



Reinvigorating Peace: A Critical Look at the UN's New Agenda for Peace

Jordan Ryan

Abstract

This Policy Brief analyses how the global landscape has shifted from post-Cold War optimism to current fragmentation, requiring changes in the approach of the United Nations to sustaining peace. It examines the priorities and limitations of the proposed New Agenda for Peace, while analysing issues like sovereignty, development, and enhanced UN integration. This Policy Brief offers concrete, practical recommendations to translate the ambitious sustaining peace vision into reality through continued reforms, recommitment to multilateral solidarity and collaboration, and the political courage to upgrade UN mechanisms for peace.

Introduction

In 1992, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali outlined a post-Cold War vision in his Agenda for Peace.¹ He built his Agenda on four key proposals to strengthen preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and post-conflict peacebuilding. The document outlined measures to promote conflict prevention, build peacekeeper capacities, and enhance cooperation among UN bodies. It underscored the pivotal need for member states to consistently apply UN Charter principles. The original Agenda for Peace embodied an aspirational vision to advance peace and security through reinvigorated multilateral institutions.

In the decades since, the global landscape has been reshaped in dramatic ways. Trends like globalisation and the information revolution empowered non-state actors, while the War on Terror and Arab Spring fueled instability in the Middle East and in North Africa. Divisions deepened between major powers as arms control regimes frayed and nationalism resurged. From climate change to mass migration, new complex threats emerged even as old conflicts festered. Meanwhile the rise of non-state actors and new technologies has reshaped conflicts. As interconnected threats like climate change, social polarisation, and pandemics converge, multilateral cooperation faces grave challenges.

It was against this backdrop that Secretary-General Antonio Guterres proposed a New Agenda for Peace in July 2023.² His proposal for a New Agenda for Peace aims to galvanise member states to reinforce the UN's capacity to meet fast-evolving security challenges. While maintaining core priorities like sustaining peace, human rights and sustainable development, the document maps out new approaches needed in a fragmented world dividing along geopolitical fault lines.

This Policy Brief examines the changing context, shifting priorities from classic peacekeeping to holistic sustaining peace, evolving notions of state sovereignty, and persistent divisions across UN pillars. It assesses implementation gaps and offers pragmatic, concrete recommendations to translate the ambitious and aspirational vision of the New Agenda into reality. This will require long overdue reforms, a recommitment by member states to solidarity, and the political courage to act collaboratively.

From Optimism to Fragmentation: Changing Contexts

The original Agenda presented by Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1992 was formulated in a period of post-Cold War optimism, with improving relations among states that enabled Security Council cooperation and a “new spirit of commonality”.³ The Cold War had just

¹ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping* (United Nations, 1992), <http://www.un-documents.net/a47-277.htm>.

² United Nations *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace* (United Nations, July 2023),

³ *An Agenda for Peace*, Para 8.

ended, marking the collapse of the Soviet Union, and generating expectations of a new world order rooted in cooperation, development, and sustained peace.

Boutros-Ghali's document, known formally as "An Agenda for Peace: Preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, and peace-keeping" was an endeavour to shape international relations beyond conflict. The original Agenda emphasised conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and post-conflict peacebuilding, aiming to shift the focus towards preventive diplomacy.

Secretary-General António Guterres' policy brief which presents a New Agenda for Peace, speaks of a world much changed from the one Boutros-Ghali addressed. Globalisation, the rise of non-state actors, growing inequality, climate change, and the emergence of new technologies have reshaped international dynamics. The New Agenda accurately describes a fragmented world, with deteriorating relations among the major powers. It warns of transitioning to a more fragmented order, with authority dispersed among state and non-state actors. It specifically cites the unraveling of arms control, uncompromising stances in disputes, and evaporating unity of purpose.⁴

This newly outlined Agenda, consisting of twelve concrete sets of action proposals in five priority areas, aims to refine multilateral efforts towards peace and security, positing new themes, challenges, and strategies. Its core focus remains committed to driving peace alongside sustainable development and human rights.

Today's conflicts involve a range of non-state actors taking on increasingly influential roles compared to the 1990s. Multinational corporations act as geopolitical players, providing revenue for conflict actors while shaping outcomes through business partnerships and lobbying. Prominent NGOs provide humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies yet may unwittingly also complicate local politics. Insurgent and terrorist groups access global finance and black markets to fund violence, while exploiting porous borders and identity-based grievances.

