

SPEECH BY THE RT HON DAVID OWEN TO THE 16TH WORLD LEADERS SUMMIT
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President Trump's second presidential term is well described by the much- respected Stephen Walt, Professor of International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School, in the lead article of *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2026 as the "predatory hegemon." He describes Trump's central aim "is to use Washington's privileged position to extract concessions, tribute and displays of deference from both allies and adversaries, pursuing short-term gains in what he sees as a purely zero-sum world."

In April 2025 Donald Trump described the United States as like "a big beautiful department store, and everyone wants a piece of that store." Or as he said "To put it another way, they need our money". Stephen Walt continues, by definition "a predatory hegemon is a dominant great power that tries to structure its transactions with others in a purely zero-sum fashion, so that the benefits are always distributed in its favour. A predatory hegemon's primary goal is not to build stable and mutually beneficial relations that leave all parties better off but to ensure that it gains more from every interaction than others do. An arrangement that leaves the hegemon better off and its partners worse off is preferable to an arrangement in which both sides gain but the partner gain more, even if the latter case yields larger absolute benefits for both parties. A predatory hegemon always wants the lion's share."¹

President Trump's America needs to be called out for what it is becoming – the ruler of the world through a series of quite simple devices. The first step is bankrupt the United Nations. The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, warned, when announcing an 18.8% cut in UN staffing compared with 2025 in a sharply reduced budget for 2026, of "a deeply precarious outlook, with high arrears, delayed contributions and the return of 'credits' threatening to wipe out liquidity." Arrears last year totalled \$760 million coupled with a requirement to return \$300m in credits to member states. The Secretary General continued, "Any delays in collection early in the year will force us to reduce spending even more that means a race to bankruptcy."

Against that background, we have the Trump solution already in place. The Board of Peace. The Board is named in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2803 as a body already tasked with overseeing the processes of the Gaza peace plan. The Board was proposed in September 2025 and formally established on the sidelines of the 56th World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2026 consisting currently of 27 member states. The UK government has not yet accepted or declined the invitation to join the Board of Peace and have not signed up to the Board's Charter. Nevertheless, Tony Blair is already a member of the executive board. The UK did attend the inaugural meeting of the Board of Peace as an observer, as did India. Several other countries including Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway and South Korea also sent observers. Many of these countries who are at present big supporters of the UN are

¹ Stephen M Walt, 'The Predatory Hegemon. How Trump Wields American Power', *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2026, p.11-12.

hesitating over the Board of Peace but for how long? To be ‘relevant’ is the new aspiration, not to be on the ‘sidelines’ if the US is backing an organisation not just for the crude guideline ‘follow the money’ but ‘stay close to power’ and go with the tide of opinion.

Others on the agenda for joining the Board of Peace who have yet to respond and did not attend as observers are Australia, Brazil, China, Philippines, Portugal, Russia, and Singapore. Canada’s invitation was subsequently rescinded. So, another pressure has developed – you can be disinvented.

The roll of honour of countries that have so far declined Trump’s invitation to participate in some way with the Board of Peace is: France, Ireland, New Zealand, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Vatican City and Ukraine.

I urge all leaders in this audience to go back to their countries and hammer home in their newspapers, TV and radio, universities and parliaments, the simple message that what we have in the UN is not to be destroyed. The UK said in the 80th anniversary year of the first meeting in London of the UN General Assembly and Security Council, “The United Kingdom remains a committed supporter, active member and significant funder of the UN.” America and its supplicants are on course to bankrupt the UN at any time unless we ready ourselves for a substantial financial response.

Not surprisingly of course, the United States has tried to buy off the UK and the British Commonwealth of nations by appointing Tony Blair as a member of the executive board. The Board has four other US members – Marco Rubio, Steve Witkoff, Jared Kushner and Robert Gabriel. Three of them well regarded internationally. Countries that wish to be permanent members of the Board of Peace must pay \$1 billion into a fund controlled by Trump; otherwise a country serves a three year term which may be renewed at Trump’s discretion. The US President Trump is named as chairman for life in the Board’s Charter. While its premise is to focus on Gaza, there is no doubt that this is intended to replace the United Nations and linked to the impending financial crisis in September 2026. Trump when asked by a Fox TV journalist whether the Board of Peace would take the UN’s place, he replied “Well it might”.

The UK should now in conjunction with some key Commonwealth countries, whose membership stands currently at 56 members, should ‘come off the fence’, and declare that they are completely opposed in principle - and will actively oppose - any attempt to replace the UN Security Council with the Board of Peace.

To carry weight and conviction UN reform has a vital role to play. To demonstrate this key Commonwealth countries should be ready to publish a consultation paper and then with its amendments, to present it to the UN Security Council and then to the General Assembly with options for discussion and decision. All within the short timetable of presenting at this year’s General Assembly in the autumn. This will make proposals for the UN to live within a reduced Budget but backed by a list of guarantors.

The first and essential reform is the veto which was originally envisaged in San Francisco in 1948 as necessary to get the major powers on board. It has now become the single greatest

weakness of the UN and must be reformed. In the first instance, it is clear that the US will not give up its veto and that should be matched by accepting China too has a veto. These two countries are now the only superpowers in economic and military terms. “China’s GDP is smaller in nominal terms but larger in terms of purchasing parity, its growth rate is higher and it now imports nearly as much as the US does. Its share of global goods exports has risen from less than 1% in 1950 to roughly 15% today, whereas the US share has fallen from 16% in 1950 to just 8%.”² The remaining three veto powers: Russia, France and the UK should give up the veto, while remaining permanent members. Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, Japan, Nigeria, South Africa and South Korea should become permanent members of the Security Council. This would make 14 permanent members and to keep the Security Council small retain 6 rotating members making 20 in all.

Hitherto, there has been no consensus on extending the membership of the Security Council. If a consensus is reached then a limited widening could be accepted, but the Security Council is the most important functioning body in the UN, apart from the veto which is to be changed. It is vital, therefore, that its membership does not become unmanageable and it can still hold debates at short notice and command a remarkably large TV audience throughout the world when crises blow up.

Such a reformed UN should be championed and the Board of Peace treated for what it is – a personal takeover by Trump of the UN. In this debate the Commonwealth should play a major role with representatives offering to go and speak in any country wishing to champion the UN over the Board of Peace.

Not enough people in the world realise that what took place in San Francisco in 1945 was a triumph for international diplomacy and the fact that there has been no World War III owes a great deal to the successes of the UN. We must NOT allow President Trump to ride roughshod over its record and achievements.

The two vital elements that must be preserved - and they do not need a high rise building in New York – are the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly. These are the parliaments of the world forged in San Francisco. For the world to lose those two forums, capable of speaking out within hours of the outbreak of war, genocide, famine, ethnic cleansing, would be a blight on the conscience of the world. They are easily affordable and must be funded and those countries who have already supported in unqualified terms the existence of the UN must be ready to demonstrate that these two bodies are going to be funded and their existence guaranteed from now on.

END

Notes

David Owen, former Foreign Secretary 1977-79; EU peace negotiator in the former Yugoslavia 1992-95; he retired from the House of Lords in 2024.

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² Ibid, p. 19