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The U.N. at Sea

The United Nations General Assembly convened yesterday under the shadow of another international diplomatic failure—a deadlock in the world organization's three-year-old Law of the Sea Conference which, if it persists, could poison prospects for peaceful cooperation on land as well as on the two-thirds of the earth that is covered by water.

The fourth substantive session of the conference closed here last week without resolving deep differences over the role of a new international regime for the deep-sea bed, rich in mineral nodules, which the Assembly has declared to be "the common heritage" of mankind. Although the conference is scheduled to resume next May, there is danger that the substantial progress it has already achieved in other areas of sea law could be undermined in the interim by a rush of unilateral claims to oceans jurisdictions.

The United States, following the lead of numerous others, has already moved to extend its fisheries jurisdiction to 200 miles, effective next March. Because of the conference impasse, Congress will be under increasing pressure to support the claims of private American mining firms to nodule-rich areas of the ocean floor. The result of these and other national actions could be the collapse of the conference and the rapid spread of anarchy and conflict at sea.

That is a prospect that neither the United Nations nor the United States, the world's leading maritime power,

can view with equanimity. To keep the conference alive and head off an irreversible sea grab, it is essential that a sustained effort to solve the problems of a deep-sea regime be launched promptly, without waiting for the next scheduled conference session.

Primary responsibility for a compromise initiative would appear to lie with developing nations who, under the influence of a few adamant ideologues, spurned American efforts to promote an accommodation agreeable to all parties. It is time that the "silent majority" of third world nations recognize their own overwhelming interest in supporting pragmatic solutions to this and other outstanding international issues.

But the United States also has a duty to spell out with greater clarity and in more detail Secretary Kissinger's last-ditch plan to help a new international regime participate directly in deep-sea mining operations. Although some third world nations concede that the Kissinger proposal had promise, many complained that the Secretary failed to supply specifics and that United States leadership at the conference has been less than inspiring.

If, as Secretary Kissinger has asserted and as should be the case, United States interests in the oceans and oceans law transcend politics, the world should not have to wait until after the November election for fresh American initiatives to help get the Law of the Sea Conference back on course.