

Donald Trump calls for United Nations reform, but with more restrained tones

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United Nations: President Donald Trump used his United Nations debut on Monday to prod the international organisation to cut its bloated bureaucracy and fulfill its mission. But he pledged U.S. support for the world body he had excoriated as a candidate, and his criticisms were more restrained than in years past.

US President Donald Trump calls for UN reform.

"In recent years, the United Nations has not reached its full potential due to bureaucracy and mismanagement," Trump said. "We are not seeing the results in line with this investment."

The president urged the U.N. to focus "more on people and less on bureaucracy" and to change "business as usual and not be beholden to ways of the past which were not working." He also suggested the U.S. was paying more than its fair share to keep the New York-based world body operational.

The short remarks at a forum on U.N. reforms were a precursor to Tuesday's main event, when Trump will address the U.N. General Assembly for the first time, a speech nervously awaited by world leaders concerned about what the president's "America first" vision means for the future of the world body.

Trump riffed on his campaign slogan when asked to preview his central message to the General Assembly, saying: "I think the main message is 'make the United Nations great' - not 'again.' 'Make the United Nations great.'"

"Such tremendous potential, and I think we'll be able to do this," he added.

But even as the president chastised the U.N., he pledged that the United States would be "be partners in your work" to make the organisation a more effective force for peace across the globe.

He praised the U.N.'s early steps toward reform and made no threats to withdraw U.S. support. The president's more measured tone stood in sharp contrast to the approach he took at NATO's new Brussels headquarters in May, when he scolded member nations for not paying enough and refused to explicitly back its mutual defense pact.

While running for office, Trump had labeled the U.N. as weak and incompetent, and not a friend of either the United States or Israel. But he has softened his message since taking office, telling ambassadors at a White House meeting in April that the U.N. has "tremendous potential."

Trump more recently has praised a pair of unanimous U.N. Security Council votes to tighten sanctions on North Korea over its continued nuclear weapons and ballistic missile tests.

The annual gathering of world leaders opens amid serious concerns about Trump's priorities. For many world leaders, it will be their first chance to take the measure of the president in person.

The president on Monday praised U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who said he shared Trump's vision for a less-wasteful U.N. that will "live up to its full potential." The U.S. has asked member nations to sign a declaration on U.N. reforms, and more than 120 have done so.

True to form, the president also managed to work into his speech a reference to the Trump-branded apartment tower

across First Avenue from the U.N.

His speech began a busy week of diplomacy for Trump, who is scheduled to meet separately with more than a dozen world leaders along the sidelines of the U.N. In his first bilateral meeting, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump declared that they "are giving it an absolute go" on Middle East peace talks.

Trump is to meet with the head of the Palestinian Authority later in the week, but the White House has played down prospects for a breakthrough.

U.S. national security adviser H.R. McMaster said "Iran's destabilising behavior" would be a major focus of those discussions. While seated next to Netanyahu, a vociferous critic of the Iran nuclear deal, Trump declared "you'll see very soon" when asked if the U.S. would stay in the agreement. Netanyahu, for his part, labeled it "a terrible nuclear deal."

Trump and Netanyahu also discussed Iran's "malign activities" in the Middle East and spoke about the need to prevent Iran from establishing any deep roots or organizing in Syria, according to a readout provided by Brian Hook of the State Department.

The threat posed by North Korea was expected to dominate the week's proceedings. Though Chinese President Xi Jinping did not travel to New York, he and Trump spoke by phone about the need to use a recent U.N. Security Council resolution to pressure North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

Trump arrived at the U.N. a few months after announcing that he was withdrawing the U.S. from an international climate agreement - negotiated during the Obama administration and signed by nearly 200 countries - and amid speculation that he might be softening his position.

But Gary Cohn, one of Trump's top economic advisers, reiterated during a meeting with energy ministers that Trump will proceed with the withdrawal plan unless terms more favorable to the U.S. can be negotiated, said a senior White House official. The official insisted on anonymity to discuss details of a private meeting.

Major European powers that support the pact have said it cannot be renegotiated. Trump's meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron included discussion of the agreement, with the U.S. president insisting the original pact was not fair to the United States - though he said he shared the goals of wanting clean air and water.

During his discussion with Macron, Trump also mused about ordering up a military parade down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington to rival the one he witnessed in Paris on Bastille Day.

Trump planned to have dinner later on Monday with Latin American leaders.

The United States is the largest contributor to the U.N. budget, reflecting its position as the world's largest economy. It pays 25 percent of the U.N.'s regular operating budget and over 28 percent of the separate peacekeeping budget - a level of spending that Trump has complained is unfair. The U.S. has yet to make its payment this year, leading some in the U.N. to be fearful that it may slash its contribution.

- AP