



OP-ED

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Kelly Knight Craft Is Quickly – and Smartly – Making Africa a Priority

How is Kelly Knight Craft doing as U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations?

It is almost exactly one month since Craft presented her credentials to Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Sept. 12. It has been an eventful period, including the annual General Assembly jamboree and Security Council crisis talks on North Korea and Syria. To top it off, Guterres warned this week that the U.N. is about to run out of operating funds because over 60 members have not paid their annual dues. The U.S. has accumulated over \$1 billion in arrears, equivalent to a third of the U.N.'s regular budget, putting Craft in a tricky spot.

Burdened with a long to-do list when she hit the ground in New York, Craft has had little time to set out her agenda. But she has dropped hints about her priorities, with a focus on Africa. Foreign diplomats will watch her position on the cash crunch closely.

The new ambassador's immediate priority was to steer President Donald Trump through the General Assembly during the week of Sept. 23. This was a moment for self-effacement. All ambassadors recede into the background during the high-level gatherings of assembly week, letting their heads of state dominate

proceedings. Trump gave a lackluster performance at the U.N., distracted by the threat of impeachment, but Craft got through the week with no big hiccups.

The General Assembly week aside, Craft has made an effort to engage earnestly in routine Security Council diplomacy. Her predecessor, Nikki Haley, largely avoided debates on African issues in her first months in New York in 2017, though she eventually gave them more weight as her term continued. By contrast, Craft has already attended council sessions on Mali and the Great Lakes region of Central Africa. She and her South African counterpart, Jerry Matjila, are also set to be co-leaders of a Security Council visiting mission to South Sudan later this month.

This early focus on Africa, and South Sudan in particular, is smart for several reasons.

Most immediately, South Sudan faces serious political risks in the coming weeks, as President Salva Kiir and his long-time rival Riek Machar are supposed to agree on a new government. If they fail to do so, there is a risk of new violence, leaving the already overstretched U.N. peacekeeping force in the country hard-pressed to protect civilians. The Security Council visit, and the clear demonstration of American interest in the process, may help prod the politicians toward a bargain, although Kiir has had fraught relations with the U.S. in the past.

Second, the decision to link up with South Africa is a clever way to strengthen ties with the strongest African state currently on the council. When the South Africans took their seat at the

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start of 2019, their initial instinct was to side with the Chinese and Russians on controversial topics like the Venezuelan crisis. But they were disappointed when Beijing and Moscow blocked the Security Council from supporting the African Union's efforts to mediate a transition to civilian rule in Sudan after the fall of former President Omar al-Bashir. Since then, the South Africans have been more open to working with the U.S. and Europeans in New York. Craft's cooperation with Matjila on the South Sudan trip is a good way to cement that relationship.

It is also an opportunity for the U.S. ambassador to define some political space of her own on a topic that more-powerful players in the Trump administration, such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, do not prioritize. As I argued earlier this year, Craft is unlikely to be a crucial figure in U.S. diplomacy over first-order national security concerns such as the Korean Peninsula and the Middle East, although she did use a Security Council session on the latter to affirm, as all U.S. ambassadors must, that she is a strong supporter of Israel. She can have a real impact in other parts of the world, though, and as I suggested when Haley announced she would be stepping down last October, Africa is one of them.

The Trump administration's continuing lack of interest in using the U.N. as a platform to address higher-level national security concerns was made very clear this month, as North Korea conducted new missile tests and Turkey launched its latest incursion in Syria. In both cases, European members of the Security Council—led by France, Germany and the U.K.—insisted on holding emergency sessions after the U.S. failed to call for them. In the case of North Korea, the U.S. presumably did not want to harm its already strained diplomatic contacts with Pyongyang or create a sense of urgency about an issue Trump claims to have in hand. In the case of Syria, U.S. policy toward the Turkish operation has been so confused throughout the past week, it is not surprising that others took the lead in New York.

In such situations, the U.S. has little interest in promoting multilateral debates, and Craft and her team have little room for maneuver or creativity. This is not the ambassador's fault, but it underlines the need for Craft to identify her own priorities on files where she can have an impact.

That said, it may be difficult for Craft to focus on many foreign crises while the U.N. goes through a financial crisis of its own in New York. Guterres has been warning for much of this year of shortfalls in the organization's regular budget—which covers basic headquarters costs, like hosting meetings, but also its political missions in places like Libya—due to member states' failure to pay their annual contributions.

This week, he declared that the U.N. may not be able to pay its staff in November, and Security Council members have been told to end their daily meetings at 6 p.m. sharp as there is no money to pay extra translators for the additional hours.

This is partly a bit of theater to put delinquent states on the spot—experts on U.N. financing think Guterres could get around the problem through ruses such as borrowing money from the separate peacekeeping budget. But it is a headache for Craft. The U.S. owes over \$600 million in regular budget dues to the U.N. for this year, and almost \$400 million for past years. (It also owes \$2 billion to the peacekeeping budget Guterres could end up borrowing from.)

Washington normally doesn't pay its full U.N. obligations until late October or November anyway, so this is not necessarily part of some grand U.S. plot against the U.N. But it is a distraction for Craft just as she is trying to establish her broader diplomatic agenda. She should do what she can to ensure that the U.S. fulfills its obligations to the U.N. regular budget as fast as it can. In picking up the South Sudan issue, the new ambassador has shown an instinct for focusing some American attention on crises that would otherwise stay below the radar. It will be harder to do that if she is bickering with other ambassadors over cash.