20,000 dead and 100,000 homeless, was somewhere in the back pages. There is a lack of proportion here, a lack of public concern about greater, but impersonal and more distant tragedies. I know that the International Red Cross and other voluntary organisations have made, and continue to make, magnificent efforts to come to the rescue in the case of such disasters. But surely they call for action and resources organised on a permanent basis by the whole international community under the auspices of its world organisation.

The contingents of an International Peace Force could be used for this purpose. It would have the men and the transport and much of the equipment, and could acquire the training, to bring help quickly and massively anywhere in the world. Is this not a field where the nations have everything to gain and nothing to lose by working together? Measures to establish the machinery for such co-operation could be taken at once in the United Nations.

The present state of the United Nations is a transitional one, as Dag Hammarskjöld once put it, ‘between institutional systems of international coexistence and constitutional systems of international co-operation’. To complete this transition is not going to be easy. No one could know that better than I do, and my knowledge is based on long and practical experience. Yet that very experience—which has shown how close we have been, more than once, to disaster—has convinced me that this transition must be made if we are to escape destruction. Of course, it can only be done
step by step; and at times we may even have to retrace our steps, or find detours around road blocks. But we must continue to move in the right direction.

I am going to suggest one step which should make the United Nations more united and less national, and therefore stronger. Yet, paradoxically, it may seem at first sight to lead away from this objective. I think we should regionalise to a greater extent than at present some of our UN activities, especially those of the 126- member Assembly. At this grand assembly there is never time now for the work that needs to be done. In the economic and social field, the practice has been growing of delegating responsibility to UN regional commissions. Why should we not adopt a similar approach to political questions which face the United Nations, and establish regional assemblies of the General Assembly meeting every year: one for the Western hemisphere, one for Western and Eastern Europe, one for Africa, one, or perhaps two, for Asia? The full Assembly, the town meeting of the whole world, would then meet, say, every three years. The regional assemblies, meeting every year, would deal with regional problems: when possible, they would settle them, and when not they would lay the groundwork for settlement at the universal assembly when it next met. As a link between the world assemblies, we would have an enlarged Security Council, meeting continually in New York with new powers and new authority and new rules. I know that all this would require an amendment to the Charter and I know that the veto operates in respect of amendments. But I would like to see this kind of change considered.

I don’t want it to be inferred from this proposal, or from the support I’ve expressed for regional associations such as Nato, and the Commonwealth of Nations, that I believe in international fragmentation. Quite the contrary. But just as, within states, federation may often be the best method of reaching unity on a broader and more enduring basis, so in the international community, regionalism—provided that it is not politically, racially or even geographically exclusive—can be a way of reaching the ultimate objective: an effectively functioning organisation that embraces the whole world of man.