

“Sovereignty can be and has been interpreted more inclusively—including during World War II—to justify cooperation in the face of common, existential threats.”

The United Nations and Sovereignty in the Age of Trump

THOMAS G. WEISS

After serving as a British intelligence officer during World War II, Brian Urquhart was the second official recruited for the United Nations Secretariat in 1946. Looking back decades later on a distinguished career as an international civil servant, he quipped, “The UN is the last bastion of national sovereignty.” It was not a compliment. He was lamenting the world organization’s inability to come to the rescue of desperate people subjected to violent attacks on their human rights. Presidents, princes, and prime ministers claimed that what they did at home was exclusively their business. Other UN member states agreed.

More recently, the international community of states occasionally has applied the doctrine of the “responsibility to protect” to revoke the license for mass murder claimed by sovereign thugs who abuse their citizens. Of course, states have also agreed to limit their sovereign prerogatives through international treaties of various sorts, and globalization means that they are largely powerless to halt some other intrusions—for instance through financial and technology transfers, and the free flow of information. In short, sovereignty ain’t quite what it used to be.

Nonetheless, the UN and other intergovernmental organizations—even the supposedly supranational European Union—remain firmly grounded in sovereignty, which US President Donald Trump made even clearer when he uttered the s-word 21 times in his September 2017 address to the UN General Assembly. His mantra was well received by such major powers as Russia, China, and India as well as minor ones including Zimbabwe and Cuba. These countries customarily emphasized

sovereignty to ward off criticism from Washington. No longer.

The contrast with Barack Obama was stark. In his first address to the General Assembly in 2009, Obama referred to sovereignty just once while reaffirming the US commitment to international cooperation and multilateralism.

Although Trump and Vice President Mike Pence have tried unpersuasively to square the circle, “America First” actually means “America Alone.” The sting of Trump’s strident use of the phrase on the world’s biggest stage may have eased momentarily when he told other leaders that they were right to put their own countries first. However, his address was primarily a declaration of war on international obligations and cooperation, and an unconvincing effort to reassert the power of a single state to address global problems.

We should recall that Trump’s slogan has its isolationist origins in the America First Committee, which was the largest and best-organized antiwar group ever. It was founded in 1940 by the likes of proto-fascists Charles Lindbergh and Father Coughlin to keep the United States out of World War II. The America First Committee collapsed after Pearl Harbor. Trump’s contemporary adaptation has reached the height of power.

Among the “alternative facts” being peddled by the Trump administration is the claim that unilateralism is the way to address pressing problems—from terrorism to North Korea’s nuclear weapons to the planet’s changing climate. Yet no country is powerful enough to impose its will and solve global problems on its own. Tending one’s own garden is not a realistic strategy in 2018. Human welfare depends increasingly on effective collaboration across national boundaries. This obvious reality, like many others, is denied by the evidence-averse White House.

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The United Nations is still the logical place to convene discussions and orchestrate action to address global problems. This preeminent universal-membership institution provides the means to confront a multitude of life-threatening problems that national actions alone cannot address effectively. At the same time, the organization's current limitations—not only its sovereignty-bound foundations but also its atomized and wasteful operations—are obvious to anyone but the most blinkered UN cheerleaders. Multilateralism all too often appears unable to deliver.

How, in the era of Trump, can the UN become a more effective mechanism for cooperation in a world of sovereign states? Can the UN of 2018 provide a dose of sanity and marshal global efforts for the collective pursuit of survival with dignity for the human race?

The ninth secretary-general, António Guterres, took over from his lackluster predecessor, Ban Ki-moon, on January 1, 2017. Hopes for a new beginning remain unrealistically high among civil society, UN staff, and many member states. We should temper such expectations, especially since Trump's inauguration followed shortly after that of Guterres. After all, we are speaking about transforming a seven-decade-old international bureaucracy—a herculean task that will be even harder given an American administration that seems uncooperative, to say the least.

