

FDD Media Call: Previewing the UN General Assembly

September 19, 2025

Featuring Jonathan Schanzer, Richard Goldberg, Craig Singleton, and RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

DOUGHERTY: Greetings, everyone. My name is Joe Dougherty, Senior Director of Communications at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. We're grateful that you've joined us today. I see many familiar names as well as a few new ones. Thank you for joining us as FDD experts preview next week's UN General Assembly. We have four FDD experts on the call today: Jonathan Schanzer is FDD's Executive Director, a Middle East scholar, and a former Treasury Department terrorism finance analyst. He's the author of several books on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and he's made numerous trips to the region and met with senior officials in several countries there since Hamas's incursion on October 7th. Richard Goldberg is an FDD Senior Advisor and former Senior Counselor for the White House National Energy Dominance Council. Former Senior Advisor to the Secretary of the Interior and former Director for Countering Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction for the White House NSC.

Rear Admiral (Retired) Mark Montgomery is an FDD Senior Fellow who served 32 years in the US Navy, retiring as a rear admiral in 2017. His flag officer assignments included Director of Operations J3 at US Pacific Command, Commander of Carrier Strike Group 5 aboard the USS George Washington, and Deputy Director for Plans, Policy and Strategy J5 at US European Command, and from '98 to 2000 he served at the NSC as Director for Transnational Threats. Also, Craig Singleton is an FDD Senior Fellow and Senior Director of FDD's China program. A former US diplomat, Craig worked on critical national security issues related to China, North Korea, and the Indo-Pacific, with particular emphasis on emerging technologies like AI and China's military civil fusion strategy. Both Craig and Mark, by the way, were co-authors of two amicus briefs on the TikTok case and that discussion will certainly pop up today.

Some very quick housekeeping: today's conversation is on the record. We will share the video of today's call soon after the call ends, and we'll share the transcript within 24 hours. We will have a Q&A period after opening remarks. To ask a question, you may type it into the chat feature and I'll be happy to read it aloud, or you may use the raise hand feature and we'll call on you to ask your question directly. We'll begin today's call with Jon with some opening remarks. He'll provide the big picture ahead of the UNGA followed by Richard, then Craig, wrap it up with Mark, and then we'll go to the Q&A. All right, let's begin. Jon, over to you please.

SCHANZER: All right, thanks Joe. Yeah, exciting times. I was going to say here, here actually for me right now is Berlin. I'll be coming back soon and I look forward to watching the festivities. Always exciting. I want to cover two things that are Middle East-related before I hand things over to my colleagues. The first is all the excitement that is brewing about possible recognition for a Palestinian state. This, of course, is garnering a lot of headlines and it is absolutely making waves in Jerusalem, Ramallah and beyond. There is a history that I want to briefly cover. I think it's important for any reporter that plans to cover these proceedings. This is actually an effort that has been underway on the part of the Palestinian Authority since 2005. It was that year that Mahmoud Abbas, the new chairman of the Palestinian Authority, went and met with Lula da Silva, the leader of Brazil.

They discussed back then what would become known as the "Palestine 194" campaign. This was the campaign, a diplomatic campaign to try to achieve recognition for the Palestinians at the UN. They called it 194 because the Palestinians wanted to be the 194th country recognized at the UN. Early on in the campaign, which truly began in 2011, Latin American countries signed on. We saw some upgrades of the Palestinian mission in places like the United Kingdom and in Denmark, -- the UK, of course, taking a significant role right now with Keir Starmer making probably most of the noise on the other side of the Atlantic. There was a moment in 2011 when UNESCO recognized the state of Palestine. This actually triggered the United States to cut funding to UNESCO. We still have laws in the books that we do not allow countries that have not yet been recognized by the UN as member states to join some of these organizations.



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This is something that dates back to the Clinton years and it's something that the US has held to off and on, not consistently. 2012 was the big UNGA vote on November 29th. This was the partition plan and anniversary of November 29th. There were 138 countries that voted yes, the UK and Germany abstained. The UN Security Council was of course needed for admission. For any country that is looking to be recognized as a state, Trump will not likely allow for this. This is something that has been fairly consistent coming out of the Trump administration, so when people have been asking, and I've heard it here in Europe, what is to happen as a result of this vote? I think my answer is probably very little. There will be an international groundswell for the Palestinians. We're certainly seeing it, but it will not lead to much. I think if anything, you may have perhaps it may set the table for three years from now when Trump is gone, but you're not likely to see recognition before then. If you want to put the worst case spin on it, this is virtue signaling for Gaza.

The best case for the Palestinians would be that in three years from now. But all of this is a bit ironic because Hamas and the Palestinian Authority are, of course, bitter political and even military rivals. They've been at war since 2007. It's why the West Bank has been relatively quiet and Gaza has not. So we're watching all of this with great interest, but I think at the end of the day there's very likely to be not much that comes of this practically speaking for the Palestinians or for the international order. The second thing I just want to mention very briefly is the question of Ahmed al-Sharaa, otherwise known as Abu Mohammed al-Julani, the head of the new Syrian regime came in in December of last year and he has spent the last nine months trying to consolidate power. This will be his first major foray into the world stage.

