

In Defense of Multilateralism: The UN We Must Aspire To

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Global Politics

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations turned 80 in 2025. Although this anniversary might be a reason to celebrate, the United Nations has come under attack as a platform, an institution, and a system of values. Major contributors are reducing their payments to the UN, some for ideological or populist reasons, others to finance their armament efforts. As a group of scholar-practitioners who have witnessed, shaped, reformed, studied, and criticized multiple different aspects of multilateral cooperation, we understand many of the critiques. We also see that many of the critiques misunderstand what the UN is and how it operates, as well as its potential. We believe that it is paramount to emphasize why a well-functioning UN is essential for the well-being of each nation, all people, and the planet. This report highlights 10 key distinctions that are essential for any meaningful discussion of the successes, failures, and reform needs of the UN; emphasizes 10 major UN achievements that illustrate the significant impact multilateral cooperation can have; and outlines 10 core recommendations to create the UN we must aspire to.

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

The United Nations turned 80 in 2025. Although this anniversary might be a reason to celebrate the lasting venue of world politics, the norms it has created, and the lives it has saved, the United Nations has come under attack as a platform, an institution, and a system of values. Some critics describe the UN as ineffective, bloated, dysfunctional, and irrelevant. Others portray it as an institution unaligned with member countries' perceived self-interest, and thus see it as potentially harmful in a world of "my country first." Meanwhile, major contributors are reducing their payments to the UN. Some do so for ideological or populist reasons; others to finance their new, expensive armament efforts in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹

As a group of scholar-practitioners who have witnessed, shaped, reformed, studied, and criticized multiple different aspects of multilateral cooperation, we understand many of the critiques. Combined, the authors of this report have 230 years of working experience involving the UN and multilateral processes. We are uniquely positioned to offer a perspective on the future of the UN that draws on both our practical engagement with its processes and member states and our decades of academic research on global governance, cooperation, and programming. We see that many of the critiques misunderstand what the UN is and how it operates, as well as its potential. We acknowledge the challenging global geopolitical context of current reform discussions. Although there is a need to reform the UN, we believe that it is paramount to emphasize why a well-functioning UN is essential for the well-being of each nation, all people, and the planet.

Member states, experts, and other stakeholders have made important suggestions for how the UN Charter could be reformed² and how institutions such as the Security Council can be transformed without Charter reform.³ UN Secretary-General António Guterres made concrete suggestions on how to review UN mandates and restructure specific aspects of the UN entities.⁴

In the present state of international relations, one cannot expect a reform of the United Nations that would effectively respond to the immense challenges that the world is facing. But the present configuration will not last forever, and the people of the world need a compass that helps them orient their efforts in the right direction. It needs the "imagination of the future," to mobilize energies and create the momentum that will eventually lead to the profound changes that are needed.

This report does *not* address all the UN's myriad institutional issues that have already been the subject of much public debate: reform of the Security Council to accommodate the changing distribution of power and make it more effective; reform of the General Assembly to make it more representative and more authoritative; improved relationships with regional organizations, whose development is very uneven in the different regions of the world; or the creation of new institutions, to accommodate civil society and create more transparency and accountability among new actors that are often more influential than states. Instead, we focus on a selected number of substantive issues that may serve as an orientation of the international community for current and future reform discussions, and we argue that in addressing major challenges all countries are facing today, the UN can be an effective actor and platform.

In the current reform process known as “UN80”—given the UN’s 80th anniversary—Secretary-General Guterres presented proposals to strengthen the UN’s delivery across the three pillars of its work: peace and security, sustainable development, and human rights, while also advancing more effective collaboration across the pillars. He suggested launching something called a New Humanitarian Compact to cut bureaucracy and integrate billions of dollars in global supply chains; establishing a system-wide human rights group to coordinate human rights systematically across all UN activities; creating what he called a UN System Data Commons and Technology Accelerator Platform to drive the modernization of the system; and pursuing a few smaller mergers of UN entities.⁵ In addition, the secretary-general proposed a series of actions on how mandates by UN governing bodies should be created, delivered, supported, improved, and reviewed,⁶ and suggested how to use short-term measures to improve efficiencies in the UN administration and save costs.⁷

In section 2 of this report, we highlight 10 key distinctions that are essential for any meaningful discussion of the successes, failures, and reform needs of the UN. When critics describe the UN as “ineffective,” their meaning is unclear. In fact, any generalizing statement claiming “The UN is...” is necessarily wrong. For an appreciation of the work of the multilateral system, its shortcomings, its bottlenecks, and its reform requirements, it is important to differentiate various aspects of the UN’s work. We emphasize 10 essential distinctions which, taken together, clarify the nature of the UN as a unique and vital international body.

10 Essential Distinctions

- 1.** It’s important to differentiate between the UN as a political forum for member states and the UN as a system of international agencies and bureaucracies. The former is often referred to as the “first UN” and the latter as the “second UN.” The “second UN” comprises the ecosystem of various UN departments in the secretariat, as well as its funds and programs.
- 2.** In different compositions, voting powers, political dynamics, and institutional rules influence the outcomes for various political processes of the first UN.
- 3.** Reform decisions and processes must take into account the differences in the various entities that make up the so-called UN family, including the Secretariat of the UN, programs, funds, and offices that are linked to the main UN’s bodies, as well as an array of specialized and related agencies. This last group of agencies, though formally associated with the UN, have their own member states, governing bodies, underlying treaties, funding mechanisms, and legal personality.
- 4.** In addition to global mandates, functions, and processes, it is important to consider the role of the UN at regional and country levels.

10 Essential Distinctions (continued)

5. The way states negotiate, how civil society is included, and the role of the UN Security Council and of treaties and other binding agreements all depend significantly on global cooperation. Global cooperation includes such issues as disarmament, peacekeeping, climate change, human rights, sustainable development, and humanitarian assistance. Sometimes criticisms stem from one area but do not apply to another area of work.

6. Discussions on the role of the UN and questions about its effectiveness and impact must recognize that it was built without the power to hold states accountable or enforce decisions and rules.

7. Understanding differentiations with regard to the UN's funding is essential for understanding the direction and impact of UN activities.

8. A meaningful discussion on what the UN can do and what it should do must differentiate among the various activities and functions its various parts may fulfill. A political process of the "first UN" can serve as a universal forum for discussions among states, a crucial mechanism for norm setting, a norm-compliance watchdog, and a norm enforcer.

9. An entity of the "second UN" may serve as a mediator between conflict parties, a forger or influencer of alliances among states or entities, a provider of peacebuilding and peacekeeping, a norm-compliance watchdog, a creator of ideas and technical norms, a designer and collector of data, a provider of technical assistance and expertise, a provider of essential services, a liaison with civil society and the private sector, and a generator and channeler of funding into global, regional, and national activities.

10. General criticisms of the UN as "uncoordinated" fall short of reflecting an understanding of what coordination means and what the UN is doing to promote coherence. One can differentiate among different dimensions of interagency cooperation, and must understand (a) the current systems at the global, regional, and country level created to foster collaboration, (b) their practices and shortcomings, and (c) why, in some cases, greater integration can actually harm the UN's effectiveness.

In section 3 of this report, we emphasize 10 clear-cut examples that show the significant impact multilateral cooperation can have. Despite its shortcomings, politicization, institutional biases, and inefficiencies, the work of the UN has been successful on many fronts, often despite having limited resources. It is important to remember this fact when discussing the future of the UN and whether we need more or less multilateralism or thicker or thinner forms of multilateralism.

We also emphasize the limited resources the UN has at its disposal to accomplish these achievements. For example, the budget for all 11 UN peacekeeping operations is less than the budget of the New York City Police Department, and it corresponds to a meager 0.6 percent of the total US defense budget. The expenses of the entire UN system, which includes the funds, programs, research and training institutes, specialized agencies, related agencies, and expenses for humanitarian assistance, human rights, climate, health, education, economic development, elections, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and overall global governance, correspond to less than 9 percent of the United States military budget, or slightly more than half of the annual budget of New York City. We don't say that we should expect less from the UN's impact. But it is worth noting that the effect also depends on resources, and it may be wise to consider the limited resources with which the UN is achieving its objectives.

10 Major UN Achievements

- 1.** The UN's work is a major factor in reducing the number of interstate and intrastate conflicts and wars.
- 2.** The UN's work has created a global norm against the spread of nuclear weapons, facilitated cooperation on the peaceful use of nuclear energy, and led to significant reductions in nuclear arsenals.
- 3.** In the past three years alone, the UN and its humanitarian partners have delivered life-sustaining or lifesaving assistance to 342 million people.
- 4.** The UN has saved millions of lives through leading the world to eradicate smallpox, containing the 2014–2015 Ebola epidemic, and increasing vaccinations.
- 5.** The UN has shaped how we talk about, define, and make policies around development.
- 6.** The United Nations has created strong universal norms for human rights and workers' rights, including standards for work hours and pay.
- 7.** The UN's standards and cooperation mechanisms are at the core of global economic cooperation and travel.
- 8.** The UN was instrumental in the process of decolonization.
- 9.** The UN's Montreal Protocol phased out the production and use of ozone-depleting substances, protecting the ozone layer and saving millions of lives.

