

Looking Back, Looking Ahead: The New Secretary-General and UN Reform

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Abstract

Every incoming Secretary-General is expected to make the United Nations (UN) more fit for purpose. The new Secretary-General is no exception with António Guterres under pressure to leverage his honeymoon to enact major change. Yet he has moved cautiously. His changes so far have been targeted, limited in scope, and accommodating to major powers. This raises the question of whether significant reform is likely under his leadership.

We analyze his actions since taking office and argue that it is. Guterres is positioned to use his early initiatives to facilitate more ambitious future ones. To make this argument, we provide a comprehensive review of the state of his reform agenda and investigate the geopolitical and institutional factors that shape the reform environment. Drawing on scholarly and policy research, we conclude by making three recommendations for a long-term change leadership strategy:

Policy recommendations

- Refine the overarching vision to aligns his two stated reform objectives of prevention and creating a more integrated, field-oriented UN.
- Take an incremental approach by separating future institutional reforms into three rounds targeting the Secretariat, coherence within issue-areas, and coordination across issue-areas, respectively.
- Articulate, eventually, an advocacy agenda that is composed of a limited number of intergovernmental reforms and global issues. The Secretary-General should not lead these changes but exercise his office's agenda setting and convening power to foster the collective leadership of a likeminded coalition.

Introduction

Every Secretary-General is under pressure to make the United Nations (UN) fit for purpose, so it is hardly surprising that António Guterres used his January swearing-in to [call](#) for ‘a deep and continuous process of UN reform.’ He would [move](#) to ‘reassert a leadership role’ using his ‘full responsibilities as Chief Executive.’ With extensive knowledge of UN operations having served as former UN high commissioner for refugees, he [set out](#) to make prevention ‘the priority of everything we do together,’ break down the ‘straitjacket of bureaucracy’ and overhaul the UN development system and peace and security architecture.

Member states typically give a Secretary-General more latitude at the outset, and past officeholders have seized this honeymoon to push for key reforms. But the new Secretary-General has been cautious. His first months were largely spent shoring up fragile relationships and personally intervening in conflicts such as Cyprus in hopes of scoring an early diplomatic win. His reforms were targeted, limited in scope, and generally accommodating to major powers.

The Secretary-General insists more change is coming, as he [bluntly](#) declared on the margins of the 2017 annual meeting of the General Assembly. But the fear is that he will play it safe as the UN is not conducive to transformational leadership. If Guterres is risk averse, he might prefer focusing on protecting scarce resources, keeping the spotlight on humanitarian emergencies, and managing crises.

We argue this conclusion is premature. His first months may have laid the foundation for important future reforms. They have put

likeminded individuals in key posts, generated goodwill with target governments, started shoring up the UN’s moral authority, and

incorporated change management into executive decision making.

The question is where to go from here. We make three recommendations. First, his program needs to clarify the vision so it aligns his two stated objectives: prioritizing prevention and creating a more integrated, field-oriented UN. Second, he should take an incremental approach that separates future institutional reforms into three rounds targeting, respectively, the Secretariat, intra-pillar coherence and cross-pillar coordination. Third, he should advocate for a limited number of intergovernmental reforms and global issues by tapping his networks and his office’s authority to foster collective leadership by a likeminded coalition.

Why Reform the UN?

Few inside or outside the UN question the need for reform. Without change, the argument goes, the organization will lose credibility and funding. Part of the challenge is addressing longstanding complaints about the performance and outdated structures of the intergovernmental forums where governments deliberate and negotiate. For instance, the U.S. [threatened](#) to withdraw from the Human Rights Council if it does not change; there are multiple [proposals](#) for reforming the Security Council’s membership, veto and working methods; and the General Assembly suffers from an unworkable agenda, budgeting process and propensity to micro-manage.

Another set of challenges are organizational and operational. Human rights are insufficiently incorporated into UN missions, and UN humanitarian agencies are underfunded and overstretched trying to assist four famine-stricken countries and over 65 million forcefully displaced people. Donor governments are also insisting that the UN

humanitarian system become more efficient with a clearer division of labor among agencies.

