Trump meeting with UN chief: Handshake or showdown?

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By George Russell

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When United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres meets with U.S. legislators and President Donald Trump this week, one of the big questions will be whether he can guarantee the sweeping U.N. reforms promised last year — as “absolutely essential” protection from the  [anticipated hostility of the Trump Administration](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/08/08/un-launches-blitz-reform-campaign-as-absolutely-essential-protection-against-trump-administration.html) [protection-](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/08/08/un-launches-blitz-reform-campaign-as-absolutely-essential-protection-against-trump-administration.html)will truly get off the ground as promised.

An additional question the Secretary General may have to answer from U.S. skeptics:  how much additional money for the U.N. is the reform really going to cost? So far, the U.N. isn’t saying, except to assert any money involved will be “voluntary”—meaning donors like the U.S. will not be automatically on the hook for it.

The atmospherics, not to mention the timing, of Guterres’ Washington foray could be vitally important for the sprawling and ill-focused institution he has promised to streamline, decentralize and overhaul, and for its relationship to the new team Trump has now selected to bring a more assertively conservative cast to the administration’s foreign policy.

As a Western diplomat told Fox News, when the reform was announced last June “the Secretary General needed to keep the U.S. in the tent. Now he needs to show results.“

How well Guterres’ meetings will go is anybody’s guess.  They are sure to cover a wide range of topics, and the U.N. has plenty of supporters as well as critics on Capitol Hill, which Guterres will visit first on Thursday.

But at the White House the next day he is likely to face harder-nosed skeptics, led by President Trump himself, as well as newly appointed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton. Both are markedly more conservative than their predecessors, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster.

Bolton, in particular, a onetime U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. who knows its weaknesses intimately, has   often spoken unflatteringly of the U.N.’s bloat and inefficiency, and has said he would like to put as much U.S. funding for the institution as possible on a voluntary basis, rather than in the form of  mandatory dues.

Atop that, Guterres has personally staked out positions in the past year that run counter to recent administration policy, and which might not improve his White House reception.

These range from opposition to the movement of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, to criticism of Trump’s announced decision to leave the Paris Climate Accord on greenhouse gases, to vocal concerns about the Administration’s rejection of the Obama-era nuclear deal with Iran.

“I think the Secretary General and his senior officials are concerned about the new U.S. leadership and what it means,” observes Brett Schaefer, an expert on the U.N. at the conservative Heritage Foundation. “This is an effort to build bridges.”

At the same time, the U.N. is revealing major signs of financial strain and overstretch around some of its most ambitious--and expensive-- missions and goals, in part due of Trump Administration pressure.

The U.N.’s multiple peacekeeping budgets are currently under discussion in U.N. committees, and further cuts are expected after a more than $500 million budget reduction last year. A major push for the cutbacks comes from U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley, who in March declared that Washington “will not pay more than 25 percent” of the overall peacekeeping budget, down from a mandated 28.43 percent this year.

At the same time, the U.N. is still under critical fire for continuing cases of sexual exploitation and abuse, both in its peacekeeping operations and elsewhere. U.N. investigators at Guterres’ behest recently reopened an investigation against a top official at UNAIDS, the U.N. agency that combats HIV/AIDS, who was earlier cleared of accusations of sexual harassment and assault, and subsequently retired.

Some of the other major causes Guterres has been espousing are also running aground. As he begins his Capitol Hill rounds, the latest talks on implementing the hyper-ambitious Paris Climate Accord — from which Trump formally declared the U.S. intention to withdraw last August — are expected to end in a fizzle.

The major stumbling block is a demand for tens of billions of dollars in climate financing for developing nations, at a time when wealthy nations are increasingly feeling an economic pinch, sometimes exacerbated by their own anti-carbon policies.

An emergency round of talks has been scheduled for December to try to deal with the impasse, prior to a planned climate summit in 2019 under Guterres’ auspices at the U.N.’s headquarters.

 Guterres has been vocal in decrying the Trump Administration’s announced intention to withdraw from the pact—the full process takes four years from the announcement--and he has urged other signatories to “unite even stronger and stay the course.”

Then there are the world’s dire humanitarian emergences, for which the U.N. remains the most important focal point for relief. This year’s U.N. humanitarian aid appeal asks the world to come up with some $25.3 billion, or $1.8 billion more than last year. The appeal is currently about 26 percent funded. The U.S. government, traditionally the world’s largest humanitarian donor, has so far contributed $1.2 billion, more than anyone else.

How well Guterres does in shoring up his battered causes may well depend on how he sells the idea that the U.N. can continue to deal with all of its responsibilities efficiently and effectively—something that Guterres himself admitted candidly, in announcing his reform initiative, it had been woefully inadequate at doing.