10 Major UN Achievements (continued)

10. Policymakers around the world rely on the scientific information provided by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The latter's 2015 Paris Agreement created institutional structures for today's global climate diplomacy, influenced national policies, mobilized considerable finance, and shaped norms, expectations, and accountability with respect to climate change and the environment.

In section 4, we outline 10 recommendations to create the UN we must aspire to.

10 Core Recommendations for UN Reform

- 1.** Make the UN less process-oriented and pivot toward impacts. UN reform must focus on the specific role the UN plays in promoting global public goods and issues that require international and transboundary collaboration, commitments, and accountability.
- 2.** Restore the authority of the UN Charter and limit the use of force in interstate relations.
- 3.** Rejuvenate the UN's peacekeeping missions, starting with a redefinition of ambitions that reflect the present state of the world and address new drivers of conflict.
- 4.** Secure the commitment of more member states to more scaled, un-earmarked, and pooled funding.
- 5.** Adopt voting as a key process for determining positions at the UN on major goals and spend less time trying to build consensus.
- 6.** Put human resources reform at the center of any meaningful UN structural reform.
- 7.** Stimulate meaningful cooperation through funding incentives, stronger lead agencies, and expanded roles for resident coordinators.
 - 7.1.** Ensure that funders use pooled funds and insist on meaningful and extensive integrated programming by key UN entities.
 - 7.2.** Strengthen the roles of lead agencies for certain sectors, UN resident coordinators who lead UN country teams, and UN humanitarian coordinators who lead the UN's humanitarian response at the country level.

10 Core Recommendations for UN Reform (continued)

- 7.3.** At the country level, streamline overlapping coordination plans and mechanisms.
- 7.4.** Uplift the UN regional and country office system to strengthen country support.
- 7.5.** Improve the coordination function of the UN Economic and Social Council and the Chief Executives Board for economic, social, and development issues.
- 7.6.** Create a UN Global Economic Cooperation Council to bring the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization, which should also become part of the UN system, closer to the UN system.
- 7.7.** Make the Inter-Agency Standing Committee the central voice and advocacy tool for humanitarian concerns.
- 7.8.** To promote environmental action and coordination, give the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) the explicit mandate to be the architect and coordinator for the environment, which includes climate, biodiversity and land systems, pollution, waste, and chemicals.
- 8.** Increase monitoring and accountability for development issues by turning the Voluntary National Reviews into a mandatory reporting mechanism.
- 9.** Create UN mechanisms to hold states more accountable for climate, environment, and biodiversity outcomes and also work outside the UNFCCC framework.
- 10.** Refocus on the UN's accountability to individuals, communities, and groups directly impacted by crises, disasters, or emergencies (affected populations).

Because the geopolitical context may not enable the implementation of our suggestions at this moment in history, we present them as a future vision. Our recommendations are meant as what political philosopher John Rawls calls *realistic utopia*. That is, they seek to strike a balance between unrealistic aspirations and ideals, on the one hand, and realist pessimism amid today's geopolitical constraints, on the other.

SECTION 2: MAKING SENSE OF THE UN: 10 KEY DISTINCTIONS FOR UN REFORM

When critics describe the UN as “ineffective,” it’s unclear if they are discussing the shortcomings of the UN Capital Development Fund’s program on expanding financial access in Myanmar; evaluating the UN Refugee Agency’s management of the Domiz 1 camp for Internally Displaced Persons in Iraq; lamenting the political stalemate at the UN Security Council; questioning the impact of soft law arrangements in global climate governance; or complaining about other aspects of multilateral cooperation. As a matter of fact, many critics are confused by what the UN is. Admittedly, it is complicated.

This section highlights key distinctions that should be made by everyone commenting on the role and reform of the UN. Are we concerned with the UN as a forum for member states or its international bureaucracy? Are we sufficiently considering the many faces of the different funds, programs, and agencies that make up the UN system? Are proposals clear about the UN’s work at the global level versus the country level and what issue area they pertain to? Do arguments take into account that the UN operates in a space of global governance without having a global government? Are discussions sufficiently clear about the different functions and roles the various parts of the UN have? And when calling for more coherence and coordination, are proponents clear about the various coordination mechanisms that exist? The many necessary distinctions and activities of entities associated with the UN system make sweeping statements problematic. Any generalizing statement claiming “The UN is...” is necessarily wrong. For an appreciation of the work of the multilateral system, as well as its shortcomings, bottlenecks, and reform requirements, it is essential to have focused discussions on the various aspects of the UN’s work. Let us briefly address each key distinction in turn.

DISTINCTION 1

Forum for Member States Versus International Bureaucracy

A useful first distinction is to differentiate between the UN as a political forum for member states, and the UN as a system of international agencies and bureaucracies. The former is often referred to as the “first UN” and the latter as the “second UN.”⁸ The “second UN” comprises the ecosystem of various UN departments in the UN Secretariat, as well as its funds and programs. The “second UN” is the operational arm of the organization that supports the political processes, produces data and analysis, monitors human rights commitments, supports countries’ sustainable development efforts, and engages in humanitarian relief the world over. The “second UN” is not independent from the state-led processes of the “first UN.” Importantly, it receives its mandates and funds from states. However, UN entities have their own legal personality.⁹

DISTINCTION 2

Political Processes Differ Across UN Organs

States come together as the “first UN” at the Security Council, the General Assembly, or the

Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) —three of the UN’s principal organs. Whereas all 193 UN member states have an equal vote and voice in the General Assembly, the Security Council has only 15 members, 10 of which are elected and five of which hold permanent membership and the right to veto decisions—the so-called P5. Thus, Global South countries have a clear majority in the UN General Assembly, whereas the institutional arrangements in the Security Council heavily advantage the P5.¹⁰ The ECOSOC comprises 54 states elected by the General Assembly, which again changes political dynamics. States are bound by institutional rules, but ultimately, the decisions made reflect the geopolitics of the time.

DISTINCTION 3

There Are Many UNs

A common misconception is that one can consider “the UN” a monolith. The various entities that make up the so-called UN family include the Secretariat of the UN, programs, funds, and offices that are linked to the main UN’s bodies, such as the UN Development Programme, UNICEF, UN Women, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights or the High Commissioner for Refugees. The UN family also includes an array of specialized and related agencies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Technically, even the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are specialized UN agencies, although they are not typically considered UN entities.¹¹ Specialized and related organizations, though formally associated with the UN, have their own member states, governing bodies, underlying treaties, funding mechanisms, and legal personality. If we abolished the UN tomorrow—which we are not suggesting—that would have no direct consequences for the ILO or the World Bank. This also means that reform resolutions and decisions made within, say, the General Assembly, do not have direct consequences for the independent agencies. Although there is a large overlap in membership, procedurally it is challenging to address comprehensive UN reform. Moreover, in some cases, the voting rules differ significantly. For example, whereas UN entities predominantly vote on the one-country-one-vote principle, at the World Bank and IMF, how much money states contribute determines the lion’s share of votes.¹² This means that we may have a majority of UN member states vote for a specific reform at the General Assembly, but this reform cannot be adopted at the World Bank because states with more votes block such reform in the bank’s governing body.¹³ Another example is the Governing Body of the ILO, which is composed of 56 titular members, of which, according to the ILO’s tripartite structure, 28 represent governments, 14 represent employers, and 14 represent workers.¹⁴ Thus, in addition to agreement among governments, reform proposals need the vote of employer and union representatives. The many UNs are relevant for understanding not only political processes but also the operational activities of the “second UN.” The multitude of funds, programs, and agencies is at the core of discussions on overlap, competition, coherence, and cooperation (see Distinction 10 below).

DISTINCTION 4

Global Versus Country-Level UN

The global mandates, functions, and processes of the UN are usually the most discussed UN topics. This may apply to whatever key fora, platform, and headquarters people imagine in New York, Geneva, or Nairobi. However, it is equally important to consider the role of the UN at regional, country, and sometimes sub-national levels. The UN works in over 1,100 locations across more than 190 countries.¹⁵ In more than 170 countries, the UN provides technical support and assistance, collects and analyzes data, mediates conflicts, or performs some combination thereof.¹⁶ For this reason, debates on the mandates, actions, and impacts of the UN need to consider the national and sub-national UN activities equally.

DISTINCTION 5

Processes Vary Across Issue Areas

The way states negotiate, how civil society is included, and the role of the Security Council and of treaties and binding agreements all depend significantly on the issue area of global cooperation. What international relations scholars call “international regimes,”¹⁷ such as the issue areas encompassing disarmament, peacekeeping, climate change, human rights, sustainable development, and humanitarian assistance, determine many aspects of multilateral work. Sometimes criticisms stem from one area, but do not apply to another area of work.

