



## The (Geo)Politics of UN80: Missed Opportunities

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### Summary

United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres launched the UN80 Initiative in March 2025. Faced with the US government's increasingly hostile approach to the UN, UN80 was presented as a reform geared towards making the UN system "fit for purpose". However, this policy brief argues that both the UN bureaucracy and member states have missed key opportunities to turn UN80 into a tool for reconfiguring UN multilateralism and providing space for multilateral cooperation that – despite rising geopolitical tensions – effectively addresses transnational challenges.

The UN Secretariat, on the one hand, has pushed for a rushed reform agenda through an avalanche of bureaucratic reshuffling and technocratic ideas that are driven primarily by the logic of efficiency gains. Despite investing considerable efforts, it has failed to develop a coherent organisational and governance vision for the future of the UN that would help the organisation adapt to shifts in global power and policy preferences. Although welcoming reform efforts in principle, member states – on the other hand – have neither provided proactive guidance on desired reform outcomes, nor offered strategic input on the reform proposals put forward by the UN bureaucracy. They have failed to take up their role as political reform governors of a UN system in need of adapting to new geopolitical realities.

Although the trajectory of UN80 to date has been far from ideal, the Initiative could still serve as a first step towards more fundamental reform efforts that address member states' diverging preferences and attempt to tackle multilateral governance deficits. In

order to highlight what is at stake, the policy brief outlines three scenarios of how post-UN80 dynamics might unfold, helping stakeholders identify what kind of UN system they would like to see and which steps might be necessary to get there.

**Scenario 1. Faltering momentum: the phase-out of UN80 contributes to UN fragmentation and decline.** Member states and the UN bureaucracy continue working through the UN80 Initiative's to-do list until everything is either proclaimed done, watered down or silently abandoned. This leaves major challenges unaddressed, contributing to increasing levels of fragmentation and dysfunction across the UN system.

**Scenario 2. Bold moves: strategic UN reform ambitions supersede technocratic logics.** Member states leave decisions about efficiency gains to UN chief executives while prioritising and spearheading more ambitious reforms. They task the new Secretary-General with designing a high-level debate on the purpose(s) and the future governance of the UN system that reaffirms the UN as the multilateral centre of world politics.

**Scenario 3. Muddling through: a combination of technocratic and governance reforms keeps the UN afloat.** Cost-cutting reforms continue while a coalition of reform-oriented small and medium-sized member states pushes for a selective reform of multilateral governance. The result is a somewhat smaller UN system that, while not fundamentally transformed, is better equipped to navigate geopolitical tensions.

## Introduction

UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched the UN80 Initiative in March 2025, shortly after Donald Trump's second inauguration as President of the United States. As the Trump administration's hostility towards multilateralism and the UN was in full swing, the stakes for the UN system seemed particularly high. In his first weeks in office, Trump had decided that the United States would cut its development assistance dramatically, including that administered by the UN, withdraw from or cease participation in a number of central UN bodies – including the World Health Organization and the Human Rights Council – and conduct a comprehensive review of US engagement with multilateral organisations more generally (Haug, Novoselova, & Klingebiel, 2025). Yet, Guterres suggested that UN80 was to be more than (just) a cost-cutting exercise in the face of anticipated reductions in US funding. In an increasingly complex geopolitical environment marked by unstable alliances, normative challenges and doubts over the UN's added value, the announced scope of UN80 reforms rather suggested a major repositioning of the UN system. Making the UN “more agile” and “integrated”, so that it can do “more, more effectively, and with fewer bureaucratic burdens” (UN [United Nations], 2025), was presented as key to making the world organisation “fit for purpose” in a volatile global environment.