Further, peace operations are struggling to manage [thirty-eight](#) political missions and peacekeeping operations including large, under-resourced, and complex ones in South Sudan and Mali, among others. The Secretary-General must also start restoring the institution's moral authority by preventing sexual exploitation and abuse during operations, supporting the survivors, and ending impunity for perpetrators. Some promising ideas to address these challenges and others are found in major reviews that his predecessor commissioned. But implementing them will be costly and complex.

Finally, the UN is finding its place in a fragmented and crowded economic development 'marketplace.' The Secretary-General is expected to define the institution's role in the implementation of two landmark agreements, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (2030 Agenda) and the Paris Climate Accord. The UN is under pressure to reorganize a loosely-organized system of specialized agencies, programmes and funds. And the resulting turf wars are exacerbated by the system's reliance on earmarked donor contributions which can disconnect assistance from domestic needs.

How much Influence does a Secretary-General really have?

An early challenge has been whittling down this laundry list into a workable reform agenda that can be implemented given the office's reliance on [soft power](#) and the talents of its occupant.

Guterres is well connected and his proponents credit him a skilled negotiator, clever political operator and careful but principled advocate for the institutions he has led. He [headed](#) the

UN's refugee agency for a decade and is the first former head of government to be elected to the top UN post. Although he has his [critics](#), his previous posts give him significant diplomatic and management experience, a vast social network, deep knowledge of the UN system, and a good understanding of intergovernmental negotiations.

The officeholder also enjoys some trappings of a chief executive, although the UN Charter confers limited formal authority. The Secretary-General manages the Secretariat, proposes budgets, and coordinates autonomous UN entities. His agenda-setting, advising, and reporting duties [inform](#) the deliberations of intergovernmental bodies, and he can draw on UN experts to give credibility to his ideas. Ambiguities in intergovernmental mandates also give him some latitude during implementation. Moreover, the Secretary-General can to put matters on the Security Council agenda, which offers a legal basis for investigating and mediating disputes on his own authority.

His office has two final sources of influence. One is the [moral authority](#) conferred as the perceived embodiment of the UN Charter and the diplomatic representative of the international community. Second, the Secretary-General has a bully pulpit and access to important social and policy networks that can be leveraged to efficiently gather information, ideas, and expert views as well as convene and mobilize stakeholders around his priorities and proposals.

None of this is to suggest that Guterres has it easy. Institutional constraints and political dynamics limit what he can change, and over-estimating the office's influence typically ends in a stalled agenda and backlash against the officeholder.

Defenders of the status quo have multiple opportunities to water down, block or delay change. Proposals with budgetary

implications require intergovernmental authorization and governments are determined to protect beneficial programs and jobs for their nationals. Additional complications arise during implementation, which usually requires the cooperation of a range of stakeholders.

The [barriers](#) are set higher for modifying the intergovernmental machinery or international standards. They are negotiated at conferences set years in advance and follow lengthy multi-stakeholder consultations and intergovernmental negotiations. These negotiations can break down or, more often, result in a lowest-common denominator agreement. Governments may also [backtrack](#) on earlier concessions when the signing ceremony ends and their bosses return to their national capitals.

Executive and resource constraints impose additional impediments. The Secretary-General has good reason to at least take the temperature of key governments—especially the Security Council's Permanent Five members—before proposing even changes ostensibly under his authority. Most of the organizations in the UN system also have their own executive head and intergovernmental board that guard their funding streams, turf and, autonomy. This makes introducing change risky as opposition mobilizes when the Secretary-General proposes, for example, a reorganization of the development system.

Further, he has few discretionary resources to use as carrots and sticks when negotiating changes. His office proposes budgets but has minimal control over the purse strings because much of the UN's funding is voluntary and [earmarked](#). The UN's last operating budget was just \$2.7 billion, and his predecessor constantly pleaded with the Security Council and troop contributing countries to provide enough funding and troops for ongoing operations.

