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***The Current* podcast**

"The United Nations at 80: Does multilateralism still matter?"

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Episode Summary:

The 80th UN General Assembly is underway in New York City, in session from just after Labor Day into December. The annual High-Level Week, when world leaders gather, ended in September. To share their takeaways from the 80th General Assembly thus far and to look ahead at the UN's role in global security and development, experts Jeff Feltman and John McArthur join *The Current*.

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DEWS: Hi, I'm Fred Dews, and you're listening to *The Current*, part of the Brookings podcast network.

The 80th UN General Assembly is once again underway in New York City, in session from just after Labor Day into December. The annual High-Level Week when world leaders gather ended last week. With me to share their takeaways from the 80th General Assembly and to look ahead at the UN's role in global security and development are two Brookings scholars, Jeff Feltman and John McArthur.

Jeff is the John C. Whitehead Visiting Fellow in International Diplomacy, and John MacArthur is a senior fellow and director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings. Jeff, welcome back to The Current.

FELTMAN: It's great to be here and great to be here with John.

DEWS: And John, welcome back to The Current, also.

MCARTHUR: Likewise. Great to be with both of you.

DEWS: So a question for both of you to start off. As noted, the 80th UN General Assembly is underway, and so I'd like for you both to share your own impressions of what you've seen thus far. What one moment, decision or overarching mood best defines the tone of this year's session for you?

Jeff, why don't you start?

[1:11]

FELTMAN: Well, Fred, thanks. I think I would have to cite that moment of suspended animation when Trump was stuck on the escalator, because that sort of, I think, symbolized something that was happening in the entire organization, the member states and the UN apparatus itself, which is everybody was waiting to see what the president was going to say, what the president was going to do.

There's always two agendas at at the High-Level Week. There's the official agenda, the meetings on this, that, or the other. And then there's the unofficial agenda. The unofficial agenda is what everyone wants to talk about in the hallways, what everyone's whispering about over dinner and the cocktail parties and things.

And the unofficial agenda this year was the United States and President Trump. But it filtered into the official agenda as well. It was remarkable how many speeches from the General Assembly podium for world leaders mentioned United States and/or President Trump. High Number. And I think it's because people are wondering what does it mean for the organization, what does it mean for global order when the primary architect and benefactor, steward of the international order is sort of changing its direction a bit. It is sort of rethinking what U.S. leadership in the world looks like. And so everybody was waiting for the president, and the president himself had to wait there hoping the escalator would start again.

So that to me symbolized the main topic of this week, which is what is the United States' leadership role in this organization going forward?

DEWS: And how about you, John? What were your key takeaways so far?

[2:43]

MCARTHUR: Oh, it's so interesting to hear Jeff. He's got so much experience. I wasn't expecting that answer. What resonates for me? It was actually a contrast of a different type. It was a contrast of the U.S. president, of course Trump, making his comments on climate change as a "hoax," I think was the word he used. And the next day President Xi Jinping of China announcing pretty seminal new targets for reducing carbon emissions and really pointing out for the first time that China's going to reduce its emissions rather than slow down the growth of them.

So it was just an utterly different approach to a major global issue. And in many ways, it was part of this kind of multi-track layer of the UN, not just in the formal bits, but in the informal and the kind of offshoot assemblies. And so to the extent that so much of global affairs is defined by this tension between the two countries right now, it just revealed the difference of approaches in these two superpowers and just as a stark difference in how different parts of the world are thinking about a key global issue.

[3:54]

FELTMAN: John, that's a really interesting point. And of course one of the theories is that China will fill a vacuum where U.S. leadership used to be. But in fact, it doesn't even have to fill the entire vacuum where the U.S. used to be. You know, for example, the U.S. is $1.5 billion in arrears to the UN right now; the UN has had to cut staffing programs, et cetera, because of the U.S. funding cuts. China can by definition play a larger role as the U.S. recedes without even having to do that much more in terms of financial contributions. China has not been a big donor in terms of voluntary contributions to the UN that the U.S. has traditionally been.

