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Issue Brief

Between Hope and Despair: Trump and the Future of the United Nations

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S*ummary*

Recent developments from Brexit to the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States to the burgeoning populist movements championing economic nationalism across the globe point towards the diminishing role of multi-lateral institutions. The Issue Brief places in perspective key issues of concern that have animated the US-UN relations in recent times. It then discusses the best and worst case scenarios for the UN under the Trump administration and closes by looking at possible options for Guterres to constructively engage with the new dispensation at the White House.

Recent developments from Brexit to the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States to the burgeoning populist movements championing economic nationalism across the globe point towards the diminishing role of multi-lateral institutions. This is clearly evident vis-a-vis the United Nations (UN), the most reputed multilateral institution of our age. Portuguese politician Antonio Guterres was elected as its new Secretary General in December 2017 through an open and transparent process. Guterres affirmed that the UN was ‘the cornerstone of multilateral approach’.¹

Guterres’s views are in direct contrast to that of the new US President, who tweeted on January 26, 2017 that the ‘UN is just a club for people to get together, talk and have a good time’.² Trump’s tweet was reflective of his positions on multi-lateral institutions like the UN. India, a firm believer in the UN cause, also recently lashed out the slow progress of reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC). Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar stated that ‘the absurdity of the main multilateral decision-making body being more than 70 years old — and due for retirement anywhere in the world — is obvious to all except those with a vested interest’.³

The Issue Brief places in perspective key issues of concern that have animated the US-UN relations in recent times. It then discusses the best and worst-case scenarios for the UN under the Trump administration and closes by looking at possible options for Guterres to constructively engage with the new dispensation at the White House.

Troubled but Applauded: The History of US-UN Relations

Some of the terms used by scholars of multilateralism to describe the US-UN relations have included the following: ‘troubled’, ‘indifferent’, ‘ambiguous’, ‘fair weather friend’, ‘hostile’, ‘uncertain’, ‘congenital unilateralism’, ‘ambivalent’, ‘antipathy’, ‘deteriorating’, ‘crisis’, ‘full of promise’.⁴ Over the last seven decades, the US and UN had a ‘love-hate’ relationship. On the one hand, the US played a vital role in the formation of the UN. The popular perception in the US is that Washington breathed life into the UN with its power and influence. Indeed, the American vision of the world reflected in the major ideas and principles of the UN Charter. It is evinced by the similarities between the Preamble of the UN Charter

¹ Secretary General’s Address to the UN Staff on January 3, 2017, at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sgsm18401.doc.htm>

² Tweet of Donald Trump on January 26, 2017, at <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/813500123053490176>

³ ‘The pressures to reform the UN will grow, says Foreign Secretary Jaishankar’, January 18, 2017, at http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/the-pressures-to-reform-the-un-will-grow-says-foreign-secretary-jaishankar-117011800431_1.html

⁴ Karen Mingst, ‘Troubled Waters: The United States–United Nations Relationship’, *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 10, no.4, 2003, pp. 82-94.

and the Preamble of the US Constitution⁵. The US monetary support further enhanced its sense of ownership over the organisation.

On the other hand, the US often reprimanded and slammed some of the UN's decisions and mistrust gradually displaced harmony over time. In the 1980s for instance, President Ronald Regan was antagonistic to the UN, believing that the institution's performance was poor. The conservative think tank Heritage Foundation — which was the leading anti-UN lobby at that time, reinforced this view and campaigned for defunding the organization. In the 1990s, President George H.W. Bush expressed strong support for the UN and held the view that the UN could fulfil its historic vision and play a leading role in the new world order.

His son, George W. Bush however, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, not only embraced a unilateralist America-first policy but openly derided the UN and renounced many multilateral treaties.⁶ While the junior Bush pursued UN support for his actions in Afghanistan against Taliban and Al- Qaeda, in 2003, when the organization failed to back his pre-emptive war against Iraq, he turned against it.