He will apparently have a speech at the UN. This is, of course, highly irregular because nine, 10 months ago, this guy was on the al-Qaeda list. This man was deemed a terrorist by the United States. His organization Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham was deemed a terrorist by the United States, and now he's going to get up in New York wearing a suit and he is going to be giving a speech about his consolidation of power and his apparent, his country's purported pragmatism. The pragmatism is, of course, called into question here. We've seen recent slaughters of Druze in Suwayda in southern Syria. There were some 2,000 people killed by people associated with the Syrian army. The jihadis that were once part of HTS have banded together to slaughter minorities in Syria. This is raising, obviously, very serious questions about the pragmatism or moderation of Ahmed al-Sharaa's government. He is, of course, going to stand up and try to put his best face on this.

The thing that I'm watching for specifically right now is that the fate of Syria really does look like a tug-of-war right now. Between the Turks and the Qataris on one side, they're the Islamist Bloc, they are trying to normalize Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist factions across the Middle East, and this is a major investment on the part of the Turks and the Qataris. On the other side, you have countries like Saudi Arabia and UAE and the United States trying to nudge al-Sharaa in a more pragmatic and moderate direction, one in which he would cooperate more closely with the US and American allies.

I would say that right now it is still pretty much anyone's game. Very tough to see what's going to come of this. Sharaa was actually just in Doha in a conference that was slamming Israel for its attack on Hamas operatives inside Qatar. That rhetoric there, not the moderate kind, not the kind that would likely lead to new security arrangements with Israel, which has been on the table now for some time, so we're watching both of these files very carefully. I will end it there. Happy to take questions, but for now, let me hand things over to my esteemed colleague, Rich Goldberg.

GOLDBERG: Thanks, Jon, and thanks everybody for being together with us. I'll go over some top-line things that I'm tracking for UNGA and look forward to Q&A afterwards. Top of the list for me at the approach of the International Organizations program here at FDD, Mike Waltz needs to be confirmed, and obviously, we've seen that stalling for the last couple of weeks, but with the Leader filing cloture and setting up a vote, that means we expect to have a confirmed UN ambassador in place for the General Assembly.

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That is extraordinarily important with all of the different issues Jon just mentioned, a few more I'll talk about that are going on, to have that high-level political representation in the seat in New York representing the president, somebody that everyone knows, speaks to the President of the United States, speaks to the Secretary of State on an ongoing basis. That'll be really important and he'll be joined as we see from the list with his key deputies, other ambassadors of the United States to the UN in different platforms. One in particular to point out --Jeff Bartos for Reform and Management will be a very important post alongside soon-to-be Ambassador Waltz.

Number two, you saw this morning, obviously, in the Security Council, the vote that took place on the snapback of sanctions on Iran. This is one of the key parallel in the back of the theater showing while UNGA starts and leaders arrive, as the UN sanctions on Iran are scheduled to come back into force, the 30-day clock continuing to count down. This was the attempt to undo the Security Council Resolution according to the process for snapback -- to basically undo the snapback, keep the sanctions relief that Iran had won under the JCPOA back in 2015, going beyond the expiration of the snapback mechanism this October. That vote, obviously, supported by the Chinese and the Russians, a couple others, Pakistan and Algeria joining in, but nine Security Council members opposing that resolution, meaning, they are for the snapback going forward. Majority no veto needed by a permanent member. That's a big diplomatic accomplishment in the Security Council.

Remember, five years ago, we had a Trump administration attempt at snapback unilaterally that the Europeans had opposed alongside the Iranians, the Russians, and the Chinese, and there was a conflict at the end of that process. Now, the US, their European allies are aligned. We had a president of the Security Council right now in South Korea that followed the rules, put forward the resolution even though they abstained in the vote today. Making sure that process completes itself, not being diverted, delayed, tricked into anything by the Iranians, very important. Sounds like the French are on board to make sure that's completed alongside the rest of the E3, and then making sure the secretariat, it follows the rules at the end of this 30-day clock and restores the prior Security Council Resolutions, restores the Sanctions Experts Committee under those previous resolutions, and then we go forward with a new international framework, which is actually the old international framework of no enrichment, no reprocessing, no nuclear-capable missile testing, no proliferation, the UN arms embargo comes back, the UN missile embargo comes back, and it really aligns with the president's stated policy of no reconstitution following the 12-Day War.

There's obviously in the background, in addition to what Jon was talking about with the Palestinian state, just ongoing situation in Gaza, major focus, obviously the stated impetus for the Palestinian state recognition campaign, but also itself, the desire to see the war come to an end, all hostages be released, humanitarian issues, obviously, that the UN is deeply involved in in Gaza. With Ambassador Waltz taking the reins and stepping forward with his reform and management team in place, this would be the moment, I think, to turn the tables and really attack the Hamas-UN business model, as I call it, which I think is one of the major obstacles to getting to the end of this war in Gaza and getting the hostages released, getting to the end of Hamas's military reign in any parts of Gaza.

