UN launches blitz reform campaign as 'absolutely essential' protection against Trump Administration

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United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres is on a blitz campaign to streamline the U.N.’s underperforming bureaucracy, give more authority to its outlying branches, and greatly expand his ability to shuffle money around in the U.N.’s regular biennial budget (just part of its total cost)—all in the next 18 months.

On paper, at least, it amounts to perhaps the most ambitious effort at U.N. reform in 20 years, before the world organization floundered into the vast Oil-for-Food scandal, and a subsequent  array of administrative fiascos and largely failed reform attempts  under Guterres’ predecessor, Ban Ki-moon.

Guterres’ chief motivation, though he won’t say so explicitly, is the Trump Administration.

Instead, Guterres is arguing to U.N. member states what he told a town hall meeting of U.N. staffers in late July:  that his version of reform  is “an absolutely essential instrument for the protection of the U.N.”  amid increasing international skepticism about the organization’s efficiency, effectiveness, and even its reason for existence—all of which also happens to be true.

But as he coyly told the staffers:  “When we see that these negative ideas are penetrating at some times, very high levels, at government levels—and I don’t need to explain what this means in relation to the neighborhood--it is very clear is that one thing we must do is project to the outside the idea that we are taking seriously this kind of criticism, and are doing our best to address it.”

Draft proposals for a hard-nosed Trump Administration look at all of its U.N. spending [that leaked last January have never resurfaced](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/01/27/trumps-hard-nosed-executive-order-asks-what-u-n-money-is-going-for-and-is-it-worth-it.html) officially --but U.N. bloat is under a gimlet eye in Washington, and the U.N.’s multibillion-dollar peacekeeping budget has already taken a sharp haircut on the watch of U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley, with more reductions likely soon.

For its part, Haley’s U.N. mission declined to comment at all to Fox News on the Guterres reform plan.

But does Guterres truly mean what he says? And can he deliver?

One of the ironies unearthed in  Guterres’ reform efforts is that an internal survey of the U.N.’s biggest failings largely validates what its harshest critics have long said.

Among the failings he itemized to staffers:  “slow, unresponsive service delivery”, a “weak performance management culture”, a “trust deficit” with member states and with staff, “ineffective implementation of mandates”, and “lack of transparency and accountability.”

Yet even as he began to lobby with member states about  the urgent necessity  of change, the Secretary General publicly assured U.N. workers around the world that, peacekeeping aside, his reform efforts  will not  cut total jobs or reduce spending in the Secretariat’s ’s regular budget—currently $5.4 billion—which, in turn, is only about half of the Secretariat’s actual cost.

(The allotted U.S. share of the regular total is 22 per cent, or about $1.2 billion—which is, once again, only a small fraction of overall U.S. spending on the U.N.’s bewildering global array of organizations. )

That rhetoric may go  down well not only with U.N. staffers but with the majority of developing countries that contribute not that much to U.N. coffers but determinedly see the organization as a font for development largesse and “capacity building,” as well as influential international jobs. They have bitterly opposed efforts at U.N. streamlining in the past, and may well do so now.

On the other hand, financially overstretched Western nations that foot much of the bills the U.S. does not pay, while publicly deploring the Trump Administration’s tough demands for U.N. spending cut,s are also experiencing acute budget strains and donor fatigue.

At a minimum they want to see the world organization sharply refocused on truly helping the world’s poorest.

But their own views on reform may not make those fearful U.N. staffers happy.

As a Western diplomat told Fox News, “The U.N. has a lot of people doing administrative functions, they are paid huge amounts of money and have massive perks. But they are doing process work. Most people, including many foreign ministries, have moved services to offshore hubs.”

The result for Guterres’s ostensible reform so far, is thus a rhetorical high-wire act, where the  Western diplomat observes, “there’s a lot of talk about efficiency and fitness for purpose. What he is not saying is what he will do with the money saved”—if there is any.

Guterres gave a skeletal Power Point indication of his reform plans at a closed-door meeting with  U.N. member states on July 27, a day after he offered his no-job-cuts assurances to U.N. staffers at an internal town hall meeting.

Long on management buzz words (“a paradigm shift for the U.N. Secretariat”) and not very informative concept-diagrams, the proposals boil down to a few major initiatives:

·         What Guterres told staffers would be a “massive decentralization” of  authority from U.N. headquarters to a variety of field offices, regional commission headquarters and other U.N. sites around the world, where roughly two-thirds of the U.N. Secretariat’s staffers work. This could  take place, Guterres said, under his current authority, without further member state approval.