DISTINCTION 6

The UN Provides Governance Without Government

More than 30 years ago, international relations scholars James N. Rosenau and Ernst-Otto Czempiel highlighted a specific aspect of our world order: The UN works toward a system of global governance without being a global government.¹⁸ None of the UN’s components can claim to have the power of a world government. Clearly, discussions on the role of the UN and questions about its effectiveness and impact must recognize that it was built without the power to hold states accountable or enforce decisions and rules. It needs the support of member states, in particular the permanent members of the Security Council and the troop and police contributors, to take executive action.

DISTINCTION 7

Different Funding Sources Determine the Scope of UN Actions

Understanding the UN’s funding is essential for understanding the direction and impact of UN activities. Importantly, there are four types of contributions to the UN. Assessed contributions are the specific dues all members have to pay according to a particular formula. In 2023, one-fifth of the US\$67.6 billion total UN budget came from assessed contributions.¹⁹ Another 8 percent of the total UN budget came from untied, core contributions to the various programs. The lion’s share of 61 percent came from voluntary earmarked contributions, a category in which the donor ties the funding to

a specific issue, country, or region and thus limits the flexibility and objectives of the UN's activities. Lastly, 10 percent of the total revenue came from other activities, such as investments, or services rendered to governments or other UN entities.²⁰

DISTINCTION 8

Different Functions of the “First UN”

A meaningful discussion on what the UN can and should do must differentiate between different activities and functions its various parts may fulfill (Figure 1). The political processes of the “first UN” can serve as:

- **A universal forum for discussions** among states that is open to all states and always available to all parties. Rule-based discussions and social norms influence the UN's role as a forum.
- **A crucial mechanism for norm setting**, especially through conventions, negotiated in the General Assembly, the governing bodies of specialized agencies, or at UN summits and conferences on specific topics. These treaties establish rules, standards, and practices, but they become legally binding only when ratified by national authorities. Ratification is voluntary; therefore, different conventions are binding for different sets of countries. Some norms are also set through simple resolutions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or soft law instruments, such as the 2018 global compacts for refugees and on migration. Whereas political bodies at the UN may create rules, norms, and standards, the responsibility for implementation is in the hands of other entities, including UN agencies and member states.
- **A norm-compliance watchdog**. The Human Rights Council, the Universal Periodic Review for human rights, the General Assembly, the UN Security Council, and other bodies can and often do act as monitors of state actions.
- **A norm enforcer**. When the UN Security Council is not divided, it can enforce norms by legally binding decisions, authorizing the use of force and declaring sanctions. However, in the absence of an actual UN standing army, the council does not have military power on its own to enforce its decisions.

DISTINCTION 9

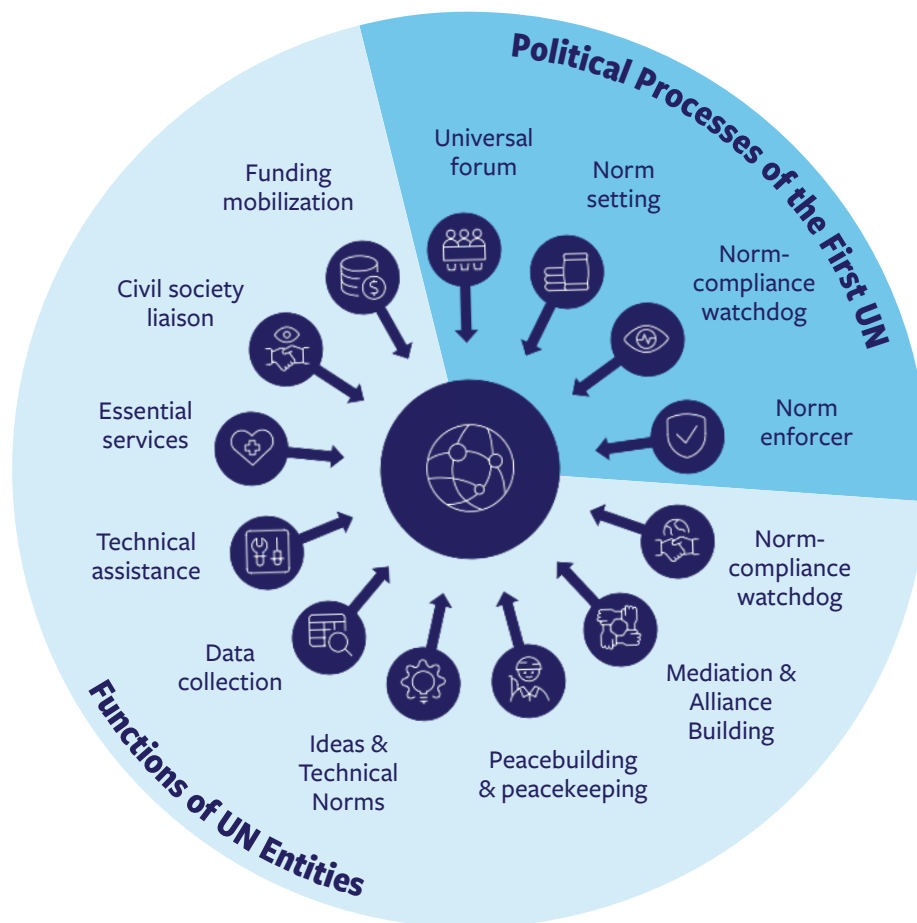
Different Functions of the “Second UN”

The entities of the second UN may serve as:

- **A mediator between conflict parties**, e.g., through the “good offices” of the Secretary-General.
- **A forger or influencer of alliances among states or entities**. UN entities can convince specific member states, which will act in the fora of the first UN, of certain positions and influence how they perceive their own interests.
- **A provider of peacebuilding and peacekeeping** at the national level.
- **A norm-compliance watchdog**, especially with regard to human rights.
- **A creator of ideas and technical norms**.
- **A designer and collector of data**.

- **A provider of technical assistance and expertise** at the global and national level.
- **A provider of essential services**, especially in so-called failed and fragile states and areas with weak or limited statehood.
- **A liaison with civil society and the private sector.** Among others, the UN Secretariat, programs, and specialized agencies support the ECOSOC NGO accreditation process and the inclusion of civil society voices in the annual High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, various commissions, the climate-change-related COPs, the UN Environment Assembly, and other annual convenings, as well as private-sector collaboration through the UN Global Compact. Having a forum for civil society and related issues is one of the greatest advantages of the UN system. Many issues, such as gender equality, labor standards, and environmental protection, have gained importance because of the strong interaction with civil society.
- **A mobilizer and channeler of funding** into global, regional, and national activities. Unlike the World Bank, the UN usually does not have significant levels of its own funding. However, UN-led donor conferences, bilateral funding facilitation, or global appeals can mobilize and channel significant amounts of money for crises and causes. In addition to the mobilization of such funds, by bringing countries and donors together, the UN's role reduces fragmentation and promotes cohesiveness of funding.

FIGURE 1: VARIOUS FUNCTIONS OF THE FIRST AND SECOND UN



Source: Authors.

DISTINCTION 10

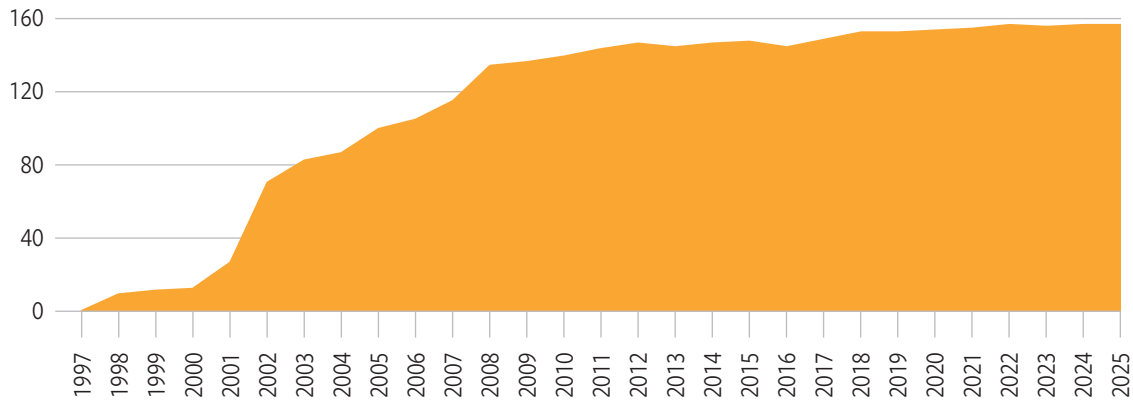
The UN Promotes Coherence, Cooperation, and Integration of Its Disparate Components

The “second UN’s” operations are divided into three dozen funds, programs, and agencies. For this reason, since the beginning of the UN’s work, questions of coordination and coherent approaches have been at the heart of many reform debates. General criticisms of the UN as “uncoordinated” fall short of reflecting an understanding of what coordination means, the level the UN should be addressing, and why 100 percent coherence may not be in anyone’s interests.

