



Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023

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What's new? The leaders of UN member states are meeting at the General Assembly for the first time since Russia's 24 February all-out assault on Ukraine. The war has strained diplomacy at the UN, but the organisation continues to do important, life-saving work in conflicts and post-conflict transitions around the world.

Why does it matter? The yearly meeting is a chance for leaders to assess the Ukraine war's impact on multilateral diplomacy and to consider how the UN – from the Security Council itself to agencies and missions – can continue to help thwart and mitigate wars and other crises and prepare to meet future challenges.

What should be done? Notwithstanding the Ukraine war, work at the UN continues. The world body can and should continue to play a constructive role in crises from Afghanistan to Mali and (where possible) Ukraine itself. It should explore new ways to support climate security, peacekeeping and other peace and security priorities.

I. Overview

World leaders will gather the week of 19 September in New York for the UN General Assembly's annual high-level session. The 2022 gathering will take place in the shadow of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine launched on 24 February. The war has dominated diplomacy at the UN in the year to date and is the greatest challenge to the body's principles at least since the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003. Russia, a permanent member of the Security Council, has breached the UN Charter's measures prohibiting the use of force and is widely reported to have committed atrocities; it dismissed condemnations of its actions in the General Assembly and other UN forums. Even before February, the UN was struggling amid increasing great-power competition and evolving threats to peace and security, and the war has magnified many challenges it faces. Yet the conflict has not resulted in the paralysis some feared. Indeed, the UN continues to both mitigate crises and position itself to meet emerging threats beyond Ukraine. Ukraine will be at the top of the agenda during General Assembly week, but progress on other matters requires attention, too.

As with all conflicts directly involving one of the Security Council's veto-wielding members, the UN was inevitably unable to mount a muscular response to Russia's new aggression. In the invasion's first weeks, most member states stood ready to denounce the invasion (although some, like China and India, hung back) but there were limits

to what they could do. Russia prevented meaningful action in the Security Council, and while the General Assembly passed a series of condemnatory resolutions, these had only modest real-world consequences. Moreover, since the late spring, non-Western diplomats, while not condoning Russia's assault, have appeared increasingly uncomfortable taking strong positions on the conflict. For the UN's many critics, the escalated war has demonstrated both the institution's powerlessness and its members' pusillanimity. Some of Russia's opponents – and Ukraine itself – have called for fundamental reforms to the organisation.

The calls for change are understandable but unlikely to be productive. The kinds of reforms called for require alignment of the Security Council's five permanent members, which is unrealistic, and fail to give sufficient weight to what the conflict has demonstrated about the UN's enduring strengths. Secretary-General António Guterres has emerged as one of the few diplomatic figures able to parley constructively with Moscow and Kyiv on issues such as the July deal to allow Ukraine to export grain via the Black Sea. Moreover, both Russia and others on the Security Council, including the U.S., have indicated that though profoundly divided over Ukraine, they remain willing to work through the UN on at least some other crises. The Council has muddled through the year despite toxic debates about Ukraine, continuing to pass resolutions on countries ranging from Afghanistan to Haiti. For all the talk of a new Cold War, the UN system is still vastly more active than it was for long spells during the West's decades-long standoff with the Soviet Union, when the Council sometimes went for months at a time without so much as meeting.

Yet although the UN system may have shown unexpected resilience in 2022, it has also demonstrated severe and worsening vulnerabilities. While diplomats in New York have concentrated on Ukraine, UN peacekeepers in Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo have struggled to deal with escalating violence and deteriorating politics. UN humanitarian agencies are under enormous strain, attempting to respond to emergencies such as economic collapse in Afghanistan, while also juggling long-running challenges like assisting civilians in non-government-controlled north-western Syria. The global economic downturn and potential cuts in Western aid allotments in light of the Ukraine war are likely to impinge on UN budgets in the years ahead, perhaps also tipping poorer states into deep recession. Taking a longer view, diplomats and UN officials are conscious that threats ranging from climate change to the weakening of the global non-proliferation regime also promise to increase international instability.

Rather than aspiring to unachievable root-and-branch reforms, the UN and its member states should focus on both applying the organisation's strengths to complex crises (including aspects of the one in Ukraine) and examining its own capabilities to consider how these can be improved in light of emerging threats. With its membership distracted and divided, that may seem a tall order. But despite its shortcomings, the UN is often the only actor with the wherewithal, the mandate and the political profile to have a chance at success, whether acting through the good offices of its own agencies or through coordination of the efforts of member states. To dispel the notion of Cold War-style paralysis, it can and should continue using its existing tools where they can be most effective and developing those others it most needs to meet the challenges of the future.

II. The Ukraine War's Impact on the UN

Russia's attack on Ukraine has caused turmoil at the UN, but not quite as much as seemed possible in February and March. The Security Council began to discuss signs of an invasion in late January. In the weeks before and after the launch of all-out hostilities on 24 February, many Council members worried that the war would not only stir up great friction in its own right – which it did – but also make Russian-Western diplomacy on other issues in UN forums difficult or impossible. In the event, the impact has been mixed. Major powers have managed to maintain a modicum of cooperation on non-Ukraine matters at the Security Council. The Secretary-General has been able to carve out a niche as a humanitarian player in the conflict. As for the General Assembly – which at first seemed set to play a central role in debates about Ukraine in the absence of Council action – it has faded diplomatically as the war has dragged on, with many Assembly members wanting to avoid controversy. In short, the escalated Ukraine war has seriously disturbed but not decisively transformed work on peace and security issues at the UN.

A. *The Security Council*

Since late February, Security Council diplomacy has proceeded on two tracks. One track has involved Ukraine. While Russia has ensured that the Council can do almost nothing concrete about the war, Ukraine and partner states have used it as a platform for frequent – at times weekly – debates with the goal of shaming Russia. The Russians have responded in kind, organising Council meetings on issues, such as allegations that the U.S. has biological weapon laboratories in Ukraine, that fit into its propaganda.¹ Most Council members are dismissive of Russia's claims, although some also fault the U.S. and other Western powers for airing recriminations that have no real chance of promoting a diplomatic solution to the war. Both sides clearly have an eye on domestic audiences and social media in convening such discussions.

The second diplomatic track has involved all other Council business. For some time – and especially after Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014 – Council members have talked about the need to “compartmentalise” major-power disputes.² This philosophy has held strong in 2022 to date. While the mood in the Council is reportedly extremely tense, the body has passed nearly 30 resolutions on issues other than Ukraine since 24 February – almost exactly the same number as in the same period in 2021. Russia has used its veto on two issues other than Ukraine, blocking U.S. proposals for additional sanctions on North Korea in tandem with China in May and – as discussed below – shooting down Western proposals to extend the Council mandate for UN humanitarian aid to non-government-controlled north-western Syria in July.³ In the latter case, Russia did agree to a six-month aid extension some days after casting its veto.

¹ See, for example, Jonathan Landay, Humeyra Pamuk and Simon Lewis, “UN says no evidence to back Russian claim of Ukraine biological weapons program”, Reuters, 11 March 2022.

² See Sebastian von Einsiedel, David Malone and Bruno Stagno Ugarte, *The Security Council in an Age of Great Power Rivalry* (New York, 2015), p. 9.

³ On the first veto, see Michelle Nichols, “China, Russia veto U.S. push for more UN sanctions on North Korea”, Reuters, 26 May 2022.

While the vetoes were consequential, it is also true that, in many ways, compartmentalisation has worked. While Russia has appeared at times to be considering additional vetoes – as in debates over the UN role in Afghanistan in March, also discussed below – it has restrained itself. The Council has at least been able to roll over existing authorisations for mediation and peacekeeping initiatives in Africa and the Middle East and in a few cases – as in a March resolution setting new terms for African Union (AU) stabilisation operations in Somalia – agree on more substantial updates to its mandates.⁴

There are a number of possible explanations for the Council's ability to keep functioning at this level. One is that its Western members have often shied away from picking unnecessary fights with Russia on sensitive issues, extending existing Council mandates in many cases with only limited revisions. France in particular has frequently cautioned against forcing Moscow into unnecessary vetoes, a stance that it had also adopted before the war. China, meanwhile, has lobbied both Russia and other Council members to avoid breakdowns that could work against mutual interests, for example warning them not to link Ukraine to Afghanistan in March.⁵ For Russia itself, keeping the Council open as a channel for talking to the West on files other than Ukraine may look like a useful way to avoid deeper diplomatic isolation and to retain a little leverage over Washington and its friends over issues like Syria. Neither Russia nor any other of the Council's permanent five members want to give ammunition to those states that say the body is irredeemably broken and irrelevant.

That said, there are also important ways in which ill feeling over Ukraine is negatively affecting the Council's functioning. While Russia may not kill off many resolutions, it has stopped the Council from making presidential statements and press statements (lower-ranking diplomatic products, which require consensus among the body's members) on issues such as the Colombian peace process for reasons relating indirectly to Ukraine.⁶ Russia and China have also abstained on a growing number of resolutions, which Council members generally believe corrodes the credibility of the body's decisions.⁷ The permanent members are also locked in wars of diplomatic attrition over issues such as the appointment of UN envoys and experts to review enforcement of the body's sanctions. Some of these predate the Ukraine conflict but have been exacerbated by it. In the case of Libya, this gamesmanship stopped the appointment of a new envoy for almost a year, allowing UN efforts to advance a faltering peace process to drift.

Veteran observers of the Council differ over whether these symptoms of dysfunction are direct results of tensions over Ukraine or simply extensions of frictions among the major powers at the UN that date back to at least the start of the Libyan and Syrian crises in 2011. It is true that the number of Russian and Chinese abstentions, and

⁴ On Somalia, see "Vote on AU mission in Somalia authorisation", *What's in Blue*, 31 March 2022; and Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°176, *Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia*, 15 November 2021.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews and correspondence, UN-based diplomats, March, May and July 2022.

