



Twilight of Multilateralism: Reforging the UN in an Age of Polycrisis

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Dying of the Light (Not so Fast)

As the United Nations marks its 80th anniversary, it faces a profound crisis of confidence, hamstrung by a crippling liquidity shortfall and thwarted from taking bold, yet necessary, actions by its most powerful members.

The concerns voiced by the UN's 193 Member States are largely focused on the institution's ability to address global challenges due to geopolitical gridlock, pervasive inefficiency, and a growing legitimacy gap.

Many UN followers and insiders attribute the organization's perceived ineffectiveness to factors such as Member States' reluctance to compromise, inconsistent fulfilment of responsibilities, selective compliance with established regulations, and the withholding of member dues when recommended actions are deemed inconvenient.

Such practices corrode the bedrock of international order; a consensus painstakingly built over decades. Yet the gravest threat to the United Nations is not procedural sclerosis but a collapse of conviction among its members.

If the principles that originally brought nations together are forsaken, even the most ambitious institutional reforms will not work. The authority and the imperative to make the organization effective rests not with its bureaucracy, but with the Member States that direct its every action.

Few of these concerns are new and have resulted from a slow-burning crisis of confidence, aggravated by decades of inaction. Some of the more glaring examples of this self-inflicted decline include:

- **The return of great power competition** that reintroduced geopolitical rivalry directly into the Security Council, often paralyzing it with vetoes on major conflicts;
- The **1994 Rwandan genocide**, which claimed 800,000 lives, was a catastrophic failure of international political will. UN peacekeepers were rendered powerless by a restrictive mandate that forbade them from using force to protect civilians.
- **The post-9/11 "War on Terror" and the 2003 invasion of Iraq** which without a clear Security Council mandate dealt a severe blow to the UN's credibility and the very idea of collective security;
- **The 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya**, authorized to protect civilians but evolved into a campaign for regime change which other countries saw as a pretext for Western interventionism;
- **The global wave of populism and nationalism** is openly and forcefully questioning the value of international institutions. This has led to the erosion of confidence in the liberal, multilateral order leaving the UN on the defensive;

The UN is being forced to rethink its purpose, its challenge no longer one of ambitious expansion but a defensive struggle to preserve a fraying multilateral system.

This painful irony was underscored by Secretary-General António Guterres, who marked the anniversary not with a celebration, but with a stark warning of new and growing threats that require immediate attention.

In a speech to the General Assembly at the start of this year, Guterres cautioned that the world had opened a “modern-day Pandora’s box” of threats — the very dangers the UN was designed to contain but now seems powerless to confront.

These challenges are:

- a cascade of **runaway conflicts** fueled by geopolitical division;
- **unchecked climate change** quickly making parts of our planet unlivable;
- **rampant inequalities** eroding social cohesion and trust, and;
- the **rapid rise of artificial intelligence** which demands urgent global governance.

In addition to these emerging threats, the UN has identified the vast and ever-expanding portfolio of mandates which are exacerbating systemic inefficiencies and further straining underfunded efforts.

A Multilateral System Complex by Design

In March 2025, Secretary-General Guterres introduced the UN80 initiative in conjunction with the UN's 80th anniversary. The aim of this initiative is to restructure the organization with an emphasis on efficiency, operational focus, and increased support from Member States. A primary objective is to enhance integration within the organization and address issues related to redundancies and internal competition.

From an operational standpoint, the United Nations organizational structure functions less as a simple chart and more as a representation of a multifaceted political ecosystem. For clarity, this intricate network of institutions can be conceptualized as three distinct entities operating under one unified mandate.

- ❖ First is the **Fortress**: the Security Council. This is an exclusive club where five nations hold a veto, and its primary function is not global action, but preventing great-power conflict, often through “controlled paralysis”. It writes the rules of war and peace but outsources the consequences.
- ❖ Second is the **Network**: the vast, decentralized web of humanitarian and development agencies like WHO, ILO and the World Food Programme. Their true power comes not from political mandates, but from leveraging their complementary expertise to meet complex challenges of many global crises. This is the UN at work, on the ground and helping people everywhere. This is what the world sees on the news and in real-time if they are traveling to areas where the UN has operations.
- ❖ Third is the **Pulpit**: the General Assembly and the human rights bodies. With no army and no treasury, their only currency is moral authority. They wield the power to define what is right, even when they have no power to enforce it.