President Barack Obama's approach towards multilateralism was based on the notion that 'the global challenges we face demand global institutions'.⁷ The global public expectations regarding Obama's foreign policy were very high. This was evident in the words of the Norwegian Nobel Committee:

'Obama has as president created a new climate in international politics. Multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play. Dialogue and negotiations are preferred as instruments for resolving even the most difficult international conflicts'.⁸

While Obama distanced the US from Bush's hostile attitudes towards multilateral institutions, he couldn't either revamp the rundown multilateral global order or secure US commitments to key multilateral agreements. During the eight years of the Obama administration, less than 20 multilateral treaties were approved by the Senate — the lowest in an eight-year period since World War II. The combination of domestic and international structural constraints ensured that Obama who trumpeted his patronage for emphatic multilateralism ended up with a long list of multilateral treaties that failed to gain the US Congress' ratification. These included the Statute of the International Criminal Court, the Landmine Ban Treaty, the

⁵ See Benjamin Rivlin, 'How does the UN System fit into American Foreign Policy Interests?' *American Foreign Policy Interest*, Vol.28, Issue No. 4, 2006, pp. 283-84.

⁶ John Dumbrell, 'Unilateralism and America-First: President George W. Bush's Foreign Policy', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No.3, 2002, pp. 279-87.

⁷ David Skidmore, 'The Obama Presidency and US Foreign Policy: Where's the Multilateralism', *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol.13, 2016, pp. 43-64.

⁸ Press Release of Norwegian Nobel Committee, October 9, 2009, at http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/press.html.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the UN Disabilities Convention, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Convention on Biodiversity.⁹

To sum up, the US-UN relationship has been dynamic over the past four decades. It reflected the power politics at the international realm, and the conflict between state sovereignty and autonomy of multilateral institutions. John Ikenberry captures well the ambiguous nature of the US-UN relationship when he writes that ‘the United States has been the greatest champion of multilateralism in the 20th century, but it has also been reluctant to tie itself too closely to these multilateral institutes and rules’.¹⁰ Currently, the general state of flux in the global political system with the coming to power of Trump is rekindling conflict between the interests of the hegemon and notions of multilateral autonomy. The following section examines the possible impact on the UN on account of the Trump administration.

Trump and the United Nations: Best and Worst Case Scenarios

For many observers, the UN is currently facing an existential threat, due to the possibility of the US leaving or defunding the UN. Some reports suggest that the Trump administration is proposing a reduction in the US funding to the UN by at least 40 percent. Alabama representative and senior Republican Mike Rogers drafted a bill to terminate the US membership in the UN. These moves if they come to fruition would impact the UN severely as the US pays about 22 percent and 29 percent of the UN’s annual and peacekeeping budgets respectively.

The essence of the Republican criticism towards the UN is based on two key issues. Firstly, the anti-Israel resolutions of the organization and secondly, the notion that the US is not getting benefits commensurate with its investment and the burden therefore must be shared among all beneficiaries. In September 2011 for instance, in the context of a bid by the Palestinian Authority (PA) for statehood, Trump stated that the US ‘must stand firm against the UN’s ploy to sabotage Israel — if the UN grants the PA statehood, then we must immediately defund it’.¹¹ During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump asserted that the US unduly funds the UN in return for nothing. In December 2016, Trump affirmed that the US’ cannot continue to let

⁹ For more details about the multilateral treaties, which are not ratified by the US, see <https://www.state.gov/s/1/treaty/pending/>

¹⁰ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, ‘International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism’, *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2005, pp. 509-524.

¹¹ ‘Donald Trump and the United Nations: A fight Waiting to Happen’, *Telegraph UK*, January 19, 2017, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/19/donald-trump-united-nations-fight-waiting-happen/>

Israel to be treated with such total disdain and disrespect. Many top leaders of the Republican camp have also expressed similar sentiments.¹²

The criticisms of Trump and his colleagues are therefore conditional to the UN modulating its anti-Israel rhetoric and the UN complying with the interests of the US. If this reading is true, there are three possible ways for the UN to continue to get US support. First, comport with the foreign policy goals of the US. This is not a hard task for the organization since it has been doing the same from its inception with occasional exceptions. Moreover, it is pragmatic as well since none of the other great or rising powers are interested or capable of shouldering the financial burden of the organization as the US is doing at present.