⁶ Colum Lynch, "Moscow strikes back at the countries that cross it", *Foreign Policy*, 18 April 2022.

⁷ As of 31 August, Russia and China had both cast eight abstentions in Council votes in 2022. In the whole of 2021, Russia lodged seven abstentions, while China filed six. As a historical comparison, Russia abstained only twice (and China once) in all of 2012. On Council members' views of abstentions, see Crisis Group Special Briefing N°1, *Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, 30 April 2019, p. 8.

debates over appointments, were all on the rise before the invasion. In this sense, the escalated war has aggravated existing problems in the Council rather than creating entirely new ones, while also making it harder to reverse the negative trends. Council members also caution that the current level of Council functionality is not guaranteed in perpetuity, noting that Russian-Western exchanges in Council discussions have grown harsher in recent months. Worse may lie ahead.

B. *The Secretary-General*

The escalated Ukraine war has given Secretary-General António Guterres an unexpected new role as an international mediator. It was by no means given that he would assume this task. Guterres has established a reputation for diplomatic caution since taking office in 2017.⁸ Well into February, he had said little of note on the threat of invasion, and he appears to have doubted Russia would in fact launch an offensive. Once it did so, he was commendably clear in condemning Moscow, but President Vladimir Putin reportedly cut off communication with him as a penalty. By mid-April, former UN officials were expressing public misgivings about the Secretary-General's low profile in the crisis.⁹

Later that month, however, Guterres secured invitations to Moscow and Kyiv, where he brokered a deal on the evacuation of civilians from the besieged Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol, building on groundwork laid by the International Committee of the Red Cross.¹⁰ He also appears to have used this visit to plant the seeds of an arrangement by which Ukraine could export grain from Odesa and the other Black Sea ports still in its hands, in return for the UN Secretariat facilitating Russian agricultural and fertiliser exports, which took an indirect hit from Western sanctions in the first half of the year. The grain deal was knotty to negotiate – with questions such as whether Ukraine would demine parts of its territorial waters proving contentious – but UN and Turkish officials were able to forge a final agreement in July. The actual impact on global grain supplies will likely be limited, but the bargain nonetheless eased many developing countries' concerns about food security as fighting persisted.¹¹ It also established Guterres as a rare figure capable of securing compromise from Moscow in the present fraught circumstances.¹²

⁸ Richard Gowan, "Explaining the UN Secretary-General's Cautious Crisis Management", Crisis Group Commentary, 4 May 2021.

⁹ Patrick Wintour, "António Guterres urged to take lead in securing peace in Ukraine or risk future of UN", *The Guardian*, 19 April 2022.

¹⁰ See Crisis Group Statement, "An Agenda for the UN Secretary-General's Trip to Russia and Ukraine", 24 April 2022.

¹¹ Alissa De Carbonnel, Rafael Ch Duran, Richard Gowan, Oleg Ignatov, Berkay Mandiracı, Olga Oliker and Simon Schlegel, "Who are the Winners in the Black Sea Grain Deal?", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 August 2022.

¹² President Putin has, however, complained about the implementation of the grain deal – claiming that Ukrainian grain is mainly going to the EU rather than developing countries – and threatened to renegotiate it. See Andrew Roth, "Putin threatens to tear up fragile grain deal in bellicose speech", *The Guardian*, 7 September 2022. UN figures do not support the claim that the EU is receiving most Ukrainian grain released via the deal. Matthew Holroyd, "Putin says nearly all Ukraine's grain has gone to the EU. Is he right?", *Euronews*, 9 September 2022.

At the time of writing, the Secretary-General and the International Atomic Energy Agency are attempting to forge some sort of bargain to demilitarise the endangered nuclear plant at Zaporizhzhia, although at least in the short term this initiative may prove less successful.¹³ Ukrainian authorities have shut down the plant for the time being as a protective measure, and the atmosphere for diplomacy is less than promising, as Russia takes aim at Ukrainian infrastructure in the face of Ukrainian troop advances in the country's north east.

There are explanations for the Secretary-General's successes to date that point as much to Russia's interests as Guterres' diplomatic chops, and clear limits to what he can achieve in Ukraine for the time being. Russia presumably desired the evacuation of civilians from Azovstal as a prelude to its final assault on the factory. The grain deal will help the Russian agricultural sector as well as the Ukrainian one. In the meantime, Moscow has signalled that it does not want the Secretary-General to devote his good offices to searching for a political solution to the war – only to helping mitigate certain of its aspects.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Guterres has to some extent shaken off his notoriety for inaction, and non-Western diplomats say they would like to see him engage more on other crises in the years ahead.

C. *The General Assembly*

One UN body that has grown notably quieter since 24 February is the General Assembly. It briefly seemed in the spring that the Assembly, where all UN members have equal votes and there are no vetoes, could take a greater part in guiding the UN's response to events in Ukraine. After Russia used its veto to silence the Security Council in February, Council members referred the Ukraine issue to the Assembly using the "uniting for peace" mechanism, which authorises Assembly members to recommend solutions to crises when the Council is stuck. In the ensuing weeks, the Assembly condemned Moscow's actions by a margin of 141 states to 5 (with 35 abstentions), passed a further resolution on humanitarian aspects of the war and (by a vote of 93 to 24, which 58 abstaining) agreed to suspend Russia from its seat on the Human Rights Council.¹⁵ In April, the Assembly also adopted an idea – long promoted by Liechtenstein – that it should routinely convene to debate Security Council vetoes.¹⁶ Even the U.S. – which normally guards the Security Council's prerogatives – co-sponsored the initiative, and even Russia did not formally oppose it.

¹³ "Ukraine: Guterres calls for safety and security at Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant", UN News, 6 September 2022.

¹⁴ Russia, for example, supported a Security Council statement welcoming the Secretary-General's "efforts" over Azovstal but did not accept a reference to his "good offices" (which in UN parlance might look like an acknowledgment of a broader political role). See "UN Security Council, including Russia, adopts text on Ukraine", Radio Free Europe, 6 May 2022.

¹⁵ Such a referral to the General Assembly is a procedural issue, and so not subject to the veto. On the initial 141-5 vote, see Crisis Group Statement, "What the UN General Assembly Can Do for Ukraine", 28 February 2022; and Crisis Group Commentary, "The Ukraine War: A Global Crisis?", 4 March 2022. The number of abstentions does not include those countries that did not cast a vote at all, a path some have chosen to avoid controversy.

¹⁶ See David MacDougall, "Little Liechtenstein takes on the world's most powerful countries at the UN", Euronews, 26 April 2022.

All this General Assembly activism echoed earlier periods of UN history. During the 1956 Suez crisis and the battle against apartheid in South Africa, when the Security Council was divided or weak, the Assembly stepped up as an alternative leader, even though it lacks the Council's power to pass legally binding, coercive resolutions. Yet the parallels can be overstated: whereas the Assembly dispatched peacekeepers to Suez, albeit with the conflict parties' consent, its strongest action on Ukraine to date has been the Human Rights Council suspension, and it has done little of late. Its declining activity is not altogether surprising: in late March, Crisis Group warned that maintaining a strong UN coalition in favour of Ukraine would prove difficult.¹⁷ Even then, Western officials noted "Ukraine fatigue" among other nations, and non-Western diplomats have since said March was likely a high-water mark for General Assembly action on Ukraine.

Yet the Assembly may soon have more to say on Ukraine. European diplomats are hopeful that it will recommend launching a register of damages to document the destruction inflicted by Russian forces.¹⁸ Ukrainian officials would like the body to pass further resolutions condemning Russia's human rights abuses, and other aspects of the war, though UN members doubt that these would pass with the huge majorities seen in March. Nonetheless, Kyiv would surely insist on calling for more meetings and resolutions if, for example, Moscow tried to annex territory now under its control and could reasonably expect strong support of its claim to sovereignty.¹⁹

The overall fading of General Assembly engagement has several explanations. The simplest is that many UN members, while shocked by Russia's actions, have sufficient ties to the Kremlin to want to avoid repeatedly condemning it in New York. Moscow made its displeasure with the Human Rights Council suspension especially clear.²⁰ By contrast, some European diplomats at the UN lost support by demanding that other states toe their line on Ukraine, while sounding dismissive of non-Western concerns about the war's implications for food and energy costs.²¹ The Biden administration partly compensated by organising consultations at the UN on food issues in late May – which non-Western diplomats contrasted positively to the lack of American leadership regarding COVID-19 in 2020 – the U.S. is set to co-convene a summit on food security with the AU and European Union (EU) during the high-level General Assembly session.²²

Some African and Latin American officials have also tried to frame their caution as a return to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) principles of the Cold War era.²³ That may be a stretch: in its heyday, the NAM was buzzing with activity on issues such as

¹⁷ Crisis Group Commentary, "Maintaining a Coalition in Support of Ukraine at the UN", 31 March 2022.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, UN-based diplomat, 11 September 2022.

¹⁹ Michelle Nichols and Emma Farge, "Analysis: Action wanes at UN to isolate Russia after almost six months of war in Ukraine", Reuters, 17 August 2022.

²⁰ Colum Lynch, "Russia to UN members: You're with us or against us", *Foreign Policy*, 6 April 2022.

²¹ See also Crisis Group Special Briefing N°7, *Seven Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine*, 22 June 2022, especially pp. 3-7.

²² Private remarks by UN diplomat in discussion involving Crisis Group, 19 May 2022. See also Edith Lederer, "U.S. accuses Russia of weaponising food in Ukraine war", AP, 20 May 2022.

²³ See Richard Gowan, "When it comes to UN diplomacy, not all abstentions are equal", *World Politics Review*, 6 April 2022.