However, we argue that both member states and UN administrative leaders have missed a number of key opportunities to turn the UN80 Initiative into a meaningful tool for the strategic recalibration of UN multilateralism. On the one hand, the UN Secretariat has pushed for a rushed reform agenda that, while containing ambitious elements, has left no space to develop a coherent and well-argued political vision for the UN's future. Member states were presented by the Secretariat's UN80 reform team with a long list of proposals – summarised in the UN80 Action Plan – that they had never asked for. Many reform proposals were presented as take-it-or-leave-it options, allowing little room for

intergovernmental negotiations. On the other hand, member states shifted too much responsibility and blame onto the Secretary-General. They expected Guterres to take a lead in the absence of reform champions among member states but left the Secretary-General and his team without strategic guidance. Systemic challenges such as political coordination across UN entities or the alignment of mandates and resources have largely remained unaddressed by UN80, mainly because member states have failed to offer bold ideas and a clear vision on how to reposition the UN system in a shifting international order.

## UN80 as bureaucracy politics: a missed opportunity for the UN Secretariat

From the outset of the UN80 Initiative (see Figure 1), reform efforts were organised around three “workstreams” on efficiencies, mandates and structures. They were led by Under-Secretary-General Guy Ryder, Chair of the UN80 Task Force, and the Secretariat's broader reform team. The Secretariat identified seven thematic clusters for developing reform proposals: peace and security; development (with a focus on processes coordinated by the UN Secretariat); development (across the UN system); humanitarian; human rights; training and research; and Specialised Agencies. The implementation framework of the reform was set out in the highly technical UN80 Action Plan, comprising 31 Work Packages and 86 Actions across 64 UN system entities (UN, s.a.).

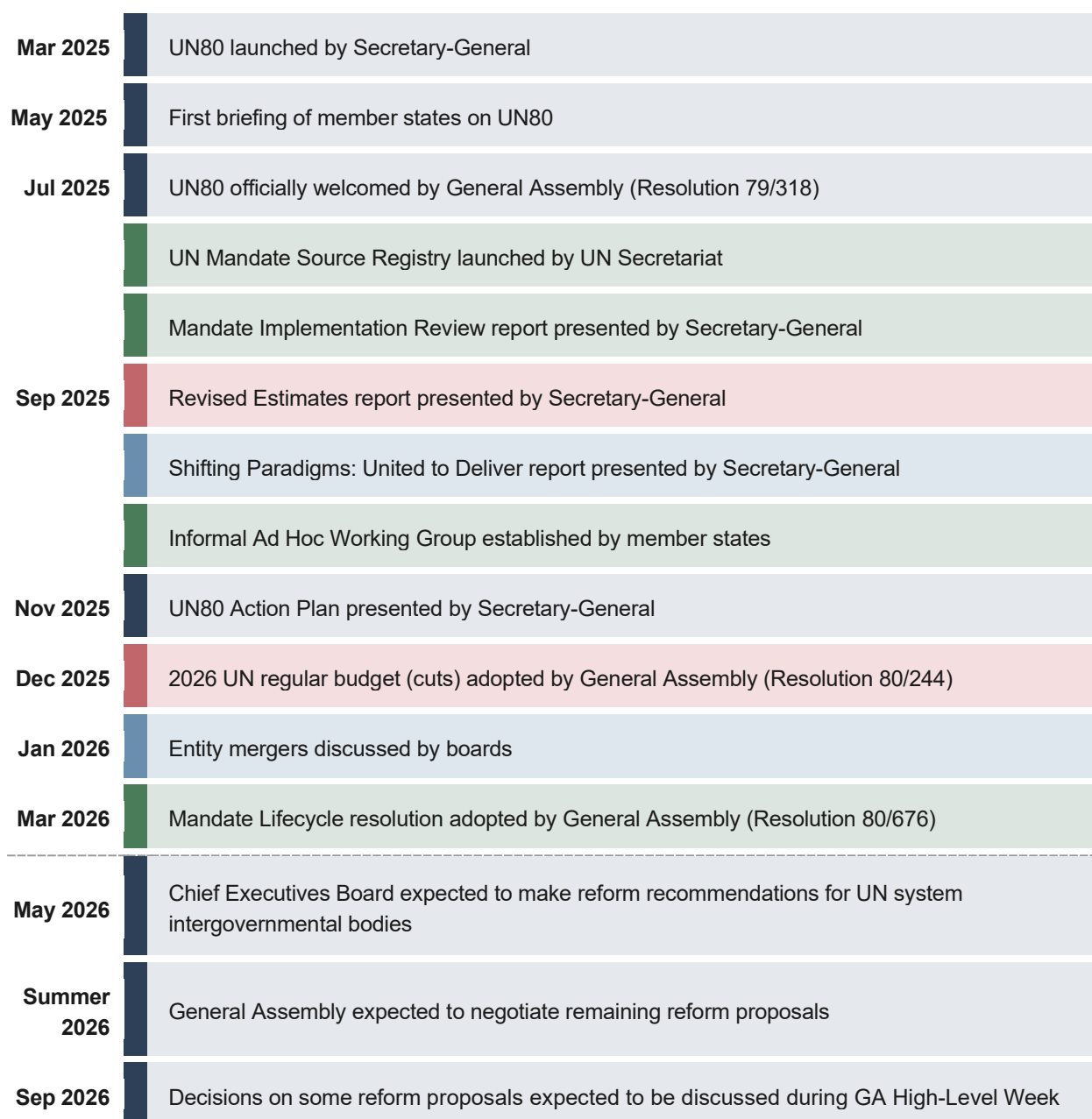
The efficiency and cost-cutting agenda of *Workstream 1* was set up as the most direct response to the Trump administration's harsh criticism towards the UN. According to various sources in the UN expert community and within the UN itself, the Secretary-General appears to have had (mis)read the Trump administration's threat to withhold its assessed contributions as a demand for cost-cutting reforms rather than as a broader challenging of UN multilateralism. This misinterpretation explains the urgency behind key measures, including the largest proposed

