



Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024

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What's new? World leaders are visiting the UN the week of 18 September for the annual high-level meeting of the General Assembly at a testing time for the organisation. Major-power divisions are shrinking the space for multilateral cooperation, and the organisation's role in managing international peace and security crises is increasingly uncertain.

Why does it matter? While UN peace operations and humanitarian assistance are helping contain conflict and suffering in many countries, the organisation's political influence is decreasing. Hamstrung by political divisions and resource gaps, the UN's leadership and member states must develop new strategies for mobilising the organisation's strengths to meet peace and security challenges.

What should be done? The UN must be pragmatic, endorsing tools like blue helmet peacekeeping in some crises and ad hoc, regionally led responses in others. The UN will sometimes be limited to delivering humanitarian aid and seeking modest political traction. UN platforms can also help address threats like climate change and artificial intelligence.

I. Overview

World leaders will convene in New York during the week of 18 September for the annual high-level session of the UN General Assembly. The meeting's formal theme is "restoring trust and reigniting global solidarity". Both have been in short supply. The breakdown in Russia-West relations is taking an increasingly serious toll. The Security Council has been slow and indecisive in reacting to crises in 2023 to date. Developed and developing countries in the General Assembly have sparred at length over the global economy's direction. As leaders consider how the UN can serve peace and security in the year ahead, their bywords should be flexibility and adaptability. In some places, such as South Sudan, the organisation can keep using traditional tools like peacekeeping operations. In others (like Mali, Sudan and Ukraine) such tools have been found wanting or infeasible, and just finding a political foothold from which to help contain crises will be a tall order. Global challenges also require attention: for example, the UN can and should also play a role in helping manage risks posed by climate change and artificial intelligence.

The geopolitical constraints on the UN are not new, but their effects on the organisation are intensifying. There were deep rifts among Russia, China and the Western powers in the Security Council before Moscow's all-out invasion of Ukraine. Yet while debates over Ukraine dominated UN business from February 2022 onward, the Council was initially able to keep working on other issues more or less constructively. It was even able to innovate in thorny cases, passing its first full resolution on Myanmar and establishing a new system of humanitarian exemptions to UN sanctions regimes in late 2022. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres also played a notable part in mitigating the global fallout from the Russian-Ukrainian war by helping broker the Black Sea Grain Initiative. But as the war has ground on through 2023, the room for residual major-power cooperation through the UN has started to narrow, and diplomats have found it harder to make compromises on difficult issues than in 2022. Russia quit the grain deal in July. It has acted as a spoiler in the Security Council with growing frequency.

As the geopolitical picture darkens, the Council has managed only lacklustre responses to many of the crises of the last year. It has done little more than make statements of concern on cases ranging from the collapse of Sudan in April to the coup in Niger in July. Regional actors have increasingly aimed to take the lead in resolving these situations, albeit with little success, leaving the UN on the sidelines. The government in Mali has underlined the Council's weakness – and the vulnerabilities of UN blue helmet missions – by demanding the withdrawal of peacekeepers from Malian territory, despite the attendant risk of new violence.

Outside the Council, many UN members have pushed the organisation to focus on global economic problems rather than peace and security issues. The General Assembly frequently debated Ukraine in 2022. In contrast, the countries of the so-called Global South have insisted that the Assembly should concentrate on development in the run-up to the high-level meetings, with a focus on making the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) more responsive to poor and middle-income countries' needs. Although the U.S. and its allies have resisted parts of this agenda, they have acknowledged the need to update the international financial system, not least to counter Chinese and Russian influence among developing states.

With the Security Council divided and UN members' attention elsewhere, the organisation's future as a player in international peace and security looks uncertain. In outlining challenges for the UN in the year ahead, this briefing highlights cases – including Mali, Sudan and Ukraine – where the organisation's primary objective is now to regain political traction after the failure of previous crisis management efforts. In contrast to the immediate post-Cold War decades, when the UN often had significant military and economic assets at its disposal, international officials have to make the best of limited resources. Given the limitations of its peacekeeping and mediation efforts, the UN's main source of influence in many cases is humanitarian aid. But as this briefing's section on Afghanistan shows, budget cuts and political pressures also place ceilings on what aid officials can achieve.

Nonetheless, there is still space for the UN's members and international officials to make inroads and even innovate on peace and security issues. After long debates about insecurity in Haiti, for example, Kenya delighted several Security Council members by offering to lead an international police mission to the Caribbean nation. As blue helmet missions like that in Mali wind up, there appears still to be room for

states to pursue ad hoc interventions of this kind. The Security Council is also considering a framework that would allow the AU to tap into UN assessed contributions to fund its peace missions – a step that has been under discussion for years but that appears to be gathering new momentum.

While acknowledging the weaknesses of UN crisis management tools, the Secretary-General has attempted to stir up an even broader debate about the organisation's role in global security. His report on this topic, entitled "A New Agenda for Peace", released in June, in some ways only emphasises the enormity of the challenges facing the UN. In addition to mobilising UN resources to combat sources of inequity (for example patriarchal power structures), Guterres is emphatic about the role the UN must play in helping meet global challenges such as climate change, as well as the security risks associated with advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and other new technologies. There seems little doubt that even as existing UN mechanisms appear to be struggling, the world needs new diplomatic processes and cooperative frameworks to handle such emerging threats. Although finding political agreement on such arrangements is likely to be exceptionally hard in today's geopolitical circumstances, the only way to make progress is to begin the work.

Despite enduring a difficult year, and facing the probability of another hard year ahead, the UN still has significant operational and diplomatic roles to play in managing both traditional and emerging threats to international peace and security. The world leaders who gather at Turtle Bay in September should look for common ground on international security issues, as well as economic ones, and take up the Secretary-General's call to face the new generation of global threats together – rather than accept the decline of multilateralism as inevitable.

II. The Year in Review: Trends in UN Diplomacy and Crisis Management

One year ago, Crisis Group previewed the 2022 high-level session of the General Assembly by noting that Russia's aggression against Ukraine had caused turmoil at the UN, "but not quite as much" as initially seemed possible.¹ In the Security Council, Western and Russian diplomats followed a two-track approach, trading barbs over Ukraine but working out compromises on issues ranging from humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan to sanctions targeting armed groups in Haiti. That the Council remained a space for such deal-making suggested that the UN might gain importance during the Russian-Ukrainian war as a forum for diplomacy with the Kremlin while other channels were closing. Secretary-General Guterres reinforced this impression by negotiating the Black Sea Grain Initiative in tandem with Türkiye in the summer of 2022, the most significant accommodation between Moscow and Kyiv in the course of the war to date.² While Guterres warned that the UN could not broker an end to the main hostilities, the organisation emerged from the war's first phase battered but functional. The subsequent year, however, has been rockier.

¹ Crisis Group Special Briefing N°8, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, 14 September 2022, p.3.

² For more, see Oleg Ignatov et al., "Who are the Winners in the Black Sea Grain Deal?", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 August 2022.

A. *The Security Council*

In the course of 2023, the pressures associated with the Russian-Ukrainian war have taken a toll on many UN bodies, including the Security Council. While the Council has managed to keep finding compromises on most existing files on its agenda, updating the mandates for peace operations and sanctions regimes, the degree of friction between Russia and Western members has been rising. The acrimony frequently plays out in time-consuming arguments over procedural issues, such as the precise process for scheduling debates on Ukraine. But geopolitical tensions have had a substantive impact on UN diplomacy, too. As this briefing describes in more detail, Russia and China have repeatedly clashed with the U.S. and its allies on the Council over how to manage crises such as Haiti's pleas for security assistance or April's unexpected outbreak of violence in Sudan.

This deterioration of relations came into sharpest focus in July, when Russia vetoed a resolution allowing UN agencies to provide humanitarian aid, which has helped sustain over two million people, to rebel-controlled north-western Syria without the consent of the government in Damascus.³ The veto was not in itself a surprise. Moscow has used its blocking power on this mandate before – most recently in 2022 – to extract concessions on assistance to Damascus. But in the past, Russia returned to the table to strike a bargain within days of using its veto. Most Council members thought it would do so again. It did not, giving the Syrian government an opening to offer to approve continued cross-border aid unilaterally, a deal that UN officials accepted after negotiations. Council members remain uncertain whether Russia was aiming for this outcome all along. Regardless, the episode both took from the Council its last substantive bit of leverage in Syria and signified the general narrowing of room for compromise in New York.

While splits among the Council's permanent members have been the main drag on its effectiveness, they have not been the sole source of friction inside it. The last year has also seen the three African members of the Council (Gabon, Ghana and Mozambique, known as the A3) claim the right, and that of the African Union (AU), to guide the UN's response to crises on the continent. The A3 held up Council statements on Sudan after war broke out in April, insisting that the AU be given time to find a solution.⁴ They have also been increasingly critical of the UN's imposition of sanctions in Africa, arguing that arms embargoes and other measures do more to weaken governments of weak states than to avert violence. Council members from all regions acknowledge that the A3 are likely to grow more assertive still. The upshot is that, while African affairs still take up the largest single part of the body's time, the Council's ability to shape the terms of crisis management on the continent will likely recede further.

Compounding these questions about the UN's future role in Africa, scepticism about the future of peace operations on the continent also loomed over the UN in 2023. Again, the doubts were no surprise. Crisis Group noted in 2022 that UN forces in Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) were struggling to contain significant violence and faced challenges to their political credibility.⁵

³ "Russia vetoes UN vote to extend key Syria aid route", Al Jazeera, 11 July 2023.

⁴ "Sudan: Briefing and Consultations", Security Council Report, 25 April 2023.

⁵ Crisis Group Briefing, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, op. cit., p. 3.

The future of the UN Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) consumed Council time through the first half of 2023, as UN officials clashed with the military government in Bamako over reports of human rights abuses by Malian forces and Wagner Group mercenaries. Though the Council mulled options for reinforcing or downsizing MINUSMA, Bamako cut the debate short by demanding that the mission withdraw from Mali as quickly as possible.⁶ While Russia appears to have known Mali's intentions in advance, other Council members – including China and the A3 – were caught off guard and believed that the UN's departure would unleash further instability. Nonetheless, all accepted that there was no way to keep MINUSMA in place without Bamako's acquiescence. The Council agreed to draw down the mission by December.⁷

MINUSMA's abrupt dismissal has led Council members to consider the fates of its other large-scale missions on the continent. As Crisis Group reported in July, the UN missions in Mali, the DRC (MONUSCO), the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and South Sudan (UNMISS) face similar challenges to those experienced by MINUSMA: they struggle to protect civilians, play diminished roles in formal peace processes and are eschewed by host governments in favour of security partners that do not scrutinise human rights records.⁸ While these governments are unlikely to expel UN blue helmets as unceremoniously as Mali did, Council members quietly acknowledge that the era of large-scale stabilisation missions is coming to an end.

But for the Council, one door opens as another closes. MINUSMA's exit has buttressed African diplomats' longstanding calls upon the Security Council to support, and possibly pay for, African-led alternatives to UN peacekeeping. Council members have routinely debated this idea since 2016, and the A3 have been pushing hard for the Council to agree on a framework for future UN-AU funding arrangements by the end of 2023.⁹ Diplomats believe that conditions in the Council are ripe for this push, not least because the U.S. has indicated that it favours the A3's efforts, in sharp contrast to its coolness to their previous campaigns in 2018 and 2019. African diplomats are expected to table a Council resolution sometime in the autumn, though they have not yet hashed out all the important financial and oversight details. Should Council members reach agreement, they will have added another tool to the multilateral toolbox. But they should also be realistic about the fact that African-led security operations will likely face no easier road to resolving crises than their UN counterparts.¹⁰

⁶ "Provisional Record of the 9350th Meeting of the UN Security Council", UNSC S/PV.9350, 16 June 2023.

⁷ "Resolution 2690", UNSC S/RES/2690, 30 June 2023.

⁸ Richard Gowan and Daniel Forti, "What Future for UN Peacekeeping in Africa after Mali Shuttters Its Mission?", Crisis Group Commentary, 10 July 2023.

⁹ For more, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°286, *The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations*, 31 January 2020.

¹⁰ Comfort Ero, "Speech to the UN Security Council on Counter-terrorism in Africa", Briefing to the 9188th Meeting of the UN Security Council, New York, 10 November 2022.

B. *The General Assembly and the Secretary-General*

If the Security Council has often faltered in 2023, the General Assembly has also stepped back from playing a significant role in peace and security matters. During the initial months of Russia's all-out war in Ukraine, the Assembly was unusually prominent in guiding the UN response, repeatedly passing resolutions condemning Russia by large margins.¹¹ Diplomats wondered if this activity presaged a broader increase in the Assembly's engagement in crisis management, noting that the body – where every member has one seat and none has a veto – has stepped up in other periods of the UN's history when the Council has floundered.

