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Trump and the United Nations crisis

*At his second speech at the United Nations, Donald Trump attacked both the host institution and his European allies. He criticised Sadiq Khan, calling him a “terrible Mayor” and claimed that London was ushering in Sharia Law. **Michael Cox** argues that this speech should be read as a measure of how far the United States under Trump has turned against all forms of multilateralism, but also as an expression of a much deeper crisis of legitimacy within the UN system as a whole.*

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For those who have been following the rise and further rise of Donald Trump over the past ten years, one could hardly have been surprised by his most recent speech at the United Nations, almost certainly his wildest yet. Nothing was spared in his near one hour diatribe against failing escalators and teleprompters at the UN itself, through to Sharia Law London and its “terrible Mayor” Sadiq Khan, and on to those political correct European leaders who were allowing Europe to go to “hell” by allowing “illegal aliens” in while pursuing dubious energy policies that were bound to end in economic ruin. Even by Trump’s standards, this was a bravura performance.

But it’s always worth remembering who Trump was really talking to other than the hundreds of delegates sitting in front of him in more or less stony silence. Trump in truth really doesn’t care what other countries either think about him or even the United States. But he does keep a sharp eye on his base at home. And what does that tell him? That taking pot shots at foreigners and the UN – a long term bastion of anti-Americanism he believes – plays well in those red republican states from whence he draws his support.

A victim of political polarisation

As a recent **Chicago Council Survey report** just revealed, the US is increasingly divided along partisan lines when it comes to the United Nations. His Democratic opponents might well think that strengthening the UN is a good idea. However, only a quarter of Republicans feel the same way. Moreover, the gap between Democrats and Republicans on this particular issue has never been wider. In fact when polled, Republicans placed the UN way at the bottom of their list of priorities which included, unsurprisingly, protecting the jobs of American workers and raising living standards at home.



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Of course, a leader looking to bring the country together would do everything in his power to unite people. But Trump has been successful as a politician – the most successful in recent American history – by doing precisely the opposite. Nor has he ever tried to hide from the American people what he thinks about the world and America's role in it. **"Americanism not globalism will be our credo"** he declared during his first successful run for the White House back in 2016. And so it was again when he ran in 2024, this time attracting 15 million more votes than he did eight years earlier. Playing the role of America's nationalist-in chief might horrify liberals, alienate Europeans and upset most of the foreign delegates compelled to sit through his speech at the UN this week. But it plays well to his base.



September 19, 2017 – US President Donald Trump gives a remark at the 72nd UN General Assembly in United Nations Headquarters. [Aditya E.S. Wicaksono in Shutterstock](#).

Trump also taps into something else as well: a more general malaise within the UN system. It all began when President G.W. Bush decided to invade Iraq without a second U.N. vote in 2003. It continued when the UN Security Council divided over what to do about the civil wars in Libya and Syria back in 2011 and 2012. And it got a whole lot worse when one of the P5 members of the Security Council in the shape of Russia incorporated Crimea in 2014, and then went on to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, supported it is worth pointing out, by another P5 member in the form of the People's Republic of China.

The United Nations is still needed

It's not all doom and gloom, however. The United Nations' image around the world in fact remains broadly speaking favourable according to a recent [25-nation 2025 Pew Global Attitudes Survey](#). As the Survey showed, whatever its shortcomings (most strongly expressed in Israel) the UN is still seen as playing a positive role. Even so there is a perception out there – especially felt in the wider Global South – that the Security Council of the UN no longer reflects the changing balance of power in the international system today but rather what that system looked like back in 1945 when Great Britain and France were still world powers. This it is argued not only makes the UN less effective, but raises serious questions about its legitimacy too.

Yet all roads in the end lead back to the United States. Looking at Trump today it is easy to conclude that the US has always been sceptical about multilateralism and international organizations. Yet it was the United States back in 1945 that was one of the UN's strongest supporters. There was even a time just following the end of the Cold War when Bush senior uttered the famous call before the same General Assembly where Trump spoke only a few days ago, that it was time to create a "new world order" in which "diverse nations" could be drawn together in the common cause of building peace and security.



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How far the world, the United Nations and indeed the United States, have travelled since then. Clearly not all the blame for the current crisis should be laid at the door of the US alone. Indeed, in what is now called the era of geopolitics there are many others with great power or regional ambitions who have been more than happy to tear up the UN rule book in pursuit of their own narrowly defined idea of what constitutes their own "national interest".

That said, the United States bears its own fair share of responsibility. There may be some Americans of course who might think that doing away with the UN altogether would be no bad thing. But as often been remarked, even if the UN were to collapse tomorrow – a development that even Trump might not welcome – something like it would have to be rebuilt in order to try and sort out the problems which individual states are palpably unable to deal with alone. Meanwhile, the world will have to try and address those problems without, and for the moment at least, against the United States under its current political leadership.

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