



# Yes, the UN did get (a few) things done this week

By SUZANNE LYNCH | 09/23/2023 08:00 AM EDT

With *Nahal Toosi* and *Mona Zhang*

*POLITICO's Global Insider is morphing this week into UNGA Playbook, an exclusive seven-edition series spotlighting the world stage at the United Nations General Assembly in New York. But that's just the start! We're thrilled to announce the upcoming evolution of this newsletter into POLITICO's Global Playbook. This premier pop-up newsletter, authored by Suzanne Lynch, is an insider's look at the pivotal gatherings and moments shaping global policy, politics, and power. Up next: The frontlines of COP28 from Dubai in November. Stay tuned!*

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Good morning from New York. Suzanne Lynch here bringing you the final edition of POLITICO's U.N. Playbook. Though there is still some activity today — not least a speech by Russian foreign minister **Sergey Lavrov** — most of the top tier political leaders have jetted back to their home countries. And yes, even the media tent on the north lawn of U.N. Headquarters is cutting its catering offerings, though it will still be open Saturday for the dedicated reporters.

## IN REVIEW

### ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER TALKING SHOP?

As we wrap up, your U.N. Playbook took the temperature from some key names here in New York about how the week played out...

**THE ROAD TO COP...** Climate was a big theme this year, centered around Wednesday's **Climate Ambition Summit**. I caught up with one of the big names in climate policy in Europe, **Teresa Ribera**, Spain's deputy prime minister and ecology minister.

Ribera is upbeat about how the week went. "There was a mix of realism and ambition," she said, describing this week's meeting as "an important stepping-stone" on the road to the COP28 summit in Dubai — which begins in late November.

The "loss and damage" fund established at last year's COP to help countries struggling from the impact of climate change was a big topic of conversation at a meeting of ministers at UNHQ on Friday.

"We are now having the conversation about the how, not the why of whether we need the fund," Ribera said. "The next step is discussing how to cover with innovative sources the gap of \$100 billion a year."

**When you're not in the room, but in the room...** British Prime Minister **Rishi Sunak** may have opted out of this week, but his decision to [water down](#) his government's climate targets — announced Wednesday — had everyone talking.

"I think everyone here is pretty surprised," Ribera said. "The U.K. — its universities, its businesses, its government in fact — was something of a leader in this field. And the argument that it's about the cost of living? Everyone has cost of living issues. It's about how you communicate, implement the green agenda."

Even French President **Emmanuel Macron**, who also skipped UNGA, appeared to [subtly roll](#) the British PM from Paris where he welcomed King Charles, an early convert to the ecological cause.

### Guterres takes charge ... but not everyone's happy...

I heard frustrations from several diplomats about a lack of information and protocol arrangements from the U.N. side about the Climate Ambition Summit, which was headed by Secretary General **António Guterres**.

**Wait your turn...** Delegations got an alphabetic list of speakers — but no one knew their time slot. "We literally did not get information until the last minute," said one official. But others saw it as a clever move. "He actually managed to achieve what usually doesn't happen at these high-level events — leaders were forced to listen to other speeches as they waited for their time to come up," said one seasoned U.N. attendee.

Then again, some of the world's biggest polluters — the United States and China — weren't given speaking slots as **Guterres** tried a [name-and-shame approach](#).

### ON UKRAINE...

While Ukraine may have been making headlines, with the in-person speech of President **Volodymyr Zelenskyy** and a special session on the war, some were worried that it risked being crowded out.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister **Gabrielius Landsbergis** expressed concern that Ukraine did not get the same level of attention as last year. "You could feel that during the speeches in the General Assembly. There has been a shift; a sense that Ukraine is just one of the cases globally that needs attention," he told me.

Lithuania, along with the other Baltic states, has been one of the most vocal supporters of Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion. Landsbergis said he worked this week to convince non-European countries that this is much more than a local war, meeting in particular with Asian-Pacific countries like Philippines, Malaysia, and Bhutan, as the Baltic country pursues a new [Indo-Pacific strategy](#).

