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Research Report

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SWP Comment

NO. 53 OCTOBER 2021

UN-General Assembly of “Hope”

A More Collaborative Debate, an Innovative Report, and an SDG Moment

Marianne Beisheim

Even though the 76th United Nations General Debate had to take place in a hybrid format yet again due to the pandemic, the overall mood was more positive than last year. Not only was the hall in New York busier, but the tone of the debate was also more cooperative, not least because U.S. President Joe Biden promised a new era of diplomacy. UN Secretary-General António Guterres presented his report “Our Common Agenda” and advocated for ambitious UN reforms. This all aligns with the theme of this year’s general debate: “Building Resilience through Hope”. In parallel to the debate, a large number of meetings took place, which, moving beyond words, aimed at action. While momentum and enthusiasm peaked in the beginning of the week, the follow through, in terms of action, was unconvincing, as demonstrated by the so-called “SDG Moment”.

The new President of the 76th UN General Assembly, former Foreign Minister of the Maldives Abdulla Shahid, is committed to a “Presidency of Hope” and defines his priorities accordingly: ensuring the sustainability of reconstruction after COVID-19, respecting the rights of people and responding to the needs of the planet. As a representative of a small island nation, he is particularly committed to advancing the fight against climate change. To these ends, he stressed the importance of multilateral cooperation and the need to revitalise the United Nations.

At the beginning of the debate, UN Secretary-General Guterres sounded the alarm, warning of a “cascade of crises”. At the same time, he said, it was the UN’s “raison d’être” to come together to solve man-made

problems — which gives him hope. But for that to happen, he remarked, processes and structures of global governance must focus on the future.

The General Debate

Some 100 heads of state and government attended the opening of the 76th General Assembly. In the general debate, heads of state usually send political signals indicating both which issues on the international agenda they believe should be prioritised and what to expect from them in the coming year with respect to their political will, demands, requirements, conflicts, and overall willingness to cooperate. Their speeches exhibited signs of both continuity and



change. Against the backdrop of events in Afghanistan, for example, some expressed disillusionment with realpolitik, but, compared to last year, significantly more voices indicated a willingness to engage in multi-lateral cooperation.

As usual, the President of Brazil opened the General Assembly debate. As in 2020, Jair Bolsonaro's speech was primarily concerned with his own country's national economic interests, coming across as part promotion for international investors and part response to criticism, especially that from Europe.

U.S. President Joe Biden struck a different tone. Speaking to a nearly full house, he emphasised the common challenges facing the global community and offered cooperation to all in meeting these global challenges, hailing the dawn of a new era of "relentless diplomacy" rather than "relentless war". Unlike Trump last year, he did not address China directly, but made clear that the United States would protect its partners and the rights of individuals, but would do so in the context of responsible competition, not by way of a new cold war.

Chinese President Xi Jinping was unable to respond directly because his speech had been pre-recorded. As in the previous year, he primarily emphasised economic and development policy issues.

Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier spoke on behalf of Germany at the end of the week. He stressed that the major powers must not undermine the international order in pursuit of self-interest, as they have a responsibility to tackle global challenges. In other words, he argued, the UN is not a "boxing ring devoid of values at the disposal of the world powers". Future generations, he noted, would judge their governments by whether they had solved conflicts and problems. In this context, Steinmeier announced Germany's candidacy as a non-permanent member of the Security Council for the 2027/28 period.

With regard to climate, Xi Jinping garnered attention with the announcement that China would no longer build coal-fired

power plants abroad, although it is unclear whether it would continue to finance them. Instead, he said, China intends to increase support for the development of green and low-carbon technologies. Biden promised to double public international financing for climate action taken by developing nations. Boris Johnson amused the audience by saying that unlike Kermit the Frog, he thought it was very easy to be "green". He went on to call for increased boldness and innovation in the run-up to the upcoming climate conference in Glasgow.

It is thus interesting to note that many speakers focused the competition for international leadership and the "pitch for power" primarily in reference to the issues of climate protection and pandemic response — a new development. Many speeches also addressed the special role of the United Nations. Xi Jinping, for example, said that the UN is the central platform for international cooperation and that the trend toward the formation of smaller groups should be rejected. Biden praised the "noble" mandate of the UN; he proposed a Global Health Threat Council, but failed to clarify whether it should be anchored in the UN system.

Our Common Agenda

Such a council would fit in well with the UN Secretary-General's latest proposals. Last year, the member states had asked him to report back with recommendations on how the twelve "commitments" in the declaration adopted on the 75th anniversary of the UN could be advanced. The report, entitled "Our Common Agenda" and prepared by a UN team led by Volker Türk (Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination in the UN Secretariat), is the product of intensive and extensive consultations. It is thematically broad, addressing all twelve concerns laid out in the 75th anniversary declaration. One of its central concepts is inclusive and networked multilateralism, which the UN Secretary-General has promoted for some time. It embraces a strong

focus on the youth as bearers of hope, newly emerging participation formats and intergenerational justice. These themes were also the topic of many speeches in the general debate. The report contains a number of innovative proposals on how the UN can better deal with long-term concerns and global goods, for example, by way of:

- a Strategic Foresight and Global Risks Report (drafted every five years) and an Emergency Platform for complex global crises;
- a Summit of the Future in 2023, complete with corresponding preparatory processes, including via UN Futures Labs;
- a UN Special Envoy for Future Generations and a UN Youth Office;
- a repurposing of the UN Trusteeship Council to realign it as a council for future generations;
- a High-Level Advisory Board on improved governance of global public goods;
- a Biennial Summit on financing issues, with the participation of the G20, the UN Economic and Social Council, the UN Secretary-General and the heads of the international financial institutions.

