

## Geopolitics

# Blows to rules-based order hurt readiness for future crises

*Individual leaders' insistence on sovereignty masks usefulness of international organisations*



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The annual meeting of the UN General Assembly is the world's largest diplomatic gathering. "UNGA week" always provokes traffic in Manhattan and some moments of genuine political drama — as well as **bizarre incidents that linger in the memory.**

This year, the assembly's general debate was opened by the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, who angrily denounced foreign concern about fires in the Amazon, as representing unacceptable interference in Brazilian sovereignty.

**This insistence on the importance of state sovereignty was reiterated by the second speaker, Donald Trump.** Speaking just hours before impeachment proceedings were opened against him, the US president argued: “If you want democracy, hold on to your sovereignty”. He added: “The future does not belong to globalists, it belongs to patriots”.

Those statements by Mr Trump came close to rejecting the whole premise behind the UN — that some form of international global governance is necessary. The implications of the president’s statement were clear: under President Trump, the US will be much less involved in efforts to find multilateral solutions to the world’s most pressing problems.

**The consequences of the world’s sole superpower and largest economy undermining efforts at global governance are potentially severe.** Under the Trump administration, the US has already announced its intention to **withdraw from the Paris climate accords** — which represent the most significant global collective effort to combat global warming. It has also pulled out of the **UN Human Rights Council**, which has had the unintended consequence of making it easier for countries such as China, to avoid criticism of their human-rights record.

The Trump administration has also dealt serious blows to the world’s arms-control framework by **pulling out of the Iran nuclear accord** and the treaty on **Intermediate Range Nuclear weapons**. The US has also signalled its hostility to the **International Criminal Court** by revoking the US visa of the ICC’s chief prosecutor.

**The world’s trading system is also coming under sustained assault from the Trump administration.** The US president has launched a trade war against China and his administration is also blocking the appointment of judges to the appellate court of the **World Trade Organization** — potentially hobbling the WTO’s ability to arbitrate in global trade disputes. **In** his UN speech, Mr Trump made it clear that demands for a new trade relationship with China remain central to his agenda — denouncing the Chinese government for allowing (or encouraging) the theft of intellectual property.

**However, the blows to the rules-based world order are not just coming from Washington.** **Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014** shocked the EU and the US — and led to economic sanctions against Moscow.

The whole notion of the unilateral annexation of territory — without agreement and contrary to international law — is creeping back on to the world agenda. Benjamin Netanyahu, currently struggling to stay on as Israel’s prime minister, talked openly in his election campaign of annexing large sections of the West Bank.

**Under Xi Jinping, China has attempted to position itself as a champion of globalisation and international law.** Mr Xi did not attend this year’s UNGA in New York, but China is an increasingly influential presence in UN forums, as America steps back.

**However, China’s acceptance of the rules-based order can be swiftly withdrawn,** if Beijing feels its “core national interests” are at stake. When, in 2016, a UN tribunal ruled against China’s expansive claims in the South China Sea, China refused to accept the ruling, dismissing it as “nothing more than a piece of waste paper.”

Given that the US, China and Russia make up three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, their equivocal attitude to international law clearly threatens the effectiveness of global governance.

Of the two other members — the UK is currently almost completely inward-looking because of Brexit; by contrast, France, under President Emmanuel Macron, has positioned itself as a champion of multilateralism — particularly on the environment. But there is a limit to what France can do to energise the world system — faced with the recalcitrance of the other members of the council.

The very fact that France and Britain still retain their privileged positions as veto-wielding members of the security council is another cause of scepticism about the legitimacy of the UN. It is clear that a security council that reflected the balance of power of 2019, rather than 1945, would look very different. It would almost certainly include India, Brazil, as well as, possibly, Japan and Germany (or a unified EU seat). But agreeing on reform has proved impossible, so the current structure is likely to limp on.

**Yet despite widespread scepticism about the legitimacy and effectiveness of the UN, the world’s major powers also know that the organisation still provides essential services.** The UN is currently running 14 peacekeeping operations around the world — containing the damage in fragile states such as Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees is helping to protect and house some of the most unfortunate people in the world — including Syrian refugees and displaced Rohingya. The World Health Organization responds to emergencies around the world, such as the current outbreak of the Ebola virus in Africa. Even governments, such as the Trump administration — which have an ideological aversion to the concept of “global governance” — can understand the practical benefits delivered by agencies such as the UNHCR and the WHO.

**Without these organisations, governments would have to let cross-border problems go unaddressed — or step in to deal with them themselves.**

**Indeed, if the current drift away from the rules-based international order leads to a crisis in international governance, that crisis is more likely to play out at the G20 than the UN.** That is because the G20, a much younger organisation, is now the forum that is expected to deal with international economic and financial emergencies.

The first ever G20 summit of world leaders took place in 2008 in Washington, just after the outbreak of the global financial crisis. That meeting, as well as a subsequent summit in London, managed to organise a co-ordinated international response, involving a large fiscal stimulus, to contain the financial panic and ward off the threat of a global depression. Facing a common threat, the leaders of the US, China, the EU, Russia, Japan and others were able to overcome their political differences and work together.

**However, in the current climate, it is hard to imagine that world leaders would be able to find a similar consensus if another financial crisis** were to break out. The chances of such a crisis cannot be dismissed, given the length of the current economic expansion, many years of unorthodox monetary policy and high levels of debt in key economies.

**But if a new financial crisis were to break out, the world’s leaders would meet against a backdrop of a global trade war that has poisoned international economic diplomacy.** The **erratic leadership of President Trump combined with the assertive nationalism** of key figures such as President Xi of China also make it harder to envisage a rational global conversation, if and when the next global economic crisis hits.