

“The General Assembly must preserve the flame of multilateralism”

EUROPE

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As the 73rd United Nations General Assembly begins, it faces a daunting agenda. There is institutional reform to be done; crises in desperate need of being addressed, none more than the impending doom in Idlib, Syria; and now, at the initiative of SG Guterres, there is climate change to deal with. It is a lot to do. But beyond all this, this General Assembly can and must perform one basic, but fundamental task: preserving the flame of multilateralism. In today's world it is an imperative that is easier said than done.

At its most ideal, the UN changes the shape of a nasty, brutish and solitary world of competition and races to the bottom. This is the vision of Tennyson's Locksley Hall - a parliament of man where “the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe, and the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law.” But like Tennyson's poem, this vision is just an arcadia. It is a dream that does not exist.

At its realistic best, the UN blunts the sharp edges of a Hobbesian world. It facilitates dialogue and cooperation. It alleviates suffering and it provides a platform for collective action. Here the record is admittedly mixed, though there is ample and tangible evidence that it can reach this level with the proper buy-in and leadership.

At its most basic, the UN should at the very least keep the idea of multilateral cooperation alive. This is a bare minimum for an organization that is founded on the principle of taking “effective collective measures” in response to the challenges facing us.

But today the drumbeat of nationalism has grown louder and stronger, perhaps more so than at any time in the last seventy-three years. There is a marked shift towards transactionalism and away from structured cooperation, while the specter of great power competition and the return of spheres of influence looms large. This shift was evident at last year's General Assembly where one word seemingly took center stage – sovereignty.

Sovereignty is not a bad thing. It is core to our Westphalian system that still predominates and will continue to do so. It is also a central element of the UN and the Charter. Sovereignty and multilateralism are not mutually exclusive. But the robust strain of sovereignty peddled by some at the 72nd General Assembly does threaten to crowd out structured cooperation. To address certain problems a broader perspective is necessary. That vision is blinded by overly-myopic nationalism.

The problem is not just that the attacks on multilateralism in New York undermine the world's ability to address common challenges, though it certainly does, it is that the rhetoric and example set at the UN trickles down. We have seen it over the last year in Europe where the centrifugal forces of nationalism, promoting 19th century sovereigntist views, are growing

stronger. Even European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has taken to touting so-called “European sovereignty” as a way of buffing up Europe’s projection in this new competitive world. Europe of all places was supposed to be past this.

And so, beyond pushing through reform of management, peace & security, and development; in addition to a needed, but exceedingly unlikely, agreement on Syria; and beyond action on climate change, this 73rd General Assembly needs to show at least a modicum of support for the idea of multilateral cooperation and push back against the idea that nationalist sovereignty trumps all.