

# UN AND THE RETREAT FROM MULTILATERALISM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: UNO and its various Agencies

The [United Nations commemorated its 75th anniversary on September 21, 2020](#) by adopting a Declaration. The anniversary comes at a time when the world is witnessing a retreat from multilateralism. It also faces an unprecedented pandemic. In his address to the UN on September 22, the UN Secretary-General called the pandemic “the fifth horseman”. No one could have predicted it. It has also brought in its wake the deepest recession the world has seen since the 1930s. This has made it more difficult to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the UN had adopted. The Secretary-General said the world is “careening off track” in achieving the SDGs.

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The challenge to multilateralism is coming not from the have-nots, but the main stakeholders of the system. The U.S. is not alone in withdrawing from multilateralism. Brexit has shown that nationalism remains strong in Europe. It has delivered a blow to the idea of Europe, united and whole. Nevertheless, the most important development is the position of the U.S. As French President Emmanuel Macron remarked in his speech at the UN General Assembly, the U.S., which created the international system as we know today, is no longer willing to be its “guarantor of last resort”. U.S. President Donald Trump stressed “America First” in his speech, and suggested that others too should put their countries first.

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China has stepped in to take advantage of the West’s retreat from multilateralism. But China’s assertion of a role on the world stage is not an embrace of the idea of multilateralism. Its flagship Belt and Road Initiative consists of a series of bilateral credit agreements with recipient countries with no mechanism for multilateral consultation or oversight. Curiously, President Xi Jinping’s speech at the UN General Assembly did not mention it. The European Union’s and U.S.’s sanctions against Russia have driven it closer to China. The rift between the permanent members of the Security Council has already started affecting the work of the UN Security Council.

The speeches at the regular session of the UN General Assembly on September 22 brought out the clashing perspectives of the U.S. and China. President Trump highlighted China’s culpability in the spread of the pandemic. He pointed out that China had banned internal flights but allowed international flights from Wuhan to continue. This set the stage for the spread of COVID-19. The World Health Organization also failed to provide early warnings. President Xi’s speech sought to project the fight against COVID-19 as a matter of collective responsibility of the international community. He said China will “honour” its commitment to provide \$2 billion assistance to the developing countries over two years. This was clearly a reference to existing pledges without bringing additional resources to tackle a crisis which has tipped the world economy into recession. This is not a large amount considering the scale. The actual assistance committed to the UN COVID-19 response fund was a paltry \$50 million in addition to a similar amount pledged earlier.

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President Macron pointed out that while the U.S. is withdrawing, the world faces China’s projection beyond its frontiers. He also highlighted problems nearer home posed by Turkey’s

intervention in Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean, which is a breach of international law. The last was a reference to Turkey sending a drilling ship in Greek and Cypriot exclusive economic zones. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made a detailed reference to the Jammu and Kashmir issue. Though otherwise Mr. Erdogan's statements may not matter, Turkey has assumed the position of UN General Assembly President.

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The UN Secretary-General's report on the work of the organisation highlights some of the achievements and challenges the world body faces. Over 40 UN political missions and peacekeeping operations engage 95,000 troops, police, and civil personnel. To be effective, they have to be put on a sound financial basis. The UN peacekeeping budget, a little over \$8 billion, is a small fraction of the \$1.9 trillion military expenditure governments made in 2019. Yet it suffers from a paucity of resources. There was an outstanding assessed contribution of \$1.7 billion for peacekeeping activities by the end of the financial year. Similarly, there was an outstanding \$711 million in the assessed contribution for the general budget. Most of the humanitarian assistance, developmental work, and budgets of the specialised agencies are based on voluntary contributions. There are calls for increasing public-private partnerships. This is not a satisfactory arrangement. The UN provides 'public goods' in terms of peace and development often in remote parts of the world. There may not be enough appetite on the part of corporations. The UN remains an inter-governmental body.

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Most world leaders spoke of climate change. President Trump mentioned that China's emissions are nearly twice of those of the U.S., and despite its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the U.S. has reduced its carbon emissions by more than any country in the world. President Xi said that after peaking emissions by 2030, China will achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. President Macron said that he was determined to see the EU agree on a target of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, in his speech made an extensive reference to Jammu and Kashmir. Though this is customary for Pakistani leaders, he brought a particularly uncivil tone to the discourse. Meanwhile, his country has slid to the 134th rank in the UN SDG index, the lowest for any country in South Asia.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi focused on UN reforms and India's contribution to UN Peacekeeping for which we can be justly proud. What does the UN bring to the developing countries? It gives them greater political space. We need to support reform not only to expand the permanent members' category of the Security Council but also to revitalise the role of the General Assembly. The retreat from multilateralism would undermine the UN's capacity to face diverse challenges.

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