cuts to the UN budget in decades, set out in the “revised estimates” presented in September 2025 (UN General Assembly, 2025).

Gaining efficiencies through UN staff layoffs, the consolidation of services and the relocation of UN functions to lower-cost duty stations was implicitly geared towards satisfying the United States and other member states, which were arguing that the UN had become too expensive. This logic has continued well into 2026, as cuts to UN staff pay and benefits are currently on the agenda. How-

ever, the strategy to appease the United States through budget cuts has so far been unsuccessful: In February 2026, the United States only paid about USD 160 million to the UN regular budget, most of which – according to internal UN documents – seem to cover unpaid pre-2025 assessments. Overall, unpaid US dues to the UN regular budget and peacekeeping budget totalled USD 4.3 billion (as of April 2026), and there are threats to continue withholding funding (Miolene & Lynch, 2026).

**Figure 1: UN80 timeline**



Note: Grey = general developments. Red = Workstream 1. Green = Workstream 2. Blue = Workstream 3.

Source: Authors

The mandate lifecycle review under *Workstream 2* is intended to address long-standing issues related to the proliferation of UN mandates and challenges to their implementation. The Secretary-General's report on the mandate lifecycle, presented in July 2025 (UN Secretary General, 2025), shifted the onus onto member states. Guterres and his reform team signalled that a main cause of inefficiencies, duplication and fragmentation in the UN system was member states' inability to manage intergovernmentally agreed mandates. The intergovernmental mechanism that emerged from this – an informal General Assembly working group open to all member states and co-chaired by Jamaica and New Zealand – worked productively, identified a large number of shortcomings and possible solutions, and managed to get a reform resolution adopted by the end of March 2026, as requested by the General Assembly (UN General Assembly, 2026).

However, the processes set up and curated by Guterres' team failed to link intergovernmental discussions on mandates with the other two workstreams. As a result, the UN leadership left two questions that are crucial for moving towards a more efficient and less fragmented UN system unanswered: how to limit or prioritise mandates amid cash shortages and substantive budget cuts; and how to prevent the creation of overlapping or contradictory mandates through better system-wide intergovernmental coordination, from the General Assembly and the assemblies of Specialized Agencies to the boards of Funds and Programmes. Although the General Assembly's mandate lifecycle resolution introduces the concept of "UN system implementation lead" and asks for ideas on how to review mandates across intergovernmental bodies, it does not provide guidelines on how to link mandate management with strategic questions concerning structural UN reform and policy rationalisation (which are supposed to be addressed by Workstream 3).

