

Anjali Dayal
June 2025

Who Can Lead a Disarrayed World?

Electing the Next UN Secretary-General



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1.

The UN Secretary-General: A Flexible Role in a Divided Time

Trygve Lie, the first UN Secretary-General (UNSG), called it “the most impossible job on earth.”¹ Others have described it as the secular papacy²—an office that gives its occupant an unusually singular yet universal moral authority to argue for peace, security, the common good of all people. It is, according to one scholar, a position that is “as frustratingly constrained as it is prestigious.”³ And yet the office is also highly personalized and flexible. Each successive officeholder has interpreted his duties differently and expanded his role in response to the era,⁴ making the upcoming 2026 selection of the next UNSG an important opportunity for the UN’s member states to appoint a leader who might again reinterpret the role to help resolve some of the epochal crises they face.

The UN Charter leaves the office comparatively undefined—it charges the UNSG with performing “the functions entrusted to him by the UN’s deliberative organs,” running the Secretariat and its international civil service under regulations established by the UN General Assembly (UNGA), and cautions that every UN member must “respect the exclusively international character” of his and his staff’s responsibilities. It also frames an independent political role for the UNSG through Article 99 of the Charter: “The Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.”⁵

This makes the UNSG a political, administrative, diplomatic, and legal actor. The UNSG leads the Secretariat and executes the collective will of member states, but in fact has little formal authority, no independent material power, and few

specifically delineated responsibilities. Furthermore, “coordinating centralized strategic goals remains a challenge”⁶ because of the complex, decentralized, and varied nature of the UN’s activities and decision-making structures. Consequently, almost all of the UNSG’s power depends on the officeholder’s personal characteristics and persuasive skill—and on wielding those characteristics and skills in a context they help shape.⁷ In other words, UNSGs are charged with executing the tasks assigned to them by member states, but can interpret both international law and the office’s comparatively loose bounds as they see fit when executing those tasks. They can also help build, sustain, and proliferate ideas about the kinds of norms, standards, and values that should structure relationships between member states, and between member states and people in those states. As a result, as Ian Johnstone says, the UNSG’s “political influence is reinforced by [his] ability to draw upon values and principles embodied in the UN Charter.”⁸ In Dag Hammarskjöld’s view, although much of the UN’s work depends on how the Secretariat interprets the limits set by member state actions, the Secretariat’s creative capacity—introducing new ideas, taking initiatives, or putting new findings before member states—might in turn influence member state actions.⁹

Consequently, each occupant of the office has framed their duty to the international community as serving the cause of peace,¹⁰ and has expanded the office accordingly. Hammarskjöld, for example, famously interpreted the role as entailing high-stakes crisis diplomacy and mediation, while Javier Pérez de Cuéllar helped develop the Secretariat’s capacity for fact-finding and generating information about potential

1 Kofi Annan, “Remarks on the Appointment of the Eighth Secretary-General,” New York, 13 October 2006, <https://www.un.org/webcast/pdfs/sg-remarks-appt.pdf>.

2 Kent K. Kille, “The ‘Secular Pope’: Insights on the UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority.” In *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership*, Kent J. Kille, (ed.). Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2007.

3 Ibid.

4 Ian Johnstone “The Role of the UN Secretary-General: The Power of Persuasion Based on Law.” *Global Governance*, 2003, 9 (4): 441-458.

5 United Nations Charter, Chapter XV, Articles 97-101.

6 Abiodun Williams, “Strategic Planning in the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General,” *Global Governance*, Oct.-Dec. 2010, 16, (4): 435-449, 436

7 Johnstone 442.

8 Johnstone 442.

9 Dag Hammarskjöld, *Hammarskjöld: The Political Man* Emery Klein (ed.), Funk & Wagnalls: New York, 1968.

10 Jodok Troy, “The United Nations Secretary-General as an International Civil Servant,” *The International History Review*, 43:4 (2021), 906-927, DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2020.1828139.

conflict areas in order “to carry out effectively the preventive role foreseen for the Secretary-General under Article 99.”¹¹ Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan expanded the Secretariat’s capacity to generate information to advance new ideas about peacekeeping and protection of civilians. António Guterres took a two-pronged approach. First, he leveraged his public diplomacy to build public support for climate action and public health goals, urging citizens to pressure their governments while using his platform to denounce leaders’ slow progress on climate goals and condemn selfish public health practices. Second, he used his private diplomacy to delegate peacemaking power to organizations and individuals whom he felt had greater independent scope for action than he did in a deeply divided political period.¹²

The next UNSG will have the opportunity to shore up support for multilateralism and global norms around peace, security, and human rights at a time when these arrangements and values are waning among many other powerful world actors, and will have to address these challenges at a time of deep fiscal crisis for the institution. The next UNSG’s role as chief diplomat is even more vital given the persistent gridlock in the UN Security Council (UNSC), notable transgressions of international humanitarian law and human rights law, new wars of aggression, and unprecedented global displacement, rising poverty in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising levels of hunger in the wake of conflict: No country has the capability or political will to solve any of these crises individually, but they collectively bear the cost of leaving them unaddressed—a less secure, more unwell, and more impoverished world. Meanwhile, the pressing problems of global climate change and future public health crises can *only* be resolved collectively, making the UNSG’s key role organizing and advocating for international cooperation more vital than ever before. In fractured times marked by globalized problems, an advocate for the shared international interest serves as an especially important counterweight to the competitive, isolationist, and violent policies that produce these problems.