Yet the Assembly's enthusiasm for Ukraine diplomacy has apparently dwindled. Early in the year, Ukraine hoped the Assembly would mark the war's first anniversary by passing a resolution endorsing its ten-point peace plan and establishing a tribunal that could prosecute Russian leaders for the crime of aggression. Kyiv's Western allies assessed that many non-Western countries would balk at such proposals, a view Crisis Group supported. Instead, they put forward a softer text calling for a "just, lasting and comprehensive peace". This wording won backing from 141 of the Assembly's 193 members, but since then the Assembly has passed no further resolution regarding Ukraine and made no significant new intervention in other conflicts.¹² Some members want to explore what more the Assembly can do in the security field – one resolution called for a new UN handbook on the topic – but the political challenges are many.¹³

As for Secretary-General Guterres, his primary near-term peace and security challenge through much of the year was to keep the Black Sea Grain Initiative going. As Section III.6 notes, his efforts to this end caused frictions with both Russia and Ukraine, while Western powers believed the UN was deferring too much to Moscow. Russia wound up pulling out of the deal in July, expressing dissatisfaction with the limited economic benefits it had received for its participation.¹⁴

Guterres was not prominently involved in other mediation processes in 2023, and often turned to the organisation's humanitarian arm to lead in situations where the UN's political leverage was limited. Martin Griffiths, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, has often acted as the UN's point person for major crises, conducting shuttle diplomacy on both the Black Sea Grain Initiative and Sudan's civil war over the last year. As later sections of this briefing observe, UN-led aid efforts have played an essential role in saving lives in Afghanistan since the Taliban seized Kabul in 2021, and UN agencies have offered solid, if under-reported, assistance in other places including Ukraine. Nonetheless, Guterres, Griffiths and UN agencies have had to contend with a double headache, as the UN has had to take on ever more aid work while funding has not kept pace with their needs.¹⁵

¹¹ Richard Gowan, Tess Gibson and Raquel Alberto De La Fuente, "UN votes reveal a lot about global opinion on the war in Ukraine", *World Politics Review*, 21 February 2023.

¹² Gowan, Gibson and Alberto De La Fuente, "UN votes reveal a lot about global opinion on the war in Ukraine", op. cit.

¹³ UN Resolution A/RES/77/335, adopted on 1 September 2023.

¹⁴ Charles Maynes, "Russia halts participation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative", NPR, 17 July 2023.

¹⁵ "Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023", *Development Initiatives*, June 2023, p. 30.

C. *A Moment for Reform?*

As diplomats and UN officials have contended with multiple crises over the last year, they have also grappled with a proliferation of discussions about how to reform the institution. Virtually all the organisation's members, regardless of geopolitical orientation, are at least rhetorically committed to the enterprise.

At the Security Council, Washington has lent reform discussions new energy. U.S. President Joe Biden created a frisson of excitement among participants at the last high-level session of the General Assembly by making an unusually full-throated call for changes to the Security Council's composition to take account of modern power dynamics; this objective is more than worthy, given that the Council's structure (and in particular its permanent membership) continues to reflect the world as it was at the time of the UN's founding in 1945.¹⁶ But it is not at all clear that Washington will be able to find a pathway to updating the body, as discussed in more detail in Section III.10 below.

While Security Council reform always absorbs outside attention in New York, Secretary-General Guterres has initiated a much broader debate about overhauling the multilateral system. The focus of this debate is a Summit of the Future that Guterres first announced in 2021 and will convene on the margins of the General Assembly's high-level week in September 2024. In the course of 2023 to date, the Secretary-General's office has released a series of policy briefs outlining potential priorities for the summit, ranging from preparing for future pandemics to reforming the governance of international financial institutions to better reflect the needs of poorer countries (a proposition that many diplomats in New York say should take precedence over Security Council reform).¹⁷ An overarching goal for Guterres is to establish multilateral frameworks for governing, or at least offering guidance about, technologies including the internet, AI and biotechnology.

The Secretary-General has not found it easy to build momentum for the Summit of the Future. Developing countries – led by Cuba and Pakistan – have argued that preparations for the meeting are a distraction from the 2023 gathering to discuss the status of the Sustainable Development Goals (objectives the UN set in 2015 and aims to achieve by 2030), as well as shortfalls in development aid.¹⁸ Diplomats have been entangled in several tracks of discussions on potential reform initiatives. While negotiations over the potential outcomes of the Summit of the Future will kick off in earnest after the din of the high-level week has died down, there is still much work to do to make the process useful.

With respect to peace and security, it is not clear what the Summit of the Future can deliver or even what level of ambition states should have in this respect. In April, a blue-ribbon High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism convened by the Secretary-General called for the Summit to elaborate a “new definition of collective security” backed up by Security Council reform and an international push

¹⁶ Missy Ryan, “U.S. seeks to expand developing world's influence at United Nations”, *Washington Post*, 12 June 2023.

¹⁷ See the policy briefs at the UN's Common Agenda website.

¹⁸ Colum Lynch, “Exclusive: Global south thwarts UN future summit plans”, *Devex*, 26 May 2023.

to abolish nuclear weapons.¹⁹ Implicitly acknowledging the geopolitical obstacles to these aspirations, the Board added a set of smaller but pragmatic proposals, including steps to improve transparency on security issues among states and initiate discussions of the security implications of new technologies.

The Secretary-General laid out his own thoughts about security in his June policy brief titled “A New Agenda for Peace”.²⁰ As Crisis Group has previously noted, this document is notable in part because it presents a cautious and often humble reckoning of the UN’s capabilities.²¹ It opens with an unusually punchy analytical section highlighting the fragmentation of the post-Cold War order and its negative impact on multilateralism, including high levels of mistrust among states. It has little new to say about the problems facing UN peace operations and, in effect, endorses African-led missions as alternatives for providing security on the continent. But looking ahead, the document also places the burden of responsibility for addressing new security threats – such as potential misuses of AI, autonomous weapons systems, cyberweapons and bioweapons – squarely on national governments, while promoting the UN as both a space where states can launch new diplomatic tracks to address these issues and a source of advice on technologies that smaller and poorer countries in particular struggle to monitor.

Juggling these discussions about reforming and rejuvenating the institution with debates about more immediate crises, UN officials and diplomats tend to grumble about their lack of “bandwidth” to absorb so much information at once. Some also question whether there is much point talking about a “New Agenda for Peace” while the major powers are locked in what many perceive to be proxy and undeclared confrontations, leaving the geopolitical bases for future international cooperation in doubt. Despite predictions of the UN’s decline, those who work in and around the institution are grappling with current conflicts and future security trends simultaneously. It is a heavy set of responsibilities.

III. Ten Challenges for the UN

This list of challenges for the UN, based on Crisis Group’s tracking of political trends at the UN and research by analysts in countries where the UN has a significant operational presence, highlights ten pressing priorities for the organisation in the year ahead, both regional and thematic. The list is far from exhaustive – other entries could have covered (for example) managing elections in the DRC, mediating in Yemen or charting the UN’s future role in Syria – but it is indicative of the array of dilemmas the body faces.

¹⁹ For more on the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, see Richard Gowan, “The Future of Multilateralism”, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 27 April 2023; and “A Breakthrough for People and Planet”, High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, 18 April 2023.

²⁰ “A New Agenda for Peace”, UN, July 2023.

²¹ Richard Gowan, “What’s New about the UN’s New Agenda for Peace?”, Crisis Group Commentary, 19 July 2023.

1. Regaining Political Relevance in Sudan

The UN's future in Sudan is in grave doubt after nearly two decades of intensive engagement in the country. The UN Transition Assistance Mission (UNITAMS) established in 2020 to help Sudan move from autocracy to democratic governance by offering political and technical support, scaled down its operations when war broke out between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April. Meanwhile, divisions among the Council's permanent members and caution among their African peers rendered the body too polarised to take meaningful action to halt the fighting, leaving the UN relegated to the sidelines.²² UNITAMS' mandate renewal is coming up in early December: Council members will need to assess then whether they should simply roll over its current mandate or whether there is support for adding features that could give it a more tailored role in the conflict. Either way, Council members need to recognise that they have a common interest in stemming the violence in Sudan. They should use the UNITAMS renewal as an opportunity to be heard.

The outbreak of open combat between the army and RSF all but ended the already diminished work UNITAMS was doing in the country. UN officials evacuated both Sudan capital Khartoum and far west Darfur region, where the war has been fiercest so far, leaving only a skeleton staff behind in Port Sudan to coordinate the UN's humanitarian effort. As fighting intensified – especially in Khartoum and in Darfur, where international peacekeepers were deployed from 2007 to 2020 to prevent a recurrence of the region's earlier horrors – the mission could no longer carry out the vast majority of its substantive tasks.²³

The mission's attempts to broker peace have not fared much better. Before the war, Volker Perthes, the Secretary-General's special representative and UNITAMS' head of mission, was part of a trilateral effort (the two other parties being the AU and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, or IGAD, a Horn of Africa body) to maintain dialogue among Sudan's rival factions, but these efforts stopped when fighting broke out. Then, the army declared him *persona non grata* in early June.²⁴ UN activity since has been limited. It is participating in another AU-led endeavour with the so-called Trilateral Mechanism (AU, UN and IGAD) and others; it has also joined in other regional diplomacy through Perthes, Hannah Tetteh and Parfait Onanga-Anyanga (the Secretary-General's envoys for the Horn of Africa and the AU, respectively).²⁵

²² Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°190, *A Race against Time to Halt Sudan's Collapse*, 22 June 2023.

²³ The UNITAMS mandate includes four strategic objectives: i) to assist the political transition and progress toward democratic governance, with an eye to protection and promotion of human rights, as well as sustainable peace; ii) to support peace processes and implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement and future peace agreements; iii) to assist peacebuilding, civilian protection and rule of law, in particular in Darfur, Blue Nile and South Kordofan; and iv) to support the mobilisation of economic and development assistance, and coordination of humanitarian and peacebuilding assistance. See "Resolution 2579", UNSC S/RES/2579 (2021), 3 June 2021.

²⁴ "Sudan declares UN envoy Volker Perthes 'persona non grata'", Al Jazeera, 9 June 2023. Perthes has since been operating from Nairobi and travelling throughout Africa and Europe. The Permanent Mission of Sudan to the UN openly called for Perthes' replacement at a press conference on 9 August.

²⁵ The AU established its Expanded Mechanism on the Sudan Crisis in April 2020 to coordinate and regional, continental and international efforts to support a peaceful resolution to the conflict. It

As UNITAMS lost purchase on the ground in Sudan, disputes arose among Security Council diplomats about the UN's role in the country. After issuing a cursory press statement shortly after the fighting began, Council members could not agree on another new output about Sudan until early June.²⁶ The A3 refused to engage until receiving explicit guidance from the AU Peace and Security Council and the AU Ministerial Committee on Sudan, concerned that divergent messaging from New York might jeopardise African-led diplomacy.²⁷ China also appeared to be opposed to the Council speaking out further.²⁸ In the meantime, parallel diplomatic initiatives, such as direct talks between the belligerents led by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, emerged without a clear role for the Council.

Negotiations over a new UNITAMS mandate in late May forced a fresh round of discussions but did not spur the Council to arrive at a new vision for its role. When the A3 began engaging with its Council counterparts on the basis of an AU roadmap for Sudan, Russia pushed back, echoing the army-aligned Sudanese delegation's argument that the war is an "internal matter".²⁹ Council members eventually agreed after difficult negotiations to extend the UNITAMS mandate, unchanged, until December; they also issued a lengthy press statement that did little to influence diplomatic efforts.³⁰ Subsequent Council meetings on Sudan – including its biannual session on Darfur with the International Criminal Court prosecutor in July and a briefing from UN officials in August – did not cause Council members to alter their positions.

New Council action will be hard to mobilise over the coming months, and negotiating a new mandate for UNITAMS by early December will be particularly difficult. Unaltered since June 2021, the current mandate allows the UN to coordinate life-saving humanitarian work, document human rights abuses and participate in political discussions. Its other functions are considerably or entirely circumscribed at present. These limitations are well known, but there is no consensus on possible solutions. Any proposals that are not explicitly supported by Sudan's mission in New York – which sides with the army in the conflict – would likely face a Russian veto.³¹ Moreover, agreements reached with army-aligned Sudanese diplomats may be out

includes the Trilateral Mechanism, the League of Arab States, the European Union, the Security Council's permanent members, the Council's three African members, Sudan's neighbouring countries (the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya and South Sudan), the countries designated by IGAD to engage the belligerents (Djibouti, Kenya and South Sudan), Comoros as AU chair, the Quad (the U.S., the UK, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), the Troika (the U.S., the UK and Norway), Germany and Qatar. For more, see Crisis Group Briefing, *A Race against Time to Halt Sudan's Collapse*, op. cit.

²⁶ "Security Council Press Statement on Clashes in Sudan", press release, UN Security Council, 15 April 2023.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, UN diplomats, May 2023. See also "Sudan: Closed Consultations", Security Council Report (What's in Blue), 11 May 2023.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, UN diplomats, August 2023.

²⁹ UN Security Council 9310th Meeting, UNSC S/PV.9310, 25 April 2023.

³⁰ Resolution 2685, UNSC S/RES/2685 (2023), 2 June 2023; "Security Council Press Statement on Sudan", press release, UN Security Council, 2 June 2023.

³¹ Though Russia has firmly opposed the Council taking any decisions on Sudan without the government's explicit support, Crisis Group assesses that Russia has taken a more ambiguous stance toward the warring parties.

of keeping with conditions on the ground, as the RSF exert significant control in Khartoum and elsewhere.³²

Further complicating this calculus has been Perthes' standing as special representative. His lack of unified backing from the warring parties, and by extension the Council, has contributed to the UN's diplomatic marginalisation. Guterres conveyed his unequivocal support for Perthes to Council members during a closed session at the end of May.³³ But the Sudanese army made clear that they no longer view him as credible.³⁴ With Perthes announcing his resignation to the Security Council on 13 September (which might set an unfortunate precedent for other special representatives facing similar pressures), Guterres is likely to confront a long and politically fraught search for a successor.³⁵

Council members will need to prepare for different scenarios when they resume discussions about UNITAMS' future. The path of least resistance would be to once again extend the mission's mandate unchanged, as diplomats may conclude that keeping an imperfect mission intact would be better than losing the UN's main political vehicle for engaging on Sudan. Paradoxically, Council members should also prepare for the possibility that the army may withdraw consent for UNITAMS irrespective of what they decide. Army-linked officials allegedly hinted at this possibility before the Council's briefing in August, suggesting that Perthes' continued presence was an obstacle to a productive working relationship with the mission.³⁶ Closing the mission now would imperil the UN's ability to rush peacebuilding assistance into the country should conditions on the ground improve.