Israel/Palestine and nuclear disarmament; that level of energy is not evident today. It seems safe to say the General Assembly will remain more of a space for governments to make statements of principle than a driver of peacemaking policy, despite its moment in the limelight.

III. Ten Challenges for the UN

After the Secretary-General visited Moscow and Kyiv in April, he embarked on a delayed trip to the Sahel to highlight the deteriorating security situation in the region. His itinerary reflected an effort to wrestle with a basic dilemma for the UN: how to give proper attention to crises outside Europe amid the overwhelming focus on Ukraine. Although the Security Council has not ground to a halt since 24 February, diplomats admit that they have given short shrift to other pressing matters. This is especially unfortunate in that while the UN can make only limited progress in mitigating the Ukraine crisis, its tools – peacekeepers, humanitarian aid, envoy missions – have a greater potential for impact in many other places. Looking into the coming year, therefore, it is necessary for UN officials and diplomats in New York alike to weigh what the organisation can achieve across the full range of crises on its agenda.

The following list outlines some of the risks and opportunities ahead, in terms of managing regional crises, augmenting the UN toolbox and addressing thematic issues that are or should be on the Security Council's agenda. It is indicative and not comprehensive (it does not, for example, include cases such as Ethiopia, Haiti, Myanmar and Sudan that have also been contentious at the UN in the last year). It should also serve as a reminder that, even if Russia's war in Ukraine has occupied an enormous amount of attention in 2022 to date, the organisation faces a legion of other complex challenges – including both present conflicts and emerging threats. The last several months have demonstrated that the organisation has the capacity to do at least some useful crisis management around the world even as the war in Ukraine rages; this list is an exhortation to do yet more.

1. Shoring Up the Peacekeeping Mission in Mali

Of all the crises on the UN's agenda other than Ukraine, the situation in Mali may best capture the range of problems – from geopolitical manoeuvring to the limits of peacekeeping – that beset the organisation today. In the past 24 months, Mali has witnessed two coups and the exit of a longstanding French counter-terrorism operation, Barkhane, amid jihadist strikes that are getting closer to the capital Bamako. The post-coup military authorities have developed firmer diplomatic ties with Russia, as well as an alleged partnership with the Wagner Group, a Russian private security company. These factors – combined with a Malian military build-up, a spike in civilian deaths and movement restrictions imposed by Bamako, which impede efforts to protect the population and investigate abuses – have put the UN's peacekeeping operation in the country, MINUSMA, on an increasingly precarious footing.

MINUSMA has often had uneasy relations with the Malian authorities since it deployed in 2013, but friction has increased since the second of the two recent coups, as the government distances itself from longstanding security partners. Bamako has

become increasingly hostile toward European and other Western actors, as well as some of its neighbours in West Africa that have imposed coup-related sanctions.²⁴ They have also welcomed Russian troops and military instructors. Together, these developments led to Operation Barkhane's accelerated departure and the suspension of two EU-led programs to train the Malian security forces.²⁵ These developments in turn had severe consequences for the UN mission. For example, Barkhane's exit deprived MINUSMA of air cover.

Against this backdrop, MINUSMA – which had already been struggling for years and has suffered more deaths than any other UN mission – has found it increasingly difficult to carry out its mandated tasks. Its work to support a political transition, for instance, is on shaky ground given the transitional authorities' uneven commitment to an electoral timetable. The mission's charge to protect civilians also faces fresh challenges in light of the Malian army's anti-jihadist offensive, carried out in tandem with Russians allegedly belonging to the Wagner Group, a campaign that has generated reports of atrocities. The government's new restrictions on movement have hampered the mission's access to sites in conflict zones, for instance Moura village, where soldiers and Wagner Group personnel allegedly massacred 300 civilians in March, according to Human Rights Watch.²⁶

The Security Council has also found it challenging to position the mission better for success. In the summer of 2021, the Council was unable to agree on a French proposal to raise MINUSMA's troop ceiling by 2,000 personnel because the Malian authorities had demanded that any new UN peacekeepers have an offensive mandate to attack jihadists. An official Council visit to Bamako that October, meant to generate support for the mission and a return to civilian rule, almost did not come off because the authorities objected to it. Although the visit went ahead, the Council's interactions with Malian leaders were reportedly spiky.²⁷

The Council's most recent renewal of MINUSMA's mandate, in June 2022, was plagued by differences over, among other things, its previously established human rights monitoring and reporting mandate, which led China and Russia to abstain. The tension between the transitional authorities and the Council showed after the vote, when the Malian ambassador to the UN announced that Bamako was “not in a position to guarantee the freedom of movement for MINUSMA investigations” and “does not intend to implement [the human rights] provisions” of the mission's mandate.²⁸

²⁴ Mali's tense relations with neighbouring states were highlighted when it detained 49 soldiers from Côte d'Ivoire deployed to support a MINUSMA contractor in July. The majority remain in custody at the time of writing. See “UN acknowledges ‘dysfunctions’ in Mali over the presence of Ivorian troops”, RFI, 26 July 2022.

²⁵ This hostility stemmed partly from deep disagreements between France and Mali, which led Paris to announce Barkhane's withdrawal from Mali in February and Bamako to renounce defence agreements between the two countries in May. Malian authorities were vocal about their frustration with what they described as France's unilateral suspension of joint operations after the second coup and its public questioning of the transitional authorities' legitimacy. See Crisis Group Commentary, “Mali: Staying Engaged Despite Souring Relations”, 25 May 2022.

²⁶ “Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers”, Human Rights Watch, 5 April 2022.

²⁷ See Richard Gowan and Ashish Pradhan, “Why the UN Security Council Stumbles in Responding to Coups”, Crisis Group Commentary, 24 January 2022.

²⁸ “UN Security Council 9082nd meeting – Meeting record”, UNSC S/PV.9082, 29 June 2022.

Council members recognise that MINUSMA may not be able to keep operating in these conditions, which may force a more fundamental discussion of the mission's viability in 2023. An important element of the June mandate was a request for the Secretary-General to review how Mali's post-coup dispensation is affecting MINUSMA's work and to suggest options for the mission's future. The Secretary-General's report, due in January 2023, could help the Council come to grips with the looming question of whether and how MINUSMA can continue to function in Mali absent French support and amid the Malian authorities' tightening controls.

The Secretary-General should take the opportunity to be frank about the challenges the mission faces and signal that the UN may have to confront the question of the mission's viability if conditions do not improve. The mission's departure would not necessarily redound to the authorities' benefit, and it would almost certainly hurt the Malian people. Despite tensions, MINUSMA does still offer Bamako a number of benefits. It continues to provide logistical support for Malian forces in the north of the country, and to convene discussions of the 2015 Algiers accord, which brought an end to fighting between the army and (non-jihadist) rebels in the north. It also still helps local authorities deliver basic public services in parts of the country. For all the force's limitations, the roughly 13,500 UN troops and police provide insurance for the government against further disorder and jihadist advances; if they were to withdraw, the poor security conditions could deteriorate further, leaving civilians even more exposed. It is not clear that the national military or Russian private military contractors could confidently handle the fallout.

Recognising these dangers, the Secretary-General should make it clear that the prospect of MINUSMA having to leave Mali is real, and that the government should be wary of testing the Security Council's collective patience further. The report should outline the minimum conditions – especially regarding access and movement – necessary for MINUSMA to effectively carry out its primary tasks of protecting civilians and monitoring human rights. The UN should use the prospect of the mission's departure to leverage concessions from the authorities; at the top of the list should be seeking to convince Bamako to loosen movement restrictions. The review should also consider how MINUSMA can counter disinformation by dedicating a team at the UN headquarters' Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs to mount better responses to campaigns aimed at whipping up anti-UN sentiment in Mali.

Granted, this strategy could be highly risky. After the early withdrawal of a number of UN peace operations precipitated security crises in the 1990s, the Security Council has become congenitally wary of threatening the "nuclear option" of closing down struggling blue helmet operations.²⁹ Whatever the Secretary-General recommends and warns, the Council will not take a decision about MINUSMA's future lightly. But the relationship between the UN and those who hold power in Bamako is becoming so toxic that it may be necessary to at least use the *possibility* of shuttering MINUSMA to force all sides to hold a more constructive conversation on keeping the mission alive and viable, so that it can work on reversing the alarming decline in security in Mali.

²⁹ Richard Gowan, "The Peacekeeping Quagmire", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2015), p. 38.

2. Working with the Taliban on Afghanistan's Recovery

The Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021 posed a complicated series of problems for the twenty-year-old UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), including the basic issue of how to engage the new de facto authorities. UNAMA was originally designed to support the previous government, not a Taliban administration that still lacks international recognition. The Security Council and UN officials had precious little time to think about how to repurpose the mission in late 2021, as a combination of Western aid cutoffs and the wartime economy's collapse plunged the country into the world's biggest humanitarian crisis.

The outlines of a new approach emerged the following March, when the Security Council renewed the UNAMA mandate.³⁰ Crisis Group has previously described the wrangling in New York as diplomats coaxed a new mandate from a divided Council, with some members (including France) opposing aid or engagement that might legitimise the Taliban; others (notably Russia and China) inclined to work with them; and still others (among them the U.S. and UK) falling back on slogans such as “help the people but not the Taliban”, which suggest a capacity to work around the latter that is not realistic.³¹

Getting a mandate of any kind was a major step in the right direction in such circumstances, but the mandate itself does not set out clear instructions for UN staff and their Afghan partners. The resolution's first operative paragraph not only instructed the mission to coordinate humanitarian aid – a conceptually clear if practically difficult directive. It also ordered UNAMA to assist with “basic human needs”, including a revival of “commercial and financial activity”, without details of how the world can help the ravaged Afghan economy recover or much guidance about how that effort should involve the Taliban government.