The next UNSG, however, can only succeed as a *candidate* if powerful states do not believe he or she will interfere in their foreign policy projects. Accordingly, strong candidates for the position will have an unusual profile: they must be forceful advocates for the values espoused in the UN Charter, able to speak as equals to the heads of state alongside whom they must work, yet deft enough to make their advocacy feel encouraging rather than threatening. They must also be strong administrators who can run complex bureaucracies with few resources and almost no enforcement capabilities. In the present political context, they should furthermore have a demonstrated ability to manage the chaos of shifting US allegiances and priorities alongside their own priorities and interests in conflict mediation. Finally, they should be able to speak meaningfully to the UN’s norms and values, harnessing enthusiasm for these norms and values among member states and civil society alike.

¹¹ Javier Pérez de Cuéllar in 1982, cited by M. Christiane Bourloyannis, “Fact-Finding by the Secretary-General of the United Nations,” *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 22, (4): 641-67, 647.

¹² Anjali Dayal, “How the U.N. Secretary-General Gets Around Security Council Gridlock,” United States Institute of Peace, 12 July 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/how-un-secretary-general-gets-around-security-council-gridlock>

2.

The Political Context of the Next UNSG's Election

The UN Secretary-General is appointed by the UN General Assembly on the recommendation of the UN Security Council.¹³ Any potential Secretary-General must therefore first curry the favor of the most powerful member states in the UN system, as candidates must clear the UNSC with nine votes—including all five of the permanent members (P5)—and then must also be broadly acceptable to a majority of UN member states. This two-stage process means a successful UNSG candidate must first survive vetting by the UNSC before gaining the UNGA's approval. Historically, this has produced a consensus candidate who strives to balance fidelity to the institution's values and goals with the preferences of the UNSC's P5 members, without whose support the UNSG can neither be elected nor run the organization successfully.

This is a uniquely difficult balancing act today. The selection process for the next UNSG will unfold against an especially fraught political background, with multilateral systems in general and the UN in particular facing some of the greatest challenges in their history. Four sets of challenges are particularly likely to shape the next UNSG's selection process: (1) At least two permanent members of the UN Security Council are actively and vocally violating central tenets of the UN Charter; (2) US foreign policy under the Trump administration has transformed the United States from a key underwriter of the UN system to a risk generator for every dimension of multilateralism; (3) A massive funding crisis downstream of these shifts in US foreign policy threatens the UN's ability to do its most basic work; (4) This work is more necessary than ever as the UN is tasked with managing unprecedented levels of displacement, a growing number of intractable conflicts and the attendant humanitarian disasters, rising hunger and poverty, and the specters of climate change and public health crises. The first three challenges are rooted in the P5's political dynamics, with consequences for everyone; the fourth arises from complex political dynamics across the world, but can only be addressed by revitalizing multilateralism.

Undermining the UN Charter. From Cold War candidate selections to Antonio Guterres' election amidst the Syrian Civil War and after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, previous secretary-general races have been shadowed by gridlock between the P5 at the UNSC. This race for the next UNSG, however, will take place not just in the midst of fundamental disagreements between the P5, but amidst efforts by some of the P5 to undermine the UN Charter's fundamental principles.

At its core, the UN Charter is a pact to outlaw aggressive warfare and affirm each member state's sovereign equality and territorial integrity.¹⁴ This core principle is grounded in the Charter's urgent call to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, and helps explain how a single global body can serve both as a forum for the great power politics of the five permanent Security Council members and as a post-colonial stage on which newly independent states take their place as equals alongside their former imperial overlords.¹⁵ Although the UN as we know it today has other key functions and features, its role in underwriting the contemporary international order of equal, sovereign states enables every other part of its work.

Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, subsequent to its 2014 annexation of Crimea, undermines this foundational principle by violating both the Charter's prohibition against aggressive war and Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The most serious previous violation of the Charter's core principles in the post-Cold War period, the US invasion of Iraq, took place during Kofi Annan's second term as UNSG. In that case, however, the US government first asked for UNSC authorization to invade Iraq on the grounds that Iraq was violating previous UNSC resolutions and constituted a threat to international peace and security—a strange nod to some parts of the UN's legitimacy, because, having failed to receive authorization, the US invaded Iraq in violation of the Charter anyway.¹⁶ Similarly, the US under the first Trump administration justified its 2017 and 2018 bombings of Syrian

¹³ United Nations Charter, Chapter XV, Article 97.