ENLIGHTENED REALISM

US presidents have often pursued what they perceive as vital national interests through the United Nations and other international bodies. In 2002, George W. Bush's administration "unsigned" the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court on the grounds that it was against US interests—except when it was not and Washington wanted to use the court to prosecute Sudanese and Libyan war criminals. The Security Council issued Bush a blank check in Afghanistan, though it declined to authorize the war in Iraq.

Obama relied on the Security Council for a green light to intervene in Libya but got none for Syria because of Moscow and Beijing's vetoes. However, that same paralyzed council suddenly came to life when Washington and other powers sought in 2013 to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons capacity and turned to the International Atomic Energy

Agency to verify the 2015 agreement barring Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Such opportunism is commonplace. But most people overlook the fact that the purpose of the United Nations at its birth was to defeat fascism. Its creation reflected a radically different US attitude toward consistent multilateral cooperation in the face of a truly existential threat. It began with the "Declaration by United Nations," signed by 26 countries in January 1942, which built on the Atlantic Charter of August 1941. That declaration committed the Allies to multilateralism—not only to crush Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in the short term, but also to maintain international peace and security as well as to foster postwar economic prosperity and social stability over the longer term.

Observers customarily trace the collapse of this early idealism to the end of the war, when the combination of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the growing tensions between the West and the Soviet Union instilled a new cynicism about the prospects for peace. Few recall the powerful mixture of realism and idealism that emerged earlier in the Lend-Lease program and the wartime United Nations. Alongside US military muscle, multilateralism was integral to US decision making during World War II.

A wide array of Allied wartime initiatives—on issues including international criminal justice, postwar reconstruction, refugee assistance, international development, economic regulations, public diplomacy, and agricultural and educational policy—not only sustained the military enterprise but also were intended to lay the foundations for future stability. Wartime planners rejected unilateral military might and lawlessness as policy options for the postwar order.

The United Nations Conference on International Organization, convened in San Francisco in 1945, and the subsequent creation of the UN system were not peripheral but rather central to US decision making. At a moment when one might have expected the fallout from the failed League of Nations to favor Hobbesian unilateralism, those overseeing the Allied war machine and thinking about the future were resolute: multilateralism and the rule of law, not going it alone and the law of the jungle, should underpin the postwar order. The bleak alternative was on display in the Third

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Reich and the Japanese Empire, which epitomized the right of might.

Decisions to collaborate in the construction of international organizations for peace and prosperity were central to the mobilization against fascism and reflected enlightened realism about the merits of multilateralism. A genuine cooperative strategy motivated peoples and kept states allied. The postwar vision was more than just propaganda, though “business as usual” once again became the default option with the Cold War’s onset. It was not the weakness of international cooperation but the intensity of the Cold War that replaced multilateralism with a diminished vision based on the lowest common denominator of narrowly defined national interests.

The bottom line at the time of the UN’s creation was straightforward: neither governments nor analysts calculated that a return to the world of 1913—that is, before World War I and without even a toothless League of Nations—was desirable. Unfortunately, the Trump administration has forgotten this lesson. The received wisdom is that middle and smaller powers prefer multilateralism while major powers favor unilateralism. However, the UN’s wartime origins suggest that collaboration is also useful for the most powerful nations when the political conditions are right.

GOING IT ALONE

Of course, plenty of contemporary leaders traffic in nationalism, nativism, and populism. But Trump’s impact will be the biggest for the UN, since he heads what has long been its most influential member state and largest funder.

Bowing to the anti-abortion views of his base, one of Trump’s first moves was a nonnegotiable elimination of US funding for the UN Population Fund, the organization devoted to the reproductive health of girls and women. The administration also urged drastic cuts to peacekeeping funds, setting an initial target of \$1 billion in cuts from an \$8 billion budget, but ultimately settling for a \$600 million overall cut, resulting in a \$170 million reduction in the US contribution. The savings amount to a rounding error in the US federal budget, but the cuts will seriously impede UN operations.

The administration’s insistence that the United States should abandon its traditional role as the

leading proponent of free trade was an even bigger indication of narrow nationalism run amok. Trump began by ripping up the Trans-Pacific Partnership, thereby forgoing the potential benefits of expanded access to Asian markets and the chance to advance human rights and environmental protection standards as conditions for participation. Trump has continued in this vein by threatening to scrap the North American Free Trade Agreement, while calling for a border tax and tariffs on steel and other imports.

