

OPINION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

Only US President Donald Trump can stand at the biggest multilateral platform, which was built to help nations shed their nationalistic impulses, and call upon the international community to reject globalism and embrace patriotism, in his speech at the United National General Assembly (UNGA). Trump underlined his visceral dislike of multilateral institutions by arguing that “America is governed by Americans,” and that the US rejects “the ideology of globalism and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism.” By doing this, Trump once again returned to the theme of his last UNGA speech: the primacy of national sovereignty in international relations. His speech was also a response to the UN Secretary General António Guterres’ recent warning that “multilateralism is under attack from many directions,” pushing the international community to “press for a renewed commitment to a rules based order and to the United Nations.”

Though Trump’s speech echoed much of what he had said last year at the UNGA, his target this time was Iran, not North Korea. Threatening to “totally destroy” North Korea last year, Trump had derided Kim Jong-un as the “Rocket Man” who was “on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime.” This year, he thanked the North Korean dictator for his “courage, and for the steps he has taken” and trained his guns at Iran, describing the Iranian regime as “brutal” and “corrupt.” Reminiscent of George W. Bush’s remarks before the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Trump thundered, “We cannot allow the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism to possess the planet’s most dangerous weapons.” The Iranian President, Hasan Rouhani responded by mocking Trump’s North Korea outreach as “photo op diplomacy” and by asking the US to come back to the negotiating table by returning to UN Security Council resolution 2231, which codified the JCPOA.

Trump has challenged the global order at multiple levels: initiating trade disputes with close allies, challenging traditional alliances in the West, withdrawing the US from global agreements such as the Paris climate accord and the JCPOA, pulling out of the global compact on migration, and threatening to try International Criminal Court prosecutors if they pursue US nationals. Washington has cut hundreds of millions of dollars in financial assistance to Palestinian refugees, hoping that the move would compel Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to participate in US-led peace talks with Israel.

The US foreign policy has been overhauled but it is simplistic to boil this all down to the Trump factor alone. As policy commentator Robert Kagan suggests, the world “may have to start facing the fact that what we’re seeing today is not a spasm but a new direction in American foreign policy, or rather a return to older traditions—the kind that kept us on the sidelines while fascism and militarism almost conquered the world.”

The Trump administration’s distancing itself from multilateralism is beginning to have an impact at the UN whereas a rising China is making its presence felt in multiple ways. Beijing is beginning to shape global discourse ever so subtly, and in the process, challenging the American-led global order. China has already emerged as a key player in the UN peacekeeping effort, contributing around 10.25% of the total UN peacekeeping budget, and providing more peacekeeping troops than the other four permanent members of the security council combined since 2012. China will be spending around \$1 billion on peacekeeping over the next five years and trained more than 8,000 People’s Liberation Army troops to serve as standby militia for UN peacekeeping operations.

America’s withdrawal from bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council and the UNESCO is

also opening up new possibilities for Beijing. Jettisoning its earlier approach of ignoring organisations which do not gel with its values, China now seeks to proactively engage these institutions so as to shape their agenda. For example, it is now working actively in the UN Human Rights Council seeking a cut in UN budgets on human rights issues and changing its normative vocabulary.

In his inaugural address to the UN general Assembly, the then US President Harry Truman had suggested that it symbolized “the abandonment by the United States of a policy of isolation.” Today, the US President is proclaiming “the success of the United Nations depends upon the independent strength of its members,” pledging to revive the “principle of sovereignty.”

Indian strategic thinking has evolved over the last several decades deeply suspicious of American multilateralism and a strong proponent of preserving the nation’s sovereignty. Both the Left and the Right in India have done a lot of sloganeering on this issue, berating the US, and making common cause with Russia and China to challenge the American global order. America’s talk of multilateralism was viewed as a ploy to dilute Indian’s sovereign rights by stealth. It is a sign of the treacherous nature of the times in which we live that many in India are befuddled when the US is speaking a language that India should be rather comfortable with. We are berating the US today for not standing up for the same multilateral order which we so despised.

The trouble for New Delhi is that the order which Beijing might be building will challenge Indian interests in more fundamental ways than the American-led global order ever did.

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