¹⁴ Oona Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 2017; Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

¹⁵ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

¹⁶ Alexander Thompson, *Channels of Power: The United Nations Security Council and U.S. Statecraft in Iraq*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

military targets without UNSC authorization by drawing on alternative sources of international law, pointing to Syria's violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention.¹⁷

Russia has not drawn on any alternative body of international law or other UNSC resolutions to justify its invasions of Ukraine.¹⁸ Under the Biden administration, the US and its European allies helped shore up global support among the UN's broader membership, whose concern about Ukraine's sovereignty reflected their own primary commitment to the UN Charter's prohibition of territorial acquisition by force.¹⁹ Waning support in the Global South for Ukraine-focused resolutions at the UNGA seems to reflect discomfort over how Ukraine's conflict has crowded out other concerns, rather than signifying waning support for Ukraine's territorial integrity itself.²⁰ Today, however, under the second Trump presidency, although Russia remains globally isolated, the US's ambiguous behavior, taken alongside Russia's efforts to normalize seizing territory by force, strengthens Russia in its opposition to Ukrainian sovereignty.²¹

This realignment at the UNSC represents a new coalition *against the core principles of the UN Charter*. Yet these core principles remain popular with the French, UK, and Chinese governments, all of whom also have a definitive say in the selection process. A divided council is not a new backdrop to the UNSG's election—every Cold War UNSG was selected with the US and USSR fundamentally at odds over their vision for international politics. Even division among the P3—the UK, the US, and France, who have so often voted together as a liberal democratic bloc—is not unprecedented: Boutros Boutros-Ghali's ouster after a single term and Kofi Annan's selection as his successor were influenced by US-French friction over who should be UNSG.²² This particular great power coalition constitutes a new kind of backdrop to the UNSG's election. On the one hand, political and economic tensions between the US and China make straightforward emergence of an authoritarian bloc unlikely, while the UK, France, and China all currently approach the UNSC with a more institutionalist style than Russia and the US. On the other hand, Russia, China, and the US already constitute an

emerging bloc among the P5 willing to reject or contest individual rights, innovations concerning protection of civilians policies and understandings of gender or women, peace, and security. This produces a more unpredictable selection process than familiar Cold War divisions.

→ A successful candidate must first survive the P5 selection round, followed by an UNGA vote. Candidates for the next UNSG may therefore find themselves confronting a political landscape in which the US and Russia agree on violating core Charter provisions, while the other permanent members of the UNSC *and* the UN's broader membership maintain a firm commitment to territorial integrity and sovereign non-intervention.

The United States as Risk Generator. This shift on Ukraine, of course, reflects a broader transformative shift within US foreign policy. For the last eighty years, the United States has been the United Nations' key underwriter, serving as both host country and largest contributor (\$13 billion in 2023, more than a quarter of the UN's budget).²³ The US has also been ideologically aligned with the UN from its inception—the UN's founding principles are cast in the same liberal model as the US's founding principles, highlighting the rights of individuals, celebrating democratic modes of politics—and investing in the UN has in turn underwritten US global influence by promoting an international political and legal order that has disproportionately benefited the US. Yet the current US administration explicitly does not subscribe to the liberal, democratic, or internationalist principles that have previously characterized US foreign policy rhetoric in its engagement with the UN.

Instead, the US government's new core principles, as outlined in Project 2025, the policy agenda and transition plan that has guided much of the second Trump presidential term, as evidenced in its first few months of foreign policy choices, advance an inward-looking, autarkic, autocratic, ethnonationalist, and hierarchical vision of society. All of this sits at odds with the vision of equality of all people and equality for all states enshrined in the UN Charter and in human rights

17 S/PV.7919 (2017); Delivered remarks at UN Security Council Briefing on Chemical Weapons Use in Syria., Ambassador Nikki Haley, 4 April 2018, <https://2009-2017-usun.state.gov/highlights/8366.html>.

18 Anjali Dayal, "Russia believes tanks trump international law. Smaller countries like Kenya are using the U.N. to push back," *The Washington Post*, 26 February 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/26/russia-believes-tanks-trump-international-law-smaller-countries-like-kenya-are-using-un-push-back/>; S/PV.8974 (2022).

19 GA/12407 (2022).

20 Jonathan Chang and Meghna Chakrabarti, "Behind the Global South's hesitancy to criticize Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *On Point*, WBUR, July 31, 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2023/07/31/behind-the-global-souths-hesitancy-to-criticize-russias-invasion-of-ukraine>.

21 Security Council Report, "In Hindsight: The US Pivot on Ukraine and Shifting Security Council Dynamics." 1 March 2025, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-03/in-hindsight-the-us-pivot-on-ukraine-and-shifting-security-council-dynamics.php>.

22 Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *Unvanquished: A US-UN Saga*. New York: Random House, 1999; Kofi Annan and Nader Mousavizadeh, *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace*. New York: Penguin, 2013.

23 "Funding the United Nations: How Much Does the U.S. Pay?" Council on Foreign Relations, 28 February 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/funding-united-nations-what-impact-do-us-contributions-have-un-agencies-and-programs>.

treaties and agreements under the UN umbrella.²⁴ Project 2025 emphasizes the UNSC's centrality for US foreign policy. Coupled with an à la carte²⁵ approach to the rest of the UN, this suggests that the US will not abandon the UN entirely. Instead, the US will continue to use its seat on the UNSC to shape international peace and security while either abandoning or upending other parts of the UN system. At UN Headquarters, in public forums, and committee meetings, the new administration has pushed back against long-running UN initiatives the US once championed, from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to the Women, Peace, and Security agenda,²⁶ raising objections about any language that gestures at equality. These ideological shifts, paired with the US's dramatic cuts to its foreign aid—cuts that have terminated an estimated 211 awards to UN humanitarian and development programs that the US has traditionally underwritten²⁷—have transformed the US from a guarantor of the UN system into a risk generator for the institution.

