

What should leaders focus on during the United Nations General Assembly High-level week 2022 to help restore some popular trust in international collective action and multilateralism?

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Leaders will come together in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) High Level Week starting September 19 for both a *return* to diplomacy and a *test* of diplomacy.

At the last minute, the schedule for the meetings has been thrown into disarray by the death of the HM Queen Elizabeth II, with her funeral in London scheduled for September 19: this will draw attendance from many heads of state and governments and will mean that the earliest many leaders will arrive in New York for UNGA is the night of September 19-20

Nonetheless, these meetings offer the chance for a return to diplomacy because it will be the first high-level week in three years that approaches normal in-person attendance and meetings (although access to the United Nations [UN] building will still be restricted for all except diplomats and special invitees). Over 100 heads of state and 50 heads of government were confirmed, although it is not clear the extent to which this will change due to the UK funeral ceremonies. The current signals are that this will affect timings more than overall attendance: President Biden's speech for example will shift to Wednesday, September 20 instead of the traditional Tuesday address.

As for a test of diplomacy, this is because the sense last year that "things could hardly get worse," after 18 months of the pandemic, has proven to be an underestimation: the invasion of Ukraine has made the political, security, and socio-economic landscape considerably worse than it was in September 2021.

In these circumstances, what should leaders coming to the high-level week focus on? Here is a small selection of what we would hope to see transpire during high-level week:

Public Events

The public events are not the main test of the UNGA high level week's success: in fact, as our previous analysis has noted ([2020](#), [2021](#)), the decline in media coverage during COVID-19 is likely explained by the absence of the bilateral meetings, corridor encounters, and side events that make the high-level event the jewel in the crown of international meetings. Nonetheless, public events are important. The following is a short wish list of what could make this year's public events a success, against the benchmark of restoring some popular trust in international collective action:

- **General Assembly speeches.** Each world leader has the opportunity to address the General Assembly during the week. Normally, these speeches are set statements drafted long in advance of

September and meant primarily for a domestic audience. Thus, there is no pretense of leaders listening to each other, and besides for the interventions of a few high-profile leaders, the hall is generally empty except for low-ranking diplomatic staff from other countries. This year would be a chance to shift this pattern, particularly given the [extent of divided opinion](#) in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. Leaders could leave parts of their speeches less scripted, in order to respond to other statements (diplomats are an agile bunch and could recommend adaptations on the run). In what would be quite a departure from the norm, some leaders might actually comment constructively on the speeches of others from different regions in their own press conferences. People around the world [think](#) that their politicians do not listen enough: and while this generally means “do not listen to their own citizens,” a more listening and interactive mode at the UNGA would not necessarily be unpopular, given that people are also concerned about a rise in international tensions.

- **Public events on the over-riding anxieties of our time—global conflict and the food security and energy challenges.** This high-level week has only one formal summit, the [“Transformation Education Summit”](#) on September 16-19. Other high-level side events likely include a large number related to **climate**, several on **preventing violent extremism**, and several on the **rights of women and girls**. While these are all important issues, we hope there will also be a focus on action related to this year’s global anxieties at the forefront of everyone’s attention: **conflict**, and **cost-of-living increases** (focusing specifically on **food** and **energy**). Below are thoughts on what outcomes to look for.
 - *Practical outcomes from the many events on food and energy.* There are three major events on the food and energy crisis: a meeting of the secretary-general’s Global Crisis Response Group on September 21; a US-hosted follow up to their summit on food security on September 20; and a meeting convened by the African Union, European Union, and the [Leaders Network](#) on multilateralism and food security. These events are very timely and build on the credibility that the UN gained through the secretary-general’s role in the Odessa grain agreement. The key for these events, however, is that they show some practical action. One way of doing this is to look ahead to the October 2022 annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), which bring the heft of practical economic tools and instruments to bear. The UNGA high-level week is an opportunity to give political direction to these meetings—not dictating means but highlighting the urgency of solutions and the goals that should be central to economic action, and above all, providing greater certainty and relief to the poor and middle class around the world.
 - *Some public events on trends in conflict, human rights, and the rule of law.* Actual progress on the war in Ukraine and other geopolitical contestation will be made, if at all, in closed meetings and will likely focus on narrow issues such as the nuclear safety in the Zaporizhzhia plant. But it would be a shame if the public do not see any constructive discussion on resolution of conflicts, given how much this dominates the headlines. Some of the side events, such as the high-level event on the rights of national or ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities offer an opportunity to talk about conflict prevention through peaceful, just, and

inclusive societies. This should not focus on the Ukraine war (although minority rights were used by Russia as part of their justification for aggression) but should rather have a broader focus.