The UN's daily reality is the collision of these three worlds: the **Fortress** dictates what is politically possible; the **Pulpit** argues for what is morally necessary, and; the **Network** is left to manage the gap between the two on the ground.

Considering these complexities, the 80th General Assembly should be seen as a pivotal crisis summit, addressing numerous global challenges and striving to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency, and innovation of the system to meet these challenges.

With 180 separate agenda points for UNGA 80, the assembled delegates work can be distilled into three massive categories that require concerted action by the system. These include:

- **Geopolitical Crises**
 - The ongoing war in Ukraine highlights the complex challenges of global security, territorial integrity, international law, and impacts on food and energy prices.
 - The ongoing strategic competition between the United States, China, and Russia frequently affects Security Council decisions further complicating action.
- **Planetary and Economic Crises**
 - Many developing nations are experiencing significant debt and require substantial financial support, potentially involving trillions of dollars.
 - The effects of climate change—such as record heatwaves, floods, and storms—have shifted discussions toward immediate action on emissions and the provision of funding for climate adaptation and addressing loss and damage.
- **The Crisis of Trust**
 - Underpinning everything is a profound crisis of faith in global cooperation and widespread frustration that the international system is unfair and that its core institutions are anachronistic and paralyzed.
 - This has fueled an intense debate on UN reform and will be the unofficial backdrop to the start of the race to select the next Secretary-General, a process that is itself a referendum on what kind of leadership the world needs.

The impact of the General Assembly is rarely felt in a single, dramatic breakthrough. It's more about setting the course for the year ahead and sending a powerful signal about the state of global cooperation.

The Undervalued Asset of Membership

Before reviewing the UN80 Initiative, I would like to provide a broad sweep of the US's relationship to the UN, its hand in its creation, the size and scope of activities as well as the benefits that it derives from being a top contributor to the UN system.

US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, building on the principles of the Atlantic Charter, was one of the primary architects of the UN. President Roosevelt skillfully built bipartisan domestic support for the UN in Congress and with the public. The UN system was established by Charter signed in San Francisco in 1945 and has been headquartered in New York City since 1950.

Its operations and the global economy have been supported by a system of international monetary management as well as the development financing through the World Bank which came into being after negotiations at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire in 1944.

The UN system addresses a vast spectrum of issues, categorized under its five core pillars:

- maintaining peace and security;
- protecting human rights;
- delivering humanitarian aid;
- promoting sustainable development, and;
- developing and upholding international law.

The UN System is comprised of six main organs, 43 independent agencies, funds, programs and bodies, with 193 Member States, functioning with approximately 131,000 staff in 1,100 offices worldwide. Each year, the UN collaborates globally with tens of thousands of development partners on technical projects to improve lives and livelihoods.

The UN system has a two-tiered funding structure (2023 figures):

- **Assessed Contributions** **\$9.7 bl** (mandatory - capacity to pay: *GNI, Pop, debt*)
 - Regular budget \$3.6 bl (*US pays 22% - \$720 million*)
 - Peacekeeping Budget \$6.1 bl (*US pays 26% - \$1.3 billion*)
- **Voluntary Contributions** **\$61.5 bl** (supports UN's specialized A/F/P)
 - Core \$5.7 bl
 - Earmark \$41 bl

Key Funding Challenge:

- ❖ The UN is heavily dependent on donor-directed funding with earmarked contributions accounting for over **87%** of all voluntary funds (*US provides \$11 bl*).
- ❖ Earmarking allows a small group of donors to dictate how and on what the UN can spend this funding and shift administrative and political power to this group.
- ❖ Additionally, some of the richest countries are reducing development aid, boosting defense budgets, and gearing up for heightened competition. While the UNGA can highlight these shifts they are not in a position to change them.

Ever since its inception, the UN system has been the cornerstone of the post-WWII multilateral order and a critical partner for US foreign policy.

The United States' engagement with the United Nations is a matter of strategic interest, providing a "force multiplier" for its diplomatic, security, and economic goals. This

relationship allows Washington to address global challenges cost-effectively while shaping the international system to its vision.

1. Security at a Fraction of the Cost

- US authorizes UN peacekeeping missions, which are eight times less expensive for American taxpayers than deploying U.S.-led forces (GAO report);
- The US also leverages its leadership at the UN to pass and enforce robust international sanctions against rogue states and terrorist groups, a critical component of its national security strategy.
- Beyond conflicts, UN agencies collaborate with US law enforcement to combat transnational threats, such as monitoring the flow of illicit drugs.