This altered political context will not necessarily torpedo all the UN's major projects and goals. The recent Pandemic Agreement,²⁸ a new global framework on preparing for, responding to, and preventing future pandemics, for example, shows us how multilateralism can look in the absence of US involvement—but the new political context may transform multilateralism meaningfully in ways that will shape the next UNSG's selection and tenure. There are at least three possible scenarios that may emerge as a shift in US priorities reshapes multilateralism. First, in some situations, as in the example above, the US may merely step back while other member states step forward and attempt to fill the funding or leadership gaps left by the US's absence. Such comparatively straightforward scenarios may even leave open the possibility for new kinds of arrangements that speak more meaningfully to the Global South's interests, as with the Pandemic Treaty. In this situation, major private-sector or civil society organizations within the US might continue to participate in multilateral arrangements, as we saw after the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement during the first Trump presidency.²⁹

A second scenario might involve the US pivoting from a broadly liberal democratic coalition of states to instead vote alongside conservative autocracies. The result could be a shift in norms and practices surrounding particular kinds of UN programs focused on gender or rights or sexuality, for example, or might entail working with conservative theocracies to bar certain kinds of civil society organizations from attending UN events.³⁰ This second possibility is one the UN has already experienced, albeit to a less extreme degree, during George W. Bush's presidency.

The third scenario might involve the US actively seeking to destabilize existing arrangements in some realms of UN activity, such as the SDGs, or senior leadership appointments, by tactically restricting or withholding funding and attempting to dismantle programs and initiatives. These would be more difficult strategic situations, because other member states and the UN leadership would need to counter the US's destructive efforts while also filling the funding and strategic gaps the US leaves in its wake.

Considering all these potential scenarios, the US's new role as risk generator at the UN makes the process of selecting the next UNSG more politically fraught and more complicated than previous selection processes:

- Candidates will have to be acceptable to the US, because the US can blackball any candidate, but *also* acceptable to every other UNSC permanent member *and* to a majority of other UN member states. To take an example, the two-stage selection process requires a candidate whose views on the Paris Agreement would not disqualify them in the eyes of the US, but *also* requires a candidate who is not antagonistic to the Paris Agreement, as that would disqualify them for the bulk of the UN's other member states.
- For UN member states concerned with ensuring the organization's survival and safeguarding its central principles, one way to think about the selection process is to try and keep it within either the first or second set of scenarios: The US either pulling back and letting other states take the lead, or the US believing its lot is in coalition with

24 Mark Leon Goldberg, "What Project 2025 Says About the United Nations," *To Save Us From Hell*, 31 July 2024, <https://www.globaldispatches.org/p/what-project-2025-says-about-the-5cb>.

25 Jose E. Alvarez, "Legal Remedies and the United Nations' À La Carte Problem," *Michigan Journal of International Law*, 12 (2): 1991.

26 "Remarks at the UN meeting entitled 58th Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly," Edward Heartney, US Minister Counselor to ECOSOC, New York, March 4, 2025, <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-the-un-meeting-entitled-58th-plenary-meeting-of-the-general-assembly/>; "Scoop: Trump admin opposes UN commitment to broaden women's peace role: U.S. negotiators also seek to remove references to disinformation, gender, and international law in the U.N. peacekeeping agreement," Colum Lynch, 25 February 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/scoop-trump-admin-opposes-un-commitment-to-broaden-women-s-peace-role-109495>.

27 Allison Lombardo, "USAID Cuts Weaken U.S. Influence at the United Nations," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 May 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/usaids-cuts-weaken-us-influence-united-nations>.

28 "World Health Assembly adopts historic Pandemic Agreement to make the world more equitable and safer from future pandemics," 20 May 2025, <https://www.who.int/news/item/20-05-2025-world-health-assembly-adopts-historic-pandemic-agreement-to-make-the-world-more-equitable-and-safer-from-future-pandemics>.

29 Angel Hsu and Amy Weinfurter, "All Climate Politics Is Local: After Trump's Paris Withdrawal, Subnational Groups Have Stepped Up," *Foreign Affairs*, 24 September 2018.

30 Rana Siu Inboden, "China at the UN: Choking Civil Society," *Journal of Democracy*, July 2021, 32 (3): 124-135.

other conservative member states. Helping the UN survive requires avoiding a situation in which the US views its role as actively attempting to destabilize the organization.

This likely advantages candidates with a low public profile on key contentious issues on which the US disagrees with other permanent members of the Security Council and with most of the UN's member states. It also likely favors candidates who can find ways of talking about human rights that draw on the language of family or religious freedom without disavowing the core principles of those rights—a tricky proposition, but one which may package individual rights in ways that are palatable to conservative governments. It privileges candidates who can speak about UN reform in ways that appeal to multiple audiences. It may even advantage candidates from countries that the US perceives to be friendly, regardless of the candidate's actual views.

