



FROM REFORM TO REINVENTION: REIMAGINING THE UNITED NATIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

The United Nations faces a crisis of financial fragility, political paralysis and declining institutional legitimacy. The United States, the organisation's largest contributor, has accumulated billions in arrears on assessed contributions, and the UN Secretary-General has warned that persistent non-payment could push the organisation into a severe liquidity crisis, with cash reserves potentially exhausted by mid-2026. Alternative governance platforms, including the United States-led 'Board of Peace', are emerging alongside and outside the UN system. This report argues that the UN requires not reform but reinvention: a political redesign of incentives, authority and financing, not simply the restructuring of mandates and budgets. Drawing on the views of global leaders and a sober assessment of institutional failings, the report reframes the UN as an unfinished political project. The report concludes with a three-phase framework for transformation and six strategic priorities for member states, the Secretariat and civil society that build on the 2024 Pact for the Future while moving decisively beyond it.

1. Introduction: Beyond the reform cycle

At eighty years of age, the United Nations once again finds itself surrounded by calls for reform. Successive initiatives, from the Millennium Development Goals to the recent Pact for the Future, have sought to modernise the UN's instruments, upgrade its operations and improve its performance. The Secretary-General's UN80 proposals—a system-wide reform initiative launched around the organisation's eightieth anniversary—continue this tradition. While necessary, these efforts are far from sufficient. The international system has changed more profoundly than incremental adjustments can accommodate. What has changed is not only the scale of global risk but also the distribution of authority, financial resources, and technological power through which international order is shaped.

This report argues that the UN must move beyond the reform cycle and embrace a more fundamental process of reinvention. That requires an honest accounting of institutional failures, not as a prelude to abandoning the UN's indispensable role, but as the starting point for transformation. It means seeing the organisation not as a finished monument to be preserved, but as an unfinished political project. Former UN Deputy Secretary-General and UNDP Administrator Mark Malloch Brown described this as a still-incomplete effort to build effective global governance.^[1]

Reform concerns efficiency: mandate reviews, budget discipline and institutional streamlining. Reinvention concerns political design: changing incentive structures, redistributing authority and rebuilding the financing architecture on fundamentally different foundations. This is not a call to abandon the Charter's principles, but to redesign the institutional structures through which those principles are actually implemented.

The distinction matters because it shapes what success looks like. A reformed UN would still be governed by the same foundational design: permanent membership, the veto, state-centred representation, and voluntary financing. A reinvented UN would revisit those design choices directly. Reinvention does not require a new Charter, but it does require the political honesty to acknowledge that several of the Charter's provisions now function as constraints on the collective action they were intended to enable. Structural reform of the veto, representational change in the Security Council, and a fundamentally different approach to financing are not technical adjustments. They are political acts. That is precisely why they have been deferred for so long.

[1] Mark Malloch Brown, *The Unfinished Global Revolution: The Pursuit of a New International Politics* (London: Penguin, 2011).

Events in early 2026 have sharpened the urgency of this argument. The organisation faces a severe liquidity crisis, with cash reserves potentially exhausted by July.[2] This financial threat is not the consequence of overspending or administrative waste; it reflects the deliberate withholding of legally obligated contributions by the organisation's largest backer.

The United States has announced withdrawal from 66 international organisations, withheld billions in assessed contributions and launched a rival 'Board of Peace' whose charter asserts a mandate to resolve conflicts worldwide.[3] These are not incremental pressures; they represent a structural challenge to the multilateral system the UN was built to sustain. The United States and Israel have since launched coordinated military strikes against Iran without Security Council authorisation, further eroding the normative architecture the UN was designed to uphold.

2. The UN on trial: Acknowledging the crisis of confidence

Defending the United Nations without acknowledging its structural weaknesses is both unrealistic and unpersuasive. Critics such as former UN Assistant Secretary-General Ramesh Thakur are right to focus attention on several structural failures of the organisation.[4] His critique, which resonates widely, has three distinct prongs that any serious case for reinventing the UN must confront directly.

First is the paralysis of the Security Council. The fact that this is a failure of its most powerful members, rather than the institution itself, is true but misses the point. An institution whose primary security organ can be immobilised by the interests of a few states has a design problem, even if the paralysis is exercised through politics rather than procedure alone. The five-power veto does not merely create procedural blockages; it generates a persistent perception of impunity that undermines the legitimacy of the Council itself.[5]

Independent data now makes clear that this is not an occasional malfunction but a sustained pattern. Analysis by Security Council Report shows that veto use is increasingly concentrated around specific conflicts, with repeated vetoes blocking action over extended periods. In cases such as Syria, the Council has been unable to sustain even minimal collective responses, not because of a lack of diplomatic engagement, but because the institutional design allows a single state to halt action indefinitely. What presents as political disagreement has, in practice, become a recurring form of structural paralysis.

Second is the critique of an intrusive and out-of-touch international bureaucracy. The UN system has too often pursued top-down, headquarters-driven approaches that fuel backlash against globalism. The perception of an unaccountable bureaucracy is not merely a populist talking point; it reflects a demonstrable disconnect between headquarters culture and the lived realities of the people the organisation is meant to serve.

