FOREIGN POLICY

The United Nations goes missing

The coronavirus pandemic should have been a moment for global action. Instead, the U.N. is riven with dissension and self-doubt, and countries are going their own way.

The United Nations Security Council chamber. | Spencer Platt/Getty Images

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It took more than three months, a death toll above 87,000 and cases in more than 180 countries, repeated pleas from smaller nations, and a growing sense of shame among senior diplomats — but the United Nations Security Council is finally going to meet to discuss the coronavirus.

That is, in a private session unlikely to yield any serious action.

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If anything, Thursday's meeting — to be held via video conference — is likely to further expose the growing irrelevance of the United Nations as a venue for countries to hash out disputes and cooperate on common crises. Overall, global coordination of the pandemic response has been minimal. But when leading countries have announced their willingness to do "whatever it takes" to fight the virus, they've turned to ad hoc forums like the Group of 20, rather than the more comprehensive body of the United Nations.

Unlike nearly six years ago, when the Security Council declared Ebola a threat to world peace and security, a disease that doesn't respect borders is no longer enough to push feuding world powers — the United States, China and Russia — to use the U.N. stage to coordinate a political response. China, which held the Security Council presidency in March, when the illness was declared a pandemic and began to overwhelm some European and American health systems, did not call a meeting on it. The U.S., increasingly guided by President Donald Trump's America First views, has not stepped up at the U.N., feeding the sense that the world body is hobbled, if not utterly paralyzed by the very kind of crisis it was meant to address.

"What is all this good for if, when push comes to shove, the countries of the world don't actually do anything?" asked Stewart Patrick, a close observer of the U.N. at the Council on Foreign Relations. "What it underscores is that multi-lateralism is what states make of it."

Thursday's session is happening only because several less powerful countries (nine of the 10 nonpermanent members of the 15-member council) demanded it. They include the Dominican Republic, which holds the council's presidency this month. A U.N. General Assembly resolution on the virus also recently passed largely due to lobbying by smaller countries.

The meeting could make the Chinese government mildly uncomfortable, given other countries' fury over how it handled the virus — but U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres is not looking to embarrass Beijing. "China doesn't want to discuss Covid at the Security Council," said one senior European diplomat. "But they can't refuse the secretary-general. He will raise it one way or another, but he wants to avoid a blame game."

The virus has further damaged the U.N.'s functioning by making face-to-face diplomacy nearly impossible, rendering its 39-story headquarters along the East River a ghost town amid a nasty outbreak of the virus in New York.

Already, there are questions about whether the annual meeting of the U.N. General Assembly, which drew 136 world leaders to U.N. headquarters in New York in September 2019, can take place this year. A vaccine will not be available by September, and leading pandemic models predict the virus will remain present in many countries at that time.

European ambassadors raised the issue of whether to cancel UNGA with Guterres in a meeting Tuesday but were rebuffed, according to one ambassador present. A spokesperson for Estonia, which holds a temporary Security Council seat, said a decision on UNGA 2020 will most likely be taken in May. If held, it would be the 75th session of UNGA.

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U.N. officials also warn that the institution faces a financial crisis amid the pandemic, thanks in part to cash-strapped member states being late on their dues. U.N. peacekeeping operations barely have enough available funds to continue through June, according to a U.N. memo obtained by POLITICO. The memo showed that U.N. officials expect the fallout from the coronavirus to further drain their coffers.

"Contributions for regular budget assessments have sharply declined in the first quarter of 2020 relative to earlier years; the payment of assessments by Member States currently stands at 42 percent compared to 50 percent by this time in earlier years," the memo said. "This has resulted in a collection gap of more than $220 million." The information was earlier reported by CBS News.

The United Nations, created after World War II in hopes of preventing a third, is a massive, multifaceted entity. Many pieces of it have worked diligently to respond to the Covid-19 crisis. U.N. "technical" arms — such as the World Health Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the U.N. refugee agency — are all playing key roles as the virus upends societies and economies.

But even those elements of the U.N. have faced controversy.