DEWS: A little over a year ago, you joined me on The Current in a very powerful episode about the humanitarian crisis in Sudan. Can you reflect on the UN role now in international peacekeeping? Is it delivering on its humanitarian mission and is China maybe more involved in that aspect?

[4:49]

FELTMAN: Well, of the five permanent members of the Security Council, China has the most number of blue helmets actually serving in UN peacekeeping operations. So I think it's more than the rest of of the five permanent members combined. But peacekeeping has definitely declined in terms of numbers of missions and numbers of blue helmets deployed around the world. My last year at the United Nations was 2018 and there were 110,000 peacekeepers deployed in something like 14, 15 missions in 2018. Now we're down to about 60,000 troops and it's going to go down even further because of the end of UNIFIL, the Lebanon mandate, next, next year. So so peacekeeping has has shrunk compared to where it was a decade ago.

But it's worth remembering that peacekeeping remains a valuable tool in the hands of the Security Council of the United Nations. Deploying a a blue helmet peacekeeper costs about one-eighth of the cost of deploying a U.S. soldier overseas. So I suspect that peacekeeping in some form is going to remain an important tool of the United Nations.

In fact, just this week, we saw the Security Council approve a mission for Haiti, not a UN mission, but giving it a UN approval for a larger mission in Haiti. I won't predict how successful it's going to be given the difficulties in Haiti, but I think you're going to see the Security Council continue to use peacekeeping, but perhaps in different and more creative ways rather than these large multidimensional peacekeeping missions that we saw in the past in places like Democratic Republic of Congo.

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On the humanitarian side, I would say that that the two issues more more serious and inhibiting the delivery of humanitarian assistance than peacekeeping efforts would be, first, financing. The UN put out a a humanitarian appeal, the the Global Humanitarian Appeal for this year, $47 billion. We're already three-quarters of the way through the year and only $15 billion has come forward. So there's a funding issue.

And then second, it's that sort of humanitarian norms are not being respected in the way that one would want. You saw intentional denial of of lifesaving assistance in places like Syria, in places like Sudan. So I I think that the humanitarian deliveries would require a a more serious look at how you overcome intentional denial of lifesaving aid to to those in need, as well as figuring out what you do about the funding.

[7:11]

MCARTHUR: I see it as a bit more complex than a binary question on how these big reform questions are going to go. And I I would actually say that it was interesting if if I read it correctly, even President Trump after his meeting with the Secretary General said quite positive things about the UN. And I think his speech talked about the promise of the UN too, while, you know, issuing clear critiques at the same time. A lot of senior people at the UN will say this place needs to reform, there's no question. But the member states are holding U.S. back from doing so.

And I think one of the big questions last week was the so-called UN 80, the 80th anniversary of the UN, but the big reform effort of the Secretary-General, which is kind of still coming forward and has another six months to work on its next delivery. I think there's a movement for ambitious reform. The UN Secretary-General has even, I think, proposed some consolidation of different agencies and programs, and a lot of people think that's for the good. Some people think it doesn't go far enough. I know even some people at the UN think it should go further, consolidate more.

And so I do think that there's this very big open playing field right now for people to say, how could this be done better? Where could a wholesale rethink make it work better? And I don't think a lot of people, for example, are defending the Security Council as a highly efficacious body right now in preventing conflict around the world.

That's kind of a a starting point, even at the the *sine qua non* level of the UN's purpose.

And so there are, I think a lot of I would say just huge open questions about how these bodies should be reformed, could be reformed, and will be reformed in the coming years.

[8:55]

FELTMAN: And I think it's very hard in the current climate, at least in the United States, and I think in some other countries, to basically defend status quo institutions. It's not part of the general atmosphere right now to to favor status quo institutions.

But what I find as as someone that believes strongly that we need to have a functioning multilateral system to meet today's challenges, what I think is missing is a really compelling narrative. Why should we care about the UN? What's irreplaceable about the UN? What would we lose if we lose if we lose the UN altogether?

