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‘Security Council reform is dead’

A conversation about the UN in the age of Trump

Richard Gowan, senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, speaks to Michael Bröning about the state of the United Nations.

Few people doubt we are living in interesting times. Nationalist forces are rising, the spectre of violent confrontation looms large, and then there are the current tensions with North Korea. Can the UN save us from ourselves?

> The UN on its own cannot save the world. But I think the UN has an incredibly important role as a mechanism for states, and especially big powers, to deal with some of the crises that we face. So on North Korea, for example, we see that the Security Council is in a sense playing the role that the founders of the UN intended. It is bringing together China, Russia and the US to undertake some very complex diplomacy when the alternative would probably be an escalation to war. It is astonishing that this is happening in the context of the Trump administration, because we didn’t expect Trump to really do any serious diplomacy through the UN.
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> And what about the longer term issues such as the environment, migration, and social pressures that are challenging all the members of the UN? Does the organisation have an answer to those issues? I think that elements of the sustainable development goals, elements of the Paris Treaty on climate change, possibly a migration compact that states are going to agree on next year can provide a road map for getting us out of this increasingly fractious situation. But it is only a roadmap, and the UN alone cannot save us.

You mentioned the T word: Trump. The US President’s approach towards multilateralism has been ambiguous to say the least. His inauguration speech ended with America First; he is threatening to cancel the Iran deal; he’s threatening North Korea with ‘fire and fury’ and he seems obsessed with the notion of sovereignty, mentioning the term 21 times in his speech to the General Assembly last month. At the same time his UN ambassador, Nikki Haley, seems to have

exceeded expectations. How do you assess the future of UN/US cooperation?

UN/US cooperation is definitely not as bad as we had feared it might become at the beginning of the year. On practical issues, such as questions of reforming the UN bureaucracy and streamlining the UN development system, Haley has been able to find quite a lot of common ground with the new UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres.

Guterres has laid out a series of reform ideas for rationalising and modernising the UN that Haley likes, and, in fairness, a lot of other diplomats around the UN like. Through doing that, Guterres has at least mitigated the US push to slash the UN budget, and we are hearing less from Washington now about cutting UN funding by 50 per cent. Even Trump's decision to withdraw from UNESCO lacks bite, as the Obama administration cut off funding to UNESCO in 2011 over its attitude to Israel and Palestine.

But that really is mainly of interest to people in the UN bubble, and I am concerned that despite that gradual progress, a breakdown over North Korea, or especially a breakdown over Iran in the Security Council could really undermine US/UN relations, and bring us back to a situation comparable to 2003 and the Iraq War where the US and the UN were profoundly divided.

If that happens, the Secretary General would be key in mediating that crisis. Guterres was elected 12 months ago. How do you assess his diplomatic footprint so far?

Well Guterres has trodden extremely carefully over the first nine or ten months in office. He has had to adapt to a Trump administration, and he did not have good access or good channels to Washington at the beginning of his term.

He has prioritised building a working relationship with Haley and also a lot of advocacy with Congress, to try and defend the UN from the worst of the Trump administration's potential cuts. Because he's been so heavily focussed on Washington, Guterres has sometimes been an almost invisible figure in New York. He has probably spent 70 per cent of his political energy on US relations, and as a result, a lot of UN officials are a little confused about what he is doing. They don't have a clear sense of his agenda.

Nonetheless, he has succeeded in building a relationship with the Trump administration, which was not guaranteed, and he has also managed to maintain good relations with China and with a lot of the developing countries. That is quite an achievement, because normally

when a Secretary General works very closely with the US, the non-Aligned movement, the Global South, gets jumpy and starts criticising him.

But we haven't seen that, and I think that reflects the fact that Guterres has amazingly good networks in Latin America and in Africa, from his days running UNHCR, and he is really working with those networks.

You mentioned Guterres' reform agenda, which was one of the basic promises of his campaign. Can you elaborate on what these reforms actually entail?