Massive Funding Shortfalls. These rapid shifts in US foreign policy have also helped precipitate a massive liquidity crisis at the UN. The race for the next UNSG has accordingly shifted from one in which questions of climate, public health, and financing for development loomed large toward one that is, as Richard Gowan has put it, about “doing less with less.”³¹

Funding shortfalls have shadowed Guterres' entire tenure as UNSG, but the shortfall has become existential as the US freeze on foreign aid spending compounds existing funding gaps. Member states agreed on a regular 2024 budget for the UN of \$3.72 billion³² and a 2024-2025 peacekeeping budget of \$5.6 billion.³³ However, many member states are in arrears—per *UN News*, with “\$2.4 billion in unpaid regular budget dues and \$2.7 billion in peacekeeping—the UN has been forced to cut spending, freeze hiring, and scale back some services.”³⁴ There is simply no way to run an organization with this kind of budget shortfall and Guterres has pitched rationalization, reorganization, and retrenchment as a way of marking the UN's eightieth anniversary. The UN80 Initiative aims to reorganize the UN toward sustainability in the face of projected fiscal austerity,³⁵ with early stages of proposals—to be agreed upon in September, at UNGA's High Level meetings—suggesting everything from a fundamental reorganization of the UN's work into four “megaclusters” with extremely streamlined workforces to consolidating the

mandates the Secretariat must fulfill or letting expensive leases in New York and Geneva run out and moving as many operations as possible to less expensive cities.³⁶

Moving beyond the regular budget, agencies funded via voluntary contributions, which often counted the US as either the top contributor or among the most significant, have seen massive hits to their operational budgets due to the Trump administration's cuts to foreign aid. The World Food Program (WFP), for example, is the largest organization fighting hunger worldwide; last year, nearly half its funds came from the US. This year, its leadership projects a 40% reduction in available funding, which the WFP estimates will necessitate cutting 6,000 jobs or around 25% to 30% of its workforce. By far the biggest consequence, however, is the constraints this imposes on where the WFP can operate and how much food it can distribute to some of the most vulnerable people in the world.³⁷ The United Refugee Agency (UNHCR), meanwhile, planned for a 30% reduction in costs, including closing country offices and pulling back on work in the field; the cuts, UNCHR head Filippo Grandi wrote to staff, “will affect our operations, the size of our organization, and, most worryingly, the very people we are called to protect.”³⁸

The selection process for the next UNSG will dovetail with these efforts to ensure the UN's survival in conditions of fiscal austerity and reduced capacity.

- Candidates are likely to be asked for their perspectives on the major proposed reforms to the organization and are likely to face questions from member states whose favored agencies, projects or initiatives may fall by the wayside in proposed reorganizations.
- Candidates for the next UNSG must therefore have a plan for managing a smaller organization that will be asked to make *do with less*, even though they are unlikely to be asked to *do less*.
- Indeed, funding crises do not necessarily make an austerity-minded candidate most attractive—while the P5, given their political preferences, are likely to privilege a candidate who can at least speak the language of lowered costs, the UN originally emerged as “a version of postwar

31 Richard Gowan, “Doing ‘Less with Less’ at the UN,” International Crisis Group, 16 May 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global-united-states/doing-less-with-less-un>.

32 Vibhu Mishra, “General Assembly approves \$3.72 billion UN budget for 2025,” *UN News*, 25 December 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158531>.

33 A/C.5/78/34 (2024)

34 “UN faces deepening financial crisis, urges members to pay up,” *UN News*, 19 May 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/05/1163436>.

35 “Guterres prioritizes reform at ‘UN80 Initiative’ launch,” 13 March 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/delegate/guterres-prioritizes-reform-un80-initiative-launch>.

36 Michelle Langrand, “UN80 or bust: Will Guterres' radical reform gamble pay off?” *Geneva Solutions*, 4 May 2025, <https://genevasolutions.news/global-news/un80-or-bust-will-guterres-radical-reform-gamble-pay-off>.

37 Gabriel Spitzer, “Feeding the hungry will be harder than ever for the world's largest food aid agency,” *NPR*, 6 May 2025, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goats-and-soda/2025/05/06/g-s1-64385/world-food-programme-famines-hunger-aid-cuts>.

38 Ayenat Mersie, “UN Refugee Agency to close some offices as donors cut funding,” *DevEx*, 28 April 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/un-refugee-agency-to-close-some-offices-as-donors-cut-funding-109937>.

internationalism premised on a kind of New Deal for the world,” conceived by Franklin Roosevelt and its other framers as a great power pact married to a social democratic model of aggressive spending to counteract global economic deprivation.³⁹

- There may be space for creative candidates who can envision this fiscal crisis as an opportunity for institutional reinvigoration.

Growing Crises around the World. Creative efforts will be especially important because demand for the UN’s work grows even as the financial pressures on the UN’s areas of work escalate. UN agencies today must try to respond to unprecedented levels of displacement;⁴⁰ post-COVID-19 reversals in progress toward lowering global hunger and poverty levels;⁴¹ deadly conflicts in Gaza, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yemen, South Sudan, and Ukraine, with accompanying humanitarian disasters; humanitarian need in Afghanistan; and the pressures of coordinating political action and collective responses to climate change and public health, among other crises.⁴²

There are almost no unilateral solutions to any of these problems. While Guterres’s tenure has been marked by a comparatively smaller political role for the Secretariat in conflict mediation and a comparatively larger role on climate-related and public health diplomacy, each of these pressing global concerns requires the skillful diplomacy of a leader who places the collective international interest—and people’s rights—above the narrow national interests of any individual member state.