Finally, if diplomats assess that there is appetite for it, they might decide closer to the day to pursue another path by negotiating a new substantive resolution on Sudan and UNITAMS.³⁷ Though it is unrealistic to expect the Council to agree on wholesale changes to the mission's mandate, a new resolution could provide a framework for diplomats engaged with the warring parties to deliver sharper messages, resonant with their new marching orders, and provide the mission with much-needed political backing.

If they go in this direction, several areas stand out as potential fodder for a revised mandate. First, Council members could encourage the various UN envoys to work together to support joint AU-IGAD efforts to develop a nascent civilian negotiating track. Secondly, the mission could also be directed (in coordination with other actors)

³² Crisis Group Statement, "Time to Try Again to End Sudan's War", 21 July 2023.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, Security Council diplomats, June 2023.

³⁴ "Provisional Record of the 9394th Meeting of the UN Security Council", UNSC S/PV.9394, 9 August 2023; "Al-Harith Idriss al-Harith Mohamed (Sudan) on the Situation in the Country – Security Council Media Stakeout", UN WebTV, 9 August 2023.

³⁵ "Five candidates in race to lead UNITAMS Khartoum", *African Intelligence*, 11 May 2020; Colum Lynch and Robbie Gramer, "Big-power rivalries hamstringing top UN missions", *Foreign Policy*, 22 July 2020.

³⁶ "Sudan threatened to end UNITAMS if Perthes' participated in Security Council meeting", *Sudan Tribune*, 9 August 2023.

³⁷ Though the A3, China and Russia opposed new language during the May negotiations over the UNITAMS mandate, Russia's deputy representative to the UN suggested a willingness to revisit the mandate "after the acute phase [of the war] is over" during the Council's May briefing on Sudan. See "Provisional Record of the 9326th Meeting of the UN Security Council", UNSC S/PV.9326, 22 May 2023.

to fill any existing gaps in the response to the war on the ground, including for instance assisting those trying to tamp down violence in Darfur or other hotspots. Thirdly, Council members should denounce the warring parties' continued obstruction of international aid, one of the few points of common ground among diplomats. Finally, looking ahead, the Council could ask the mission to examine possible UN roles in potential ceasefire mechanisms and transitional security arrangements.

Unabated fighting throughout the country has rendered UNITAMS a shell of the robust body it was intended to be. While the Council would not have been able to stop the war on its own, or compel the belligerents to negotiate, its silence about the mission's struggles, and about the broader war, has been deafening. Diplomats should use the forthcoming negotiations as an opportunity to speak up and, through the global body, weigh in behind efforts to end the fighting.

2. Restoring Development Support for Afghanistan

The UN organised a surge of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in 2021, almost certainly saving millions of lives as the country stumbled through the aftermath of war. Despite this heroic feat, the UN increasingly looks like a villain in the eyes of both donors and the Taliban authorities. As the Taliban start their third year in power, the UN footprint in Afghanistan seems at risk of shrinking. Donor governments, justifiably horrified by the Taliban's systematic violations of the human rights of girls and women, are trimming UN funding and putting stringent conditions on aid programs. Budgets are stretched in crises around the world, but the UN humanitarian response in Afghanistan ranked among the worst-funded in 2023.³⁸

In part, Western donors are turning away from Afghanistan because they feel disappointed by the Taliban's refusal to relax their pursuit of supposed religious and cultural purity, especially on gender issues.³⁹ Many of the countries that gave millions of dollars in humanitarian aid to cushion the impact of the U.S. and NATO military withdrawal from Afghanistan had hoped that their generosity would soften the Taliban's rule. But as Crisis Group has pointed out, those expectations were unrealistic. The Taliban, having withstood raids and airstrikes for years, were always unlikely to bow to donor demands.⁴⁰ Donors seeking to provide support in a manner consistent with their values also persisted with unworkable instructions for the UN and NGOs, requiring that they help Afghans without benefiting the Taliban. Yet the functioning of the government and the welfare of the Afghan people proved too closely bound together for such strictures to work.

For their part, the Taliban have been taking steps to bring UN operations in the country into alignment with their own agenda. That is a recipe for tension, as the Taliban's vision for a theocratic society that disenfranchises girls and women clashes with international standards on human rights and gender rights. It also flies in the

³⁸ Crisis Group calculations indicate that the UN has received only 17 per cent of the funding requested in its original 2023 humanitarian response plan for Afghanistan (see Appendix A). By that measure, the only country-based UN humanitarian plan with less funding is that for Honduras. A mid-year revision downscaled the Afghanistan plan.

³⁹ Crisis Group Asia Report N°329, *Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis*, 23 February 2023.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group Briefing, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, op. cit.

face of Afghanistan's obligations under various international instruments.⁴¹ The Taliban's move to prevent girls from studying at secondary schools and universities, and their ban on Afghan women working at UN and NGO offices, are only the most infamous examples. Additionally, in many other ways, the Taliban's plans do not fit with the UN aid priorities, and these differences are becoming stark. A particular point of friction is the requirement by most donors that UN engagement remain limited to basic forms of life-saving assistance. The Taliban feel impatient with having to rely on handouts, and all signs suggest they will get more assertive in demanding self-sufficiency.⁴²

These growing pressures, from both donors and the Taliban, put the UN in a squeeze – and something has to give. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to react to such pressures with a wholesale revision of the mandate for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, which is up for renewal in March 2024. The relevant text helpfully gives the mission an expansive set of instructions for coordinating humanitarian activities, facilitating dialogue with relevant Afghan parties and promoting human rights, among other responsibilities.⁴³ Efforts to tailor the directives to match evolving reality – as opposed to the politically easier path of hewing to precedent – could wind up gutting the mandate altogether. Although Council members unanimously agreed to give the UN these tasks in 2022, there is no guarantee that the Council would stay united if asked to renegotiate these priorities.

There is little reason to expect dramatic solutions in the short term. No realistic pathway exists for the Taliban to shake off pariah status, escape sanctions and take up Afghanistan's seat in the General Assembly, which continues to be filled by a solitary representative of the former government. That is primarily because the Taliban have made clear that they will, unfortunately, continue refusing the compromises that they should be making – especially with regard to women and girls – which would upset their own supporters and, in their view, corrupt their values. Diplomatic recognition of the Taliban thus seems like a distant prospect.

In the meantime, the UN should place greater emphasis on restoring essential services and promoting economic development, two of the few areas where its support can both align with the Taliban's agenda and materially improve the lives of Afghans. To its credit, the Council has already requested “forward-looking recommendations” on topics such as economic development in the sweeping mandate it gave in March to an assessment of international engagement on Afghanistan.⁴⁴ The

⁴¹ These include Afghanistan's obligations under Article 13 (on the right of everyone to education) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 10 (equal rights of women and men in the field of education) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and Articles 28 (on the right of the child to education, progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity) and 29 (the direction of education of the child) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Afghanistan also acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1983.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, June 2023.

⁴³ “Resolution 2626”, UNSC S/RES/2626, 17 March 2022.

⁴⁴ The independent assessment, mandated by the Security Council in March, requested “recommendations for an integrated and coherent approach among relevant political, humanitarian, and development actors, within and outside of the United Nations system, in order to address the current challenges faced by Afghanistan, including, but not limited to, humanitarian, human rights and especially the rights of women and girls, religious and ethnic minorities, security and terrorism,

Council's challenge will be to settle upon a constructive way of building upon the findings from Special Coordinator Feridun Sinirlioğlu, who is heading up this review, rather than allowing it to languish, as time is running short. Schools, hospitals, electrical grids, irrigation systems, currency markets – all of these things must keep functioning if the world does not want to see Afghanistan collapse. There is no appetite abroad for another state-building effort in Afghanistan, but a limited degree of collaboration with the regime will be necessary to help Afghans survive the slow-down of humanitarian aid.⁴⁵

Realising this shift depends not only on reallocating aid from short- to long-term projects; it also requires Western donor countries to restore levels of day-to-day dialogue with Kabul. Japan and the European Union (EU) have set a good example by stationing officials in the country. Others should follow suit so that UN officials can spend less time on politically sensitive tasks and leave diplomacy in the hands of diplomats.⁴⁶ Specifically, donors should negotiate face to face with the Taliban about broad policy themes, allowing UN officials and aid workers who implement the policy to focus on more technical aspects of the job.

Some donors will prefer to signal disapproval of the Taliban, especially on gender issues, by continuing to limit aid to the barest necessities, but this approach will not have the desired results. If they wish to see basic living conditions improve for women and girls, as well as other Afghans, donors should provide development funding, via the UN and other channels. They should also allow the UN to join a forthcoming dialogue with the Taliban on economic issues, which the U.S. government has indicated will happen “soon”.⁴⁷ Assigning the UN to work on economic recovery will not stop the trend of diminishing aid – and does not necessarily require bigger budgets – but it would give the remaining UN presence greater longevity and impact.

More than half of Afghanistan's people cannot satisfy their basic household needs. Despite the widespread scepticism inside and outside the country about UN operations, millions of Afghans cannot survive without them. Yet humanitarian efforts are, almost by definition, unsustainable – and growing more difficult by the day. Empowering the UN to provide much-needed development support is necessary, even as the Taliban remain outcasts.

narcotics, development, economic and social challenges, dialogue, governance and the rule of law; and to advance the objective of a secure, stable, prosperous and inclusive Afghanistan in line with the elements set out by the Security Council in previous resolutions”. “Resolution 2679”, UNSC S/RES/2679, 16 March 2023, para 3.

⁴⁵ Graeme Smith and Ibraheem Bahiss, “The World Has No Choice but to Work with the Taliban”, *Foreign Affairs*, 11 August 2023.

⁴⁶ Nicholas Kay, “Like it or not, the UK needs to be on the ground again in Afghanistan”, *The Independent*, 15 August 2023. See also Nicola Gordon-Smith, “Don't shut the door on Afghans. The people deserve connectivity and all its hope and promise”, *The Guardian*, 15 August 2023.

⁴⁷ “Meeting of U.S. Officials with Taliban Representatives”, press release, Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, 31 July 2023.

3. Helping Haiti Emerge from Its Political and Security Crisis

The Secretary-General has repeatedly urged UN member states to heed the Haitian government's October 2022 appeal for international security assistance.⁴⁸ Criminal gangs control most of Port-au-Prince and are expanding their footprint beyond the capital. The Haitian police publicly acknowledge that they cannot reestablish authority over these areas unless backed by foreign forces.⁴⁹ For almost a year, no country appeared willing to lead the proposed multinational force. But Kenya's announcement in late July that it would take on this role, and is readying to deploy 1,000 police officers, opened the door for Haiti to receive the help it sorely needs.⁵⁰ The Security Council may well mandate what is being called a UN Security Support Mission, expected to operate with the UN's blessing but not under its auspices, in the coming weeks. The Council's seal of approval should come alongside a reinvigorated effort to achieve a settlement among Haiti's feuding political forces and meaningful steps toward a compromise solution. Clear progress on this front will be crucial to ensuring the mission's success.

Along with a security crisis, Haiti is experiencing a prolonged political dispute that was greatly exacerbated by former President Jovenel Moïse's assassination in July 2021. The acting prime minister, Ariel Henry – who took office through a less than orthodox succession arrangement rather than by popular vote – is widely seen by Haitians as illegitimate, owing both to the manner of his internationally backed rise and to his unwillingness to negotiate power-sharing arrangements since assuming office. (The Core Group – made up of the UN, Germany, Brazil, Canada, Spain, the U.S., France, the EU and the Organization of American States – issued a statement shortly after Moïse's death urging Henry to form a transitional government.⁵¹) The country has not seen national elections since 2016.

In June, Haiti's leading opposition groups issued a statement calling for the creation of a presidential council that would work alongside a prime minister (preferably, in their view, not Henry), providing checks and balances for Henry's currently unfettered powers.⁵² Although Henry has paid lip service to the idea of forging a broader political consensus, he has firmly rejected the idea of a power-sharing agreement.

⁴⁸ "Letter from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council", S/2022/747, 8 October 2022.

⁴⁹ "Frantz Elbé reconnaît que la police n'était pas préparée à faire face au grand banditisme", *Le Nouvelliste*, 28 December 2022.

⁵⁰ Other countries, including Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Jamaica and Rwanda have expressed willingness to contribute police or troops to a multinational force. Renata Segura, "Haiti Needs Help. Foreign Troops Might Be the Least Bad Option", *Foreign Affairs*, 1 December 2022.

⁵¹ President Moïse named Henry prime minister two days before his assassination but failed to complete the legal procedures required to make the appointment official. Joseph Lambert, then president of Haiti's senate, and Claude Joseph, then prime minister, vied to replace Moïse. The Core Group issued its statement in these circumstances. See "Communiqué du Core Group", press release, UN Integrated Office in Haiti, 17 July 2023.

⁵² Four leading political parties, one political coalition and the Montana Agreement signed this declaration at negotiations hosted by the Caribbean Community in Jamaica. "Déclaration conjointe de Kingston", 13 June 2023.