Geopolitical dynamics present a final set of challenges. The Group of 77 (today 134) developing countries has long used its majority voting bloc in majoritarian fora (like the General Assembly) to defend against perceived violations of state sovereignty, protect development budgets and exercise control over the bureaucracy. In contrast, donor states from the Global North want to reduce G77 budgetary control, budget increases, and micro-management.

The U.S. is the largest contributor to the UN budget and under the Trump Administration has insisted the organization scale back its [activities](#). It initiated the Security Council decision to cut \$700m from the peacekeeping budget, and the president has asked congress to cut the U.S. contribution to the UN operating budget by thirty percent.

The European Union's engagement with the UN may also evolve. [Brexit](#) has not reduced the EU's commitment to multilateralism but it could limit the voluntary funding it contributes and its influence during intergovernmental negotiations. Germany has also long coordinated with Japan, India and Brazil—the so-called Group of 4—to (unsuccessfully) demand a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Although this group has not made continued support conditional on a permanent seat, the countries have historically insisted that any major UN reform initiative propose such a change.

Two other council permanent members, China and Russia, are wary of any change that could dilute national sovereignty, especially an expansion of the UN's authority to publicize human rights violations. [China](#) is increasingly assertive in UN forums and has shown an interest in leading on issues where collective action supports national priorities (e.g. climate change). However, it has minimal experience organizing complex, multilateral negotiations and continues to resist UN intervention in regional security affairs. Russia has taken a

leading role in reforming UN counter-terrorism but has limited UN engagement in its 'near abroad' and used its veto to protect its allies such as Syria's Assad regime.

Where does the Secretary-General's Reform Agenda Stand?

Over the past months, Guterres has shown a healthy appreciation for the barriers to change. With a few notable [exceptions](#), he has largely avoided antagonizing Member States, especially important powers. Instead, the Secretary-General has sought to broker a peace deal, introduced executive-level reforms and convened internal reviews. These reviews focused on three strategic priorities: Management reform, restructuring the development system, and reforming the peace and security architecture.

Management Reform

The majority of his early reforms centered on the Office of Secretary-General, including increasing its capacity to manage change. In a January memo, he announced a new Executive Committee and Deputies Committee that would streamline decision making, support strategic planning, and coordinate policy development upstream and downstream. His Special Advisor on Policy was given responsibility for strategic reform planning while executing reform was delegated to Fabrizio Hochschild as the first Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination. For his part, Hochschild—an experienced UN hand who authored a lengthy study of UN change leadership—recruited from across the UN system to leverage different intra-UN networks and expertise into the Policy Planning Unit.

The Secretary-General has also appointed more women to top positions. His inner circle includes Deputy-Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed, Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti as Chef

du Cabinet and Ana Maria Menendez as Special Advisor on Policy. Notably, Jan Beagle was tapped to head the Department of Management. A veteran UN staffer, Beagle had previously led the human resources division where she [proposed](#) major changes to Secretariat rules to increase mobility and streamline recruitment.

The tradition of appointing to leadership roles the nationals of the Security Council's Permanent Five and other major contributors has also continued. The American head of Political Affairs was asked to stay-on and a French, British and Chinese national head the departments of peacekeeping, humanitarian affairs and economic and social development, respectively. A Russian national was tapped to be the first Under-Secretary-General for counter-terrorism and Atul Khare of India retained the top post at the Department of Field Support. Guterres selected nationals from Japan and Germany—two of the UN's largest budget contributors—to lead disarmament affairs and the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

Development System Reform

In 2016, Member States [tasked](#) the Secretary-General with improving the development system in the context of advancing the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. A key element is coordinating a sprawling system of UN entities. [On average](#), eighteen UN development agencies operate at the country level often leading to turf wars and funding streams that reflect donor preferences over national priorities.

In July, Guterres issued a preliminary report largely drafted by his deputy, Amina Mohammed. Mohammed is widely credited for coordinating the drafting of the SDGs and working with governments to get them adopted. Her 2017 [report](#) presented a 'road map for change' organized around

decentralization and consolidation, and the report's thirty-eight recommendations were collectively framed as a donor-recipient bargain: A reorganized system would attract more resources and be more responsive to national priorities, while donors would see cost savings, greater accountability, and less duplication.