UN officials have tried to flesh out the details but arguably have made things yet more complicated. In the summer of 2022, officials in Kabul circulated a draft paper among international donors. Titled “A New Aid Architecture for Afghanistan”, the short document tries to clarify who should do what to assist the country with economic development. But it is difficult to imagine how the key actors could implement this plan. The document contains illustrations reminiscent of the “spaghetti charts” that mapped out older generations of Western strategy in the country.³² Arrows zig-zag across a diagram purporting to show how the UN, World Bank, donor states, and other humanitarian and development actors would work together in coordination with the de facto authorities. The UN may find it challenging to mesh its plan with others: the World Bank has published its own scheme for helping Afghanistan with economic recovery, and at least five multilateral trust funds are envisioned.³³

The bigger problem is that Taliban officials involved with aid coordination – who often remind visitors that they have their own vision for developing the country –

³⁰ Resolution 2626 (2022), UN Security Council, S/RES/2626 (2022), 17 March 2022.

³¹ Ashish Pradhan and Graeme Smith, “Toward a New Mandate for the UN Mission in Afghanistan”, Crisis Group Commentary, 28 January 2022.

³² See Elisabeth Bumiller, “We have met the enemy and he is PowerPoint”, *The New York Times*, 26 April 2010.

³³ These are the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund; the Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan; the Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund; the Afghanistan Humanitarian Trust Fund; and the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund.

say they have not been sufficiently consulted. Some Western officials in Afghanistan agree on this point, complaining of limitations imposed from faraway capitals that restrict discussions with the Taliban-controlled government.³⁴ The Taliban warn of another impasse like that which blocked the Humanitarian Exchange Facility (HEF), a proposal for fixing the Afghan financial sector that the UN floated in early 2022; outside experts were strongly supportive of the HEF, but the Taliban were not.³⁵

The UN, World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Afghanistan's major donors need to go back to the drawing board, consulting with the Taliban to develop a more straightforward plan for economic development that has buy-in from the de facto authorities. This task is urgent, because humanitarian donations are neither sustainable nor sufficient to meet the country's challenges, and aid workers are warning that food insecurity – and deaths by starvation – will rise again as winter arrives.³⁶ A plan is required for Afghan self-sufficiency, building on the foundations (sometimes literally) of water, electricity, transport and other unfinished projects that were abandoned in 2021. The plan should focus initially on restarting development efforts that were conceived and funded before the Taliban takeover, to avoid jettisoning years of work. Its other elements should be added cautiously, with attention to principles of equity and inclusion so that women, minorities and other disadvantaged groups get their fair share.

Donor states need not accord the Taliban diplomatic recognition for this plan, but they will need to set aside objections to projects that would, by design, help the Taliban-controlled state with delivering services to suffering Afghans. Some donors feel caught in a dilemma, reluctant to do anything that might help entrench a regime whose policies toward women and girls are abhorrent and hoping that the denial of development aid might pressure the Taliban to change course. Thus far, however, nothing suggests that Taliban leaders will succumb to such pressure – while the Afghan population, women and girls especially, bears the brunt of policies seeking to isolate Kabul. Opponents of stabilising the country under Taliban rule offer no viable alternatives; nor do they account for the potentially catastrophic human costs of renewed instability. Providing economic development and helping women meet their basic needs would, on the other hand, be a tangible contribution to Afghans' well-being, certainly more so than symbolic gestures such as the UN Security Council's recent debates over travel bans for Taliban diplomats.³⁷

3. Solidifying Yemen's Truce

Thus far, the UN can claim Yemen as one of 2022's relative bright spots, but it is not yet clear whether recent gains are sustainable. In April, UN mediators got the main parties to the country's long-running civil war – the Iran-aligned Huthis and the Saudi-backed, internationally recognised government that the rebels ousted – to

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban and Western officials in Kabul, May-September 2022.

³⁵ The HEF would have created a parallel system of currency swaps between Afghan businesses and humanitarian agencies, circumventing the central bank that remains hobbled by U.S. and European asset freezes. The Taliban chafed at the prospect of foreigners regulating the national currency instead of keeping that responsibility in state officials' hands. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban and Western officials in Kabul, May-September 2022.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, current and former humanitarian officials, September 2022.

³⁷ Edith Lederer, "Divided UN council fails to approve more top Taliban travel", AP, 20 August 2022.

accept a two-month truce. They have since renewed it twice. Despite reports of hundreds of minor violations, Yemen has seen its most peaceful period since fighting broke out almost eight years ago. But while putting the war on pause was an achievement, a political settlement remains elusive, with the parties unable to reach agreement on reopening roads in and around the besieged city of Taiz. Moreover, time may be running out, as neither side seems interested in maintaining the status quo for much longer. Recriminations about ceasefire violations and complaints of non-compliance with key confidence-building measures have come from both sides. The UN, too, recognises that the truce – a self-policing agreement – cannot be extended forever.

Since brokering the truce, UN officials have sought an expanded agreement that would lead to political talks. But deadlock over one of the three confidence-building measures attached to the truce is a barrier to progress. As laid out in the first two measures, the government and its outside backers committed to allow commercial flights into the capital Sanaa for the first time in six years and to assure the flow of fuel into the Red Sea port of Hodeida. As concerns the third, the Huthis agreed to discuss reopening roads in and around Taiz, but that is as far as things have gone. A lopsided state of affairs has resulted. The Huthis got most of what they wanted: a few airliners have landed in Sanaa, and some oil tankers have docked in Hodeida. But the government has received nothing: the roads around Taiz remain closed.

With the truce's current extension set to expire on 2 October, both sides are setting preconditions for any further renewal. Though they do not recognise the government, the Huthis demand that it help pay civil servant salaries in areas they control from its oil and gas income and its taxes on imports. The Huthis say salaries must be paid before the truce can be expanded as the UN wishes. The government has, in turn, made progress on Taiz's roads a prerequisite for discussion of salaries, creating a logjam.

Confronted with such roadblocks, Hans Grundberg, the UN envoy for Yemen since 2021, will struggle to sustain the pause in hostilities. His job is made harder by two additional factors.

The first is the shifting balance of power among anti-Huthi factions. Shortly after the truce began in April, Riyadh engineered the ouster of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, then the internationally recognised president, and arranged for a presidential council handpicked by Saudi and Emirati officials to replace him. The council made a series of military and civilian appointments that stirred up tensions among rivals in the anti-Huthi camp. It was unable to prevent fighting between nominally allied forces in Shebwa governorate in August or the takeover of neighbouring Abyan governorate by the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC) in September. These events have left the STC – whose head Aydrous al-Zubaidi is a presidential council member – in a dominant position in the south. They have also rattled Islah, Yemen's main Sunni Islamist party, which has been a key government ally but was humiliated by the STC's gains. Infighting in the anti-Huthi camp has diverted the presidential council's attention from UN-led talks at a crucial moment.

The second factor is the UN's reliance on a Saudi-Huthi back channel, over which it has little influence, to sustain and expand the truce. Huthi-Saudi talks (and U.S. pressure on Saudi Arabia to get out of the war) were a deciding factor in stopping the shooting. Riyadh's primary goal at this point is to extract guarantees from the Huthis that they will stage no further attacks in the kingdom or along its southern border. As

Riyadh wields considerable clout in the presidential council, it is positioned to force an expanded truce of the kind Grundberg seeks and perhaps even a political settlement, if it thinks these guarantees are forthcoming. But any attempt to foist a pre-cooked Huthi-Saudi deal on other Yemeni factions without reflecting their input and interests could undermine rather than advance efforts to end the war, as several of these groups have their own agendas that such an accord would likely not address, and especially given rising tensions among ostensible allies in the anti-Huthi camp.

Unless the UN envoy and his member state partners can help the parties find a way forward to extend and expand the truce – sustaining the unsteady calm that might permit long-awaited talks about the country’s future – Yemen could well veer toward a new phase of war, coupled with more mass hunger. In order to have the best odds of success, Grundberg should prioritise reopening at least some of Taiz’s roads; working out a way for the Huthis and the government to cooperate to pay salaries, perhaps with Saudi funding; and pushing the parties toward a durable cessation of hostilities along with talks about ending the war. In order to achieve a compromise, the UN will likely have to proceed in parallel to rightsize government expectations on Taiz while convincing the Huthis to reopen at least some roads. He should also – working with Riyadh – encourage Huthi-government discussions on salaries, including the technical measures needed to move quickly toward payments while finding the money needed to underwrite the costs involved.

4. Restoring Trust in UN Peacekeeping in the DR Congo

MONUSCO, the two-decade-old UN peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), faces growing insecurity, exacerbated by national and regional political manoeuvring. In June, MONUSCO head Bintou Keita told the Security Council that the peacekeepers cannot withstand the resurgent March 23 Movement (M23), an armed group hostile to the Congolese government. Once openly backed by Rwanda and Uganda, and defeated by UN and Congolese forces in 2013, the M23 re-emerged in November 2021.³⁸ A confidential UN report leaked in August offered evidence that Rwanda has quietly helped reinvigorate the M23, and there are indications that Uganda, too, may be backing factions in the insurgency.³⁹ Following redeployment of government and UN troops to areas where the M23 is most active, other armed groups have intensified attacks in Ituri and North Kivu provinces, where the soldiers left a security vacuum. This turn of events could jeopardise MONUSCO’s transition plan, which lays out a loose scheme for its drawdown and eventual exit based on the achievement of certain benchmarks.⁴⁰

³⁸ “Human rights under threat in DR Congo and beyond, Security Council hears”, UN News, 29 June 2022.

³⁹ “U.N. experts say Rwanda has intervened militarily in eastern Congo”, Reuters, 4 August 2022. Crisis Group interviews, UN official and Congo expert, Nairobi, July 2022. Crisis Group telephone interview, AU official, July 2022.

