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UN Pact for the Future: Multilateral reform plan without guarantee of success

UN Member States adopted the Pact for the Future in New York and committed themselves to reform a multilateral system which falls short in delivering solutions in certain areas. However, words alone will not save multilateralism.

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On 23 September, the Heads of States and Governments of UN Member States gathered at the United Nations in New York and adopted the Pact for the Future. This political declaration provides a compass for the reform of the multilateral system. Although, the Pact falls short on what is necessary in certain areas, it includes actions on five different topics. It is imperative that States take concrete steps to implement the agreed actions. While the Pact enjoyed overwhelming support, Russia and its proxies proved once again that they remain increasingly destructive actors for multilateralism.

Agreeing on reform within the United Nations system can be a rocky road. This time it was a particularly difficult endeavor due to three reasons:

- › The objective of the Summit of the Future and the [Pact](#) is to reform the multilateral system on a **wide range of topics** such as peace and security, global governance, sustainable development, new technologies and future generations. The mere complexity of issues and national interests alone made it a challenge.
- › **Geopolitical tensions** run high (Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon, China-US relations) and this means a massive burden for multilateral negotiations which require consensus.
- › An ever-widening **gap between European countries and the US on the one hand and the G-77 group** (134 States predominately from Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia) on the other hand hampered the preparation of the Summit and the Pact.

Consequently, the negotiations which Germany and Namibia led as so-called co-facilitators were difficult from the beginning. For example, the agreement on the five overarching topics was preceded by long debates. Moreover, the Summit was postponed for one year. During the Summit opening Russia introduced an amendment supported by its proxies Iran, North Korea, Belarus, Syria, Sudan and Nicaragua. It should emphasize the principle of non-interference and the intergovernmental character of the UN. As a matter of fact, it was an obvious try to torpedo the Pact since several provisions would have been watered down significantly. In the end the maneuver ended in an embarrassing diplomatic defeat for Russia and the Pact was adopted. Beside the Pact for the Future, the Global Digital Compact¹ and the Declaration on Future Generations were adopted as well.

Small steps towards UN Security Council reform

¹ The GDC defines guiding principles and actions for the digital future at a global level. It includes, for example, digital divide, AI and data governance.

² Initially a first proposal was planned in June.

One of the greatest points of contention ahead of the Summit and the preparation of the Pact for the Future has been the reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC). Due to increasing great power competition the council has often failed to address the various threats to international peace and security besetting the world. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, is only one recent example of its ineffectiveness. Russia continues using its veto power to block the UNSC's resolutions and nurtures the criticism of his partial inability to act.

Consensus for better African representation

The debate which is ongoing for decades is primarily about two issues: enlargement of the Council and the veto. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, the co-facilitators of the Pact came up with a proposal at the very end of the negotiation process at the end of August.² The proposal was the result of tough negotiations lead by the IGN co-chairs³ Austria and Kuwait. Although, the five permanent members (P5) have proven resistant to a substantial reform so far, there seems to be movement and a certain acceptance that adaptation to the realities of the 21st century is inevitable. Improved representation of African countries is a widely acknowledged consensus in the meantime. This is also reflected in the text of the Pact which identifies in Action 39 guiding principles for the negotiations and gives priority to a greater representation of African States, although it also foresees the end of the underrepresentation of other world regions. In their speeches during the High-level Week, African leaders in particular urged the States to give way for profound reform. The United States publicly supported two permanent seats for Africa in the UNSC several days before the Summit.

Veto reform and new members beyond Africa remain an illusion.

While it seems to only be a question of time that the UNSC will be enlarged by new African

³ Intergovernmental Negotiations Framework is an Open Ended Working Group with Members States which work on the reform of the UNSC.

members⁴, there is not much to expect with regard to other regions or the veto. There is simply too much resistance within the respective regions for the membership of other potential candidates such as India, Brazil, Germany or Japan. It is noteworthy that the Pact explicitly mentions the balance between better representation and effectiveness of the organ.

International Financial Architecture Reform (IFA): A key pillar for multilateralism

The reform of the IFA is of utmost importance for countries in the G-77 and the southern world regions. Already during the negotiations they made clear that they expect substantial progress. However, Europe and in particular the US remained reluctant to give too far-reaching concessions.

The Summit reaffirmed the shared ambition for IFA reform. The Pact includes seven specific actions on IFA reform under the “transforming global governance” section, in addition to one action calling directly to close the SDG financing gap in developing countries. The Pact revealed several points for meaningful reforms.

