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SWP Comment

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Germany and Namibia as Co-leads for the United Nations

Chances and challenges on the road to the 2024 UN Summit of the Future

Marianne Beisheim and Silke Weinlich

The President of the United Nations General Assembly has appointed the German and Namibian permanent representatives as co-facilitators for the Summit of the Future. The summit is scheduled for September 2024. Its aim is to reinforce the UN and global governance structures to better address old and new challenges. That includes making progress on implementing the sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030. Given the current geopolitical tensions, this will be no easy task. At this juncture it is important to get the process off to a good start in order to gather support, generate attention and engender confidence.

In the course of the commemorations of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations in September 2020, the member states asked Secretary-General António Guterres to prepare “recommendations to advance our common agenda and to respond to current and future challenges”. When Guterres presented his report in September 2021, its title “Our Common Agenda” precisely reflected that request.

The goal is to strengthen multilateralism to tackle current and future problems, to improve responses to global shocks and crises, and to step up protection of global public goods. That means enabling the UN to operate in a more networked and inclusive manner and to play a central role in global governance structures. The report lists about 90 proposals. Some of these are

already being implemented in the UN system, but most will require political and financial support from member states. The latter have been discussing the recommendations in the UN General Assembly since early 2022. While a “Pact for the Future” is to be concluded by 2024, it is hardly going to make the UN a capable manager of multiple crises overnight. But the organisation’s capacity to respond to crises can be greatly enhanced through actionable short- and medium-term measures and longer-term reform processes.

Heterogeneous interests

The inability of the UN Security Council to act on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has



exacerbated doubts over the institution's effectiveness. But the United Nations did reclaim a degree of political significance through the General Assembly votes condemning Russia, through the Mariupol evacuations and above all through the Black Sea Grain Initiative. The UN Secretary-General's ability to tap expertise from the UN system, the private sector and civil society to address humanitarian, developmental and logistical problems paved the way for a deal on grain and fertiliser exports.

That is precisely the kind of networked response that Guterres would like to see strengthened. But not all the member states want to expand the UN apparatus and the role of non-state actors. Both China and the Group of 77 (G77) criticise several of the Secretary-General's initiatives as premature. They point out that the United Nations is an *inter-governmental* organisation, where the member states have the last word. All the same, a considerable number of developing countries indicate interest in new ways of working. Many of the G77 states are pressing for solutions on debt relief, financial governance and development funding. The desire for change ranges across the long-standing demand to beef up the UN's economic and financial role; concrete measures for improving the access of low-income countries to urgently needed funding; and a broader reform of the international economic and financial institutions. This overlaps to some extent with the G7 initiative to improve the ability of the World Bank to tackle global challenges. But many industrialised countries also harbour strong reservations against granting the UN greater economic and financial powers.

So, all in all, the starting situation for the negotiations is anything but promising, as there is little agreement on what should be changed.

Processual complexity

In spring 2022 the UN General Assembly held five rounds of consultations on the report's proposals. Many member states still saw a need for clarification. Only on a handful of issues did a majority signal clear support – even if the official summary sounds more positive. To date only the negotiations on establishing a UN Youth Office have been brought to a conclusion.

A resolution adopted in September 2022 lays out modalities for the continuing process, with the Summit of the Future as its conclusion. The summit is scheduled for 22/23 September 2024 (pushed back a year at the request of many developing countries).

The German and Namibian permanent representatives, Antje Leendertse and Neville Gertze, will now lead the negotiations on preparing the summit. One of their most important tasks will be to identify by September 2023 the issues to be negotiated in 2024 for the Pact for Future. In early August 2022 the Secretary-General indicated which of the negotiating tracks he regarded as especially important and announced that he would publish a policy brief on each of these in the first half of 2023.

The tracks to date

A result has already been achieved on *Meaningful Youth Engagement* with the decision to establish the Youth Office. And intergovernmental negotiations are under way on the planned declaration on *Future Generations*. Currently the member states are working to agree on the key points, for which the representatives of Fiji and the Netherlands have circulated an elements paper.

Other topics of the future are on the agenda too. The track on a *Global Digital Compact* can build on prior consultations, and could now gain momentum under co-facilitators Rwanda and Sweden, with the support of the Secretary-General's new Envoy on Technology. In response to "fake

news” it is also planned to adopt a code of conduct for *greater integrity of public information*. Progress on global rules for the peaceful, safe and sustainable use of *outer space* is also envisaged.

It is currently unclear how the Secretary-General’s *New Agenda for Peace* is to be implemented. The expert debate concentrates on responding more effectively to old and new security risks and improving prevention, also by including regional partners. The African Union welcomes this, but believes that reforming the Security Council is at least as important.

