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THE SECRETARY- GENERAL OF EVERYTHING AND THE UNITED NATIONS OF NOTHING

How Mission Inflation Has Weakened the UN and Why the Next Secretary-General Must Put Peace First

FERID BELHAJ

POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH

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The next Secretary-General should begin with an act of institutional rebellion: refuse to become the Secretary-General of everything. Over three decades the office's political and administrative reach has spread across sustainable development, climate, health, migration, digital governance, financing, gender, food systems, and a still-growing list of global priorities. These issues are not unimportant; the trouble is that institutional ambition has simply outrun institutional capability. Call it mission inflation: more agendas, more coordination mechanisms, more summits and declarations, and a correspondingly diffuse sense of who is actually responsible for what.

This essay draws on the post-1945 architecture of the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the specialized agencies to argue for a return to functional specialization and institutional subsidiarity. The Secretariat should gradually withdraw from fields where other institutions already hold stronger financing instruments, technical depth, or operational authority, while the Secretary-General preserves political capital for the tasks that have no substitute: preventive diplomacy, mediation, collective security, and the preservation of international peace. At a moment of renewed great-power rivalry and multiplying wars, a stronger United Nations may need a more disciplined Secretariat — one prepared to do less, in order to become indispensable again in the one area the Charter actually gave it.

FERID BELHAJ

I. INTRODUCTION: RECOVERING A STRATEGIC CENTER

The next Secretary-General will take office at one of the most dangerous moments in the post-Cold War era. Great-power rivalry has returned as a defining fact of international politics. Wars are multiplying and lasting longer. The Security Council is repeatedly divided on major crises. New technologies are reshaping both economic competition and the instruments of war. And yet, at precisely this moment, the office of the Secretary-General is expected to provide political leadership across almost every major global policy domain.

That widening portfolio is usually presented as evidence of the United Nations' continuing relevance. It can just as easily be read as a symptom of strategic drift. When every worthy cause becomes a priority of the Secretary-General, the office risks losing the concentration of attention it needs for the one responsibility over which the UN holds a genuinely unique constitutional claim: international peace and security.

This is not simply a matter of tone. The UN development system has itself been deliberately reorganized around stronger, system-wide coordination from the center. In 2017–18 the Secretary-General proposed, and Member States approved, what he called the most ambitious transformation of the UN development system in decades: empowered Resident Coordinators, stronger reporting lines to the Secretary-General, new country-team arrangements, system-wide planning, and a strengthened coordination architecture. In 2017 the Secretary-General noted that UN country offices contained, on average, eighteen agencies; today the UN Sustainable Development Group brings together 37 agencies, funds and programmes across 130 country teams. The reform was meant to overcome fragmentation. It also illustrates the institutional habit this essay questions: when mandates overlap, the answer has usually been more central coordination rather than sharper functional boundaries.[1]

So the paradox is fairly simple. The broader the Secretariat's agenda becomes, the more its limited political attention has to be divided among functions for which other institutions often have better tools. The World Bank and the regional development banks can lend. The IMF can deploy surveillance and balance-of-payments support. Specialized agencies bring sectoral expertise and treaty-based mandates. Governments retain the actual power to reform, tax, regulate, and implement. What is distinctive about the Secretary-General is something else entirely: political legitimacy, diplomatic access, and the capacity to put international peace on the table before states that might otherwise refuse to speak to one another.

This essay makes a deliberately provocative claim: the next Secretary-General can make the United Nations stronger by asking the Secretariat to do less. For from an argument against multilateralism, the point is to advocate for a multilateralism with boundaries — a recovery of the functional specialization built into the post-war architecture, and of a principle familiar from another experiment in multilevel governance: subsidiarity. The relevant question is rarely whether an issue matters globally; almost all of them do. It is whether the Secretariat happens to be the institution best placed to lead on it.

II. RETURNING TO THE ORIGINAL CONSTITUTIONAL SETTLEMENT

To understand the present mismatch, it helps to go back to the constitutional moment in which the modern multilateral order was built. Dumbarton Oaks, Bretton Woods, San Francisco, and the agreements establishing the specialized agencies were not isolated diplomatic episodes; together they produced a decentralized architecture in which different institutions were given different instruments, governance structures, and fields of responsibility.