### ON THE U.N. SECURITY COUNCIL...

**Helen Clark**, former New Zealand prime minister and chair of the United Nations Development Group.

"When I was with the U.N. I used to make the point that, despite the criticism that it is just a talking shop, everyone comes every year. This year, that's not true. I personally think that it is disgraceful that, of the permanent five members of the Security Council, four of the leaders aren't here. Doesn't being a member of the permanent five carry with it a responsibility to front up and pull your weight at a leadership level?"

### ON HEALTH...

There were not one, but three health-related declarations signed this week at UNGA — even though a group of 11 countries who opposed the measures still threaten to cause trouble when they go to the General Assembly for adoption later in the year. There were also an array of other gatherings, including a meeting by African Union leaders on malaria.

So what's the verdict of some of those at the frontlines of these issues?

Dr. **Michael Charles**, CEO of the [RBM Partnership to End Malaria](#) welcomed the various declarations that were signed on health this week:

"Having a declaration is a first step but it's not the only step. The world still needs to come together. The next question is resourcing and financing. From the Global South our leaders have said very clearly that we need to look at debt repayment — how do we restructure this so that we have enough money to pay for some of these needs."

**Lucica Ditu** of the Stop TB Partnership, speaking after a declaration on the fight against tuberculosis was signed Friday:

"We have had a very positive week here — we took the place by storm, hosting meetings every day and agreeing [on] additional investment in preventative treatment. But I'm disappointed personally that heads of state and government did not attend in the numbers we wanted. We speak to health ministers all the time — which is great — but this is an opportunity for us to meet higher-ranking officials we don't get to meet."

### ON THE SDGs...

This was a big week for the Sustainable Development Goals, with leaders convening on Monday to take stock of progress on [the 17 goals](#) that were agreed way back in 2015.

Here's **Carlos Alvarado**, former President of Costa Rica and member of the Club de Madrid.

"On the positive, I think it's a good reboot to remind leaders why this is so critical now that we're at the halfway point. On the negative, the results have not been good so far. We're lagging behind, even regressing, and it's a good reminder that we need to re-prioritize SDGs. Because SDGs are not an end of themselves. They actually drive human development, across the board, and also improve our relationship with nature."

### MENENDEZ REVERBERATIONS

**WHEN NEW JERSEY MATTERS TO THE WORLD: Bob Menendez**, the powerful Democratic senator from New Jersey who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has been indicted on [corruption-related charges](#) that involve everything from gold bars to Egypt.

The reverberations are global, given Menendez's influence on U.S. foreign policy decisions, including arms sales. The governments of Cuba, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are among those likely to enjoy this moment. They've all seen him sink some of their hopes. Menendez's hawkishness has also at times put him at odds with the Biden administration.

"They'll pop some champagne!" **Alper Coşkun**, a senior fellow in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Europe Program, predicted [to our colleagues at NatSec Daily](#) when asked about Turkey's response.

The senator denies any impropriety and notes he's beaten similar accusations before. Menendez has agreed to [relinquish his position as chair](#) until the court case is resolved. Just who will fill his spot could dramatically affect Senate, and global, business.

### THE COUP DEFENSE

**GABONESE PM DEFENDS COUP** — Gabonese interim Prime Minister **Raymond Ndong Sima** took the podium Friday, a day after Gabon's original speaking slot was skipped over amid [questions over who would represent the nation after a military coup](#).

He described a "chaotic electoral process" on Aug. 30 when Gabon's Armed Forces launched a coup just minutes after the country's Electoral Commission announced **Ali Bongo**'s win.

Sima pushed back on international condemnation, wanting to "provide a balance of information and to allay some suspicions," he said, highlighting the international concerns over the validity of the 2016 election and [the violent protests that followed](#).

This year's elections risked a similar outbreak in violence, he said. "This military intervention without any bloodshed ... was seen as the lesser of two evils."