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That would mean, number one, putting forward a resolution of the Security Council to put Hamas on the UN sanctions list. When you hear about meetings going on right now of the Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs, WFP, UNICEF, others, UN policy is that Hamas is not a terrorist organization and that's a major problem. It's a major problem for staff vetting, contracting, where they go, who they work with and how they operate in Gaza, so put that forward. If the Chinese and Russians want to veto that and say that Hamas is not a terrorist organization, let's have that debate in front of the international community. We need to put US sanctions on UNRWA. It's proven itself to be a front for Hamas. I think a lot of what's going on right now, the UN trying to sabotage the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, the World Food Programme's unwillingness to coordinate with GHF, has to do with the Secretary General's order to keep UNRWA alive, make sure it's ready to come back at some point, don't allow anything that steps into the breach to fully full-time replace UNRWA going forward. That's obviously for other political reasons tied to UNRWA itself. And so if we were to put terrorism sanctions on UNRWA through the United States and any ability for nations to contribute and its ability to spend money with exceptions that we would make for how it operates in other areas outside of Gaza, that would send the signal that UNRWA's days are done, we're not allowing it to come back, and then we need to get tough with World Food Programme and Cindy McCain and say, "Hey, how is it possible in the month of August, we paid for 2,309 food convoys to go into Gaza, two of them got delivered?"

According to the UN's own data, 2,307 got diverted. We're literally spending US taxpayer money handing it to Cindy McCain and handing food over to Hamas. That's not acceptable. She says she won't allow private security for her convoys. Guess what? They won't tell you that, but behind the scenes, UNICEF is already using private security. They've made deals with local tribes. So Cindy McCain is claiming she's standing on principle, won't allow the militarization of aid. It's completely false. If she secured her convoys and worked with the GHF, you'd have a different picture in a lot of areas of Gaza.

I think Waltz is going to have to drive a larger efficiency and consolidation campaign in the UN if the UN wants to count on US dollars going forward. So I think we're going to be seeing probably the DOGEing of the United Nations by the United States. There are a lot of inefficiencies. You think about how many humanitarian organizations exist. On the refugee and migration side, a UN High Commissioner for Refugees, IOM, the UN Migration Agency, UNRWA. This can all be consolidated into one organization. On the food aid and just helping people in various humanitarian ways, you have World Food Programme, you have UNICEF, you have many others. Again, consolidation and efficiencies. I think you can get rid of organizations like OCHA, the Office of Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs. What is that necessary if you can consolidate down to one or maybe two major humanitarian organizations that really do the coordination?

And finally, I would say obviously the president has established a National Energy Dominance Council, very focused on American energy dominance. We're at a time when the UN Secretary General himself and all of the various aspects and organs of the UN are waging war on fossil fuels and major sources of American energy that we need here and that our companies need to export to partners and allies. Whether this is happening in the UN environmental program, in UNDP, whether it's happening in the International Maritime Organization or the Civil Aviation Organization with standards and regulations, it's happening all throughout the United Nations and we're going to have to fight back against that, either defunding or doing more against countries that are using those entities to wage war against American energy sources.

I'll leave you this thought. We're obviously in major trade negotiations with all the countries in the world and you're seeing energy be a big part of those trade resolutions, Europe signing on to buy \$750 billion of American energy, while European countries are going to the UN to try to add standards, regulations, and UN rules that curtail the ability of the United States to make that energy and export that energy. That's a mismatch here in the policy of our government, and I think we're going to see Ambassador Waltz launch a broadside campaign against this attack on American energy.

DOUGHERTY:



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Thank you, Rich. Craig, over to you.

SINGLETON: Yeah, thanks everyone. Thanks Rich. Thanks everyone for dialing in. I'm going to focus my comments on a few China-related issues. We are still waiting a readout of the Trump-Xi call that happened this morning. Big picture, what's Beijing's objectives here at UNGA 80? It's really, its play is norms, not noise. I think China has really come to see the UN as a norms factory. It can practice power by paperwork in effect. They're really working pretty patiently to see language, like "the community of shared future" and other packaging from the Global Security Initiative and the Global Development Initiative as consensus. And they're working the committees where I think few cameras really roll.

I think this year from the Chinese, we can sort of expect three aims. One is just this continued narrative embedding. They're going to continue to push euphemisms, win-win, shared future, mutual respect into all the General Assembly texts and those first committee follow-ons, everything that's involving AI and cyber, development-first rights language. And that agenda already obviously has a lot of UN lineage on the China side where the Chinese have really effectively included phrases like shared future and countless UN Security Council Resolutions, and I think we can expect that going forward.

