



The United Nations Prepares for a Somber 75th Anniversary

Stewart M. Patrick | Monday, Aug. 17, 2020

When the United Nations commemorates its 75th anniversary next month (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28858/remembering-the-san-francisco-conference-that-created-the-u-n>), it will be in a somber mood. Well before COVID-19 hit, the Trump administration's "America First" policies had deprived the world body of its traditional leader, the United States, while rising geopolitical frictions had paralyzed the U.N. Security Council. The coronavirus pandemic has reinforced these dynamics, accentuating U.S. unilateralism and exacerbating an increasingly heated rivalry between the U.S. and China. Much of the U.N.'s productive work has been brought to a standstill.



Secretary-General Antonio Guterres addresses the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Sept. 24, 2019 (AP photo by Richard Drew).

The Security Council dithered for months on a noncontroversial resolution to freeze violent conflict during the pandemic (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1067552>), thanks to the Trump administration's resistance (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28762/is-all-hope-lost-for-a-global-cease-fire-resolution-at-the-u-n>) to an explicit mention of the World Health Organization, and its efforts to include language embarrassing to China. Given the dysfunctional state of U.N. diplomacy, holding the annual General Assembly by videoconference may be a blessing.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has adapted to these realities. Rather than announce a bold reform agenda, he has focused the "UN75" (<https://www.un.org/en/un75>) festivities on two broad initiatives. The first is winning intergovernmental endorsement for a general declaration of principles in support of multilateral cooperation, an effort the Trump administration nearly derailed. The second is consulting with global civil society on the directions the U.N. should go in during its next quarter-century—findings he will present to member states in September.

These humble ambitions are a far cry from the sweeping reform proposals (https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/in_larger_freedom.shtml) that one of Guterres' predecessors, Kofi Annan, famously unveiled in 2005. They will disappoint those who had hoped that the COVID-19 pandemic, the

greatest global crisis since World War II, would inspire creative proposals to update the U.N.

(<https://www.stimson.org/2020/un-2-0-ten-innovations-for-global-governance-75-years-beyond-san-francisco/>) and the broader global governance system to the world of 2020.

Guterres has reason to be prudent, however. Animosity between China and the U.S. has infected diplomacy throughout the U.N. system. In July, the Trump administration formally announced plans to leave the WHO (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28907/leaving-the-who-is-no-way-to-deal-with-a-pandemic>), primarily, it said, because the U.N. body was kowtowing to Beijing. The sovereignty-obsessed Trump administration is in no mood for any ambitious multilateral schemes, which would in any event immediately become a political football at home and a geopolitical one abroad.

The best strategy for Guterres, who is eligible for a possible reappointment in September 2021, is a holding pattern until the winner of November's U.S. presidential election is clear. Should Joe Biden defeat Trump, an American return to the multilateral fold seems certain. Presuming the new administration supports Guterres for a second term, a Biden victory could open possibilities for concrete action to ameliorate not only pandemic disease, but the other major dangers that Guterres believes confront humanity in the 21st century (<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-01-22/secretary-generals-remarks-the-general-assembly-his-priorities-for-2020-bilingual-delivered-scroll-down-for-all-english-version>), namely: geopolitical rivalry, global warming, economic inequality and the "dark side of the digital world."

On Sept. 21, world leaders will meet virtually for a special U.N. session on "The Future We Want, the UN We Need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism" (<http://sdg.iisd.org/events/commemoration-of-the-75th-anniversary-of-the-un/>), when they will formally endorse a political declaration (<https://www.un.org/pga/74/2020/07/03/final-draft-declaration-for-the-commemoration-of-the-seventy-fifth-anniversary-of-the-united-nations-3/>) that U.N. member states approved in early July after laborious negotiations. Given the poisonous atmosphere in New York, reaching agreement on this aspirational, if anodyne, document (<https://www.passblue.com/2020/07/22/the-uns-75th-birthday-offers-a-critical-chance-for-the-world-to-save-humanity/>) counts as an accomplishment.

Seventy-five years after the U.N.'s creation, its supporters have set themselves a more modest goal: ensuring they are not present at its destruction.

The concise, four-page vision statement (<https://www.un.org/pga/74/2020/07/03/final-draft-declaration-for-the-commemoration-of-the-seventy-fifth-anniversary-of-the-united-nations-3/>) reaffirms the imperative of international cooperation and commits U.N. member states to a dozen broad objectives. These aims include realizing the Sustainable Development Goals to "leave no one behind," protecting the planet from climate change and biodiversity loss,

preventing violent conflict, combatting terrorism and nuclear proliferation, abiding by international law and human rights norms, advancing gender equality, combatting inequality within and between nations and improving digital cooperation for the benefit of all.

Member states further pledge to “upgrade the United Nations” to make it more “agile, effective, and accountable,” as well as to ensure its sustainable financing, expand its partnership with nongovernmental stakeholders and engage the world’s youth in its work. Finally, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments agree to cooperate on improving pandemic preparedness and global resilience.

Despite the declaration’s innocuous content and nonbinding nature, the Trump administration threatened several times to walk away from the negotiating table. The most significant dispute concerned the commitment to combat climate change (<https://www.passblue.com/2020/07/22/the-uns-75th-birthday-offers-a-critical-chance-for-the-world-to-save-humanity/>), which the United States, alone among 193 member states, sought to exclude. To mollify the Trump administration, other states grudgingly qualified the document’s reference to the Paris climate agreement by adding the phrase “applicable State commitments to.”

In parallel with these intergovernmental negotiations, the U.N. Secretariat has been leading a global consultation with civil society groups around the world (<https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/06/18/the-un-is-mobilising-for-the-next-quarter-century>) since January. Guterres describes this effort as a way to expand the conversation beyond national governments and to fulfill the cosmopolitan promise inherent in the U.N. Charter, which begins, “We the Peoples of the United Nations....” Under the leadership of special adviser Fabrizio Hochschild-Drummond (<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/profiles/fabrizio-hochschild-drummond-0>), the Secretariat is consulting with representatives from civil society, youth, the private sector and academia on what sort of world they want and what sort of U.N. they need by 2045, when the United Nations will turn 100. This process encompasses a massive, online “one-minute survey,” (<https://un75.online/?lang=eng>) to which anybody can respond; countless virtual dialogues and discussions, including some led by national chapters of the United Nations Association; and public opinion polling by the Pew Charitable Trusts and other organizations. The secretary-general will release the main findings of this outreach to world leaders next month.

It is easy to be cynical about these efforts and skeptical about their ultimate impact on high-level U.N. diplomacy, particularly in an era of political polarization and geopolitical antagonism. Yet there is inherent value in getting a clearer sense of which global problems actually matter, not only to officials or experts, but to citizens everywhere. This is especially true today, when social movements are arguably having more impact on domestic and global trends than sovereign governments and international institutions. These soundings may reveal national and regional differences in perceived priorities, but they are also likely to demonstrate strong public support worldwide for enhanced multilateral cooperation, including through the U.N. and its many programs and agencies.

Neither the declaration of principles nor the U.N.’s public consultation will cure what ails this world. They are more about diagnosis than treatment. Nevertheless, there is merit in our turbulent age in reaching for a baseline consensus, at both elite and mass levels, on the need for multilateral action to address the world’s

biggest problems, and on principles that should inform that cooperation.

In 1945, a war-weary world birthed the United Nations in a historic “act of creation.” (<https://www.amazon.com/Act-Creation-Founding-United-Nations-ebook/dp/B009IU4YT6>) Seventy-five years on, its supporters have set themselves a more modest goal: ensuring they are not present at its destruction.

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