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Before the

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Subcommittee on International Development, International Organizations and Corporate Social Impact

On 23 March 2021

“United States Standing in International Organizations”

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for your invitation to me to appear before the Subcommittee on International Development, International Organizations and Corporate Social Impact.

It is a privilege to be called to share with you my knowledge and experiences in effective US participation in international organizations. I held one of the longest tenures on the US Delegation to the United Nations in history – 26 years – followed by three as a professor at Seton Hall University’s School of Diplomacy and media commentator. I then resumed service to country as acting Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs. Most recently I served at the National Security Council as its Senior Director for International Organization Affairs.

My career in this realm spanned six American presidencies, eleven US ambassadors to the United Nations, and, most importantly for today, 16 sessions of the House of Representatives. Congress has much in common with an international organization: both are membership based, both seek to leverage their values into policies, and they appreciate the force-multiplier effect of working together. It bears repeating for students of world affairs today what you distinguished Members appreciate: politics ends at the water’s edge.

The preeminent responsibility of the US Government is to defend and protect the American people and advance their interests and welfare domestically and abroad. Fulfilling this responsibility requires the US to engage in a broad spectrum of bilateral and multilateral relationships, international organizations, and legal agreements and treaties. However, these devices are not ends, but mere means, for securing the safety, prosperity, and opportunities of the American people. Their capacity to deliver as designed depends upon willing and able member states to steward them well and to send skilled delegates meeting together true to the rules-based international order.

The title of today's hearing is "US Standing in International Organizations". When we stand in international organizations, our goal is to stand with others to promote the ideals of the United Nations, and to stand out as an example to others in pursuit of shared interests through international cooperation. Otherwise, we risk merely sitting, uncritically, expecting it to be interpreted as some sort of diplomatic goodwill. If the US is seen as indulging international bureaucrats, we rediscover, yet again, that the chess pieces do not move themselves.

Progress at international organizations, which are membership bodies by, for, and of their member states, requires responsible stewardship of the organizations by their members. In the frequent absence of this, the managers and staff have grown their footprints akin to gatekeepers and moral guardians over the member states, instead of the other way around. However, any such questions should come from each member state: #1 Does this international organization work? And #2 Does it work for us and our shared interests?

Today, our look at US standing in international organizations should not merely give itself over to foreign judgments on the United States. I see today's hearing to raise with distinguished Members of this Committee that our standing in international organizations is only as good as our diplomatic investment in the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed by Team USA in current times.

Our talent bench has become thin over time, and this has coincided with a much-bemoaned ineffectiveness of some organizations. And in these same organizations our adversaries have supersized their efforts not only to best us on issues, but to hijack the whole platform. Authoritarian encroachments on international organizations' programs, agendas, and images are designed to usurp the idealism of international cooperation - to internationally regressive, damaging ends. And they are well underway. Attentive stewardship by our allies and us of international organizations, in and of themselves instruments of power, is needed to safeguard the interests of the American public and the liberal international rules-based order.

Americans historically have been allergic to participating in membership international organizations, distrusting what they perceived as constraints on American sovereignty contrived on old world models about which George Washington warned.

They footnoted enigmatically their WWI sacrifices by rejecting President Wilson's League of Nations. After defending freedom in WWII, turning inward again was a proven "no go." And allies agreed that avoiding any future global scourge required more than state power. It required the power of example among all states, example on how to develop and live in peace. So, an Organization was established by the wartime coalition dubbed the United Nations.

In time, the seismic effects of post-USSR geopolitical tectonics moved Washington to probe: could a thawed-out UN Organization now advance American interests for a new world order, a stronger liberal international rules-based order strengthened by a growing number of free-market democracies in the room?

That optimism was both validated and challenged in recent years, to include recent realization that repressive regimes' participation in liberal international organizations was insufficient to deliver them from their base tendencies. Now these tendencies include perverting international organizations in their own image. The launch last week at the UN of a China-led caucus with authoritarian fellow travelers is but the latest assault on the idealism that the broader membership brings to their ponderous workload. Perhaps President Biden's "Summit of Democracy" to quell this tide might consider taking place on UN premises this year.

