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Empty Chair Diplomacy 2.0 at the United Nations



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The game of musical chairs is popular with children. If the child's game is based on successfully sitting on a chair when the music stops, recent diplomacy at the U.N. has been focused on empty chairs.

Empty chair diplomacy goes back to French President Charles de Gaulle when the French boycotted European institutions in July 1965. The French leader's boycott showed he favored European integration rather than increased power to European institutions. It reflected de Gaulle's disdain for supranational organizations.

Empty chair diplomacy re-appeared at the recent annual meeting of the United Nations. Four out of five leaders of the permanent member states of the U.N. Security Council

(UNSC) decided, albeit for different reasons, not to attend. And, to show his frustration at slow progress to tackle climate change, the U.N. Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, did not invite major polluters to a climate mini-summit.

While these two instances cannot be called “Empty Chair Crises,” questions should be raised about the importance of the empty chairs at the United Nations: on the one hand the effectiveness of the Security Council, the U.N.’s primary organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security, and on the other the lack of serious progress in halting global warming through achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The UNSC absentees were: President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation, President Xi Jinping of China, President Emmanuel Macron of France, and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of the United Kingdom. The fifth permanent member of the UNSC, the United States, was represented by President Joe Biden, perhaps only because the U.S. is the U.N.’s host country. (It should also be noted that the leader of the world’s most populous country, India, was not represented at the General Assembly by its leader, Prime Minister Narendra Modi.)

Each of the four no-shows had different reasons for not attending: For China, it reflected a hostile attitude toward Western-dominated institutions. The remarks by Vice-President Han Zheng at the U.N. General Assembly (UNGA) indirectly criticized Washington and by implication aspects of the multilateral system the U.S. has led since 1945. “China opposes hegemonism, power politics, unilateralism and Cold War mentality,” Han said. “A small number of countries have arbitrarily imposed illegal and unilateral sanctions, severely undermining the harmony and stability of international relations. The international community should jointly resist such acts,” he added. Han also called for countries to “oppose politicization and double standards, in particular, the use of human rights and democracy as a political tool to interfere in the affairs of other countries.”

(President Xi last appeared at the General Assembly in 2021. Xi also failed to attend this year’s G20 meeting in New Delhi. Beijing did not send its top diplomat to New York, Foreign Minister Wang Yi.)

For Russia: President Putin would risk arrest on U.S. soil as he is under a warrant by the International Criminal Court for war crimes related to the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia. Like China, Russia also rejects Western institutional hegemony. “The future of the world is being decided today,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared to the General Assembly, and “the question is whether or not it is going to be the kind of order with one hegemon at the head of it.”

The absence of the French and UK leaders was more surprising, and certainly not tied to anti-Western positions. French officials explained that President Macron had scheduling conflicts, hosting King Charles III for a visit and then hosting Pope Francis the weekend after. Sunak was the first prime minister to not attend the U.N. meeting in a decade. As Labour shadow foreign secretary David Lammy said, Sunak's absence "would mark a low ebb of the Conservatives' isolationist foreign policy."

The four absences reflect a voluntary de-emphasizing of the role of the U.N. The annual meeting in New York is supposed to be the highlight of the year's multilateral schedule. Leaders of the world's 193 member states ritually come to New York to meet collectively and bilaterally. Inclusion is part of the process. But not having four-fifths of the leaders of the primary U.N. organ supposed to deal with international peace and security reflects a disdain of the Security Council similar to de Gaulle's actions towards European institutions. The lack of top leaders can only be interpreted as marginalizing the Council and the U.N. in general.

The U.N. head made his own statement about empty chairs when he convoked a climate mini-summit on the sidelines of the General Assembly. Without naming and shaming specific countries, Guterres tried another type of empty chair diplomacy. He showed his frustration by inviting only 34 speakers representing heads of state and business leaders to address the summit ahead of the upcoming COP28 climate summit in December in Dubai. Guterres chose the speakers from those who have taken strong action on climate change, the "frontliners". Not included in the list of speakers were representatives from major polluting countries; China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, India, and Australia.

"This is not a vanity fair," Guterres told *UN News* in relation to the missing leaders. "This is a political body in which governments are represented. What matters is that [countries] are represented by someone that can [rise to] the present moment," he said and added: "So I'm not so worried about who's coming. What I'm worried [about] is making sure the countries that are here ... are ready to assume the commitments necessary to make the Sustainable Development Goals that unfortunately are not moving in the right direction a reality."

If meetings of the Security Council have been blocked because of the Russia/ Ukraine war and permanent members' veto, the Secretary-General's exclusion of several countries from his Climate Ambition Summit around the annual meeting was forced empty chair diplomacy. "Every continent, every region and every country is feeling the heat, but I'm

not sure all leaders are feeling that heat,” he said in his opening remarks to the General Assembly, expressing his frustration and dissatisfaction with very limited climate change progress.

By not inviting several major polluting countries, Guterres used his convening power to show what he hoped was the power of the empty chair. He used his version of empty chair diplomacy to make his point – shaming without naming.

If musical chairs is a children’s game, empty chair diplomacy is played by adults. It is one of the many tools in the diplomatic toolbox. But to what end? The four leaders’ absence was noted, but nothing more. The war in Ukraine continues. Guterres’ shaming will probably have little effect. Global warming continues as well.

All leaders of major powers should have been at the U.N.’s annual meeting and the mini-summit. The empty chairs represent a marginalization of the institution, reflecting diminishing international cooperation. Global politics, after all, is not a children’s game.

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