

Question: Choose an institution in either the present or the past (for example a political, economic, cultural or legal institution) and discuss how colonialism has influenced its development, and with what consequences.

Discipline: Politics and International Relations

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## Neo-colonialism and the United Nations

### An analysis of imperial hegemony under the UN

“A State in the grip of neo-colonialism is not master of its own destiny.” - Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: the Last Stage of Imperialism*, p.5, 1965

“Debt is neo-colonialism, in which colonizers have transformed themselves into ‘technical assistants.’ We should rather say ‘technical assassins.’” - Thomas Sankara, *A United Front Against Debt*, 1987

### Introduction

Following its inception in June 1945, the United Nations (UN) emerged as the ideological antithesis to colonialism and the bastion of the modernised world order. Founded on principles of equality, peace and justice, the organisation promised liberation from Western imperial hegemony and the reformation of global relations. In contemporary times, the UN is regarded as the epicentre of international diplomacy and the agent of ‘development’ in the Global South. However, this essay aims to re-examine these positivist interpretations of the UN through a de-colonial lens, demonstrating the organisation’s roots in imperial structures and its consequent perpetuation of neo-colonialism in modern policy.

Far from being the revolutionary emancipationist of Western colonialism, the UN is inherently an imperial creation established to maintain the underlying politico-economic structures of colonial supremacy. Despite rhetoric of universal liberation and self-determination, the UN has become the structural enabler of Western neo-imperialism through its hegemonic institutional framework, resulting in the global homogenisation of Eurocentric norms, paternalistic ‘development’ policies in the post-colonial Global South, and the establishment of systemic economic dependency.

Importantly, this essay does not seek to totally refute the UN’s role in constructive diplomacy and development on a global scale. Instead, it explores the institutional, cultural and *de facto* resemblances of the UN to colonialism, as well as highlighting how many of the injustices the organisation claims to fight against are indirect products of its neo-imperial global governance. Specifically, this analysis will examine the neo-colonial aspects of the UN in its (1) internal structure, (2) decolonisation policy, (3) economic inequality and (4) peacekeeping interventions.

## 1. Internal structure

In first conceptualising how neo-colonialism is engendered within the UN's structural framework, one must consider the organisation's fundamentally imperial roots. When its founding charter was produced in June 1945, the UN was comprised of 50 signatory nations in a world defined by colonial domination. Therefore, it is essential to consider its consequent institutional structure as a product of this geo-political reality where colonised nations were denied political representation, resulting in Western hegemony being integrated into a super-structure of international governance. This super-structure, fragmented between several political organs, has ultimately facilitated imperial hegemony with measures of legal, diplomatic and political inequality. A crucial factor facilitating this structural predominance of imperial nations is the Security Council (UNSC), the political organ comprised of 15 states empowered with military, economic and political authority over the General Assembly. Heading the UNSC, 5 permanent members (the P5) were selected as the sole UN member states with universal veto powers – these nations being France, Russia, China, the USA and UK.

While the efficacy of global governance is contingent on these nations' participation, the UN's concentration of unilateral authority within the P5 has undermined global justice by enabling imperial political dominance. Effectively, the UN's legislative structure has facilitated neo-colonialism by allowing imperial nations to dictate international policy in their politico-economic interests. For instance, the USA's political protection of Israeli expansionism with its power of veto has enabled it to pursue long-term imperial goals in the region by utilising Israel as a key geo-political asset. Between 1972 and 2023, the USA vetoed 45 resolutions condemning Israel's settler-colonial activities in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, thereby harnessing the UN's structural framework to achieve extractive control and military presence in the region via Israel's genocidal consolidation of regional power. (O'Dell, 2023)

As well as facilitating imperial hegemony in the diplomatic and political spheres, the UN's structural stratification also enables legal and cultural policy to reflect neo-colonial goals. As P5 states possess greater diplomatic authority, their cultural influences and politico-economic interests are greater represented in international legal doctrine and policymaking. This normative standardisation is therefore analogous to the moral and cultural paternalism of the colonial era, as Western neo-imperial ideology is translated into global legislation superseding the Global South. Consequently, the UN legitimises "further informal forms of social control" by alienating non-conforming ideology from global diplomatic dialogue, resulting in global policy that ossifies imperial standards in 'universal' legislation. (Rahaman et al, 2017, p.12)

This imposition of 'universal' norms in UN policy has led to generational cultural erosion that replicates the indigenous marginalisation of the colonial period. For instance, the moral objectivism of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is essentially grounded in the context of European rights-based philosophy, thereby alienating alternative world views and cultural values while universalising Eurocentric ethical constructs under international law. By

implementing such standardised normative legislation on a global scale, therefore, the UN is reproducing the “tinctures of decay” left in “[colonialism’s] wake” that initially led to social, epistemological and cultural alienation. (Fanon, 1961, p.249) Therefore, the UN’s rhetoric of internationalism and modernisation masks an inherent neo-imperial supremacy that enables hegemonic cultural structures to become ingrained in international policy.