*Workstream 3* is geared towards reforming UN structures, with a focus on addressing fragmentation and duplication at the UN system level.

This workstream builds on long-standing UN discussions, from reforming UN country-level work (e.g. the reconfiguration of UN country teams) to discussions about setting up joint services for UN entities (e.g. human resources, procurement). The most visible elements of this workstream have been plans to merge individual UN entities, such as UN Women and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), or the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS). Even a merger of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had been discussed but quickly discarded.

Unlike the adopted budget cuts under Workstream 1 and the fast-tracked intergovernmental discussions under Workstream 2, implementing Workstream 3 has proven to be particularly challenging. The reform team developed a long – and somewhat eclectic – list of structural reform proposals, many of which were eventually placed in an excessively long UN80 Action Plan that covers a myriad of possible changes on multiple levels, from the regionalisation of UN functions to UN entity mergers, the re-organisation of UN human rights work and the consolidation of office software (UN, s.a.). For most member states and external observers, the Action Plan is a list rather than a plan: It does not provide a clear-cut rationale for how to go about achieving structural reform or prioritising efforts. What is more, the implementation of any system-wide structural reform is inherently challenging, as the UN system consists not only of the UN proper but also of legally independent Specialized Agencies – with separate membership bodies – as well as a considerable number of entities whose functioning depends more on activities determined by voluntary contributions than on centrally coordinated mandates. Given its circumscribed formal authority and limited de facto ability to implement system-wide reform, the Secretariat – led by Guterres and his Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed – overloaded member states with details, which left them with little choice but to accept proposals or be blamed for non-reform.

According to conversations with member state officials, this overly zealous approach backfired. In intergovernmental boards, for instance, member states expressed frustration over attempts by the Secretariat to push ahead with the merger of UN entities without awaiting proper impact assessments.

It is not necessarily surprising that UN80 reform efforts have stalled, as defending established fiefdoms and leadership positions is typical during major reform processes in multilateral organisations (see Trondal, 2017). However, the Secretary-General's urgency and the avalanche of proposals coming from the Secretariat overwhelmed most UN stakeholders, undermining both systematic analysis and strategic communication (Patz, 2026). Efforts by the UN bureaucracy failed to help convene member states strategically, with the exception of budget cut decisions – unsurprising in a context of financial crisis – and a resolution on the mandate lifecycle, whose implementation will fail unless the underlying governance deficits (see below) are addressed. Most UN80 proposals are likely to have only a limited impact on UN system efficiency, as in the case of expected mergers, and to attract limited political support, as with proposals linked to peace operations that depend heavily on Security Council veto powers.

### **UN80 as diplomacy politics: a missed opportunity for UN member states**

A positive reading of UN80 might suggest that the Secretary-General's UN80 reform team did what member states, notably the United States, had signalled they should do: develop proposals that would increase the ability of the UN to deliver "more with less" on a path to a UN system that was "fit for purpose". However, defining what is "fit for purpose" in the context of a partially disintegrating international order – with substantial budget cuts in both core and non-core UN funding – clearly required member states, as the collective principal, to define not only what they understood

by "fit" but also what "purpose" they saw in the UN system and its different parts. Without such guidance, Guterres and his team were largely left to develop reform ideas on their own.

Most importantly, member states failed to acknowledge that major inefficiencies in the UN system stem from both a lack of intergovernmental coordination and from the inability to align the interests of major donors with those of the majority of member states. Thus, any reform aimed at making the UN fit for purpose was destined to fail if it did not touch upon the governance of the UN system, which is a core domain of member state prerogatives well beyond the mandate and reach of UN bureaucracies. Member states should have played a much more proactive role in the process of identifying key goals for structural and governance reform. This would, in turn, have provided a more strategic framework for asking the Secretary-General to identify areas of administrative fragmentation and duplication that are major cost drivers across the UN system. The combination of targeted cost-cutting and concrete steps to improve the UN's fragmented governance – especially in domains financed largely by earmarked voluntary contributions – would have made UN80 a considerably more attractive initiative for member states, including major contributors. It would have helped reduce the overall number of items in – and add a strategic rationale to – the UN80 Action Plan, since many of the UN's structural challenges stem from poor governance, uncoordinated funding decisions and the unwillingness of member states to consolidate overlapping parts of the UN system.