- **Forgotten political and humanitarian crises.** The UNGA is always an opportunity to hold meetings to pledge diplomatic responses and development assistance to crises around the world. This year, it would be particularly important that several serious side meetings about political and humanitarian crises around the world that risk being forgotten in the aftermath of Ukraine be organized, be it Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Sahel, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, or Yemen. Some of these are indeed already listed as side events such as the G7+'s High-Level Summit, "Conflict Prevention in Multipolar World" on September 23. The UNGA high-level week is the key moment for world leaders to signal to the population of these countries and regions that they are not, in fact, forgotten.
- **Education and pointing ahead to the Sustainable Development Goal Summit and Summit of the Future.** The Transforming Education Summit is scheduled for September 19: it is not known how this will run or how it will be rescheduled as Queen Elizabeth's funeral is on the same day. Yet the issue is critically important: an opportunity to highlight the needs and expectations of children and youth today for a broad sense of human security and opportunity, and how they need to be met. This also includes dealing with the digital divide, which greatly affects underprivileged children globally, and all paves the way ahead to the Sustainable Development Goal Summit in 2023 and Summit of the Future now likely to be held in 2024.

Bilateral and closed meetings

The most important value of the UNGA to member states is in its "private" meetings—bilateral meetings scheduled between leaders, and between smaller groups of countries. What can be expected or wished for here?

- Let us start with an unusual choice: **the highest possible level bilateral discussion between India and Indonesia.** Indonesia hands over the G20 chairmanship to India at the end of 2022. The G20 has been ridden by problems due to the Ukraine war and has been unable to fulfil the purpose for which it was created, to address global economic risks such as the food, debt, and energy crises. Indonesia has done a stalwart job of maintaining dialogue and delivering smaller gains, such as a [Financial Intermediary Fund for Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness, and Response](#) and the [Bali COMPACT](#) to accelerate energy transitions. As Indonesia hands over to India, discussions on the coming calendar and the prospects to deliver real agreement on the rising cost-of-living and debt are paramount, supported by other G20 members and the broader community. These issues may well continue into the chairmanship of Brazil and South Africa in the two subsequent years.
- Closely watched will be the **bilateral meetings organized by the US, and by Russia.** Naturally, US President Biden will meet with key players in the Ukraine conflict. But this should not be to the exclusion of other important encounters. In this sense, it is probably the meetings with leaders in other regions that are most worthwhile in providing information the US does not already have, to give a direct understanding of the dynamics in G77 countries around current geopolitical tensions. It would send a

powerful message if President Biden were to meet with countries such as Bangladesh, Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, Indonesia, and neighbors in Latin America. If the US does not take many of these meetings, other Western European and Others Group (WEOG) countries should. Russia's delegation, led by Minister Lavrov or even at a lower level, will in any case use the opportunity to shore up relations with countries who have been close militarily, diplomatically, and economically: it may be desirable from the West's perspective that Russia is not the only P5 member meeting with many smaller developing countries.

- **China's bilateral meetings are rarely publicized.** China is likely to meet with countries it deems important for the Belt and Road Initiative, which is under pressure from rising debt and low returns during COVID-19, as well as the drop in demand caused by the slowdowns in China's own economy. China may also choose to conduct meetings around its newer [Global Development and Global Security Initiatives](#). As with the US, the UNGA is also an opportunity for China, which has been under criticism in some developing countries recently, to listen to different perspectives (for example, [see the role played by Chinese lending and labor market practices in the recent Kenya election debate](#)), to broaden its dialogue. Meeting with Latin American, Asian, and African countries to acknowledge concerns around debt and the role of Chinese firms and workers in relation to recipient country's jobs would be a good sign of being in a listening mode on these issues.
- **US-China relations** in the following decades are likely to be more important than most others, but little can be expected at the leader's level: neither Biden nor Xi will want to be seen giving up the rhetoric of confrontation, and the Chinese delegation looks likely to be at a relatively junior level, with China perhaps preferring to avoid the spotlight in today's tense geopolitical discussions, and after the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights' publication of the High Commissioner's report on Xinjiang. Yet there is an opportunity at the high-level week to where lower-level officials can deepen their contacts, for example by seeking common ground on issues such as food security, health, energy, and climate. This could point ahead, as with other UNGA high-level week private discussions, to the international financial institution meetings in October, laying the basis for some coordinated announcements on these issues.

In sum, this year's UNGA high-level week provides some important opportunities, to de-escalate inter-state tensions, and to show people in the countries attending that international collective action matters, it counts for something. It is up to member states to meet that challenge.

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