Recent polls indicate that more than 60 per cent of Haitians support the deployment of a multinational force, but that is far from a universal mandate.⁵³ Opposition movements, including those in the so-called Montana Agreement – a broad coalition of political and civil society groups championing what they call a “Haitian-led solution to the crisis” – are cautious about the idea.⁵⁴ Their primary concerns are that international personnel could become a de facto force supporting the current government, strengthening Henry’s hand and possibly enticing him to delay long-overdue elections.⁵⁵ The chequered legacy of previous international interventions in Haiti – notably MINUSTAH, the last UN peacekeeping force in the country, blamed for unknowingly introducing a massive cholera outbreak that killed almost 10,000 people – also leaves some Haitians sceptical that outsiders can make lasting improvements to the country’s security.⁵⁶

Externally it also remains unclear whether there is sufficient backing for an international mission. At the Security Council, both China and Russia have expressed misgivings regarding the deployment of a foreign force – claiming that the current interim government lacks legitimacy and that any security assistance plan should be based on a broad consensus among Haitians.⁵⁷ Some commentators argue that such a mission would represent a failure to learn from the past.⁵⁸ Crisis Group has argued that a foreign force may be the only way to get the security situation in hand and save the state from total collapse, but that success will almost surely require both considerable operational planning, and joint support from Haiti’s main political forces, which should also make a firm commitment to work together in creating a legitimate transitional government.⁵⁹

As a practical matter, proponents of a mission – including supportive Council members, representatives of the UN’s political and technical assistance mission in Haiti (BINUH) and Core Group members – should first convince Haitian politicians to take irreversible steps toward forming an inclusive government. Now is an

⁵³ “Rapport d’étude. Deuxième sondage auprès de la population haïtienne sur l’évolution de la situation d’insécurité du pays”, AGERCA, August 2023; “Rapport de sondage sur la situation d’insécurité en Haïti”, AGERCA, January 2023.

⁵⁴ The Montana Group argues that only a new transitional government backed by broad political consensus should have the power to negotiate the terms of the international assistance authorities need to restore order and ensure the justice system’s proper functioning. “Nòt pou laprès. Akò Montana di se twòp atò”, 20 August 2023.

⁵⁵ Monique Clesca, “Haiti’s Rule of Lawlessness: Why a Military Intervention Would Only Entrench the Island’s Problems”, *Foreign Affairs*, 10 March 2023.

⁵⁶ Vélina Élysée Charlier, Alexandra Filippova and Tom Ricker, “Six Ways the U.S. and the International Community Can Help Haiti Without Armed Intervention”, *Just Security*, 19 October 2022.

⁵⁷ Although the resolution renewing the mandate for the UN Integrated Mission in Haiti (BINUH), unanimously adopted by the UN Security Council in July, encourages Council member states and countries from the region to provide security assistance to Haiti, including by deploying a specialised force, China and Russia have consistently stated that voices of Haitians opposed to such an intervention must be heeded. They have added that any international assistance must be grounded in objectives defined in a political settlement between government and opposition. “Resolution 2692”, UNSC S/RES/2692 (2023), 14 July 2023.

⁵⁸ Blaise Malley, “Will the international community intervene in Haiti – again?”, *Responsible Statecraft*, 19 December 2022.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°48, *Haiti’s Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention*, 14 December 2022.

especially good moment to apply pressure, using the leverage created by a possible Council vote in September to authorise the mission. In particular, proponents should insist on moves by Henry and his allies toward a power-sharing agreement that can create a meaningful check on the power concentrated in the acting prime minister's hands. These partners should also back the Caribbean Community's dialogue facilitation group, which has helped set up delegations representing the government and opposition, as well as outlined an agenda for negotiations.

Secondly, the Security Council should double down on work to cut off Haiti's criminal gangs' access to resources that bolster their power. The Council's sanctions regime on Haiti, established in October 2022 to target individuals sponsoring the gangs, should be used to encourage a severing of the links between them and Haitian elites.⁶⁰ BINUH should also support creating a judicial task force that would help the Haitian authorities, supported by international experts, focus on the long-term objective of prosecuting individuals suspected of sponsoring violent groups. It will take a while to get such a task force up and running, due to the judicial system's dire condition, but determined steps to end the impunity enjoyed by certain powerful Haitians would contribute hugely to restoring citizens' trust in the state.

In addition, Council members should keep pressing for stronger controls on the illicit flows of arms and ammunition into the country.⁶¹ Haiti's own customs service, border patrol and coast guard need bolstering, to be sure, but authorities overseas should also help by increasing scrutiny of outbound shipments at the ports where most of the weapons entering Haiti are illegally loaded.

Finally, Council members need to address the practicalities of the planned multinational force. Kenyan officials undertook a fact-finding trip to Haiti in late August, meeting with members of the Haitian police and government to begin scoping out the proposed mission's concept and operational requirements.⁶² While many of the important details will take time to iron out – including whether the mission will guard strategic infrastructure, as Kenya first proposed, or engage in combat with the gangs – it is already clear that the force will require considerable support from the UN. This help, as the Secretary-General outlined in an August letter, could come in the form of either an UN-mandated logistical package (ie, food, fuel, medical services, communications and information technology), for both the force and Haiti's police, or an expansion of BINUH's mandate that allows the UN, among other things,

⁶⁰ In 2022, the Security Council adopted a regime of sanctions targeting persons or entities that directly or indirectly support criminal activities and gang violence. The only person who has been sanctioned so far is Jimmy Chérizier, aka Barbecue, the infamous leader of the G9 gang coalition. The UN Panel of Experts is to submit a final report by mid-September, at which time it will propose a confidential list of other individuals and entities to be sanctioned. "Resolution 2653", UNSC S/RES/2653 (2022), 21 October 2022.

⁶¹ In its July resolution renewing BINUH's mandate, the Security Council recognised a strong correlation between the illegal arms trade and extreme levels of violence in Haiti. It urged member states to take all appropriate steps to prevent trafficking of weapons, including inspection of cargo headed for Haiti from their own ports. "Resolution 2692", UNSC S/RES/2692 (2023), *op. cit.*

⁶² Jacqueline Charles, "A delegation from Kenya leaves Haiti. Will its proposal prove effective against gangs?", *Miami Herald*, 24 August 2023.

to provide a larger range of civilian support services to the national police.⁶³ Both forms of UN assistance may be needed, given the magnitude of Haiti's challenges.

It is possible that the Security Council will approve the mission even before there has been meaningful progress along all these axes – with Russia and China grudgingly acquiescent and insisting on strict assessment protocols. Henry's calls for foreign security assistance have gained wider support in Haiti as gang violence asphyxiates communities. Kenya's initiative is a major development – suggesting that a viable force could be waiting in the wings. But crossing the approval threshold does not make the items laid out above any less critical. Perhaps most important, if the mission is to succeed, then its friends and supporters will need to use all of the influence they can muster with political forces inside Haiti to help create conditions conducive to that result, including by addressing very real concerns among the opposition that the acting prime minister may exploit the mission to his advantage.⁶⁴

The mission's success could well hang on whether Henry and the main political factions take meaningful steps toward establishing a more inclusive government. These could include widening the membership of the existing High Transition Council (a three-member commission in charge of preparing the way for elections and selecting another commission to reform the constitution) and giving it real decision-making powers; ensuring that ministerial positions are distributed to representatives from a wide range of political forces; and establishing a transparent process for choosing new heads of the electoral authorities.⁶⁵ Moreover, throughout the multinational force's deployment, member state diplomats and UN officials should promote dialogue among parties along the political spectrum; support transitional authorities' efforts to reestablish a broad set of functioning state institutions; and encourage agreement on a calendar for future elections that enjoys the approval of all the main political forces.

4. Navigating a Dangerous Road to Elections in South Sudan

In the year ahead, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) faces a hard choice about whether to support the country's first-ever national elections, which are currently slated for December 2024. The elections should in theory be a landmark in the evolution of South Sudan, which gained independence in 2011 but collapsed into civil war two years later. In practice, they could presage a new wave of conflict. UNMISS can both help the elections through technical assistance and logistical support, and work to prevent and mitigate the unrest that they could set off.

⁶³ Both models would require that the mandate support close coordination with other UN entities present in Haiti to make work on specific issues more effective. For example, both the civilian and military components of a mission would have to work to strengthen and protect UN entities' service provision in response to sexual violence, which has become daily practice for the gangs. For more, see "Letter from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council", S/2023/596, 15 August 2023.

⁶⁴ The challenges posed by gang violence have been aggravated by the rise of a violent vigilante movement known as Bwa Kale. See Diego Da Rin, "Haitians Turn to Mob Justice as the Gang Threat Festers", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 July 2023.

⁶⁵ Some of these initiatives are already part of the 21 December agreement signed by Henry and leaders of various political parties, but have yet to be implemented by the government.

Fresh elections to instal a democratically chosen national government are an important element of the deal that President Salva Kiir and his opponents signed to end the civil war in 2018. Although most of that bargain's legislative and security provisions remain unfulfilled, it remains the lodestar for efforts to steer the country toward greater stability. As Crisis Group has warned since 2021, there are multiple risks associated with the forthcoming vote.⁶⁶ Tensions will rise as elections near. Politicians in South Sudan frequently resort to violence. Badly run or rigged polls would add to the chaos. Opposition figures including Riek Machar, South Sudan's vice president and ex-rebel opposition leader, could boycott the vote or otherwise reject a defeat, risking more violence. While polls are all but guaranteed to spark widespread unrest, as competing armed elites face off at the state and local levels, postponing them could also stir up more turmoil. Public opinion surveys show that South Sudanese overwhelmingly want elections but equally expect them to lead to even greater mayhem.⁶⁷

Expectations concerning UNMISS's role in helping manage the coming events and the potential for chaos must inevitably be coloured by its rocky history. It sheltered hundreds of thousands of civilians on its bases after war broke out in 2013, but it often struggled to protect these people, much less project security farther afield.⁶⁸ Over time, maintaining security has continued to prove beyond its capabilities. Most recently, inter-ethnic fighting erupted among the displaced inhabitants of a UN compound in June, lasting for days.

Still, the mission has had its successes – for example, in mediating local disputes and establishing a passable working relationship with the government – and it could play a useful role in navigating the challenges that the 2024 elections will pose. National authorities are counting on it to provide substantial technical and logistical support for balloting.⁶⁹ South Sudanese civil society groups and outside actors are also looking to UNMISS to help forestall violence in the run-up to the polls. It will be a tall order, as much of the country is already experiencing rampant insecurity, including conflict-related sexual violence.⁷⁰

A key role for UNMISS as the polls approach will be to advise the Security Council of whether there is a realistic prospect that credible elections can be staged. In March, the Council offered UNMISS guidance for thinking about this problem, outlining “key milestones” on the road to polls, including major legal and institutional

⁶⁶ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°300, *Toward a Viable Future for South Sudan*, 10 February 2021; Comfort Ero and Alan Boswell, “South Sudan's Dismal Tenth Birthday”, *Foreign Affairs*, 9 July 2021.

⁶⁷ David Deng, Sophia Dawkins, Christopher Oring and Jan Pospisil, “Elections: Perceptions of Peace in South Sudan”, PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh, 19 October 2022.

⁶⁸ For background, see “Letter dated 1 November 2016 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council”, UNSC S/2016/924, 1 November 2016; Mark Millar, *The Peacekeeping Failure in South Sudan: The UN, Bias and the Peacekeeper's Mind* (New York, 2022); and “MSF Internal Review of the February 2016 Attack on the Malakal Protection of Civilians Site and the Post-event Situation”, Médecins Sans Frontières, June 2016.

⁶⁹ “Situation Report: Malakal”, UN OCHA, 23 June 2023.

⁷⁰ “State of Impunity: The Persistence of Violence and Human Rights Violations in South Sudan”, UN A/HRC/52/CRP.3, 3 April 2023; “Conflict-related Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in South Sudan”, UN A/HRC/49/CRP.4, 21 March 2022.

reforms as well as a reduction in violence.⁷¹ The Council did not, however, give the mission direction about exactly when or how to make a decision with respect to the polls' feasibility or about whether UNMISS should back the vote in any case. Moreover, Russia and China abstained on the mandate because they considered that the benchmark-based approach placed too many conditions on election support.⁷² The two powers also opposed clauses calling for UN peacekeepers to take a more assertive approach to the protection of civilians. UNMISS leaders in Juba will have to proceed on this imperfect basis.⁷³

There is little doubt that, for the time being, South Sudan is not close to meeting the Council's benchmarks. In August 2022, rival figures in Juba agreed to push back the 2018 agreement's timelines (and extend their own terms in office) by nearly two years until February 2025, given the lack of progress in implementing many of the deal's conditions. Not much has changed in the ensuing year: South Sudan has taken few tangible steps to draft a permanent constitution, undertake a first-ever census, demarcate constituency boundaries, enact basic legislation and complete transitional security arrangements, among other unfulfilled provisions.⁷⁴

As for what to do, UNMISS should in the first instance (with the backing of the Council membership and in coordination with the AU and IGAD) press South Sudanese politicians to reach the peace deal's most important benchmarks well before December 2024. While smooth elections may be difficult to pull off regardless of what happens, the odds will be considerably better if these politicians make the difficult compromises necessary to accomplish what they have agreed to on paper. Of particular importance are providing resources and momentum to the constitution-making process, unifying the army and deploying it nationwide, making public financial management reforms, passing legislation organising the polls and appointing the bodies needed to oversee them.

A wrenching decision may loom. If the government and opposition do make real progress on these files, UNMISS should offer the technical assistance and logistical support needed to help South Sudan prepare for the polls.⁷⁵ On the other hand, if UN officials conclude by mid-2024 that South Sudan cannot hold credible or safe

⁷¹ "Resolution 2677", UNSC S/RES/2677 (2023), 15 March 2023, para. 7.

⁷² "UN Security Council's 9281st Meeting, on the situation in South Sudan", UNSC S/PV.9281, 15 March 2023.

⁷³ Officials at UNMISS in Juba say they plan to conduct an assessment of South Sudan's electoral preparations by November. Crisis Group interviews, July 2023.

⁷⁴ Recent UN estimates suggest that electoral preparations are at least nine months behind schedule. The peace deal's dedicated monitoring body continues to sound alarms about Juba's lack of urgency in carrying out its tasks. "UN Security Council's 9353rd Meeting, on the situation in South Sudan", UN S/PV.9353, 20 June 2023; "Report on the Status of Implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan for the period 1st April to 30th June 2023", Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (RJMEC), Report No. 019/23, 22 July 2023.