⁴⁰ In September 2021, the UN and Congolese authorities agreed on a transition plan (UNSC S/2021/807, 17 September 2021), as requested during the MONUSCO mandate renewal in December 2020 (UNSC S/2020/1041, 18 December 2020). The plan focuses on “reducing the threat posed by national and foreign armed groups to a level that can be managed by national authorities, as well as addressing the root causes of conflict”, to enable the mission’s exit. The exit strategy has three pillars: the restoration of state authority through institutional reforms in conflict and post-conflict

Meanwhile, the Congolese population is increasingly dissatisfied with the UN's inability to tamp down fighting in the east. In late July, the frustration boiled over into riots in Beni, Butembo and Goma, North Kivu's three main cities, that left at least 33 people dead, including four MONUSCO peacekeepers, with locals looting UN offices and supply bases.⁴¹ Exacerbating tensions, MONUSCO personnel returning from leave opened fire on people waiting at the Kasindi post on the DRC-Uganda border on 31 July, killing three civilians.⁴² Congolese politicians say it is time for the mission to "pack its bags".⁴³ Following the riots, President Félix Tshisekedi requested a meeting with the mission to reassess the drawdown schedule, though no decision was taken to accelerate it. The authorities also expelled MONUSCO's spokesman, saying his comments on the mission's limited capacity to fight the M23 had led the violence to escalate.⁴⁴

With unrest growing in the east, and MONUSCO's future in doubt, Tshisekedi has turned to the East African Community (EAC), which has agreed to help the DRC target the resurgent rebels. In April, the EAC's seven leaders agreed to establish a joint force to stem the violence.⁴⁵ Led by a Kenyan commander and headquartered in Goma, North Kivu's capital and commercial hub, the force would operate in four Congolese provinces (Haut-Uélé, Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu) with a six-month renewable mandate. Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda are all to provide troops, who will fight alongside Congolese soldiers. Because of Rwanda's alleged support for the M23, Tshisekedi has excluded that country from participation in the force. In August, Congolese authorities announced that a Burundian contingent was the first to enter the DRC under EAC auspices, but little is known about when other units will follow.⁴⁶

As Crisis Group has written previously, the introduction of troops from neighbouring countries – many of which have their own interests in the resource-rich region and a history of pursuing proxy contests there – raises the spectre that the EAC plan could do more harm than good.⁴⁷ There are many unanswered operational questions as well, including how the new force will coordinate with MONUSCO, which has an

areas; a people-centred approach focused on community recovery, protection and stabilisation; and a disarmament and demobilisation plan. The authorities did not fix a date for the mission's exit, but some benchmarks in the transition plan have five-year timelines.

⁴¹ Jason Burke, "Death toll reaches 36 in eastern DRC as protesters turn on UN peacekeepers", *The Guardian*, 5 August 2022.

⁴² "Secretary-General outraged over deadly incident by mission military personnel on Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda border", UN News, 31 July 2022.

⁴³ "RDC : Bahati Lukwebo exige le départ de la MONUSCO qui dans plus de 20 ans a failli à sa mission", video, YouTube, 15 July 2022.

⁴⁴ See Sam Niknie, "'A playground for colonial forces': Unpacking the anti-UN protests in DR Congo", *The New Humanitarian*, 23 August 2022; "Le gouvernement congolais demande à l'ONU l'expulsion de son porte-parole en RDC", RFI, 3 August 2022.

⁴⁵ The DRC joined the EAC, a regional intergovernmental organisation composed of Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda, with its headquarters in Arusha, Tanzania, in March 2022.

⁴⁶ See Nelleke van de Walle, "East Africa's DR Congo Force: The Case for Caution", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 August 2022.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

overlapping territorial writ but a different mandate (with the UN focused more on civilian protection).

Against this backdrop, the UN Security Council should continue to back MONUSCO. It should not place great confidence in, nor fully endorse, the force that the EAC seeks to deploy. Some Council members seem to believe that when this force comes in, MONUSCO can get out. But given all the uncertainty that surrounds the proposed new force, and the distinct role that MONUSCO continues to play, it seems premature to entertain this prospect. Instead, the focus should be on helping the mission perform its tasks in an increasingly difficult environment and making more progress toward the benchmarks set out in its transition plan, so that drawdown planning can begin in earnest.

Improving MONUSCO's operating environment will also require the Security Council to more directly address the challenge created by neighbouring countries' support for DRC rebels. The findings of the confidential UN report regarding Rwandan involvement with the M23 and other sources addressing alleged Ugandan support, for instance, should be the basis for the Council to relay clear messages to Kigali and Kampala condemning such violations of Congolese sovereignty and underscoring the threat that instability in the DRC could grow into a regional conflagration. Statements from the Council should be accompanied by clear calls from key capitals, including Washington, to cease military support to rebel groups in the eastern DRC. The Secretary-General should also use his channels to leaders from the Great Lakes region to underline the need to avoid a resurgence of proxy conflict.

At the same time, UN officials should urge President Tshisekedi to be wary of over-reliance on the EAC force and underscore to him the importance of keeping MONUSCO on the ground until relevant benchmarks are achieved. They can point out that militias often step into the void when UN peacekeepers leave an area. Moreover, without the mission in place, the DRC's east will also be even more at the mercy of neighbouring countries with their own agendas. Tshisekedi will also need MONUSCO's assistance in running the 2023 presidential election.

Finally, with those polls approaching, the mission should take steps to protect itself from electoral politics. While acknowledging MONUSCO's shortcomings, several diplomats and UN officials have suggested that the recent demonstrations against it were in part ginned up by Congolese politicians who were jockeying for position by painting themselves as protectors of local interests against foreign interlopers.⁴⁸ An investment in communications designed to convey the mission's value, build confidence and counter disinformation may afford a measure of protection against these sorts of tactics.

5. Fighting Corruption and Impunity in Honduras

An opportunity exists for the UN to help break entrenched lawlessness in Honduras. For years afflicted by corruption and impunity among its political and economic elites, Honduras has seen stubbornly high crime rates and recurrent unrest amid sluggish,

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Goma, August 2022. Crisis Group telephone interviews, UN officials and NGO staff working on the eastern DRC, August 2022.

unevenly distributed economic growth.⁴⁹ Indeed, its homicide rate is now the highest in northern Central America.⁵⁰ Together, these problems have contributed to significant displacement, helping push hundreds of thousands of Hondurans to undertake the dangerous journey north to the U.S. every year.⁵¹ The election of President Xiomara Castro, who ran as a leftist reformer willing to work with multilateral institutions, may create an opening for the UN to help build an institution that can help meet these challenges.

Castro's platform ahead of the November 2021 presidential contest, which she won by a convincing margin, included a proposal to instal a UN-backed commission to build on the work of the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH), set up in 2015 by the Organization of American States after mass protests rocked the country. MACCIH had the power to prompt and support high-level corruption probes by national judicial authorities as well as suggest essential legislative reforms. It was closed in 2020 after it linked members of the Honduran Congress – mainly from the governing party of Castro's predecessor, Juan Orlando Hernández – to the illicit diversion of public funds. Since then, Congress has passed a series of reforms curbing judicial authorities' powers to pursue corruption.⁵²

But in a reversal of this trend, after taking office in January, Castro has followed up on her campaign pledge and formally requested that the UN establish an International Commission against Impunity in Honduras. It is a worthy goal: if properly constituted, such a body could serve as a check on the Honduran security forces and judicial system, bolstering their commitment to tackling corruption and readiness to fight violent crime. In Guatemala, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), which operated from 2007 to 2019, showed that such a mechanism can bring tangible security benefits, such as a lower murder rate.⁵³

Castro's government is now in delicate negotiations with the UN to set parameters for the commission's work. In July, after officials from New York paid a preliminary visit, the UN tabled a proposal charting its next steps in two phases. First, a small team would arrive in Honduras to evaluate the justice system and determine any legal reforms required before the new commission can start working. Then, the UN

⁴⁹ Honduras ranked 157th of 180 countries included in Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Index. See the Corruption Index at Transparency International's website. In 2020, 95 of every 100 murders went unpunished. "Estado de País: Honduras 2022", Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa, 31 May 2022. See also Crisis Group Latin America Report N°77, *Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras' Emergency*, 25 October 2019.

⁵⁰ See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°83, *Virus-Proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle*, 13 November 2020. See also "InSight Crime's 2021 Homicide Round-Up", InSight Crime, 1 February 2022.

⁵¹ For recent migrant apprehensions on the U.S. border with Mexico, see "Southwest Land Border Encounters (By Component)", U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 11 September 2022; for historical migration data to 2015, see "U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector", 11 September 2022.

⁵² Reforms to the penal code ordered that banks keep the account details of suspects accused of corruption-related crimes secret, for example. Crisis Group interview, prosecutor, Tegucigalpa, 21 October 2021. Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°45, *Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll*, 25 November 2021.

⁵³ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°70, *Saving Guatemala's Fight Against Crime and Impunity*, 24 October 2018.

and the Honduran government would sign an agreement including provisions defining the commission's methods and funding sources. The UN would choose its personnel, who would work alongside the attorney general's office but independent of it, much like CICIG. In August, the government worried that the commission would displace, rather than support, the judiciary, and suggested that national authorities appoint its staff. It also asked to limit the commission's powers to bring cases to the courts independently. A UN official said the differences on these issues would be widely seen as bearing on the commission's credibility.⁵⁴

As the two sides work through these issues, the UN Secretariat's objective should be to come to agreement with the Castro government on a commission that is recognised by Honduras' judicial system, enjoys political support, has the independence needed to take effective action against high-level graft and can build the state's ability to do the same over the long term. In pursuing these goals, the two sides could consider a consultative process for the appointment of high-level national and international staff, while agreeing that the commission would have the power to carry out independent probes. At the same time, they could curb the risk of excessive discretionary powers – either for international officials or national politicians – by establishing clear rules of case selection, grounded in the public harm caused by the crime in question.