The second option is to reform the funding provisions of the organization to distribute the financial burden equally. This is a difficult task for the organization for various reasons. Firstly, reform at any level is paralyzed in the UN, and if anything happens, it will take decades. Secondly, though Trump and his companions are undeniably right in their argument that the financing burden must be shared by all beneficiaries, in reality, the US as the global hegemon or the leading power will not be happy to tolerate anyone else as the patron of the organization. Particularly, in the backdrop of growing Chinese influence, such an approach would be suicidal for Washington. The anti-China group in the incumbent US administration will also oppose such a policy move that reduces the US dominance in the organization.

Finally, Washington knows that it is the real beneficiary of the organization. The US as a global superpower contributes to most UN functions for the sake of its own interest. In terms of cost-benefit analysis, funding the UN continues to make sense for the US as it helps in achieving US foreign policy interests. For instance, US' association with UN peacekeeping is based on real foreign policy calculations such as making American trade, investment, and tourism safe. The ongoing 16 peacekeeping operations cost about \$8 billion a year. This is close to 1 percent of US defence budget. If the US tried to do all this alone, it would cost the lives of US citizens and billions of dollars more in cost. The UN sanctions are another example of how the US uses the world body to contain actions by other states which are conflicting with American foreign policy interests. Sanctions against Iran, Russia, and North Korea are instructive in this regard.

Options for Guterres

Guterres has to forcefully convey to the new US administration that the US-UN relationship is a two-way street, where both parties need each other to safeguard their respective interests. His diplomatic savoir-faire can easily carry the task of communicating the message that neither the US nor the UN can afford to let the

¹² 'Trump Nominee Questions US Funding of UN', *CNN*, January 19, 2017, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/17/politics/haley-un-confirmation-hearing/>

relationship continue on its current downward spiral. Building channels of communications to engage constructively with the White House and other federal agencies is essential here. This will enable the new administration to recognize how beneficial the UN is as a negotiating forum and as a source of global legitimacy.

In his first response towards the US ban on people from seven countries, which affects none other than the refugees fleeing from conflict zones, Guterres stated

[A]ll complicated things have an easy answer, and the answer is to be firm in assessing all principles and open in engaging in constructive dialogue. That is the combination that I will try to make effective in the way we deal with US administration or in the way we deal with any other administration in the world'.¹³

Secondly, to prevent immediate cuts on funding, Guterres can delay further UN action against Israeli settlements, which provoked the Republicans badly. Any move against Israel could end up with not only a stalemate in the UNSC but the overall functions of the organization as well. However, in this particular case of settlements, a pro-Israeli move from the UN is less likely due to the global public opinion against Israeli violations. Even after the continuous warning and defunding threat from President Trump and senior Republican leaders, Guterres condemned Israeli settlement activity by asserting that it violates international law and that there will be 'far-reaching legal consequences' for the country.¹⁴

Thirdly, some genuine reform pushes on critical issues will help the Secretary General to build credibility in Washington. For instance, the US Congress has been criticizing issues such as sexual abuse by peacekeepers and overstaffing of the organization. Due to the bureaucratic apathy in the UN however, all the reforms proposed became cosmetic and nothing has changed fundamentally. Guterres can use the present threat of the US de-funding as an opportunity to rally other member states to consider the reform issues seriously. This strategy would also help the UN regain its image among the American public.

1. Finally, the Secretary-General should make efforts to engage with the US Congress directly. During the most intense battle over UN funding led by Republican Senator Jesse Helms in 1990s for instance, the then Secretary General Kofi Annan successfully managed the crisis by engaging with the Congress directly.

¹³ Antonio Guterres address to media at UN Headquarters, February 1, 2017, at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56087#.WJK3F9J97cs>

¹⁴ Statement of Guterres on Knesset's Regularisation Bill on 7 February 2017, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56123#.WJqx3NJ97cs>

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