

Donald Trump at the UN

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Region: [USA](#)

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It seems to have reached a point of near exhaustion. What will the President of the United States do next? The money was on some diplomatic mayhem, a series of insults, and a trashing of various aspects of the organisation some Americans regard as a world government. But Donald Trump surprised those at the United Nations with a modest tone, and not one the current UN Secretary General disagrees with.

History provides some context on what might have been, but it proves to be a poor tool. In terms of predicting the next Trump move, betting agencies should be raking in a fortune, the odds always slanted in favour of the spontaneous and unscripted. He is a creature that abides by winds of unchecked strength and volatility, a true Aeolian spirit.

With Trump, matters with the UN, as with so much else, had been personal. He failed, for instance, in winning a contract to refurbish its New York headquarters in the early 2000s, claiming that he could do the job at a third of the price (half-a-billion as opposed to the projected cost of \$1.5 billion). Given the organisation's insatiable appetite for self-perpetuation and growth, this was a blow indeed.

Prior to heading to the White House, Trump mined the quarries of American resentment, sharpening the America First line which entailed putting the UN last. The organisation, he asserted, was no "friend of democracy", inimical to freedom, and even unfriendly to the United States.

To show his disdain for all matters UN, he took the unilateral position to take the US out of the Paris climate agreement, only to then suggest the possibility of remaining on renegotiated terms. Trumpland lends itself to fickle refrains and adjustments, booming promises and drastic revisions.

The opening words in his UN address promised some customarily cringe worthy entertainment. For one, pronouncing the name of the Secretary General António Guterres seemed a bit beyond him, the emphasis all too strong on "Gutter" followed by "ez".

Then there was that little matter of real estate.

"I actually saw great potential right across the street," he explained in the context of Trump Tower's proximity to the UN building. "[I]t was only for the reason that the United Nations was here that it turned out to be such a successful project." [1]

Then came modest, almost banal reflection. Had the voice of moderation seeped into Trump?

“In recent years, the United Nations has not reached its full potential because of bureaucracy and mismanagement.”

Hardly a clanger, and certainly one the grand poobahs would agree with.

“We encourage the secretary general to fully use his authority to cut through the bureaucracy, reform outdated systems, and make firm decisions to advance the UN’s core mission.”

Rather than unleashing withering salvos, Trump had time to afford a few carefully chosen words of sugary praise.

“The United Nations was founded on truly noble goals.” These goals, in turn had been advanced “in so many ways: feeding the hungry, providing disaster relief, and empowering women and girls in many societies across the world.”

Trump’s accommodating tone has as much to do with necessity as anything else. While boisterous unilateralism might work on some domestic level, Washington has required the assistance of other UN member states to push such agendas as the containment of North Korea.

“The net result,” writes Richard Gowan, “is that a president who once promised a unilateralist, or outright isolationist, foreign policy, is leaning hard on the world’s main multilateral body to manage the main crisis on the agenda.”[2]

Problematic a beast as it might be, the body is providing, on some level, indispensable.

The reform agenda remains problematic, because any such agenda always has trouble sailing through the behemoth that is the UN. Where states are involved, interests will conflict. Bureaucracies will also battle cutters of the red tape. The old issues persist: the burden of dues paid by wealthier countries; the scepticism of poorer states that such efficiency policies are cover for bullying and undue influence.

Trump’s points, to that end, seem matters of aspiration rather than functional realities.

“To honour the people of our nations, we must ensure that no one and no member state shoulders a disproportionate share of the burden, and that’s militarily or financially.”

Peacekeeping missions, asserted the president, should also be seen in terms of “defined goals and metrics for evaluating success.” All to the good, till these make it to the nigh impossible task of implementation. The UN can only be as good, or as efficient, as what its members want to make it.

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Notes

[1] <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/18/remarks-president-trump-reforming-united-nations-management-security-and>

[2] <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/17/trump-un-general-assembly-test-215614>

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