2. A Direct Economic Return

- Hosting the UN headquarters in NYC injects over \$3.6 billion into the local economy annually.
- Although not yet estimated, the presence of the World Bank and IMF in Washington also generates significant economic vitality into the capital's economy.
- US companies consistently win more UN procurement contracts than any other nation, securing over \$2.4 billion a year which supports American jobs.

3. Creating Future Markets

- US foreign aid through the UN's development framework fosters economic growth and a stronger middle class in recipient nations, these programs increase their purchasing power for goods and services, including the US (i.e. South Korea and Brazil, have become major trading partners);
- US engagement in the UN creates immediate demand for goods and services from US companies in the sectors of agriculture, pharmaceutical/medical equipment, transportation, engineering and ICT)

4. Setting Global Standards

- US representatives have immense influence in setting technical standards that govern global industries through the ITU, ICAO, ILO, IMO, FAO, WHO and WIPO;
- US leadership in these bodies ensures that American innovation and technology are embedded in the global marketplace, benefiting US corporations and maintaining their competitive edge.

Although some people may associate the UN with blue helmets peacekeepers, or trucks delivering humanitarian aid, or diplomatic gatherings in New York, the full scope of its work often goes unnoticed. The UN influence extends far beyond these high-profile activities, shaping the very fabric of our interconnected world in ways that are rarely visible to the public.

These efforts, though often unseen, are essential to the seamless functioning of everything from international trade and shipping, air travel to protecting intellectual property rights and to ensuring fair working conditions.

Consider for example:

- When a shopper finds a bargain at a big box store or an online order arrives in record time, few acknowledge the World Trade Organization's role in regulating and facilitating global commerce;
- After breezing through airport security, travelers rarely credit the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) for establishing the uniform safety standards for machine-readable passports and biometrics that make such a smooth passage possible, or;
- When connecting to Wi-Fi anywhere in the world, it is the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) that has managed the global radio-frequency spectrum, a critical and often recognized responsibility.

A deeper understanding of the UN's role in our daily lives could foster a greater appreciation for its work behind the scenes setting global standards that underpin the modern economy.

Pushing for a Nimbler UN

To mark the UN's 80th anniversary as an opportunity for its renewal, Secretary-General Guterres launched the UN80 Initiative to address donor's concerns by reinvigorating the UN system to meet the challenges of today and strengthen its ability to anticipate tomorrow's global challenges.

The Initiative is a system-wide reform effort designed to translate the visionary principles of the Secretary-General's 2021 report "Our Common Agenda" which is further guided by the specific commitments of the 2024 Member-State led process called "Pact for the Future."

It is the intention of the UN system that this framing will be a practical engine for building a more effective and relevant organization. "Our Common Agenda" sets out a proposal for renewing the social contract, increasing global solidarity, and adjusting aspects of global governance. The initiative is designed to supplement existing agreements by outlining approaches that address issues such as climate change, inequality, and digital access.

The Pact for the Future is the culmination of an intensive intergovernmental negotiation process which seeks to forge a new international consensus for both the present and the future. It is designed to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs) and to strengthen global governance in an era of profound transition and interconnected crises.

At its core, the UN80 initiative uses three main workstreams — enhancing efficiency, reviewing mandates, and realigning structures—to implement the Pact's ambitious roadmap. This process directly answers "Our Common Agenda's" call for a more networked and inclusive multilateralism.

STREAM 1: Improving Efficiency and Effectiveness

This workstream focuses on immediate, practical measures to streamline operations, reduce costs, and enhance service delivery under the UN's current structure.

- The primary output for this stream will be the forthcoming revised estimates for the 2026 program budget. This is the most anticipated document, as it will translate the initiative's goals into concrete budgetary and administrative actions. It is expected to be presented to the current General Assembly for consideration.
- A dedicated Working Group for the Secretariat is tasked with developing specific proposals which will include:
 - reducing posts by 20% in some departments (other estimates are higher);
 - relocating services and staff from high-cost duty stations like New York and Geneva to lower-cost locations;
 - centralizing IT and support services, and;
 - eliminating redundancies.