Should the new commission be established, there will inevitably be questions about its independence and durability. It cannot succeed in its mission if it shirks pursuit of the powerful. Yet, as noted, its predecessor was shut down when it homed in too closely on the former president. The Guatemalan government likewise closed down the CICIG, in effect, after the commission opened investigations into then-President Jimmy Morales and his son and brother, as well as into Morales' alleged illicit campaign funding.⁵⁵ A similar body in El Salvador, also backed by the Organization of American States, was nixed after a short time by President Nayib Bukele, who appeared to see it as a possible threat to members of his government.⁵⁶

The UN is hoping that a clear legal framework will buffer the commission from reputational risks, but inevitably the government will retain the authority to scuttle the body should it be displeased by the body's work. While the commission cannot eliminate this possibility, it should make a deliberate effort to show that it is applying a broad lens, looking at misconduct throughout state institutions and across the full spectrum of Honduran political forces. Results will also matter: achieving tangible improvements in security and institutional effectiveness would help the commission win public backing, although even high levels of support could not stop the Guatemalan government from compelling the CICIG's departure. While there is no guarantee of success, and indeed precedent suggests many challenges ahead, it is worthwhile for the UN, Honduras and foreign partners to continue trying to launch an effort that has the potential to make real progress toward tackling corruption, crime and impunity in this violence-ridden country.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, 24 August 2022.

⁵⁵ Tiziano Breda, "Curtain Falls on Guatemala's International Commission against Impunity", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 September 2019.

⁵⁶ "Statement from the OAS General Secretariat on CICIES", Organization of American States, 7 June 2021.

6. Keeping Aid Flowing to Syria's North West

The Security Council may soon face another contentious debate over humanitarian aid to Syria. In 2014, the Council mandated UN agencies to deliver aid from neighbouring countries to opposition-controlled parts of Syria without requesting permission from the government in Damascus. Since 2018, Russia has used its power in the Council to narrow this mandate's scope from four crossings to a single crossing – at Bab al-Hawa – between Türkiye and the rebel-held enclave of Idlib in north-western Syria. Bab al-Hawa remains a lifeline for approximately three million Syrians in Idlib, many of whom were displaced from other parts of the country in the course of the war and live in highly precarious conditions. Hundreds of trucks bring food and medical supplies to those in need each month. A senior UN official estimates that 15,000 aid workers are involved in the operations.⁵⁷ If the Council mandate were to lapse, many of Idlib's inhabitants would be left destitute, facing deepening hunger and loss of shelter, potentially forcing them to flee to Türkiye or farther afield.

The Security Council consensus on keeping this cross-border aid flowing is extremely fragile. In 2021, the U.S. negotiated intensively with Russia to extend the mandate. But by the time it came up for renewal in July 2022, U.S.-Russian relations had deteriorated badly due to Moscow's aggression in Ukraine. Ireland and Norway, the two elected Council members tasked with guiding negotiations on Syrian humanitarian affairs, tabled a resolution prolonging the mandate to July 2023. The U.S., France and the UK backed the draft, along with all ten elected Council members, who made a joint plea for the extension on humanitarian grounds. Russia, however, vetoed the proposal (while China circumspectly abstained) and agreed to roll over the mandate only until 10 January. Council members also agreed to hold a further vote in late 2022 or early the next January on prolonging the mandate by another six months to July 2023, but some worry that tensions in the Council over Ukraine will keep them from following through.

If the Council cannot agree on this additional extension, the inhabitants of north-western Syria will be deserted mid-winter, when they are most vulnerable. NGOs based in Türkiye could continue to send some aid if the mandate lapses and UN agencies cease cross-border operations. But UN officials estimate the amount would add up to less than one third of current supplies. Russia and China argue that the UN could deliver more aid to Idlib from government-controlled territory in Syria (known as "cross-line" as opposed to cross-border aid). But aid convoys using this route to date have been sporadic and small, with fewer than twenty trucks arriving at a time. An aid official says the cross-line option is simply "not scalable", given logistical hurdles and the Syrian government's record of manipulating humanitarian assistance.⁵⁸

Security Council members should make every effort to keep the cross-border mandate in place. Ireland and Norway continue to manage the file. They are likely to table a new resolution extending the mandate for six months (in line with the July resolution) at some point in December. But Russia typically drags out negotiations on the

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior UN official, July 2022. In April and May, for instance, the UN counted more than 1,600 trucks carrying supplies into Idlib from Türkiye. Richard Gowan, Dareen Khalifa and Ashish Pradhan, "A Vital Humanitarian Mandate for Syria's North West", Crisis Group Commentary, 5 July 2022.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, UN official, July 2022.

issue to the last minute, and Council members worry that Moscow could introduce controversial new demands – such as for additional funding for government-affiliated recovery projects or more cross-line aid – or threaten to terminate the mandate altogether in the first weeks of January, after the Irish and Norwegian Council terms end. With major donors seeming increasingly unwilling to acquiesce to Russian pressure, the negotiation could be quite contentious and there is no guarantee of success.

Both current and incoming Council members should be prepared to defend the mandate starting in late 2022 and into 2023. While Ireland and Norway will focus on making the immediate case for a six-month extension until July 2023, concerned countries that will be on the Security Council in its next term, which begins in January, should coordinate with aid organisations and donors to press for a shift back to longer mandate renewals. They should push Russia to agree to a twelve-month extension of the mandate starting in July 2023, rather than continuing to eke out six-month extensions, which create considerable uncertainty for aid agencies and donors. Western powers, Türkiye and Arab governments could also quietly lobby China, which seemed uncomfortable during the July row, to lean on Russia to approach the issue less combatively from now on. The exact terms of any deal on a one-year extension will depend in part on the overall state of Russia's relations with Washington, Ankara and European capitals in 2023.

Donors and NGOs based in Türkiye should meanwhile take prudential steps to be ready in case the mandate does lapse. NGOs should not only improve their coordination but also negotiate with Ankara a framework for operating through Bab al-Hawa (an issue that major donors such as the U.S. and EU may need to lead on). NGOs will need to work closely with Türkiye to organise and monitor convoys in a professional fashion, with minimal interference from local authorities in Idlib. Some aid officials believe that the UN could continue to play a convening and oversight role in such operations without a Security Council mandate, but the legality of this proposal is at best ambiguous. The best option for the people of Idlib remains Council-mandated cross-border aid. But those who wish to help them must prepare for all scenarios.

7. Getting Aid to Civilians in Russian-occupied Areas of Ukraine

Different parts of the UN system are involved in parallel efforts to respond to Russia's war in Ukraine, ranging from gathering evidence of war crimes to monitoring the safety of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant in the combat zone. Nonetheless, the UN's broadest form of engagement in Ukraine is in the humanitarian field. Since the war began in 2014, when Russia intervened to foster and support separatists in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, Ukrainian civil society groups and individuals have made a remarkable ad hoc effort to assist the vulnerable around the country. UN agencies have continued relief work since February, and they now have some 1,000 staff in Ukraine. They claim, as of June, to have helped some 9 million civilians, most frequently with emergency cash handouts.⁵⁹ They continue to struggle, however, to gain

⁵⁹ "Ukraine: Four months after Russian invasion, humanitarian needs intensify", UN News, 30 June 2022. The UN's cash programs have drawn criticism from Ukrainians for putting speed of distribution over reliability. See Sam Mednick, "Ukraine aid response gears for the long haul", *The New Humanitarian*, 22 June 2022. Crisis Group has heard similar concerns. Crisis Group interview, senior National Social Service Agency official in Lviv region, 21 June 2022.

access to Ukrainians trapped inside Russian-controlled territory, who face intolerable conditions.⁶⁰ While it risks political controversy, the UN should work with Ukrainian and Russian authorities to improve aid to Russian-occupied areas as the winter draws near.

The UN's humanitarian work now is a departure from the work it did before the 24 February assault. Prior to that point, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs managed agencies providing aid mainly along the contact line between the Ukrainian army and Russian-backed separatist forces in Donbas. Access to areas occupied by Russian proxies had always been difficult due to restrictions imposed by the self-proclaimed local authorities. Surveying the impact of aid in non-government-controlled areas was also complicated by those same authorities' restrictions on data gathering. The situation improved after the introduction of a Ukrainian Humanitarian Fund in 2019, which channelled money to local organisations, such as faith-based charities, that could operate more freely in separatist-held Donbas. A 2020 UN humanitarian response plan promised, *inter alia*, to get aid to more than a million recipients in these areas. By 2021, many programs in Donbas were shifting from emergency aid to development.

Russia's massive February offensive has inevitably changed the scale and complexity of the humanitarian challenge facing the UN. By the summer, Ukraine had lost control of 20 per cent of its territory (including Crimea and the parts of Donbas held by Russian-backed forces since the start of the war), and aid workers have struggled to get assistance into many occupied areas due to hostilities. In the first half of September, Ukrainian forces began taking back chunks of occupied land – a counter-offensive that soon accelerated dramatically – but conditions near the front and in those areas most recently occupied by Russia are especially dire. Many civilians remain without basic services and housing suitable for the coming winter. A food riot reportedly erupted in August at an aid distribution point in Mariupol, which Russia had captured after intense fighting, and a cholera epidemic also threatens the battered city.⁶¹

Russia blames Ukrainian forces for hampering relief efforts, accusing UN officials of mimicking Ukrainian narratives that place all the onus on Moscow.⁶² But there is evidence that Russia compels inhabitants of Ukrainian territory it controls to undergo “filtration” (detention and interrogation) in squalid conditions and that it has forcibly relocated Ukrainian civilians to Russia.⁶³

UN aid agencies face several obstacles to getting more aid to Russian-occupied areas. These include security concerns and fears that Russia may manipulate aid – for example, by channelling it only to displaced persons who appear to acquiesce to the occupation. Kyiv has been critical of the International Committee of the Red Cross for ostensibly cooperating too closely with Russian forces, although aid workers say

⁶⁰ Lisa Schlein, “Little humanitarian aid reaching Ukrainians in Russian-controlled areas”, *Voice of America*, 26 August 2022.