The UN Charter sets out broad purposes, but it also establishes a hierarchy among them. Peace and security come first, in Article 1. Chapter V gives the Security Council primary responsibility for maintaining them. Article 99 gives the Secretary-General an unusual political prerogative: the authority to bring to the Council any matter that, in his or her judgment, may threaten international peace and security. The office was designed, in other words, not as the chief executive of a world administration but as a political post sitting at the intersection of diplomacy, judgment, and international legitimacy.

Economic governance, by contrast, was deliberately placed elsewhere. Bretton Woods created the IMF to promote monetary cooperation and address balance-of-payments instability, and the World Bank to finance reconstruction and, later, development. Both were given separate governance, capital, and legal personality. The specialized agencies followed the same logic: the ILO, FAO, UNESCO, and WHO were never departments of the Secretariat. Under Articles 57 and 63 of the Charter they were linked to the United Nations by agreement while keeping their own governing bodies, budgets, and technical mandates. Coordination was expected. Subordination was not.

Although the Charter never uses the word, this architecture resembles subsidiarity as it later developed in European law, where the question is whether action is better taken at the Union, national, or subnational level. Applied to multilateral institutions, the same logic is useful: authority should sit with whichever institution actually has the mandate, the instruments, and the comparative advantage to use it well. Functional specialization is not the same thing as fragmentation. Done properly, it is what makes coordination meaningful in the first place, because each institution arrives at the table knowing exactly what it brings.

The balance shifted for reasons that were, at the time, entirely understandable. Decolonization widened UN membership and put development at the center of political demand. The North–South dialogue and the New International Economic Order raised expectations of economic solidarity. Humanitarian emergencies expanded operational footprints. The end of the Cold War then produced a wave of optimism about collective action, and the global conferences of the 1990s, followed by the Millennium Summit of 2000, increasingly turned the Secretary-General into the public face of one broad global agenda after another.

The real turning point was not that the UN began caring about development — development had always been part of the Charter. It was that the Secretariat gradually took on responsibility for orchestrating system-wide agendas whose implementation depended on institutions it did not actually control. The 2018 development-system reform made this explicit: the Secretary-General would reassert leadership over sustainable-development coordination, Resident Coordinators would be empowered to steer country teams, and headquarters arrangements would be strengthened to produce a more coherent policy voice.[2] All of this was a reasonable response to fragmentation. But it also pushed the system further toward centralized coordination, at exactly the point where the original architecture had relied on differentiated mandates instead.

III. FROM MISSION CREEP TO MISSION INFLATION

International organizations have to adapt. A United Nations frozen in 1945 would be useless in a world of climate risk, pandemics, cyber threats, and artificial intelligence. Rather than adaptation as such, the real issue is the absence of any disciplined test for deciding which institution should lead on what. Mandates have piled up faster than they have been retired, and coordination mechanisms have multiplied faster than institutional boundaries have been clarified.

Mission creep usually describes a gradual extension beyond an original task. Mission inflation is more serious: objectives multiply faster than the authority and instruments needed to achieve them. Expectation outruns capability. The organization becomes politically responsible for outcomes it cannot actually produce, and the gap between promise and power becomes, over time, a source of institutional weakness rather than strength.

The MDGs and the SDGs illustrate the difference well. The eight Millennium Development Goals were an effective piece of political compression: they made an inflated development agenda legible, measurable, and communicable. Their implementation, though, stayed decentralized by design. Governments changed policy; development banks financed investment; specialized agencies supplied technical expertise; bilateral donors provided grants; private actors created jobs and capital. The Secretariat's role — agenda-setting, advocacy, monitoring, convening — complemented that division of labor rather than replacing it.

