

Managing Opportunities, Challenges, and Expectations for the New Agenda for Peace

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Amongst the many elements proposed in the secretary-general's 2021 report [Our Common Agenda](#) was the call for a New Agenda for Peace because “the world is moving closer to the brink of instability, where the risks we face are no longer managed effectively through the systems we have.” In the [thematic consultations](#) that followed the release of the report, the call for a New Agenda for Peace was among the proposals supported by member states but for which further clarification was requested. The United Nations (UN) system was invited to develop a New Agenda for Peace as part of the preparations of the Summit of the Future, and the New Agenda will be the subject of one of 11 policy briefs to be issued in advance of the September 2023 preparatory ministerial meeting for the Summit of the Future.

The forthcoming Secretariat policy brief will be informed by consultations with member states and other stakeholders. However, as the Pact for the Future will ultimately be a member state document, the issuance of the Secretariat policy brief will mark the initiation—not the culmination—of the intergovernmental deliberations on what will be included in the New Agenda for Peace to be agreed by member states during the Summit of the Future in September 2024.

Historical antecedents for the New Agenda for Peace

The name of the initiative harkens back to the original 1992 [Agenda for Peace](#), the signature policy initiative of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. The original Agenda was intended to take advantage of a time of global transition to strengthen the capacity of the UN in the areas of preventative diplomacy, peacemaking, and peacekeeping. It also introduced the concept of peacebuilding at the United Nations, drew attention to the opportunities afforded by cooperation with regional organizations, and accompanied a significant [structural reorganization of the Secretariat](#), including the establishment of the Department of Political Affairs (DPA, now DPPA) and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO, now DPO). Given the far-reaching impact and scope of the original Agenda, expectations are unsurprisingly quite high for the New Agenda. To understand the opportunities and limitations provided by the New Agenda requires understanding the differences in the contexts under which the two initiatives were developed.

First, the original Agenda was developed shortly after the end of the Cold War at a time of multilateral optimism. Indeed, Boutros-Ghali submitted his Agenda for Peace in response to the [UN Security Council presidential statement of 31 January 1992](#), which noted that “there are new favourable international circumstances under which the Security Council has begun to fulfil more effectively its primary responsibility for

the maintenance of international peace and security,” and that “the ending of the Cold War has raised hopes for a safer, more equitable and more humane world.” Little trace of that optimism is visible at the United Nations today.

Second, the original Agenda was issued at the start of Boutros-Ghali’s term. Since the end of the Cold War, UN secretaries-general have enjoyed a honeymoon period in the initial years of their term during which they enjoyed sufficient goodwill from member states and Secretariat staff alike to be able to implement wide-reaching structural reform. After their initial years in office, however, their ability to implement such reforms is limited, and the policy initiatives introduced in the latter half of their terms generally focus more on stocktaking and identifying necessary changes to process and approaches rather than to structure, as in the case with Boutros-Ghali’s 1995 [Supplement to An Agenda for Peace](#), Kofi Annan’s 2006 report [Investing in the United Nations: for a stronger Organization worldwide](#), and the commissioning by Ban Ki-moon of the 2015 [report of the High-level Panel on Peace Operations](#).

These historical examples strongly suggest that structural reform is unlikely to result from the New Agenda for Peace, even if structural reform may be necessary. The restructuring of the peace and security architecture in 2019 during Secretary-General António Guterres’s first term that resulted in the current organization of DPPA and DPO was insufficient to overcome the segmentation within the peace and security architecture. The secretary-general requested the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)—with the Department of Peace Operations (DPO), the Office of Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), and the Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT)—to lead the further development of the New Agenda for Peace, in collaboration with relevant United Nations entities; the fact that the secretary-general requested four departments (and not just DPPA and DPO) to work together on the New Agenda for Peace is an implicit recognition that the scope of the first term reforms was insufficiently broad. However, reform fatigue on the part of both member states and Secretariat staff has reduced the appetite and likelihood for further structural reform during the current secretary-general’s term.

Challenges and opportunities

At the United Nations, attempts to ensure that certain topics are given sufficient attention, resources, and guidance led over time to the creation of separate intergovernmental processes and associated bureaucratic structures.

