

A Crumbling Order with No Shared Remedy

The First Day of the General Debate at the 81st Session of the UN General Assembly

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A Shared Diagnosis

The speeches on the first day of the general debate of the UN General Assembly produced a fairly coherent diagnosis, but no shared remedy. UN Secretary-General António Guterres spoke of four challenges linked to the exercise of power, namely war, inequality, climate change and artificial intelligence. French President Emmanuel Macron warned against a return to “the law of the jungle”, Angolan President João Lourenço against “global anarchy”, and Finnish President Alexander Stubb against a multipolarity built on transactions, zero-sum games and unrestrained power.

Almost everyone agrees that the existing order is falling apart. The dispute is about who is dismantling it and what should replace it. Europe speaks of defending international law, the states of the Global South of its selective application, and US President Donald Trump above all of the effectiveness, strength and freedom of action of his own country.

Gaza as a Test of Western Credibility

Gaza generated the most emotion, and it was Gaza that did most to structure the debate. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the Emir of Qatar Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and the Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Denis Bećirović spoke of genocide. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called Gaza the most inhumane and shameful concentration camp of our time. King Abdullah II of Jordan argued that the destruction of Gaza and the de facto annexation of the West Bank are two parts of the same strategy, whose aim is to prevent the emergence of a viable Palestinian state.

Bećirović compared the world’s response to the aggression against Bosnia with its response to the war in Ukraine and to the situation in Gaza, and found each of them inadequate. Belgium’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Maxime Prévot argued that the principles defended in Europe cannot be applied on one continent alone. Macron observed that the sovereignty many in Europe defend is often treated as worth less when it comes to the states of the Middle East. For many leaders, Gaza thus served above all as proof that international law is applied selectively.

The conclusion for Poland is an uncomfortable one. The argument for the inviolability of borders and the prohibition of the use of force may lose credibility in the Global South if the defence of these principles in Ukraine is not matched by their consistent application to the Palestinians. This does not mean that the states of the South regard Russian aggression as acceptable. They do, however, increasingly reject the West’s claim to decide when a violation of the rules is a threat to the whole world and when it remains a regional conflict.

The Emir of Qatar also spoke of the rise in food and medicine prices caused by the crisis in the Persian Gulf and of the need to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. Lula said the strait had become a battlefield, although it should have remained a vital route for global trade. Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi warned of a food crisis, and South Korean President Lee Jae-

myung pointed to the situation in the Red Sea. Belgium, Seychelles and Morocco also spoke about maritime security.

Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita called for sanctions against states that support non-state actors threatening straits and maritime trade routes. Erdoğan pointed to Turkey's defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in connection with the conflict in the Gulf. Maritime security has ceased to be a technical issue and has become a matter of food, energy and medicine prices, which explains why small states dependent on trade and imports devoted so much attention to it. For Europe, this is one of the few areas where its interests coincide with those of the Global South, and it is on freedom of navigation, rather than on judging the policies of others, that it may be able to rebuild its credibility.

Trump Is Changing More Than American Policy

Donald Trump spoke according to an entirely different logic from most of the hall. He presented Iran with a choice between a deal and the "annihilation" of the Islamic Republic, and said that a deal could come right after the midterm elections. The future of Iran, and indirectly of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, may therefore be decided by the American electoral calendar. He boasted of the arrest of Nicolás Maduro and of a huge oil deal with Venezuela. He called on states to withdraw from the International Criminal Court and presented a 15 per cent cut in the UN budget and the elimination of more than 4,000 posts as the greatest reform in the Organization's history.

Trump also announced the construction of two major military bases in Greenland and the signing, later that same day, of an agreement with Denmark and Greenland. This matters particularly for Northern Europe and for NATO, because it shows that transactional logic extends to allies as well, and that questions concerning the territory of an Alliance member can be settled under pressure from Washington. For Poland, which bases its security on the American presence and on ever closer cooperation with the Nordic and Baltic states, it is a signal that even a close ally is not exempt from this logic.

Trump's vision of UN reform consists of reducing the Organization's resources and competences rather than making it more representative. The American president appears not to be trying to repair an order based on shared rules, but to be replacing it with a transactional arrangement in which a state's position depends above all on its importance to US interests and its readiness to strike a deal with Washington.

In 1940 the Republican Party's presidential candidate was Wendell Willkie, a lawyer and utilities executive who lost the election to Franklin D. Roosevelt. After his defeat he did not return to the isolationism that then dominated his party, but backed aid to Britain in its fight, including the Lend-Lease Act. In 1942, as Roosevelt's unofficial envoy, he travelled around the world through the Middle East, the Soviet Union and China. The result was his 1943 book "One World", one of the greatest bestsellers of its time, in which he argued that after the war the United States should help build an international organisation and that lasting peace would be impossible without an end to colonial empires. Willkie died in 1944, but his stance helped build a base within the Republican Party for postwar internationalism, without which the creation of the UN is hard to imagine.

Trump's speech showed how far Republican foreign policy has moved away from that tradition. For decades, the conviction that American power requires building international

institutions united both American parties. Today the spirit of Willkie seems to be in retreat. It is telling, too, that his call for equal treatment of non-European nations is now being made by Sierra Leone, Suriname and the African Union, only without Washington, and often against it.

Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov showed what this shift means for middle-sized and small states. On the one hand, he presented himself as an advocate of a stronger UN. He recalled Kyrgyzstan's election to the Security Council for 2027 and 2028 with the votes of 142 states, proposed a public registry tracking the implementation of UN resolutions, and called on the permanent members of the Council to voluntarily refrain from using the veto in cases of systematic non-implementation of the Organization's decisions.