China has made the most of this opportunity delivered to it on a silver platter. It now can dictate the standards for international commerce in Asia; it has picked up new trading partners, in Asia and worldwide; it even presents itself as the new champion of free trade. Even those who viewed the rise of China and other emerging powers as inevitable underestimated how quickly the stature of the United States would diminish and its credibility evaporate. A strident and unpredictable Washington seems determined to start a world

trade war; meanwhile, Beijing is the calm and predictable voice for free trade and stability.

Of still greater significance was the May announcement that the United States would abandon the

Paris Agreement on climate change and make no effort to meet voluntary targets to curb planet-warming emissions. Once again, China is the direct beneficiary of Trump’s myopia. Beijing is happy to fill an unexpected new role as the leading advocate for action on climate change, just as it has become the world’s largest producer of greenhouse gases. Green-technology producers in China are forging ahead toward a dominant global market position while the Trump administration vows to create jobs in coal mines—never mind that ten times as many US workers are currently employed in renewable energy and other green-technology jobs as in the coal industry.

The 2020 presidential election will be held just before the US withdrawal takes legal effect. By then, perhaps, more voters will have come to their senses. In any case, the fact that many US cities, states, and corporations are mobilizing in support of the Paris Agreement and have vowed to adhere to its goals means that a multilateral approach will still be a viable option for the United States. The final communiqué from the July 2017 Group of 20

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meeting in Hamburg—which noted that the climate agreement was irreversible and nonnegotiable, notwithstanding Trump’s demands for a new deal—showed that the other 19 members of the G-20 remain committed while Washington pouts.

Trump’s isolationism starkly contrasts with the views and approaches of virtually all of Washington’s friends. Rubbing salt in their wounds, the administration announced in December that it was pulling out of UN negotiations toward a global compact on migration, shortly after having set its withdrawal from the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Of course, even as committed an internationalist as Obama occasionally reverted to heavy-handed pressure on the UN: the US had already stopped paying its bills to UNESCO in 2010 to protest its admission of Palestine.

POLITICAL THEATER

Trump’s UN debut resembled many of his domestic speeches in its incoherence and hostility toward liberal values and institutions. He paid lip service to the UN’s values, but went on to suggest that he remains committed to dismantling the web of intergovernmental organizations and the rule of law created and nurtured by the United States since World War II.

The General Assembly has long been the setting for memorable performances by bombastic and narcissistic leaders. In 1960, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev banged his shoe on a table to demonstrate his diplomatic dyspepsia. In 1974, the Palestine Liberation Organization’s Yasser Arafat ceremoniously checked his revolver at the door and then brandished an olive branch. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez began his 2006 speech by sniffing the chamber, indicating that it still smelled of sulfur—because “the devil,” George W. Bush, had addressed the assembly the previous day.

During the “general debate” that opens each year’s session of the General Assembly, Brazil by tradition speaks first, followed by the host nation, the United States. Thus, the start of the seventy-second session of the General Assembly on September 19, 2017, provided a stage for Trump’s reality show at UN headquarters. Speaking for almost three times the suggested 15-minute limit, he hardly set a new standard for succinctness.

After a tepid opening, he reverted to complaints about the US paying an unfair share of the UN’s bills, self-promotional chest-thumping, and rants about North Korea and Iran. While expected, Trump’s

warning that he was prepared to annihilate North Korea was a first—threatening nuclear war in the assembly hall supposedly devoted to the peaceful resolution of disputes. Overall, the speech was received as a declaration of unrepentent nationalism in the very home of internationalism.

Of course, great powers have never been reluctant to throw their weight around, which the UN Charter recognizes by putting five veto-wielding permanent members in the Security Council. In one way, oddly enough, Trump’s approach resembles that of a far more respected, cultivated, and dignified world leader of an earlier generation. Charles de Gaulle was temporarily successful in attacking multilateral institutions while at the same time expressing an atavistic Gallic nationalism.

