

## Trump's bullying and bluster on Jerusalem is bad news for the UN

US hard-power diplomacy over Israel will end up being an expensive clash if Washington cuts its funding to the UN

*[Patrick Wintour](#) Diplomatic editor*

*Thu 21 Dec '17 13.49 EST*

“Strong, sovereign nations let diverse countries with different values, different cultures and different dreams not just coexist but work side by side on the basis of mutual respect,” [Donald Trump](#) said in his first speech to the UN general assembly, in September, drawing sighs of relief.

Three months later, those same diverse nations were warned by the US president’s UN ambassador, Nikki Haley, that she would take their names if they failed at the UN to support the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem and recognise the city as the capital of [Israel](#). The era of mutual respect was short-lived.

Haley’s implicit threat was that countries that defied the US president would face consequences. A few hours later, Trump made explicit what is implicit in [America First diplomacy](#). If the UN voted against the US, he forecast that the US would “save a lot”.

“We don’t care. But this isn’t like it used to be where they could vote against you and then you pay them hundreds of millions of dollars. We’re not going to be taken advantage of any longer,” Trump said.

If soft power, in the words of Joseph Nye, “is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion,” then Trump has become the ultimate exponent of hard-power diplomacy.

It is partly because he is a product of a mindset that has long seen the UN as a hotbed of anti-Americanism, corruption and waste, best set out in the Fox News correspondent Eric Shawn’s book *The UN Exposed*. In the words of John Bolton, the US ambassador to the UN in the George W Bush administration, the UN has always represented “a target-rich environment” – especially due to its perceived anti-Israel bias.

It can also be argued that Trump’s bullying only put in lights a constant feature of hard-power diplomacy at the UN. It is what David Hannay, the former UK ambassador to the UN, describes as “the trepidation index”, the calculus of the consequences that come with voting against a big power. Every permanent member of the security council, including the UK, hopes to be high on that index. A repeated resort to the veto by a permanent security council member – as has been the case with Russia over Syria – is normally a sign that a country’s diplomacy is misfiring.

But there has been something qualitatively different about the US treatment of fellow member states over Jerusalem. The line of attack was so populist, so redolent of a protection racket, that it

can only be aimed at a domestic audience rather than an external one. As countless diplomats have warned in the past 24 hours, it will also be counter-productive, only deepening US isolation.

Despite the warnings, the UN general assembly voted by a huge majority to reject Trump's [unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital](#) on Thursday, with Canada reportedly switching from supporting the US to abstaining in protest at the attempt to strong-arm states.

Even before the vote, Bolivia's UN ambassador, Sacha Llorenty, advised Haley that the first name she should write down in her black book was Bolivia. For many countries, especially in the Middle East and Latin America, it will be a badge of honour to have defied a super power.

Countries normally close to the US, such as Egypt, France and Saudi Arabia, had to take a discreet step away. They had their own courts of public opinion. When the roll call was taken, only nine countries – most with populations counted in the tens of thousands – backed the superpower. Haley's notebook was filled with the names of 128 countries that had ignored her threats.

Yet this could turn into an expensive symbolic clash for the UN as a whole. In 2016, the US remained the largest donor to the [United Nations](#), contributing more than \$10bn (£7.5bn) – roughly one-fifth of its collective budget. Of this, \$6bn was voluntary and \$4bn assessed. The US gives \$2.4bn to UN peacekeeping operations alone.

In addition, according to figures from the US government's aid agency, USAid, in 2016 the US provided \$13bn in economic and military assistance to countries in sub-Saharan Africa and \$1.6bn to states in east Asia and Oceania.

It provided \$13bn to countries in the Middle East and north Africa, \$6.7bn to countries in south and central Asia, \$1.5bn to states in Europe and Eurasia and \$2.2bn to western hemisphere countries, according to USAid.

The danger is that Trump's row could spiral out of control, causing long-term damage to the UN and to the reform programme of the secretary general, António Guterres. The US has already pulled out of Unesco, and this week the UN high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, announced he was not seeking a second term, saying he would not bend the knee to the US.

Still worse, Trump's bullying of the UN may obscure the seriousness of the issue at hand. Moving the US embassy to Jerusalem is not some real-estate decision. Recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel challenges the peace process, discomforts Saudi Arabia, America's closest ally in the Middle East, and sets the US apart from its closest European allies, who have advocated a two-state solution for 40 years.

No amount of bluster can hide this fundamental error, or the fact that Thursday's vote does nothing in the real world, save underline America's self-imposed isolation.