



# Less is more? The US at the UN

by Bart Szewczyk

The US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley took office on 27 January 2017, a week into the new administration, as the third cabinet member to be confirmed (after Defense Secretary Mattis and CIA Director Pompeo). Her membership in the cabinet and on the principals committee of the National Security Council (NSC) is unusual for recent Republican administrations, as the tradition – established by President Eisenhower and continued by Presidents Ford, Reagan, Clinton, and Obama – was discontinued in the two Bush administrations. With this apparent momentum, Ambassador Haley announced immediately that the administration would “look at the UN, and everything that’s working, we’re going to make it better; everything that’s not working, we’re going to try and fix; and anything that seems to be obsolete and not necessary, we’re going to do away with.”

Nine months into the administration, no coherent US policy towards the UN seems to have emerged yet. At a minimum, policy requires declarations matched by decisions over time. But for a significant period of time, it appeared that statements by the ambassador did not even reflect US views on particular issues, such as Russia or Syria, because they were not cleared internally with the White House or the US State Department. Moreover,

heightened diplomatic activity around crises, such as Syria’s use of chemical weapons in April, appear to have dissipated into symbolic one-off actions (such as missile strikes) that did not translate into any leverage, subsequent political process, or lasting decisions. With the notable exception of UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea, whose ultimate effectiveness in stemming Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons programme is still to be determined, there have been no significant diplomatic accomplishments. (Even the customary photographs of senior administration officials have not yet been hung at the entrance of the US Mission.) At the high-level week in mid-September, President Trump’s speech to the UN General Assembly also did not seem to establish a clear outline of US policy at the UN. Instead, the overall theme of the current US approach towards the UN has appeared to be that ‘less is more’.

In theory, spending less money could yield more desired outcomes by providing greater clarity of priorities and efficiency of operations. In practice, having fewer resources and engaging less has seemed to result in more festering crises and disorder. And over time, less leadership at the UN, especially from a founding member and traditional anchor such as the US, could provide more instability in a deteriorating strategic context.

## From unipolar to non-polar?

The rules-based international order is under “grave threat”, as the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres noted on 10 January 2017 in his first remarks to the Security Council. The order is challenged not only by external threats such as international terrorism or climate change, but also by internal doubts raised by traditional pillars of the UN system, such as the US and parts of Europe. As the international system moves from the unipolar moment of the 1990s and early 2000s, the greatest danger is not conflict due to power struggles arising from a temporary transition to a multipolar world, but perpetual conflict and instability in a *non-polar* world with no global leadership, no rules, and no norms.

This strategic context led the late Zbigniew Brzezinski to call for President Trump to explain “why America is important to the world and why the world needs America.” Others questioned whether the US could currently deliver. Charlie Kupchan, former NSC senior director for Europe under President Obama, argued that the US, rather than projecting global leadership, was retreating not only from the world at large but also from its closest allies in the West. Jon Finer, Secretary Kerry’s former policy planning director and chief of staff, concluded even more worryingly that “the United States currently has no real foreign policy at all”. And even at the UN, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain a coherent set of US priorities and consistent actions to achieve them.

## Cut and close

Ambassador Haley sought to outline the emerging US approach to the UN in the run-up to holding the monthly rotating presidency of the Security Council in April. In a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, she listed two main objectives: prioritising human rights at the UN and within the Security Council and reducing and reforming peacekeeping operations. She noted that the Security Council had never held a session dedicated to human rights and security, and the Human Rights Council (where these issues are addressed) is “corrupt”, to the extent that the US would reconsider its membership of the body. And on peacekeeping, she argued that many missions lack an exit strategy, such that operations ongoing in places such as South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic have “no political solution in sight.”

Within this framework, the main efforts were concentrated on cutting and closing peacekeeping

operations, primarily to reduce the share of US contributions from 28.6% to 25% (a cut of \$283 million out of the \$7.87 billion for the 2016-2017 fiscal year) or potentially to 18% (a cut of \$834 million). The former level has been set in statute by Congress, but with waiver available to the executive branch and utilised by prior administrations. The latter level would result in a 40% reduction in overall US contributions to the UN, sought by the initial budget proposed to Congress by the administration in March.