Reiterating the need to fulfil existing commitments. The Pact seems to be conservative, as it largely calls on States to fulfill existing commitments agreed to, rather than introducing new and bold proposals. Considering the existing political and fiscal realities in some developed countries, this makes sense to avoid unrealistic expectations. The 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda provides a strong basis for much of the Pact’s content pertaining to IFA reform, suggesting a need to revisit past commitments which remain unmet. For instance, Action 4 calls on States to fulfil existing commitments on official development assistance (ODA), advance discussions on modernizing measures of ODA, and meet the SDG Stimulus proposal of the Secretary-General. G20 countries bear a special

responsibility to meet these challenges, as emphasized throughout the Summit. This means that also emerging economies such as China as well as Arab countries share a responsibility to ensure sufficient funding.

The UN plays a complementary role in global financial governance with the international financial institutions (IFIs). Enhanced coordination and multistakeholder engagement in financing were reiterated throughout the Summit. The IFA agenda is unique in that it involves a wide and complex ecosystem of actors – including IFIs, Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), the private sector, foundations, and creditors, in addition to UN system bodies like ECOSOC, the Security Council and the Peacebuilding Commission. The precise role of the UN within this agenda is thus contested, with some States aligning with a more conservative approach – opting for the IFIs themselves to steer change, with the UN in the back seat. In contrast, some States call for a wider scope of action for the UN, seeking to bring matters ranging from oversight on international tax cooperation to managing debt burdens under official UN auspices and formal mechanisms. The Pact includes elements such as the UN Framework convention on international tax cooperation.

Reforming governance structures of IFIs to ensure they are more inclusive, transparent and accountable. Action 48 of the Pact calls to reform the governance structures of the IFIs and MDBs to increase the voice and representation of the developing countries in economic decision-making. One step in this area is the creation of a 35th chair on the IMF Executive Board for sub-Saharan Africa, as well as recent changes to IMF quotas and voting powers. However, further structural changes remain to be implemented, and the Pact merely encourages IFI directors themselves to lead this reform.

Comprehensive debt relief initiatives tailored to the unique needs of developing countries. The Pact recognizes the dire situation of

⁴ Such a process will take years since a two-third majority in the UN General Assembly must vote in favour for it. After that at least two-thirds of the Member States must ratify the amended Charter

(including all P-5 countries). At the moment, it is not clear which countries would take the permanent seats in the UNSC. Therefore, there is the expectation that African countries develop a proposal.

developing countries, in which 1 in 3 is at risk of defaulting on debt obligations today. Considering the stark contrast in borrowing rates between developing nations and wealthier countries, States called for a permanent institutional mechanism to deal with debt under UN auspices. Mechanisms to deal with debt systematically still remain elusive beyond existing initiatives like the G20 debt service and common framework for debt treatment. The Pact also encourages the IMF to review the sovereign debt architecture, and make greater use of debt swap initiatives.

Making long term affordable loans and improving access to financing for developing countries. Flows of capital to many developing countries are falling, and it is often the case that more capital is leaving developing countries than is coming in. The Pact responds on this point, urging IFA reforms to be responsive to the unique needs and vulnerability of developing countries and to provide direct financing to those most in need. At the same time, discussions raised the need for a realistic balance whereby domestic reforms to increase productive capacities and create a favorable environment to attract private sector investment at home should go hand in hand with international support. Developing countries also face the challenge of high risk perceptions and high costs of borrowing. The Multidimensional Vulnerability Index and call to establish criteria beyond GDP both showcase efforts from the G-77 group to adapt criteria to access finance to the needs of the most vulnerable nations; initiatives which the coalition of Small Island Developing States and allies have pushed for a long time.

New technologies as multilateral challenge for peace and security

In recent years, the UN's ability to maintain international peace and security has come under intense strain. The world is grappling with the highest number of violent conflicts since the Cold War and new and emerging technologies not only

threaten to exacerbate existing but also create new challenges.

In view of this complex security environment, the Pact recognizes the UN's indispensable role in ensuring peace and security worldwide and the urgent need to address accumulating and diverse threats across all domains. To that end, the Pact sets forth 15 action items across a broad range of issues, from humanitarian emergencies to terrorism, maritime security to transnational organized crime. Notably, it underscores the interdependence of peace and security with sustainable development and human rights, expressing particular concern for the impact that growing military expenditure—an estimated [\\$2,5 trillion](#) in 2023—has on investments in sustainable development (currently facing a [\\$4 trillion](#) financing gap) and sustaining peace.

The international community is broadly united in its concern for the security risks posed by ungoverned, unregulated technologies. Rapidly evolving technologies are increasingly shaping the nature of conflict and challenging the maintenance of peace and security worldwide. Recognizing its considerable risks if left unabated, the Pact is especially focused on the weaponization of emerging technology. To that end, Member States pledged to take measures and engage in international negotiations to avoid an arms race in outer space. Similarly, Member States agreed to further discussions and the development of instruments or other measures to address autonomous weapons systems (LAWS)—although the Pact falls short of calling for a legally-binding regulation. In particular China, Russia and the US have no interest to allow multilateral governance in the military domain concerning new technologies.⁵ The adopted version of the Pact also features new language calling for the continued assessment of existing and potential risks associated with the military applications of artificial intelligence. Despite the dangers posed by digital technologies, the Pact also recognizes its potential for good and invites enhanced international cooperation and capacity-building efforts to ensure all States can benefit.

