Source: *The Straits Times,* pB4
Date: 16 February 2026

On paper, US President Donald Trump's Board of Peace resembles a conventional international organisation. Its charter declares international legal personality, establishes organs, sets voting rules, and provides for amendment. But authority is concentrated in extraordinary fashion in one office – and one individual. PHOTO: AFP

Trump's Board of Peace: Should we take it literally or seriously?

As it prepares to hold its inaugural meeting this week, plenty of questions remain about the design and larger ambitions of this neo-royalist organisation.

Simon Chesterman

When the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2803 in late 2025, it welcomed the proposed Board of Peace as a transitional mechanism to help implement a plan to end the horrific Gaza conflict. At the time, it appeared to be another pragmatic, time-limited device in the long tradition of ad hoc arrangements endorsed by the council to implement a mandate.

Then, at Davos in January, US President Donald Trump unveiled something far more ambitious and ambiguous. The Board of Peace was touted as a new "international organisation" with a global mandate to promote stability and restore governance in "areas affected or threatened by conflict". On Feb 19, it meets for the first time in Washington at the recently renamed Donald J. Trump Institute of Peace. A reconstruction plan and stabilisation force for Gaza will be the focus of its inaugural meeting.

Membership of the board is invitation-only. Some 30-odd states have already signed on — including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Argentina, and most recently Israel. Many European governments have publicly declined the invitation, citing constitutional or policy concerns. Canada initially expressed openness about joining, but President Trump withdrew the invitation after Prime Minister Mark Carney's own speech in Davos, in which he called for middle powers to rally against the economic coercion of unnamed "great powers".

Others are more circumspect. Singapore is among those "assessing" whether to join. That phrase is doing some heavy lifting. Voltaire is said to have observed that when diplomats say "yes", they mean "maybe"; when they say "maybe", they mean "no"; and if they say "no", then they are no diplomats at all.

The wariness is justified. For this is not simply an invitation to attend an event hosted by the US President, but to take a step in the direction of a new and uncertain world order.

For many international lawyers, the Trump initiative is disorienting. The United Nations may be flawed, fragile, and underfunded, but it remains the constitutional centre of the post-1945 order. The Board of Peace now looks like something else entirely.

NEO-ROYALISM

On paper, the board resembles a conventional international organisation. Its charter declares international legal personality, establishes organs, sets voting rules, and provides for amendment.

But authority is concentrated in extraordinary fashion in one office – and one individual.

Mr Trump is named as inaugural chairman. He approves all decisions of the board. He appoints and may remove its executive board. He confirms amendments. He is the final authority on interpretation. He designates his successor. He may dissolve the organisation at will – and in any event it dissolves at the end of every odd-numbered year unless he chooses to renew it.

Membership is by invitation of the chairman. States contributing more than US$1 billion (S$1.26 billion) avoid term limits. Funding is voluntary and may come from "other sources".

Policy wonks have searched for analogies. In its Gaza role, it resembles transitional administrations in the former Yugoslavia and Timor-Leste, which trace their heritage back through the Trusteeship system of the UN and the Mandates system of the League of Nations.

But its larger ambitions evoke much older models of order: the 19th-century Concert of Europe, where stability was managed by a small club of powers operating through personal relationships rather than universal law. Yet even the concert was a gathering of peers. The Board of Peace is explicitly hierarchical.

The UN was built on liberal institutionalism, grounded in rules and sovereign equality. It has long coexisted uneasily with realism, which acknowledges the primacy of state power. What we see here is something different: a kind of neo-royalism, centring authority in a dominant individual – privileging personal leadership, hierarchy, and transactional loyalty over both institutional constraint and systemic equilibrium.

Liberal institutionalism trusts rules, some would say naively. Realism trusts states, some would say cynically. Neo-royalism asks us to trust the ruler.

DISCONTENT GOES GLOBAL

It would be tempting to dismiss this as theatre. One commentator described it as "an imperial court where vassal states pay cash and vie for the ear of the orange emperor".

But that misses the point.

Across many countries – not only the United States – voters have expressed deep dissatisfaction with established institutions. They see them as distant, technocratic, and unresponsive. Populist and authoritarian movements have gained traction by arguing that traditional systems serve elites rather than ordinary people. The proposed remedy is not incremental reform but decisive leadership, even if that means abandoning longstanding norms.

The Board of Peace translates that domestic mood into international design. Its preamble calls for departing from institutions that have "too often failed". It promises nimbleness and results. Legitimacy, in this conception, flows from effectiveness and access, not from sovereign equality or elaborate procedure.

In that sense, the board is not an aberration but a symptom. When confidence in institutional liberalism wanes domestically, it should not surprise us that international institutionalism is questioned as well.

WHITHER THE UN?

Reflexive defence of established institutions like the UN will not suffice. The Security Council entrenches privilege among its permanent five members, freezing political reality at the end of the Second World War. The UN itself struggles for relevance amid geopolitical rivalry, technological disruption, and the slow-burning climate crisis. Financially, it is being starved and remains dependent on discretionary funding that can distort priorities.

Yet each time leading states have proposed alternatives, the UN has endured. In the wake of the Iraq war in 2003, the United States proposed a League of Democracies to find greater support for its objectives. Variations abound – contact groups, "coalitions of the willing", the G-7, G-20, the Summit for Democracy – each born of frustration with multilateral gridlock. None supplanted the UN. They coexisted with it, sometimes competing, sometimes reinforcing, but ultimately returning to it when legitimacy was required.

The Board of Peace may yet fit within that pattern. Its Gaza iteration reflects a division of labour that is familiar to the UN. The most likely outcome of this week's meeting is a funding vehicle for reconstruction, and a group of states working together to establish an International Stabilisation Force.

The novelty lies in the larger ambition and the design. The board is not embedded within the UN system; it is rhetorically positioned as an alternative to it.

LITERALLY OR SERIOUSLY?

So, how should we take it?

To take the board literally is to interrogate its legal foundations: whether three signatures sufficed for entry into force; whether a head of state may bind his or her country without legislative approval; whether such a structure truly creates an independent international organisation; whether its decisions could conflict with obligations under the UN Charter.

To take it seriously is to recognise what it signals: impatience with existing norms, attraction to speed over deliberation, and willingness to experiment with radically different institutional forms when established ones are seen as failing.

Nonetheless, we should be wary of accepting the premise that power and money alone shape the world, dismissing law and principle. A middle ground lies in what Finnish President Alexander Stubb has called "value-based realism": holding fast to core principles while recognising the world as it is.

For Singapore – a small, trade-dependent state that has long championed a rules-based order – the calculus is delicate. Engagement may offer influence; abstention may affirm principle.

At Davos, Prime Minister Carney invoked a metaphor that is also the title of a memoir by Professor S. Jayakumar, formerly Singapore's ambassador to the UN: if you're not at the table, you may find yourself on the menu.

Mr Trump's Board of Peace presents itself as the solution to global disorder. But the table he is setting is unmistakably lopsided. Only one diner writes the menu and orders a la carte; the rest choose from a set menu – or wait to see what, or who, is served.

• Simon Chesterman is David Marshall Professor of Law at the National University of Singapore, and dean of NUS College.

Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.