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THE 2024 SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE

WHAT TO EXPECT NOW AND AFTER

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The Summit of the Future (SOTF) was proposed by UN Secretary-General António Guterres to forge a new consensus on managing current interdependence and improving international collaboration. Scheduled for September 22-23 this year in New York City, the Summit aims to address critical global challenges and secure a viable future for coming generations. Despite its ambitious objectives, the SOTF will occur against a backdrop of heightened geopolitical tensions and a challenging environment for international agreements. This contrasts with the plethora of innovative ideas and debate emerging from civil society on reforming multilateralism. While expectations for concrete outcomes have been tempered, the SOTF provides a valuable opportunity to showcase fresh thinking on global governance reform. This paper argues that, rather than a disappointing finish line, the SOTF could serve as a starting point for charting a way forward. It has the potential to rally attention and political will to upgrade 20th-century international governance structures for 21st-century realities.

INTRODUCTION

The escalating global challenges of the 21st century have reignited efforts to establish new platforms for international cooperation. The [Summit of the Future](#) (SOTF), under the auspices of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, is a direct response to these pressing issues. It will take place in New York City on September 22-23, 2024, with the aim of managing global interdependence and advance reform of the multilateral system. The Summit is rooted in the commemoration of the UN's 75th anniversary and [Our Common Agenda](#), the Secretary-General's vision for strengthening international cooperation and multilateralism.

The initiative to host the Summit was launched in 2021. It seemed very timely at a moment when the world was coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic and given the recent change in the White House, with hopes to revive international cooperation under President Biden, following the Trump years.

However, it's important to note that the global landscape has changed dramatically since then. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ongoing situation in Gaza have heightened international tensions to unprecedented levels. These conflicts run the danger of escalating into larger ones. Russia, one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, has blatantly breached the sacred principle of territorial sovereignty, while the daily violation of human rights in Gaza continues to erode trust in the system. Coupled with an underlying increased international rivalry between the United States and China, this scenario has created a challenging environment for international agreements. Yet, despite these obstacles, the SOTF aims to bring together world leaders to express commitments to global cooperation. Its emphasis on inclusive dialogue and coordination underscores the UN's role as a

global convener. So, the question is, can we realistically expect impactful results from the SOTF?

THE ROAD TO SOTF

The first indication that the SOTF might face challenges came with its rescheduling from 2023 to 2024 due to the conflictual international context. This postponement highlights the increased difficulty in advancing the global agenda compared to a decade ago when the international community adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Still, hard work has been invested over the past two years to prepare the Summit, particularly in negotiating its outcome document: a [Pact for the Future](#) that will include two annexes, a [Declaration on Future Generations](#) and a [Global Digital Compact](#).

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Following a slow start in 2022 marked by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, UNGA resolution [A/RES/76/307](#) adopted in September of that year outlined the Summit's modalities. Practical consultations among member states began in January-February 2023, led by the Permanent Representatives of Germany and Namibia to the UN, and following guidance of the President of the General Assembly. These discussions were informed by policy briefs from the UN Secretary General, advancing the topics from [Our Common Agenda](#) report, particularly the [New Agenda for Peace](#). The process was further enriched by [A Breakthrough for People and Planet](#), an independent report from a High-Level Advisory Board (HLAB) that Secretary-General Guterres had established. The



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report provided valuable proposals on six transformative shifts to address major global challenges and ten principles to make multilateralism more effective.

Preparations accelerated in September 2023 with a Ministerial Meeting in New York, coinciding with the annual high-level General Debate of UNGA and the SDG Summit. The event helped clarify the relationship between the 2030 Agenda and SOTF, and the following month saw progress on specific deliverables, with Germany and Namibia confirmed as the co-facilitators for the Pact for the Future negotiations and other co-facilitators appointed for additional outcome documents and intergovernmental preparatory processes, including the reform of specific UN bodies.

The [zero-draft](#) of the *Pact for the Future*, published on January 29, 2024, was a 20-page document with 148 articles that drew on inputs from 80 Member States and grouping and more than 500 contributions from different stakeholders. It was received with some criticism by civil society for its perceived lack of ambition, limited specificity on reforms, and for its diplomatic bickering language. Some felt it failed to fully capture the depth of proposals put forward in the preceding years. Nevertheless, this zero-draft served as the foundation for negotiations that have continued over the past few months, until this day.

An important landmark in this SOTF process was the UN Civil Society Conference held in Nairobi on May 9-10, 2024, which brought together senior UN officials with over 2,000 representatives from civil society with the aim to incorporate non-governmental perspectives into the outcome documents, particularly the Pact for the Future. Among other results, the Nairobi conference

produced an [ImPACT for the Future Outcome Package](#), offering civil society recommendations to country negotiators. The Coalition for the UN We Need, a leading platform of non-governmental organizations and relevant stakeholders, has also produced an inspiring [People's Pact for the Future](#), a set of proposals culminating nearly two years of work.