There's going to be a lot of coalition choreography. They're going to continue to court G77 and probably a lot of the swing states by co-sponsoring what they're calling "south south" items. Think about, for example, increasing connectivity between the UN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and really positioning China as a reliable convener. And this is really at a time, as Rich mentioned, when the US doesn't have a confirmed US ambassador.

The third is they're going to just stay very firm on red lines involving Taiwan. Their primary goal is to keep the UN system doors shut to the UN. They're going to continue to invoke UN Resolution 2758 to block Taiwan's participation and to press capitals to echo Beijing's bottom line. We've seen this at the World Health Organization where members recently declined to invite Taiwan to the World Health Assembly. The US and the EU positions I think by contrast make clear that 2758 does not and did not determine Taiwan's status and nor does it enshrine Beijing's One China principle at the UN. So I think for me, Beijing doesn't really need a standing ovation at UNGA. It just needs a standing definition of sorts, get its words into the resolutions and then bend the rules to follow it.

There's a lot of talk of whether China is taking over UN agencies, and I think the way I think about it is it's less a takeover than targeted toeholds. They lead one agency, but they're placing deputies in a few more and they are flooding expert bodies where all of these standards are really shaped. So they of course have concrete posts. They hold the FAO director general position and will until 2027. The UNESCO deputy director is also Chinese, and these aren't trivial perches. They touch food security, as Rich mentioned. They touch cultural and educational standards, and increasingly AI ethics, which is really taking place at UNESCO.

There is, of course, a distinction between policy leverage and optics for the Chinese. Beijing doesn't want to control the UN system, but it does serve as a meaningful theater to amplify their influence via the staffing pipelines and internships and the block building, and that's especially true with the UN outposts in Geneva. I think UNESCO is a really interesting case study. Beyond the 2021 recommendation on the ethics of AI, which serves as sort of a global baseline for all of the members and it was adopted by all UN members, UNESCO has inked all of these cooperation deals with Chinese institutions and engaged in Belt and Road Initiative adjacent sort of technical and vocational education and training work, and it really does show how Beijing can align its multilateral brand with its own initiative. And that's influence. It's not ownership. I think a lot of these programs let Beijing align multilateral legitimacy, UNESCO's brand and Belt and Road, and I think that's something we just sort of have to remember that China isn't conquering agencies, it's curating committees, and that's the place where all of these small words decide really big standards.

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I think the third takeaway for me, sort of what I'm watching during high-level week is if you want to maybe cut through all the speeches and watch where the rubber meets the road, at least in the China file, there are a few sort of tripwires and tells, I think. The first I mentioned is this increasing focus on AI governance. After the 2024 US-led General Assembly resolution on "Safe, Secure and Trustworthy AI" and a follow on 2024 resolution on AI in the military domain, I think we're going to increasingly see the Chinese speak up on this issue, really try to promote resolutions that soften a lot of the rights language around AI and AI governance.

They're going to dilute accountability where they can and they are going to sort of smuggle that sovereignty-first framing into all of the follow-on documents that follow. That includes some of the cyber rules. The UN has just completed a five-year cyber working group. It just delivered its final report, and I suspect we'll see plans to sort of institutionalize this, a global mechanism for AI and cyber. And I think that's, again, a venue where China can press a lot of its state-centric framing and norms.

Another issue to look at is a lot of the growth of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. We should see some more signals that talk about enhanced relations between the UN and SCO. This is all part of China's coalition diplomacy efforts. I think we should really track how text about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is cited in resolutions and in adopted frameworks to justify future alignment between the two organizations.

I already mentioned Taiwan, but I think we'll see it there. We can continue to see and expect, I think, Beijing and its partners to cite UN Resolution 2758 to rebuff any efforts by Taiwan to get onside and be involved. And I think the Chinese will just ramp up efforts to lobby all of the neutral parties to echo that reading. So I think for me, it's sort of like the headlines are all in the hall, but the real action is in these annexes and these addendums that they use and the addenda that are going to come out of this week's high-level session. I'll turn it over now to Mark to talk a little bit about Russia, but looking forward to questions.

MONTGOMERY: Hey, thanks, Craig. Good to see you all. Russia is going to be represented by Sergey Lavrov. I think he's speaking on the 27th. He's, in my opinion, a slithery little character, but he will push first and foremost Russia's assessment of the war with Ukraine. He'll try to explain how Ukraine allegedly is responsible for the war and if Ukraine is responsible, the west is responsible for creating the conditions where President Putin had to take these actions. He'll offer ceasefire talk and the idea of peace in a very rhetorical way. I think we've all come to learn there's no reality to that discussion, but I expect a significant amount of his remarks to be centered on that. I would gently say this is a massive disinformation campaign and distorted from the reality that we all see every day.

Then their second issue will be he'll begin to push the idea of an international treaty on information security, what they call information security. This proposal is about creating the legal basis for the prevention of any political provocations using information technology. And in a real hypocritical leap, Russia alleges that it's the victim of a hybrid war carried out by the US and its allies, if only we had that ability, and that while the US forces other states to quote, "Dance to the beat of the US drum," he'll say Russia really just wants to create a fair system for information security.