When it concerns one of the root causes of fragmentation and duplication – the drafting, adoption and implementation of intergovernmental mandates (see Mahn, 2016) – member states cautiously agreed to review their own approach to formulating future General Assembly and other core UN body mandates (Workstream 2). Under the arbitrary time pressure of a process that was announced to last only six months, member states did not opt for developing system-wide

governance mechanisms to prevent or limit mandate proliferation and duplication across the UN system. By omitting funding-related questions, member states have failed to address the core systemic driver of fragmentation at the global, regional and country levels (see Graham, 2023), leaving UN80's focus on structural reforms (Workstream 3) to engage with symptoms rather than underlying causes. Member states have not freed themselves from the bureaucratic – and somewhat eclectic – logic of the UN80 Action Plan, nor invested efforts into linking debates on creating mandates with structural reform negotiations.

Thus, from the outset of UN80, member states did not show any signs – neither individually nor as groups – that they were ready to lead the reform initiative. As key contributors to UN budgets, Western member states have supported cost-cutting efforts, with many officials being aware that their governments were pushing for reduced multilateral aid spending anyway. At the same time, their political leadership has been largely engaged in other pressing geopolitical matters, tightening domestic budgets and – particularly in Europe – the costs related to the war in Ukraine, all of which precluded a high-level political focus on UN reform. China, attempting to strike the right balance between its developing-country identity and its role as a global superpower (see Baumann, Novoselova, Surasky, & Schönrock, 2024), has shown little interest in investing political capital into reforming UN operational structures dependent on Western voluntary contributions, even though it has regularly expressed a keen interest in a UN system focused on development as a central pillar. Instead, the emphasis of China, as a major assessed contributor across the UN system, has been on avoiding “wasteful spending, redundant formalities, and excessive bureaucracy” (China Mission, 2025) – cost drivers that, via the expansion of regular budgets, also increase China's financial contributions. The Group of 77 (G77), as the largest Global South bloc at the UN, has neither articulated a clear common vision for UN reform beyond a general

focus on preserving the development pillar and country-level operations; nor given any signs that intra-G77 leadership will ensure that UN80 aligns with such a vision. Russia, in turn, has largely focused on maintaining intergovernmental control across reform steps and not shown much interest in improving the functioning of the system as a whole.

### **UN80 and geopolitical shifts: a missed opportunity for reconfiguring UN multilateralism**

Although member states should have weighed in to push for a deeper and more systematic reform process, simply increasing member state engagement would not have been enough to ensure a meaningful repositioning of the UN system. Any UN reform initiative at the current historical juncture will be unable to rise to the occasion if it is not seen as a first step towards revising multilateral governance for a much more disunited world. So far, however, UN80 has failed to address how the UN should respond to geopolitical disruption, and what member states as a collective should do to strategically strengthen UN functions in a context where challenges to multilateralism loom large. To different extents, not only Russia, China and the United States but also the European Union (EU) and regional powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia are increasingly signalling interest in dominating their hemispheric, continental or subregional neighbourhoods. They seem willing to use the UN system, through obstruction and/or financial influence, to increase their dominance and/or prevent interference in what they see as their respective spheres of influence.

Although some major powers – notably Russia and the United States – embrace overt geopolitical unilateralism and openly undermine multilateralism, UN80 has allowed participants to focus on organisational and largely technocratic issues rather than confront tougher questions about how to adapt institutionalised forms to provide the best available safeguards against unilateral attacks.