·         A major reshuffling of U.N. bureaucratic roles between its internal Department of Field Support (DFS) which currently supports peacekeeping, and its Department of Management. This would extend DFS support to U.N. functions beyond peacekeeping, reduce duplication of services, and ostensibly improve execution and oversight  of U.N. strategy and policy in the Management Department .

·         Improved staff performance management and greater mobility to match the decentralized model.

·         Replacement of the U.N.’s confusing and complicated biennial budgeting system for a process of annual budgets and fewer financial performance reports.

·         Reduced U.N. funding pigeonholes in the budget, from 36 to six, which would greatly expand the Secretary General’s ability to juggle resources against demands.

·         Expanded use of  technology changes, including the U.N.’s expensive and much delayed computerized management system Umoja, [to improve its $17.6 billion procurement business](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/12/14/is-costly-un-computer-mega-project-turning-around.html) and consolidate  global service hubs.

·         An extremely undefined increase in U.N. “transparency” and “accountability,” neither of which has been in great evidence in the past, to ensure that poor U.N. performance, fraud and corruption to not flourish in the new decentralized system, and that U.N. member states can clearly see the results.

According to his own timetable, Guterres hopes to get a vote of confidence in his overall strategic plan, the “proof of concept,”  from U.N. member states by the end of the year. They he expects to  spend a full year working out details, and have the entire reform system in place by January 1, 2019.

Just how he will do this, and whether the Secretary General will even succeed in getting approval for those ambitions,  is still an open question.

 “I have not been overly impressed by how fast he has come off the starting blocks,  observes Thomas Weiss,  a distinguished expert on U.N. organization and governance, and a staunch but critical supporter of the organization.

“He’s taken eight or nine months to arrive at his recent positions, and it’s not quite clear what his next steps are,” he added.

Weiss also notes  that when Guterres first took office, he had the opportunity to make a complete administrative sweep of top officials, but instead extended the terms of most of them. “I think it would have helped to fire more of them.”

This does not bode well for overcoming institutional inertia, he said.

Nonetheless, Weiss also adds that Guterres has proposed “doing some things that desperately need to be done,” while warning that “they are only announced; nothing has happened.”

Aside from a slow start, Guterres can also expect growing opposition from member states that have gotten used to micro-managing internal U.N.  affairs, and helping to produce the current bureaucratic labyrinth.

U.N. budgetary authority is zealously guarded by member states, even if they don’t put up the money themselves. Simplification of the budget system amounts in many cases to reduced bargaining leverage.

While Guterres claims great latitude in decentralizing U.N. authority, that claim is greeted with skepticism by some influential U.N. member states. “There is a slightly different interpretation of what he can do on his own versus what member states think he can do,” observed a Western diplomat, without citing the actual differences.

When it comes to reorganizing and reshaping budget lines, and decentralizing expensive decision-making, the opposition is likely to stiffen further, especially with Guterres highly undefined promises of greater transparency and accountability as the secret sauce that supposedly binds all such changes together. “Neither him nor us know exactly what that means,” says a Western diplomat.

Indeed, transparency and accountability, along with staggering inefficiency, have been glaring weaknesses of the U.N. for decades, while Guterres’s ideas  so far amount to a stronger emphasis on performance management reviews for senior executives and technological tweaks such as “scorecards and dashboards.”

The same goes for near-invisible past U.N. concerns with fraud, [which Guterres also promises](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/07/12/fraud-what-fraud-watchdogs-find-un-in-state-near-denial-about-internal-corruption.html) to help fix with “strengthened investigation capacity” and “a dedicated monitoring, quality assurance and accountability mechanism” in his newly renovated Department of Management Strategy and Policy.

The departmental reshuffle, in the view of one Western diplomat, may also be a mistake: “You need an awful lot of political capital to start smashing departments together.”  Moreover: “It will not make any difference if people don’t learn to work together.”

At a deeper level, observes Brett Schaefer, an expert on U.N. finance and reform at the conservative Heritage Foundation, there is no effort in the reform program to look, for example, “at the U.N.’s more than 9,000 mandates to see if all of them are necessary and relevant today.”

“He talks about the U.N.’s fragmented management style, but he talks more about moving boxes around U.N. diagrams,” Schaeffer said. “Decentralization complicates fragmentation substantially.”

Any substantial U.N. reform, Schaeffer says, “is going to have to look at actual activities, and whether they are worth continuing.”

What the reform campaign shows so far is that “he has clearly gotten the message fro the U.S. that there is vast dissatisfaction at the way the U.N. is working.”

For the rest, he says, “wait and see.”