⁶¹ “‘Hunger riot’ takes place in Mariupol due to lack of humanitarian aid – adviser to the mayor”, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 30 August 2022.

⁶² See Gowan, “An Agenda for the UN Secretary-General’s Visit to Russia and Ukraine”, *op. cit.*

⁶³ See the reports in “‘We Had No Choice’: ‘Filtration’ and the Crime of Forcibly Transferring Ukrainian Civilians to Russia”, Human Rights Watch, 1 September 2022.

their Ukrainian counterparts are more pragmatic in private.⁶⁴ Ukraine will surely oppose any arrangement between the UN and Russia that appears to legitimise Moscow's occupation, especially to the extent Russia claims sovereignty over any of the land it holds. Western donors are also likely to balk at funding any aid operations that could be construed as abetting Russia's control of Ukrainian territory. Nonetheless, with winter imminent, it is a humanitarian imperative to try improving access to Russian-occupied areas.

UN humanitarian officials have already played a significant part in talks with Moscow and Kyiv over the Mariupol steelworks evacuation and the Black Sea grain deal; they should now try to persuade the Russians to allow humanitarian access to occupied areas for reputational reasons and to avert threats of disease and disorder. The Ukrainian government, meanwhile, emphasises that it views the inhabitants of occupied areas as full citizens who deserve support, with the UN possibly the only actor able to help deliver the assistance they need.⁶⁵ Still, Kyiv also has to factor in the concern that aid agencies' inevitable collaboration with de facto authorities could bolster their legitimacy. If donors do not wish to appear to be legitimising proxy authorities or to be financing the costs of the Russian occupation, they may find it helpful to pool funds through the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, as this mechanism backs aid efforts that carry no donor's flag. A related challenge will be finding a way to conduct independent needs assessments and monitoring of aid distribution to ward off accusations of Russian manipulation.

In the meantime, the UN should also look at ways to support Ukrainian volunteer networks working along the front, who already play an important role in getting aid to vulnerable people in combat zones on both sides of the line. The UN could offer these volunteers grants, salaries, training and protective equipment to help them expand their efforts. There are obvious risks involved in such operations, not least that the same volunteers are often also engaged in supporting Ukraine's armed forces, but the UN has already adopted a "no regrets" policy toward disbursing aid in Ukraine, meaning that it is less risk-averse than in some other places. This approach is the right one: while the political challenges to getting assistance to Ukrainians under Russian rule are considerable, the UN should do all it can to help some of the war's worst-affected victims.

8. Drafting a "New Agenda for Peace"

In addition to contending with immediate crises, UN officials and diplomats will also have opportunities to debate longer-term peace and security issues in the coming year. In 2021, Secretary-General Guterres released a report entitled "Our Common Agenda", exploring the future of international cooperation.⁶⁶ The report focused on issues such as climate change, pandemics and economic inequality. It had less to say about security and crisis management. Guterres did, however, promise to prepare a

⁶⁴ See, for example, "Iryna Vereshchuk: Forced deportees to Russian Federation should get in touch as soon as possible – everyone will get help", Government of Ukraine, 27 March 2022.

⁶⁵ See, for example, "Tell people in the occupied territories about Ukraine, that the Ukrainian army will definitely come – address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy", Ukrainian Presidency, 13 June 2022.

⁶⁶ "Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General", UN, 2021.

“New Agenda for Peace” covering these topics. The UN Secretariat is working on this document – with a tentative publication date in mid-2023 – as part of preparations for a Summit for the Future, slated for 2024, at which leaders are meant to discuss a broad set of potential UN reforms.

The proposed paper’s title harks back to “An Agenda for Peace”, produced in 1992 by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and outlining the UN’s role in international security after the Cold War.⁶⁷ That report remains the conceptual foundation for much of the organisation’s subsequent work in conflict prevention, peacemaking and peacebuilding. UN officials caution that, whereas Boutros-Ghali had the luxury of writing in a period of international amity, the drafters of the “New Agenda for Peace” will need to account for the realities of high global tensions.⁶⁸

In the wake of Russia’s attack on Ukraine, diplomats in New York have expressed growing interest in what Guterres will say about security matters. In consultations in early 2022, General Assembly members agreed that the New Agenda should focus on “strategic risks”.⁶⁹ The report’s drafters will have to interpret that prompt carefully. They will need to reflect both the challenges raised by Russia’s actions – including the risks of interstate war involving nuclear powers – but also the national security concerns of non-Western UN members.

As he considers the scope of the report, Guterres would be wise to adopt a broad definition of “strategic risks”, talking both about the need to reduce the threats of nuclear use, but also about sources of instability in the Global South, such as the proliferation of small arms, inequality and the challenges poorer states face in delivering basic services to their citizens. Guterres can also emphasise cross-cutting themes, such as the consequences of climate change for conflict (discussed further in the next section) and the rise of online disinformation and misinformation as a factor in political instability, which can be seen in conflicts in all regions.

The report will also need to reflect on the UN’s conflict mitigation and peacemaking tools, their usefulness and ways to improve them. Guterres may want to strike a modest tone in addressing these points. He has made clear in the past that he believes UN peacekeeping forces have been given tasks – such as containing terrorist threats in Mali – that are beyond their capabilities.⁷⁰ He could use the New Agenda to repeat his past warnings about misusing blue helmet missions, but he could also remind member states that – as numerous studies have confirmed – these missions *can* succeed when deployed in support of credible peace processes and agreements.⁷¹ Looking beyond peacekeeping and peacebuilding, the report should also flag the UN’s

⁶⁷ See UN document A/47/277 – S/24111, 17 June 1992.

⁶⁸ Richard Gowan, “Priorities for the UN’s New Agenda for Peace”, speech, UN event regarding “A Common Agenda for Peace”, 4 August 2022.

⁶⁹ See paragraph 3.2.4 of the President of the General Assembly’s note, “Our Common Agenda: Summary of Thematic Consultations”, May 2022.

⁷⁰ See “Unrealistic demands on UN peacekeeping costing lives and credibility – Guterres”, UN News, 28 March 2018.

⁷¹ See, for example, Barbara F. Walter, Lise Morjé Howard and V. Page Fortna, “The Astonishing Success of Peacekeeping,” *Foreign Affairs*, 29 November 2021; Lisa Hultman, Jacob D. Kathman and Megan Shannon, *Peacekeeping in the Midst of War* (Oxford, 2020); and Jessica Di Salvatore and Andrea Ruggieri, “The Effectiveness of Peacekeeping Operations”, in William R. Thompson (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Empirical International Relations Theories* (Oxford, 2018).

potential role in fostering ideas about revitalising arms control and collective security mechanisms in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine. In a period when many governments and organisations are focusing on deterrence, UN agencies such as the UN Institute for Disarmament Research should try to seed thoughts about how to ease major-power tensions in the future.⁷²

In their spring consultations, General Assembly members also indicated a desire to see the New Agenda discuss "regional prevention".⁷³ Guterres has always advocated for strong UN support for the African Union in particular; he will likely use this paper as a chance to contend that the UN should better fund AU stabilisation operations (discussed further below). But the New Agenda should also address how the UN can help promote confidence-building measures and collective security arrangements in parts of the world, like the Middle East, where solid regional organisations are absent, as Crisis Group has previously argued.⁷⁴

A topic the New Agenda drafters can probably leave out is the perennial bugbear of Security Council reform. As part of the follow-up to "Our Common Agenda", Guterres appointed a High-Level Panel on Effective Multilateralism – chaired by former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and former Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven – to discuss improvements to global governance.⁷⁵ The panelists will have to opine on options for Council reform in light of current international tensions, but the chances of the U.S., China, Russia and the wider membership finding common ground on fundamental alterations to the Council, which would be required under the UN Charter's terms, are virtually nil. The authors of the New Agenda for Peace, and UN officials generally, will need to keep innovating as best they can with a flawed multilateral system.

9. Channelling UN Funding to AU Operations

Long-running disputes over UN funding for African Union-led peace operations continue to be an irritant in relations between the Security Council and AU member states. As the UN missions in the DRC and Mali, as well as the Central African Republic (CAR), find it increasingly difficult to protect civilians, African diplomats in New York have begun questioning whether these missions are fit for purpose. With some continental actors rallying their neighbours to address insecurity through ad hoc coalitions in the Sahel and now in the eastern DRC, a dormant debate over the UN's role in assisting and partly funding certain future initiatives led by the AU is re-emerging. Some African Council members are now keen on revisiting the topic. If they are to stand any chance of securing assistance, they should first encourage greater cohesion among AU member states and then build on the extensive work their predecessors have done on this file.

Debate about whether the UN should fund continental peace operations dates back at least 2008, when a joint UN-AU panel took up the subject. The Obama administra-

⁷² On options for the UN on misinformation/disinformation and arms control, see Richard Gowan, "The Ukraine War and UN Reform", speech, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 3 May 2022.

⁷³ See source at note 69 above.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°212, *The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown*, 27 April 2020.

⁷⁵ For details, see the website of the High-Level Advisory Board for Effective Multilateralism.

tion appeared to get behind a cost-sharing proposal, under which the AU would pick up 25 per cent of the tab and the UN 75 per cent. But Washington's enthusiasm flagged, the AU struggled to identify how it would pay its share and Council members expressed a range of misgivings. Divisions between the UN and AU on this issue deepened in late 2018 when Ethiopia tried unsuccessfully to get a draft resolution through the Council that would have committed the UN to providing assessed contributions based on the previously proposed 25/75 split.⁷⁶ That endeavour fell short owing to strong objections from the U.S. (then under the Trump administration) and UK, with the former threatening to wield its veto. Another attempt by South Africa to revisit the proposal the following year also failed due to differences among African member states.