## QUOTES OF THE WEEK

**OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF WORLD LEADERS:** We curated some of the more striking quotes from speeches head of state and other foreign officials gave to the General Assembly. Many of them are not from G7 countries — maybe making them feel freer to be candid and colorful. We'll leave it to readers to figure out the context.

"What is the difference between the Arab Spring and the African Summer, I ask?" — Dominican President **Charles Savarin**

"It is time for the most responsible for climate change to put your money where your mouth is." — Micronesian President **Wesley Simina**

"There is no peace to maintain where the peace needs to be restored," — Senegalese President **Macky Sall**

"Our world is not a happy place today. We are not craving sympathy, and we do not want to be a scar on anybody's consciousness." — Ghanaian President **Nana Akufo-Addo**

"The consecutive innovations have led to productivity, prosperity and a level of communication amongst people that can be tantamount to science fiction." — Qatari Emir **Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani**

"If they got it wrong then, I bet you they have it wrong now." — Kenyan President **William Ruto**

"The world is bigger than five." — Turkish President **Recep Tayyip Erdogan**

## SEEN AND HEARD

### AROUND TOWN

**DR. OZ REPS SUPPLEMENTS** — **Mehmet Oz** was at the U.S.-Cambodia Business Forum at the Millennium Hotel Friday. When asked what brought the TV host, surgeon and former Senate candidate to the business forum, Oz said he was there as part of his work building schools for the Cambodian Children's Fund.

But on the event's sign-in sheet, Oz listed his affiliation as iHerb, a supplement e-commerce site that Oz has promoted on his show and social media. Representatives of the company were in town to meet with government officials on health and e-commerce policy.

At the coffee station, Oz told Mona to "go for the decaf." No chance, doc!

Cambodian Prime Minister **Hun Manet** presided over the meeting in his first appearance in the U.S. since being appointed to the post in August. Also in attendance: **Leth Bun Oun**, whose memoir on his journey from the killing fields of Cambodia to the Secret Service was published in February; head of Southeast Asia at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce **John Goyer**; and CEO of the US-ASEAN Business Council **Ted Osius**.

**A WEED REPORTER GOES TO THE U.N.** — "Is it legal here?" was the first question when diplomats, delegates and their ilk found out Mona — who more regularly spends her days as a cannabis policy reporter — was chipping in on U.N. coverage this week.

Many were eager to point out dispensaries they spotted in the area, only to be confused to learn of their illegality. In fact, not a single regulated dispensary has managed to open up shop in Midtown Manhattan, where the U.N. and most of the side events are happening.

Others expressed fears that they would get a contact high as they made their way through the inevitable clouds of weed smoke that have become a permanent feature of New York City sidewalks.

(For the record, this is very unlikely to happen, unless you happen to be in a poorly ventilated, hotboxed enclosure.)

**ICYMI:** Quad foreign ministers (that's the U.S., India, Australia and Japan) issued a [barely veiled warning](#) to China following a meeting on the sidelines of UNGA on Thursday.

"We reconfirm our conviction that international law, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the maintenance of peace and security in the maritime domain underpin the development and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific."

### AGENDA

— The **U.N. General Assembly** continues. Speakers in the morning session include: Russian Foreign Affairs Minister **Sergey Lavrov**, Mexican Foreign Affairs Minister **Alicia Bárcena Ibarra** and Azerbaijani Foreign Affairs Minister **Jeyhun Aziz oglu Bayramov**.

In the afternoon slot: Saudi Arabian Foreign Affairs Minister **Faysal bin Farhan Al Saud**, Burkinabè Foreign Affairs Minister **Olivia Ragnagnewendé Rouamba** and Venezuelan Foreign Affairs Minister **Yvan Gil Pinto**.

**AND THAT'S A WRAP...** from me, Suzanne Lynch, in New York. Keep an eye on your feed for the next Global Playbook, coming to you from Dubai in November at COP28.

*Thanks to Carmen Paur; Eric Bazail-Eimil; editor Heidi Vogt; and producer Kelsey Griffin.*

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