Interagency cooperation can be measured along five main dimensions. (1) The frequency of cooperation; (2) the mode or intensity of cooperation; (3) the geographic level of cooperation, especially whether cooperation takes place at the headquarters, regional, national, or sub-national level; (4) the extent of issues covered by collaborative systems; and (5) to what extent a broad range of agencies partake in activities (inclusiveness).²¹ The continuum of cooperation modes starts with basic *coordination*. Coordination aims at avoiding conflict and overlap between the activities of different actors. It is often limited to sharing information in institutional working groups. *Cooperation* or *collaboration* involves a higher-intensity partnership that enhances activities through the buy-in, resources, and expertise of the involved actors. The mode with the highest interaction intensity is based on full-fledged *joint, integrated programming* that creates synergies between the unique strengths of the involved partners.²²

As a matter of fact, there are many global, regional, and country-level coordination mechanisms. Under the chairmanship of the UN Secretary-General, the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) provides broad guidance, coordination, and strategic direction for 30 UN funds, programs, and specialized and related agencies. The UN Sustainable Development Group serves as a high-level forum for joint policy formation and decision-making. It guides, supports, tracks, and oversees the coordination of development operations in 162 countries and territories and brings together the executive heads of 38 UN member entities. Since 1991, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has served as the highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the United Nations system. It brings together the executive heads of 19 organizations and consortia to formulate policy, set strategic priorities, and mobilize resources in response to humanitarian crises. There are regional refugee and migration plans, such as the 3RP for the Syrian crisis, and at the country level, where operational coherence matters most, the various UN entities working in the country coordinate their work in so-called UN Country Teams. For at least 153 countries, the UN works on the basis of nationally owned UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (formerly known as UN Development Assistance Frameworks, or UNDAFs) that provide a system-wide overview of key UN activities and functions in a country. Since 1997, more than 650 such plans have been adopted, predominantly in low- and medium-income countries around the world (Figure 2).²³

**FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF COUNTRIES COVERED
BY A UN COOPERATION FRAMEWORK (1997–2025)**



Source: Naujoks (2025).²⁴

This does not mean that the UN does not need better coordination. But any discussion on coordination and coherence must be based on a thorough understanding of past and current mechanisms and why they may or may not be sufficient or adequate. It is also important to note that in some cases, integration can actually harm the UN's effectiveness. For example, in countries in crisis, keeping the peacekeeping forces, political missions, and humanitarian endeavors separate may be an important precondition for safeguarding the neutrality and credibility of humanitarian actors.

To sum up this section, the multilateral system is too multifaceted and complex for simple, generalizing statements about its failures and successes. Any serious reform proposal must be based on the opportunities and constraints of the UN's institutional design, the heterogeneity of the actors and processes, and the geopolitical realities hindering (or facilitating) the UN's efforts to reach its full potential.

SECTION 3: IN DEFENSE OF MULTILATERALISM: 10 MAJOR UN ACHIEVEMENTS

In this section, we offer a short defense of multilateralism. We do so not through abstract theoretical reasoning but through a list of 10 tangible achievements. These achievements clearly show that multilateral processes have more impact on the world than they are given credit for. This is not a comprehensive list, but it showcases the power that collective action can have—power that we must replicate, amplify, and strengthen, as we will discuss in the subsequent section on reform ideas.

Before we get to these remarkable multilateral achievements, it is worth stressing that people calling for greater effectiveness and impact from the UN's work frequently fail to consider the modest size of the UN's operations (Figure 3). For example, the budget for UN peacekeeping operations in 2025 was less than the budget of the New York City Police Department (NYPD).²⁵ The UN's entire peacekeeping budget amounts to a meager

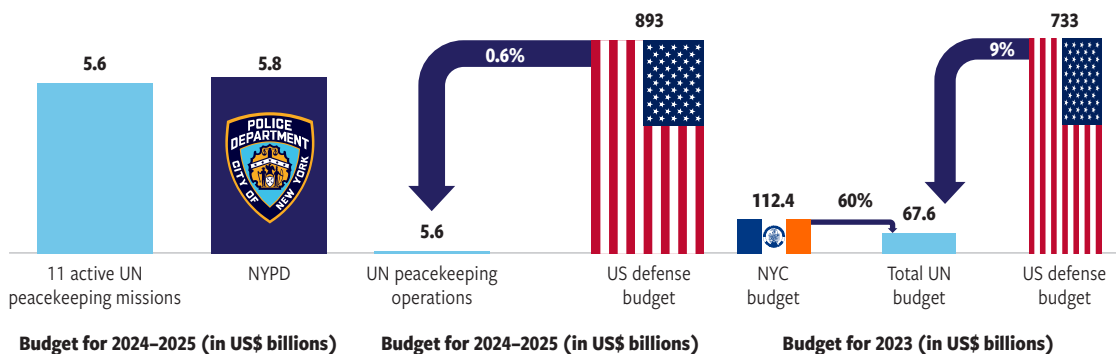
0.6 percent of the US defense budget. In other words, the US government spent 160 times as much on defense as all 11 active UN peacekeeping missions combined.²⁶ Beyond peacekeeping,

“

The entire UN budget is only slightly more than half of the annual budget of New York City.

if we compare the expenses of the entire UN system, which includes the funds, programs, research and training institutes, specialized agencies, and related agencies, the combined UN expenses on humanitarian assistance, human rights, climate, health, education, economic development, elections, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, and overall global governance, correspond to less than 9 percent of the US military budget.²⁷ Using a different comparison, the entire UN budget is only slightly more than half of the annual budget of New York City.²⁸ We don't say that we should expect less from the UN's impact. But it is worth noting that the effect also depends on resources, and it may be wise to consider the limited resources with which the UN is achieving its objectives.

FIGURE 3: BUDGET COMPARISONS ILLUSTRATE THE RELATIVELY SMALL FUNDING FOR UN OPERATIONS (IN US\$ BILLIONS)



Source: Various UN and government sources.

The UN was instrumental in bringing about the longest period of relative peace in modern history. The United Nations was designed to avoid a repetition of the failures of the League of Nations—which was unable to prevent the Second World War, barely two decades after its creation at the end of the First World War. From the outset, the priority of the UN has been “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”²⁹ With regard to world peace, we count the following achievements by the UN:

ACHIEVEMENT 1

The UN’s work is a major factor in reducing the number of interstate and intrastate conflicts and wars.

It is frustrating and disheartening that the UN has been unable to stop some of the current conflicts, such as in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and Iran. However, it is important to stress that until recently, the UN could claim a measure of success in the pursuit of that goal. The eight decades that have elapsed since the end of WWII have had their share of conflicts and violence, but in the long arc of history, they look much better than the short interval between the two world wars. And although many factors have contributed to the longest period of relative peace in modern history, the UN can take credit for having been a major factor in that progress.³⁰ The number of interstate conflicts declined significantly after 1945, and it is only in the last few



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years that interstate conflict has picked up again. Part of that decline may be attributed to nuclear deterrence, but much of it has reflected the strengthening of the norm prohibiting the unilateral use of force in interstate relations.³¹ The UN plays a critical role in reducing conflict by driving coordinated international responses—through resolutions, preventive diplomacy, peace operations, peacebuilding, ceasefire efforts, good offices, and the promotion of norms against the use of force—that shape state behavior and support the success of peace processes. This includes actions by the General Assembly that are often crucial to the success of peace initiatives and that can directly prompt measures like ceasefires and withdrawals, exemplifying the UN’s tangible impact on limiting and resolving conflicts.³²

During that same period after 1945, there was a marked increase in *intrastate* conflict. The UN was not designed to prevent such conflicts, but remarkably, it invented new tools that have helped prevent or end intrastate conflict as well as containing interstate conflict: Peacekeeping is not mentioned in the charter, but it has played a crucial role over the years. In the Cold War period, the UN served primarily as a tool to prevent local conflicts from escalating into global conflicts that could lead to a third world war. In the post–Cold War period, it has helped end civil wars in Cambodia, Cote d’Ivoire, Liberia, Mozambique, Namibia, Sierra Leone, and Timor Leste, as well as mitigate the impact of conflict on civilian lives.³³ Scholars have shown how peacekeeping efforts can contain conflict and reduce its impact. Statistics bear out that assessment,

especially during the period when there were no major disagreements between the permanent members of the Security Council.³⁴ Tens of thousands of lives have been saved thanks to the United Nations—possibly millions, if one counts the wars that have been avoided.³⁵

ACHIEVEMENT 2

The UN’s work has created a global norm against the spread of nuclear weapons, facilitated cooperation on the peaceful use of nuclear energy, and led to significant reductions in nuclear arsenals. This was achieved not only through the 1970 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, but also through the comprehensive safeguards agreements between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and non-nuclear weapons states that provided every state with an assurance that others are abiding by their non-proliferation obligations.³⁶

The UN has provided lifesaving humanitarian aid to hundreds of millions and saved millions of lives through promoting vaccinations, eradicating smallpox, and containing the Ebola epidemic. It also has shaped our notion of policies to promote development, created global standards for essential human rights and workers’ rights, and is at the core of global economic cooperation. There are many examples of effective multilateralism in the area of development and human rights, including health. These include the achievements below.