In an increasingly multipolar world, with growing risks of international conflict, even states largely committed to international norms and multilateralism are withdrawing from some international arrangements. In their joint statement recommending withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention banning anti-personnel landmines, for example,⁴³ Latvia, Estonia, Finland, and Poland’s defense ministers wrote, “Military threats to NATO member states bordering Russia and Belarus have significantly increased...With this decision we are sending a

clear message: our countries are prepared and can use every necessary measure to defend our security needs.”⁴⁴

This kind of rollback is explicable from a security perspective and yet comes at a cost to civilians worldwide. It also comes with a cost to shared norms and values about civilian protection and the regulating war that have characterized the UN’s approach to international peace and security since the Cold War. It follows member states’ reinvestment in the idea of the United Nations—last year’s Summit of the Future and Pact for the Future reaffirmed that its member states *want* the UN to be a vibrant new force fit for new challenges, and that they are ready for a renewed multilateralism fit for purpose in the twenty-first century.⁴⁵ In that context, the UNSG’s normative role becomes even more pressing. As a key advocate for the protection of civilians in war, international humanitarian law, and the shared responsibilities of states to peoples, the UNSG may face diplomatic challenges from even sympathetic states when it comes to defending and fostering these values. This is also, however, a real opportunity: given the demonstrated commitment of member-states to a reinvigorated UN system, projects to reforming the institution significantly may have some chance of success. There is also, however, an opportunity; given member states’ demonstrated commitment to a reinvigorated UN system, projects to reform the institution may have some real chance of success.

- States concerned with upholding shared ideas about international peace and security, as well as those concerned with making collective efforts to manage climate change, should arrange multiple low-profile public briefings with many different constituencies to enable both transparency and careful vetting for candidates without generating too much backlash from actors hostile to the UN’s core values and shared agreements.⁴⁶
- Candidates with ideas for reforming the institution in line with the Pact for the Future can highlight how their plans appeal to both those who want a reinvigorated United Nations *and* those who want to push the organization toward fiscal austerity.

39 Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present*. New York: Penguin, 2013, p. 197.

40 UNHCR Global Trends 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>.

41 Carolina Sánchez-Páramo, Ruth Hill, Daniel Gerszon Mahler, Ambar Narayan, and Nishant Yonzan, “COVID-19 leaves a legacy of rising poverty and widening inequality,” *Let’s Talk Development* (World Bank Blogs), 7 October 2021, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/developmenttalk/covid-19-leaves-legacy-rising-poverty-and-widening-inequality>.

42 “Ten Challenges for the UN in 2024-2025,” International Crisis Group Special Briefing No. 12, 10 September 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb12-ten-challenges-un-2024-2025>.

43 Elena Bertozzi, “The Return of Landmines: A Symbol of Eroding Global Norms,” *PassBlue*, 16 April 2025, <https://www.passblue.com/2025/04/16/the-return-of-landmines-a-symbol-of-eroding-global-norms/>.

44 “Baltic and Polish defence ministers recommend withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention,” Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Defense, 18 March 2025, <https://kaitseministeerium.ee/en/news/baltic-and-polish-defence-ministers-recommend-withdrawal-ottawa-convention>.

45 A/RES/79/1.

46 “Ten Challenges for the UN in 2024-2025,” International Crisis Group Special Briefing No. 12, 10 September 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb12-ten-challenges-un-2024-2025>.

3.

Navigating the Selection Process

Diplomatic practice has established regional rotation among UNSG officeholders and, while this practice has sometimes varied from a strict sequence, Latin America's candidates are next in line for the office in this selection cycle. Moreover, after eighty years of all men Secretaries-General, the last two election cycles have featured sustained campaigns from civil society and member states alike to appoint the first woman SG. This makes Latin American women the most likely pool of candidates for the next UNSG.⁴⁷

While the historical moment demands a transformative, creative, and brave UNSG, the political environment will likely select for candidates who present their most anodyne face to the public—but there may nonetheless be opportunities to fulfill both briefs. The deeply divided UNSC's selection of Javier Pérez de Cuéllar in 1982, at a volatile moment in the Cold War, serves as an instructive historical example. A career diplomat who was described as “everyone's last choice” for UNSG, Pérez de Cuéllar won the office after a six-week deadlock at the end of the sixteenth ballot. He had not campaigned for the office, but was ultimately what one delegate described as “the least objectionable” candidate. In his two terms, he went on to help end the war between Iran and Iraq, broker the end of conflicts in Cambodia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, oversee Namibia's independence, and secure the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, among other things.⁴⁸ While the closed-door, smoky-room secrecy of his selection rightly belongs to a different era, his demonstrated fidelity to the values of the UN Charter before selection, his willingness to engage in high-stakes diplomacy personally, and the consensus nature of his candidacy likely underwrote much of his success.

From today's perspective, changed values and norms mean the P5 alone cannot merely step into a back room and eventually pull a quiet Peruvian woman diplomat out of a hat.

Instead, finding a candidate who can survive the selection process and do transformative work may require building coalitions to nominate candidates jointly; remaining mindful about the many audiences that candidates will need to address; and balancing that mindfulness with transparency. This may entail extending the selection process to include widely broadcast public meetings with civil society, member states, and UN staff as well as rounds of closed-door Chatham House Rule meetings with many stakeholders, not just the P5. In a highly polarized time, when the UN is an active target for its key funders, there is a real challenge in balancing the meaningful vetting every candidate should face with the imperative for transparency that should characterize the UN's work.