I I don't think we were ever going to be able to to create a new charter. The 50 countries that came together in San Francisco in 1945, 80 years ago, had a unified look to the to the world. They'd just gone through two world wars. Now you've got global north, global south, east, west, all sorts of different constituencies. I don't think we can recreate the charter right now. So what do we need to make sure we don't lose as we look forward to to consolidation and reform?

DEWS: I would love to get back to that question of what we lose and also multilateralism in a moment. I I would like John to address this other aspect of the UN, which is development. Jeff, you talked about humanitarian issues and peacekeeping. John on the development side, what's been your biggest takeaway, positive or negative, regarding development, specifically progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals?

[10:16]

MCARTHUR: Well, I'm anchored in a presentation I gave at the UN last year, actually a year ago, on the so-called SDG moment on how the world's doing. And my bottom line synopsis is basically the same as it was doing before the SDGs. Like most of the things, they're carrying on business as usual since 2015 when we look at the data. Not all of them, but most of them. And so it's not that nothing's getting better and nothing's getting worse, it's that the the trajectories haven't really changed around the world since 2015. Certainly not enough to make a a discernible difference.

And so I've encouraged, you know, in the UN circles, people not to talk about whether it's succeeding or not, but talk about, like, what's changing for the better or for the worse, and what needs to be done differently in order to get more of the better.

And I see that the official elements of the intergovernmental processes are not really talking enough about that, arguably outside of global health as a specific domain. Clearly, the cutbacks in the U.S., UK, Netherlands, Germany on global development assistance over the past year, major cutbacks are going to have major consequences in the next couple of years.

But I also think that there is a a renewed spirit in a lot of the developing and emerging economies of kind of strategic autonomy of how they can, you know, build their own development paths better anyhow.

In the long term, you know, that the the data will tell us how it goes. But I think it's not to minimize the strains that are current right now because they're massive in a lot of corners around the world. But I do think we're, again, in this moment of of reset of thinking about how the global development partnership strategies work very broadly defined. The SDGs have ultimately been very successful in organizing the the concepts of those discussions, not just in governments, but in business, and universities, research around the world, all sorts of places.

But I think in terms of how the Goals help countries and governments change course, I think that still is an open question. And when we get into these reform questions on the institutional side, you know, it leads us to another question of which international institutions should be helping on which Goals and have more accountability for doing so. And and I think we need better answers on that.

DEWS: I want to go to multilateralism. Jeff, you you brought that up a minute ago. The United Nations is one of the world's oldest and largest multilateral institution today, 193 member states. But multilateralism itself is under challenge as a mechanism to address global problems. What is this challenge to multilateralism and is multilateralism still relevant? Jeff?

[13:01]

FELTMAN: Another colleague from another organization I'm affiliated with sort of compared criticism of multilateralism itself, the concept of multilateralism, to blaming to blaming a sports stadium when your team lost the game. It's basically a structure that is only as good as the member states decide to make it.

That there's a there's a real discrepancy between what different constituencies, meaning governments, believe should be the priority of multilateralism. I find myself surprisingly sympathetic to the Trump administration's view about getting back to basics at the UN, which is the peace and security portfolio. I suspect that they say that as a way of explaining why they're they're reducing and eliminating some of the humanitarian and other assistance.

But anyway, the idea of getting back to basics on peace and security I think is extremely important because there is no other organization with the capacities and the legal authorities of of the United Nations, as bad as the Security Council often is.

But there would be other countries that would say no, the development or dealing with climate change, dealing with the financial burden that governments fall into, that should be the priority of the multilateral system. That should rise to the top.

So I don't think we've had yet a serious, candid conversation about which parts of the multilateral system are essential to preserve. No one would invent the UN system today that exists. So it it makes a lot of sense to do some of the consolidation, but it's a really difficult conversation when you have different countries with with very different ideas of what the priorities should be of what should be salvaged.