⁷⁵ UNMISS is currently mandated to provide technical assistance and logistical support to help open civic and political space, help South Sudan adopt legislative frameworks for the electoral process (including through passage of a permanent constitution), provide security support to facilitate the elections, support women candidates' full participation therein, and help South Sudanese IDPs and refugees cast their ballots. See "Resolution 2677", UNSC S/RES/2677 (2023), 15 March 2023, para. 3(c)(v).

elections on time, they should alert the Council and inform Juba that the UN cannot in good conscience provide full (or any) electoral support under such circumstances. In parallel, the UN might also quietly encourage another fraught and unpopular short-term delay as an unwelcome necessity. (Given the public's strong desire for a vote, the latter course would carry its own risks.) In such a scenario, the government might choose to push ahead with polls anyway, leaving UNMISS to focus on addressing risks of violence.

With or without full UN support, the elections are likely to be flawed, and some level of unrest seems likely as well, even if the country does not fall back into full-blown civil war at the national level. The last experience the South Sudanese people had with elections was in 2010, when South Sudan was still a semi-autonomous region inside Sudan. Several state gubernatorial contests during that period became violent, giving rise to sustained insurgencies. To keep history from repeating itself, the UN mission will need to take precautionary measures in order to prevent and contain electoral violence where it can. Additional investment in community dialogue may help the UN better understand local dynamics, while scaled-up efforts to mediate among elites nationally and locally could help reduce the risk that particular contests and disputes turn ugly.⁷⁶

Should risk reduction efforts fail, nimble and responsive deployments of blue helmets will be required, building on the mission's bolstered protection mandate. The UN could already begin mapping out what operations might be required in hotspots to stop attacks on civilians and to safeguard those who flee their homes.⁷⁷

Finally, however any elections go, the Security Council will need to remain engaged in the country's affairs once they are over. Even as pressure mounts to reduce the UN peacekeeping presence on the continent, Council members should be careful not to withdraw blue helmets from South Sudan prematurely. They should instead hold off until security improves throughout the country. In the meantime, they should help ensure that any flare-up of conflict gets the attention it deserves. At a moment of heightened geopolitical tensions and tumult elsewhere in the Horn of Africa, South Sudan could easily slip off the international radar. The Council should not let that happen.

5. Finding New Avenues for Political Engagement in Mali

The government of Mali's decision in June to demand the withdrawal of peacekeepers from Malian territory has left the UN with vanishingly few openings to stay engaged in the country politically. The transitional authorities, who took power in 2021, succeeded in compelling the Security Council to draw down MINUSMA by

⁷⁶ "Democracy on Hold: Rights Violations in the April 2010 Sudan Elections", Human Rights Watch, 30 June 2010.

⁷⁷ The mission's quick deployment of peacekeepers and establishment of temporary operating bases in Tambura, Western Equatoria State (mid-2021) and Kodok, Upper Nile State (December 2022) shortly after violence broke out in these towns are models for future UNMISS responses. For more information, see Nicholas Haysom, "Briefing to the United Nations Security Council by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of UNMISS Mr. Nicholas Haysom", 13 December 2022; and "Attacks on Civilians in Tambura County, June – September 2021", UNMISS and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 2021.

the end of the year.⁷⁸ Russia, which has fostered closer ties with Mali at the expense of former colonial power France, has backed its demands to the hilt. There is little sign that the Malian government sees any future role for the UN in the country's politics, although ministers have underlined that they are still willing to work with the organisation's humanitarian and development agencies.

This turn of events is no great surprise. Crisis Group noted in 2022 that despite fielding over 13,000 peacekeepers, MINUSMA was in an "increasingly precarious" position.⁷⁹ The UN and post-coup authorities clashed over the military's human rights record, particularly with regard to its growing collaboration with the Kremlin-affiliated Wagner Group in operations targeting jihadist insurgents.⁸⁰ In May, a UN human rights report accused Malian and Wagner personnel of killing up to 500 civilians in one such operation in central Mali.⁸¹ By that point, Security Council members were already contemplating whether the mission, which was struggling to address the threat posed by regular jihadist attacks and had lost 174 peacekeepers in battle, could survive under these circumstances.⁸² The Council's reaction to Bamako's withdrawal request was one of resignation.⁸³

Though Mali did not collapse after France's military intervention under Operation Barkhane wrapped up in 2022, MINUSMA's departure could lead to a sharp downturn in security across the country. While UN forces often appeared weak, their presence at least kept urban centres out of the hands of jihadist groups. MINUSMA's leadership and mediation experts also played an essential role in supporting the 2015 Algiers Accords, which established peace between Bamako and various armed groups, notably the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), a separatist coalition in the north of the country.⁸⁴ There are growing signs of renewed hostilities between the CMA and the Malian government as MINUSMA prepares to withdraw: clashes between the two entities in mid-August forced the mission to speed up its departure from a base in the Timbuktu region.⁸⁵

No one, including the Malian government, is under any illusions about the level of risk. Russian officials are frank that their partners in Bamako understand that

⁷⁸ "Resolution 2690", UNSC S/RES/2690, 30 June 2023.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group Briefing, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, op. cit., p. 8.

⁸⁰ Jean-Hervé Jézéquel and Ibrahim Maïga, "Ensuring MINUSMA's Smooth Departure from Mali", Crisis Group Commentary, 27 June 2023.

⁸¹ "Rapport sur les événements de Moura du 27 au 31 mars 2022", UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 12 May 2023.

⁸² "Provisional Record of the 9302nd Meeting of the UN Security Council", UNSC S/PV.9302, 12 April 2023. For background, see "Internal Review of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali: Report of the Secretary General", UNSC S/2023/36, 16 January 2023; and Jean-Hervé Jézéquel, Franklin Nossiter and Ibrahim Maïga, "MINUSMA At a Crossroads", Crisis Group Commentary, 1 December 2022. Fatalities data are from UN Peacekeeping, "Stats (4) Fatalities by Mission and Incident Type", 30 June 2023.

⁸³ Richard Gowan and Daniel Forti, "What Future for UN Peacekeeping in Africa after Mali Shuttles Its Mission?" op. cit.

⁸⁴ On the Algiers Accord, see Mathieu Pellerin, "Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On: An Uneasy Calm", Crisis Group Commentary, 24 June 2020.

⁸⁵ "Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General", UN, 23 August 2023; and note from the UN Secretariat to Security Council members, 16 August 2023 (on file with Crisis Group).

expelling MINUSMA raises security problems, and will also likely affect aid flows, but are willing to absorb these costs; Bamako seems ready to do anything to regain a foothold in the north of the country, even if it imperils the peace agreement. The Malian authorities have not deviated from their course despite Wagner's failed coup in Russia and the death of its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in an unexplained plane crash that many speculate was Moscow's handiwork.⁸⁶ While the UN Secretariat typically tries to devise plans to reduce the dangers associated with the end of its peace operations – such as establishing follow-on peacebuilding presences – its only option is a short, hard exit in Mali.⁸⁷

In the short term, MINUSMA's priorities are to manage this exit as expeditiously and peacefully as possible. UN officials have attempted to reduce tensions around the mission's evacuation of bases in the north, encouraging the government to find compromises with CMA, like refraining from sending large numbers of troops to hotly contested areas such as Aguelhock and Tessalit in the Kidal region. UN officials say they believe all Security Council members, including Russia, want to avoid a resumption of fighting in northern Mali. Some Council members grumble that MINUSMA has eased off criticism of the Malian authorities as they try to finesse the drawdown, but they recognise this tactic is necessary to avoid a further loss of trust.

Looking beyond MINUSMA's drawdown deadline, the most pressing political question for the UN is whether it can still play a role in facilitating talks between the government and the signatories of the Algiers Accord. The Dakar-based UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), a regional conflict prevention centre that was active in Mali before MINUSMA deployed in 2013, may be able to step in, as Secretary-General Guterres has noted. It may also be able to contribute to efforts to restore democracy in Mali (in combination with the Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS), but only if the UN's Fifth Committee agrees to provide UNOWAS with additional resources and staff.⁸⁸ That said, there is no sign that the Malian authorities, despite meeting with the recently appointed head of UNOWAS, Leonardo Santos Simão, want this mission to engage with the signatory parties.⁸⁹

The best that Simão may be able to aim for in the immediate term is keeping open contacts with the authorities in Bamako – most likely emphasising less contentious themes than talks with the CMA – and looking for ways to restore trust with them. His personal diplomacy will need to be adroit, as he cannot expect the Security Council to offer him unified support. Russia in particular is likely to follow Bamako's lead in projecting disinterest, even though, as a matter of convention, Mali will stay on the body's agenda for three years after MINUSMA ends.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Polina Ivanova, "DNA results confirm Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, Moscow says", *Financial Times*, 27 August 2023.

⁸⁷ "Letter dated 18 August 2023 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council", UNSC S/2023/611, 21 August 2023.

⁸⁸ "Letter dated 18 August 2023 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council", op. cit.

⁸⁹ See the Malian permanent representative's speech to the UN Security Council at the August 2023 briefing: "Provisional Record of the 9407th Meeting of the UN Security Council", UNSC S/PV.9407, 28 August 2023.

⁹⁰ Loraine Sievers and Sam Daws, *The Procedure of the UN Security Council* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 231-233.

As for the possibility of UNOWAS coordination with ECOWAS, a key date is March 2024. ECOWAS has pressed Bamako to restore constitutional order by then, and the transitional authorities claim (whether plausibly or not) that they will respect the deadline.⁹¹ As that moment approaches, ECOWAS, UNOWAS and the AU will need to send common messages about the importance of moving back to civilian rule. Should elections in fact take place, the UN may be able to lend a hand to regionally led efforts to facilitate this transition.

Looking outside the realm of multilateral actors, the best-placed player outside Mali to help prop up the Algiers Accords may be Algeria. Mali's northern neighbour mediated the original deal and has launched several initiatives over the years to boost the peace process. Recently, Algeria has taken a lower profile in this regard, possibly discouraged by gridlock among the signatories. But this position may be hard to sustain come 2024, when Algeria begins its two-year term on the Security Council, as other Council members will likely look to it to help manage the post-MINUSMA situation in Mali. If Algiers is willing and able to take on a greater diplomatic role in Mali, UNOWAS might be able to offer it quiet, technical backup.

While UN officials and Council members feel out their political options in Mali, donors can at least try to retain some good will in Mali by tending to the population's basic needs. To date, the UN's humanitarian response plan for Mali in 2023 has only received 21 per cent of its \$751 million budget.⁹² MINUSMA's exit will further complicate aid efforts, as many UN agencies relied on the peacekeeping mission for transport and logistical support. It will be tempting for Western donors in particular to funnel their resources elsewhere. But it would be both humane and prudent to keep money flowing to Mali despite resentment of Bamako's shifting geopolitical posture, including its decision to kick out the peacekeepers.

6. Regaining a Political Foothold in Ukraine

The UN has played a useful, if under-appreciated, role in mitigating the effects of Russia's war in Ukraine, through humanitarian and diplomatic measures. The most important measure has been the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which allowed Ukraine to ship agricultural products to market. But Russia's decision to quit the deal in July raises questions about the UN's future role in containing the war's fallout.⁹³ UN aid agencies continue to assist the Ukrainian population, and international inspectors monitor safety at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, which lies in Russian-occupied territory near the front lines in Ukraine's south east. Yet with both sides appearing increasingly wary of compromise, it is unclear if the UN will have opportunities to launch conflict mitigation initiatives akin to the grain deal in the near future. For now, the organisation's best approach to the war may be to keep offering what help it can to the suffering population while preserving the option of supporting higher-profile efforts to ease the fighting, or help end it, if battlefield and diplomatic conditions change.

⁹¹ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°185, *Mali: Avoiding the Trap of Isolation*, 9 February 2023.

⁹² "Overview of the Humanitarian Response in Mali – Funding Update", UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs, 25 August 2023.

⁹³ For more, see "Who are the Winners in the Black Sea Grain Deal?", op. cit.

At the 2022 high-level session of the General Assembly, leaders praised Secretary-General Guterres for his role in negotiating the grain deal together with Türkiye. The agreement, which enabled Ukraine to export more than 30 million tonnes of grain over twelve months (equivalent to over a third of its exports in 2021), helped reduce global food prices after a spike following Russia's assault on Kyiv that February.⁹⁴ But the Secretary-General faced mounting difficulties in keeping the deal alive from the last months of 2022 onward. Russia complained that it was reaping too few benefits.⁹⁵ One point of contention was that Russian fertiliser exporters had trouble getting their products to market, despite the UN committing to facilitate this trade. When Guterres lobbied for lifting barriers to Russian agricultural exports, U.S. and European officials worried that he was coddling Moscow to protect the grain deal. They were especially critical of his failure to launch a UN investigation into Iran's supply of drones to Russia, which Western officials say violated Security Council sanctions against Tehran.⁹⁶

In May, Russia renewed its participation in the deal for two months but signalled that it was unlikely to do so again. UN members and Western financial institutions tried to assist the UN and Türkiye in addressing some of Russia's concerns, for example by proposing new payment mechanisms that would help importers compensate Russians. Moscow declared these efforts inadequate and quit the deal on 17 July.