So far, however, the way he is going about it may be drawing as much concern as support.

“The effort has been incredibly disjointed,” one Western diplomat told Fox News. “This doesn’t feel much different than in previous years when we had reform. We are all a little bit confused about what to do.”

Said a U.S. official:  “We are going to have to untangle what the reform means.”

Simplifying and straightening out the U.N.’s byzantine bureaucracy, and bringing more of its top-down authority closer to the people it is supposedly trying to serve “in an accountable manner,” was the major impetus behind the reform as Guterres announced it last June.

As a U.N. spokesperson put it to Fox News, “In all areas, the proposed restructuring will reduce areas of overlap that currently exist and establish a much clearer division of responsibilities between the departments at Headquarters.

In its simplest terms, this entails breaking apart and reorganizing the U.N.’s central Department of Management, which sets administrative policy for Guterres’ Secretariat, and U.N. Department of Field Support, which supports peacekeeping and special political missions outside headquarters. In fact, however, says the U.N. spokesperson, “both departments currently perform similar tasks, but for different entities. “

The reformed U.N. will supposedly once again separate U.N. policy-making into a reformed “Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance,” while many operational functions, whether related to peacekeeping or not, would be the responsibility of a new “Department of Operational Support.”

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Not much of that clarity, however, is evident in a mind-deadening, 252-page document that lays out the nitty-gritty elements of the bureaucratic changes in bewildering detail, mostly in glutinous prose.

“We need a big vision of what the reform is to achieve,” said a Western diplomat. “But this [document] has gone straight down into the smallest detail.”

Notes Heritage’s Schaefer: “they seem to be reorganizing boxes rather than streamlining the organization.”

Amid the fine tuning, some of those poring over the document, the diplomat added, feel “there are huge gaps in the architecture” that still need to be addressed. “I don’t think we can tell at this stage what will be the outcome.”

The same can be said about the price tag. Haley, among others, haled the fact that budget cutting efforts took some $285 million, or roughly 5 percent, out of the U.N.’s budget last December.

Guterres’ reform document says nothing about dollars and cents, but declares that the sweeping reorganization, despite its ostensible removal of  much overlap and duplication, will be “post-neutral,” meaning it will not cut any jobs, as mandated in a U.N. resolution endorsing the reform.

In fact, at a minimum, the cost of the “post-neutral” jobs is bound to rise. In UN-speak, as the U.N. spokesperson puts it: “the post neutrality of the restructuring exercise does not mean that implementation of the reforms can be seamlessly done within existing resources.”

“As in any major change management initiative, additional resources will be required for change management and to align existing capacities with new functions, including through training.”

But not to worry, “these requirements are, by their nature, not of a continuing nature.” Hence Guterres made no additional budget request for them, and “intends to meet them through voluntary contributions as required.”

One possible translation: The expenses are potentially open-ended; may stretch over a very substantial period of time; and may even have to be repeated if the “alignment of existing capacities with new functions” doesn’t work well the first time. Moreover, they may be voluntary in name only if, at the end, the entire reform effort then demands them.

“The fact that they keep insisting the reform is post-neutral should raise alarm bells,” says Heritage’s Schaefer. “This has the potential to reverse the budget-reduction accomplishments of Ambassador Haley, specifically the $285 million reduction  she helped engineer this past December.”

 At least one Western diplomat was less concerned about that: “It has always been known that he was going to ask for more money. Most people are willing if the results are there.”

But another key area that is so far glossed over  is how those results are actually going to be monitored and how will those responsible be judged for their actions in the new, decentralized organization.

This is intended, according to Guterres’ massive report, to be the responsibility of a new Business Transformation and Accountability Division, which the report says is “integral to the Secretary General’s vision of a transformation… based on sound management principles, to make the United Nations more nimble, effective, efficient, transparent and accountable.”

When it comes to putting this into practice, however, the report says only that “procedures for monitoring and oversight of the authority delegated as well as criteria for withdrawal of the delegated authority and other corrective actions will be developed.”

In other words, the standards for holding anyone to account do not yet exist.

Queried further about the issue, the U.N. spokesperson did little to dispel the murk in telling Fox News that “In the proposed structure, the Business Transformation and Accountability Division will help establish these [common] standards and support entities that lack a self-evaluation function.”

Perhaps more clarity will emerge next month, after Guterres completes his Washington visits and tough, line-at-a-time readings of the  management reform document start up in  the U.N.’s watchdog budget advisory committee.

A U.S. official, self-described as “cautiously optimistic,” told Fox News “there is still a lot to be discussed.”

But maybe, as the same Western  diplomat who expressed less concern at any U.N. cost increases speculated, what will be discovered is that “what [Guterres]  is doing is making it up as he goes along.”