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# country report

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## Summit of the Future: Disillusionment instead of optimism

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**The multilateral system with the United Nations at its center is facing a crisis of confidence. A profound reform is needed. However, prospects are low in an increasingly polarized world order. Germany plays a special role in the run-up to the Summit of the Future.**

*Thomas Tödtling*

United Nations (UN) member states are negotiating a political declaration – the Pact for the Future – on the reform of the multilateral system, expected to be adopted during a summit of Heads of State in New York in September 2024. The Pact for the Future aims to restore trust in the UN and multilateralism. However, negotiations are difficult given diverging positions on key issues and geopolitical tensions hampering agreement. There is the risk of a minimum consensus with negative mid- and long-term consequences.

### Summit of the Future – the solution?

Anniversaries often offer opportunities for self-reflection and stocktaking. This was the case on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the UN in 2020. Since then, the pre-existing notion that the multilateral system with the UN at its center is not living up to current and future challenges has grown stronger. It is at the crossroads. While in the 1990s and 2000s a series of international treaties were concluded within the framework of the UN with high hopes in regard to global governance, the international community has since reached a phase of disillusionment. Many states but also non-state actors have lost their confidence in multilateral solutions. Under reinforcing pressure of the Covid-19 pandemic and its global political, economic and social consequences, the Heads of State of all UN member states defined those areas which require reform to ensure a functional multilateral system during the high-level week of the 75th UN General Assembly<sup>1</sup>. The member states asked UN Secretary-General António Guterres to develop proposals and

recommendations. The Secretary-General provided a report entitled, “Our Common Agenda”. Amongst other things, he suggested to hold a Summit of the Future which should help to create shared understanding and consensus between member states on multilateral solutions for current and future global challenges.

### G77: A critical group

Such summits are preceded by long and comprehensive negotiations. This time Germany plays a key role as a so-called co-facilitator since it coordinates and manages this preparatory process together with Namibia. The Group of 77 (G77) – a group of 134 UN member states from Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Pacific Ocean – had a critical view on the Summit of the Future. While it was emphasized that both processes should be complementary, the group saw it in competition with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Summit which took place in September 2023 due to two main reasons:

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution of the UN General Assembly A/75/L.1, [n2021118.pdf \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/press/docs/2021/20211118.pdf)

- › Many (in particular smaller and economically weaker) states did not see themselves capable to follow two highly complex and comprehensive UN processes for preparing both summits in parallel due to **limited capacities**.
- › Moreover, there was the concern that **political attention and the willingness to make financial commitments** for the SDG Summit and its related goals could suffer.

As a consequence, the Summit of the Future – initially planned for 2023 – was postponed to 2024. This was a welcome decision due to the politically sensitive topics and geopolitical tensions. The critical position of the G77 states towards the Summit of the Future changed significantly after the SDG Summit in September 2023. The member states explicitly renewed their commitments to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Consequently, this led many states in the Southern world regions to be at ease. However, discord has not only appeared amongst states but also between member states and the UN Secretary-General who published a series of policy briefs on specific topics ahead of the summit in 2023, assuming a certain kind of leadership. Several states viewed this with skepticism since they see themselves in the driver seat.

## Unambitious zero draft & divides

The Summit of the Future is supposed to provide a political declaration – the Pact for the Future – which will not be legally binding. The draft for the summit declaration (the so-called zero draft) which serves as the basis for the ongoing negotiations comprises a preamble (chapeau) and five issue-specific chapters covering nearly the whole range of areas of multilateral cooperation. It is a positive fact that the draft includes emerging and future topics such as digitalization, artificial intelligence, the peaceful use of the outerspace as well as youth and future generations.

### Topics of the multilateralism reform (UN Summit of the Future):

- I. Sustainable development and financing for development
- II. International peace and security
- III. Science, technology and innovation and digital cooperation
- IV. Youth and future generations
- V. Transforming global governance

However, several issues are politically explosive. This includes the financing of the SDGs and development (chapter 1), the reform of the international financial institutions (chapter 5) and the reform of the UN Security Council (chapter 5).

### › Funding of the SDGs and development

In September 2023, the SDG Summit made clear that the sustainable development goals are far from being achieved in 2030, as only 15% of the goals are on track at the halfway point to 2030. One of the key challenges remains funding<sup>2</sup>. According to the UN Secretary-General, an additional USD 500 billion per year is needed. Although the summit will not deal with detailed arrangements for financing, it will provide an indicator of the willingness of western countries in particular to further their financial commitments. However, in this context it must also be asked how not only the countries of the West, but also emerging powers with corresponding economic power, such as China, can increase their financial contributions.