⁵ Earlier this year in separate UN General Assembly resolutions the US and pushed for more use of AI in the

area of SDGs but made clear that that they do not want such a multilateral approach in the military area.

Notably though, commitments relating to the potential risks posed by the misuse of digital technologies, including information and communication technologies (ICTs) and artificial intelligence, were scrapped in the final negotiations leading to the Summit. For example, earlier [versions](#) of the Pact included language reaffirming the role that norms of responsible state behavior in the use of ICTs have on reducing risks to international peace, security, and stability. Also absent from the Pact is a [commitment](#) by Member States to refrain from conducting or knowingly supporting ICT activity that damages critical infrastructure—a glaring omission in the context of Russia’s ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine and its repeated cyber attacks on government, energy, and financial sectors.

Forging multilateral consensus on nuclear disarmament remains a seemingly Sisyphean task. As geopolitical tensions could push the world closer to the nuclear brink, de-escalation and nuclear disarmament have become an increasingly paramount but out-of-reach objective. In view of this existential threat, the Pact strongly declares that nuclear war “cannot be won and must never be fought,” calling upon Member States to make every effort to avert its danger.

Yet for many, the Pact signifies less of a breakthrough and more so the “best we can do” given the prevailing geopolitical dynamics. Pact negotiations on this issue proved especially challenging, with nuclear weapons states reportedly objecting to the inclusion of concrete measures in this section.

While the Pact recognizes general and complete disarmament as the final objective, it skirts ambitious actions towards this goal, instead emphasizing the more immediate goal of eliminating the danger of nuclear war and avoiding an arms race. With regard to Member States’ nuclear strategies earlier [versions](#) of the Pact called for Member States to review the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies. Also removed from the adopted Pact is language calling for nuclear weapons states to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict or refrain from inflammatory rhetoric. The absence of both

commitments is particularly troubling in light of Russia’s recently announced [expansion](#) of its nuclear doctrine to include attacks on non-nuclear weapons states.

By and large, Member States support peacebuilding and peacekeeping as the cornerstones of international peace and security efforts. Against a backdrop of unprecedented conflict, peacebuilding and peacekeeping remain vital instruments in helping countries transition towards sustainable peace. While neither topic featured very prominently in Member States’ addresses during High-Level Week, the Pact contains several noteworthy commitments aimed at strengthening these important tools.

Since the launch of the Secretary-General’s Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative, how best to evolve peace operations to respond to new and existing challenges has been a topic of much debate. Amid ongoing discussions on peacekeeping reform, some may view the commitments set forth in the Pact as vague. The Pact does call on the Secretary-General to undertake a review on the future of all forms of UN peace operations. However, so far there seemed to be a certain reluctance within the UN system itself to take up the topic. Among other commitments aimed at adapting peace operations to the changing security landscape, the Pact emphasizes the critical role of political solutions and strategies. As with peacebuilding, Member States also recognized the need for more predictable, adequate, and sustained financing for peace operations. Also of note is the Pact’s call for enhanced collaboration between the UN and regional and subregional organizations, especially the African Union.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the Pact for the Future does not deliver what would be necessary for a substantial multilateral reform, but it is also not a failure. Russia’s attempt to divide the UN Member States isolated the country and its allies on this issue and led to a strong signal of support for multilateralism by the other States. The fact that

the African group took the lead and requested a motion not to vote on Russia's amendments is a blow for the country. Although, it was a diplomatic maneuver one should not underestimate the political message: Russia as a P5 member of the UNSC and its allies are not interested in this ruled-based multilateral order and will put massive efforts into significantly weakening or destroying this global order in general and the UN system in particular - a logical continuation of Russia's current foreign and security policy.

Germany played a key role as co-facilitator in the negotiation process what could prove useful for its candidacy for a non-permanent seat in the UNSC (term 2027-2028).

It will be decisive that States and non-state actors quickly take concrete steps to implement the actions of the Pact, in particular with regard to the reform of the IFA, successful implementation of the SDGs as well as the reform of the UN Security Council. Such actions could not only be a first step to improve the North-South relations between Europe, the US and the G-77, but also to restore trust in multilateral solutions countering increasing nationalist tendencies in international relations. However, the Pact as a reform plan itself does not solve any of these challenges and although agreeing on reform within the United Nations system can be a rocky road, implementing them can be even rockier.

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