A cornerstone of this bargain was a revamped UN Country Team with more autonomy and authority. The leadership structure would also dramatically change with Resident Coordinators (RCs) being 'delinked' from the UN Development Programme and having 'a clear reporting line' to the Secretary-General. The RC would supervise all Country Team members and serve as the UN point of contact. Moreover, the office would be given additional resources and authority and, in return, would be more accountable for the UN's performance.

These country-level reforms would complement ones to regional offices and global headquarters. The core functions at these levels would be strategic analysis, policy development, and convening experts and funders. To improve coordination, the intergovernmental boards of autonomous UN agencies would be merged. Regional offices would be responsible for developing policy guidance to align in-country activities with regional and global policies and standards.

The report was generally **well received**. For many experts, a major reorganization was long overdue, though some UN staff worried that a major restructuring would be disruptive and undercut current initiatives. During the ECOSOC debate, some major donors and G77 members welcomed the commitment to coherence and decentralization, but reminded the Secretary-General of the importance of continued consultation. A group of African countries added that the final report should place additional emphasis on financing for development.

Reforming Peace and Security Strategy, Operations and Architecture

The Secretary-General has prioritized conflict prevention and **called** for designing UN operations around a 'peace continuum' that gives prevention tasks equal standing with peacemaking, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and development ones. Operationalizing prevention requires strengthening the UN's analytical capabilities so it can sound the alarm as well as providing timely information, conflict analysis and expertise. The Secretary-General has also **proposed** a 'surge in peace diplomacy' including expanding mediation services and proactively offering those services to countries at risk of conflict. To this end, Guterres personally extended his good offices in Cyprus and Columbia and announced a new partnership with the World Bank addressing state fragility.

Beyond prevention, the Secretary-General's first proposal for reforming the peace and security architecture were not introduced until September. The proposal, which was circulated for Member State consideration, drew on his own internal review and three major reviews commissioned by his predecessor. It reflected his **skepticism** of large and complex peacekeeping operations and the need for consolidation. Peacebuilding responsibilities across the Secretariat would be merged into a new Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and peacekeeping and field-based political missions would form a single Department of Peace Operations.

Notably, the Secretary-General had moved more quickly on two fronts. Much of the UN counter-terrorism machinery was **consolidated** into a new Counter-Terrorism Center, and a Russian national was appointed to lead it. Despite important concerns **raised** by experts and NGOs, Russia in particular welcomed the move, having persistently lobbied for it partially out of concern that the existing UN

strategy placed too much emphasis on countering violent extremism.

Second, he released a [report](#) that detailed allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation and proposed additional measures to curb it. Specifically, the report recommended a ‘victim centered approach’ with proposals to prevent further abuses, support survivors, and end impunity for perpetrators. The most controversial change would withhold payments to troop contributing countries that did not investigate credible allegations and redirect withheld funds to a victims’ fund. These changes will be followed by additional recommendations from a new [high-level panel](#).

Where can the Secretary-General go from here?

Clarify the Vision

Looking ahead, one shortcoming of the Secretary-General’s reform strategy is that it has two key reform objectives without an overarching vision. The first objective is prioritizing prevention, which includes helping prevent disputes from escalating to war and sustaining peace by addressing root causes of conflict. The second strategic [objective](#) is to make the UN ‘less bureaucratic and more efficient, productive and field oriented.’ The UN would take a more holistic view to assisting the membership with staff ideally adopting a ‘whole-of-UN’ approach to designing and executing operations.

Neither of these objectives is new and past efforts highlight their potential and pitfalls. There is no shortage of [interest](#) in making the UN less reactive. Boutros-Ghali pushed to expand preventive diplomacy in his widely read [An Agenda for Peace](#) (1992). A decade later, Kofi Annan dedicated a full [report](#) to the issue and called for “greater coherence and focus for conflict prevention,” and Ban Ki-

moon repeatedly [recommended](#) that conflict prevention feature more prominently in the UN peace and security architecture.