Subject	General Assembly bodies	Associated Secretariat entity
Counter-terrorism	Plenary	UNOCT
Disarmament	First Committee	UNODA
Peacebuilding	Plenary, plus Peacebuilding Commission	DPPA (PBSO)
Peacekeeping	Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations and Fourth Committee	DPO
Special political missions	Fourth Committee	DPPA

Over time, these processes and structures created siloes in how those topics are considered and operationalized. At the same time, many factors—such as the preferences member states have amongst United Nations entities, the fact that no single entity is equipped to address all aspects of complex crises and the fact that dependence on voluntary contributions for programmatic activities force entities to chase after the issue of the day—drive mandate convergence and thematic overlap amongst entities which, in turn, exacerbates competition and contradiction across the United Nations.

This is certainly the case with the peace and security apparatus within the Secretariat, in which different entities have adopted fragmented approaches to issues such as prevention (e.g., conflict prevention in DPPA, prevention of violent extremism in UNOCT, and prevention of violent crime in UNODC), peace operations (e.g., special political missions in DPPA and peacekeeping operations in DPO), reintegration (e.g., disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration in DPO and prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration in UNOCT).

In fact, DPPA and DPO continue to maintain three separate policy units (the ones corresponding to the former DPKO and DPA along with the policy branch in the Peacebuilding Support Office) despite the fact that the 2019 restructuring was intended to facilitate a shift to a whole-of-pillar approach and integrate PBSO with DPA. Considerable overlap also exists with the work of the agencies, funds, and programs. The restructuring also failed to examine the interaction of the two departments with the human rights pillar, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights as well as various thematic special representatives of the secretary-general.

However, even the mechanisms established to foster policy and programmatic coherence across the United Nations system are fragmented, with entities favoring the mechanisms they chair or co-chair (e.g., the Global Focal Point for DPO and UNDP and the Coordination Compact for UNOCT). Indeed, elements of the New Agenda for Peace that have already been developed by the Secretariat, such as the proposals on [investing in prevention and peacebuilding](#) and [financing for African Union peace support operations](#) have been standalone proposals rather than part of a coherent vision for the role of the United Nations in peace and security.

Past experience suggests that, absent sufficient pressure from member states or strategic clarity from the secretary-general, Secretariat documents drafted by committee are likely to succumb to the following pressures:

- (1) adopting a Christmas tree or “stapled-together” approach enumerating all of the thematic agendas of all Secretariat stakeholders involved,
- (2) emphasizing actions and commitments to be made by member states instead of the Secretariat, and
- (3) focusing on items that are subject to the least bureaucratic contention, such as issues that fall squarely within the remit of one Secretariat entity or issues that are not currently covered by any Secretariat entities rather than on strategic issues that require cooperation across departments.

The Secretariat should therefore take steps to avoid falling into the trap of drafting by committee and instead articulate a coherent vision for the role and relevance of the United Nations in peace and security. This would also allow it to draw attention to persistent pain points that don’t fit neatly into any existing agenda items, including more flexibly leveraging the full spectrum of peace operations, aligning

approaches across departments on prevention, and reconciling approaches to counter-terrorism and sustaining peace. It also provides an opportunity to strengthen and align approaches across departments on prevention, helping to center the discussion around the agenda on support to and linking it to related efforts such as on small arms and disarmament.

The policy brief could also maintain a higher level of ambition and avoid some of the bureaucratic roadblocks if it were to be structured around evolving international risks and threats. Under this approach, the first point of departure would be the form of threat faced and not the particular interests of individual Secretariat departments.