The previous Administration Trump team acted in typical Republican fashion: skeptical of international organizations and the potential threats to national sovereignty, but willing to engage when it served American interests. Security Council successes sanctioning North Korea were significant, carrying China's support. But, given the CCP's suddenly obvious aggressions, the US must rise above its instincts as a reluctant internationalist – but it must not revert to an indulgent internationalist, that is, indulging the UN that reform is no longer as critical in 2021 as it was in 2020.

Regrettably from where I sit, the US appears to be abandoning leverage developed by the previous Administration pressuring for more accountability from the likes of the Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization. An elaborate reform proposal shared widely by the US with allies was ignored by WHO managers, and other openings for maintaining US participation were unrequited.

Whether reform is only possible if the US is a member was disproven over many years by each the Human Rights Council and WHO. We shall see what the Administration plans, none of which has been announced.

Other ambitious projects, such as resuming as a party to the Joint Comprehensive Program of Action (Iran) have missed their trains recently, as well. The US is serving as President of the Security Council this month which would have provided every opportunity to advance in the most serious fashion the Administration's plan. Instead of commandeering the podium there, Vice President Harris opted to make her premier at the UN via the Commission on the Status of Women for what amounted to little more than a pep talk and a victory lap. March was a missed opportunity for a Nikki Haley moment in Turtle Bay – one of focusing on accountability in UN affairs – instead of deleveraging hard-earned momentum.

My years reaffirm that every nation-state has a right to play, but not all states play fair. Most respect the UN's purposes for peace and security, economic and social development, and human rights. Others want UN blessings for strong governance (predictably authoritarian), for state security (peacefulness not a requirement), and for ambitious development (regardless of sustainability). All along the way they expense human rights as a cost of goods sold.

The UN and other international organizations are command posts for strengthening the post WW-II rules based liberal international order. But in recent years the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has surmised them as “supersized World Trade Organization” opportunities: ripe for Beijing's plundering, hijacking, and reprogramming to its authoritarian, hegemonic ambitions. Whether here or at the World Health Organization or the UN Human Rights Council, Beijing has remained Beijing - the rest of us suffer.

Without freedom-defending states prioritizing their stewardship of international organizations, the sun will set on them; and out of the shadows comes an unleashed “wolf warrior diplomacy” meant to cower or devour anything on its way to global hegemony.

Only in recent years has China decided to grow into its UN skin. Its stated aversion to UN intervention of most any type is based on its desire to be left unaccountable for abuses and practices at odds with UN norms and principles. But satisfied that it had mastered opportunities from the WTO, China then surmised that had net more to gain from growing its presence in UN workaday considerations and influence within the UN's program of work. In doing so, it has had to double down in opposite to any form of intervention in its or others' internal affairs forsaking applicable UN norms to the contrary.

No government likes criticism, but the Chinese government has a disturbing track record of not just rejecting criticism but threatening the experts and offices across the UN human rights system responsible for bringing human rights violations to light, according to colleagues at Human Rights Watch. These more personal and public attacks, coupled with patently hypocritical calls for accountability, may signal a darker turn. Human Rights Council members are expected to “uphold the highest standards” of human rights, but China appears to be sinking to the lowest.

China is now opting for open hostility: “wolf warrior diplomacy” versus US Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield’s self-styled “gumbo diplomacy”. Unless we strengthen our pot, is there any question who will be eating whose lunch in the UN cafeteria?

The reality is that on all the key issues China and the United States are at vastly different places, and the most constructive thing is to recognize that. In good form, the Biden Administration has broadly intimated it would continue a tough-on-CCP stance having diagnosed China’s predatory practices for itself.