Non-Western states that regularly demand a greater say in multilateral affairs have refrained from championing UN80. They have not, as of yet, taken the Initiative seriously enough to use it as a platform for governance reforms that would afford them a more central role in more effective and integrated decision-making, and/or help channel scarce resources towards their geographic preferences and global policy goals. Most traditional donors have been overly focused on reducing their multilateral contributions and have been happy to endorse most cost-cutting measures. They have also had little interest in discussions about their own responsibilities in financing a fragmented system that has long served their political goals; instead they point fingers at inefficiencies of UN bureaucracies and a less-than-perfect reform process.

Reconciling different expectations of what the future UN system should look like requires a renegotiation of “purpose” in the “fit-for-purpose” logic that has dominated UN80. Meaningful UN reform would need to address not only the amalgam of evolving challenges – from climate change and biodiversity loss to the proliferation of highly publicised wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Iran and Sudan – but also the various interests and expectations across the UN membership spectrum. The United States under Trump wants the UN system to refocus on what it calls UN “core” functions – peace and security – with as much US control as possible. China seeks a greater say through strengthened intergovernmental bodies, ideally reducing its assessed funding footprint while expanding its influence through targeted China-led schemes. Together with Russia, China and the United States are wary of a strengthened UN Secretariat, while many Western states support UN autonomy where it improves delivery and is accompanied by strong accountability mechanisms. Most G77 countries prefer the redistributive function of the operational UN system while continuing to value the symbolic representation of their interests – such as through the UN Conference on Trade and Development – even when its impact is limited without Western

funding. As the most important non-member donor for the UN system, the EU is increasingly scrutinising the UN’s costly operational role in development and humanitarian assistance and is likely to shift its support to EU-based agencies and local in-country actors in the future. EU representatives tend to instead emphasise the UN’s normative function, particularly its role in upholding individual human rights and governance standards, whereas the United States, China and Russia assign low priority to these issues or openly oppose them.

The technocratic logic of UN80 leaves little room for the fundamental need to address and – at least in part – balance these hardly compatible interests. Even a more systematic and streamlined Action Plan would have been unable to overcome geopolitics. Although it is, again, not surprising that a multilateral reform initiative primarily designed by a multilateral bureaucracy refrains from addressing geopolitical tensions head-on, the extent to which UN80 has shied away from or ignored the broader geopolitical context is remarkable. This is all the more concerning because that context is crucial for assessing whether specific UN80 reform proposals are likely to succeed or instead undermine their intended goals. For instance, the proposals in the UN80 Action Plan that are supposed to contribute to the UN’s regionalisation efforts – that is, strengthen regional UN coordination and harmonise regional work across UN pillars – could further limit global coherence. Centralising UN system functions and offices at the regional level might lead to an even more fragmented system – this time along regional rather than mandate-specific lines – and provide major powers with additional levers for exercising control over UN operations in their respective regions.

A more explicit geopolitical lens would have also helped with reviewing and evaluating plans to merge individual UN entities. The merger of UN Women and UNFPA might – as some argue – result in strengthening women’s rights advocacy and operational support for sexual and reproductive rights. In the current geopoliticised

environment, however, the creation of one combined agency could also create an easier target for obstruction, facilitate more focused funding cuts, and make it simpler for governments to direct their efforts towards interfering with or redefining gender-related mandates. Similarly, closer coordination by UNHCR and IOM along route-based migration movements – which is also part of the UN80 Action Plan – could strengthen refugee rights. However, in a context of tightened intergovernmental control over multilateral work, it could also become an additional tool for aligning international migration management less with global norms than with national anti-migrant sentiments.

Against this backdrop, any multilateral reform process requires member states to be ready to explore and test possible contours of global governance in an increasingly geopoliticised context. Major reforms require political entrepreneurship in order to coordinate diverse interests, something the UN Secretary-General has not – at least visibly – tried to do during the UN80 process. At the same time, no member state grouping has filled the (geo)political vacuum created by the – at least partial – US retreat from UN multilateralism to proactively drive UN80, and/or prepare what might come after the UN80 Action Plan. For now, despite widespread rhetorical support for the UN and calls to strengthen multilateralism in times of crisis, UN80 still lacks champions willing to set aside technocratic shopping lists and tackle the complex questions that really matter for the future of the UN system.

