The UN has made headlines in 2017 for all the wrong reasons. Just this month, fifteen of its Tanzanian peacekeepers were killed and more than 50 wounded in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the UN has been engaged in a long, costly and – some would argue – fruitless campaign to restore peace to the war-torn eastern region.

In September, the UN General Assembly was the focus of international attention when, to the horror of more experienced diplomats, US President Donald Trump used his first speech to the organisation as a bully pulpit. He threatened to annihilate North Korea, saying that if the US is ‘forced to defend itself or its allies, [it] will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea’, a notion that goes against the most basic principles of peace and security which are the bedrock of the UN.

To the horror of more experienced diplomats, President Trump used his first speech to the UN as a bully pulpit

Both the lethal attack on the peacekeepers and Trump’s outburst depict the UN as a weak, ineffective entity that can be attacked from all sides and which lacks autonomy and efficacy. This is an image the organisation shares with its predecessor, the League of Nations. However, to prevent the UN from being relegated to obscurity, as the League was, it is important to take a more expansive view of its history as a means of carving out a path forward.

When the League quietly folded in the summer of 1945, US diplomats, in particular, were adamant that no public link be made between the old Geneva-based institution and the newly endowed UN organisation. For the first years of its existence, US and British officials conducted frantic diplomatic and public relations campaigns, keen to promote the image of the new organisation among the global public as being effective and essential for world peace.

However, as the UN began its work, the system of global governance established by the League, particularly in the areas of economic, social and humanitarian development became part of the new arrangement. In addition, the diplomatic practice of oratory, public debate and committee discussion continued to be the main methods of negotiating international relations, albeit in a more representative setting.

As delegates from across the globe came together to create and expand the governance of everything from questions of sovereignty to human rights to the monitoring of drug trafficking and much more, the UN expanded its mission far beyond that of the League. New agencies were created as the international civil service grew in size and scope.

As the age of European colonialism drew to a close, a host of new, internationally minded nations rose to the world stage. During loud and garrulous debates in the General Assembly, the voice of previously marginalised peoples began to dominate proceedings, challenging the views of US and UK delegates, used to controlling the UN agenda. This group, later referred to as the Global South, was characterised by two essential features: solidarity between nations from regions as disparate as Africa, Asia and Latin America; and a clear motivation for change.

Using their numerical majority in the General Assembly, the Global South group pushed for sweeping reform

Using their numerical majority in the General Assembly to wrest the UN agenda away from the Anglo-American powers, mainly interested in stemming the Cold War and preserving European networks of capital and power, the Global South group pushed for sweeping reform. As representatives from Africa and Asia led the campaign for recognition of self-determination, Caribbean nations led the charge for universal human rights, while Latin American countries led innovation in economic and social development.

Uniting these various crusades was a simple idea: that the decolonisation process and the North–South divide was equally, if not more important, than the East–West conflict that dominated the attention of the superpowers.

The North–South struggle at the UN was crucial for two main reasons. First, it brought together a wider variety of anti-colonialists and anti-imperialists, beyond the selection of states mentioned above, but also a host of...
transnational and NGO advocates and groups working along similar themes. Second, although progress on many of these issues was incremental at best, and there remain ongoing challenges, the innovation of the UN by a variety of different actors created new forums for action and lasting forms of negotiation and practice.

Crucially, by breathing life into the international system, Global South states expanded the utility and relevance of the organisation, developing the capacity for UN action. At the centre of this moment of dynamism was a determination to challenge the liberal world order. This idea continues to underpin Global South activity today as the group refocuses on the UN due to a growing vacuum of Anglo-American power.

Trump’s speech to the General Assembly in September was not just a threat to the North Korean leadership, it was also a strategic declaration of a change in the direction of US foreign policy. Since 1945, the US has had a largely interventionist impulse, bringing it into conflict with the UN at certain critical moments, most clearly during the Vietnam War and the Iraq War. Over time, while the organisation proved powerless to prevent Washington flouting international law (the retention of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay is one example), it provided an important echo chamber, acting as a valve on American power as US diplomats sought to cast a multilateral cloak over more controversial operations, such as the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

More recently, alleging that the organisation has an anti-Israel bias, America’s withdrawal from UNESCO in October and increasingly militaristic rhetoric against Iran from the US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley signals a different approach. By disengaging from certain UN forums, US officials have more room for manoeuvre, but it also points to a
diminishing emphasis on soft power. This has long been one of the most important negotiating tools available to the liberal lodestars of the State Department and has previously led to such schemes as the Marshall Plan and the Global Climate Change Initiative.