I mean, our assessment, this is a further attempt to validate their aggression on the international stage in the digital space. And really, this builds on a highly successful Russian and Chinese effort to get the cyber crime convention ratified, which they did and the US eventually buckled on during the last administration. There's a Fellow here [FDD], Ivana Stradner. She and I have been highly critical of these efforts by Russia. We warned that if this treaty was ratified, Russia would interpret the treaty in a way which justifies its aggression and further entrenches kind of the Russian understanding of what cybersecurity is, international law. I think they'll be emboldened from their success. I think there's going to be a ratification event in Vietnam later in the year. And at that, I think when they get enough signers on that, they'll bring this international information security treaty next. So Lavrov will tee that up in his remarks.

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And finally, he'll give a critique of the US and the global south and continue the narrative of western neocolonialism. I suspect he'll make at least aversions to the US actions against both Venezuela and drug boats and international waters. But I think he'll be careful to not be too explicit there because that ties directly back to President Trump. So I kind of think those three areas: Ukraine is not our fault; we need an international treaty on information security; and the US is not a good player in the global south. I think those are the three main ones. I mean, he'll give an extended speech. He's a Russian diplomat, and there'll be other issues in there, but those will be the three big ones that I foresee. Joe, I'll kick it over to you.

DOUGHERTY: Copy. Thanks, Mark. Thanks, Rich. Thanks, Craig. Thanks, Jon.

DOUGHERTY: We will begin the Q&A portion of the call right now. A couple of things. First of all, we had some new folks join the call in, a little bit late. We are recording this. It is on the record. And we will share the transcript and video as soon as all of that is available. If you have a question, you can use the chat feature, you can post your question there and I'll read it aloud, or you can raise your hand and Ellie, who's running things in the background so well, will unmute you and will be able to have you ask your question there. I will get a quick question underway so we can get things started.

Well, one, I wanted to flag that Pierre Ghanem was kind enough to post a President Trump post, I think it's in the Q&A feature, talking about his call with Xi. So folks have a chance to give that a read.

Jon, I want to get back to you on the Syria file. You have some concerns there. I want to give you an opportunity to flesh that out a little bit as it is certainly an unusual circumstance.

SCHANZER: Sure. Thanks, Joe. Yeah, look, I mean, again, the entire circumstance here has been entirely, actually, just downright bizarre. We saw the collapse of the Assad regime in December. Nobody saw that coming. We see the rise of Abu Mohammed al-Julani, changes his name to Ahmed al-Sharaa, stops wearing fatigues, starts wearing a suit, and begins to engage with the international community. I actually met with some Syrian officials early on in this process. They were immediately looking to have sanctions removed. I told them to their face that I thought it was a bad idea, that we needed to have a little bit more of a track record, that we needed to see the actions of the new Syrian regime, not just the rhetoric. Within a few weeks to a few months, I suppose, we began to see some of these attacks against not just the Druze but also against Alawites, other minorities in Syria.

What we have seen is that, A, that this government doesn't control all of the country, B, that the government or at least elements of the government have been involved in atrocities, crimes against humanity, war crimes. I think we can say with certainty that the 2000 or so Druze that were slaughtered by Sunni jihadists affiliated loosely or directly with the Syrian government is a sign that all is still a bit chaotic, to put it mildly, within the Syrian regime. And so, what we've now watched over the course of the last couple of months is this back-and-forth where Ahmed al-Sharaa met with Donald Trump in Saudi Arabia, engaged with the king in Saudi, engaged with the UAE. They are trying very concertedly to bring him into the fold of U.S.-led allies in the Middle East, the so-called pragmatic bloc of the region. And then you've got the Qataris and the Turks and perhaps a few other countries that are more, let's say, aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, more aligned with Islamist forces in the region. They're trying to get influence over this regime.

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The fate of Syria is still undecided. And therefore, I believe that it is premature to allow this man to stand up in front of the UN and to spout rhetoric one way or another. I think this is not a legitimized, solidified government yet. And so, I think even if we hear something from al-Sharaa at the UN and it goes one way, we still could see him flip-flop and change positions well into the future. This does not feel like a suitable place for a man that only months ago was recognized as a terrorist internationally. The entire thing is, again, quite different than anything that we've seen before. I mean, certainly, we've seen people like Yasser Arafat in the 1970s get up in front of the UN and make speeches. This even feels beyond that in terms of the bizarre spectacle. The UN is sort of known for these sorts of things, but I must say I don't put a lot of stock in whatever we're going to hear from Abu Mohammed al-Julani in the coming days.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks, Jon. We will start the questions. Benny Avni has his hand raised, so we'll go with Benny, and then we're going to follow up, Jeff, with your question. Thanks for submitting. Benny, over to you, please. You are muted, Benny.

BENNY AVNI: Unmute. Is that okay?

DOUGHERTY: You are good to go. Thanks, Benny. Appreciate it.