Since then, the Secretary-General has urged Russia to consider a limited return to the deal in exchange for Rosselkhozbank, the Russian Agricultural Bank, being allowed to reconnect to the SWIFT financial messaging system.⁹⁷ Russian officials have shown some interest. But several EU member states have rejected the possibility of Russian reconnection to SWIFT, and Ukraine has begun to use alternative means of exporting grain, preferring to avoid reprising a deal with Russia if possible. As shipping and maritime insurance companies become increasingly uneasy about crossing the Black Sea, Ukraine has begun offering insurers compensation for losses related to grain shipments to encourage them to continue operations in the Sea.⁹⁸

Absent the grain deal, the UN has few high-level political entry points into the conflict, but its agencies are still active on the ground. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has personnel based at all Ukraine's nuclear plants, including at Zaporizhzhia, Europe's largest plant which was occupied by Russia early in the war. It has urged both sides to abide by a set of principles (such as not storing heavy military equipment at the site or firing upon it) to keep it secure.⁹⁹ IAEA staff at the plant have also investigated claims that Russia could be preparing to sabotage it, though they do not always have complete freedom of movement at the site.¹⁰⁰ In the spring,

⁹⁴ Data, Black Sea Grain Initiative Joint Coordination Centre, 30 August 2023.

⁹⁵ Maynes, "Russia halts participation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative", op. cit.

⁹⁶ Edith Lederer, "U.S. and Iran clash over Russia using Iran drones in Ukraine", AP, 20 December 2022.

⁹⁷ Michelle Nichols, "UN asks Putin to extend Black Sea grain deal in return for SWIFT access, sources say", Reuters, 12 July 2023.

⁹⁸ "Ships backed up in Black Sea lanes as Russia warning shots raise tensions", Reuters, 14 August 2023.

⁹⁹ "Update 146 – IAEA Director General Statement on Situation in Ukraine", IAEA, 10 February 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Usaid Siddiqui, Priyanka Shankar and Arwa Ibrahim, "Russia-Ukraine updates: Warnings of sabotage at nuclear plant", Al Jazeera, 5 July 2023.

UN officials appear to have explored whether it would be possible to broker stronger security arrangements for the site, around which Russia has set up a military base. Making such arrangements could have cemented the organisation's status as a mediator after the grain deal – but the initiative fizzled.

Notwithstanding its diminishing political influence, the UN continues to have a significant humanitarian role in the war. According to the organisation's own figures, various UN agencies were able to get assistance – including cash aid – to more than seven million Ukrainians in the first half of 2023, representing approximately one fifth of the country's current population (excluding those now living outside the country).¹⁰¹

There are, of course, challenges. Ukrainian officials and civil society groups have criticised the UN for inefficiency (an unfortunately common complaint in multilateral aid efforts).¹⁰² Compounding the difficulties, Russian forces and their counterparts in the civilian occupation authorities refuse to give humanitarian workers access to the areas under their control, meaning that just 4 per cent of aid disbursements have gone to occupied Ukraine.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, UN aid efforts make an important contribution to mitigating the conflict's effects. Donors should ensure that they are fully funded, while pushing UN agencies to continue making their resources more accessible to local NGOs and lay the groundwork for the Ukrainian state to take over their operations in time.

In parallel with this humanitarian work, the Secretary-General could attempt to regain a political foothold in the war by informally coordinating with those countries that have tried to engage in peace efforts with Moscow and Kyiv. If and when circumstances on the battlefield create the conditions for more substantive peace efforts, the UN may still be well placed to play a supporting role, as it did with Türkiye during the grain deal negotiations. Right now, however, peace initiatives are greater in number than in prospects. In 2023 so far, Brazil and South Africa have each launched such initiatives, while Saudi Arabia hosted discussions of how to end the war with representatives of Ukraine and 40 other states in Jeddah. None have had success thus far, and Guterres is sceptical that the moment is ripe for peacemaking.¹⁰⁴ Thus, for the time being, the Secretary-General and his advisers may find themselves doing little more than comparing notes with those powers that aspire to mediate an end to the conflict.

Finally, UN officials can stake out potential roles for the organisation in facilitating on-the-ground peacebuilding efforts in the event that the war ends or enters an extended stalemate. Kyiv has, for example, been vexed by the challenge of how to vet and rehabilitate those local officials in areas liberated from Russia who decided to

¹⁰¹ "Ukraine Humanitarian Response 2023, Situation Report", UN OCHA, 3 August 2023.

¹⁰² Corinne Redfern, "One year on, Ukraine exposes the limits of well-funded international aid", *The New Humanitarian*, 14 February 2023; "Ukraine Build Forward: NGO Recommendations on Ukraine Recovery and Reconstruction", RISE Ukraine/Save the Children, June 2023.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ In June, when Indonesia's defence minister floated a proposal for the UN to deploy peacekeepers to Ukraine and oversee referendums on the future of Russian-occupied areas, his Ukrainian counterpart dismissed the notion with derision. David Latona, "UN chief says peace talks in Ukraine conflict not possible right now", Reuters, 9 May 2023.

work with the occupying powers.¹⁰⁵ While many among the Ukrainian public resent these people, some sort of agreed approach will be needed to sort those who wilfully committed serious offences from those who collaborated for the sake of their own, or their communities', survival. Although the Ukrainian government will likely take primary responsibility for reintegration, the UN may be able to help shoulder the burden by helping to design and monitor a system that can handle this unpopular task in a way that is seen as fair and legitimate and can garner sufficient public support.

7. Managing the Security Risks of Artificial Intelligence

Of all the areas examined in the UN's New Agenda for Peace, AI – and its potential impact on international peace and security – is foremost among Secretary-General Guterres' concerns. AI is widespread in civilian and military domains, he notes, but the frameworks regulating its use are no match for the technology's "rapid scalability, lack of transparency and pace of innovation".¹⁰⁶ The past year has seen a flurry of diplomacy around AI, including the Security Council's first-ever meeting on the topic in July. This broad interest has emerged in no small part because generative AI models such as ChatGPT have grabbed so much public attention.

From the peace and security perspective, the attention is warranted, as AI's exponential growth is sharpening geopolitical competition and raising tensions. For example, the U.S. desire to stay ahead of China in the development of AI technology has led it to impose far-reaching trade and investment restrictions that, even if carefully calibrated, have increased tensions between Washington and Beijing.¹⁰⁷ Yet the UN's role in governing AI and its potential impact on peace and security remains an open question. Fully aware of this gap, the New Agenda for Peace calls on countries to create a new global body, under UN auspices, to manage AI's risks to international peace and security, as well as begin intergovernmental negotiations to shape the "norms, rules and principles" of AI's military applications.¹⁰⁸

This task will be enormous. Regardless of venue, powerful states resist ceding the advantages that AI confers, or yielding the prerogative to try to out-compete current and prospective adversaries, making agreement on far-reaching restrictions improbable. Still, the Secretary-General's call for the UN to house these debates is the right one. In doing so the institution may be able to help frame the debate about AI's uses, set at least some guidelines for its applications and help manage the geopolitical tensions that AI is intensifying.

The geopolitical stakes are evolving nearly as fast as the technology is. Debates about AI's impact on international peace and security, which for nearly a decade were dominated by concern about lethal autonomous weapons, have grown to encompass broader questions about AI's military applications. Among the salient new

¹⁰⁵ A Crisis Group publication on the liberated territories of Ukraine is forthcoming.

¹⁰⁶ "A New Agenda for Peace", op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁰⁷ Kevin Klyman, "Biden takes measured approach on China investment controls", *Foreign Policy*, 19 August 2023.

¹⁰⁸ In August, the Secretary-General also established a multi-stakeholder High-Level Advisory Body for Artificial Intelligence that will report on global AI governance by the end of the year. "A New Agenda for Peace", op. cit., p. 28.; "High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence", UN Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology, June 2023.

uses of AI are for command and control, decision-making support and creating deep-fakes in the service of disinformation.¹⁰⁹

Against this backdrop, China, Russia and the U.S. see the digital arms race as existential, and they are not alone.¹¹⁰ Regional powers such as Israel and Türkiye are deepening their political influence through ostensibly AI-enhanced weaponry.¹¹¹ Other states without advanced AI technology, fearful of what a new arms race will mean to them, continue to push for far-reaching controls or an outright ban.

While AI's applications have evolved rapidly in recent years, the intergovernmental channels for dealing with them have developed less efficiently and with less to show for it. The state parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons – which bans or restricts the use of certain weapons systems – limited their debates to “weapons systems based on emerging technologies in the areas of lethal autonomous weapons systems”.¹¹² Those conversations have now seemingly run their course. Meanwhile the proliferation of AI applications has rendered the lethal

¹⁰⁹ Autonomous weapons need not incorporate AI, though without it their automaticity would be limited to implementing a set of pre-defined rules, as opposed to AI-equipped autonomous weapons that are capable of making decisions and adapting to a changing environment.

¹¹⁰ For example, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated in September 2017 that “the one who becomes the leader in [artificial intelligence] will be the ruler of the world”. “Putin: Leader in artificial intelligence will rule world”, AP, 4 September 2017. U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said in September 2022: “Preserving our edge in science and technology is not a ‘domestic issue’ or a ‘national security issue’. It’s both”. “Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan at the Special Competitive Studies Project Global Emerging Technologies Summit”, White House, 16 September 2022. A statement following a meeting of the Chinese Communist Party, chaired by Chinese President Xi Jinping, described the threats posed by artificial intelligence to China: “We must be prepared for worst-case and extreme scenarios, and be ready to withstand the major test of high winds, choppy waters and even dangerous storms”. “China warns of artificial intelligence risks, calls for beefed-up national security measures”, AP, 31 May 2023.

¹¹¹ Turkish firms, which had carved out a niche as a drone supplier even before the AI revolution, have already made strides to upgrade their technology: Baykar and STM have shaped the course of combat in several conflicts, including in Ethiopia, Libya and Syria. Azerbaijan used a combination of Turkish and Israeli autonomous weapons to particularly strong effect in Nagorno-Karabakh. Israel, too, has used its autonomous technology in combat, to “swarm” targets in Gaza, fire remote machine guns in the West Bank and drive combat vehicles. Judah Ari Gross, “In apparent world first, IDF deployed drone swarms in Gaza fighting”, *The Times of Israel*, 10 July 2021. In the West Bank, Israel deployed AI-powered robotic guns to fire tear gas, stun grenades and sponge-tipped bullets at Palestinian protesters. Sam McNeil, “Israel deploys remote-controlled robotic guns in West Bank”, AP, 16 November 2022.

¹¹² The Convention (the purpose of which is reflected by its full name, the UN Conference on Prohibitions or Restrictions of Use of Certain Conventional Weapons which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects) dates to 1980. It began discussing lethal autonomous weapons in its annual meetings in 2014; in 2016, the Convention’s parties established a Group of Governmental Experts on emerging technologies in lethal autonomous weapons, which meets multiple times each year. It took until 2019 for the convention to adopt the ambiguous formulation “human responsibility must be retained”, much to the frustration of the 30-plus state parties to the convention that advocate a pre-emptive ban. The first two guidelines read, “International humanitarian law continues to apply fully to all weapons systems, including the potential development and use of lethal autonomous weapons systems; (b) Human responsibility for decisions on the use of weapons systems must be retained since accountability cannot be transferred to machines. This should be considered across the entire life cycle of the weapons system”.

autonomous weapons framework partial at best.¹¹³ Particularly notable in this regard is large language models (of which ChatGPT is one version) that technologically sophisticated armies already use to improve command and control or that might someday assist in designing war strategy and help less sophisticated actors improve warfighting. Although some countries, Russia chief among them, continue to argue that the Convention should remain the principal negotiating forum, others have already moved on.

Groupings with wider mandates are trying to step into the void. In February, the Netherlands and South Korea inaugurated the first Summit on Responsible AI in the Military Domain (REAIM). The summit's modest call to action, endorsed by over 50 participating countries, was a step forward even though the notion of "responsible AI" remains inchoate.¹¹⁴ The U.S. also launched its own declaration at the summit, outlining a unilateral commitment to what it considers to be responsible AI. Other initiatives launched by solo actors or small groups are legion.¹¹⁵

This piecemeal, and in some cases unilateral, approach to coming up with a global governance scheme for AI's military applications is a recipe for neither cooperative nor collective security, and risks turning the regulation of AI's risks into a political football.¹¹⁶ Russia was not invited to the REAIM summit, and China, which attended and joined the call to action, is nevertheless unlikely to engage in depth in a process where the U.S. plays a dominant role. Latin American and Caribbean states, including some that joined the summit's call, held their own regional gathering shortly thereafter, where they repeated the demand for a ban on autonomous weapons.¹¹⁷ More than twenty countries, including such regional heavyweights as South Africa, which also supports an autonomous weapons ban, refused to join the REAIM call to action, likely for that reason.

¹¹³ The U.S., for instance, exempts certain AI military applications, such as autonomous cyberspace capabilities, from the human oversight required for automatic weaponry, and applies different requirements to some AI-equipped defensive weaponry than it does to other AI-equipped weapons. U.S. Department of Defense, "Directive 3000.09: Autonomy in Weapons Systems", January 2023.

¹¹⁴ "REAIM 2023 Call to Action", outcome document of the Responsible AI in the Military Domain Summit, 16 February 2023. On responsible AI, see Dustin Lewis, "On 'Responsible AI' in War", in Silja Voienky, Philipp Kellmeyer, Oliver Mueller and Wolfram Burgard (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Responsible Artificial Intelligence* (Cambridge, 2022).

¹¹⁵ A number of parallel unilateral initiatives have been proposed on AI, including China's "New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan", the G7's "Hiroshima AI Process", the EU's "Coordinated Plan on AI", the U.S. "National Artificial Intelligence Research and Development Strategic Plan" and Canada's "Pan-Canadian AI Strategy". See the insightful analysis by Tobias Vestner and Juliette François-Blouin, "Globalizing Responsible AI in the Military Domain by the REAIM Summit", *Just Security*, 13 March 2023.

¹¹⁶ In launching the U.S. Political Declaration, Ambassador Bonnie Jenkins, U.S. under secretary of state for arms control and international security, used the term "responsible" both as a governance standard (as in "responsible military use of AI", which was the subject of the REAIM negotiations) and as a political standard ("Our collective ability as *responsible states* to converge on an understanding of responsible state behaviour can advance our collective security"). "Keynote Remarks by U/S Jenkins to the Summit on Responsible Artificial Intelligence in the Military Domain Ministerial Segment", U.S. State Department, 16 February 2023.