## 2. Decolonisation

Despite the best efforts of the imperial nations to retain their colonial supremacy, decolonisation had become a political necessity of the UN by its establishment in 1945. Under Article 73 of the founding charter, imperial nations became obligated to “develop self-government”, “promote... development” and ensure “just treatment” in non-self-governing territories under their control, facilitated and overseen by the long-term framework for global decolonisation – the International Trusteeship System (ITS). With this token of fundamental progressive change, the UN appeared to have paved the way to colonial liberation and independence for the Global South. Nevertheless, despite the nominal and symbolic self-determination granted through the flag independence of the ITS, the underlying socio-economic conditions of colonialism were simply restructured in adapted forms. While the explicit foundations of colonial domination were dismantled under this system, decolonisation ultimately allowed for neo-imperial hegemony to be integrated into a global structure of law, economics and diplomacy centralised within the UN.

An important frame of reference to examine decolonisation within is the realm of political and legal interpretation. Fundamentally, a large factor in the failure of decolonisation stems from the ambiguity and structural weakness of the founding charter’s legislation. Far from being a legally binding document legislating colonial liberation, Article 73 obliges imperial metropolises to impose “development” on their own terms through constitutional oversight and military and economic control of their dependent territories. Imperial predominance within UN bureaucracy meant that the cultural “advancement” of the trust territories was determined by Eurocentric norms and not indigenous epistemological values, resulting in constitutional agreements that alienated those who were achieving emancipation. In addition to this statutory bias, Article 73’s essential flaw is its allowance of imperial control over the terms of decolonisation. Effectively, the sole responsibility of colonial nations became providing statistics about the “development” of democratisation and self-government in the country, allowing for colonial narratives to be perpetuated in legitimised UN reports. Inevitably, the ITS lacked the unilateral authority to enforce true measures of decolonisation, resulting in constitutional independence that favoured imperial politico-economic interests.

Once the constitutional process of decolonisation began, therefore, the UN had already facilitated their position of coercive control within the negotiations through explicit diplomatic authority and subliminal propagandised legitimacy. In Gramscian terms, the combination of constitutional coercion with manufactured political consent allowed for imperial nations to retain their global hegemony. Through the UN’s concepts of international law, ‘universal’ norms and developmental discourse, these hegemonic conditions were dispersed in an expansive structure of legitimate international governance.

For instance, when French West Africa underwent independence in the late 1950s, it was France who ultimately controlled the independence negotiations and their subsequent constitutional outcome. Due to the unequal political dynamics of the negotiations, France maintained control of the region's fiscal affairs through the CFA, rights to resource extraction, and defence agreements under the independence constitution. (Chafer, 2002) This manufactured a neo-imperial structure of economic dependency and military subjugation in the region. Furthermore, France utilised its position as a P5 state to legitimise peacekeeping operations that served to stabilise economic output and ensure French imperial influence continued in the region. Up to the modern day, France continues to impose neo-colonial hegemony in Mali, Senegal, Niger and other states as a source of politico-economic supremacy.

Ultimately, decolonisation's failure to implement true emancipation was a result of its legal foundations, political dynamics and the UN's structural complicity in establishing the neo-colonial world order. As a fundamentally imperial creation, the UN inevitably took on the role of the "civiliser" — the 'modernising' neo-colonial interventionist — and "[re-legitimized] it as a feature of international public policy" by re-establishing Western political control in the Global South. (Wilde, 2008, p.426) Consequently, post-colonial nations became hindered by the super-structure of political neo-imperialism that emerged from the ITS, leading to expansive forms of cultural and socio-economic neo-colonialism.

### 3. Economic neo-imperialist policy

Having undergone the transitional process of decolonisation, the economic conditions of imperialism were ultimately restructured to ensure the continuance of Western financial hegemony in the Global South. By defining political emancipation in terms of Western liberal democracy, decolonisation instituted Fukuyama's 'end of history' on a global scale, thereby integrating colonies into the global free market as a precondition of independence. (Ogar et al, 2019; Collins, 2017) Fanon describes this economic integration in *The Wretched of the Earth* as "the national bourgeoisie [stepping] into the shoes of the former European settlement" through the constitutional establishment of the liberal capitalist state, re-instituting extractive economic conditions as international standards. (Fanon, 1961, p.150) Consequently, the UN facilitated a politico-economic transition that established the global framework for neo-colonialist exploitation.

Post-colonial Western economic predominance is also evident in the indirect manipulation of the global economy through other diplomatic means. Through the UN-affiliated organisations of the IMF and World Bank, Western corporations gain access to resources and cheap labour in the Global South due to neoliberal privatisation policies imposed when countries default on international loans. (Rahaman et al, 2017) Dependency theory explains this economic domination by demonstrating that the previously colonial metropolises accumulate capital from the global periphery due to imposed inequalities in trade, resource extraction and labour. (John et al, 2023) Therefore, by 'liberalising' colonial economies into Western-dominated global capitalism, the UN remains complicit in perpetuating neo-colonial economic relations by allowing for the Global South's resources to be re-exploited through corporate means.