BENNY AVNI: Okay. Two questions, probably for everyone, but maybe Rich would be able to handle it best. By the next GA, a year from now, we'll have the race for a new secretary-general. So, does anybody want to hazard a guess how that will go and how America can affect that? Also, more broadly, is it still worth it for the U.S. to have the UN?

And maybe one quick, a little more esoteric for Mark. Ambassador Kislyak [Kyslytsya] of Ukraine has challenged last year the mere membership of Russia in the UN and the Security Council based on that when the Soviet Union disassembled, this was gone. They took the week between Christmas and New Year's to just say, "Okay, we're moving from Soviet Union to Russia." Any thought on that?

GOLDBERG: I'll jump in on the first two, and then if others want to jump in on your third. Secretary-General race, that is correct. We'll be heading into election season. We're sort of already in the background there, though Guterres still does seem to rule with an iron fist, having consolidated control across the humanitarian agencies, which I think is what's playing out in Gaza, unfortunately.

We know Rafael Grossi, the current director-general of the IAEA, wants to run. He has been thinking about how to handle the Iran file and, just in general, his leadership of the IAEA in the context of that potential campaign. Frankly, I think he probably comes out pretty well of how he has handled the diplomacy, trying to put out his hand to Iran, go to Iran several times, literally give Iran as much rope as it wants to hang itself with, which it has done, and at the same time, be somebody who the United States, the E3, other major board members that the IAEA can trust, go to, provide information, ask for investigations, and make sure our money is being put to good use at the IAEA.

Not to say it's a perfect organization and it could still use some reforms, particularly with a Chinese deputy director-general, which we don't have to get into. But I do think coming from Latin America, coming from somebody who has tried to reach out across various factions will definitely be the Western-oriented choice, I would say. There could be somebody who comes up from Global South to try to block him, somebody else. Unpredictable at the moment.

We don't have a great way of influencing this election. I think that's probably the feeling inside the administration, inside State IO, inside the mission that our attempts to really play in these elections haven't worked out very well in the past. It's not a great use of our time, unless there's something really problematic and we think that it'll be a close election. There's ways to influence. So, we typically need to spend most of our time digging in on these standard-making organizations, the specialized agencies that have elections for director-general and sometimes deputy director-general to make sure that the Chinese, the Russians don't gain control of those standards organizations for all the reasons that Craig laid out there.

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We're pulling out of UNESCO, for example, but the Qataris have already engineered, it seems, a takeover of UNESCO in the coming election in a few days. An Egyptian that they recruited to take the helm. They're going to be the chair of the board as well, while an Egyptian takes control as director-general. So, these are the ways in which there will be problems that pop up inside the UN system, not just from the sec-gen's perspective. Our leverage there, whoever wins, will be the money and really forcing through some substantial reforms systemically for efficiency and policy changes if they want our billion dollars of cash just from the General Fund.

Value of UN? It's a good question. I think having a permanent veto on the Security Council is valuable, not because we're going to achieve anything but we can stop things. I think the era of the Security Council being this place for us to achieve common good and move things through and get compromise and really get things done was a post-Cold War through just post-9/11 aberration of history. We have returned to a Cold War-era model where we're in political warfare 24/7 in the Security Council. Our government has not shifted that mindset, unfortunately, especially our career diplomatic staff at the UN that still believes compromise is the name of the game and having to veto something as failure. I think we should embrace veto. I think we should embrace being vetoed because this is, in fact, a forum for political warfare with our greatest adversaries in the world at the moment. I'll stop there and turn over for other questions.

MONTGOMERY: This is Mark. I'll take that last part. Look, I appreciate the Ukrainian position, but let's be clear. I mean, Article 23, which is what names the Security Council members, does say Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. But I would say this is more irregular but really necessary to allow it to shift to the Russian Federation back in 1990 under the continuing state theory. So, the UN Charter is supposed to be altered. That never is going to happen. We wouldn't allow that to happen because of all the other crazy that would try to slip in when we alter the UN Charter. So, look, 35 years of accepting this have made it de facto. Even if it's in a de jure way, it's probably still disputed. So, while an interesting argument by the Ukrainians, it falls on largely deaf ears. So I think you'd need to acknowledge it and move on.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks, Mark. And thanks, Richard. I'm going to merge the first two questions we have from Jeff and Aamer. Jeff asks, "What can we expect from President Trump's speech Tuesday and what kind of reaction will we see from other leaders at UNGA?" And related from Aamer, "For Trump, thoughts on how the recent strikes on Venezuelan vessels, Charlie Kirk's killing, and even this call for re-establishing a beachhead at Bagram, how that will play into his address and the dynamic of the General Assembly more broadly." So, focusing on Trump's Tuesday remarks. I'll open that up to the team here.