On the other hand, Japarov thanked Trump for halting funding for non-governmental organisations around the world. In his view, they had interfered in the internal politics of developing countries, and Washington's decision had created conditions for strengthening their sovereignty and allowing them to choose their own path of development.

In 2024 Kyrgyzstan adopted a "foreign agents" law modelled on Russian legislation. Taken together, the two threads therefore appear less a contradiction than a coherent concept of sovereignty, in which accountability is meant to apply to the great powers on the international stage, but not necessarily to the government at home. Bishkek can now justify restricting non-governmental organisations by pointing to Washington rather than Moscow. This is a significant change, because it removes the stigma of being pro-Russian from such policies and presents them as part of a broader turn towards sovereignty.

The President of Naoero (the country previously known as Nauru), David Adeang, announced his country's withdrawal from the Rome Statute, on which the International Criminal Court is based. The Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, thanked Trump for inviting her country to join new formats for fighting drug cartels. Erdoğan spoke out against "gender neutralisation" policies, and Peruvian President Keiko Fujimori spoke of political agendas imposed from outside that had divided society and weakened the institution of the family. Kyrgyzstan is therefore not alone.

These speeches form a loose but distinct group of states for which the Trump administration has become a point of reference and political cover for restricting civil society and rejecting external scrutiny. For Europe, this means that the defence of human rights and support for non-governmental organisations, including in Central Asia, rests increasingly on the European Union alone, without the former American backing and in the face of growing resistance from the region's governments.

At the same time, Japarov spoke of the growing role of Central Asia. Membership of the Security Council will give Bishkek a weight it has never had before. It also shows that the states of the region no longer wish to be merely the object of rivalry between Russia, China, the United States and the European Union, but want to set the terms of cooperation with each of these partners themselves.

More Sovereignty and More Seats at the Table

Security Council reform was one of the most frequently recurring themes, although individual leaders gave it different meanings. The President of the General Assembly Khalilur Rahman of Bangladesh, Guterres, Sierra Leone's President Julius Maada Bio and Suriname's

President Jennifer Geerlings-Simons called for permanent African representation on the Council.

Sierra Leone, as coordinator of the African Union's Committee of Ten, is demanding two permanent and five non-permanent seats for African states and agreement on a common reform model during the current session. Takaichi also wants the anachronistic "enemy state" clauses removed from the Charter of the United Nations. Erdoğan repeated his slogan that the world is bigger than the five permanent members of the Council.

Sierra Leone and Suriname also raised the question of reparations for slavery and colonialism. The African states did not confine themselves to general appeals, but put forward concrete demands concerning seats, votes and influence over decisions. The reform sought by the South thus means broader representation, while the one Trump boasted of means cuts to budgets and staff. If both proceed at the same time, the UN may become more representative and at the same time weaker, with broader membership of bodies that have ever fewer resources at their disposal.

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda called Russia's aggression against Ukraine the greatest threat to the world order. Macron proposed a double moratorium covering strikes on energy and civilian infrastructure as well as operations in the Black Sea. Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković spoke about illegal migration, EU enlargement and the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The European speeches were concerned above all with the war in Ukraine and with Europe's own security, and hardly at all with what the order Europe so strongly defends should actually look like.

The most concrete proposal came from UK Prime Minister Andy Burnham. He announced the creation of a National Centre for Information Defence, pointed to the roughly £1.3 billion the Kremlin spends each year on manipulating the information space, and recalled British support for protecting elections in Moldova. For Poland, this may be a useful point of reference in its work on protecting electoral processes from external interference.

This was Guterres's last address to the General Assembly as Secretary-General, with 100 days of his term remaining. The contest for his succession is therefore beginning. Geerlings-Simons formally endorsed Guyana's former Foreign Minister Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett. The choice of Guterres's successor will be the first test of whether the logic of broader representation or the logic of cuts prevails at the UN.

Artificial intelligence featured in almost every speech. Rahman warned against an arms race in this field. The United Kingdom announced a developing defence partnership with the United States on artificial intelligence, and South Korea announced a global platform for cooperation on its development. Developing countries, on whose behalf Vietnam's leader Tô Lâm among others spoke, want to help shape the rules in this area, so the dispute over a share in decision-making now extends beyond the Security Council.

Tô Lâm also spoke about preparations for the 2027 APEC summit and presented ASEAN as a model of confidence-building. Stubb and Swiss President Guy Parmelin, for their part, defended flexible coalitions and regional organisations as a complement to the UN system rather than a substitute for it.

The first day shows above all that fewer and fewer leaders are asking whether the rules-based order will survive. They are asking instead how to position their own states in a world in which

the United States has ceased to be the unequivocal guarantor of that order. Middle-sized and small states are simultaneously trying to exploit the space this has opened, strengthen their own sovereignty and gain greater influence over the institutions that the existing system was meant to protect.

Today the debate continues into its second day, and President Karol Nawrocki is among the speakers. According to Marcin Przydacz, head of the President's Bureau of International Policy, the President will present Poland's assessment of the most important challenges and threats facing the world, and will address violations of international law by authoritarian states. It will be worth watching whether Poland's voice speaks only to Europe, which talks about Ukraine, or also to the states of the South, which ask whether these principles are applied consistently, and how the President positions Poland in relation to the transactional vision of the UN that Trump presented yesterday.