¹¹⁷ Bonnie Docherty and Mary Wareham, "Latin American and Caribbean nations rally against autonomous weapons systems", *Just Security*, 6 March 2023.

Such is the crowded terrain that Secretary-General Guterres stepped into over the course of the summer. In his statement to the Security Council's July meeting, Guterres recommended a ban on autonomous weapons and the creation of a new agency dedicated to AI, similar to the IAEA, to oversee its development. He also urged member states to reach international agreements to govern AI's military applications and uses for counter-terrorism, in addition to developing their own national strategies.

But however well-intentioned, these suggestions are unlikely to have substantial effect. They do not alter the underlying politics that have stymied multilateral progress on lethal autonomous weaponry. The more binding the instrument, the narrower the constraint that powerful actors will accept. Recent experience suggests that any treaty with teeth is unlikely to go much further than repeating that international humanitarian law is applicable to AI, as is already accepted, without setting any new meaningful provisions for human control and involvement in weapons usage or decision-making. (States may be willing to make an exception for nuclear weapons, which would be welcome.) A ban certainly does not have the major-power political support it would need to take hold. Moreover, even were states to adopt a far-reaching treaty, enforcement would be difficult, since the technologies underlying many military AI applications are easily accessible.

But though certain aspirations are likely to remain out of reach for the foreseeable future, bringing AI discussions formally under the UN umbrella would have value. Military uses of AI are a global concern, not least because state capacities are grossly unequal, and the states and companies with the greatest capacities are not transparent about them. The UN could play a role in educating people about how abuse or recklessness with respect to AI could violate human dignity by mining personal data – and could risk human lives should military decision-making algorithms fail to incorporate de-escalation or conflict prevention. Moving the AI conversation to a multilateral venue where all states have a voice and vote could also gradually build support for greater levels of human control of AI weaponry as well as other military applications of AI. Human control of weapons is often articulated in legal terms, but it is also a sensible policy precaution to reduce the possibility of mistakes that could escalate conflict.¹¹⁸

As Guterres encourages the UN to pivot toward the future and emerging threats, the challenge posed by weaponised AI belongs at the top of the list. Although a path toward truly responsible regulation may not yet be visible, the Secretary-General was right to encourage the UN to try to make itself the starting point.

8. Using the momentum created by the New Agenda for Peace's call to dismantle the patriarchy

For weeks after the Secretary-General published the New Agenda for Peace in July, one of its most resonant phrases reverberated in UN corridors: a call to “dismantle the patriarchy”.¹¹⁹ This provocative exhortation, a departure from previous UN language

¹¹⁸ Vincent Boulanin, Neil Davison, Netta Goussac and Moa Peldán Carlsson, “Limits on Autonomy in Weapons Systems: Identifying Practical Elements of Human Control”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and International Committee of the Red Cross, June 2020.

¹¹⁹ “A New Agenda for Peace”, op. cit., p. 7.

on gender issues, elicited mixed reactions from diplomats and UN officials. Some were incredulous that member states would commit to such a goal. Others felt that the New Agenda was correct to use clear rhetoric in calling for the redistribution of power across genders – something that member state bodies which regularly discuss the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda have been unable or unwilling to do.¹²⁰ In any case, there is a pronounced gap – even in the very document where the Secretary-General made his call – between the UN’s rhetoric and its actual level of ambition.

In policy terms, the New Agenda’s appeal for “transformative progress” on gender dynamics is accompanied by recommendations that are familiar to the WPS community. These include admonitions to work toward women’s equal participation in peacebuilding; eradication of gender-based violence; and financing for gender equality initiatives. But while this language carefully avoids suggesting any new objectives that would require the Security Council to enact a broader WPS resolution (where China and Russia are liable to block progressive language) the New Agenda’s call to action can still be put to good use.

At a minimum, the report’s bold language is a welcome riposte to the overall tone of discussions around gender issues in New York, which have recently been gloomy. Many UN officials and diplomats worry that critics of WPS have succeeded in blocking progress on implementing the agenda and have positioned themselves to push back on past advances. But while the fillip provided by the New Agenda can help with morale and momentum, proponents of the WPS agenda – which comprises four pillars (Participation, Protection, Prevention, and Relief and Recovery) – now need to work out how to use it to push for more concrete action to revitalise the concept.

One place to start is the New Agenda’s call for more “quotas, targets and incentives” to encourage women’s equal participation in peacebuilding, which is imperative not just as a matter of equity, but also to help ensure that peacemaking teams draw on the talents of the entire population. But this worthy objective can only be advanced if proponents develop a common set of tools and coordinated approach to move toward the goal. The reality that many existing gender targets go unmet suggests how important it is to focus on practical impediments and how to overcome them. When it comes to political participation, for example, women make up only 26.5 per cent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses in national governments, far off the Sustainable Development Goals target of achieving gender parity in such bodies by 2030.¹²¹ Participation in peace processes is even lower, with women comprising 13 per cent of negotiators in peace processes between 1992 and 2019, rising to a still depressingly low 19 per cent in 2021.¹²²

So, what to do? While the UN does not have the power to enforce gender quotas on states, member states can at least focus attention on whether and how actors pursue these standards in the peace and security realm. For example, a Security Council open debate on WPS that Brazil is set to convene in October will likely focus on

¹²⁰ A former diplomat with knowledge of negotiations leading up to WPS-related resolutions noted that they made no such unambiguous calls. Crisis Group interview, September 2023.

¹²¹ “Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments”, Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline, January 2023.

¹²² “Facts and Figures: Women, Peace and Security”, UN Women, 14 October 2022.

women's participation in political and peace processes. Proponents of a robust WPS agenda should be strategising about how they can use that forum to put the New Agenda's recommendation to work, for example by bolstering calls for a minimum 30 per cent women's participation rate in peace negotiations, which some have already adopted as a WPS-linked goal in specific processes.

The open debate can also be an opportunity to showcase how member states committed to WPS are implementing their own quotas in peace processes in which they are directly involved or support, or making quotas part of their "asks" when formulating financial and political support packages for countries recovering from wars.¹²³ There may be some places where this approach is unfortunately not a viable option, as the above discussion of Afghanistan indicates, but the default should not be to acquiesce in gender-imbalanced negotiating teams.

The New Agenda could also be harnessed to a renewed push toward eradicating gender-based violence and ensuring access to legal and physical response measures for survivors. The New Agenda fails to break new ground on this score – essentially asking member states to recommit to previous standards, including the provisions of a 2019 Security Council resolution (2106) on conflict-related sexual violence – but that need not be an impediment to progress. Indeed, if member states could take meaningful steps toward satisfying their existing commitments, that would itself represent forward movement.

One fairly straightforward place to focus support would be in providing more resources for the women's protection advisers and gender advisers who are embedded with blue helmet missions. These officers have a broad mandate to counter gender-based violence and can help direct UN resources toward everything from meeting protection needs to finding health care for survivors (often a critical humanitarian gap because of the damage sustained by health care infrastructure during conflict) to seeking legal redress against perpetrators. Funding for these positions is often tight. Meetings of the WPS Informal Expert Group can be a useful forum for encouraging, making and reporting on the satisfaction of commitments in this space.¹²⁴

Finally, there is the matter of development financing. The New Agenda recommendations on financing for gender equality initiatives echoes an unmet previous call to allocate at least 15 per cent of development aid to conflict-affected countries for gender equality initiatives. But it fails to challenge donors to consider (as the UN has previously done) how the 85 per cent balance of this assistance can be allocated in ways that respond appropriately to the needs of those marginalised due to gender.¹²⁵ Still, proponents should use the New Agenda to call attention to this deficit heading into the UN's annual summit on gender equality, the Commission on the

¹²³ Crisis Group has argued in recent reporting on Yemen and Cameroon that, wherever feasible, outside mediators should push participants to improve women's representation in negotiating teams. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°221, *The Case for More Inclusive – and More Effective – Peacemaking in Yemen*, 18 March 2021; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°307, *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict*, 23 February 2022.

¹²⁴ Cristal Downing and Floor Keuleers, "Strengthening the Response to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence", Crisis Group Commentary, 6 July 2023.

¹²⁵ "Report of the Secretary-General on Women and Peace and Security", UNSC S/2019/800, 9 October 2019; "Report of the Secretary-General on Women and Peace and Security", UNSC S/2020/946, 25 September 2020.

Status of Women. The March 2024 summit will likely focus on addressing poverty and increasing gender-responsive financing, including in the peace and security space.¹²⁶ Member states should consider using this moment for driving support to the UN Peacebuilding Fund's Gender Promotion Initiative, which supports a range of entities, including civil society organisations, working on gender programming in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Such steps forward will not by themselves spell the end of patriarchal power structures. As the New Agenda itself says, incremental approaches to addressing gender inequality rarely deliver radical improvements. But progress along these lines could nevertheless be highly beneficial, and it is almost surely more achievable than revolutionary change, at least over the short term. Meanwhile, those states that would like to advocate faster, deeper change may have to move ahead on their own – and indeed go beyond the New Agenda's vision.

Some areas are particularly ripe for such independent action. For example, despite a reference to the need “to challenge and transform gender norms”, the Secretary-General's paper has no recommended actions on the protection and participation in peacebuilding of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) populations. Brief mentions of gendered power dynamics and their impact on men and boys are also not accompanied by concrete proposals. These are nevertheless important areas for states to explore when forming policies that try to account for the full range of ways in which people of all genders experience and interact with conflict.

9. Advancing the Peace Agenda at COP28

Two months after meeting at the UN General Assembly, world leaders will reconvene in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, for COP28 – the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's twenty-eighth Conference of the Parties. Assessments of progress toward the Paris Agreement's 2030 emissions goals are set to dominate the agenda. But COP28 will also test whether delegates can shine the spotlight on conflict-affected countries and provide much-needed support to their adaptation efforts. In a period in which Security Council divisions have impeded climate security conversations in New York, November's forum in Dubai is an opportunity to build on initiatives in this area that began in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt at COP27.¹²⁷ Member states should use COP28 to channel more financial, technical and political support to the people who are most vulnerable to the impact of both climate fragility and armed conflict.

Conflict-affected countries face distinct challenges in the climate arena. Climate change tends to act as a “risk multiplier” that exacerbates underlying social tensions and drives armed conflict; recent studies assess that half of the most climate-fragile

¹²⁶ For more about this summit, see the UN Women's website.

¹²⁷ For more, see Ulrich Eberle, Ashish Pradhan and Richard Gowan, “Can the UN Security Council Agree on a Climate Security Resolution?”, Crisis Group Commentary, 20 October 2021; Crisis Group Statement, “Time for the UN Security Council to Act on Climate Security”, 7 December 2021; “How UN Member States Divided Over Climate Security”, Crisis Group Commentary, 22 December 2021; and Crisis Group Briefing, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, op. cit., pp. 26-28.

countries struggle with deadly violence.¹²⁸ South Sudan, Somalia and Iran are shaped by vastly different conflict dynamics, but extreme climate shocks (like flooding or protracted droughts) and environmental degradation in all these countries heighten intercommunal tensions and competition over natural resources and agriculture-based economic opportunities.¹²⁹

As Crisis Group has previously reported, conflict-affected countries also run up against obstacles in getting access to international climate financing.¹³⁰ Some are well-known: donors often fall short of meeting the pledges they have made, and conflict-affected countries receive a significantly smaller percentage of climate financing, on average, compared to countries not experiencing fighting. In addition, the physical danger and governance deficiencies that arise from armed conflict often impede and distort adaptation work.¹³¹ Other obstacles, ranging from the prevalent use of non-concessional loans to difficulties in receiving UN accreditation and meeting donors' fiduciary standards, are less prominent in policy conversations but hold these countries back all the same.

"Peace" is a new item on the annual climate summit's agenda, creating a welcome opportunity to tackle climate security issues.¹³² Diplomats historically approached climate fragility and war as separate issues, often hoping to stop politically charged debates about conflicts from derailing sensitive negotiations over emissions cuts and donor pledges. Egypt used its COP27 presidency in November 2022 to begin weaving these conversations together under the UN umbrella.¹³³ Over twenty different side events in Sharm el-Sheikh discussed various aspects of the climate security agenda.¹³⁴ But despite this push, climate security was peripheral to the formal negotiations about the summit's outcomes on adaptation and climate financing.

As for 2023, the UAE plans to feature climate change's impact on peace prominently at COP28. Discussions during the third day of the two-week summit will be dedicated to Health/Relief, Recovery and Peace – the first explicit focus on peace and conflict at any COP.¹³⁵ Emirati diplomats plan to launch a flagship "global call to action" during this thematic day, which would encourage donors to offer dedicated pledges to conflict-affected countries. Proposed side events on the newly created Loss and Damages Fund (which will compensate climate-affected countries for damages caused by climate change) and exploring climate financing outside the UN

¹²⁸ Climate change's impact on conflict is complex and highly specific to place and time. For more, see Crisis Group, "COP: A Special Series", 28 February 2023; and Crisis Group, "How Climate Change Fuels Deadly Conflict".

¹²⁹ See "Climate Change and Conflict in Somalia", video, Crisis Group, 3 November 2022; Crisis Group Visual Explainer, "Floods in South Sudan", October 2022; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°241, *Iran's Khuzestan: Thirst and Turmoil*, 21 August 2023.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group Visual Explainer, "Giving Countries in Conflict Their Fair Share of Climate Finance", November 2022.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Ulrich Eberle and Andrew Ciacci, "Getting Conflict into the Global Climate Conversation", Crisis Group Commentary, 5 November 2021.