Although these proposed cuts caused concern in some quarters, most observers soon realised that the reductions could be achieved with UN missions that had been in the process of closing down already: in Cote d’Ivoire, \$153 million, by June 2017; in Haiti, \$345.9 million, by October 2017 (for the military mission); and in Liberia, \$187 million, by March 2018. Indeed, whereas the overall UN peacekeeping budget was thereby reduced for the 2017-2018 fiscal year to \$6.8 billion, the US share has remained at 28.47%. Others noted that the US pronouncements could be leveraged by Secretary-General Guterres to push for his own reform ideas within the UN system, which like many bureaucracies could be run more efficiently. Moreover, the initial US focus on spending cuts at the UN was undermined by Trump’s acknowledgement that the UN’s budget is “peanuts” relative to the “important work” it does.

During the US presidency of the Security Council in April, Ambassador Haley further expanded on the current approach in a thematic briefing on UN peacekeeping operations, listing five guiding principles for peacekeeping missions:

1. Missions must support political solutions;
2. Missions need host country cooperation;
3. Missions must have realistic and achievable mandates;
4. Missions must have an exit strategy; and
5. Mandates must be adjusted when situations improve or fail to improve.

While these standards may appear reasonable on the surface, there are other factors to consider as well. For instance, peacekeeping missions may seek to open options for a political solution to emerge in the future, rather than only support an already ongoing process. Some missions may need to operate even without host country cooperation, in order to protect civilians from atrocities perpetrated, for instance, by the host government. Mandates can

combine realistic short-term deliverables with aspirational long-term goals that are achievable beyond a mission's duration (promoting rule of law, for example). Exit timetables must be balanced against other objectives such as preserving the peace or protecting civilians. Finally, missions need not be micromanaged through constant mandate reviews, but instead require clear political guidelines from the Security Council along with operational flexibility by local UN officials staffed with sufficient resources.

The US presidency of the Security Council also included holding the first thematic debate on human rights, which the Council had not previously discussed as a stand-alone issue. Without acknowledging the Human Rights Council in Geneva – whose mission is to promote and protect human rights around the globe and to address human rights violations – Ambassador Haley argued that human rights should be a greater focus for the Security Council as they are intertwined with its core mission of maintaining international peace and security. A couple months later, she spoke at the Human Rights Council, noting that the US was reviewing its participation on the Council. She argued that the Council paradoxically includes human rights violators, such as Venezuela and Cuba, and unfairly targets Israel on its agenda. Yet, only two weeks later, Ambassador Haley praised the Human Rights Council for investigating abuses in the DRC.

Time will tell to what extent either of these two lines of effort is operationalised and makes a lasting impact in terms of UN policy. And ultimately, any efficiency gains in lower spending or institutional tweaks would have to be weighed against the time spent in attaining them and opportunity costs in not attending to festering crises, of which there is a growing number and with grave consequences.

## Festering crises

Missed diplomatic opportunities are the most difficult to assess as an outside observer, without having the insider's sense of politically-feasible options at specific moments. Some policies may not be ripe to pursue at a particular time, even though they may have been considered and chosen by a particular decision-maker. Other policies, though preferred by a specific senior official, may not be

supported by others in the government or among other members of an international institution such as the UN. Thus, any analysis of policy needs to take these constraints into account.

Nonetheless, the worst global humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, with over 20 million refugees and over 65 million forcibly displaced people around the world, continues unabated. What has changed is the US and international willingness to provide sufficient financial support to meet basic needs of displaced people and to prevent humanitarian crises from creating political instability. As of 29 September 2017, the US provided \$3 billion in aid (or 28.1% of the total amount) in contrast to \$3.6 billion (or 30%) in 2016.

By comparison, the top four European donors (Germany, the European Commission, the UK, and Sweden) thus far provided \$4.2 billion (or 39.3%) in 2017. Even more worryingly, the current global humanitarian appeal is funded only at 45%, in contrast to an average of 63% over the past eight years. The only year it dipped below 60% was in 2015, when cuts to the World Food Programme and overall funding of only 56% of the need precipitated mass refugee flows into Europe. Since Ambassador Haley has not appeared to highlight these ongoing gaps in her public remarks, it

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is likely that she has also not urged a more forceful response within US interagency government discussions or in her interactions with foreign counterparts and leaders. And such diplomacy is essential to avoid even larger

problems in the near-term future.