[2] António Guterres, letter to UN Member State Ambassadors, 28 January 2026. See "Guterres warns of UN's 'imminent financial collapse'," *CNN*, 30 January 2026, Story by Reuters, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/01/30/world/guterres-warns-un-imminent-financial-collapse-latam-intl>

[3] The White House, "Withdrawing the United States from International Organizations, Conventions, and Treaties that Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States," Presidential Memorandum, 7 January 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2026/01/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-international-organizations-conventions-and-treaties-that-are-contrary-to-the-interests-of-the-united-states/>

[4] Ramesh Thakur, "The Art of Saying No to Trump's Peace Board," Toda Peace Institute Global Outlook, Toda Peace Institute, 29 January 2026, <https://toda.org/global-outlook/2026/the-art-of-saying-no-to-trumps-peace-board.html>. Thakur is a former UN Assistant Secretary-General and Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University.

[5] Security Council Report, *Living with the Veto*, Research Report No. 1, 23 March 2026. Available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Veto_report_2026_F.pdf

Third is the harder institutional critique: the UN has become what Thakur calls a self-perpetuating system, addicted to a model that seeks to continually expand mandates, budgets and personnel by perpetuating the very problems it was set up to solve. The UN system is too often inert, risk-averse, and overly focused on process rather than impact.

Acknowledging these deficiencies is not an act of disloyalty; it is a prerequisite for change. To be a credible advocate for the UN is to see its flaws clearly, to understand their origins in both political expediency and institutional pathology, and to conclude, nonetheless, that the answer is not to walk away but to rebuild. The case for the UN rests not on a claim of past perfection but on the global public goods that only its reinvention can deliver.

3. A chorus of concern: Voices for reinvention

The call for a new approach is not coming from the UN's critics alone. In his January 2026 address to the General Assembly on priorities for the year ahead, Secretary-General António Guterres was blunt: “The context is chaos.” He described a world “brimming with conflict, impunity, inequality and unpredictability.”[6] His warning was stark: “1945 problem-solving will not solve 2026 problems. If structures do not reflect our times... they will lose legitimacy.” In practice, that erosion is already visible.

This sense of a system at its breaking point is echoed by leaders of states large and small. Finnish President Alexander Stubb, addressing the 80th UN General Assembly in September 2025, declared that “the post-Cold War order is over, but we don't know what the new order is going to look like.”[7] He identified a growing tension between multilateralism and a transactional multipolarity, calling for “values-based realism”: a commitment to fundamental principles while remaining pragmatic and adaptive in how those principles are pursued.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, speaking at Davos in January 2026, extended this argument, explicitly crediting Stubb's formulation.[8] Describing the current moment as “a rupture in the world order,” he urged middle powers to stop pretending that the rules-based international order functions as advertised and to act together on shared values and practical resilience.

This diagnosis is not limited to the Global North. Juan Manuel Santos, the former Colombian president and Nobel laureate who now chairs The Elders, has argued that “we need to change the multilateral system, because what was accomplished and negotiated after World War II is not applicable now,” while insisting that the answer is “not to do away with multilateralism, which would be suicide, but to change the model.”[9] Kenyan President William Ruto, at the same General Assembly session, issued a blunt warning that the UN faces its “deepest crisis in credibility and capacity.”[10]

[6] António Guterres, “Secretary-General's Remarks to the General Assembly on Priorities for 2026,” United Nations, 15 January 2026, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2026-01-15/secretary-generals-remarks-the-general-assembly-priorities-for-2026>.

[7] Alexander Stubb, address to the 80th Session of the UN General Assembly, New York, 24 September 2025, <https://singjupost.com/transcript-finlands-president-alexander-stubbs-speech-at-unga-2025/>.

[8] Mark Carney, “Principled and Pragmatic: Canada's Path,” address to the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, Davos, 20 January 2026, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2026/01/20/principled-and-pragmatic-canadas-path-prime-minister-carney-addresses>.

[9] Juan Manuel Santos, interview with Albert Trithart, “Staying True to the Principles at a Time of Multilateral Crisis”, IPI Global Observatory, 16 April 2025, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2025/04/staying-true-to-principles-at-a-time-of-multilateral-crisis-interview-with-juan-manuel-santos/>

[10] William Ruto, address to the 80th Session of the UN General Assembly, New York, 24 September 2025, <https://gadebate.un.org/en/80/kenya>

While their language differs, the diagnosis is the same. The convergence of these voices—from the Secretary-General to a Nordic president, a G7 leader and representatives of the Global South—signals that the case for transformation has crossed from dissident critique to mainstream concern, creating a political opening that can either be seized or squandered.

China's position in this debate is more complex than it is usually presented. The Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation are elements of a parallel institutional architecture that challenges some assumptions of the liberal international order. But China has also consistently argued for multilateralism with the UN at its centre. At his 29 January 2026 press conference, Secretary-General Guterres acknowledged that “China has been consistently advocating for the need of multilateralism and with UN at its centre”—a position, he added, recently reaffirmed by President Xi Jinping.^[11] China's Global Governance Initiative, launched in 2021, reflects a distinct but not necessarily incompatible vision of global order. The harder question is whether a reinvented UN, particularly one that explores more population-reflective or non-state representation, can accommodate that vision. China has strong reasons to resist any architecture that dilutes the state as the primary unit of international order. Navigating that tension honestly is part of what reinvention requires.