## **The future of UN multilateralism: post-UN80 scenarios**

The key argument put forward in this policy brief is that UN80 has been, at its core, a technocratic cost-cutting exercise responding to the concerns of key contributors – notably the United States – that want to reduce their financial UN footprint. UN80 workstreams and the Initiative's Action Plan have been incapable of – and were not designed to – helping the UN reactively adapt to or proactively co-shape the disruptive geopolitical

forces undermining its normative and operational functions. The current Secretary-General's focus on technocratic reshuffling – driven in part by concern for his legacy as he prepares to step down at the end of 2026 – has kept member state officials busy at the working level and, at least in part, has precluded a more strategic, high-level reform effort that acknowledges the need to fundamentally adapt the wider UN system in the absence of sufficient resources.

Although the trajectory of UN80 to date has been far from ideal, the Initiative could serve as a first step towards more fundamental reform efforts that address member states' diverging preferences and tackle multilateral governance deficits. Over the coming months, the *UN bureaucracy* should explicitly recognise the changing geopolitical context and – building on a more streamlined organisation of UN80 Action Plan items – provide systematic modular reform options that leave room for intergovernmental negotiations. As a collective, *UN member states* should learn from the productive discussions in the UN80 Informal Ad Hoc Working Group (Workstream 2) in the General Assembly to ensure that future reform processes remain in their hands. Early guidance can prevent the UN bureaucracy from setting up reform processes that, from the outset, are unlikely to succeed. *Major powers* – notably China, the United States, Russia and the EU – should make use of the selection process for the new UN Secretary-General to agree on joint reform priorities. *Small and medium-sized member states*, in turn, should recognise the opportunities that UN reform can offer, as it may provide a rare chance to secure at least some voice in reformed multilateral governance structures.

It is unclear whether member states and UN executive leaders will learn from the experiences of UN80 and adapt their approaches to UN reform. We therefore outline three possible scenarios for how the post-UN80 process – that is, steps beyond those foreseen under Guterres' leadership – may unfold in the year(s) ahead: UN80 may be phased out; its logic may be

integrated into a somewhat more comprehensive process; or it may serve as a first step towards significantly more ambitious, large-scale reforms. Although the likelihood of these scenarios depends on political decisions yet to be made and geopolitical circumstances that are hard to predict, they provide a basis for thinking about possible courses of action and help stakeholders identify what kind of UN system they would like to see, as well as which steps might be needed to (try to) get there.

### **Scenario 1. Faltering momentum: the phase-out of UN80 contributes to UN fragmentation and decline**

*In short: UN80 efforts are phased out without leading to more comprehensive reforms, contributing to an increasingly dysfunctional UN system.*

Under this scenario, member states and the new UN Secretary-General continue on UN80's technocratic path without addressing more fundamental questions or embarking on a broader reform initiative. The conclusion drawn after the August 2026 deadline set by Guterres – and presented during High-Level Week at the General Assembly in September – will be that UN80 has been a success, even if a considerable number of Action Plan items are not implemented and dissatisfaction across member states and the UN bureaucracy remains high. The UN system's executive leaders, boards and assemblies will continue to work through the UN80 Action Plan selectively until its elements are either declared complete, watered down or quietly abandoned. The UN system will be neither fit for new geopolitical realities nor equipped to address the need for high-level political discussions about its future functioning and purpose. The UN system will continue to fragment along politicised dividing lines, with some parts securing the necessary financial and political support from member states while others face sudden – or, more likely, protracted – decline. Even though some mergers will take place and there will be examples given of institutional adjustments, the UN system will be considered more dysfunctional than pre-UN80.

