FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 14.02.2025 | Matthias Jobelius

Wild new world

Trump ushers in a new era for the United Nations. There are possibilities to shape it

For decades, the United States was *the* indispensable nation for multilateralism. Back in 1945, the US developed an architecture of global institutions to protect the world from sliding into another abyss. Without the firm commitment of US presidents such as Roosevelt and Truman, we wouldn't have a United Nations, International Monetary Fund or World Bank today. And without the enormous financial commitment from the Americans, the UN system wouldn't have survived for all this time. There was one guiding principle that made the US a major player in multilateralism throughout various administrations in the second half of the 20th century: it was in US interests to engage other countries in a multilateral system whose rules were in part decided by the US itself.

This principle began to slowly erode around the turn of the century: the invasion of Iraq, drone warfare, a weakening of the International Criminal Court and the first withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement. In retrospect, there is a long list of political decisions that cast doubt on whether the US has used its unipolar moment after the Cold War wisely. As a result, Washington lost soft power, criticism of double standards grew, and global dissatisfaction with the US-dominated international order increased.

In limbo

That world order does no longer exist, but a succession order has yet to be established. Instead, the world is in a state of transition, an unstable interregnum characterised by greater multipolarity and a relative decline in US power. This phase will draw out for even longer, regardless of who is in charge in Washington. So, it would be wrong to see Trump as the dawn of a new order. But there is reason to believe that the relationship between the US and the international community will look rather different since his re-election. Trump's administration has adopted a new approach to foreign policy — one that will soon find itself being emulated and could be a defining factor for a world in interregnum.

It is the approach of a great power that does not want its freedom of action constrained by international rules. In this logic, multilateral organisations are obstacles and, at best, subordinate instruments for the enforcement of interests. It is no longer the rules-based order but the deals-based order that seems to be the guiding principle for the US in its dealings with the international community. Narrowly defined benefits and domestic policy considerations seem to be more important to the new administration than securing long-term interests through a multilateral framework. And the way to achieve this is through a 'coercive diplomacy' - customs duties, threats, penalties and sanctions. At the same time, the bilateral level is becoming more important than alliances. The UN system takes a back seat in this transactional power play.

The level of prestige, trust and soft power the US has lost is remarkable.

This approach encounters an already weakened multilateral system. The demands on multilateralism are growing, but the UN seems less and less able to meet them, evidenced not least by veto after veto in the Security Council. Behind this are geopolitical rivalries and a lack of mutual trust between the major powers, which might increase under the new US administration. Lately, the US government has been flexing its muscles and scoring successive victories over other countries day after day. But its allies have been closely watching how it has dealt with Panama, Colombia and Denmark, a lesson in how important it is not to be too dependent on the US. The level of prestige, trust and soft power the US is losing is remarkable. And the rest of the world has cause for concern: since Trump announced plans to expand his country's territory, there are now three out of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council that have been pursuing an agenda of geopolitical expansion. And the greater the rivalry, the less likely they are to agree on the rules of play.

Herein lies the problem, because there is a large consensus among the 193 UN member states that the multilateral system is in need of reform. Many deem the status quo unfair: countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia are calling for the Security Council to be reformed, and for more influence in the IMF and the World Bank, on global tax issues and on how top personnel are selected, as well as better development and climate finance for the Global South. For the US and other Western states, many

of these demands would mean giving up privileges and providing more resources. Trump, and other Western leaders, are unlikely to make these concessions, diminishing the multilateral system's legitimacy and reducing its ability to reform.

These problems are exacerbated by the anticipated decline in US financial contributions. Given the tasks that it takes on, the UN is already underfunded, with income of around $74 billion, around 28 per cent coming from the United States. Now, the UN and many of its agencies are preparing for the US to slash its contributions or, in some cases, stop them altogether. In some areas and regions, this could bring the UN to the brink of being unable to act.

A deal-based order, but at what cost?

The fact that war continues unabated in Ukraine and elsewhere is also a symptom of weaker multilateralism. The UN has been practically absent in recent efforts to resolve ongoing wars and conflicts. If Trump succeeds in forcing ceasefires and stabilising conflicts, it would provide legitimacy for his foreign policy. Suddenly, a deal-based order might be more appealing than multilateralism after all. But at what cost? As a result, a stable network of multilateral rules would be replaced by an unstable network of bilateral transactions. Europe knows this approach well enough from the 19th century. It ended in violence.

European countries have drawn their own conclusions from this experience. The European Union is a result of this. An entity that gives the globe ideas for navigating the wild world we are heading for. The option of an enhanced cooperation that underpins EU treaties can be a guiding principle for new alliances with countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The EU could work more strategically and intensively with these on joint projects. The countries of the Global South, in particular, have an interest in setting out common rules to prevent the future world order from becoming a stage for the great powers.

Cooperation with the US government remains extremely important in strategic terms.

For these reform-oriented alliances to work, the rules-based order needs to provide better "deals" for partners than the deals-based order, which only benefits those with huge bargaining power. The EU should therefore focus its reform efforts on the most critical areas for countries in the Global South: better access to funds and financial security nets, sustainable development finance models, solutions to the global debt crisis, more say in the IMF and World Bank,

reform of the UN Security Council and a fairer global tax system.

Many far-reaching reforms are unthinkable without US support, so cooperation with the US government remains extremely important in strategic terms. The aim must be to tie the US as closely as possible to international memberships and agreements. Trump has nominated someone from his inner circle as UN ambassador, in the form of Elise Stefanik. That adds weight to the post. Stefanik will hold cabinet status, which is not always a given for Republican administrations. She is young, accomplished and ambitious, and will use her position to forge her own foreign-policy profile to support her career plans. Constructive cooperation with Stefanik on certain UN dossiers seems possible.

For multilateral cooperation with the US to work, the strategic value of multilateral rules must be made clearer to Washington. Neither disorder nor power vacuums are in American interests. Nor were they ever. For the wild times the world is facing, it is worth recalling why Roosevelt and Truman were so committed to bringing the international community together in 1945 so that it could give itself its own constitution in form of the United Nations Charter: to save the peoples of the world from 'the scourge of war'. The order at the birth of which these words were written in the preamble to the Charter has since disintegrated. Now there is no task more important for the international community than to transfer this core mission into a new order. The United States remains inevitable for this. And the United Nations indispensable.



Matthias Jobelius
New York

Matthias Jobelius is Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in New York. Previously, he worked for the foundation in Romania, Georgia and India and was head of the European Union and North America Department and the Central and Eastern Europe Department at the FES headquarters in Berlin. He studied political science in Berlin and development studies in London.