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A BIG TENT FOR ALL SEASONS: REJIGGING THE UNITED NATIONS



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Along with autumn leaves comes the annual gathering of heads of State and government in the Hall of the General Assembly of the United Nations. In the week of 22 September, the great and less great will congregate, deliver speeches and rub shoulders with each other in New York. Unusually, Xi Jin Ping will attend and Donald Trump has actually paid a quarter of his debts to the organisation ahead of his visit.

The Parliament of Mankind thus retains its unique character and attractiveness in spite of the multiple difficulties experienced by the organisation. It manifests the irreplaceable and central role of the one truly universal institution that is constantly evolving in response to the shifts in the power, influence and commitment of its member state components and of the challenges of global security, development and human rights.

Sir Thomas More would have been pleased with the versatility and ability to adapt of an institution which seeks to keep a moral centre and purpose through the dedication of its public servants. But he would also have been preoccupied by the erosion of its authority and of the legal and substantive framework that was built over its first six decades.

Exchanges during the high-level week will inevitably reflect how imperfectly the prescriptions of the Charter are being fulfilled presently. More than fifty conflicts are raging around the world, several of which involve permanent members of the Security Council. The writ of international law is being set aside and violated both in its interstate and in its human dimensions by many States including those who were once its greatest sponsors.

As a consequence of the withdrawal of funding from the US and other donors, the outreach and contributions of the UN system in the field of humanitarian relief, support for refugees, food aid, pandemic prevention have been cut by more than a third, leading to widespread suffering and mortality for vulnerable populations.

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Also, the UN and its specialised institutions are themselves going through the UNat80 process which results in a drastic cut of their manpower and ultimately of their capabilities. A sombre mood permeates a UN system under siege, increasingly fragmented and undercut by key actors.

The forthcoming high-level debate will serve as a mirror to some of the negative trends at work on the global scene. The diffidence of the US administration with regard to international institutions and multilateral action will likely be confirmed. Washington expects the UN to focus on crisis management in peripheral conflicts and to provide blessings to its own initiatives such as the Board of Peace. It retains an interest in only a few parts of the system such as the IAEA and ICAO.

Since nature abhors a vacuum, the rising tide of Chinese influence throughout the UN system will proceed unabated. The communiques of well attended Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS meetings express support for the UN Charter and support a stronger UN role in all domains but those domains are expected to acquire Chinese characteristics. Remarkably, China is an active proponent of a UN role in the oversight and regulation of artificial intelligence.

Russia will probably express its formal support for the UN, cherishing a framework where it can be an effective nuisance and promote its skewed interpretation of international law.

Together the big three keep the outcome of major conflicts under their exclusive watch, relying on the use of their veto power to protect their priorities, and those of their allies of the moment in the UN context. That leaves the rest of the world as a plural and diverse group of supporters of the UN system.

The smaller countries, the majority of the membership of the General Assembly, find in the UN a unique venue to observe and seek some influence on major global trends that affect their destiny.

The emerging major players have an interest in enlarging their influence and heft by being proactive in this framework among others. They also expect their new-found capabilities to be better represented in various organs, chiefly the Security Council.

By and large, the countries of the South now seek to challenge the authority of the western countries and of what they perceive as western double standards. Yet, the hard core of UN support lies in the European group and like-minded states. They have had a lasting involvement in multilateral cooperation, they retain some historical positions, and they are deeply committed to the *acquis* of human rights and cooperation for global governance. They provide a significant proportion of the resources that run the system.

Increasingly, within the UN the drive comes from ad hoc coalitions on given issues within a broad tent that combines European, emerging and small states. In 2025 Germany and Namibia prepared together and steered General Assembly adoption of the Pact for the Future, a broad plan of action that encompasses all the fields of action of the UN around the core 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Each year there is a succession of UN-based “conferences of parties” to conventions that have been adopted under UN auspices: on the law of the sea, the global climate, the environment,

health, development finance, cyber security, artificial intelligence, and unguided weapon systems, for example. With or without US official participation, these conferences form part of a loose global governance process, enabling public and private actors to take stock together and shape common prospects.

While their legitimacy as privileged members of the Security Council is challenged, the UK and France act as facilitators and catalysts of the continuous work of that organ, which remains active and relevant. The Council reviews all areas of tension and conflict in an open way, adopts a regular flow of resolutions on peace-keeping forces and sanctions, and addresses a number of thematic issues. It is to be expected that the French President will call for a summit level meeting of the Council, presided over by France, and dedicated to Ukraine, during the high-level week in September.

This year, as every ten years, tensions, rivalries and hopes within the broad UN tent are crystallising on the designation of the next Secretary General. Always a political issue, the race is a test of the mettle of key actors and of the orientation of the organisation. It is possible that the current race will extend throughout the current General Assembly in view of the particularly difficult present context.

The next Secretary General will have the task of preserving the integrity of the Charter, complemented by sixty years of progress, and of meeting extremely difficult contemporary challenges to peace and security. As long as the UN is present and functioning, it can be given a fresh impetus and resume the central role that it exercised in its best years.

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