

Trump administration extends its assault on multilateralism

Attack on the ICC marks an escalation of Washington's unilateralism

If John Bolton had his way he would, in his own words, remake the UN Security Council with “one permanent member: the United States”. President Donald Trump’s national security adviser has also expressed a desire to lop off the top 10 storeys of the UN headquarters in New York. So his threat to slap sanctions on officials from the International Criminal Court and prosecute them if they investigate alleged US war crimes in Afghanistan should come as little surprise — even if he might have been expected to use his first speech as NSA to address bigger battles.

An unabashed believer in the primacy of US might, Mr Bolton’s animosity to multilateral organisations and the international bureaucrats that people them is long established. It was well rehearsed when he served as US ambassador to the UN under George W Bush. Moreover, his position on the court is broadly consistent with that of successive US administrations since the days of Bill Clinton. The US has never accepted the court’s jurisdiction and only briefly, under Barack Obama, engaged constructively with it.

The belligerent tone of Mr Bolton’s attack does however mark a rhetorical escalation of US unilateralism in the Trump era. It raises the question of how far this administration is prepared to go to wreck the global rules-based system. That question is no less alarming for the number of times it has arisen since Mr Trump entered the White House last year.

Under his command, the US has jettisoned the global climate pact, and started stripping out rules to contain emissions. It has pulled America out of the Iran nuclear deal, and forced unwilling European allies to consider the unravelling of that fragile truce. While launching a string of trade wars, Washington has simultaneously paralysed the World Trade

Organization by blocking the appointment of judges who preside over the dispute settlement process. Most recently it has withdrawn financing for the UN refugee agency for Palestine, UNRWA, sacrificing any residual pretence to be a neutral arbiter in the Middle East.

With a hawk like Mr Bolton given the president's ear this could be just the beginning. The IMF could be next. It faces the uncomfortable prospect of arbitrating between two of its three largest shareholders as America faces off against China over bailout funds to countries such as Pakistan that are indebted to Beijing.

Washington has been a driving force in building many of the international institutions it now seeks to undermine. In a unipolar world the US used its dominance in these institutions to assert American hegemony. In the multipolar world that is emerging, it needs to maintain its influence in them all the more. The cost of US "exemptionalism" in terms of credibility on the world stage will be significant.

Mr Bolton may be justified in pointing out flaws in the ICC, which has swallowed hundreds of millions of dollars and secured only eight convictions in the 16 years since it opened. His loathing of the court, however, illustrates how America has helped to create international rules to apply to other nations but resists abiding by them itself. This makes a mockery of justice, which can only function blindly and when applied to all.

Throughout Barack Obama's presidency, Republicans routinely accused the Democrat president of squandering America's global leadership. But when it comes to rescinding a responsible role for the US in the world, it is his Republican successor who has his foot on the accelerator. At home, Mr Trump seeks to be above the law. Abroad he wants his country to be above it too.