**Likelihood: high.** *No key stakeholder needs to invest significant political capital, and continuity may be face-saving for everyone involved, even if these efforts fail to strengthen the UN system.*

### **Scenario 2. Bold moves: strategic UN reform ambitions supersede technocratic logics**

*In short: The technocratic logic of UN80 is replaced by far-reaching structural reforms that address geopolitical realities.*

Under this scenario, member states – including key donors and small and medium-sized powers supporting UN multilateralism – use the occasion of a new UN Secretary-General to move beyond the logic of UN80 and tackle UN governance challenges head-on. Member states delegate further efficiency gains, cuts and relocations to executives of major UN entities, with ex-post board and assembly oversight, and instead focus on reshaping the UN system for new geopolitical realities. They acknowledge that geopolitical disruptions and obstructions of key UN processes will increase the dysfunctions that UN80 tried to address, and that they will therefore need to be addressed head-on. Having learnt from the UN80 process that bureaucracy-driven reform proposals cannot replace necessary (geo)political discussions, member states instruct the new Secretary-General to design a high-level debate on the purpose(s) and governance of the UN system. Major powers, geopolitical groups and diverse coalitions of member states committed to effective multilateralism develop reform suggestions that include proposals for UN Charter reform (through Article 109) and/or systemic reforms with a substantive re-organisation of UN work and a comprehensive mandate re-evaluation. When ambitious reform options are on the table, member states ask the new Secretary-General and a high-level reform panel to lay out the legal and political trade-offs for each major reform option and develop modular pathways for a five-year time horizon to set in motion reform options for a post-2030 UN system. While reform proposals are the subject of heated

debate, including across geopolitical divides, the UN is reinvigorated as the multilateral centre of world politics.

**Likelihood: low.** *There are currently no member state champions ready to push for an ambitious UN reform; the new Secretary-General will likely not be selected for their reform visions, and geopolitical divisions will undermine the necessary foundation for reform-focused cooperation.*

### **Scenario 3. Muddling through: a combination of technocratic and governance reforms keeps the UN afloat**

**In short:** *Cost-saving UN80 reform steps continue while more far-reaching structural reforms are put on the agenda.*

Under this scenario, both the member states and UN chief executives learn from UN80 that efficiency gains and budget cuts are necessary in the current funding landscape. Driven by bureaucratic logics without strong member state agency, related reform steps continue to be implemented cautiously while more controversial topics, such as merging major agencies, are abandoned. Simultaneously, pressure for a separate track with broader governance reforms grows as stakeholders realise that the UN80 Initiative is not enough to address the major shortcomings of the UN system in the face of current geopolitical realities. As a result, a coalition of reform-oriented small and medium-sized countries develops selective governance reform proposals that target some of the root causes of dysfunction that UN80 did not address. This additional reform track is more focused on purpose and governance than on fitness and efficiency. For instance, member states might decide that more far-reaching system-wide reforms require an intergovernmental equivalent to the UN's Chief Executives Board, such as a high-level committee of member states selected via the UN's Economic and Social Council, the original body designed for UN system-wide coordination in the Charter (e.g. Article 63.2). The new Secretary-General makes

use of their convening power – contrary to Guterres' focus on developing reform proposals – to engage high-level political leaders in discussions about the UN system's current purpose(s). Learning from UN80 that member states are not able to initiate a major reform process, the Secretary-General encourages – behind the scenes and through targeted public efforts – the formation of a reform-oriented coalition of member states from across regional groups to develop balanced proposals. Although far from perfect, these proposals try to respect red lines put forward by major powers and reflect at least some concerns of smaller states. They focus on strengthening backbone functions of the UN system while avoiding the issues – such as the foregrounding of human rights and other normative frameworks – that are likely to undermine the already fragile reform consensus. The combination of technocratic reform steps à la UN80 and a limited set of governance-focused efforts does not lead to a fundamentally transformed UN system. However, it allows member states and the UN bureaucracy to – sometimes productively – muddle through. The result is a somewhat smaller UN system that, while not immune to attacks from major powers and polarisation, is better equipped to navigate geopolitical tensions.

**Likelihood: low to medium.** *The (process leading to the) election of the new Secretary-General may increase member state readiness to allow for UN governance reforms, but reform fatigue – or major events redirecting political attention – might set in before broader reform elements can be tackled.*

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