General de Gaulle dismissed the UN as “*le machin*” (the thing) in order to create space for France to maneuver outside the US-Soviet confrontation. A few years later, as president of the Fifth Republic, he withdrew France from the integrated military command structure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), seeking autonomy within the Western alliance. He also temporarily left vacant the French seat in the European Economic Community (which would become the European Union) in order to ensure that members retained full sovereignty and that Britain was excluded.

Although steeped in history, de Gaulle seemingly forgot that the predecessor of “the thing” had liberated occupied France. He also was unable to recognize the essential contribution of NATO and expanded European integration in maintaining peace and ensuring growth and prosperity in France and on the continent.

Trump’s unilateral and nativist perspective—he has heaped scorn on “obsolete” NATO as well as the UN—will be revealed as just as shortsighted as de Gaulle’s over half a century ago. It is important to hold the fort in the interim. Just as the multilateral institutions discounted by de Gaulle were resilient enough and ready to expand operations and membership after his departure, the UN and NATO—and proponents of international cooperation more broadly—should be prepared for a resurgence after Trump disappears from the international scene.

GUTERRES TO THE RESCUE?

Trying to reform the UN has been virtually a perpetual task since the ink dried on the signa-

tures to the Charter in 1945. Efforts never cease to improve the UN's effectiveness; to make it more inclusive, transparent, and accountable; and to pull together its autonomous parts. The results have been modest and uneven at best. Those who see the institution as essential interpret these efforts optimistically as an encouraging sign of life. Critics see the sclerosis of an aging institution that is not worth saving. Meaningful change and renovation, if not structural transformation, are indisputably necessary.

The decibel level of the criticism is rising, including but certainly not only in Washington. What Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, calls "a world in disarray" has become more complex and uncertain precisely when predictable collective action is so desperately required. Powerful and less powerful countries and their publics appear skeptical about intergovernmental organizations; they are likely to move toward more of a cost-benefit, transactional approach to multilateralism of all stripes, including under UN auspices. The multilateral narrative has less visceral appeal than in 1945, or even a few years ago.

This context was already obvious during the 2016 US presidential race. Simultaneously, António Guterres was running his successful campaign to become the ninth occupant of the UN's top floor. The stage was set for only the second time—the first was in 1996—when the campaigns for US president and UN secretary-general ran in parallel.

The 2016 UN contest produced a slate of thirteen nominees—seven of whom were women. (Over the previous seven decades, through all eight prior campaigns for the UN's top post, only three women were actively considered.) All the candidates pursued their campaigns both in person and through lobbyists. Member states were also lobbied by 1 for 7 Billion, a campaign endorsed by 750 civil society organizations from around the world "committed to getting the best UN Secretary-General."

In a refreshing break from past practice, the General Assembly gathered for two-hour hearings with each candidate from April to September 2016. It also organized an open public event for all of them, while civil society debates in New York and London augmented these governmental gatherings. The candidates' resumes were avail-

able for public and private scrutiny. Each of them circulated a "vision statement" that contained proposals for reshaping the unwieldy UN and making better use of its 80,000 international civil servants and the 120,000 soldiers and civilians engaged in peacekeeping operations. As a result, the selection process was somewhat open and transparent. It no longer resembled a papal conclave, though only an inveterate Pollyanna would have hoped to eliminate backroom horse-trading in the Security Council's small electoral college of the five permanent members.

Guterres, the frontrunner for several months and the winner of five straw polls in the usually divided Security Council, secured the recommendation of that body. The General Assembly then appointed him by acclamation in early October 2016. Having previously served as a two-term prime minister of Portugal and then for over a decade as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, he is the first socialist former head of government to hold the top UN post. While thus not the *Wall*

Street Journal's preferred candidate, his distinguished government and UN management experience, together with his evident energy and diplomatic finesse, made him the best of the declared candi-

dates. Other leading contenders included UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova, UN Development Program Administrator Helen Clark, and former UN climate chief Christiana Figueres. Many inside and outside governments and the Secretariat insisted the post should finally go to a woman, but the declared female candidates never fared well in the straw polls.