While the intergovernmental process is expected to pick up speed soon, to date the discussions on certain reorganizations have remained largely within the UN Secretariat and other UN entities. Work has begun on a new standard for measuring prosperity (*Beyond GDP*). The Secretary-General is in discussions with the international financial institutions (*Reform IFIs*) and planning a first biennial summit with the G20, ECOSOC and the IFIs. Through his role in the Black Sea Grain Deal, Guterres has also demonstrated what his concept of an *Emergency Platform* means: not a new bureaucracy, but effective and networked action including relevant stakeholders. In order to develop further – concrete, ambitious and implementable – proposals in this direction he has established a *High-level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism*. It will publish its recommendations in spring 2023.

The ambassadors of Germany and Namibia now face the challenge of developing a vision that is both ambitious and realistic for these rather disparate topics. Many voices need to be heard and majorities built. In order to overcome entrenched divisions in New York, discussions could also be sought with national capitals and with plurilateral alliances like the G20. It would also be worth exploring whether the Alliance for Multilateralism could be transformed into a cross-regional group of friends that would support the co-facilitators in their work.

Tie the narrative to the SDGs

The first results of all these efforts are to be presented at a preparatory ministerial meeting in New York in September 2023, back to back with the SDG Summit. Both the Secretary-General and many member states want these two high-level meetings to be closely coordinated and synergetic.

The SDG Summit 2023

At the SDG Summit heads of state and government will come together to review progress on implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs (*mid-term review*). It was already apparent in 2022 that, unless the pressure and pace are increased, many goals will not be achievable by 2030. Making progress here is the summit’s second and main task. The Global Sustainable Development Report 2023 will supply proposals.

The UN Secretary-General describes “Our Common Agenda” as “a booster shot for the SDGs”. At the SDG Summit the member states could define the areas where they want to make progress (the *what*), while strengthening the multilateral capacities to do so (the *how*) at the Summit of the Future. Moreover, member states could decide to address gaps and new risks.

Beyond that, there is not yet a very well-developed understanding of how the changes that are being discussed in the various tracks will “turbocharge” the SDGs’ implementation. Those responsible for the two summits should work together to develop a convincing narrative complete with theories of change. Only then will it be possible to leverage the consensus on the SDGs to also achieve progress on UN reforms. One venue for that could be the General Committee, which General Assembly President Csaba Kőrösi has opened to all member states in order to coordinate the processes on all existing negotiating mandates.

Credible support for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, including concrete improvements in the area of development cooperation and financing, will be important – not least in order to rebuild trust in inter-

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national cooperation, which has taken a battering in many developing countries. Only then will it be possible to mobilise the necessary majorities in the various tracks. Germany will not achieve that on its own, but it can take the lead in the group of Western states. Namibia will need to work with the G77 and China to seek and develop areas of consensus.

Meaningful participation of civil society and other stakeholders

In his letter appointing the co-facilitators, Kőrösi called on them to “ensure that major groups and other stakeholders participate and engage meaningfully in the preparatory process”. In order for this to occur, a roadmap indicating when which topics are to be discussed and where the process is intended to lead should be tabled at an early stage. The discussions and negotiations themselves should be transparent and ideally broadcast via UN Web TV. Documents and statements should be accessible on the UN website.

A number of civil society groups have been closely following the processes around the UN's 75th anniversary and the Common Agenda report. Some of their proposals were taken up in the report. Certain groups advocate more ambitious reforms, such as revising the UN Charter, establishing a UN parliamentary assembly or a UN council for non-military threats. Other civil society actors are extremely critical of the report's so-called multi-stakeholderism, arguing that it undermines inter-governmental multilateralism and grants excessive influence to private-sector actors. All responsible for the process should invest in information activities in order to manage expectations, dispel fears and build the broadest possible coalition for capacitating the UN.

An opportunity to create a more proactive and capable UN

Germany and Namibia assume responsibility for a high-profile process that touches on central areas of the UN's work. The ministerial meeting in September 2023 provides for “an opportunity to address contemporary and emerging issues”, as the co-facilitators write in their recent letter. Secretary-General Guterres will brief member states about his preparations on February 13, including the upcoming series of policy briefs. On February 14, the co-facilitators will present their proposal for a roadmap for 2023. Further consultations with member states and with major groups and other stakeholders are planned soon afterwards. They will indicate the scope of the further negotiations and the level of ambition to aim for in both September 2023 and 2024.

The Summit of the Future offers a rare opportunity to bridge the considerable gap between the magnitude of the challenges the world is and will be facing and the agility and capacities of the UN to mount effective responses, partnering also with others to this end. Despite political differences, member states should recollect that a capable UN is in their best self-interest and seize the opportunity.

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