Furthermore, the reach of social media, advances in AI, drones and surveillance, and emergence of cyber warfare have fundamentally altered conflict landscapes. From propagating hate speech to psychologically manipulating various population groups to paralysing critical infrastructure, technology has granted state and non-state actors alike unprecedented asymmetric capabilities. Prevention and sustaining peace require adapting to these proliferating risks.

While the analysis in the early sections of the New Agenda is strong, the recommendations lack clear implementation plans, instead remaining aspirational in nature. There is a reliance on voluntary collaboration and hope for greater cooperation, without outlining operational steps to achieve the goals.

⁴ A New Agenda for Peace pages 3-4

This Policy Brief puts forth practical recommendations to translate the ambitious vision of the New Agenda into concrete actions. With pragmatic reforms, renewed commitment to multilateralism, and political courage, the United Nations can meet 21st century threats.

Evolving Priorities: From Peacekeeping to Sustaining Peace

The original Agenda focused substantially on strengthening UN peacekeeping operations, which expanded after the Cold War through increased Security Council cooperation in the new geopolitical environment. Boutros-Ghali outlined basic principles for peacekeeping like consent of parties, impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defence. He also introduced robust peace enforcement concepts.

Three decades later, the New Agenda advocates a more holistic “sustaining peace” approach. This involves redressing root causes of conflict like exclusion, inequality, and disrupted development that drive cycles of violence. Research shows income inequality and youth unemployment were contributing factors to the onset of the Syrian war, for example.

The New Agenda for Peace argues sustainable development is integral to prevention, and without major investments aligned with the global goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 known as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), deprivation and violence will continue. It emphasises inclusive, people-centred approaches fully incorporating women, youth, civil society, and human rights. While affirming peacekeeping’s utility, the New Agenda sees it as only part of a multidimensional peace continuum.

Sustaining peace requires long-term, comprehensive efforts focused on strengthening institutions, social cohesion, human rights, and sustainable development. In Sierra Leone, the UN helped strengthen inclusion and social cohesion after civil war through local peace committees and youth programs that dealt with root causes.

The transition from the UN’s peacekeeping operation in Liberia to a peacebuilding mission exemplifies the shift to sustaining peace priorities. While the peacekeeping mission focused on stabilising the political situation after civil war, the follow-on peacebuilding efforts took a more holistic approach to strengthen social cohesion, rule of law, human rights, and sustainable development. Through initiatives like civic education, youth employment programs, and reconciliation efforts, the UN aimed to address root causes such as inequality and human rights abuses to sustain peace over the long-term. Similar comprehensive approaches are needed to tackle issues such as socioeconomic opportunities, corruption, and justice deficits in other conflict-affected contexts.

However, while the SDGs provide an important shared vision, meeting basic human needs may be a more realistic and immediate priority in fragile, conflict-affected contexts. The SDGs represent aspirational development benchmarks that many countries struggle to reach even in stable conditions. Judging development progress mainly by SDG achievements risks setting unrealistically high standards in nations where meeting basic needs is the priority.

Accordingly, the emphasis should be on foundational development priorities like food security, infrastructure repair, job creation, and reestablishing security and the rule of law. This aligns with past UN frameworks prioritising resilience and government reconnection with citizens after conflict. The New Agenda could better balance the laudable aims of the SDGs with a renewed commitment to urgently meeting basic needs where deprivation drives conflict.

Shifting Approach to State Sovereignty

The original Agenda for Peace emphasised state sovereignty as a core UN principle, while noting that in the post-Cold War era, "absolute and exclusive sovereignty" was no longer tenable. It stated sovereignty should not shield states from accountability for grave violations of international law and human rights.⁵

The New Agenda for Peace acknowledges that effectively addressing some shared global challenges requires universal commitment to collaborative solutions that may necessitate recalibrating traditional Westphalian sovereignty concepts. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that viruses do not respect borders. This public health crisis required coordinated global actions like vaccine research, production and distribution that impacted state sovereignty.