As the SOTF approaches, negotiations are intensifying. Members are working on a final text, following a [third revised](#) version distributed on August 26. The content has evolved much since January, following several rounds of editing and expert consultation. For instance, [REV 2](#), released on July 17, raised serious concerns by removing specific commitments related to climate change such as transitioning away from fossil fuels. This triggered a protest letter by 77 world leaders and Nobel laureates calling for the reintroduction of these commitments, which was done in the final public version.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN NEW YORK

Barring major surprises, world leaders at the SOTF will likely adopt the documents that are negotiated over the past year. Central amongst them is the aforementioned Pact for the Future, which has faced criticism for limited ambition in multilateral reform. It covers five key areas: sustainable development and SDG funding; international peace and security; science, technology, and innovation cooperation; youth and future generations in policymaking; and transforming global governance for inclusivity and effectiveness.

Additionally, a Global Digital Compact will outline principles for responsible use of digital technology, with the goal of making it more open, secure and free; and a

Declaration on Future Generations will foster intergenerational solidarity and should help to incorporate the interests of coming generations into the current decision-making. Sweden and Zambia are co-facilitating the Compact and the United Kingdom and Jamaica are overseeing the Declaration.

The Summit itself will feature a plenary session and four interactive dialogues on the following topics: (i) transforming global governance and turbocharging the 2030 agenda for sustainable development; (ii) enhancing multilateralism for peace and security; (iii) strengthening inclusive innovation for a common digital future and (iv) enhancing the global system for current and future generations. Preceding the Summit, the [Action Days](#) on September 20-21 will engage civil society, with a focus on youth segment and three priority themes: peace and security, sustainable development and financing, and technology and digitalization.

The main challenge for SOTF is the risk of being perceived as another international jamboree delivering declarations without practical impact. Year after year, summit after summit, governments agree on well-intentioned statements and announcements but fail to walk to the talk. People wonder what the point of negotiating documents to the latest comma during months is if from the very onset there is no real commitment to implementing them. Citizens are largely losing faith in multilateralism precisely because they witness how resources are poured into international diplomacy and summitry, but outcomes are not followed through, turning into a dead letter. The question is if the SOTF will break this cycle, or if it will hammer another nail in the coffin of people's faith in global cooperation.

WHAT COULD BE THE SOTF'S REAL CONTRIBUTION

In the dawn of the summit, we could consider looking at the SOTF through a different lens and, rather than focusing solely on concrete results, we should consider two potential key contributions in the current international context: revitalizing hope for multilateralism and infusing fresh, original thinking into future reforms.

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Secretary-General Guterres has consistently framed the Summit as once-in-a-generation opportunity to [reinvigorate multilateralism and rebuild eroded trust](#). He views it as “an essential means of reducing risks and creating a safer and more peaceful world.” Paradoxically, the very same conflictual background that hinders ambitious consensus is what endows the SOTF with a unique symbolism: showing resilience and endurance in tough times. The potential agreement among the 193 UN members on basic principles and an agenda, despite fierce competition and Cold War-level hostility, offers a beacon of hope for future global cooperation.

After all, we should never forget that it is in the darkest moments of history that the foundations for the next stage in human development are forged. This pattern is crucial to the understanding the potential significance of the SOTF. During World War II, the Atlantic Charter (1941) laid the contours of the current international order, leading to – through years of reflection and negotiation, during the worst of the fighting – the Bretton Woods system and the United

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Nations. The same can be said of World War I: Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points predated the end of the conflict by several months and the idea of creating a League of Nations can be traced back to 1914, paving the way for the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles and the establishment of a new international system.

These examples underscore how crises can be leveraged to accelerate reflection on necessary changes when existing orders fail to deliver peace and prosperity. This highlights SOTF's second key contribution could make: driving new thinking for global governance reform. The current sense of crisis has sparked fresh ideas and proposals for reforming multilateralism, many of which will be showcased in New York at the Summit. These range from a specific initiative led by the Global Governance Forum to replace the current UN Charter with a [Second UN Charter](#), taking advantage of article 109 of the current text, to different proposals for transforming the [Bretton Woods institutions](#) and building a more inclusive global financial system that can help tackle development and energy transition challenges.

Many reform proposals focus on reviewing UN bodies' mandates, composition, and working methods. Front and center is always the reform of the UN Security Council, with special attention to expanding its membership to reflect current global power dynamics (rather than that of 1945) and tackling the perennial issue of the veto right of the Permanent Five. Additional proposals include increasing the people's voice in UN governance, for instance by creating a [Parliamentary Assembly](#) alongside a revitalized General Assembly. Some advocate reinforcing the Economic and Social Council's (ECOSOC) or strengthening the UN's human rights pillar and machinery. Consolidating the environmental and climate dimension in the UN's core structure

as well as enhancing transparency and inclusivity of the Secretary General selection process are also key areas of focus.

These structural reform proposals are complemented by others centered on the [management side](#) and the day-to-day function of international organizations. Under Secretary-General Guterres' tenure, management reform has focused on decision-making decentralization, simplification, strengthened accountability and transparency, and the adoption of innovation and foresight. But ideas on how to continue making the UN system more agile and effective keep outpouring.