Prevention is appealing because most UN entities can see at least some of their work as preventing war or sustaining peace. This inclusivity could reduce internal resistance by enabling staff to reconfigure existing activities, while additional prevention capabilities could be added without a disruptive reorganization.

However, prevention is likely to face opposition when the rubber meets the road. Preventing war [requires](#) early UN intervention, gathering sensitive information about a country, and reporting hotspots to the Security Council. These activities have long made the Group of 77 and China [wary](#), and they have historically opposed a UN ‘intelligence’ capability or empowering the Secretary-General to ‘internationalize’ domestic political disputes. Furthermore, complex root causes makes operationalization difficult, and a preoccupation with prevention could come at the expense of other activities. Indeed, Guterres has already felt compelled to [promise](#) that enhancing prevention will not redirect resources from development assistance.

The second [objective](#)—a more integrated, field-focused UN—leverages a unique institutional asset: the range of assistance, expertise, and services offered across the UN system. Improved intra-UN coordination would increase effectiveness, especially in addressing policy challenges that do not fall under a single UN entity’s mandate or cut across the human rights, peace and security and development pillars. There are also political advantages. Donors want the UN to redirect more funding to the field, reduce duplication and create clearer lines of authority. Recipient governments, local authorities, partner organizations and other beneficiaries would also enjoy greater clarity about who is in charge.

Yet some UN entities are likely to resist an expected loss of autonomy and a disruptive reorganization of workflows and management structures. Governments may also be hesitant. For some, the resulting changes could hurt their favored programs. And while donors advocate for strengthening coordination, many have perpetuated bureaucratic silos by earmarking their contributions so they can claim ownership of a program or issue. These barriers help explain his predecessor's limited success at integration such as efforts to [coordinate](#) UN external partnerships, [modernize](#) Secretariat management or [consolidate](#) UN humanitarian agencies across the UN system.

To mobilize support and overcome these barriers, the reform program will need an overarching institutional vision. This [vision](#) should be accompanied by a small number of strategic principles to set priorities, guide the reform process, and unify likeminded staff and governmental and non-governmental actors. The strategic principles should help planners boil down existing recommendations into a workable and coherent program and senior leadership make tradeoffs and align their own ideas with higher level goals. Without a vision, prevention and integration risk becoming competing priorities. Proponents of each objective will expect the Secretary to make their objective the priority, and opponents of each objective will seek to direct his focus to the alternative. The risk is a disjointed process unable to attract sustained financial and political support.

One vision is of an integrated, accountable and field-focused UN with '[fewer moving parts](#).' The reform program would be guided by the principles of operational coherence and strengthening the field, and these strategic principles would apply to all reform programs from changing management structures, the development system, and the peace and security architecture. As such, conflict

prevention would not serve as the overarching vision that defines the organization, but missions would be enhanced and put on an equal footing with other operations along the peace continuum. Reforms would also seek to ensure that staff carrying out prevention work are less siloed and [better resourced](#).

Play the Long Game

Second, reform should be a '[permanent attitude](#)' where change takes place incrementally. One possibility is rolling out institutional reforms over roughly four rounds. Early rounds would pave the way for more ambitious future ones by providing proof of concept, creating functional spillover or empowering likeminded actors interested in further change. In this view, the Secretariat's first months have planted '[the seeds](#) for the 117 months that follow.' They centralized strategic planning and positioned a reformer as head of the Department of Management. Goodwill was also built with some major powers, including the Trump Administration, which hosted a high-level meeting in September that required the 120-plus participating governments to [back](#) the Secretary-General's reform agenda.

The next three rounds of institutional reforms would leverage these changes to advance the vision of a more integrated and field-oriented UN. The second round would implement more sweeping changes to Secretariat management by breaking down inter-departmental walls and modernizing personnel policies to suit primarily an operational agency and not a conference servicing one. This round would include many of the changes that the Secretary-General circulated in September such as the consolidation of field-based peace operations in addition to rewarding field experience, increasing staff mobility, and reducing deployment times.