Guterres might not have prevailed under the old rule, which called for a geographical rotation and would have dictated that it was an Eastern European's turn. The outgoing secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, arguably would not have been selected in 2006 if the new procedures had been in effect.

Perhaps these welcome, albeit modest, steps toward a more merit-based and transparent process will become part of the standard for filling other senior UN positions. This appears to have happened in the May 2017 election of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, a former Ethiopian foreign minister and health minister, as director-general of the World Health Organization, and the November 2017

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election of French culture minister Audrey Azoulay as UNESCO director-general. Greater meritocracy at the UN may well also have an impact at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, where the top jobs have always been reserved for US and European nationals, respectively.

IMPOSSIBLE JOB?

In his first remarks after taking the oath of office in January 2017, Guterres signaled that the prevention of armed conflict would be a priority, a familiar plea from secretaries-general since the 1990s. His two other stated emphases are management reform of the bureaucracy and getting the UN's pillars—peace and security; human rights and humanitarian action; and sustainable development—to work together instead of separately.

Guterres's reform agenda needs to reflect the emerging, long-term opportunities signaled by global unpredictability and instability. The UN is the logical forum for organizing for cooperative responses to global problems. The secretary-general is the most visible advocate for and manager of an essential global institution. It is more crucial than many believe.

The waste and overlap in the UN and its network of organizations are hardly news. High-level panels, international commissions, academic treatises, and media analyses have all highlighted the fragmentation of UN activities and the resulting turf wars over scarce resources. Can Guterres replicate the administrative slimming-down and decentralization that he implemented while he was the high commissioner for refugees? If not, the world body risks continuing along the path to obsolescence.

A year into his five-year term, the secretary-general's honeymoon is over. His position remains what the first incumbent, Trygve Lie, glumly called "the most impossible job in the world." Based on his experience, Guterres is fully aware of the UN's political flaws and structural and staffing shortcomings. We must hope that he has the fortitude not to shy away from the Sisyphean task of transforming the way that the UN does business.

On the eve of opening his first General Assembly, the secretary-general laid out numerous proposals for overhauling the UN's operational machinery, and the US Permanent Mission to the UN along with twelve other countries co-hosted a high-level event on UN reform. Given the number of previous proposals for such efforts that ended

up on the cutting-room floor, it would be unrealistic to expect major changes anytime soon.

Nonetheless, could Guterres use the Trump administration's tightening of financial screws to do what long has needed to be done? In an interview with PBS following his late-October meeting with Trump at the White House, the secretary-general said: "The UN can also be very useful to the United States, especially if we will be able, as I strongly intend, to have a more dynamic, more reformed, more nimble UN." If Guterres fails in this task, a self-reinforcing dynamic will result: the UN's inability to manage global problems will mean additional blowback for multilateralism.

The world certainly would not be better off without the UN—both the "first UN" of member states and the "second UN" of staff. To deny this proposition is to assert that we would be better off without the cooperative international campaigns to eradicate smallpox, to promote women's rights, to orchestrate efforts to counter climate change, and to aid and protect victims of war. Yet it is equally difficult to maintain that the world would not have been far better off if those same two UNs had improved their performance in numerous ways—for example, if member states had acted earlier to halt Rwanda's genocide in 1994; or if peacekeepers had been prevented from raping children in the Central African Republic or spreading cholera in Haiti; or if UN personnel had performed better in implementing development projects and setting global norms and standards.

State sovereignty is a convenient crutch on which everyone leans to explain international inaction—undoubtedly the UN's worst ailment. Article 2 incorporates sovereignty as the point of departure in the UN Charter. However, sovereignty can be and has been interpreted more inclusively—including during World War II—to justify cooperation in the face of common, existential threats. Sovereigns can calculate and define their interests to help or hinder efforts to improve the quality of human life and address those transboundary threats that former Secretary-General Kofi Annan aptly called "problems without passports."

In the age of Trump, sanity and survival are at stake. "We are calling for a great reawakening of nations," Trump told the General Assembly, thereby ignoring history: the United States actually helped to create the world organization to curb the horrors of nationalism. Instead, he should be calling for a great reawakening of the United Nations. ■