The WHO in particular has suffered criticism from its biggest donor — the United States. Trump as well as several Republican lawmakers have cast the health organization as too friendly to China, slamming it for compliments WHO officials bestowed early on Beijing, which initially sought to downplay the crisis. Trump has threatened to cut WHO funding, while some lawmakers are urging investigations into its actions.

"They've been wrong about a lot of things," Trump alleged Tuesday, accusing the WHO of being too "China-centric" and making missteps early on in the crisis.

Guterres publicly condemned the Trump administration's threats on Wednesday, saying in a written statement that "now is not the time" to issue blame for the pandemic, when thousands of WHO staff "must be supported" in their work to get the virus under control.

Other countries reiterated their support for the health organization, among them fellow permanent Security Council member Britain. "The U.K. supports the role that the WHO is paying in coordinating the global health response to the pandemic," a U.K. government spokesman told reporters Wednesday. He added there were no U.K. plans for funding withdrawal from the WHO.

The U.N. secretary-general has repeatedly urged international cooperation and unity amid the pandemic. Guterres has called for cease-fires in conflict zones and [decried](#) the rise of domestic violence amid the crisis, which has forced many victims to stay at home with abusers. He pushed an initial $2 billion [drive](#) for aid to developing countries, many of which have yet to feel the coronavirus' full force. More recently, he's laid out a [plan](#) that calls on the international community to devote some 10 percent of global GDP — an amount in the trillions — to helping the planet recover from the pandemic.

Richard Gowan, a U.N. analyst with the International Crisis Group, said the coronavirus is the "defining crisis" of Guterres' term, and that he deserves credit for his efforts so far. "He has been one of the few international leaders who seems to grasp the scale and breadth of the challenge ahead, and he has spoken out unusually frankly about it," Gowan said.

But overall, Guterres' pleas have had limited impact on the ground. And ultimately, he is constrained in how much he can say given that he answers to the leaders of the U.N.'s member states.

Years of growing discord among some of the world body's most powerful actors have badly undercut the vision of the United Nations as a forum for peaceful resolution of political disputes. That three of those members — the United States, China and Russia — are permanent, veto-wielding members of the Security Council only adds to the torpor. China and the U.S. have in recent months traded accusations over who is to blame for the coronavirus' origin and spread.

"There's no denying there are structural issues at the U.N. that need to be resolved, and which are perhaps fundamentally unresolvable," a former Obama administration official said. "We have an international body unable to break through to create consensus around shared action."

Over the past decade, tensions between Washington and Moscow have split the Security Council, paralyzing the U.N. amid bloodshed in places like Syria. China's communist leaders, who often side with Moscow, meanwhile seem to be trying to gain more influential positions in the U.N. system as a means of counterbalancing the United States.

Even what seemed to be breakthrough moments for the U.N. look underwhelming years later.

In 2011, during the presidency of Barack Obama, the Security Council approved the use of force against Libyan forces trying to assault the city of Benghazi; China and Russia abstained on the resolution, letting it pass. But as the U.S.- and European-led military intervention grew in scope, eventually toppling Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi, the Russians grew increasingly unhappy with the mission. Today, Libya is a mess, with multiple militias and politicians vying for power with support from Moscow and other outside powers. U.N. mediation efforts there have proved largely ineffective.

But perhaps nothing has shaken up the United Nations so much as the election of Trump as America's president. Trump came to power with an "America First" foreign policy vision and a strong disdain for multilateral organizations. His aides at times literally cut words like "cooperation" from speeches Trump gave to world leaders, according to a former National Security Council staffer involved in the process. (They were willing to go with "coordination.")
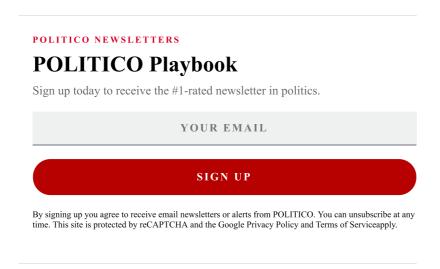
It was Trump who pulled the U.S. out of the Obama-negotiated Iran nuclear agreement. The deal, which involved seven countries and was supported by the European Union and the U.N. Security Council, was arguably one of the most significant multilateral diplomatic achievements of the decade.

