



The UN General Assembly, one of the bastions of international cooperation, has just kicked off its 73rd annual session, under a cloud of threats to multilateralism, according to two Nordic and European veterans of UN politics.

Two of the latest Europeans to preside over the Assembly are Jan Eliasson of Sweden and Mogens Lykketoft of Denmark, respectively the President of the 60th and the 70th General Assembly. The UNRIC Nordic newsletter interviewed the two veteran statesmen about past and present challenges as the 73d General Assembly is underway. The underlying tensions can perhaps be seen in a nutshell with one look at the list of speakers on the opening day of the so-called General Debate; US President Donald Trump and Iran's President Hassan Rouhani sharing the same podium within hours of each other.

„The General Assembly takes on a particular importance because we have seen so many threats and challenges to international cooperation and multilateralism“, says Jan Eliasson in an exclusive interview with UNRIC Nordic Desk. „I think we need to recall that we have an international body to deal with the global issues of peace, development and human rights. We should bear in mind the first three words of the UN Charter: „We the peoples“. And we should remember that in a way it is the Parliament of Man. Although its resolutions are not binding, it is a forum to discuss the major issues of today and they are crucial.“

Eliasson is a veteran of both government and diplomacy. He served as the Foreign Minister of Sweden and as a diplomat both for his country and the UN retiring as UN Deputy Secretary-General at the end 2016. He crossed paths with Lykketoft in his last capacity at the UN when the Dane was President of the General Assembly 2015-2016 after a long career in politics as minister of Foreign affairs and Finance, Chairman of the Social Democratic Party and Speaker of Parliament.

Lykketoft says in an interview with the UNRIC that he experienced frustrations in the General Assembly over the stalemate in the Security Council on such issues as Syria, where the Council has, in his opinion not lived up to the intentions of the Charter of the UN.

„The impatience of the general members led to efforts to strengthen the authority of the General Assembly, which we saw in the decision to have an open process of nomination of the next Secretary-General, but we also saw it on other issues.“

The Nordic Countries are better known at the UN for giving the world Organisation two of the first Secretary-Generals, but they also have a long history with the General Assembly. When the United Nations resolutions are adopted they are in UN lingo „gavelled“ by the President of the General Assembly, using the symbol of power, the co-called „Thor’s hammer“.

Although it does not owe its nickname to the ancient Nordic God of thunder and war, but to the Icelandic diplomat Thor Thors, it is genuinely Nordic since the gavel was a present to the „parliament of man“ from Iceland, one of the Nordic countries and home to the world’s oldest parliament. And the Icelandic hammer has been used to „gavel“ important decisions.

Eliasson, President of the General Assembly 2005-2006, points out that, while the Security Council’s power on matters of peace and security is mostly uncontested, the General Assembly has taken several landmark decisions of major global importance in recent times.

During his tenure as President of the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council and the Peacebuilding Commission were established and the concept of responsibility to protect was recognized. „This principle is crucially important in a world where such atrocities are being

committed around the world. It underlines that every government has the responsibility to protect its own population," Mr. Eliasson says. He participated actively as Deputy Secretary-General in the negotiations that led to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in September 2015, which he calls „a very major road-map for the future and a sustainable world.“

„These are some examples of when the General Assembly has been truly relevant and played a major role. Of course the General Assembly’s resolutions are not binding, unlike the Security Council’s and that is a cause of frustration when they are not implemented," Mr. Eliasson says.

Major UN reforms were adopted during the tenure of the late Kofi Annan, but reforms are once again on the agenda. Mr. Lykketoft expresses guarded optimism on the subject.

„I think there is some hope that the UN will be strengthened in the future, I hope that the Secretary-General, António Guterres, will be able to come through with his ideas of reform of the UN system but of course we are all very, very concerned about the Trump administration cutting down budgets for the UN and working against any kind of multilateralism right now.“

„The reform of the development system, will be a very crucial step forward," says Mr. Eliasson, who also welcomes the introduction of a new concept *Sustaining Peace*. „...which binds together and unites the work for peace, development and human rights. It is a very important reform effort.“