ACHIEVEMENT 3

In the past three years alone, the UN and its humanitarian partners have delivered life-sustaining or lifesaving assistance to 342 million people.³⁷ Despite decreased funding and access constraints, in 2025 alone, at least one form of the UN’s lifesaving humanitarian aid reached 98 million people.³⁸ Of these, 62 million people received food security assistance, agriculture and livelihood assistance, or both in the first six months of 2025. Humanitarian protection services helped at least 22 million people across 32 operations.³⁹

ACHIEVEMENT 4

The UN has saved millions of lives through leading the world to eradicate smallpox, containing the 2014–2015 Ebola epidemic, and increasing vaccinations. The World Health Organization (WHO) led a global campaign to fight smallpox, which resulted in the eradication of the disease in 1980. Consequently, it saved millions of lives and prevented generations of people everywhere from needing to be vaccinated, in addition to saving the costs of vaccinating against or treating the disease. This achievement was possible only because every country in the world eliminated smallpox. A single country, no matter how powerful, could not have achieved this outcome on its own.⁴⁰

In 2014, the outbreak of the highly contagious and deadly Ebola virus in West Africa constituted a major global health crisis. Many parts of the UN were chiefly involved in addressing this crisis. The WHO designated the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern. The UN Security Council encouraged the governments of affected countries in West Africa to create appropriate national mechanisms and to resolve and mitigate the wider political, security, socioeconomic, and humanitarian dimensions of the Ebola outbreak.⁴¹ In response to the outbreak, many countries created travel and trade bans to and from West African countries. The Council subsequently expressed concern about the detrimental effect of the isolation of the affected countries and called on member states to lift general travel and border restrictions.⁴² Under the guidance of the WHO, the Secretary-General created the first UN emergency health mission. The UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) was essential, and its work was largely successful in containing the West African Ebola epidemic by coordinating UN agencies, achieving 70 percent case isolation and safe burials within two months, and mobilizing over US\$5 billion in global support. Many other UN agencies were also involved. For example, the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) Ebola Crisis Response and Resilience Programme focused on the delivery of essential services, addressing the gender-specific impacts of the disease and recovery from its socioeconomic impacts.⁴³ Although it was not without its challenges, UNMEER and the UN's involvement is a historic example of effective multilateral action.⁴⁴

UNICEF's work on vaccinations alone saves three million lives per year. UNICEF supplies vaccines to 45 percent of the world's children,⁴⁵ without which diseases such as polio, measles, diphtheria, and tetanus can spread fast and cost many lives.

ACHIEVEMENT 5

The UN has shaped how we talk about, define, and make policies around development. Since 1990, UNDP's Human Development Index has promoted a vision of development that focuses on improving the lives people lead rather than assuming that economic growth will lead development. Following the 2000 Millennium Summit, the UN created first the Millennium Development Goals and then (in 2015) the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Undoubtedly these goals, with their specific targets and indicators, have influenced policies around the world on urban development, economic growth, poverty alleviation, environmental protection, gender equality, peaceful societies, and other aspects of sustainable development. The UN not only had a role in drafting these goals, but worked closely with governments, the private sector, and civil society partners to collect data, monitor progress (or the lack thereof), and design policies and programs.⁴⁶ Since 1964, the UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) agency has shifted the discourse on the international financial architecture and indebtedness, investment, and trade.⁴⁷ In addition to setting standards and providing technical assistance on development, the UN works toward ensuring adequate funding to enable meaningful development.

ACHIEVEMENT 6

The United Nations has created strong universal norms on human rights and workers' rights, including standards for work hours and pay. The UN adopted the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights, as well as the nine core international human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the Convention Against Torture; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Most of these treaties currently are legally binding for between 170 and 196 countries and territories. The “universality” of human rights speaks not only to the near-universal coverage but also to the conceptualization that human rights apply to all people. The norms that have been created under the umbrella of the UN state that human beings have these rights solely by the virtue of their humanity. These treaties have specific monitoring bodies that assess states' compliance with their international obligations. Since 2006, for example, all countries have undergone the Universal Periodic Review, which calls for each UN member state to undergo a peer review of its human rights records every 4.5 years.

Also, the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples sets an “authoritative standard that is influencing states and other powerful actors in the world, even if only incrementally.”⁴⁸ The International Labour Organization (ILO) has been critical in establishing and promoting important workers' rights, including those involving work hours and pay, and fighting child labor. Founded in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles, the ILO was a pioneering body that established international labor standards addressing various aspects of workers' rights, including work hours, pay, safety, and freedom from discrimination. The ILO, which became a specialized UN agency in 1946, is also a key player in reducing child labor, which affects more than 138 million children worldwide. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1973 ILO Minimum Age Convention (No. 138), and the universally ratified 1999 ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182) set legal boundaries for child labor and provided grounds for national and international actions to end it. In addition, the ILO sets global standards for child labor statistics and runs the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour. Periodic review processes have incentivized states to incorporate human rights into their national law and policy frameworks. Human and labor rights, as well as environmental standards created within the UN, have also been incorporated into the work of multilateral development banks and other international organizations, as well as into the private sector, further amplifying the reach of such norms.

ACHIEVEMENT 7

The UN's standards and cooperation mechanisms are at the core of global economic cooperation and travel. Many people think the UN's actions are not directly relevant to their personal lives. However, the UN's 1968 Vienna Convention on Road Signs and Signals makes

sure travelers from all over the world recognize road signs wherever they go. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a specialized UN agency, helps 193 countries cooperate and share their skies, to their mutual benefit. The ICAO defines the guidelines that govern civil aviation worldwide and is essential for the safety, efficiency, and regularity of global air mobility. Another example is the Universal Postal Union (UPU), a specialized UN agency established in 1874 that is the second-oldest existing international organization. The UPU's harmonized framework for global postal exchanges not only allows each of us to send letters and packages around the globe, it also enabled cross-border commerce long before private logistics networks could.⁴⁹ In fact, Amazon's transformation from an online bookstore into one of the world's largest e-commerce ecosystems is based on the multilateral infrastructure underpinning international postal cooperation. These multilateral agreements effectively built the connective tissue of global e-commerce, setting the logistical and regulatory foundations that allowed Amazon to grow at extraordinary speed and scale.⁵⁰

ACHIEVEMENT 8

The UN was instrumental in the process of decolonization. When the UN was founded in 1945, European colonial powers still held, and in some cases had reasserted, control over vast regions of Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. Twenty years later, the United Nations had expanded to 117 members, the majority of them newly independent former colonies. This shift was accomplished in part through the work of the UN Trusteeship Council, a principal UN organ established to oversee the transition of so-called trust territories from colonial rule to independence. Even more importantly, a rising coalition of Global South countries gave fresh substance to the UN Charter's commitment to self-determination and mobilized the UN to bring formal colonialism to an end.⁵¹ Through political activities, norm setting, and international development assistance, the UN was instrumental in managing decolonization and related state-building processes peacefully in the postwar era up to the 1990s.⁵²



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Many success stories show the UN's impact on protecting the environment and addressing climate change. Through its convening power, treaty-making authority, financial mechanisms, and strategic partnerships, the UN has enabled collective responses to climate change, biodiversity loss,⁵³ pollution, and resource management, embedding environmental concerns into broader peace, rights, and development agendas.