4. The financial precipice: An existential threat

On 28 January 2026, Secretary-General Guterres warned all 193 member states that the UN faces imminent financial collapse.^[12] His language was direct: “The crisis is deepening, threatening programme delivery and risking financial collapse. And the situation will deteriorate further in the near future.” Based on historical trends, he warned, “regular budget cash could run out by July,” a scenario that would imperil core operations, including the General Assembly session scheduled for September.

The numbers are stark. Outstanding assessed contributions reached a record \$1.568 billion by the end of 2025, with collections covering only 76.7 per cent of what was owed. The 2026 regular budget, approved at \$3.45 billion—already cut by roughly 7 per cent from the previous year—cannot be executed if contributions are not received. The United States accounts for more than 95 per cent of outstanding regular budget dues, not because of its assessment share of approximately 22 per cent, but because most other member states have paid in full. By early February 2026, the United States owed approximately \$2.19 billion in regular budget arrears, an additional \$2.4 billion in peacekeeping arrears and \$43.6 million for UN tribunals.^[13]

The crisis is compounded by what Guterres described as a Kafkaesque cycle: under existing rules, the UN must credit back hundreds of millions of dollars in unspent assessed contributions to member states each year, even when those contributions were never actually paid. “We are trapped in a Kafkaesque cycle expected to give back cash that does not exist,” Guterres wrote. The return of those credits at the start of 2026 removed a substantial share of the budget from available cash before the year had begun.

This financial crisis is inseparable from a deliberate policy of disengagement. On 7 January 2026, President Trump signed a Presidential Memorandum directing the withdrawal of the United States from 66 international organisations, including 31 UN entities.^[14] The administration's 2026 budget proposal indicates it does not intend to restore regular budget funding or most voluntary contributions.

[11] António Guterres, Press conference on 2026 priorities, United Nations Headquarters, New York, 29 January 2026, <https://press.un.org/en/2026/sgsm22995.doc.htm>.

[12] António Guterres, letter to UN Member State Ambassadors, 28 January 2026.

[13] David Brunnstrom, “US Plans Initial Payment towards Billions Owed to the UN, Envoy Waltz Says,” *Reuters*, 6 February 2026 (updated 8 February 2026), <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/us-plans-initial-payment-towards-billions-owed-un-envoy-waltz-2026-02-07/>

[14] White House, “Withdrawing the United States from International Organizations.” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2026/01/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-international-organizations-conventions-and-treaties-that-are-contrary-to-the-interests-of-the-united-states/>

The Trump administration simultaneously launched what it calls a ‘Board of Peace’, formally established at Davos on 22 January 2026, with its charter granting the United States President the role of indefinite chairman and asserting a conflict-resolution mandate extending well beyond Gaza.[15] As of mid-February, roughly 25 of 62 invited countries had signed; most established liberal democracies, including France, Germany and the United Kingdom, declined to join.[16] Whether or not this initiative survives its evident contradictions, its significance lies less in its institutional design than in what it demonstrates: the deliberate construction of alternative multilateral architecture, outside the UN framework and free of its accountability constraints, is now politically feasible. It is a proof of concept for institutional substitution.

As this report was completed, the crisis escalated from institutional to normative. The United States and Israel launched coordinated military strikes against Iran while diplomatic contacts that several governments and analysts described as still active were under way, entering open conflict without Security Council authorisation and without any evident pathway to resolution.[17] Russia and the United States, both permanent members of the Security Council, have each now conducted offensive military operations without Council authorisation: Russia in Ukraine, the United States alongside Israel in Iran. The normative framework the UN was designed to uphold has, in Carney's words, been ruptured.

5. An unfinished project: The case for reinvention

To accept the critiques outlined above is not to conclude that the United Nations has become obsolete. The idea of the United Nations retains its relevance; many of its operating systems are no longer fit for purpose. Viewing the organisation as an unfinished political project provides a more constructive starting point, one that avoids both defensiveness and fatalism. The problem is not that the UN's founding principles have failed, but that the institution lacks the resilience and corrective mechanisms that would have allowed it to address problems evident for decades.

The Charter was an ambitious experiment in 1945 that deliberately preserved great-power prerogatives while aspiring to universal principles. Eight decades of survival testify to its adaptability. The challenge now is to match the ambition of the founders with a new generation of institutional innovation.

Successive Secretaries-General have introduced coordination and modernisation initiatives, often producing genuine administrative improvements. What these efforts have seldom addressed are the deeper structural tensions: the gap between universal membership and unequal power, the dependence on voluntary political support and the difficulty of adapting institutions designed in 1945 to twenty-first-century realities. The result is a recognisable pattern: significant organisational activity, insufficient political transformation.

Reinvention means moving beyond the idea of the UN as a static hierarchy of councils and committees and reimagining it as a networked platform for global problem-solving, capable of convening diverse coalitions of states, cities, companies and civil society. It means embracing agility, accepting occasional failure in the pursuit of innovation, and re-grounding the organisation in its foundational values not as rhetorical pieties but as the operational code for a new era. The UN's founding principles remain relevant; the institutional platforms through which those principles are translated into action require fundamental redesign.

[15] The White House, Charter of the Board of Peace, 22 January 2026; “President Trump Ratifies Board of Peace in Historic Ceremony,” 22 January 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2026/01/president-trump-ratifies-board-of-peace-in-historic-ceremony-opening-path-to-hope-and-dignity-for-gazans/>.

[16] “What to Know about Trump’s “Board of Peace,”” *NBC News*, 23 January 2026, <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/europe/trump-board-of-peace-countries-davos-cost-nato-what-know-rcna255433>.