[14:32]

MCARTHUR: And I would just tweak that in my own view to say, not necessarily back to basics, but forward on basics. So I I think there's a lot of, like, protecting the institution that comes out very quickly in some of these conversations. Whereas often the institution needs to be updated, and it's a healthy conversation if we can say to, you know, have that in the right way that discussion about, well, what would a better institution look like? What is the forward looking problem that needs to be solved? And what's a legitimate way to do that, given that every country's going to have its own interest in in taking on those issues?

So actually I agree that the focus on basics and core mandates, core responsibilities is a crucial starting point. Secretary Bessant has also raised that in the context of the international financial institutions, World Bank and IMF. I don't think it's a a wrong question to start with, quite the opposite. But then we have to think about what does it mean to follow through on those principles?

And and I'm of the view that a lot of institutions need to be reimagined if we think more creatively. Because the reality is the world is so different today than it was 20 years ago; it's going to be even more different in another 20 years. And we just have to be thinking very clearly and, you know, rigorously on how to build that that new world.

DEWS: I think it's so interesting that you've both talked a lot about issues around United Nations reform, and so as we wrap up, given that context, I do want to go back to a question that you posed, Jeff, earlier, which is what do we lose if there is no United Nations?

[16:05]

MCARTHUR: I start with the word cooperation on all these things. I I wrote a piece a few years ago saying it's not about the "*united* nations," because no one should pretend everyone's united. And it's not just nations; it's all these communities around the world. So we thought about it as the goal of the enterprise is *uniting communities*. It becomes more of an action enterprise to say how do we do that together?

So I think this kind of quest for cooperation is what I see as the centerpiece, not to downplay the difficulty of it, because there are opposing views on many key issues, back to my my opening point. But I think to stress that there are opportunities to find pathways to cooperation even amongst parties with starkly opposing views. And that's the job of an enterprise like the UN to help, you know, ensure that there's a venue for that and a professional competency to keep it moving forward on each of the domains where, you know, the members agree it has a job to do.

[17:04]

FELTMAN: I agree with what John said, but I put a slightly different spin on it. And part of this is for the messaging. Part of this is for the for the narrative. I believe that member states join the United Nations, sign up for running for the Security Council elected membership, join certain conventions, whatever it happens to be, because of their national interest, that they've decided that this in their national interest to do these things, to be part of this effort.

And so I look at I look at the UN and the multilateral system more broadly as force multipliers for national interests. And I think it has a different ring to those that might be skeptical of words like "cooperation." To to think about being a force multiplier for your national interest, that's why you've signed up for this convention, why you joined why you joined this particular institution.

I found interesting that the Better World Campaign, which is part of the the United Nations Foundation based here in Washington, D.C., did a recent survey where even now with all the skepticism about an 80-year-old global order, that three out of four Americans believe that the United States should maintain an active role in in the, in the UN, and that includes 65% of Republicans, 88% of Democrats.

So there's still a constituency for the UN. I think that talking about pursuit of national interest and being enforced multiplier might help overcome some of the skepticism about the value of of working together in a way that John described.

[18:29]

MCARTHUR: I I would just add one quick add on to that, which is there's so many countries where the UN is the place where they have a voice. And I think this is often not appreciated that there's a a space to air perspectives in a an international setting because each country does have a voice. And so for smaller countries, for countries that are lower income, often that that voice also becomes a valve to let out frustrations.

But also, I would just say there's a a question of, like, where where does the town hall exist for the voices to be captured in a world where a lot of people feel that they're not heard very broadly? And I think that is a challenge where the new technologies of the world could also help new institutions think very differently about how to bring voice to the global town hall, because it can't simply be 193 odd people sitting at a table in a world of 8 billion, where we have extraordinary capacities to capture insight from broad constituencies thanks to digital technology.

And I think I would urge any new team taking on that leadership in this context to think about how to really bring voice to the table in a new and creative way.

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DEWS: Let's leave it there. This has been a fascinating and important conversation. Jeff, John, thank you so much for sharing your time and expertise with us today.

FELTMAN: Thanks, Fred.

MCARTHUR: Thank you.

DEWS: You can learn more about Jeff Feltman, John McArthur, and their research on our website, Brookings dot edu.