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From a Whisper to a Scream: A Brief History of the US relationship to the UN

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In recent years it appears as though America's relationship with the United Nations has deteriorated; appearing publicly as a series of loud recriminations and American abdication of global leadership on the principles which underpin the organization. This characterization has manifested in tirades against Russia in the Security Council led by the US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Hayley, and brash, controversial invectives from US President Donald Trump speaking to the UN General Assembly. Commentators have voiced concern about these declarations, with many alleging that such instances are reflective of a wider withdrawal of American global leadership at the UN, as in other places.

However, these public spats should be viewed in a historical context. The US relationship, from the White House to the National Security Council to the State Department, to the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, Nairobi and New York and beyond, has changed dramatically over time. Lurching from forthright support for the UN's mission in the world, to tacit agreement with the policies and practices of the organization, to obtuse refusal to abide by the rules based international order upheld by the UN; this relationship has been nothing if not dynamic. Any analysis of the most recent declarations of intent by US leaders should take account of how this vital partnership has evolved over time.

When the UN organization was officially inaugurated in San Francisco in 1945, it was a moment at which two important contexts intersected. Firstly, the world community, limping out of the Second World War, vowed that "never again" would there be such a large-scale destruction of humanity. Participants from around the world, including US Secretary of State Edward Reilly Stettinius Jr. and Anthony Eden, later British Prime Minister, set in place a series of principles designed to maintain peace and security across the globe. Secondly, at the same moment, peoples and nations from what we now refer to as the Global South, called for recognition of their contribution to the war effort and moreover, freedom from the shackles of colonial rule. As the anti-imperialism of the early twentieth century began to formalize into the campaign for decolonization, the world order was set to be shaken up again, in a process that would fundamentally alter the international system, and with it, the UN.

The US participants included many who believed that these two processes were complementary and that both should be managed by an institution based on the principles of the Atlantic Charter. The organization was designed to draw the victorious war allies into a power-sharing multilateral framework, re-establishing the rules-based international order around the UN which would guarantee global peace and security. Many historians, including



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Stephen Wertheim, have argued that the creation of the UN was also an effort on the part of the US to institutionalize their global position as a rising hegemon.

Despite the optimism of the post-war moment in 1945, the relationship between the US and the UN in the early years was decidedly tense. Officials in Washington had lobbied strongly for the headquarters of the UN to be located in New York, under the leadership of Trygve Lie, a former Norwegian Foreign Minister. Lie proved a difficult appointment as after the UN's involvement in the Korean War, his reappointment was blocked by the Soviet Union in 1951, eventually leading him to resign in 1952. In addition, the McCarthyism of the late 1940s and early 1950s in the US, created controversy for the UN when the FBI insisted on vetting appointments made from among US citizens. Such was Lie's close relationship with the Eisenhower administration, that he permitted the FBI to have an office in the new UN Secretariat building at Turtle Bay in New York City. This caused uproar among UN staff and other member-states who argued that the FBI should have no jurisdiction over the appointment of staff members to the international secretariat of the UN or any of its agencies.

Into this controversy about the political role of international civil servants strode Dag Hammarskjöld, Lie's replacement and perhaps one of the most well-known UN Secretaries-General. Hammarskjöld believed that the UN should foster the development of newly-independent nations and that it should be both activist and interventionist on this issue. He also advocated a neutral and considered role for his staff who, he argued, should work solely for the purposes of the UN, abandoning the narrow national interests of their home countries. While Hammarskjöld succeeded in this endeavor, developing a sense of solidarity and purpose among his staff, his efforts to carve out a more active role for the UN drew him into dispute in relations with the US.

Differences of opinion, which for the first time led to breaks in relations between the US and the UN, began during the Congo crisis from 1960-1964. Hammarskjöld had argued for the creation of a UN peacekeeping force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, to intervene to protect the sovereignty of the newly-independent Congolese state in 1960. Under Chapter VII, the UN can launch a military or non-military intervention into a conflict in order to protect international peace and security. Soon however, internal violence and outside interference by Belgium, Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States, led to the collapse of the country. The UN was drawn into a long, politically difficult and financially costly peacekeeping mission which pushed the organization to the brink of collapse.

When John F. Kennedy became President in 1961, he instigated efforts to restore relations with Hammarskjöld and to revive the UN. Disaster struck however on 21st September when Hammarskjöld was killed in a plane crash on his way to negotiations in Zambia. As rumors swirled around how and why the plane came down, resulting in the death of all on board, it was revealed that authorities on the ground failed to raise the alarm when the plane did not arrive and did not launch a search until hours later. A 2017 UN investigation into the circumstances surrounding the crash has called for the release of files which remain classified in US national archives.