While the initiative has since been on pause, there are indications that space to renew discussions of funding questions could open back up. An informal Security Council Arria Formula meeting on strengthening regional organisations' attempts to address conflicts in July was the most recent attempt to broach the issue. At the meeting, which was organised by Ghana, the High Representative for the AU Peace Fund Donald Kaberuka devoted his full remarks to AU-led operations' need for UN assessed contributions, which would give them predictable, sustainable and flexible funding.⁷⁷ Kaberuka provided assurances that the AU has taken adequate measures to address concerns over sticking points like its ability to uphold the UN's stringent fiduciary standards, financial governance requirements and compliance conditions including relating to human rights. Kaberuka also argued that the AU might be better placed than the UN to stem violence in conflicts like those in CAR and Mali, if it had more systematic access to funding.

Geopolitical dynamics in the wake of the Ukraine war may force even the Council's more sceptical members to adjust their positions on the issue. Some Western officials who are hesitant about the UN funding AU-led operations admit in private that they may soften their stance as their governments jockey for support from African states in multilateral settings. Still, the slightly more amenable political circumstances are no guarantee of progress on the issue.

Against this backdrop, some African officials are apparently weighing the prospects of a renewed attempt to table a resolution before the end of the year that would set the stage for the UN to use assessed contributions toward co-financing AU-led peace operations. Some African Council members have argued that if the UN does not adapt and find ways to partner with the AU, more African governments may follow in the footsteps of their Bamako counterparts in seeking alternative arrangements, including with the notorious Wagner Group. Proponents of such a mechanism argue that AU forces are positioned to do essential peace and security work that UN peacekeepers cannot, including tackling the spread of jihadism in Africa. Whether the Council is prepared to allocate funding for counter-terrorism missions that UN peacekeep-

⁷⁶ For more, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°286, *The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations*, 31 January 2020; and N°279, *A Tale of Two Councils: Strengthening AU-UN Cooperation*, 24 June 2019.

⁷⁷ Donald Kaberuka, statement to UN Security Council Arria Formula meeting on "Collective security through equitable burden sharing: Strengthening regional arrangements for the maintenance of international peace and security", 27 July 2022.

ers themselves could not undertake remains an open question, although UN funding for the AU mission in Somalia is arguably a precedent.

African member states exploring options to reignite these discussions should focus on two areas. First, they must set clear guardrails on their proposals making clear that UN assessed contributions would only be used for AU-led operations. Opening this debate up to sub-regional organisations or ad hoc regional coalitions would introduce too many variables and further complicate prospects of an agreement. It may not fulfil the aspirations of all regional capitals that the UN directly assist them in weeding out threats posed by terrorist groups, but it could enable the AU to come up with more realistic alternate options.

Secondly, African member states should heed the lessons learned from the experiences of Ethiopia and South Africa before seeking to table a draft text. In particular, they should keep seeking agreement on how much funding they can guarantee for AU peace operations themselves. While AU members are committed to covering 25 per cent of these costs in theory, what their pledge means in practice is a point of contention.⁷⁸ An AU Assembly decision clearly outlining the member states' commitment to cover their share of the split at the AU summit in February 2023, for instance, could create momentum toward a Council resolution and assure U.S. and British diplomats that the AU will pay its share. In the interim, African Council members should consult with their Western counterparts, including at the annual joint consultative meeting in October between AU Peace and Security and UN Security Council members, to re-emphasise their interest in a resolution. Such consultations combined with consensus regarding the AU's financial burden on the continent will be essential to ensuring progress on a thorny issue.

10. Advancing the Climate Security Agenda in the Security Council

In December 2021, Russia blocked a Security Council resolution outlining a more systematic UN approach to analysing and responding to the links between climate and conflict.⁷⁹ The failed initiative lowered the ceiling on the Council's aspirations for tackling climate security issues in 2022; it was a missed opportunity to better position the UN to address the impact of climate change on conflict, such as how droughts, heat waves, erratic precipitation and rising sea levels can fuel instability by exacerbating food insecurity, displacement and competition for resources. Still, despite fears that the resolution's quashing could halt – or even reverse – climate

⁷⁸ There are differing views among AU member states, for instance, regarding whether the AU Peace Fund would be best used to fund peace operations or mediation and prevention. There are also counter-proposals weighed by continental actors that would include the AU using in-kind contributions, as opposed to cash, to cover its 25 per cent share. These divisions undermined South Africa's attempt to advance the debate in 2019. They have not been fully resolved since then, despite an understanding that a common position among AU member states would likely be a prerequisite before progress at the Security Council. For more, see Crisis Group Report, *The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations*, op. cit.

⁷⁹ For more, see Ulrich Eberle, Ashish Pradhan and Richard Gowan, "Can the UN Security Council Agree on a Climate Security Resolution?", Crisis Group Commentary, 20 October 2021; Crisis Group Statement, "Time for the UN Security Council to Act on Climate Security", 7 December 2021; and Crisis Group Commentary, "How UN Member States Divided Over Climate Security", 22 December 2021.

security gains, proponents have found enterprising ways to keep the agenda alive. They should explore ways to expand it further in 2022-2023.

The December draft resolution, spearheaded by Ireland and Niger, was a chance to upgrade the Council's ad hoc and country-specific engagement on climate security to a more comprehensive one. The text, however, was blocked by a veto from Russia with India also voting no. Both these members, along with China, argued that the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was the more appropriate forum to tackle climate-related issues. Brazil's entry to the Council in January strengthened the bargaining power of the Council's climate-security sceptic bloc and closed off the pathway to another thematic resolution for the year. Supportive members were thus forced to temper their ambitions as the focus turned from expanding the agenda to preserving it as, in the months since the veto, even previously settled ways of dealing with climate security issues became contentious.

Proponents centred their objectives around country-specific resolutions and statements where they aimed to safeguard pre-existing climate-security language and expand it where possible. Previously agreed language, especially on a thematic issue such as climate security, is generally straightforward to repeat in new versions of a UN peacekeeping mission mandate. At issue was language that, among other things, tasked UN missions to provide advisory support to governments to address the adverse impacts of climate change and generate risk assessments on climate change to improve humanitarian aid delivery. The debate over the UN mission in Afghanistan was the most tense as India (the leader of the sceptical bloc) strongly objected to direct mentions of climate change's impact on conflict, agreeing only to more oblique references.⁸⁰ The renewal of UN missions in South Sudan and Somalia also featured differences over climate-related language, but the Council's sceptical members backed down, apparently unwilling to undermine UN operations over climate security issues.

India did, however, successfully block the adoption of two draft presidential statements (which require consensus among all fifteen Council members) on West and Central Africa, which sought to address recent security challenges in both regions. In both cases it cited objections to the inclusion of climate-related language.

Aside from engaging in these debates, the climate security agenda's proponents have also convened several discussions on both thematic and country-specific cases aimed at bringing more evidence forward tying climate change to conflict. Some of these convenings have also been linked directly to negotiations on UN mission mandates. The United Arab Emirates organised an Arria Formula meeting in March, at which it sought to spotlight concerns voiced by, among others, the Council's African members regarding the need for greater climate adaptation and mitigation funding for developing countries. An Informal Expert Group of Council members on climate security – a mechanism launched by Germany and Niger in 2019 – also held discussions on Iraq and Mali ahead of the renewals of UN missions in both countries.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, UN Security Council diplomat, New York, August 2022. In general, India argued that all climate-related language should be struck from Council texts following the veto of the climate security resolution.

⁸¹ This Group was formed following an initiative led by Germany and Niger in 2020. It is meant to provide an informal platform for discussions on issues related to climate security and to allow members to hear from experts working on the issue. The body does not have a formal status and some members, like Russia and India, have not participated in meetings while others, like China, have

There are plans for further informal discussions – on both thematic and country-specific topics – to be held before the end of the year.

Changes to the Council's membership in 2023 could provide opportunities to re-invigorate the climate security agenda. India will exit the Council at the end of 2022. Concerned members like Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates – the latter is keen on linking its Council term with its chairing of COP28 in November 2023 – should work closely with African counterparts that have been vocal about the impact of climate change on conflict to explore new areas of action.

These members should continue bringing research and evidence forward to address Russia's reservations. At the very least, proponents of a more robust agenda should continue the twin approach of continuing to preserve and expand climate security language in country-specific resolutions and consolidating the evidence of the impact of climate change on conflict. Russian objections may continue to limit significant progress on a thematic resolution on climate security, but members with channels to Moscow should use all avenues in New York and through their capitals to test the feasibility of a renewed effort to systematise the UN's approach to this growing global challenge.

IV. Conclusion

It has been a turbulent year since the last high-level week at the UN General Assembly, and the next twelve months may prove even more so. The global economic downturn could translate into more humanitarian crises and political instability, posing unexpected challenges for the Security Council and UN officials. The war in Ukraine will surely continue to cast its shadow over multilateral diplomacy. Even if there is a pause or halt to hostilities, Russia and the West will continue to have unpredictable relations at the UN. The list of challenges outlined above will inevitably prove incomplete. Nonetheless, these ten items show why the UN's presence in many countries – and its focus on global policy questions – remain useful and important. Even in an era of acrimonious major-power competition, the institution has shown resilience and the capacity to offer aid and protection in crises where other actors are unable or unwilling to step into the breach.

New York/Brussels, 14 September 2022

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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September 2022

Appendix B: Crisis Group Special Reports and Briefings since 2019

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Nineteen Conflict Prevention Tips for the Biden Administration, United States Briefing N°2, 28 January 2021.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.



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