[17] United Nations Security Council, SC/16307, 28 February 2026, <https://press.un.org/en/2026/sc16307.doc.htm>; Security Council Resolution 2817 (2026), SC/16315, 11 March 2026, <https://press.un.org/en/2026/sc16315.doc.htm>. See also Abdallah Fayyad, “The End of Diplomacy,” *Boston Globe*, 6 March 2026, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2026/03/06/opinion/trump-us-israel-iran-diplomacy/>.

6. The 21st-century stress test

The need for reinvention is driven by converging structural pressures: geopolitical rivalry has paralysed the Security Council; digital surveillance and the weaponisation of information have created new domains of conflict; inequality and eroding trust have made collective action harder; and artificial intelligence is transforming economies faster than institutions can respond. These are not cyclical disruptions but structural shifts that demand a structural response. What follows maps several domains in which these shifts are already degrading the UN's capacity and legitimacy.

Democratic backsliding has accelerated sharply since 2016 and now affects states across every region. Institutions built on the premise of sovereign equality and the rule of law are structurally weakened when a growing share of their member states no longer honour those principles domestically. Reinvention cannot therefore be understood solely as an institutional challenge; it is inseparable from the broader renewal of democratic governance worldwide.

Hard-won gains in the Women, Peace and Security agenda are also at risk. Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, established the foundational framework for women's participation in peace processes and their protection in conflict. The resolution has since generated nine additional Security Council resolutions and has been incorporated into the operational frameworks of dozens of UN field missions. The current financial crisis threatens this architecture directly. Gender advisers are often among the first positions eliminated in budget rounds. Several UN entities focused on women's rights face severe resource constraints. What is lost when these capacities contract is not simply a programme line item; it is a generation of normative and operational progress.

The consequences of disengagement are already visible on the ground. When the United Nations Mission in Mali completed its withdrawal in December 2023, security conditions deteriorated rapidly. Africa Corps, formerly the Wagner Group and now operating under Russian Ministry of Defence control, moved into the vacuum. What the United Nations leaves behind is rarely neutral space; it is contested space, occupied on terms no Security Council mandate could have endorsed.

Sudan provides an even starker illustration. The country now faces the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, with more than twenty-one million people experiencing acute hunger and over eleven million displaced. In such environments the United Nations is often the only actor capable of negotiating humanitarian access and coordinating large-scale relief operations. When that presence is weakened, it is not replaced by anything more effective. The same dynamic is unfolding wherever the UN Refugee Agency, facing an \$8.5 billion budget with early pledges covering less than twenty per cent of its funding needs, is compelled to scale back operations.

Taken together, these developments reveal the scale of the stress now confronting the multilateral system. The United Nations is being asked to address an increasingly complex set of global challenges while the political and financial foundations that sustain its work are simultaneously weakening.

7. UN80 in context: Necessary, but not sufficient

The UN80 reform initiative represents a serious effort to improve the organisation's efficiency. A review of mandates, a realignment of structures and a more disciplined budget are all welcome. However, they do not amount to a strategy for reinvention. UN80 is a plan for a better twentieth-century organisation, not one suited to the twenty-first.

The initiative has evolved significantly since its launch. The UN80 Action Plan, presented in November 2025, encompasses 87 actions across 31 work packages.[18] The scale of proposed changes is substantial: the 2026 budget reduces staffing by approximately 2,900 positions (an 18.8 per cent cut compared with 2025), with more than 1,000 staff already separated by early 2026. System-wide resources are estimated to fall by 25 per cent in 2026 compared with 2024.[19]

Unfortunately, the aspirations of UN80 have been overtaken by the financial crisis. What was conceived as a reform initiative has increasingly been conflated with budget austerity driven by the withdrawal of United States funding. As a sharp analysis in Just Security observed in February 2026, the initiative “risks becoming a de facto cost-cutting and merging exercise that falls overwhelmingly on the functional staff who carry out the UN's core mandates.”[20] The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has absorbed a 16.7 per cent reduction in posts, a cut proportionally deeper than those imposed on the development or peace and security pillars.[21] The High Commissioner's warning that his office is in “survival mode” is the direct consequence.

The General Assembly briefing on the UN80 Initiative on 27 February 2026 confirmed both the ambition and the limitations of the reform agenda.[22] Under-Secretary-General for Policy Guy Ryder acknowledged that the complexity of the reform process had been “challenging for Member States to stay on top of,” an admission that speaks to the transparency deficit at the heart of the initiative. The New Humanitarian Compact, unveiled at the same briefing, promised faster and more accountable humanitarian support, but independent analysts at the International Peace Institute assessed it as “more cosmetic than substantive.”[23]

The United States, at an informal briefing on UN80, rejected the humanitarian reform branding as language that “serves only to distort and confuse,” and characterised several proposed actions as “plainly intangible.”[24] The pattern reinforces the central argument of this report: significant organisational activity, insufficient political transformation.

The 2019 reform of the UN Resident Coordinator system is instructive: delinked from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to enhance impartiality, it delivered measurable improvements in coordination while being hampered by chronic funding shortfalls and higher-than-anticipated costs. The pattern is familiar: suggest radical change, begin radical change, underfund radical change, lament the outcomes, then launch another reform programme.

Reform that is not implementable because of financial constraints is not reform. It is intention.