ACHIEVEMENT 9

The Montreal Protocol phased out the production and use of ozone-depleting substances, effectively protecting the ozone layer and saving millions of lives. The Montreal Protocol, a treaty negotiated under the auspices of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), saw universal ratification. Thanks to the treaty, the ozone layer is projected to recover by the middle of this century, saving an estimated two million people from skin cancer each year by 2030.⁵⁴ Similarly, incidences of exposure to mercury and other hazardous chemicals have been reduced primarily because UNEP has taken on transboundary topics. Although these efforts are still under development, taxes on shipping, the plastics treaty, and the 2023 Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement, also known as the High Seas Treaty, have all come about because of the UN's forceful advocacy and action for transboundary topics related to the environment. The UN General Assembly resolution on the human right to a clean, safe, and sustainable environment is used by many to argue for clean air and water in sub-national contexts.⁵⁵

ACHIEVEMENT 10

Policymakers around the world rely on the scientific information provided by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The latter's 2015 Paris Agreement created institutional structures for today's global climate diplomacy, influenced national policies, mobilized considerable finance, and shaped norms, expectations, and accountability with respect to climate change and the environment. Created in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and UNEP, the IPCC is the world's premier science-policy interface on climate change science. Evidence-based policymaking is difficult when the science is complex, as it is for climate issues. Hence, the IPCC brings together the world's leading scientists to provide authoritative, in-depth scientific information that governments and other stakeholders use to design climate policies. IPCC reports are key touchstones for international climate change negotiations.⁵⁶

Before the UNFCCC was established in 1992, climate action was fragmented. The UNFCCC created the first legally recognized framework that obligated countries to report emissions, share data, and negotiate collective action. The Paris Agreement introduced Nationally Determined Contributions, requiring countries to submit climate action plans and strengthen them every five years. At present, nearly all countries have adopted policies to reduce emissions, many of which would not exist without the Paris process. Examples include US climate measures included in the Inflation Reduction Act; the European Green Deal; and China's pledge to peak emissions before 2030 and aim for carbon neutrality by 2060. Although still insufficient, these policies represent a major shift, since climate action is now mainstreamed into national development planning. UN agencies such as UNDP, UNEP, FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), WHO,

and UN-Habitat operationalize these commitments in climate resilience, sustainable agriculture, health care, and urban sustainability, and work with countries to revise their policies.⁵⁷ The UN has mobilized finance, technology, and capacity for climate-related impacts. Under the UNFCCC framework, countries have collectively agreed to shift US\$100 billion per year from developed to developing countries to support adaptation and mitigation measures. Mechanisms like the Green Climate Fund (GCF), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the Technology Mechanism were created to channel resources to needed climate investments. Lastly, the Paris Agreement established a so-called ratchet mechanism requiring regular review and transparency, increasing political and social pressure on governments and corporations. Major corporations and financial institutions, outside the direct reach of international law, now make net-zero commitments aligned with Paris targets. The agreements have also empowered civil society, inspired youth movements, and boosted litigation. Courts increasingly reference the Paris goals in climate lawsuits.⁵⁸ Public opinion has shifted, with surveys in many nations showing stronger climate concern and expectations for action since 2015.⁵⁹

This section showcased some important achievements of the UN, but this was by no means a comprehensive list. Two achievements we did not elaborate on: (1) the UN's achievements related to coordinating the international statistical system, particularly through the Statistical Commission, and (2) its role in creating the System of National Accounts, an internationally agreed-upon standard set of recommendations for how to compile measures of economic activity, used by almost all countries in the world.⁶⁰ Some of the successes outlined here, however, may not be fully uncontested. And all of the mentioned achievements come with certain caveats. Nonetheless, there is clear and substantial evidence that multilateral cooperation can have concrete and massive impacts.

It is a truism that many of today's problems are too big for any one state to handle on its own. But we also acknowledge that we must ask more from both the "first UN" and the "second UN." In the next section, we outline our vision for UN reform.

SECTION 4: OUR VISION FOR UN REFORM: 10 CORE RECOMMENDATIONS

We need to be ambitious about the role of the UN. In this section, we highlight 10 specific recommendations for a UN we should aspire to.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Make the UN less process-oriented and pivot toward impacts. UN reform must focus on the specific role the UN plays in promoting global public goods and issues that require international and transboundary collaboration, commitments, and accountability. Global public goods and transboundary topics that require the UN’s attention include protecting the climate and biodiversity; fighting pollution and global disease; governing the high seas and outer space; fostering global and regional peace; creating global regimes on artificial intelligence, cross-boundary taxes, and trade; judicious global debt relief; and accessible development finance. In an unlevel international playing field, the UN’s role is normative. It is an entity that upholds values of justice, equity, and high standards. This is not only a technical role—it is inherently political and normative. Debates on the reform of the UN must be based on the fact that all states and societies have a responsibility to collaborate on global public goods.⁶¹ The specific mandate, fundamental character, and legal personality make the UN more than an instrument of great power interests. In the era of “my country first,” it is paramount to safeguard the legitimacy of the UN, to recognize its mandate, and to emphasize its unique and essential role in addressing global and regional public goods.

The UN needs a stronger focus on measured outcomes and impact. Its internal reforms have focused more on processes than on outcomes. The UN entities’ activities in development, humanitarian assistance, climate change mitigation, human rights, gender equality, and security need to steer past descriptions of activities toward clear identifications of measurable impacts, especially those that can be attributed to the UN and demonstrate its added value. We say this in full awareness of the methodological challenges.

The UN is rarely the only actor working on a specific issue, and often an empowered government deserves the credit for certain outcomes. We don’t need a boisterous UN that claims to have single-handedly solved conflicts, pulled people out of poverty, or overcome the climate crisis. But the various parts of the system must focus on collecting, assessing, and focusing on outcomes and impacts. Given the methodological, high-resolution, and high-frequency data now available, sidestepping the responsibility to provide credible, measured impact is not an option.

The UN needs to prioritize and be strategic. Driven by divergent donor interests, broad requests from partner countries, and proactive entrepreneurship on the part of UN bureaucracies, so far, the UN has found it easier to add to its list of goals than to prioritize. Calls for the UN to “go back to



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basics” are usually based on a limited understanding of the actual work of the UN and its governance. However, the UN must be pushed to prioritize better for greater impact.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Restore the authority of the UN Charter and limit the use of force in interstate relations.

Member states must address the fundamental question of the use of force in interstate relations and how the authority of the charter can be restored on that critical issue. The threat posed by non-state actors to states, combined with the incapacity of some states to control their territory, has led to a dramatic expansion of the concept of self-defense, which has altered the balance that had been established by the charter. Article 51 of the UN Charter recognizes the right of self-defense as an exception to the prohibition on the use of force contained in Article 2 of the charter. In the majority of cases where force would be used, it should be authorized by the Security Council under Article 42 of the charter, which recognizes the UN’s mandate to be the guardian of the international legal order defined by the charter.

The attacks of 9/11 and the response to them started a process that destroyed that balance. By striking Afghanistan for not having prevented the attack of al-Qaeda, the United States could claim that it was shoring up the principle that a state should be held responsible for any aggression launched from its territory, and was thus restoring an international order of which states are the building blocks. But the practical consequences have been quite different: Targeted killings committed by intelligence operatives or contract killers, drone strikes, and finally bombings of military and non-military targets have turned what was supposed to be a rare exception into common practice. The assassination of Osama bin Laden by the United States in Pakistan, of various terrorists by Israel in Arab countries, or of a Kremlin opponent by Russia in Germany, could still be seen as isolated acts of violence rather than war. The same cannot be said of the 2003 invasion of Iraq led by the United States and the United Kingdom, the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine by Russia, the bombing of Iran by Israel and the United States in 2025 and 2026, or the United States’ bombing of Venezuela and kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Preemptive military action, admissible under international law to stop an imminent attack,⁶² became preventive action, in the case of Iraq and Iran, to stop a state from becoming a nuclear power, and in the case of Ukraine, to stop a state from becoming a potential enemy.⁶³ What remains is such a broad interpretation of self-defense that it is no longer a meaningful constraint and hollows out the most important provisions of the charter.

In alignment with a substantial group of other scholars, we believe that military action is justified for reasons of self-defense only to preempt an imminent attack.⁶⁴ An overwhelming majority of member states consider the broadening trend to be dangerous for their own security.⁶⁵ These countries should build political coalitions to reverse it and restore the prohibition of the use of force beyond the narrow confines of self-defense after an attack occurs or where it is imminent, where no other means would deflect the attack, and where the action is proportionate.

The looser interpretation of the UN Charter is all the more damaging as new tools have been weaponized, creating new battlefields, blurring the line that should separate war from peace. This evolution, which is de facto abrogating a key provision of the UN Charter, should make it a priority for member states to build as broad a consensus as possible on what *self-defense* is, on what *use of force* means, on what is *an act of war*. Without such definitions, the UN is unlikely to remain relevant in the future. That consensus is not out of reach if one considers that while many states are wary of any initiative that could infringe on their sovereign responsibility for the management of domestic affairs, a vast majority, which may include China, prefer a world in which interstate relations are governed by rules rather than raw power. One possible way to facilitate agreement would be to broaden the debate on the use of force and explore whether an international consensus can be built on the rules that should govern the weaponization of economic power.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Rejuvenate the UN’s peacekeeping missions, starting with a redefinition of ambitions that reflect the present state of the world and address new drivers of conflict. The success of peacekeeping operations has in large part been determined by the level of political backing that such operations receive. In the present fractured political context,⁶⁶ peacekeeping operations can at best mitigate the consequences of conflict for civilian populations and end up playing a humanitarian role rather than a political one. This needs to change.