This way of approaching challenges argues that the Secretariat should approach challenges strategically and see what action could be brought to bear across the organization. For example:

- **The challenge of national ownership:** Many countries have a sensitivity to discussing conflict and violence prevention, with a concern that this will open them too much to external debate on their domestic circumstances. Yet action to eliminate all forms of violence is part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and universal: violence prevention objectives resonate as much in the [US](#) and [UK](#) as they do in [Mexico](#), [South Africa](#), or [Indonesia](#). This is a preoccupation of many governments, and there is now rising evidence on what works—at [local](#), [national](#), regional, and [global](#) levels; in the interaction of culture, institutions, and behavior; and in the [processes that governments have taken to embed violence prevention](#) in their own systems, including in partnerships with civil society. A key element of the New Agenda for Peace should be to support nationally led prevention exercises with UN knowledge and finance, which is not currently available.
- **Emergence of digital and cyber technologies:** This is a separate area of action in *Our Common Agenda* but is also integral to a New Agenda for Peace. From direct attacks on essential infrastructure to the use of social media to foment divisions, new technology can be used both for harm and for social gain. The UN has a crucial role in helping to take forward the international regulatory framework as well as in assisting with tools for national governments to develop, such as digital codes of conduct during elections.
- **Internationalization of conflict, reflecting growing geopolitical contestation:** Much of the action to prevent regional escalation of conflicts is carried out at regional level, but the ability to create cross-regional communication to reach non-regional players is also important and is a unique comparative advantage of the UN. Here, for example, the UN could engage in stronger regional partnerships to prevent arms from some conflict zones—whether the Sahel or Ukraine—from causing damaging spillover in neighbors and more widely.
- **Economic pressures and fragmentation:** Rising food, fuel, and fertilizer prices have already spurred riots and unrest in many countries over the last 18 months. The UN could, for example, cooperate with the International Monetary Fund on [its social unrest analysis](#). Additionally, building on the Black Sea Grain Initiative, the UN could explore other opportunities, with regional organizations and powers where appropriate and with the international financial institutions, to establish and maintain “[guardrails](#)” on the economic fragmentation caused by geopolitical rivalry, helping to mediate in situations where conflict or geopolitical realignments threatens to worsen suffering by cutting off supplies of food, medical technologies, and other essential goods.

Additional considerations for member states

For member states, the inclusion of the work of four separate Secretariat entities into the policy brief provides an opportunity to break out of the siloes created by the regular intergovernmental processes. To fully capitalize on the opportunity afforded by the Summit of the Future, member states should use the deliberations on the New Agenda for Peace to take a more comprehensive view of the peace and security work of the Organization and examine aspects that are not covered through the normal intergovernmental processes. These aspects include the issues at the intersection of the existing intergovernmental processes and bureaucratic structures associated with the four Secretariat entities working on the New Agenda, namely DPPA, DPO, UNODA, and UNOCT.

Regardless of what is ultimately included in the policy brief, member states may also wish to include as part of the New Agenda for Peace issues related to the interaction of the peace and security apparatus of the Secretariat with the development and humanitarian activities of the United Nations. Despite efforts over recent decades to enhance the coherence of the United Nations in the field through approaches such as integration and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, coherence across pillars and entities remains elusive and aspirational in the field. Member states should therefore use the deliberations on the New Agenda for Peace to identify and address obstacles—including ones created by member states—to better leverage the full range of capacity, expertise, and relationships available across the United Nations to prevent and respond to complex crises.

Conclusion

The New Agenda for Peace provides a rare opportunity for the United Nations to examine and reflect upon the totality of the peace and security work of the Organization to uncover and better understand the synergies and contradictions of the existing processes and structures. Instead of simply recycling agreed language from past intergovernmental decisions and reaffirming the existing priorities of existing bureaucratic structures and mechanisms, member states should instead take a more strategic view in **providing policy guidance** to the United Nations, **reinforcing areas of alignment** and **excising areas of contradiction**.

The deliberations over the New Agenda for Peace are as important as the outcome, as they will help build a common understanding among member states of the areas where further work is required to develop the tools, methodologies, and capacities required for the Organization to effectively implement its responsibilities with respect to peace and security. Beyond such policy guidance from member states, structural change is certainly necessary.

Although the New Agenda for Peace is unlikely to lead to structural reform during the remainder of Secretary-General Guterres's term in office, the deliberations on the New Agenda for Peace can help build a strong conceptual basis for any structural reforms to the peace and security apparatus (and the collaboration between the peace and security, development and humanitarian, and human rights pillars) of the United Nations that the next secretary-general may decide to implement at the start of their term.

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