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*Commentary*

# THE NEXT UN SECRETARY-GENERAL: AN OFFICE BUILT FOR ANOTHER ERA

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On January 1, 2027, the United Nations (UN) will have a new Secretary-General. The race to lead the organization is underway, and attention has focused on who should occupy the office. The harder question is what member states are prepared to do once the selection is complete.

During the post-Cold War period, member states gave the UN broader responsibilities in areas ranging from peacebuilding and humanitarian action to human rights, sustainable development, and climate cooperation. This expansion took place during a period of comparatively strong cooperation among the major powers, reflected in unusually high levels of Security Council consensus and broad confidence that multilateral institutions could take on a larger role in managing international problems.

This "Golden Age" of multilateralism is now over, and gave way to renewed strategic rivalry, weaker major-power consensus, declining confidence in multilateral cooperation, and a growing number of alternative forums through which states could pursue their interests.

As geopolitical conditions changed, member states rarely revisited what they had assigned to the UN, reflecting that international institutions and the responsibilities that states entrust them with tend to evolve more slowly than the political environment in which they emerge. The result has been a widening mismatch between what member states expect of the UN and what they are prepared to support. This also changes the meaning of the 2026 selection process. The central question is no longer simply who is best qualified to lead the organization, but whether member states will provide the conditions under which effective leadership remains possible.

## HOW DID WE REACH THIS POINT TODAY?

Three developments have made that mismatch progressively harder to manage.

The first is the fragmentation of governance. As the responsibilities expected of international organizations expanded, member states created new institutions to carry them, each with its own governing board, funding arrangements, and organizational priorities. When coordination problems have emerged, the response has been to add coordinating mechanisms rather than to simplify. The way the UN delivers development assistance illustrates that: dozens of agencies, funds, and programs operate in the same country, each with its own governing board, budget, and mandate. To improve coordination between them, member states created the Resident Coordinator system, under which a senior UN official in each country is responsible for bringing these organizations together behind common priorities. In 2018, the General-Assembly strengthened that system by giving Resident Coordinators greater independence from individual agencies and making them more directly accountable to the Secretariat.

The reform improved coordination, but it did not change who controlled the agencies, their funding, or their mandates. The Secretariat gained a stronger coordinator, but not greater authority over the system the coordinator was expected to bring together.

The second development is the erosion of predictable financing. Assessed contributions have become unreliable, with arrears approaching USD 1.6 billion by late 2025. The 2026 regular budget was reduced to USD 3.45 billion, with staffing reductions approaching 19% compared to 2025. The financial framework has also become less resilient. Until July 2026, unspent appropriations had to be returned to member states, even when underspending resulted from cash shortages caused by non-payment, late or partial payment. Nearly USD 300 million was returned in 2026, nearly 10% of the regular budget. Although the General Assembly has since revised this rule, the change does not address the foundational problem of unpaid assessed contributions. Voluntary contributions increasingly arrive with earmarks and other conditions attached, limiting the Secretariat's ability to allocate resources according to system-wide priorities. The Secretary-General must manage financial constraints that largely stem from decisions made by member states.

The third is the weakening of geopolitical consensus. The expansion of the UN's responsibilities after the Cold War rested on three conditions: sufficient cooperation among the permanent members of the Security Council, sustained US support for the organization, and broad agreement on the purposes the UN should serve. Each has weakened. Divisions among the permanent members have deepened. US engagement has become less predictable. A growing number of member states contest elements of the institutional and normative agenda that expanded after the Cold War. Major powers increasingly operate across multiple institutional platforms, including regional organizations, “minilateral” arrangements, and parallel financial institutions. Although some emerging economies are pursuing similar strategies, most states have far fewer opportunities to diversify their institutional engagement and therefore depend more heavily on an effective UN.

These three developments are connected. Member states that disagree on fundamental questions of purpose will not agree on how to finance or organize a common institution. Governance fragmentation and financial instability follow from a weakening geopolitical consensus. As that consensus weakened, the arrangements that had allowed the organization to function—periodic agreement among the permanent members, reliable US contributions, and a working majority behind the post-Cold War agenda—became less available. The responsibilities remained, but the political conditions that had made them workable withered.

The selection process illustrates this broader pattern. General Assembly resolution 79/327 consolidated a decade of reforms by requiring candidates to publish vision statements, disclose campaign financing, and participate in public dialogues. The process is more transparent than at any previous stage. The distribution of authority, however, remains unchanged. The Security Council recommends, and the General Assembly appoints, which means any successful candidate must remain acceptable to all permanent members. Procedural legitimacy has widened without moving the decisive gate. The selection tends to produce the least objectionable candidate rather than the most capable one, and the margin between those two categories has grown as geopolitical divisions have deepened.

Candidates are accordingly pressed on leadership, vision, and reform, as though the office could overcome structural conditions by force of character. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan liked to note that “SG” often stands for scapegoat. The observation captured a persistent feature of the office: responsibility has consistently exceeded formal authority. Today, the gap is wider because the political conditions that once helped offset institutional constraints have become less reliable.

None of this diminishes the importance of leadership: every successful Secretary-General has found ways to expand the office’s influence by building coalitions, using convening authority strategically, seizing political opportunities, and exercising moral and diplomatic leadership where formal authority is limited. The next Secretary-General will need to do the same. But while leadership can make the most of the conditions it inherits, it cannot indefinitely compensate for conditions that member states are unwilling to provide.

## HOW WILL MEMBER STATES ACT?

The harder test in this selection year falls on the member states. Three commitments would begin to narrow the gap.

The first is to restore a credible financing compact. Member states should pay assessed contributions in full, on time, and avoid using non-payment as an instrument of political pressure. Predictable financing is the material expression of whether member states regard the institution as worth sustaining.

The second is to align governance arrangements with the coherence that member states themselves have requested. Repeated calls for system-wide delivery will remain difficult to achieve while governing boards, earmarking practices, and institutional incentives continue to pull in different directions.

The third commitment is to realign priorities, mandates, and resources. Member states should retire mandates that have fulfilled their purpose, provide resources for those that remain, and avoid creating new obligations without identifying how they will be met. The Secretariat carries a complexity it cannot prune on its own authority.

The UN80 mandate review process opened by resolution 80/251 will be significant only if it produces substantive decisions rather than additional procedural discussion.

None of these steps requires amending the UN Charter. Each, however, depends on choices that member states can already make within the existing institutional framework. Trust—between the Secretariat and member states, between staff and leadership, and between the Global South and an institution whose governance still reflects the distribution of power in 1945—will gradually recover if the organization consistently delivers on the responsibilities entrusted to it.

The responsibilities now carried by the office were assigned during a political moment that has passed. The question the selection year should ask is, therefore, whether member states are prepared to govern the organization differently.


## About the Author

Thibault Camelli is a research scholar with the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, specializing in multilateral governance, United Nations reform, and the selection and leadership of the UN Secretary-General. Before joining academia, he served as a French and European Union diplomat to the United Nations, where he negotiated issues relating to UN financing, governance, and institutional reform.

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