[18] “UN Presents UN80 Initiative Action Plan, Setting Coordinated Path for System-Wide Reforms,” *UN News*, 21 November 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/11/1166429>.

[19] Ibid. See also “UN Faces ‘Race to Bankruptcy’ as Guterres Unveils Sharply Reduced 2026 Budget,” *UN News*, 22 October 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/10/1166128>.

[20] “The Results of UN80: Reform or Decline?,” Just Security, 4 February 2026, <https://www.justsecurity.org/129013/un80-reform-decline/>.

[21] International Service for Human Rights, “UN80 Reform: States Endorse Slashing of Human Rights Budget,” 9 January 2026, <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/un80-reform-states-endorse-slashing-of-human-rights-budget/>. The High Commissioner's “survival mode” statement was reported by *Al Jazeera*, 5 February 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/5/un-rights-chief-warns-his-office-is-in-survival-mode-over-funding-crisis>.

[22] “UN Unveils Bold Overhaul of Strained Humanitarian System,” *UN News*, 27 February 2026, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/02/1167055>.

[23] “One Compact Too Far: UN80 and the Humanitarian Reform Malaise,” IPI Global Observatory, 2 October 2025, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2025/10/one-compact-too-far-un80-and-the-humanitarian-reform-malaise/>.

[24] United States Mission to the United Nations, “Remarks for the Informal Meeting on the UN80 Initiative,” 27 February 2026, <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-for-the-informal-meeting-on-the-un80-initiative/>.

8. Middle power coalitions: Platform or substitute?

At a time when great-power consensus appears increasingly unlikely, coalitions of middle powers are often presented as potential drivers of institutional innovation. Flexible groupings of states that cooperate around specific issues are frequently viewed as alternatives to the United Nations. That interpretation is too narrow. Properly understood, such coalitions may instead provide clues about how the multilateral system itself could evolve.

Canadian Prime Minister Carney framed the choice directly in his 5 March 2026 address to the Australian Parliament: “The question today for middle powers like us is whether we establish the conventions and help write the new rules that will determine our security and prosperity, or let the hegemony dictate outcomes.”^[25] He then spelled out the strategic asymmetry: “Great powers can compel, but compulsion comes with costs, both reputational and financial. Middle powers can convene.” The convening capacity he describes is precisely the comparative advantage a reinvented UN could restore to the multilateral system.

That convening capacity encounters a structural ceiling when exercised entirely outside formal institutions: agreements reached without multilateral backing are harder to sustain, and coalitions formed on strategic trust alone cannot generate the universal legitimacy that global challenges ultimately require. A reinvented UN would treat a coalition of states working on climate action, pandemic preparedness or financial stability not as a competitor but as a partner in a broader architecture of global governance.

Recent initiatives illustrate the potential of this approach. The Ottawa Group on World Trade Organization reform has sought to sustain momentum on trade governance despite the paralysis of the WTO's appellate body. The Global Methane Pledge has mobilised governments around a specific climate objective outside the slower processes of formal treaty negotiation. Each reflects an effort by states to advance cooperation where universal consensus has proven elusive.

Yet the limits of this framework are equally clear. Effective global cooperation on climate change or pandemic preparedness cannot occur without the participation of major powers, and great powers have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to construct alternative frameworks when existing institutions fail to serve their interests. China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) represent elements of a parallel institutional architecture that challenges key assumptions of the liberal international order. Regional organisations and development banks are supplements to the multilateral system, however imperfect their relationship to it. The AIIB challenges the World Bank's institutional primacy in development finance. The Board of Peace is different in kind: it is a direct intrusion into the Security Council's most central obligation—conflict resolution and the authorisation of the use of force. The United States' initiative is not an anomaly but part of a broader pattern.

The central question is not whether coalitions will emerge alongside the United Nations; they already have. The question is whether the UN can evolve into the platform that connects and legitimises these initiatives, or whether it will increasingly be bypassed by institutions designed to serve narrower interests. What middle-power coalitions cannot provide is the normative architecture, the universal membership, the legal authority and the institutional memory, that transforms ad hoc agreements into durable global commitments. That remains the unreplaced function of the United Nations, and the most compelling argument for its reinvention rather than its abandonment.

[25] Mark Carney, address to both Houses of Australia's Parliament, Canberra, 5 March 2026, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2026/03/05/prime-minister-carney-delivers-address-both-houses-australias-parliament>.

Who would actually drive reinvention? The Secretary-General can frame the agenda but cannot enforce it. A post-Trump American administration is a factor, but making the analysis contingent on that outcome is too speculative to be useful. The most plausible engine is a coalition of middle powers: Canada, the Nordic states, Kenya and South Africa as representatives of an African bloc with deep investment in the multilateral system, Japan, South Korea and, in specific domains, India. These states have the institutional standing, the reputational stakes and increasingly the strategic incentive to act. On financing, the same coalition would need to provide the political cover and, in some cases, the initial resources for a hybrid model less dependent on the contributions of any single great power.

9. A framework for reinvention: Building capabilities

The question of what reinvention requires in practice begins with capabilities. A reinvented United Nations must translate its values into institutional capacity. The five capabilities described below, as subsections 9.1 to 9.5, form the foundations for the strategic priorities in Section 10; each priority either strengthens one of them or creates the political and financial conditions without which none can be sustained.