The last two selection cycles have been explicitly more structured and transparent than previous UNSG selections, with reforms formally adopted by UNGA and put into place for the first time in 2016. These procedural transformations aimed to break with the secret elite-pact style of decision-making that had produced previous UNSG candidates and to involve other constituencies—including UNGA and civil society—more formally in the process.⁴⁹ The reforms include identifying an official start point for the process, a call for candidates, publication of candidates' names, vision statements and hearings at UNGA for each candidate, followed by informal UNSC discussions, civil society and media participation, and addresses, questionnaires, and events to interrogate candidates' priorities. These reforms were further consolidated during the selection process preceding Guterres's second term and include formal language that leaves open possibilities for states to nominate a candidate jointly, for states to work with civil society to identify and nominate a diverse slate of candidates, and for states to consider the unbroken pattern of male UNSGs when nominating candidates.⁵⁰ Reform advocates argue that a more transparent,

⁴⁷ Pía Riggiozzi, “The Next UN Secretary-General? Latin America, Gender Equity, and the Fault Lines of Global Governance,” United Nations University-Institution on Comparative Regional Integration Studies Connecting Ideas Blog, 16 May 2025, <https://cris.unu.edu/next-un-secretary-general-latin-america-gender-equity-and-fault-lines-global-governance>.

⁴⁸ Robert D. McFadden, “Javier Pérez de Cuéllar Dies at 100; U.N. Chief Brokered Peace Pacts,” *The New York Times*, 4 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/04/obituaries/javier-perez-de-cuellar-dead.html>; Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, *Pilgrimage for Peace: A Secretary General's Memoir*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997.

⁴⁹ Natalie Samarasinghe, “The Next UN Secretary-General Must Be a Woman Plus a Feminist,” *PassBlue*, 19 September 2024, <https://www.passblue.com/2024/09/19/the-next-un-secretary-general-must-be-a-woman-and-a-feminist/>.

⁵⁰ Ben Donaldson, “The appointment of the UN Secretary-General and other executive heads: opportunities for reform,” UNA-UK, June 2023, available at https://bluesmoke.blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/the_un_secretary-general_and_other_executive_heads_opportunities_for_reform.pdf.

more publicly engaged selection process produces more support and legitimacy for the UNSG in the long run.

Critically, reform advocates, while acknowledging that the P5 maintain a de facto lock on the actual selection process,⁵¹ also note that the UNSC may not be able to produce a consensus candidate this time.⁵² In a non-paper laying out its negotiating position, the ACT (Accountability, Coherence and Transparency of the UN Security Council) group of twenty-seven countries argued that UNGA, “as the main, most democratic, and representative body of the organization should reassert [its] primacy” in the UNSG’s selection, because the UNGA “is the only body with the power to appoint”—the Charter invites the UNSC to make a recommendation only.⁵³ Reformers, including some regional blocs and the 1 for 8 Billion Campaign, further encourage the UNSC to nominate two or more candidates for the UNGA’s consideration.⁵⁴ The draft resolution that the Ad Hoc Working Group (AHWG) on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly is currently considering would also dramatically reform the election for SG. The changes it proposes include limiting the SG’s time in office to one non-renewable seven-year term, and calling on UNGA’s President to convene a candidate town hall of member states and civil society with ECOSOC observer status; the UNSC to make its internal deliberations more transparent and public; and UNGA to hold interactive sessions with candidates recommended by the UNSC.⁵⁵ These proposed reforms distribute decision-making power between the UNSC and the UNGA and open the door for a process that reflects the will of more member states and civil society.

The hard-right turn in US foreign policy, however, brings with it additional complications to these carefully considered recommendations from coalitions of member states and civil society groups. First, while the move towards a more transparent selection process has been vital, one challenge will be ensuring that transparent processes do not attract the attention of a far-right media environment that will frame candidates with values consonant with the UN Charter as radical extremists and torpedo the candidacies of potentially

excellent leaders by mobilizing US domestic constituencies otherwise uninterested in the UNSG. One way to manage this issue may be to adopt a mediated approach to transparency. This could involve opting to “quietly sound out candidates’ views,” as the International Crisis Group put it,⁵⁶ in smaller Chatham House Rule sessions with broad groups of member states and civil society groups, and then, as reformers suggest, having broad coalitions of multilaterally-minded states—including permanent Security Council members—nominate a candidate or candidates jointly. The strategy here would be to keep the issue of UNSG selection in the category of situations that the US deems unimportant, or in the category of situations where the US believes it can join friendly countries in supporting a candidate whom they have no strong objection to—and to keep UNSG selection out of the category of situations in which the US actively seeks to upend the organization.

Second, because the P5 ultimately retain a lock on the referral process, the turn in US foreign policy has real consequences for aspirations toward a woman UNSG, especially one with explicitly feminist goals. Given the dramatic funding shortfall that US policy has produced for the UN, appointing a woman as the next UNSG now looks less like breaking through a glass ceiling and more like pushing someone onto a glass cliff—a phenomenon in which organizations in crisis are more likely to choose women leaders, with often difficult consequences for the women leaders themselves.⁵⁷ The Trump administration is also actively hostile to any policy platform that takes equity or equal representation as its baseline and is likely to reject any efforts to appoint a woman because she is a woman. Surprisingly, President Trump is not hostile to placing women in positions of power. In this context, the hard-right turn in US foreign policy may actually make selection of a woman candidate *more* likely—but women candidates and their backers may unfortunately be well-served by not highlighting questions of representation or the historic natures of their candidacies, focusing instead on other substantive aspects of their platforms and downplaying their feminist bona fides. There may be some possibility that a new P3 of China, Russia, and the US could agree on

51 Natalie Samarasinghe, “The Next UN Secretary-General Must Be a Woman Plus a Feminist,” *PassBlue*, 19 September 2024, <https://www.passblue.com/2024/09/19/the-next-un-secretary-general-must-be-a-woman-and-a-feminist/>.