MONTGOMERY: I'm happy to talk about Bagram. Donald Trump 2025 needs to talk to Donald Trump 2019 and 2020 because he set this in process, this piece. His reinterpretation of what his demands were in 2019 and 2020 through Ambassador Khalilzad, I would say he's slightly forgetful. This is a terrible deal. We shouldn't have left Afghanistan the way we left it. We shouldn't have left Bagram. I mean, there's a lot of wishes. The Biden administration executed this in the worst possible way. But President Trump needs to remember that this was his negotiation that initiated in 2019 that was finished and then poorly executed by President Biden.

I don't think there's a reasonable way. I don't think the Chinese would allow this. As the INDOPACOM J3, I always thought airfields in Afghanistan were pretty excellent. And giving them up was a very significant tactical failure by the Biden and Trump 45 administrations. And now we're paying the price for it. I'm not even counting the price of how we treated our European allies and how we treated our Afghan allies. Setting all that aside, at a purely tactical level, this was a mistake. And I'm glad he recognizes it now, but unfortunately, I think this is a settled law.

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GOLDBERG: I'll just speak to big-picture speech. I think you've seen President Trump give UNGA speeches before. They're pretty high level, big picture. Would he honor Charlie Kirk in the speech? Possible. It's obviously top of mind. I think he has some foreign policy points already this year that he'll probably want to highlight on the international stage from his transition on forward, actually getting deals done to get hostages back from Gaza, even if the war continues today, and actively negotiating still to get all hostages out of Hamas to end the war, and to bring humanitarian relief to the people of Gaza. I think he would probably point to what he views as great success and multilateral success in taking out Iran's quest for nuclear weapons and denying them the ability to cross the threshold and setting them back several years. May speak to the snapback as well. I would recommend him doing that.

Broader issues, he might sort of extend the olive branch, all of the Truth Social posts you just saw to President Xi. He may talk and sort of continue his discussion of wanting peace and to end the war between Russia and Ukraine, but hints at continued sticks if that doesn't happen. I don't imagine he will break major news, he hasn't really done that in the past. He has tried to put his America First agenda forthright. I don't know if he will call out certain things that he doesn't like seeing at the UN right now, like attacks on US energy. I think that would be great to do that. But in the past, it's been pretty high-level top points, and wherever he can point to an accomplishment or ongoing initiative, he does that.

SCHANZER: One quick... or maybe two quick points for me. I've been in Europe for the last week or so. The thing that I'm picking up here from various governments is an understanding that the transatlantic relationship is changing, but not necessarily in a bad way. It's uncomfortable, it's forcing a bit more independence. It's putting national interests first. And I do wonder whether that's something that Donald Trump would continue to touch on.

I think it is the theme. With the transatlantic relationship, it is undoubtedly the theme. The Germans here, that's all they're talking about right now is the new direction that everybody's going in. And then, it may not be the worst thing in the world. The first Trump administration, there were fights, there were disagreements, but now it looks like we're heading into this new direction. People putting their national interests first and then acting accordingly.

And look, the other thing that I'll just note about Donald Trump from a personal perspective, I cannot tell you what he's going to say. He's an unpredictable man, as we all know. He has absolutely climbed a learning curve as it relates to the office of the presidency, whereas I think he was defiant and often controversial. I think he has learned how to speak to different audiences. I think he's going to try to reinforce the notion that he is seeking peace in multiple conflicts around the region. This is a man who seeks a Nobel Prize for the various efforts that he has undertaken. And I would expect him maybe not necessarily to lobby directly in front of the UN General Assembly for that recognition, but I think to reinforce the brand that I think he has evolved into, which is that of a peacemaker, at least in certain theaters.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks, Jon. Follow up from Aamer. And this is for Craig, and I guess Mark, if you wanted to weigh in. Thoughts on Trump agreeing to a visit to China early next year? Has Xi given Trump enough to earn a visit from a US president?

SINGLETON: Yeah, I mean today's call and all the summit talk really allows Xi Jinping to argue that Washington must engage China on China's terms. So, both capitals are obviously going to call this recent teleconference as constructive. Beijing is banking on optics and time, while Washington is chasing a TikTok headline and a summit and hopes, I think for more wins later. In a lot of respects, summitry serves a way for China to slow or dull US competitive actions, while quietly pocketing a lot of exemptions. And Beijing is betting that high PR, low pain deliverables, like symbolic fentanyl actions, are going to be traded for relief on tariffs and technology controls in Taiwan. And I think that's exactly the way it is playing out, and I think the Chinese are very happy with the current dynamic.

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Let's just remember that it's Washington that's hungry for a summit, not the Chinese. And so, I think what we can really expect here are some headline wins and probably a lot of attempts by the Chinese, again, to trade some short-term gestures for time while really continuing to test, I think, our soft spots. I think that's where we're going here.

MONTGOMERY: Yeah. I'm going to add in, but I'm actually going to comment on Jeff's question and I agree completely with Jon Schanzer's answer, that Trump, he's a much more developed and on-message president now. And his speech is going to be driven by how much he really believes he has a chance of getting a Nobel Peace Prize. If he thinks that's still something he can do, then I think he knows you don't go into the UN and drop a grenade down the tank hatch and shut it, right? I mean, that's probably not the way to do it.