9.1 FORESIGHT

The UN must move from reactive to proactive, systematically scanning for emerging threats. Foresight begins with institutional self-awareness: an organisation unable to correct its own structural weaknesses will be poorly positioned to anticipate the evolving dynamics of global risk. A standing anticipatory analysis function, reporting directly to the Secretary-General and linked to regional political desks, would systematically identify emerging political, environmental and technological risks and route early warning into decision-making before escalation forecloses options.

9.2 AGILITY

The current system, in which mandates accumulate but are rarely retired, produces an organisation that expands in scope while contracting in capacity. Faster mandate revision, structured sunset reviews and the willingness to discontinue programmes that no longer serve their purpose are the operational expression of this capability.

9.3 NETWORKED GOVERNANCE

The UN must function as a platform for convening multi-stakeholder coalitions, engaging cities, the private sector, civil society and regional organisations as genuine partners rather than peripheral participants. Formalised partnership frameworks, explored in early form under the Pact for the Future, could give this capability institutional expression.

9.4 ACCOUNTABILITY

The UN must be accountable not only to member states but to the populations affected by its decisions. Independent annual impact assessments for field missions, tied to mandate renewal and published in full, would help close the persistent gap between institutional priorities and the needs of affected communities.

9.5 LEARNING

The UN already produces substantial lessons learned across peacekeeping, humanitarian response and development programming. The difficulty lies not in identifying lessons but in translating them into institutional change: reviews are conducted, reports written and recommendations endorsed, yet implementation fades as political attention shifts. A reinvented UN must embed learning as an operational requirement, with evaluation findings triggering mandatory management responses and field evidence informing policy revision on a structured, recurring basis. The difference between an organisation that accumulates lessons and one that acts upon them is not procedural. It is a matter of institutional will.

These capabilities will face resistance from member states protective of sovereignty and from bureaucracies protective of institutional prerogatives. Middle powers may play a critical role as catalysts: not as rivals to the UN, but as political actors capable of sustaining the momentum reinvention requires. None of these capabilities can be fully realised while the five Security Council members' unconditional veto remains intact. The priorities in the next section therefore address both capabilities and the political foundations on which they depend.

10. Strategic priorities for a reinvented United Nations

Building on the capabilities described above requires a focus on concrete strategic priorities. The six priorities below are organised in three phases: financial and political stabilisation (10.1 and 10.2), which are the constraints without which no other priority is achievable; institutional capability renewal (10.3, 10.4 and 10.5); and democratic legitimacy (10.6), reconnecting the institution to the people it is meant to serve. Some build on the foundations of the Pact for the Future, adopted at the Summit of the Future in September 2024;^[26] others go significantly beyond it. But these priorities do not stand on their own. They depend on a shared commitment to the principles that underpin the Charter.

The Charter's prohibition on the use of force, set out in Article 2(4), remains the clearest expression of a shared international commitment that continues to command broad, if uneven, adherence among states. It is one of the few principles that retains formal recognition across geopolitical divides. In a period marked by renewed conflict and the erosion of restraint, reaffirming this principle is not rhetorical. It is foundational. Any effort to renew or reinvent the United Nations must begin by strengthening the norm against aggression as a practical condition for international order. Without that baseline, more ambitious doctrines, including collective security or the responsibility to protect, risk deepening division rather than building consensus.

10.1 REFORM UN FINANCING FOR PREDICTABILITY AND INDEPENDENCE

Member states must address the structural vulnerability in the way the organisation is financed. The United Nations' current architecture, in which a single member state can bring the organisation close to operational paralysis by withholding legally obligated contributions, is not merely a management problem. It deserves attention equal in seriousness to the debate surrounding the veto.

The same analysis applies to the balance of authority between the Security Council and the General Assembly. A reinvented UN would not simply reduce the damage that veto abuse can inflict; it would strengthen the General Assembly's capacity to act when the Council cannot. The Uniting for Peace mechanism already provides a procedural pathway. What has been absent is the expectation, backed by sufficient political will, that this pathway will be used as a matter of course when permanent members act in their own interest at the expense of collective security.

[26] United Nations, *The Pact for the Future*, A/RES/79/1 (2024), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4061879?v=pdf>

The immediate priority must be to align institutional commitments with realistic resource expectations rather than maintaining the fiction that unfunded mandates constitute real operational capacity. Over the medium term, the UN should move toward a hybrid funding model that reduces dependence on voluntary contributions for core functions. A modest replenishment mechanism, similar to those used by multilateral financial institutions, could provide predictable financing for peacebuilding and humanitarian coordination. A UN endowment supported in part by innovative levies, modest charges on certain digital services or high-frequency financial transactions, would help insulate essential capabilities from geopolitical pressure.

The political obstacles are real. Any such change would require General Assembly approval and would face resistance from member states wary of new international financing mechanisms. Those constraints are arguments for beginning the political conversation now rather than postponing it indefinitely.

10.2 SECURE A FORMAL COMMITMENT BY THE PERMANENT FIVE TO REFRAIN FROM USING THEIR VETO IN CASES OF MASS ATROCITIES

Member states, led by the Pact for the Future signatories, must strengthen norms of voluntary veto restraint while creating procedural pathways that mitigate the consequences of paralysis. The veto was the constitutional bargain struck in 1945 to ensure the major powers would remain inside the multilateral system rather than operating outside it, and no serious reform strategy should treat abolition as politically attainable in the near term.

