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## THE UN SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE

### NEITHER BREAKTHROUGH NOR BREAKDOWN

*The complex and interconnected governance challenges facing the world have led the UN to convene a Summit of the Future. Despite the tense international political climate, the aim is for UN member states to come together to lay out a roadmap for transforming global governance.*

Amid a heated US presidential campaign, devastating wars in Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan, accelerating AI competition, and an ever-warming globe, world leaders are gathering in New York on 22 and 23 September for the Summit of the Future. Already postponed by a year, the summit is expected to set the tone for the future of multilateral cooperation. While the name of the summit conveys a sense of a ‘reset’ in international cooperation, some pundits will consider it a success if the UN merely survives the ordeal. To say that expectations are meagre, and the challenges enormous, is putting it mildly.

The UN as a world organization, now on the cusp of its 80th anniversary, has suffered in recent years from great power rivalry and tensions brought about by various conflicts – factors that also affect

the summit and its ability to deliver tangible outcomes. Small states have generally shown more enthusiasm for the summit than major powers, yet clear ownership has, to some extent, been lacking. Moreover, member states are struggling when it comes to deciding which items to prioritize on the summit’s packed agenda.

The summit aims first and foremost to reinvigorate multilateral cooperation with a view to working towards better and more effective solutions to contemporary challenges. In particular, it seeks to enhance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with an emphasis on the opportunities provided by digital solutions. A notable element of the summit is also the focus on the intergenerational nature of contemporary governance challenges. To this end, policymakers currently in

power are facing demands to pledge urgent action to address environmental challenges, for example, in order to safeguard future generations. Improving global governance is listed as one of the goals of the summit, including UN system reform. A prominent but difficult part of this is the persistent issue of Security Council reform, which cannot be achieved without the consent of the five permanent member states (the US, China, Russia, France, and the UK).

The summit will focus on three outcomes. First, the aim is to adopt by consensus a summit Outcome Document, which is political in nature but will pave the way for future, concrete action. The document, entitled “Pact for the Future”, is being prepared by Germany and Namibia, and drafted in consultation with member states, civil society and

other major stakeholders. The so-called Zero Draft (the starting point for intergovernmental negotiations) lists numerous challenges and deals with the following themes in particular: 1) Sustainable development and financing for development; 2) International peace and security; 3) Science, technology and innovation and digital cooperation; 4) Youth and future generations; and 5) Transforming global governance.

Second, the summit aims to adopt a “Declaration on Future Generations”, formally as an annex to the Pact for the Future. This declaration, co-facilitated by Jamaica and the Netherlands, seeks to lay down guiding principles to help member states live up to their obligations towards future generations. The third outcome sought, also in the form of an annex, is the Global Digital Compact (GDC). Sweden and Zambia are working on a document for revision and approval by the summit, which aims to establish principles for a digital future that would help accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In more specific terms, the focus is on data governance and AI.

The summit should not be seen as a single, isolated event dependent on the present-day mood of world leaders. Its agenda and Outcome Document have been in preparation

for a long time, with the foundation laid by UN Secretary-General António Guterres’ report “Our Common Agenda” in 2021, and the “New Agenda for Peace” in 2023. UN member states have managed to overcome divisions before, as demonstrated nearly 20 years ago with the 2005 World Summit, which led to the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission as a new UN body, the debated Responsibility to Protect doctrine, and the endorsement of the Millennium Development Goals preceding the SDGs.

As the summit approaches, member states still have many open issues under negotiation, including how to address the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and how to tackle the reform of international financial institutions for greater fairness and effectiveness. Yet the co-facilitators note that the third revised version of the Outcome Document already contains over 60 actions.

While both diplomats and pundits believe that a Pact for the Future is likely to be agreed upon, it is clear that the summit and its concomitant Outcome Document will not reform the Security Council or the international financial architecture, nor will it create a new AI Agency. Nonetheless, progress may again be made in relation to international peace and security, for example by

emphasizing preventive diplomacy and reforming the Resident Coordinator system, which brings together UN agencies in the field.

The focus should be on the big picture, however. The value of the summit lies in reaffirming existing commitments, providing direction, and paving the way for future talks on important issues. An outcome worth celebrating could also be the avoidance of any further increase in animosity among states, as well as the fact that major powers like the US and China have not obstructed the process. In fact, just before the summit, the US expressed support for adding two African states to the Security Council as permanent members. Such concrete proposals on how to move forward, along with broader recognition of the concerns of Global South countries – such as sustainable development and representation – are also of importance.

The summit will not constitute the UN’s swan song. Rather, it will demonstrate that reforming the system is the only way forward. Holding the summit at this point in time was necessary in order to halt the further deterioration of multilateral cooperation. It will, however, take a lot more to turn this political mandate into concrete results and deliver for future generations. /

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