### › Reform of international financial institutions

Basically, this discussion does not exclusively deal with the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) but also the framework of sovereign debt, the orientation of the multilateral development banks

<sup>2</sup> See Castillejos-Aragón, Mónica/Mumford, Erica/ Val, Teresa (2023): Busy Week at the East River, KAS Country report, [5fd7351a-c287-c051-af24-f7c97af32c2e \(kas.de\)](https://www.kas.de/fdf7351a-c287-c051-af24-f7c97af32c2e)

towards the SDGs and global tax cooperation. African countries in particular have high expectations with regard to the World Bank and the IMF and have strongly demanded Western countries to agree to reforms. This concerns, for example, the issue of special drawing rights and better representation of developing countries in international financial institutions and their decision-making processes<sup>3</sup>. However, western states have been reluctant so far.

### › UN Security Council Reform

The reform of the Security Council has been on the agenda for decades. Whereas the need for reform is undisputed, opinions differ on how such a reform should look. In the end, the debates revolve around three main points:

1. Enlargement of Security Council membership
2. Type of enlargement (non-permanent vs. permanent membership)
3. Future of the veto and role of the P5<sup>4</sup>

It is necessary to increase the representation and improve the ability of the Council to act. Certain reform proposals which advocate for an enlargement of the Security Council provoke the question if those objectives can be achieved. Doubts are justified. Both, representation and the ability to act must be taken into consideration. At the moment the zero draft only includes a place holder emphasizing the sensitivity of the issue. The co-facilitators will present a proposal in June. Germany, Japan, India and Brazil (G4) have been pushing for a permanent seat on the Council for years. However, this meets resistance from China, Pakistan, Mexico and Italy. African states also demand more seats for the region. The current members with veto power do not have much ambition for profound changes. Consequently, even a conservative reform of the UN Security Council does not seem realistic.

<sup>3</sup> See KAS and IPI (2024): Summit of the Future: Advancing African Perspectives for a Networked and Inclusive, [Summit of the Future: Advancing African Perspectives for a Networked and Inclusive Multilateralism \(kas.de\)](#)

### Limited involvement of civil society

At the moment the member states negotiate the individual chapters of the Pact. The compiled version of the draft now has more than 240 pages in comparison to the initial 20 pages of the zero draft. The tense geopolitical context poses a special challenge for Germany and Namibia. The involvement of civil society and non-state actors in the process remains rather limited. In the run-up of the summit non-state actors have the possibility to submit written inputs, make statements in consultative meetings and there will be a gathering for civil society representatives in Nairobi in May. Nevertheless, authoritarian states in particular do not have much interest in such an involvement and push back.

### Conclusion

Loudly announced reforms are often not implemented. At the moment this may also apply to the Summit of the Future. Five months ahead of the summit, a comprehensive overhaul of the multilateral system that is equipped to deal with existing and future challenges seems to be out of reach. This necessity is not reflected in the zero draft, which is not very ambitious, largely reiterates already agreed language and is not really action-oriented. Moreover, the timing is bad. The increasing geopolitical tensions and the resulting polarization in the UN system have a significantly negative impact on the negotiation process. The inclusion of issues such as digitalization, artificial intelligence and outerspace can be seen as positive.

Germany as one of the co-facilitators is facing a Herculean task. However, this is also an opportunity since Germany is applying for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council for the term 2027/2028. A successful co-facilitation is not only an important contribution for ensuring a rules-based multilateral order but also for

<sup>4</sup> P5 are those five states holding a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and have veto power which enables them to block decisions of the Council. The states are the People's Republic of China, the United States, France, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation.

strengthening Germany's positioning with the other UN member states.

It remains to be seen how the negotiations proceed but the positions with regard to the most critical issues are still far from consensus. Without substantial progress in those areas, disappointment especially amongst vast parts of the G77 states is inevitable. If the summit ends with the lowest common denominator and the implementation of comprehensive reforms fail in the months after the summit, this will have mid- and long-term impacts for the future effectiveness and especially the legitimacy of the UN-centred multilateral system. States already organise themselves in smaller and more flexible groups at the regional level which could pose, at least to a certain extent, a challenge to the UN even though such fora cannot substitute it.

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