STREAM 2: Reviewing UN Mandates

The Mandate Implementation Review has been completed, and the findings show that the UN system's effectiveness is undermined by “mandate overload”, with excessive demands exceeding available resources and time.

- The report highlights frequent duplication and wasted funds due to competing mandates among UN bodies, and heavy reporting detracting from fieldwork.
- A major issue identified is the lack of expiration dates for most mandates, allowing outdated activities to persist and blocking resource reallocation to urgent priorities.
- Chronic underfunding worsens this problem, as Member States often assign new tasks without additional funding. UNGA Resolutions often use the language “within existing resources” to avoid calling for additional funding which has not been forthcoming.
- To address these challenges, the report recommends reforms such as:
 - creating a digital registry of mandates;
 - using AI tools for clearer resolutions, and;
 - requiring that all new tasks be fully funded to proceed, and;

- making sunset clauses mandatory in new resolutions, ensuring regular review and justification for ongoing activities.

Ultimately, implementation depends on Member States' willingness to commit to change and overhaul longstanding organizational practices.

STREAM 3: Making Structural Changes and Programmatic Realignment

This is the most ambitious and long-term workstream, exploring fundamental changes to the UN's organizational structure, including merging agencies and consolidating functions to eliminate deep-seated duplication.

While a single, definitive report for this stream is still forthcoming (*expected in 2026*), its direction has been outlined through several channels:

1. **Leaked Internal Memos:** Confidential memos have revealed radical proposals being considered, including:
 - **Creation of a Single Humanitarian Mega-Agency:** One of the most significant suggestions is to merge the operational responsibilities of the UN's major humanitarian powerhouses—the WFP, UNICEF, and the WHO—into a single, unified humanitarian entity. Another option suggests creating a "UN Humanitarian Operations Dept" by integrating the OCHA, WFP, UNRWA, and a new "UN Refugee & Migration Agency" formed by merging UNHCR and IOM.
 - **Consolidation of Peace and Security Functions:** The memo proposes merging the Dept of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and the Dept of Peace Operations (DPO) into a single department. It also suggests consolidating various Special Envoy and Special Advisor mandates to eliminate overlaps.
 - **Major Mergers in Health and Gender Equality:** It explicitly suggests the "strategic integration" of UNAIDS into the WHO to create a more unified global health authority. Similarly, it proposes to merge UN Women and UNFPA to form a new entity focused on gender equality and reproductive health.
 - **Streamlining Human Rights Mechanisms:** The memo calls for the establishment of a unified "Office for the Protection of Vulnerable Populations" by consolidating several specialized protection-related offices.
 - **Cost-Cutting and Relocation:** Beyond structural changes, the document details aggressive cost-saving measures. This includes a strategic reduction of the UN's presence in high-cost locations like New York and Geneva, with

proposals to relocate staff and functions to more affordable hubs. It also calls for a reduction in high-level posts (D1 and above) across the system.

2. **Seven Thematic Clusters:** The structural reform work is being advanced through seven high-level clusters (*Peace and Security, Humanitarian, Development [UN System and Secretariat], Human Rights, Training and Research, Specialized Agencies*), which bring together the heads of various UN entities to develop and vet reform options within their respective areas.
3. **Review of Field Presence:** The Secretary-General has explicitly stated his intention to review and consolidate the structure of Regional Offices, Special Representatives, and Envoys to create a more streamlined and cost-effective system. The findings from the first two workstreams are intended to directly inform these broader structural decisions.

While Member States broadly support the UN80 Initiative, different groupings have divergent views of what may or may not happen. For example:

- ❖ The **US** is a key proponent but **emphasizes cost-cutting and a return to core peace and security functions**;
- ❖ **European members** support efficiency but **worry reforms could sideline priorities like human rights and climate action**;
- ❖ **China and the G77** support the reform but caution it should not be a pretext for major contributors to **avoid their financial obligations**, and they **stress the importance of the UN's development pillar**;
- The **African Group (C-10)** and the **L.69 Group** are concerned about the lack of progress in making the Security Council more representative. Their reform proposals include expanding seats, limiting veto use, and improving accountability.

Next Steps and Decisions

With the start of the 80th Session of the UN General Assembly on 9 September 2025, this ambitious and controversial plan will be a crucial test of budget negotiations among the organization's 193 Member States.

A series of meetings at the General Assembly this year will determine whether the initial, practical proposals to streamline the bureaucracy will gain the necessary political and financial backing or are watered down by national interests and fiscal constraints.

