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UN Summit of the Future: Prospects and Challenges

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SYNOPSIS

*The UN Summit of the Future will be convened in New York from 22 to 23 September this year. **ALISTAIR D. B. COOK** reviews similar past summits to assess what prospects and challenges might lie in store later this year.*

COMMENTARY

When United Nations member states marked the body's 75th anniversary in 2020, the global system faced multiple crises. The UN75 Declaration called for the secretary-general to report back to the UN General Assembly. The following year, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres delivered his report, "[Our Common Agenda](#)", to speed up implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and advance the commitments made in the UN75 Declaration. The report identified gaps that have emerged since 2015, requiring new intergovernmental agreements, and so called for a Summit of the Future to build consensus on new areas of concern, navigate current crises, and rebuild trust in the multilateral system.

The UN General Assembly welcomed the report and agreed to hold the Summit of the Future from 22 to 23 September 2024 after a ministerial meeting in 2023. Given the state of world affairs, with the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine, multiple conflicts from Myanmar to Israel-Palestine, the cost-of-living crisis, and widespread distrust in global institutions, holding such a summit is no easy feat but may be the jolt that helps to navigate areas of cooperation, forge consensus around solutions of mutual interest, energise Security Council reform, and push for greater connectivity. This optimistic

outcome is sobered in the knowledge that the summit outcome could merely involve a series of technical fixes that were already under way.



The Summit of the Future, which will take place from 22 to 23 September 2024 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City, will follow the post-Cold War custom of UN secretaries-general and the General Assembly meeting with heads of state on a regular basis to discuss global challenges. The agenda will cover a wide range of topics, from "surge" agenda items to human security components.

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At the invitation of member states, the secretary-general issued a series of policy briefs to provide more detail on the 11 key issues raised in his “Our Common Agenda” report, how they impact achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and how they will be informed by the UN Charter and UN Declaration on Human Rights, with gender equality as a cross-cutting theme. These policy briefs cover topics such as [future generations](#), an [emergency platform proposal for responding to complex global shocks](#), [youth engagement](#), going [beyond gross domestic product \(GDP\)](#), a [global digital compact](#), [information integrity](#), [international financial architecture reform](#), [outer space](#), [A New Agenda for Peace](#), [transforming education](#), and a “[United Nations 2.0](#)” [vision](#). This is a wide array but not an exhaustive set of issue areas for such a forum to consider.

UN Summits: Past and Present

In the post-Cold War world, UN secretaries-general and the General Assembly have periodically convened heads of state to address global challenges.

The first of these summits was held in 1992, when Boutros-Boutros Ghali was secretary-general. He delivered his report to the General Assembly – “[An Agenda for Peace](#)”, which outlined his vision of how the international system needed to respond to conflict in the post-Cold War world. Most notably, this vision included the introduction of post-conflict peacebuilding and peacemaking, a focus on conflict prevention measures, and the explicit use of Chapter VII of the UN Charter to legitimise the use of force without the consent of the warring parties.

Eight years later, in September 2000, the UN General Assembly convened the Millennium Summit while Kofi Annan was secretary-general. Ahead of the summit, Kofi Annan released his report, “[We the Peoples: the Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century](#)”. Kofi Annan was an advocate of greater coordination between the UN

system and regional organisations like the African Union. At the Millennium Summit, member states agreed to the Millennium Development Goals, to be achieved by 2015.

Earlier, in his Millennium Report of March 2000, Kofi Annan posed a challenge to states: “if humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda or Srebrenica?” This challenge laid the foundation for the “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine endorsed at the subsequent World Summit in 2005. This principle, in keeping with the UN Charter, enshrines in the United Nations the right, through the Security Council, to use force where peaceful means are inadequate and national authorities have failed to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

While reform of the UN system was agreed and under way by the time Ban Ki-moon became UN secretary-general in 2007, he faced several challenges. He convened discussions on the post-2015 development agenda to replace the Millennium Development Goals with the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Later, in 2012, Ban Ki-moon announced that he would convene the first World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. Ahead of the summit, the secretary-general released his report and proposed an [“Agenda for Humanity”](#). The outcome was agreement on the “Grand Bargain”, which was intended to overhaul the humanitarian system, but the reforms, where they occurred, have not had the expected impact.