The third round would focus on coherence *within* the three pillars of the UN system: human rights and humanitarian affairs, peace and security, and social and economic development. One example is the Secretary-General's preliminary report on development system reform with its focus on decentralization, strengthening field leadership, a clear division of labor, and joint analysis and planning.

The final round would enhance system-wide coherence *across* pillars in-line with a whole of UN approach. For example, the Secretary-General could address the humanitarian-development nexus and scale promising cross-pillar collaborations such as the Conflict Prevention Advisers jointly managed by the UNDP and the Department of Political Affairs. Further, human rights protection activities could be implemented across pillars, perhaps through the diffusion of analytical frameworks and new policies to promote field staff advocacy.

Get Involved in Global Standard Setting and Intergovernmental Reform, Eventually

With good reason, the Secretary-General has avoided proposing changes to intergovernmental bodies, nor has he adopted a signature issue the way his predecessor did with climate change. The office's limitations caution against rushing to promote politically sensitive changes that might bog down his institutional reforms. But pressure on the Secretary-General to advocate for broader changes will intensify. He will eventually need an advocacy agenda or risk his change leadership being dismissed as bureaucratic tinkering.

This advocacy agenda should align with his institutional vision. It will also need to take political realities into consideration, and he should [avoid](#) packaging institutional reforms

with broader ones as part of some grand bargain. One possible, if thorny, issue is Security Council reform, which is central to the UN's continued legitimacy and a priority for much of the membership. It could also be framed as reversing what Guterres has decried as declining trust in governing institutions. Alternatively, the Secretary-General could champion plans for implementing a Post-American Paris Climate Accord that engages U.S. industry, cities, and states.

The advocacy agenda could also introduce new international standards or push anew for the implementation of existing ones. He could return to his UNHCR roots and make migration a signature issue with a focus on protection such as expanding resettlement programs and keeping the borders of host states open. Additionally, his office could try to fill normative gaps by putting the protection 'climate refugees' on the intergovernmental agenda.

Regardless of what issues he adopts, the Secretary-General will need to be realistic about his influence. He may want to [forego](#) serving as chief leader. Instead, his agenda may be better served by tapping his networks, convening, and agenda setting power to foster an inclusive change process. His office can support the formation of a transnational advocacy [coalition](#) composed of likeminded reformers including governments, academics, parliamentarians, statesmen, international civil servants and activists.¹

He may also appoint a prominent expert or statesmen to coordinate the reform effort and cajole North-South middle powers committed to multilateralism to take the lead in intergovernmental negotiations. Their leadership can help prevent the process from being coopted or stalled by those with conflicting agendas. For his part, the

¹ Commission on Global Security, Justice and Governance. [Confronting the Crisis of Global Governance](#). June 25, 2015,

Secretary-General can contribute his bully pulpit and foster intra-coalition cohesion, ensure proposals are politically feasible, lobby behind-the-scenes, and help avoid common tripwires.

Finally, he can invite governments to a culminating summit that serves as an end point for negotiations and an opportunity to showcase any agreed changes. One possibility is a [proposed](#) 2020 Summit to coincide with the United Nations 75th anniversary. And likeminded governments should be prodded to co-chair the proceedings. The Secretary-General can also facilitate the participation of non-governmental coalition members, and his personal interventions can also help navigate divisive issues and any last-minute obstacles.

Conclusion

The UN is not conducive to strong leadership, and the new Secretary-General seems to acutely aware of the limits of his office. So far, he has been a cautious reformer.

Yet there is reason for optimism. He has called for an overhaul of the operational machinery and takes office with political executive experience and an appreciation of the soft power of his office. His early initiatives may also form the basis for a sustained reform process, if they are incorporated into an effective change leadership strategy.

First, reform should be organized around his vision of a more integrated and field-oriented UN. Second, reform should be incremental and organized into rounds that target coherence in the Secretariat, within pillars, and across pillars. Finally, the Secretary-General must articulate an advocacy agenda and foster collective leadership to advance it.

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