A rejuvenation of peacekeeping should start with a redefinition of its ambitions, reflecting the present state of the world, and also new drivers of conflict: On the one hand, many issues, including those related to security, cut across borders, and taking a strictly national approach—as is the case in traditional peacekeeping operations—no longer works, as the movement of people, money, and weapons increasingly ignores borders. On the other hand, states are wary of foreign intervention, and the shifting balance of power, illustrated by the growing engagement of China in peacekeeping, reinforces that reality. Meanwhile, conflicts are increasingly driven by money rather than ideology, and controlling the flows of money that fund conflict parties becomes more important. Peacekeeping should take stock of all those evolutions. A mission should not necessarily be confined to one country, but it should also avoid substituting for the government it has been called to help. That approach may lead to a more limited political role, but also to greater engagement with the security sector of the country, which may include seconding UN personnel to national security actors. Redesigned political and security strategies could then be complemented by a more robust approach to the economic and financial drivers of conflict. The UN could develop its capacity to track, and, if required by the Security Council, to monitor and check the financial flows that fuel a conflict. Such rethinking of peacekeeping will require patient efforts to build a new political consensus around it, and should complement the parallel efforts to restore a measure of consensus on the limits of the use of force and coercion in international relations.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Secure the commitment of more member states to more scaled, un-earmarked, and pooled funding. Arguably the biggest impediments to the UN’s efforts to reach its potential are its limited budgets. Some of the countries with the largest assessed contributions are constantly in arrears, leading to an annual budget crisis for the UN Secretariat. As a starting point, the global community must collectively request that these states pay their dues in full and on time. More profoundly, the great majority of funding is voluntary, earmarked, and small-scale, coming from a handful of donors. In recent times, funding rules and practices have sidelined multilateralism.⁶⁷ This trend must be reversed. More member states must contribute to UN activities. We are currently seeing budget cuts in many UN entities. Global humanitarian and emergency appeals often reach barely 50 percent of the required (or requested) resources. It is time for governments to abide by their responsibilities and provide the UN with the needed funding. Importantly, donors should not undermine efforts for more cohesion and prioritization by requesting that UN entities deal with donors’ pet projects — especially small-scale projects that lead to a fragmentation of operations. The much-critiqued lack of interagency cooperation is often directly caused by specific donor interests.

Donors should contribute to pooled funds that are dependable, multiyear endeavors with key conditions: Resources need to be allocated and programmed based on a performance framework with strong and measurable results that are additional and credible; implementation must be undertaken by countries as the UN provides on-demand advice and service; UN agencies must be required to program together in a coherent and collaborative manner. Programming should be based on data-supported evidence of country needs, but also alignment with other actors (internal and external), and the likelihood of making a difference. It must be designed in a way that does not subtract from other efforts but rather builds on existing and planned efforts, so as to be truly additional. Applying these conditions will ensure that UN agencies build for scale and results and that they cooperate rather than compete. Indeed, research shows that jointly mobilizing resources is key to overcoming the limitations of inter-UN-agency cooperation.⁶⁸ Many of these conditions were already agreed upon in the 2024 Funding Compact for the UN’s support to the SDGs.⁶⁹ However, it is high time for the global community to demand that donor states abide by these guidelines to ensure an effective, flexible UN that can prioritize and collaborate meaningfully.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Adopt voting as a key process for determining positions at the UN on major goals and spend less time trying to build consensus. Building consensus is an important goal for any political community. This includes the diplomatic world of the UN, which is why almost three-quarters of all General Assembly resolutions are adopted by consensus.⁷⁰ Consensus-based decision-making can be critical for creating universal acceptance of norms. Legally, declarations approved by consensus are considered “agreed-upon language.” Consensus-based processes cultivate discussion, participation, and responsibility, and avoid the so-called tyranny of the majority.⁷¹

However, in certain contexts, consensus decisions can boil down to the lowest common denominator. They often dilute ambitious proposals to the point where they become meaningless or lead to the UN shying away from hard topics for which there can be no unanimity. Thus, a focus on consensus can significantly slow progress, make it incremental, and empower obstructionists. It is hard to craft a steadfast, rigid rule relating to this problem, and consensus building may continue as a priority objective. However, we encourage presidents of the UN General Assembly, ECOSOC, and other bodies to be more forthcoming about using voting as the foundation of decision-making rather than being shy about it. Another way to allow progressive development of areas of international cooperation is to explicitly allow and encourage clubs of states to deepen their standards and mechanisms for these issue areas.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Put human resources reform at the center of any meaningful UN structural reform. Human resources and procurement reform is a sine qua non of the organization. UN staff have been described as the “foot soldiers of multilateralism.”⁷² The work of the UN entities is premised on having a smart, committed, well-trained, culturally sensitive, and ethical workforce. The UN must be able to recruit, retain, promote, manage, and train the best analysts, mediators, program designers, legal experts, and communicators.⁷³ Member states will have to decide whether they want a merit-based international career civil service, as envisaged at the outset of the UN, or a politically appointed and politically managed staff of subcontractors and short-term appointees. However, it is clear that contracts that allow staff to have lifetime appointments and make it difficult for managers to deal with a fast-evolving world economy are not the ideal HR instrument for an agile UN.



Member states will have to decide whether they want a merit-based international career civil service, as envisaged at the outset of the UN, or a politically appointed and politically managed staff of subcontractors and short-term appointees.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Stimulate meaningful cooperation through funding incentives, stronger lead agencies, and expanded roles for resident coordinators. The objective of full coherence is impossible to meet. No government is fully coherent in its activities. And there can be good reasons to avoid full coherence. Discussions on the alleged duplication of work by various UN entities also fail to recognize the need to “mainstream” certain issues, that is, to integrate them into different activities by different actors. For example, gender work cannot be limited to UN Women. Instead, all UN entities need to work on gender issues and consider these perspectives in their work. Similarly, UNFCCC and UNEP may be the lead agencies on climate issues and the environment, but given the interconnected effects of climate change and environmental challenges, many UN entities must be working on various

aspects of this topic. In conflict-affected societies, all UN partners working on humanitarian assistance, economic recovery, peacebuilding, and human rights will need to consider the implications of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) on peaceful societies. Performing a bird's-eye analysis of the work of different agencies and dividing responsibilities without understanding activities at the level of programmatic line items will not generate meaningful separation of responsibilities. Below, we offer eight overarching suggestions for creating better coordination and integrated approaches to the UN's programmatic work, especially at the country level.⁷⁴

RECOMMENDATION 7.1:

Ensure that funders use pooled funds and insist on meaningful and extensive integrated programming by key UN entities. Funding arrangements have the biggest impact on streamlining the work of UN entities. They must ensure that each participating agency gets a sufficient amount of the funds. Otherwise, agencies may add their names to the program but be unable to commit staff and organizational resources. To ensure cooperation and collaboration, integrated programming could be inserted as a requirement in fund contributions.

RECOMMENDATION 7.2:

Strengthen the roles of lead agencies for certain sectors, UN resident coordinators who lead UN country teams, and UN humanitarian coordinators who lead the UN's humanitarian response at the country level. Currently, individuals in such positions have limited powers to shape the actual outcomes of interagency work. They are tasked with fostering cooperation without having authority over programs or budgets. The 2017 UN development reform strengthened the role of resident coordinators, but their role must be further empowered to include responsibility and authority together for in-country policy and programming.

RECOMMENDATION 7.3:

At the country level, streamline overlapping coordination plans and mechanisms. In several countries, the planning processes of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, Humanitarian Action Plan, and national and regional refugee response plans create duplicate planning instruments, frameworks, and working groups. It is vital to create one overarching planning document at the country level to ensure higher levels of collaboration and to address questions about the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. In addition to UN Country Team (UNCT) mechanisms, the UNCT processes must be clearly and institutionally linked to coordination with the larger efforts of development partners, and with the national government.

RECOMMENDATION 7.4:

Uplift the UN's regional and country office system to further strengthen country support. Currently the UN is supposed to work either through country staff from different

agencies or in a UNCT that is in turn overseen by the resident coordinator. On paper this allows country governments and bureaucracy to have a single interlocutor to help coordinate and align different UN agencies within the country. Arguably, this has not worked as designed, in practice. In some countries, UNCTs include as many as 28 different agencies,⁷⁵ which has led to competition and duplication. As part of the UN80 Initiative process, it will be good to see how UN country presence could be rationalized, better coordinated to ensure true value for countries, and organized such that duplication and competition are both reduced. In this context, “uplifting” the role of the resident coordinator is clearly required. Additionally, it is important to ensure that at the country level, there is a clear demarcation of the roles of different agencies, while also ensuring that agencies that have a specific role in transboundary issues (e.g., UNCTAD, UNEP) are incorporated into this clear identification of roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, the country presence of agencies should be discussed and agreed upon with the highest echelons of the host country administration and reviewed every 5 to 10 years to ensure that agencies are meeting needs. This will require that the UNCTs are strengthened, that the overarching in-country UN architecture is clear to everyone, and that the work meets the needs of countries.

RECOMMENDATION 7.5:

Improve the coordination function of ECOSOC and the Chief Executives Board for economic, social, and development issues. Both organs and platforms exercise some form of coordination, but their role is often limited to sharing information, reporting, and agreeing on principles of common action, instead of actively shaping a coherent approach. It is critical to significantly strengthen their coordination function with adequate incentives on both sides.