This analysis of economic decolonisation is summarised most succinctly in the following passage:

“American capitalist imperialism swallowed up the empire. Far from being decolonised, in this view, the British system was neo-colonized more intensively under new management”  
(Louis and Robinson, 1994, p.474)

Ultimately, decolonised relations neglected the Global South’s economic self-determination and instead established a global system of Western-dominated ‘investment’ — essentially, material extraction and exploitative labour practices. If anything, economic imperialism strengthened following decolonisation, as Western powers reaped the benefits of a free-market system allowing for wholesale appropriation of the Global South’s material wealth.

Furthermore, the UN’s structural stratification has ensured Western notions of liberal capitalism are used in defining its economic policy. For instance, the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals propose climate action by outlining methods of corporate innovation in the sustainability sector, often masking the structural inequalities of resource extraction, environmental racism and socio-ecological collapse that over-burden the Global South due to ‘green-washed’ capitalism. (Krauss et al, 2022) This is a direct consequence of Western corporate predominance within UN policymaking, as normative economic policy conforms to the interests of Western capital rather than international needs.

Ultimately, neo-colonial economic hegemony has been integrated into UN policy through its framework of Western corporatist exploitation. Facilitating a globalised structure of economic dependency and resource extraction, the UN’s role as an international ‘developer’ is used to validate Western paternalistic hegemony in the Global South. The UN’s perpetuation of economic inequality is often what necessitates paternalistic ‘development’ in the first place, creating a vicious cycle of neo-colonial extraction and Western neoliberal intervention.

#### 4. Peacekeeping interventions

When conceptualising the physical domination of colonialism, many think of the military imperial endeavours that sought to ‘bring civilisation’ to the colonies by forceful integration and military expansion. In the modern day, UN peacekeeping missions embody a similar material purpose: an international military-political complex seeks to impose ‘civilised’, peace-seeking values on warring countries in the Global South. Despite explicitly benign intentions of socio-political stabilisation, these peacekeeping missions ultimately benefit Western politico-economic interests by re-establishing the exploitative relations that engineer conflict, social fragmentation and the cyclical patterns of cultural erosion and imperial superiority.

The neo-imperial combination of military coercion and Western corporate intervention is exemplified by the UN’s peacekeeping mission in Darfur (UNAMID), where structural economic extraction was legitimised under the guise of combating ethnic conflict. The UN’s neglect of local communities meant that the intervention was often characterised by

alienated militarism rather than lasting political compromise, resulting in a weak peace resolution that neglected extractive economic systems and socio-cultural grievances. Political stabilisation therefore relied on short-term patronage systems rooted in the regional gold industry, consequently failing to institute measures of minority representation and democratisation. Economic patterns of patronage and ethno-paramilitary predominance were eventually maintained following the mission, replicating colonial extraction by concentrating resources and capital in Western-friendly regional allies. (Bolash, 2025)

As such, the mission ensured sufficient economic stabilisation for imperial capitalisation to resume in line with Western interests, while preventing progressive political reforms from taking place and ignoring deeper systemic issues of inequality and exploitation. (Ghimire, 2018) The detrimental consequences of the UNAMID's failure are evidenced by the current crisis in Sudan, where the same cycles of extraction and social antagonism manufacture repetitive conflict in the absence of political stability, democracy and the rule of law. Moreover, Western powers continue to benefit from the deregulated gold trade controlled by Sudanese paramilitary groups, institutionally facilitating colonial modes of production at the cost of human lives.

While the UNAMID exemplifies the self-defeating nature of failed peacekeeping missions, even 'successful' interventions – such as in Cambodia or Mozambique – facilitate neo-imperial interests by stabilising extractive economic conditions, manufacturing dependency on Western capital, and facilitating political paternalism. As previously mentioned, interventions are legitimised and co-ordinated by imperial nations within the UNSC, allowing for abuses of national sovereignty to be disguised by UN internationalism. Ultimately, the structural framework of peacekeeping missions fuses imperial ideology with military coercion, allowing for economic, political and cultural hegemony to be imposed on the Global South.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay hopes to demonstrate the resemblance of the contemporary UN with historical Western colonialism by examining its structures of neo-imperial hegemony in political, socio-economic and cultural spheres. In our globalised modern age, colonialism's deep links with international institutions are often deemed redundant under new terms of trade, diplomacy and co-operation. Nevertheless, as this essay seeks to highlight, neo-colonialism is a much more subversive and normative force of imperial hegemony than its historical counterpart. Therefore, modern institutions play a crucial role in acknowledging their colonial roots, as well as opposing manifestations of neo-imperialism in the modern day. In the case of the UN, deep-rooted institutional reform will be necessary to replace imperial domination with global relations defined by equality, co-operation and political legitimacy.

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