So, instead of being a condemnation of past behavior, I think it might be a demand for future behavior. In other words, "I expect these things from you." That's the kind of leaders who have a chance... Whether he has a chance at Nobel Prize or not is not relevant to whether he thinks he has a chance for a Nobel Prize. And so, I think Jon's right, that as he's evolved and become a more, I don't want to say graceful, but more wise president in terms of how the power works, if he wants that you don't do it by flattening the Earth around him at the UN, but instead saying, "This is what I demand from you," not, "This is what I condemn about you."

DOUGHERTY: Rich?

GOLDBERG: Yeah, I know Aamer had a question on Venezuela as well up front there, and we haven't addressed that. I don't know if he'll call out Venezuela in the full UNGA, he could. I think maybe the broader issues of what they're up against and both on migration, fentanyl, things like that will probably be topics du jour that they're talking to allies about and are top of mind. I think people don't really understand that Maduro's days may be numbered for Donald Trump. I think we're much more advanced in thinking of what might be unfolding there than people understand is as Maduro tries to test the president in response to some of these, at this point, low-level interdictions. Pushing the envelope, poking the bear. I think he does that at great peril.

I think the president sees the map right now and thinks to himself, "Look what happened in Syria when a client state of Russia and Iran, with those two powers overwhelmed, overstretched, or defeated in certain cases, can collapse very quickly. Is there another place on the map where you have this mid to low-level dictatorship that's a nuisance to US national security, where Russia has been a protectorate militarily, Iran has been a financial and military arm as well?"

And with Russia overstretched, on its back foot and/or Iran now severely degraded in capability, that you could see an opportunity to unlock major strategic opportunity in the entire Western hemisphere. It's obviously Venezuela. You add in the problems that Maduro creates for him from a migration border perspective and other gangs and illicit trafficking issues. It is pretty obvious to me that we are positioning ourselves with a lot of options, contingency options, and I'm not so sure Maduro is long for this world, at least as the head of Venezuela.

DOUGHERTY: I think we're coming to the final moments of today's call. I will ask each of you to provide a 30-second wrap-up summary of your key points. Before we get there though, I just want to thank all the journalists, again, who are on today's call. We know that you have busy schedules. There's many places you can be. You chose us, and we're very grateful for you doing that, so thank you. A quick thank you to Ellie for her behind-the-scenes reports and the rest of the comms team for your help.

In closing, a reminder, FDD is a nonpartisan research institute, focused on national security and foreign policy. You'll find all of our research at [FDD.org](https://fdd.org). If you'd like to set up an individual conversation with one of our experts here today, please reach the team here, press@fdd.org, and we will get that scheduled. Why don't we start with Mark, then we'll go to Craig, then to Rich, wrap it up with Jon and we will conclude the call.



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MONTGOMERY: Thanks. I just want to echo what Rich said in his opening remarks, which is that the Senate needs to confirm Mike Waltz in time to make... This is going to be very hard. But we deserve to have a permanent UN ambassador at the UNGA. A one-week difference here is a big deal, and they should do everything they can to squeeze him through the Gordian knot and get that confirmation done. That's it.

SINGLETON: Yeah, for me, I mean, look, Beijing views the UN as a theater for great power competition, less about solving problems and more about, I think, shaping the script. China isn't chasing applause in the General Assembly. It's working the subcommittees and it's inserting its language and it's bending the norms that follow. And for Beijing, I think the UN is where paperwork becomes power.

GOLDBERG: I'll just close with four points, like the admiral. Confirm Mike Waltz, get him there in New York with his team. DOGE the UN, a lot of consolidation, efficiency opportunities if they want as much money as they're getting out of the United States taxpayer going forward. And the Hamas UN business model, put forward a resolution to put Hamas on the terrorist list and put WFP to an ultimatum to make sure they're securing their convoys in Gaza. And end attacks on American energy at the US, and I think that's a much broader campaign than people understand.

SCHANZER: And I'll close here. I will echo what my esteemed colleagues have said about Mike Waltz. Crucial that we have a ambassador and hope to see him in that chair soon. We'll be watching the Syrian president try to make the case for legitimacy. We'll be watching countries very likely virtue signal about Palestinian statehood with the full knowledge that it will likely not be something that can be achieved anytime in the near future or even over the next three years. I would say though, and we have not talked about this, I do expect something of a food fight at the UN as it relates to the war in Gaza.

Charges of war crimes, charges of antisemitism. This is very likely to spill out all over UNGA, and I don't think that this reflects well on the UN system. In fact, what I would argue is that the US-led international order that was designed to protect countries and to allow them to defend themselves and to uphold Western values, democratic values. I would say that right now Israel is under full assault. It is a coordinated campaign and I certainly expect it to see play out at the UN over the coming weeks, and I do think it will be a rather bizarre and saddening spectacle.

DOUGHERTY: Jon, Mark, Craig, Rich, thank you very much. This concludes today's call.