Not only the scale but also the speed of response is crucial, as lost time means lost lives. For instance, in April, Secretary-General Guterres stressed that 19 million people in Yemen needed emergency support and 17 million were food-insecure. He further noted that only 15% of the \$2.1 billion humanitarian appeal had been funded, with 50 children dying preventable deaths per day due to the sheer lack of resources. By that point, Ambassador Haley had not made any remarks at the UN regarding Yemen, notwithstanding two Security Council consultations in late January and March. She did not use the US presidency of the Council in April to convene a session on Yemen in the run-up to the pledging conference in Geneva. And when asked in an interview specifically about the world's worst famine in 70 years in Yemen, she responded





with remarks about peacekeeping cuts and humanitarian access in South Sudan and Syria.

In a similar vein, there appeared to be little high-level US attention to the UN-led peace negotiations in Cyprus, in which Secretary-General Guterres invested significant time, effort, and political capital and where he made his first trip abroad upon taking office. Since the talks were ultimately unsuccessful, it is unclear whether there were any missed opportunities for the US to engage decisively, but it is evident there were few if any attempts to contribute to a successful outcome.

Furthermore, notwithstanding two Security Council sessions in February on conflicts in Europe, including in Ukraine, there have been no subsequent US efforts to try to identify ways to engage the UN to help break the stalemate in the conflict in Ukraine and help facilitate prospects of a political solution there (through a peacekeeping mission or a special political mission, for example). With the recent Russian proposal in September for such a force, there is now an opportunity to explore this concept, although many questions remain whether there can be a meeting of minds in the Security Council regarding the potential mission's mandate, scope of authority, composition, scale, and duration.

Finally, although the US has prioritised counterterrorism efforts in its foreign policy and welcomed the creation of a new UN Office of Counterterrorism that would coordinate UN efforts through a dedicated post of Under-Secretary-General, it has not appeared to introduce new initiatives on how to improve global CT efforts through the UN. For instance, it could have organised a global summit on counterterrorism on the margins of the UN General Assembly high-level week, on the model of prior US-led summits on peacekeeping (in 2015) and refugees (in 2016), to generate concrete resource contributions to help implement international policy on counterterrorism.

## Who leads?

President Trump, in his speech at the UN General Assembly, recognised the importance of leadership to ensure the UN can fulfil its wide-ranging vision and mandate of maintaining international peace and security as well as protecting human rights and promoting human dignity. Quoting President Truman, he twice stated that the “success of the United Nations depends upon the

independent strength of its members.” He also acknowledged the Secretary-General's initiative on UN reform and the US signed a 10-point declaration in support of Guterres' efforts.

Indeed, the UN needs strong engagement from the US and other members to be successful, both in terms of active diplomacy and resource contributions. To be sure, international crises will continue to emerge and challenge UN efforts, making such engagement invariably frustrating and potentially disappointing. But there are few better institutional alternatives to manage international crises other than the UN, and it deserves continued strong support from its members.

Someone has to lead to uphold and strengthen the rules-based international order that has contributed to general peace and prosperity over the past seven decades. With ongoing debates regarding the future US role in the world, including at the United Nations, the key question is who will chart the necessary path forward. In this strategic context, the UN Secretary-General and other global leaders (particularly in Europe) also need to demonstrate strong engagement to continually affirm the core values and principles of the UN Charter that have provided the foundations for the international system. Given the onslaught of negative press about a chaotic world full of danger, it would be wise for leaders to project a strategic narrative of order and control, as well as potential hope and opportunity. Governments also need to increase efforts to shape the strategic narrative within a decentralised media environment, where the threshold for reporting is minimal and where the traditional journalistic commitment to truth has eroded.

Global leaders also need to identify ways in which the system could be renewed and adapted to new challenges. Both ambition and creativity are required to develop new norms and institutions to preserve and strengthen the core values of the UN Charter and the liberal international order. The main challenge will be in both the international community's intellectual efforts and the scope of imagination that can be deployed.

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