Two initiatives already provide the foundation for such restraint. The Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) Group's Code of Conduct, endorsed by more than 120 member states, calls on permanent members to refrain from using the veto in situations involving genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes.[27] The French-Mexican initiative advances a similar principle.[28] In parallel, General Assembly Resolution 377, the Uniting for Peace mechanism, offers a procedural pathway for the Assembly to act when the Security Council is unable to fulfil its responsibilities.[29] These instruments already exist within the system. What has been lacking is the political expectation that they will be activated as a matter of course when the Council fails to act.

Recent experience suggests, however, that voluntary restraint remains politically valuable but operationally insufficient. Security Council Report analysis indicates that recent years have seen some of the highest annual levels of veto use in decades, including repeated vetoes on conflicts involving large-scale civilian harm. This is not evidence of a system gradually internalising restraint. It is evidence of a system in which the political and reputational costs of veto use remain too low to alter behaviour in moments of acute crisis.[30]

The Liechtenstein-led initiative adopted by the General Assembly in April 2022 (A/RES/76/262), which requires a formal debate following any use of the veto, has introduced an additional measure of political accountability. [31] While the requirement is procedural rather than substantive, it establishes the principle that the exercise of the veto should carry a political cost visible to the full membership.

[27] Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) Group, "Code of Conduct regarding Security Council Action against Genocide, Crimes against Humanity or War Crimes," submitted to the UN Secretary-General, 14 December 2015, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/70/621>

[28] France and Mexico, "Political Declaration on Suspension of Veto Powers in Cases of Mass Atrocities," presented at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, August 2015. <https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/political-declaration-on-suspension-of-veto-powers-in-cases-of-mass-atrocities/>

[29] United Nations General Assembly, "Uniting for Peace," A/RES/377(V), 3 November 1950. [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IP%20A%20RES%20377%20\(V\).pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IP%20A%20RES%20377%20(V).pdf)

[30] Security Council Report, *Living with the Veto*, Research Report No. 1, 23 March 2026. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Veto_report_2026_F.pdf

[31] United Nations General Assembly, "Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council", A/RES/76/262, adopted 26 April 2022. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/76/262>

Structural proposals for modifying the veto itself remain in circulation, including suggestions that a veto require two permanent members voting against rather than one. These proposals face near-insurmountable obstacles under Article 108 of the Charter, which itself requires Security Council assent for any amendment. Their value lies less in their immediate achievability than in making explicit what voluntary restraint norms leave implicit: that the unconditional single-state veto is increasingly inconsistent with the Council's stated purpose.

The problem is also larger than the formal veto tally suggests. As Security Council Report notes, the “pocket veto” operates when draft resolutions are never tabled, or are substantially diluted, because of an anticipated veto threat. That hidden form of coercion is harder to measure but often just as consequential, since it shapes the Council’s operating environment before a vote ever occurs. A serious reinvention agenda should therefore address not only the use of the veto, but also the shadow cast by its threatened use.[32]

Recent events underline the urgency. When major powers conduct military operations without Council authorisation, the ACT Code of Conduct, the French-Mexican initiative, and the Uniting for Peace mechanism cease to be supplementary governance tools. They become the last procedural barriers between a paralysed Council and a system in which great-power military action proceeds entirely outside multilateral oversight.

10.3 ESTABLISH A FORMAL HIGH-LEVEL UN DIGITAL COUNCIL

Member states should create a formal UN Digital Council to address the fragmented governance of digital infrastructure. Authority over data, algorithms and technical standards increasingly shapes economic competition, political influence and military capability, yet the multilateral system remains institutionally inadequate in its response.

The Global Digital Compact, adopted as part of the Pact for the Future, represents an important step toward strengthening digital cooperation.[33] These initiatives help establish a shared knowledge base but do not yet provide an institutional mechanism capable of exercising sustained governance over rapidly evolving digital systems. A Digital Council should include representation from governments, the private sector and civil society, supported by a permanent technical secretariat and operating with binding advisory authority. Its early agenda should focus on norms governing autonomous weapons systems, algorithmic transparency in public decision-making and minimum standards for state use of surveillance technologies.

10.4 CREATE A DEDICATED UN PEACEBUILDING SERVICE

The Secretariat should build on the newly established Peacebuilding and Peace Support Office to create a dedicated professional peacebuilding service.[34] Peacebuilding remains one of the United Nations' most frequently invoked priorities yet one of its least institutionalised capabilities. Administrative consolidation is not equivalent to a professional service: the new office still lacks the budget autonomy, staffing depth and institutional authority required to coordinate activity across agencies, funds and programmes.

A dedicated UN Peacebuilding Service would establish a ring-fenced operational budget, a professional career stream for civilian peacebuilding specialists and a mandate strong enough to coordinate efforts dispersed across UNDP, other UN entities as well as regional programmes, providing the system with a genuine centre of excellence capable of ensuring that prevention and post-conflict recovery receive sustained professional attention rather than episodic political focus.

[32] Security Council Report, *Living with the Veto*, Research Report No. 1, 23 March 2026, discussion of “pocket veto” dynamics and informal veto influence. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Veto_report_2026_F.pdf

[33] United Nations General Assembly, *The Pact for the Future*, including the *Global Digital Compact* (Annex), A/RES/79/1, adopted 22 September 2024. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/79/1>

[34] United Nations, “A Unified Peacebuilding and Peace Support Office (PBPSO) Is Now Operational,” <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/>. The PBPSO integrates the former Peacebuilding Support Office with Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration, Security Sector Reform and Justice and Corrections functions previously housed in the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions. It is led by an Assistant Secretary-General and serves as secretariat to the Peacebuilding Commission and manager of the Peacebuilding Fund.