The UN Secretariat formally submits its revised estimates for the 2026 program budget to the General Assembly by mid-September this year. This document will be the

first tangible translation of the initiative's work on improving efficiency into an actionable, and budgeted plan.

Political maneuvering will begin during the week of the **UNGA General Debate** (23-29 September) when world leaders, particularly major financial contributors, will be closely watched for signals of support or opposition to the specific cuts on the table.

The most decisive battles will take place in the UN's Fifth Committee, which oversees administrative and budgetary matters. The negotiations are expected to be contentious, and their outcome will determine which, if any, of the proposed efficiency measures, budget cuts, and staff reductions are ultimately approved.

The results of this fall's budget session will set the stage for the most ambitious part of the UN80 Initiative — *the potential merger of large UN agencies and structural realignments* — which is on a longer timeline, with formal proposals expected by 2026 and 2027.

Whether that ambitious vision for the UN succeeds or fails will be decided in the coming months. This series of upcoming negotiations are set to show if Member States truly share the Secretary-General's desire for a nimbler institution, or if the first attempt at a major overhaul in a generation will die a quiet death in committee.

For many UN employees, plummeting morale is tied to a suspicion that the UN80 Initiative will serve as a cover for significant layoffs. The prevailing fear is that these cuts will fail to address the organization's persistent problems, and may, in fact, exacerbate them.

Amid the raft of escalating global crises and deep-seated questions about its own relevance, the United Nations is quietly embarking on one of its most critical tasks: selecting a new Secretary-General to lead the institution through a deeply fractured era.

With Secretary-General Guterres's final term ending in December 2026, the race to succeed him is now underway. The contest, which is just beginning to take shape in the corridors of the UN headquarters in New York, is already defined by a fundamental clash between diplomatic tradition and the stark realities of great-power politics.

For example, under long-standing precedent, the SG post is expected to rotate to Latin America, and a vigorous campaign by many Member States is pushing for the appointment of the first-ever female leader. But those traditions are running headlong into the unassailable power of the five permanent members of the Security Council.

Despite modern, transparent measures like public forums with candidates, the final decision will be made in a series of secret "straw polls," where a single veto from the United

States, Russia, China, Britain, or France can end a candidacy. The process, diplomats concede, often produces not the most dynamic leader, but the one least objectionable to all sides.

According to senior diplomats and officials tracking the early discussions, two leading contenders have emerged, representing two distinct visions for the role:

- **Rebeca Grynspan** of Costa Rica, the head of the UN's trade and development agency, is seen by many member states as the embodiment of what they are seeking. A former vice president with deep experience in the UN system, her candidacy would satisfy the dual calls for a woman from the region.
- **Rafael Grossi** of Argentina, the Director-General of the IAEA, formally announced his bid in Washington recently. He is positioning himself as a crisis-tested manager who has gained a high profile for his hands-on diplomacy in global hotspots.

The choice between a seasoned development expert like Ms. Grynspan and a high-voltage crisis manager like Mr. Grossi – *or even a non-traditional yet undeclared candidate* – will offer a clear signal of the qualities the world's power brokers are prioritizing for the future of the UN.

A Necessary Path Forward

While the UN is an imperfect network of institutions, it has shown itself to be an indispensable partner for international cooperation and growth.

The criticisms it faces today are serious and raise questions about its mission and effectiveness. These concerns have converged with a cascade of global threats and a severe financial shortfall to create a moment of existential danger.

The UN80 initiative serves as a pragmatic recognition of existing limitations and outlines a comprehensive plan for reform. It seeks to adapt the organization to the complexities of current and future global challenges.

By addressing systemic issues within the mandate lifecycle and recommending significant consolidation of its functions, the United Nations aims to enhance its agility, coherence, and overall effectiveness.

Moving forward will be politically challenging. UN reform depends on cooperation between the system and Member States. And while the Secretary-General can make internal changes, Member States ultimately control mandates. They need to replace obsolete mandates, properly fund new ones, and support a streamlined structure.

In concluding his “Pandora’s Box” statement, Secretary-General Guterres’ said that after all the evils had escaped Pandora’s Box, “*Only Hope remained.*” He encouraged delegates to “never lose sight of hope” emphasizing that hope is achieved through action, adhering to principles and “speaking the truth.”