While civil society is already eagerly discussing the report, even as a possible turning point for multilateralism, member states have been slow to respond so far. Without their political support and commitment to funding, most of the above proposals will be impossible to implement. The heads of state and government of Costa Rica, New Zealand, Sweden, South Africa, Senegal and Spain signalled support for strengthening the UN's capacity for foresight and risk management and for the proposed Summit of the Future in 2023. In contrast to this backing, the ministerial meeting of the Alliance for Multilateralism, held under the title "Shaping our common agenda", made hardly any reference to the report, much less concrete steps towards achieving its aims.

Many Parallel Activities

As usual, this year also saw a number of high-level meetings and dialogues take place in parallel to the general debate, including the UN Food Systems Summit and the High-level Dialogue on Energy which occurred under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. Germany also co-hosted meetings on the "Berlin Process" on Libya, the situation in Afghanistan and the previously mentioned "Alliance for Multilateralism".

Such parallel meetings are intended firstly to generate political momentum, usually through appearances by heads of state and government or celebrities. Second, they are also intended to produce concrete results, usually voluntary commitments or funding pledges, or at least to present interesting findings. At the Dialogue on Energy, for example, member states and other interested stakeholders were invited to enter into so-called "energy pacts" in the realms of energy access, integrated and equitable energy transition, innovation, technology and data, and/or finance and investment. Pledges are then often listed publicly in an online register, as in the case of the Dialogue on Energy and the Food Systems Summit. More and more, non-governmental actors are also participating in these processes. At the same time, many non-governmental organisations and experts have voiced criticism that these events are dominated by lobby groups.

The SDG Moment: High-Profile and Upbeat, but Lacking Substance

This year's "SDG Moment" highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) approach. In the end of June, member states adopted UN governance reforms on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, one element of which was to strengthen the SDG Moment during the launch of the UN General Assembly. The resolution asked that this meeting, convened by the UN Secretary-General, begin

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on the day before or the first day of the opening of the general debate, with the participation of heads of state and government, “to highlight inspiring action on the Goals”.

The UN Secretariat issued three objectives for this year's meeting: first, to build “momentum” for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs; second, to highlight how urgently needed COVID-19 response and recovery efforts can be aligned with the transformation towards sustainable development (the title and ambition of the 2030 Agenda); and third, to demonstrate with examples that this transformative change is possible by 2030.

While in previous years the “Moment” was rather short, this year 27 heads of state and government spoke over the course of the day. Invited were those countries that had presented voluntary reports on their implementation of the SDGs at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). In the (mostly pre-recorded video) messages, the dominant themes were again COVID-19 recovery and climate protection; in addition, gender issues, financing, (intergenerational) equity, education and innovation were also discussed.

The fact that heads of state and government spoke at the SDG Moment boosted its political relevance and attracted attention. The program was presented in a fast-paced, upbeat manner, complete with a performance by the popular K-pop boy group BTS, who, as “Special Presidential Envoy for Future Generations and Culture”, also held a speech after the President of the Republic of Korea. This created momentum, at least on social media. The following day, UN expert Richard Gowan noted with amusement on Twitter that the Secretary-General's speech garnered only 5,300 views on YouTube compared to BTS's 6.4 million; the group's accompanying music video has been clicked over 27.6 million times.

The results with regard to the other two objectives of the SDG Moment were extremely meagre, not least because convincing concrete examples of transformative

change were not presented. Although some speakers mentioned programs and processes, they were mostly projects that had already been decided elsewhere or were merely announced. The German government described Chancellor Angela Merkel's contribution as a “greeting”, and accordingly, she just briefly mentioned Germany's revised Sustainable Development Strategy and the Climate Protection Act. All contributions were largely unsuccessful in clarifying to what extent the measures mentioned have actually promoted or will in fact lead to a transformative change in terms of the 2030 Agenda and why others should follow their path. In short, they failed to inspire through their example. To avoid a similar outcome in the future, the UN should consider better tailoring the format of the SDG Moment with these concerns in mind.

“Who dares nothing, need hope for nothing” (Friedrich Schiller)

The general debate's tone was more cooperative this year — indeed giving cause for hope. But many problems persist. In the areas of security and the economy, for example, member states would not dare cede further sovereignty and authority to the UN. Only recently, negotiations failed that had aimed at giving the UN more authority and resources to review SDG implementation. Hence, the UN bureaucracy has no choice but to work through softer formats, hoping to generate momentum for the implementation of jointly agreed goals and to interest non-governmental partners in joining these efforts. In the future, the K-pop girl group “Blackpink”, who UN Secretary-General Guterres appointed (along with a Nobel Prize winner and the president of Microsoft) as SDG advocates, may help with this; after all, they do have 68.3 million YouTube subscribers.

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