The Trump team has quit U.N. bodies such as the Human Rights Council, protesting the inclusion of authoritarian states like China, and has repeatedly tried to slash funds for U.N. agencies. U.S. officials — with some justification — also insist that Americans bear too big a share of the burden for paying for the U.N., which has had some corruption scandals.

Despite the sniping among world powers, there is precedent for U.N. Security Council action related to disease, in large part thanks to the United States.

In September 2014, at Obama's urging, the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution declaring Ebola a threat to global security and calling on countries to provide more resources to fight the illness wracking West Africa. It was a highly unusual Security Council session due to its focus on an infectious disease.

Days later, during the annual U.N. General Assembly gathering, a special meeting was held on the issue of Ebola, with Obama warning fellow world leaders that the international community was "not doing enough." The rallying at the U.N. has been credited with helping spur more countries to donate funds and logistical and medical aid to help stop the spread of the vicious disease.

With the coronavirus, the U.S. has appeared to be either absent from the United Nations or stands accused of trying to sabotage action there.

For instance, efforts by some Security Council members to draft a resolution or some sort of statement on the virus have hit a wall as the U.S. has insisted the document include references to the virus' origins in China, according to two ambassadors POLITICO spoke to. That infuriated Beijing, which for a time pushed conspiracy theories blaming the U.S. for the illness.

The U.S. is not alone in pushing back against China. Germany, which holds a temporary Security Council seat, is similarly angry. Emily Haber, Germany's ambassador to the United States, accused Beijing on Wednesday of a lack of transparency "to say the least," suggesting China's actions have contributed to unnecessary deaths and economic damage.

In early April, the U.N. General Assembly, which consists of more than 190 members, adopted a resolution calling for international cooperation to battle the virus. That measure was sponsored by Norway, Indonesia, Ghana, Liechtenstein, Singapore and Switzerland. But it carries little legal weight, and if anything, it underscored the frustration of less powerful countries over the impotence of the Security Council.

"A General Assembly resolution is largely symbolic," said Rob Berschinski, a

former Obama administration official who dealt with international organizations including the U.N. "In a crisis like this, it's really the U.N. Security Council that needs to act. Only resolutions coming from the Security Council carry the weight of international law and can spur the sort of action that the current crisis so clearly requires."

A spokesman for the State Department denied that the U.S. has been largely absent, insisting that America "is leading conversations among [Security] Council members to advocate for a session centered on underscoring the need for sustained and concerted international action to slow the spread of Covid-19. We would support a resolution designed to enhance that effort."

The U.S. supported the General Assembly measure. But in a carefully crafted statement about it, it took a veiled swipe at China, stressing the "importance of accurate, science-based data collection and analysis of the origins, characteristics, and spread of the virus."

World leaders increasingly frantic about the crisis have turned to other international forums beyond the U.N.

In mid-March, the countries in the Group of Seven (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States) held a video conference to discuss the crisis, reportedly at the urging of the French. It yielded some notable commitments to cooperation.

The G-20, which includes China, has been more active. That group met by video conference March 26 and committed to $5 trillion in domestic economic stimulus packages. According to POLITICO's calculations, the countries appear to have come through on those pledges, even overdelivering by some measures.

G-20 diplomats are also working on an Africa support package. "We commit to do whatever it takes" to defeat the virus and help economies recover from its impacts, G-20 leaders said in a statement from the March 26 meeting.

Former U.S. officials and analysts say it's crucial for world powers to be thinking about the potential future impact of the virus in parts of the developing world. Failure to stop the pandemic in those countries, which often have poor health infrastructures, could lead it to bounce back and reemerge in wealthier nations already suffering from it.

It's a massive task for the U.N., despite its truly global membership — and it would be a struggle even if the world body were functioning at its peak, said

Patrick, the analyst with the Council on Foreign Relations.

"The rolling nature of this was going to be hard to coordinate because the epicenter keeps shifting," he said.

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