10.5 APPOINT THE SPECIAL ENVOY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS WITHOUT DELAY

The Secretary-General should proceed without further delay with the appointment of a Special Envoy for Future Generations, as endorsed in the Pact for the Future.^[35] Multilateral institutions are structurally oriented toward immediate crises. Diplomatic attention gravitates toward the urgent rather than the long term, leaving systemic risks such as climate instability, technological disruption and institutional fragility consistently underrepresented in day-to-day decision-making.

The effectiveness of the position will depend on its authority. The mandate must go beyond symbolic advocacy to include the capacity to review major UN policy initiatives, highlight long-term risk implications and report publicly on whether institutional decisions align with intergenerational responsibilities.

10.6 PILOT A UNITED NATIONS CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

Member states should authorise and fund a pilot United Nations Citizens' Assembly to begin addressing the widening gap between global decision-making and public participation. While the Pact for the Future emphasises inclusive governance, the United Nations still lacks a meaningful mechanism through which ordinary citizens can participate in global deliberation.

Citizens' assemblies have demonstrated their value at national level: processes in Ireland, France and Canada have produced deliberative and legitimate recommendations on complex issues. Adapting such models to the global level, while requiring careful design, is entirely feasible. The assembly's mandate should remain advisory, its legitimacy deriving from representativeness and transparency rather than formal authority. Deliberations would be public, supported by independent expert briefings and conducted according to a stratified sampling process to ensure global demographic balance.

Two further areas warrant attention beyond the priorities set out above. The appointment of the next Secretary-General, expected in late 2026, provides an immediate opportunity to reform a selection process long dominated by Permanent Five negotiation and largely closed to wider membership and civil society input. A more transparent and merit-based procedure would itself be an act of institutional reinvention. The continuing erosion of global health governance capacity, exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic and deepened by recent funding cuts to the World Health Organization,^[36] requires a dedicated institutional response that the UN80 initiative has so far not provided.

[35] United Nations, Declaration on Future Generations, Annex to 'The Pact for the Future', A/RES/79/1 (2024).

[36] World Health Organization, Executive Board Meeting, 2 February 2026; "Global Health Systems 'at Risk' as Funding Cuts Bite, Warns WHO," *UN News*, 2 February 2026, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/02/1166869>.

11. Conclusion: Redesign or irrelevance

The United Nations faces a decision it can no longer defer. It can continue along the path of incremental adjustment, improving its efficiency in ways that leave its fundamental design unchanged, or it can find the resolve to reinvent itself: to match the ambition of its founders and adapt their vision to the demands of a new century.

The events of early 2026 have made the stakes unmistakable. Reinvention will not succeed as a purely institutional exercise. It depends on restoring a certain level of shared restraint among states, without which even the most carefully designed reforms will struggle to hold. The Secretary-General warns of a severe liquidity crisis by mid-year. The organisation's largest contributor has withdrawn from dozens of its constituent bodies, constructed rival institutional architecture and launched strikes against Iran without Security Council authorisation, entering open conflict without a clear legal framework or any evident diplomatic pathway to resolution. Staff are being cut by the thousands while the crises they were hired to address intensify.

The central weakness of today's UN is not simply that it is underfunded or politically constrained, though it is both. It is that its institutional design still assumes a world in which legitimacy flows mainly through states, power is exercised largely through formal intergovernmental channels, diplomacy is trusted and collective action can be sustained without far more resilient financial and political foundations. That world has passed. Risk now moves faster than mandates. Power is dispersed across states, firms, networks and platforms. Yet the UN remains financed, authorised and judged as if none of that were true.

The three-phase framework outlined in Section 10 offers a concrete path: stabilise the financial and political foundations through restructured financing and veto restraint in mass atrocity situations; build institutional capabilities through the five subsections of Section 9; and renew democratic legitimacy through citizen engagement mechanisms. Member states must address the financing architecture and the veto. The Secretariat must build the capabilities. Civil society must sustain the demand.

A reinvented UN would rest its financing on predictable, legally binding foundations rather than the annual uncertainty of voluntary pledges and withheld dues. Its Security Council would be governed by the principle that no single state can permanently block collective action in the face of genocide or mass atrocity. Its field operations would be measured by impact, civilians protected, displaced populations returned, peace agreements sustained, rather than by process compliance. And its leadership would possess the institutional courage to act on the evidence before it, not wait for a consensus that may never arrive.

As Carney told Australia's Parliament: "This is not a retreat from multilateralism. It is its evolution."^[37] That is the spirit in which this report argues for reinvention: not as a slogan, not as an excuse for another cycle of internal reorganisation, but as a practical effort to rebuild the conditions under which multilateralism can still work. The choice is not between preserving the UN and abandoning it. The choice is between redesigning it for the world that exists or watching it become a monument to a world order that has passed. That is the decision member states can no longer defer.

[37] Prime Minister of Canada, "Address to Australia's Parliament," 5 March 2026.

<https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2026/03/05/prime-minister-carney-delivers-address-both-houses-australias-parliament>



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