52 Ben Donaldson, “The appointment of the UN Secretary-General and other executive heads: opportunities for reform,” UNA-UK, June 2023, available at https://bluesmoke.blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/the_appointment_of_the_un_secretary-general_and_other_executive_heads_opportunities_for_reform.pdf.

53 “ACT’s 2025 Non-Paper on the selection and appointment of the Secretary-General and Executive Heads of the United Nations,” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5399cc0ae4b0705199b37aa3/t/67cf358dbaebd41d461937f/1741091672321/250220-New-York-ACT-NonPaper-SG-Selection+%284%29.pdf>.

54 Ben Donaldson, “The appointment of the UN Secretary-General and other executive heads: opportunities for reform,” UNA-UK, June 2023, available at https://bluesmoke.blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/the_appointment_of_the_un_secretary-general_and_other_executive_heads_opportunities_for_reform.pdf; “1 for 8 Billion discussion paper for the meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly on 20 February 2025,” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5399cc0ae4b0705199b37aa3/t/67af3f98c1e1821190a61e54/1739538329333/1+for+8+Billion+Discussion+Paper+and+Recommendations+for+the+79th+Session+of+the+General+Assembly++Feb+2025.pdf>.

55 AHWG Co-Chairs, “Draft resolution on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly,” UNGA79.

56 “Ten Challenges for the UN in 2024-2025,” International Crisis Group Special Briefing No. 12, 10 September 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb12-ten-challenges-un-2024-2025>.

57 Susanne Bruckmüller and Nyla R. Branscombe, “The glass cliff: When and why women are selected as leaders in crisis contexts,” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, (2010), 49: 433–451. <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466609X466594>

putting forward a pro-autocracy, anti-feminist woman for an UNGA vote. In this context, member states eager to see a feminist woman Secretary-General take office may find it useful to nominate women for the position without emphasizing their gender, and to present multiple candidates to UNGA for its consideration, centering UNGA as a co-equal locus of selection.

Finally, these shifts may require extending the timeline for the selection process to accommodate more rounds of public and private vetting, with a particular eye toward coalition building during the largest convenings of the year at UNHQ. The UNSC and UNGA Presidents might consider jointly encouraging nominations from qualified candidates as early as High-Level Week in September 2025, closing nominations after the March 2026 meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women—the next-largest gathering at UNHQ—and subsequently extending UNGA hearings with all candidates through High-Level Week in 2026. Even with all these reforms and this timeline, there is a risk that a divided UNSC may not reach consensus on a candidate until November or December 2026.

Taken together, the 2026 selection of the next UNSG, in the UN's momentous eightieth year, is a singular opportunity for member states to shore up support for multilateralism, for the UN's core principles, and for global norms around peace, security, and human rights, even as support for these arrangements and values is fading in many national capitals, and even as active antagonism from some powerful member states crystallizes a fiscal crisis so dire it threatens the UN's core functions. The selection process also unfolds amidst real and meaningful efforts to make its procedures more transparent, systematic, and democratic, and to elevate a woman to the UNSG's role—but also in a political context that requires balancing transparency against drawing too much attention from a right-wing misinformation media machine. Any successful candidate will need to survive the UNSC's vetting amidst the hard-right turn in US politics that realigns the politics of P5 voting while also being faithful enough to the UN's core values to receive a majority of other member states' votes. In this context, low-profile candidates who know how to speak persuasively about the UN's core values to many constituencies are most likely to survive a vetting process, and member states who build coalitions to nominate candidates together, or agree to present multiple candidates to the UNGA for its consideration, are most likely to advance candidates who can survive that vetting process.

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Who Can Lead a Disarrayed World?

The 2026 selection of the next United Nations Secretary-General presents the UN's member states with a singular opportunity to bolster support for multilateralism, for the UN's core principles, and for shared values about peace, security, and human rights, even as support for these arrangements, principles, and values wanes across national capitals, and even as the UN faces a funding crisis so profound it threatens the UN's core functions.

The selection process unfolds against two political backdrops that run at cross-purposes in some ways: (1) a political context in which the hard right turn in US politics has realigned the UN Security Council and transformed the US from the UN's key underwriter to a risk generator for the UN; and (2) real and meaningful efforts to make the selection process more transparent, systematic, and democratic, and to elevate a woman to the UNSG's role. The two-step selection process for the office requires any successful candidate for the position to first gain the approval of the UNSC and subsequently of the UN General Assembly, producing a consensus candidate who can survive the UNSC's vetting while still receiving a majority of other member states' votes.

In this context, low-profile candidates who know how to speak persuasively about the UN's core values to many kinds of constituencies are most likely to survive a vetting process where transparency is balanced against drawing too much attention from a right-wing misinformation media machine, and member-states may find it useful to build coalitions to nominate candidates together, or to agree to present multiple candidates to UNGA for their consideration.

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