¹³³ "The Climate Responses for Sustaining Peace initiative to be launched at COP27", press release, COP27, 2022.

¹³⁴ "COP27 Peace Report", COP27, November 2022.

¹³⁵ "COP28UAE Thematic Program", COP28UAE, July 2023.

architecture should allow participants to interrogate the impact of climate security more explicitly than in years past.

Despite this growing attention, efforts to make progress on the overlap between climate, peace and security at COP gatherings face huge constraints. The Loss and Damage Fund, a historic outcome of COP27, could take years to bring online.¹³⁶ According to the World Bank, lower- and middle-income countries now require an estimated \$783 billion annually to fund their mitigation and adaptation efforts; this amount far exceeds the \$100 billion annual pledge developed countries made in 2009 but are only now on track to meet.¹³⁷ While more countries readily acknowledge climate change's direct and indirect impact on armed conflict, they are divided on whether (and how) to address these effects in intergovernmental forums such as the UN climate grouping, the Security Council and the General Assembly.¹³⁸ Few, if any, of these obstacles can be removed overnight.

Diplomats can nonetheless use COP28 to advance the climate and peace agenda. Raising peace and security issues in a wide range of formal sessions may spur negotiators to consider the specific effects of their decisions on conflict risks in vulnerable countries. This focus could empower conflict-affected countries to advocate for a greater percentage of adaptation support and climate financing from new pledges than they currently receive. A "global call to action" could provide helpful momentum for diplomats who wish to keep the links between climate and peace on the agenda of future COP summits. Delegates could also explore how they can build on the 2022 Climate Response for Sustaining Peace initiative, which could help countries translate international agreements into domestic practice.

A change to the COP agenda does not absolve the Security Council of the responsibility to help shape international responses to climate change. Discussions in New York and under other UN auspices should be seen as complementary, and not zero-sum, if diplomats intend to offer meaningful support to the people most affected by armed conflict and climate change.

10. Continuing the Quest for UN Security Council Reform

When U.S. President Joe Biden addressed the General Assembly in September 2022, he emphasised the need to reform the Security Council to ensure it remains "credible and effective".¹³⁹ From a political perspective, his gesture was a smart one. Russia had ridden roughshod over the Council for months, using its veto to block any criticism of its aggression in Ukraine. Accordingly, many leaders at the 2022 high-level week were talking up the need to overhaul the body. But one year on, despite an uptick in public and private discussions of what Council reform might look like, there is little sign that the U.S. initiative has led to a breakthrough. The hesitancy is not

¹³⁶ "Transitional Committee on Loss and Damage Holds Second Meeting in Bonn", UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1 June 2023.

¹³⁷ "What You Need to Know About How CCDRS Estimate Climate Finance Needs", World Bank, 13 March 2023. "Rich nations to meet overdue \$100 billion climate pledge this year", Reuters, 2 May 2023.

¹³⁸ "UN Security Council 9345th Meeting", UNSC S/PV.9345, 13 June 2023; "How UN Member States Divided Over Climate Security", *op. cit.*

¹³⁹ Joseph R. Biden, "Remarks by President Biden Before the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly", speech to the UN General Assembly, New York, 21 September 2022.

surprising, given the complexity of the issue, but if the Council proves immune to reform, its credibility will shrink further with many countries.

The procedural and political obstacles to reforming the Council have always been exceedingly high. Changing the Council's composition or revising the rules governing the permanent members' vetoes would require amending the UN Charter – which in turn requires ratification by two thirds of the UN's membership and all five current Council members.¹⁴⁰ Member states are split into blocs supporting incompatible visions. While Brazil, Germany, India and Japan (the G4) have campaigned jointly for permanent seats on the Council for two decades, they face opposition from a coalition of middle powers – ranging from Canada to South Korea – that fear they will lose influence at the UN if the club of permanent Council members expands.¹⁴¹ Complicating matters further, African states argue that the continent deserves to hold two permanent seats on the Council, though they cannot agree on which countries would fill them.¹⁴² In the background sits the U.S. Senate, which as part of any ratification process would have to approve by two-thirds vote a Charter amendment, a high bar to clear with a body that has proven less than hospitable to multilateral treaty-making in recent years.¹⁴³

Given these hurdles, some UN members doubted that the U.S. was sincere when it elevated the topic of Council reform. Cynics saw Biden's statement as a bit of political opportunism in the wake of Russia's aggression, as well as a gambit to irritate China, which is strongly opposed to Japan gaining more influence at the UN. By this metric it succeeded, as Chinese officials responded to Biden's initiative with suspicion.¹⁴⁴ To her credit, U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield conducted extensive consultations with other UN members about Council reform in late 2022 and early 2023. But while Biden indicated that Washington is broadly supportive of the G4's ambitions for permanent seats, the U.S. has not tabled a specific model for Council reform that it wishes to champion. It is unlikely to pay great attention to the issue as the White House juggles an already full foreign policy agenda while preparing for the 2024 election.

The display of U.S. interest in Council reform was enough, however, to jolt other countries into discussing the issue with new energy. Washington's geopolitical rivals have tried to use the debate to boost cooperation among non-Western states. Russia has indicated that it would support Brazil and India gaining permanent seats, but not Germany and Japan. China has indicated that it would be open to developing countries gaining more power in the Council (again sidelining Berlin and Tokyo) although its exact preferences are unclear. At August's BRICS summit in South

¹⁴⁰ "Article 108", United Nations Charter, Chapter XVIII: Amendments, 26 June 1945.

¹⁴¹ "UN Security Council Reform: What the World Thinks", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 June 2023.

¹⁴² "The Common African Position on the Proposed Reform of the United Nations: The Ezulwini Consensus", African Union Ext/EX.CL/2 (VII), 7-8 March 2005.

¹⁴³ Ryan, "U.S. seeks to expand developing world's influence at United Nations", *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, UN diplomats, June 2023.

Africa, China and Russia for the first time backed a statement supporting Brazilian, Indian and South African “ambitions” to join the Security Council.¹⁴⁵

In New York, discussions about the annual Intergovernmental Negotiations on Security Council Reform – traditionally a tedious affair – have grown more animated, with ambassadors organising side meetings to sell their versions of Council reform. The co-chairs of the process in 2023, Austria and Kuwait, have suggested that states should hold more structured meetings reviewing the differing models on offer in the coming year, in order to identify “a conceptual approach that enjoys the widest possible acceptance”.¹⁴⁶ Some UN members would like to see a timeline for completing reform discussions, possibly setting the 80th anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter in 2025 as a deadline for agreement.

All this diplomatic activity around Council reform could still fail to deliver results. There are parallels between the current moment and the run-up to the 60th anniversary of the UN’s foundation in 2005 when the G4 – taking advantage of disquiet with the U.S. decision to circumvent the Council over Iraq – made a push for permanent seats.¹⁴⁷ Washington and Beijing eventually blocked that effort. While China and the U.S. are less likely to cooperate over the Council’s future now, current reform efforts could also peter out inconclusively. Many UN members are less focused on Council reform than changes to the World Bank and IMF that could make the financial institutions more responsive to developing nations’ needs.

If Council reform proves unattainable, reforms to other parts of the UN security architecture may be more feasible. The New Agenda for Peace highlights the possibility of strengthening the Peacebuilding Commission, an advisory body that works with vulnerable states on recovering from or avoiding conflict, possibly by strengthening the body’s links to the international financial institutions and development banks.¹⁴⁸ That could offer the UN openings to get money to states at risk of conflict or coping with the effects of climate change.

While strengthening the UN’s peacebuilding efforts would be valuable in its own right, it will not satisfy those powers – notably India and Brazil – that have most to gain from potential Security Council reforms. Although the debate about the Council’s future can often seem far removed from immediate geopolitical issues, those players who want reform will not let the issue drop. If progress stutters once again, it could well convince policymakers in Brasilia and New Delhi to focus more on frameworks such as the G20 and BRICS, where they have status and influence, and less on a UN system where it is impossible for them to secure change. Having put Council reform on the table, the U.S. should continue to look for ways to move the discussion forward, if it wants to convince other powers that the Council is still a serious platform for cooperation.

¹⁴⁵ “XV BRICS Summit Johannesburg II Declaration”, BRICS, 23 August 2023. Previous BRICS statements had acknowledged the three countries’ ambitions in the multilateral system and the UN, but made no specific reference to the Security Council.

¹⁴⁶ Letter from the Permanent Representatives of Austria and Kuwait to the President of the General Assembly, 2 June 2023.

¹⁴⁷ “UN Security Council Reform: What the World Thinks”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 June 2023.

¹⁴⁸ “A New Agenda for Peace”, op. cit.

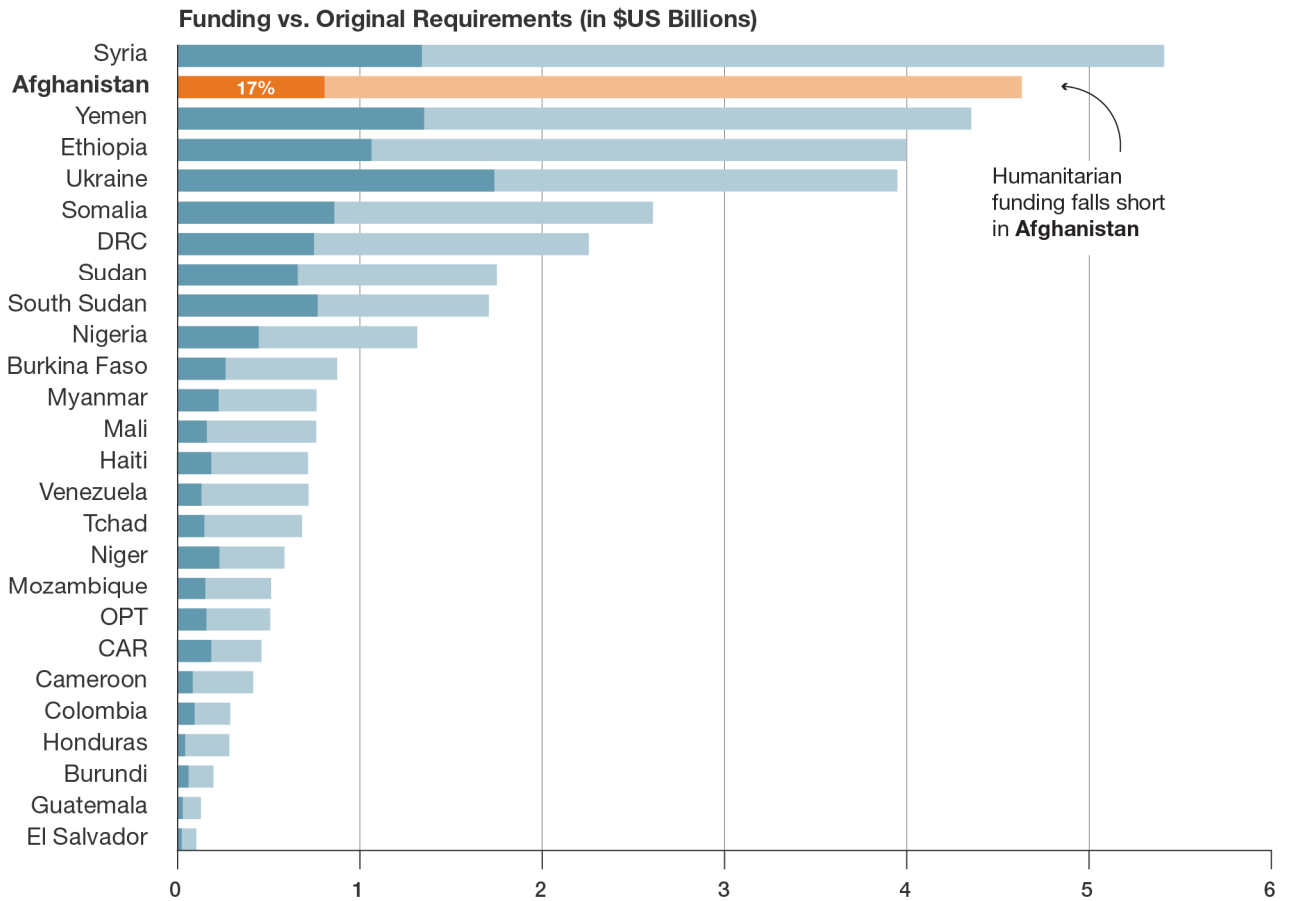
IV. Conclusion

The pressures that the UN has faced over the last twelve months are likely to persist, or intensify, over the coming year. A further deterioration of relations between Russia and the West – or a sharp downturn between the U.S. and China – could make Security Council diplomacy even more confrontational. UN peace operations will continue to face tough security and political conditions. While the Secretary-General has sketched out an intriguing and far-sighted reform agenda through the New Agenda for Peace, negotiations in the run-up to the Summit of the Future are liable to be difficult as well as rife with the tensions between developed and developing countries that have lately been on display in New York.

Yet there are still reasons to believe that the UN can play a role in maintaining international peace and security even if the geopolitical picture remains bleak. Despite the Security Council's travails, it is still available as a rare space for the major powers to make compromises where their interests do align. The organisation has in-house expertise on issues like mediation and peacekeeping that it can offer to international actors, even if big blue helmet missions are winding down. As the Secretary-General is usefully reminding member states, the UN still has a unique status as a facilitator on issues such as AI and climate change. The leaders that attend the annual General Assembly high-level week, which is itself an example of the UN's convening power, should take the opportunity to signal their support for world organisation's continuing relevance in dealing with current conflicts and emerging threats.

New York/Brussels, 14 September 2023

Appendix A: Status of Humanitarian Funding Appeal in 2023



Humanitarian funding falls short in **Afghanistan**

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Financial Tracking Service, August 2023 / CRISIS GROUP



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