So, the Administration is keeping in place a newly established State Department Office of UN Integrity located within the Bureau of International Organization Affairs. It seeks to strengthen our engagement with the UN Organization in ways to defend and bolster its principled activities for peace and security, development, and human rights.

According to Secretary of State Blinken, the relationship would be “competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.” Competitive, collaborative; adversarial. Our multi-lateral diplomats need these multi-abilities now.

Alarming, America’s talent bench for utilizing and improving international organizations has never been thinner. It needs emergency recruitment, training, and 24/7 policies – no longer for 1945 but for 2021. Job One: to organize like-minded states to face-down the CCP’s grab at the world order’s dashboards and passwords. Otherwise, the platforms of collective arrangements to advance international cooperation will be subverted to serve coercion, and alarmingly fast, by the CCP: assuming the guise of the United Nations Charter.

Although over that timeframe the cyberworld has evolved with entirely new architectures for human activity unconstrained by geography, American investment to improve its participation in the original world wide web, the United Nations and related machinery, pre-dates black and white television. State Department culture regard multilateral affairs officers like a table of veterinarians at an American Medical Association banquet. Their skill set is wrongly considered mongrel and a nuisance to the bilateral-relationship neighborhoods. The stakes within international organizations demand now a fast-tracked, hybridized skill set recognized and prized with career development incentives.

Increasing multi-lateral character of our diplomacy demands of us stronger capacity within international organizations. Particularly, the growth of “problems without passports” in the world has swelled the agenda of multilateral bodies, requires of Team USA ever more multi-tasking in multilateral matters.

Further, there has been a swell at the threshold of significant non-state actors such as influential oligarchs, civil society associations, online marketing channels, social and business entrepreneurs, and just about anyone with a social media account. Nevertheless, international organizations have resisted these entrants, often not gracefully. This will soon force a point of reckoning on political stages unless our diplomacy can factor more of humankind into the meeting rooms – or prepare new types of meeting formats in our digital future.

FACT: Our best game against eroding effectiveness in international platforms is a strong team on the field guided by a dedicated and sophisticated HQ leadership – all having each other’s backs. Alternatively, any game plan merely to “take down” opponents is woeful; and given the other teams’ impressive benches, is alarmingly too late.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies among others has been sounding the alarm that the United States needs to up its game in the multilateral system <https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/472489-to-compete-and-win-the-us-needs-to-get-into-the-game> . My colleague there Dan Runde writes that "great power competition" has come and that the US needs to protect the commanding heights of the multilateral system as well as get much more active in the competitive elections for top leadership posts especially for leadership posts. CSIS will release a major study on this issue later this year.

Another chore for the Administration is the selection of the UN Secretary-General to occur by the end of 2020. There should be a publicized a field of candidates - with the expectation that a woman candidate might go the distance as had been hoped previously. I have been advising Telos Governance Advisors on its efforts to provide greater transparency on the selection process that has been historically a closed-door matter. A key test for Secretariat leadership will come in meeting the new moment of advancing authoritarianism. The Secretary-General’s stated role is Chief Administrative Officer. The Organization will need such resilience to stem Russia’s tactic to degrade and erode the liberal principles of human rights in the UN’s DNA. It will need even stronger resolve to counter China’s game plan to superimpose its interests over those of the UN Charter and eventually replace the spirit of openness with one of jealous authority.

International Organizations are more than institutions. They house the spirit for international cooperation, and for the most part the US has found them available for promoting US values in force-multiplying ways. When well-understood and thoughtfully approached, they enable us to lead by the example of our power and the power of our example.

A colleague writes that the US cannot eliminate every bad actor, right every wrong, or correct every perceived injustice in the world. That is impossible. But the US has contributed to building a world order in which the rule of law, the integrity of national borders, democratic capitalism, freedom of the seas, democratic self-government, human rights, and international trade prevail, not as guaranteed outcomes, but as opportunities. By standing, and not sitting, at the United Nations Organization and elsewhere, the US must not only continue contributing to the liberal world order, but it must also rise immediately and champion others to defend it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.