Furthermore, there are proposals to fill the governance gap of public goods and bads, such as the creation of a Global Environmental Agency to tackle more effectively climate change and biodiversity loss, a World Technology Organization to help regulate Artificial Intelligence development, and an International Anti-Corruption Court, this latest supported by a growing [global campaign](#).

BEYOND THE SOTF

The value of the SOTF will lie not in immediate outcomes but in its potential to catalyze long-term reform. Its success should be measured by its ability to call attention, build momentum, and initiate a reform process that extends well beyond this year and beyond the UN itself.

Timing is critical. While current conditions are not the best for the advancement of multilateral cooperation, situations can change fast. Windows of opportunity may open sooner than expected, particularly given the urgency and magnitude of the global challenges we confront. This is why it is important to be ready.

For example, the recent Kursk incursion

launched by Ukraine this summer showed momentarily how the direction of the war can quickly change, something that may eventually bring the parties to the negotiation table. Likewise, mounting international pressure and the growing evidence that Israel's military strategy is a dead end should lead at some stage to a negotiated ceasefire in Gaza, brokered by incessant international diplomacy. This may seem far today, but even a minimal breakthrough could precipitate things, reducing the risk of escalation. Will 2024 be the first year in recent time that we conclude without the outbreak of a new major international crisis?

Importantly, a change in US leadership, could significantly impact international cooperation. While President Biden symbolized a positive overturn of President Trump's unilateral and nationalistic stand, certain protectionist trade policies and a confrontational approach to China persisted. A potential President Kamala Harris could bring new air into the prospect of global governance reform. Moreover, she belongs to a younger generation than her two immediate predecessors and embodies a more progressive outlook that might foster a renewed and reconsidered multilateral cooperation, moving beyond simply "building back better." But of course, this hope hinges on the outcome of the upcoming US presidential election.

Besides the "when" aspect, is important that the SOTF also considers the "what". Much of the reflection so far has focused on managerial and structural changes within existing UN bodies. However, a deeper reflection is needed given how hyper-globalization has fundamentally altered the nature of interdependence.

Therefore, the drive for change must

transcend the UN system to the transformation of the system of international cooperation as a whole. This requires bringing greater coherence and consistency to multilateralism, considering the deepening of regional integration processes and the proliferation of international organizations and minilateral arrangements in recent decades. How do we articulate groupings like the G7 and BRICS into the current global governance architecture, in a coherent and non-confrontational manner? How do we leverage on the G20 to improve international financial cooperation, as we did during the 2008 crisis? These are critical questions that may be answered.

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But it is also essential to go even further. We must rewire our mindsets about globalism and international relations. As we approach a world of 10 billion people, we need a bold, peaceful evolution of the current system to revolutionize the governance of our planetary interdependence. This involves revising our fundamental concepts of sovereignty and citizenship, and amending the monopoly that countries guided by national interests currently hold over multilateral institutions.

To tackle global challenges effectively, we must transcend international inter-governmentalism and make global governance truly global, with new institutions and a transformed identity rooted in a sense of shared global human citizenship coexisting with an endangered planet.

The paradox is that to achieve this paradigm shift without the trauma of major global conflict, we need states to embrace and

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champion this cause. They must recognize that resolving the [trilemma](#) posed by economist Dani Rodrik – the impossibility of having all three democracy, economic integration, and national sovereignty – lies precisely in giving up the third element and envisioning a future in which the Westphalian system is overcome. In this journey, the role of civil society providing ideas and pressuring governments will be critical.

CONCLUSION

The Summit of the Future, taking place in just a few days in New York, epitomizes the current state of multilateralism – a fascinating moment that combines both danger and opportunity. It will illustrate a dichotomy: civil society’s vibrant, bold proposals for reform in contrast with potentially disappointing agreements from UN Member States, limited in ambition and perceived as mere rhetoric.

While the immediate international situation is barely favorable for minimum advancement on global governance reform, the SOTF’s added value may lie in its symbolism and its ability to set a point of departure. It offers a unique platform to highlight the urgent need for transforming multilateralism and to amplify original thinking around it. It could also assemble support and build momentum behind the agenda for reform, charting a path forward through collaboration between champion governments and civil society.

Post-Summit reactions will likely be mixed, with some criticizing it as just another UN-led jamboree and others emphasizing the importance of reaching any agreement in such adverse conditions. Regardless of those immediate reactions, the key takeaway is the importance of readiness to transform global governance when the opportunity presents itself. Continued and steady effort in this direction is crucial. The window may

open sooner than anticipated – let’s not only hope for it but prepare for it, because we are running out of time.

ENDNOTES

For more information:

Coalition for the UN We Need, People’s Pact for the Future (New York : C4UN, 2024)

Global Governance Forum, A Second Charter: Imagining a Renewed United Nations (Madrid : GGF, 2023)

High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB), A Breakthrough for People and Planet: Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future (New York: United Nations University, 2023)

United Nations, Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General (New York: United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 2021)

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

United Nations, ImPact for the Future Outcome Package (Nairobi: UN Civil Society Conference, 2024)

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