On the other side of the Atlantic, America’s most steady European partner, Britain, has been accelerating the strategy of extricating itself from all sorts of multilateral arrangements, not least the EU with the Brexit process well underway, but also pulling out of some UN development agencies. Prime Minister Theresa May churned out a familiar old British strategy in September when she warned that British financial contributions to the UN could be halted unless the organisation becomes more effective.

For the first time since the creation of the court alongside the UN in 1945, Britain will not be represented on the ICJ benches in The Hague

This vague threat has been part of the rhetorical repertoire of the British delegation since their position started to be squeezed by anti-colonial actors in the 1960s. However, more recent developments, most notably the withdrawal of the British candidate for the International Court of Justice (ICJ), reflects a more accurate picture of events.

For the first time since the creation of the court alongside the UN in 1945, Britain will not be represented on the ICJ benches in The Hague. In the most recent election of judges, the British candidate Sir Christopher Greenwood lost his re-election bid to the Indian nominee Dalveer Bhandari.

Interestingly, although Greenwood had secured the support of the UN Security Council, India engaged the General Assembly. In addition, and according to some sources, India employed anti-colonialist rhetoric to garner support for Bhandari among the nations of the G77, a coalition of developing nations created to promote its members’ collective economic interests and create an enhanced joint negotiating capacity in the UN.

Most importantly, the Indian campaign moved the debate away from the Security Council and into the General Assembly, where majority voting can be dominated by Global South countries, reviving a diplomatic strategy from the 1960s that heralded the strongest-ever movement to reform the international order.

The seizing of UN procedures, diplomacy and politics is a repetition of events in the 1960s and 1970s, when newly independent states from the Global South sought to utilise the UN to redress the economic and political problems caused by the North–South divide. This time, given the shirking of the UN by the Anglo-American powers, each for different reasons, there is a unique opportunity for the Global South to lead a new moment of dynamism at the UN.

First, with a reduced American focus and a diminished British presence, the opportunity is ripe for UN reform. While abolishing the P5 veto system of the Security Council remains highly unlikely given the constellation and structure of that organ, the reinvigoration of the multiple bodies and powers of the General Assembly and the Secretary-General would make the organisation at once more representative and more effective.

By giving a clearer voice to the Global South at the UN, the organisation can be revitalised and strengthened from within, developing its capacity for decisive action, agency and autonomous activity in certain areas.

Second, the reduced presence of the US and Britain in the UN system offers a chance to remake the world order and engage an international public, large swathes of whom feel disenfranchised by the global capitalist system, which thrives on the North–South divide.

As much as American and British policymakers were concerned about the image of the UN in the post-war years, so too should we pay attention to the ways in which the UN is currently viewed with scepticism and disdain. Events such as the Global Citizens Festival, organised for the past five years to coincide with the opening of the General Assembly session in New York each September, try to encourage the general public to engage with the ideas and principles of the UN and their relevance to our world today.

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Similar endeavours that promote cosmopolitan worldviews and create a sense of dynamism around international politics at the UN are essential if the organisation is going to survive the twenty-first century.

At the centre of this moment of opportunity is an opening to remake the system of global governance and the world order it supports. If the UN has faced criticism for ineffectiveness and inefficiency in recent years, it is due to the stagnation of the Anglo-American powers that have for too long dominated the agenda.

Rather, the organisation can be reformed only if the Global South nations and their transnational groups, the G77 and the BRICS among others, seize upon this opening to perhaps finally realise their shared vision of a more equitable world order.

Dr Alanna O’Malley

Alanna is a historian of the UN, decolonisation and the Cold War. She is currently a Fulbright Scholar at George Washington University in Washington, DC, and Assistant Professor of History and International Relations at Leiden University. Her first book The Diplomacy of Decolonisation: America, Britain and the United Nations during the Congo Crisis 1960–64 (Manchester University Press) will be published in February 2018.

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