However, the New Agenda reiterates that any reinterpretation of sovereignty must be carefully bounded to preserve space for pluralism, self-determination, and human rights. Core UN Charter principles upholding universal human rights must remain anchored amidst this complex recalibration.

But the New Agenda avoids calling for accountability measures such as sanctions when sovereignty is egregiously violated through invasion of another state. Such unilateral use of force clearly violates the UN Charter's prohibition on violation of another state's territorial integrity. The New Agenda should advocate for multilateral coercion through penalties and isolation to impose costs on illegal invasions. Relying solely on voluntary collaboration is insufficient to address the dire threats of inter-state conflicts.

While individual state sovereignty remains vital, incentives and constraints are needed to safeguard humanity from existential threats such as climate catastrophe and nuclear war. The New Agenda must catalyse global cooperation not just through aspirational principles but enforceable restrictions when collective action is essential for peace and survival.

⁵ An Agenda for Peace at Para 17

Assessing UN Integration

Enhancing UN system integration has been a major priority in both the original and New Agenda for Peace. The 1992 Agenda called for greater cooperation among the Security Council, General Assembly and Secretary-General.⁶ It recognised that new operational relationships had emerged in the post-Cold War era that transcended the UN Charter's state-centric foundations.

Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali boldly called for "integration" within the UN system, stating: "...the focus should be on the field where economic, social and political decisions take effect. I am taking steps to integrate various UN programmes and agencies in specific countries."⁷

In a 1995 follow-up report, Boutros-Ghali stressed the urgent need for significantly broader coordination at UN Headquarters and country offices. He noted that the multifaceted responsibilities of post-conflict peacebuilding "transcend the competence and expertise of any one department, programme, fund, office or agency of the United Nations."⁸ This highlighted the imperative of an integrated UN response to advance peace.

Three decades later, the New Agenda for Peace acknowledges that divisions across the development, humanitarian, human rights and peace and security pillars have persisted. Competition over mandates, funding streams and priorities have sustained institutional siloes.

A 2021 UN Integration Review identified additional structural barriers like misaligned planning and funding timelines, together with behavioural obstacles stemming from siloed identities and lack of senior leadership exchange across pillars. Among its recommendations, the Review called for increased integrated strategic planning, joint needs analysis, increased mobility incentives and collaboration requirements. It also put forth behavioural solutions such as recognition of integration champions, interagency team building, and prompting reflection on shared goals.

While implementation remains uneven, incremental steps such as co-located offices, pooled funding, and updated compacts have been taken. However, without renewed political courage and commitment to reforms, the UN will continue operating in siloes unable to meet complex, interconnected challenges of sustaining peace.

The tools exist to fulfill the bold integration vision called for by both Agendas. Creative leadership, incentives, and consistent follow-through on identified solutions can overcome barriers and align the UN system around the principle of collaborative advantage.

⁶ An Agenda for Peace Para 16

⁷ An Agenda for Peace Para 81

⁸ Report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization SUPPLEMENT TO AN AGENDA FOR PEACE A/50/60 - S/1995/1 (1995) <https://archive.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/226-initiatives/32315-report-of-the-secretary-general-on-the-work-of-the-organization.html>

Closing the Implementation Gap

The New Agenda articulates an ambitious and aspirational vision, but without pragmatic reforms, a recommitment to solidarity, and political courage, it risks becoming another report relegated to the archives. The time for dramatic action is now.

The following recommendations aim to translate the vision into reality through concrete, practical steps.

Recommendations:

1. Scale up prevention and mediation capacities

- 1.1. Member States should substantially increase dedicated funding and personnel for prevention and mediation efforts, including those of the Peacebuilding Fund, and do so on a multi-year basis.
- 1.2. The UN Secretary-General should be prepared to appoint empowered envoys supported by multidisciplinary teams to engage in mediation of high-risk conflicts.
- 1.3. Ensure Resident Coordinators on the ground have sufficient resources to effectively coordinate sustaining peace efforts.

2. Reform decision-making processes

- 2.1. The UN Secretary-General should engage the permanent members of the UN Security Council “members” to institute a voluntary norm of restraint in exercising the veto on vital humanitarian issues, starting with a pledge from at least 2 members by mid-2024.
- 2.2. UN member states should commit to expanding permanent and non-permanent Security Council seats to achieve more equitable geographic representation by 2025.
- 2.3. The UN Secretary-General should commission an expert panel to develop policy recommendations on incentives for compromise and consensus building for adoption by the General Assembly by end 2024.