It is worth saying that his reform agenda doesn't cover what perhaps 95 per cent of normal people assume UN reform means, which is Security Council reform. The last Secretary General to even talk about Security Council reform was Kofi Annan, and that led nowhere. Ban Ki-moon didn't touch the issue, Guterres isn't touching it either.

His reform agenda has four main pillars. One stand-alone pillar is the promotion of gender parity in the organisation. A lot of UN commentators were disappointed that the Security Council didn't select a female Secretary General last year. Guterres cannot help the fact that he is a man, but he is doing his best to promote gender parity. About 50 per cent of the senior appointments he has made so far have been women. So he is making some progress on that.

The main structural reforms are an overhaul of the UN development system, which is really about cutting out elements of it that are no longer fit for purpose. The UN's approach to development is still stuck in the last century: there are too many offices duplicating each other, and a lot of UN work is now rendered frankly irrelevant by the rise of China as a major global funder. So Guterres has plans to slim down the UN's development footprint worldwide, and also clarify lines of accountability back to him as the leader of the organization. He's trying to cut through some of the bureaucracy.

Secondly he is prioritising management reform. We have a situation across the UN system where we have management rules that actively stop UN officials being flexible and creative in the field. Guterres says his personal priority is cutting away a lot of the management nonsense and empowering UN officials on the ground, such as peacekeepers and humanitarian workers, to help the needy.

Finally, there is a smaller, but still pretty common sense set of proposals about realigning the departments that run UN mediation, UN peacekeeping and UN peace building activities in New York. The

departments that deal with security at UN headquarters have evolved in a slightly haphazard way, and Guterres is planning quite a limited rationalisation of them, to improve the UN strategic oversight of operations like those in Darfur or mediation processes like that for Syria.

So he is not going to touch the hot potato of Security Council reform – what 90 per cent of people expect when they hear the term UN reform?

I think that is true. But the stark reality is that discussions of Security Council reform are dead, and it has become very clear in recent years that China in particular is not willing to countenance any reform of the council that would give Japan even a limited increase in its leverage at the UN. It runs very deep for the Chinese. I don't think that anyone imagines the Trump Administration is going to bother with Security Council reform either. The Obama Administration flirted with it, but never really pursued the issue.

I detect a notable loss of enthusiasm for council reform amongst the main advocates of change, including Germany. Even the Indians, who have often been the most vocal proponents of reforming the council to get permanent seats for themselves, Brazil, Germany and Japan, seem to be exhausted and frustrated with the process.

I think Germany is finding new and more creative ways of applying influence at the UN than just demanding a permanent seat. Guterres meanwhile has to deal with the problems down in the boiler room of the organisation, because peacekeeping is overstretched, humanitarian operations are overstretched, development aid is underperforming, and those are all real-world day-to-day problems that he has to tackle.

What should Europeans, and Germans in particular, do to defend the multilateral, international order?

Let's begin by accentuating the positive. I think Germany's profile and substantive contribution to the UN has increased very significantly over the last five years in particular. And there is a real recognition around New York that, whereas in the past Berlin played second fiddle to the French and the British in UN diplomacy, it is now increasingly influential.

Brexit is going to make a big difference at the UN, because you will no longer have two EU countries sitting permanently in the Security Council. France cannot carry the burden of leading the European block at the UN in its own right. It is not as big a player on aid as Germany is, for example. When it comes to negotiating with Russia on a lot of issues, Germany is actually often better placed than the

French to get results from Moscow.

So I see, over the next five to ten years, Germany not getting a permanent seat on the Council, but essentially replicating versions of the P5+1 model in more and more policy areas, with Berlin on the outside, but still plugged into a lot of Security Council decision-making, as it was previously over Iran.

Now, to sustain that, Germany needs to keep on making its financial strength felt in the UN system. It also needs to maintain its increased role in peacekeeping.

Germany, the indispensable nation.

I would say more that Germany is the friend that you now need to bring to every party at the UN, and if only because the Germans are the people who can pay for drinks.



Richard Gowan

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