In the flurry surrounding Hammarskjöld's death, the US State Department was keen that his successor should be a candidate who was more malleable to US interests. In the Burmese diplomat U Thant, American representatives believed that they had found their man. However, Thant proved more activist than had been anticipated and as the first non-Western Secretary-General, he played an important role in carrying forward Hammarskjöld's view that the



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UN should be both a platform and a space in which countries from the Global South could advocate for the restructuring of the unequal relationship between North and South. His stewardship of the UN from 1961-1971 heralded a period which arguably represents the zenith of their influence with the creation of numerous initiatives from United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964, to the campaign for the New International Economic Order.

Global South demands for a more just international economic order largely fell on deaf ears among Western representatives at the UN until the OPEC oil crisis in 1973 emphasized the reliance of Western economies, including that of the US, on the supply of oil and gas from Global South countries. Up to that point, American representatives had grown increasingly frustrated with the UN which they viewed as being far too much under the influence of the Global South.

Effectively sealing the fate of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) and signaling a period of deterioration in relations with the UN which took place simultaneously with the introduction of neo-liberalism, US Special Assistant for National Security under President Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger denounced the campaign for reform. In an infamous aside, he quipped: "I'd just say to hell with the UN. What is it anyway? It's a damned debating society. What good does it do? Very little..."

The end of the Cold War and the opening of the Eastern bloc from 1989 onwards offered a moment to recalibrate the relationship and importantly for the US, an opportunity to reassert the liberal internationalist agenda of the UN – albeit with a more prominent role for the world's remaining superpower. Amid declarations of a new world order based on humanitarian ideals, promoted by the US President Bill Clinton among others, relations between the US and the UN seemed to be back on an even keel. Kofi Annan became the UN's first African Secretary-General with the strong support of the US. The illusion of a multilateral world quickly fell apart however when an under-prepared UN peacekeeping force failed to prevent the slaughter of almost 1 million Tutsis by their Hutu neighbors in Rwanda in 1994.

While the UN was publicly held responsible for not doing enough, the US quietly abdicated responsibility for the episode, defending their neutralist position on the Security Council. Relations between the two hit an even lower ebb shortly afterwards when US President George W. Bush arguably violated international laws regarding sovereignty and invaded Afghanistan and later Iraq in 2001 without the support of the Security Council, in retaliation for the terrorist attacks in September 2001 which killed 2996 people.

The UN appeared powerless in the face of the assertion of American unilateral power which rendered the organization in the view of many, including other P5 members, largely toothless and unable to enforce its own rules. Amidst strained relations, the Obama administration appeared to mend fences with the UN, particularly by appointing the noted humanitarian Samantha Power as its chief representative. As she used her position to challenge human rights offenders and employed lofty rhetoric to stir up debate on humanitarian issues, it allowed the State Department to pursue a quiet policy of disengagement from the traditional role of American global leadership.



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This situation paved the way for current relations which are perhaps worse than at any other point in history. The US has openly withdrawn from UNESCO (alleging that the agency has an anti-Israel bias) and has iterated increasingly militaristic rhetoric towards Iran and Russia indicating that the US, at once more reliant on, and yet less prominent in, the international system, again seems to be working at cross purposes from the UN.

These events culminated in a tragi-comic scene at the opening of the General Assembly in September 2018 when world leaders laughed mockingly during President Donald Trump's speech. Relations between the UN and the US appear to be at a notably low point, but this time around, it is not because the US has flouted international law, worse, it has denounced the legitimacy of the international system by attacking its validity and utility from within. There is an opening now, however, for the current Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to finally empower the organization more fully by developing closer relations with Global South countries who make up the majority of its members. In this way, it may be able to deliver the checks and balances on the exercise of American power that are required more urgently now than ever before.

Given the historical ebbs and flows of the relationship between the US and the UN over time, it is highly unlikely either that the US will withdraw completely from the organization, nor that the UN will itself become obsolete without the support of the US. Rather, as the US seeks to recalibrate its relationship with the world, the UN will arguably become even more important as a node of interaction, collaboration and confrontation between the US and the international community. What will be most interesting will be whether or not, the plethora of American internationalists working behind the public face of Trump's problematic administration, will seek to refashion America's relationship with the UN acting as a keystone.

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