RECOMMENDATION 7.6:

Create a UN Global Economic Cooperation Council to bring the Bretton Woods institutions and the WTO, which should also become part of the UN system, closer to the UN system. The major economic powers are essential for global economic decision-making, but they are not necessarily members of ECOSOC. Currently, the world lacks a principal intergovernmental organ for economic cooperation. An Economic Security Council or a Global Economic Cooperation Council would bring the World Bank and the IMF more closely into the UN system.⁷⁶ This would strengthen cooperation that presently takes place around the Conferences on Financing for Development. Alternatively, the Group of 20 could be integrated into the UN system, with a constituency that mirrors the structure of the Bretton Woods institutions but that would also have several elected members from the general UN membership.

RECOMMENDATION 7.7:

Make the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) the central voice and advocacy tool for humanitarian concerns. The humanitarian sector is under siege: In the face of

expanding humanitarian crises, humanitarian funding has been decimated, the legitimacy of humanitarian principles have been questioned, and the political will to address the underlying causes is now virtually nonexistent. The highest-level humanitarian coordination forum, the IASC, is not a sufficiently active platform to stand up for humanitarian action. Occasionally, it issues policy papers, repeats the pleas for support of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and serves as a venue for technical updates on various humanitarian operations. We envision the IASC becoming the central voice and advocacy tool for the humanitarian enterprise. Rescuing humanitarian aid is a global political challenge. The IASC should become a major forum for rallying support, raising funding, and creating truly coherent programs. It must become a strong choral voice, with joint analysis, common prioritization, and common advocacy, thus exerting pressure on donor countries.

RECOMMENDATION 7.8:

To promote environmental action and coordination, give UNEP the explicit mandate to be the architect and coordinator for the environment, which includes climate, biodiversity and land systems, pollution, waste, and chemicals. With General Assembly resolution 2997 and the Pact for the Future, UNEP already has the mandate to coordinate within the UN system. The key actor in this space is the Environment Management Group, which the executive director of UNEP chairs. However, over time, this forum has become a talking space, where issues-related papers are presented. There is very little mandate or openness to coordinating these areas in an inter-agency sense. Additionally, UNEP currently hosts or administers 18 multilateral environment agencies. If its mandate and the role of the United Nations Environment Assembly were strengthened, there would be reduced fragmentation and a stronger voice for keeping the environment under review, with a stronger acceptance of UNEP's normative role as well as its role at regional, national, and sub-national levels to provide operational, context-specific, bespoke advice on the environment as a whole, while also reducing the fragmentation we witness today. Finally, as the leading global environmental authority, UNEP should be strengthened in its scientific, standard-setting role, as well as in transforming its regional offices into Centers of Excellence that are both normative and operational.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Increase monitoring and accountability for development issues by turning the Voluntary National Reviews into a mandatory reporting mechanism. Building on the experience of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), where peer reviews are a key tool for accountability, a meaningful peer review mechanism should be established to hold states accountable for their commitments to the SDGs. We suggest expanding on ECOSOC's annual review of Voluntary National Reviews as part of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the central UN platform for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs.

Such reviews should be mandatory for all countries, and the review process should be accompanied by reporting on impacts by UN entities. Besides creating such mechanisms to ensure the implementation of the current 2030 agenda, such review systems should be integrated into the upcoming global development agenda beyond 2030.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Create UN mechanisms to hold states more accountable for climate, environment, and biodiversity outcomes and also work outside the UNFCCC framework. In the previous section, we highlighted the success the UN has had in creating and steering global discussion on climate issues, shaping national climate policies, and raising funds. There is significant value in the Paris Agreement and each year's global discussions and commitments, yet COPs "succeed" by getting an agreement on paper. However, the measure of achievement that truly matters is the level of CO² in the atmosphere. And this has risen every year since the first round of negotiations began. Emissions have been rising, reaching an all-time high in 2024, the most recent year for which data is available. One clear problem is with the decision-making arrangements for this treaty, which requires unanimity. Another problem is that the UNFCCC has been unable to enforce agreements incorporating legally binding emissions limits. The 2016 Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol is currently phasing down emissions of hydrofluorocarbons (or HFCs), a greenhouse gas that the UNFCCC tried but failed to limit. Kigali will work better mainly because, in addition to limiting the production and consumption of HFCs, it bans trade in these chemicals between parties to this agreement and non-parties. Thanks to this trade restriction, once enough countries participate in the agreement, the rest want to participate so as to avoid losing out on trade.

Relatedly, the UN needs other ideas for achieving success. A fruitful approach would seek agreements on sectoral emissions, focusing on the need to change technologies, fuels, and investment rather than focusing directly on emissions. Beyond calling for states to raise their ambitions, the UN's role must be to strategically shift the focus of negotiations. The soft-law character of many climate-related treaties has enabled an almost universal engagement. However, it has allowed countries to avoid being held accountable. Going forward, the global community must strengthen coherence among multilateral environmental agreements, create binding obligations, and hold countries accountable. It must also mainstream environmental issues in peace and development agendas, and scale up finance and technology transfer to achieve a resilient planet.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Refocus on the UN's accountability to individuals, communities, and groups directly impacted by crises, disasters, or emergencies (affected populations). In the current environment, there is a tendency to focus on the UN's accountability toward member states and governments. No doubt, such accountability is justified. In a time of funding scarcity, this approach may also be pragmatic. However, we argue that it is equally important, or even more important, for the UN to

continue on its path to developing meaningful accountability and participation mechanisms for affected populations. People in humanitarian and development settings do not only need to be “somehow engaged” but must feel that their concerns and ideas are heard and considered in meaningful ways.⁷⁷ In humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding settings, UN entities need to have clear social and environmental standards, and they must take account of, give account to, and be held to account by the people UN entities seek to assist and interact with. In light of today’s power dynamics, it is important to give voice to those with the least institutional power and to ensure that debates on efficiency are not unfairly marginalizing those who are vulnerable (because it takes a lot more to ensure impacts for them). At its core, this effort is not only about meaningful participation in the design, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation of activities on the ground but also about the creation of easy-to-access complaints and feedback mechanisms.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

In 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted the ambitious Pact for the Future, in which states expressed their desire to “transform global governance and reinvigorate the multilateral system to tackle the challenges, and seize the opportunities, of today and tomorrow.”⁷⁹ The pact envisioned reforming the Security Council, revitalizing the work of the General Assembly, strengthening the United Nations system, and reforming the international financial architecture. It vowed to make multilateralism effective and capable, prepared for the future, just, democratic, equitable and representative of today’s world, inclusive, interconnected, and financially stable.⁸⁰

This report highlights 10 key distinctions that are essential for any meaningful discussion of the successes, failures, and reform needs of the UN. We must reiterate that any broad, generalizing statement about the UN is necessarily incorrect. Any assessment or proposal must make clear what aspect, function, and level of the UN’s work it refers to. Every time you hear a claim that the UN is not effective, you must ask, what part of the UN are you referring to? Effective for whom, what does *effectiveness* mean here, and what information exists to support this claim? We emphasize this point perhaps because in addition to being practitioners, we are academics and thus want the discourse to be driven by evidence—not by generic claims that sound true because others have made them before.

We emphasize 10 clear-cut examples that show the significant impact multilateral cooperation can have. Despite its shortcomings, politicization, institutional biases, and inefficiencies, the work of the UN has been successful on many fronts, often despite having limited resources. It is important to remember this fact when discussing the future of the UN and whether we need more or less multilateralism, or thicker or thinner forms of multilateralism.

In the last section, we outline 10 core recommendations to create the UN we must aspire to. As we note at the outset, we don’t believe that all of them can be implemented in the current geopolitical climate. We hope, though, that these ideas will serve as a time capsule that will resurface when the global political environment is ripe for a more meaningful strengthening of the UN’s work. In the meantime, actors should be careful not to jeopardize and decrease the work of the UN in the areas we highlighted. The UN must prevail against specific global actors’ particular interest as a bulwark for the international legal order.⁸¹

Opening the 80th Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2025, Secretary-General António Guterres stated that “at its best, the United Nations is more than a meeting place. It is a moral compass. A force for peace and peacekeeping. A guardian of international law. A catalyst for sustainable development. A lifeline for people in crisis. A lighthouse for human rights. A center that transforms your decisions—the decisions of member states—into action.”⁸² This is an important vision and conceptualization that we share with Secretary-General Guterres. But it requires work and commitment by the global community, an understanding of the need for multilateral cooperation to secure global public goods and other cross-border challenges; sufficient, responsible, flexible, and pooled funding; and the ambitious reform of key UN institutions to make this vision become a full-fledged reality. The UN as we know it is not perfect. But we must be ambitious in how we strengthen it into a system of institutions that will make the planet and the people inhabiting it better off, now and in the future. **This is our vision for the UN we must aspire to.**

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- 26 The budget for UN peacekeeping operations in 2024–2025 was US\$5.6 billion. The US defense budget for the same year was US\$892.6 billion.
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