Recurring Themes

Since 1992, it has become expected that a UN secretary-general will convene a signature summit and outline their vision for global peace and security to offer reform proposals. Since 2000, this expectation has been accompanied by summits on global development. These two parallel paths – security and development – reflect the components of human security captured in the phrases “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want”, first introduced in the 1994 UN Human Development Report.

The main difference this time is that the convening of the Summit of the Future will have a comprehensive agenda including both human security components, illustrated through Antonio Guterres’ policy briefs on “Beyond Gross Domestic Product” and “A New Agenda for Peace”. It further includes the “United Nations 2.0” proposal as an issue area to reform the UN bureaucracy, which previous secretaries-general have included as part of their agendas.

The remaining issues areas either fall within these two remits or are essentially an update to areas which the UN system has not yet invested enough time and resources in to find consensus to establish rules and norms of engagement. This latter set of issues can be understood as part of a “surge” agenda.

Measuring Expectations

Through a reading of the 11 policy briefs for the Summit of the Future, it is evident that the recommendations are indicative of the time and energy spent on developing policy proposals. Many of the “surge” agenda items like future generations, youth engagement, information integrity, outer space, and transforming education have low-bar expectations of declarations, reinforcing Sustainable Development Goal

commitments, regularly convening expert meetings, and dedicating more UN bureaucracy to tackle such issues.

The remaining four issue areas fall within the two human security components of “freedom from want” – through Beyond GDP and international financial architecture reform – and “freedom from fear” – through A New Agenda for Peace and the emergency platform proposal.

Freedom from Want

In the first aspect of human security, the Beyond GDP proposals include a commitment to develop a conceptual framework, establish a high-level expert group to develop a dashboard of key indicators and present them for consideration ahead of the summit, and strengthen statistical capacity. This will formally lay the groundwork for discussions on the post-Sustainable Development Goals 2030 agenda around the needs of people and the planet. This is where we are likely to see the influence of works on the nine “planetary boundaries” within which, the proponents argue, humanity can develop and thrive for generations to come.

Inherently tied to the Beyond GDP proposal is the reform of the international financial architecture. This structural reform proposal has been a mainstay of past summits, with futile calls for more democratic voting in international financial institutions. However, the proposal to convene a biennial summit on coordinating economic decisions for a more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive global economy may gain traction with member states.

Freedom from Fear

In the second aspect of human security, A New Agenda for Peace and the emergency platform proposal offer some of the more tangible potential outcomes for the forthcoming summit, provided they gain the necessary support from member states. Within A New Agenda for Peace, there are many necessary components to reinforce the multilateral system, such as strengthening norms and mechanisms to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, using the secretary-general’s good offices for preventive diplomacy, and ensuring that peace support operations, including those involving sub-regional organisations under the UN Charter’s Chapters VII and VIII, have the required resources.

This is an important starting point for the summit process and is likely to involve numerous calls from different regions around the world to go further in a commitment to engage regional organisations like ASEAN and the African Union through Chapter VIII. The New Agenda also calls for commitments to prevent the weaponisation of new domains and promote responsible innovation. The proposals also focus on Security Council reform, the democratisation of procedures, and the need to make sanctions more targeted and regularly adjusted.

These are all proposals whose time has come but no major breakthrough is expected, particularly in the current global climate. More likely to see traction at the summit are the proposals to revitalise the General Assembly’s role in disarmament and enhancing the role of the Peacebuilding Commission.

The emergency platform proposal seeks to gain support for providing the secretary-general and the UN system with standing authority to convene and operationalise an emergency platform for complex global shocks like COVID-19. Those participating in the emergency platform should commit to cooperate and report to the secretary-general while remaining accountable for their own arrangements. The platform should focus on high-level convening and advocacy work while ensuring it does not duplicate work at other layers of the UN system. In this regard, it would be worthwhile to consider the work already done in aligning the United Nations and ASEAN through “[dynamic simplicity](#)” since 2016 to identify areas of convergence.

By convening the Summit of the Future, UN member states, with the support of the secretary-general, are laying the groundwork for the global community to embark on the important phase of negotiating the next set of global goals to achieve the sustainable, resilient, and inclusive economy that has long been promised. While fundamental reforms are not considered likely in the current global climate, this summit will signal directions for the international community to negotiate the post-2030 global agenda.

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