3. Pursue creative diplomacy for emerging or existing conflicts

- 3.1. Budget allocation to unarmed civilian peacekeeping capacities to supplement peace operations.
- 3.2. The UN Secretary-General should appoint 1 new special envoy dedicated to pursuing creative diplomacy specifically within the Security Council membership.
- 3.3. By mid-2024, the UN should establish an innovative partnership with organisations like Diplomats Without Borders to leverage retired diplomats in challenging negotiations.

4. Embrace diversity, technology, and partnerships
 - 4.1. The UN should inject diverse multidisciplinary perspectives into UN mediation teams, drawing on specialised skills from women mediators, civil society, and local stakeholders.
 - 4.2. The UN should commit to tripling investment in early warning systems and data analytics to bolster prevention efforts and situational awareness for sustaining peace efforts while ensuring early action.

5. Forge strategic partnerships with regional organisations, civil society networks, and the private sector to multiply capacity.
 - 5.1. The UN should allocate programmatic resources to construct national and regional sustaining peace infrastructures.
 - 5.2. Appoint empowered Regional Sustaining Peace Envoys and field offices to provide conduits for context-specific support.
 - 5.3. The UN Peacebuilding Fund should proactively assist member states in establishing dedicated prevention and peacebuilding ministries and institutions designed to sustain peace nationally.

6. Bridge the UN pillar divides
 - 6.1. Institute a requirement that at least 50% of senior leadership appointments have substantive cross-pillar experience by 2025.
 - 6.2. The UN should prioritise capacity development for UN leadership in the fundamentals of negotiation, team building, acting-as-one, conciliation, and inclusive leadership.
 - 6.3. The UN should make interagency mobility assignments a standard prerequisite for middle and senior leadership promotion beginning in 2024.
 - 6.4. The UN should commit to implementing proposed behavioural solutions from the Integration Review, including recognising integration champions and shared goals reflection.

7. Balance SDG goals with basic development needs in fragile contexts
 - 7.1. UN member states should pledge to increase investment in basic development needs including food security, healthcare access, employment generation, rule of law, and infrastructure rehabilitation in fragile contexts.
 - 7.2. Drawing on the experience of UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (2001-2014), the UN should launch a system-wide initiative to deploy multi-disciplinary rapid response teams to provide basic relief and stabilisation in countries facing conflict or crisis.
 - 7.3. The UN should balance reporting on SDG progress with assessments of fundamental development priorities in fragile settings.

Conclusion

Today's fragmented landscape marks a pivotal moment for the United Nations. The New Agenda warns of a world divided, with multilateralism under siege precisely when cooperation is most needed. Paralysis and divisions have allowed global crises to converge.

As in 1945, we again face a fundamental choice between repeating past failures or summoning the courage to build new solidarity. With visionary leadership and political courage, the United Nations can meet 21st century threats. By embracing pragmatic reforms, bridging institutional divides, and recommitting to its Charter, the UN can reinvigorate cooperation. Sovereignty may need recalibration, priorities realignment, but peace, sustainable development, and human rights remain interlinked and vital.

The recommendations in this brief offer concrete steps to operationalise the New Agenda's ambitions. We must not lose the opportunity to renew the UN's promise. The choice between regression or renewal must be made together, with wisdom, hope, resolve, and pragmatism. The window for collective action may be narrowing, but it is not yet closed.

The Author

Jordan Ryan is a Senior Consultant for the Swedish Folke Bernadotte Academy and Hamilton Advisors. He recently was lead author of the UN integration review for the Executive Office of the Secretary-General. Mr. Ryan served as Vice President for Peace at The Carter Center. From 2009-2014, he held positions as UN Assistant Secretary-General and UNDP Assistant Administrator directing the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery. Mr. Ryan also served as Deputy Special Representative in the UN Mission in Liberia and in Vietnam as UN Resident Coordinator. A founding member of Diplomats without Borders, Mr. Ryan earned his B.A. from Yale, a JD from George Washington University, and a master's in international political economy from Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs. He was a fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School.

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Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan
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