The SDGs changed the scale of the whole exercise. Seventeen goals, 169 targets, and more than 200 indicators tried to capture almost every dimension of economic, social, and environmental policy. That was, in its own way, a political achievement, but it weakened prioritization. No single institution had the authority or the resources to direct implementation across so wide a field, and the demand for coherence itself became a major administrative project in its own right: integrated planning, voluntary national reviews, inter-agency mechanisms, financing dialogues, monitoring frameworks, and increasingly elaborate reporting systems.[3]

None of this means the division of labor worked smoothly under the MDGs and then collapsed under the SDGs. It means the broader SDG agenda made the limits of centralized political leadership harder to ignore. The more comprehensive the goals became, the more implementation necessarily spread across governments, financial institutions, specialized agencies, and private actors, even as the Secretariat took on a larger role coordinating the whole. The center acquired responsibility without acquiring anything like corresponding control.

The distinction between influence and execution matters here. Development does not happen because a declaration gets adopted. It happens when states reform institutions, firms invest, infrastructure gets financed, central banks preserve stability, teachers teach, health systems function, and citizens build productive societies. The Secretariat can mobilize, convene, and legitimize — valuable powers, but not ones that should be confused with the operational instruments that actually turn aspiration into outcome.

Mission inflation becomes especially costly once you recognize that the Secretary-General's scarcest resource is not money - though finances are running alarmingly low at the UN - but attention. There are only so many high-level interventions a Secretary-General can make, only so many mediation channels that can be sustained, only so much political capital to spend with rival leaders. Every additional claim on the office carries an opportunity cost, and at a moment of geopolitical fracture, that cost is no longer theoretical.

IV. THE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM: WHEN COORDINATION BECOMES A SUBSTITUTE FOR SPECIALIZATION

The contemporary UN development system makes this dilemma concrete. The UN Sustainable Development Group now brings together 37 agencies, funds and programmes, working through 130 country teams in more than 160 countries and territories.[4] These bodies differ enormously in legal status, governance, financing, and expertise. Some are treaty-based specialized agencies, others funds and programmes created by the General Assembly, others still Secretariat departments or regional commissions. Diversity is not itself the problem. The problem starts when overlapping mandates get managed mainly by adding more coordination, rather than by deciding who should lead and who should step back.

The Resident Coordinator system is the clearest case. The 2018 reform separated the Resident Coordinator function from UNDP and created an independent coordination system reporting to the Secretary-General. The reasoning made sense at the time: country teams were often fragmented, cooperation depended too much on personalities, and Resident Coordinators lacked any formal authority over agencies. The reform gave them stronger leadership, accountability, and system-wide planning responsibilities.[5] But it also created a permanent coordination layer whose entire job is to align institutions that remain, legally and financially, autonomous of one another. It treats fragmentation as an administrative problem rather than a constitutional one.

Funding makes this worse. Many UN funds and programmes rely heavily on voluntary, often earmarked, contributions. Earmarking lets donors direct resources toward favored countries and themes, but it also shapes institutional incentives from the inside. Agencies have every reason to expand into fundable sectors, build up thematic portfolios, and compete for visibility. What results can look less like a coherent system than a kind of multilateral marketplace, in which institutional boundaries follow financing opportunities almost as much as comparative advantage.

Climate action is a useful illustration. UNDP, UNEP, FAO, UN-Habitat, UNIDO, the regional commissions, and any number of UN partnerships all run climate-related activities. Meanwhile the World Bank and regional development banks have expanded their own climate finance dramatically, the Green Climate Fund has become a major dedicated vehicle, and private capital supplies most of the investment needed for renewable energy and resilient infrastructure. The relevant question isn't whether each UN entity can find a climate angle in its mandate — most can. It's whether multiplying institutional roles actually improves outcomes by enough to justify the coordination costs involved.

Those costs rarely show up on an organizational chart. Governments receive multiple missions, prepare parallel reports, and try to reconcile different programming cycles. Agencies negotiate joint frameworks while keeping separate boards, budgets, and accountability systems. Country teams produce common analyses, cooperation frameworks, results groups, and reporting mechanisms. Each of these devices might make sense on its own. Together, they can turn coordination into an activity with its own bureaucracy, its own incentives, and its own measures of success.

The comparison with the Bretton Woods institutions is telling. The World Bank and IMF are hardly free of bureaucracy, and both are, some would say rightly, contested institutions. But their identities stay recognizable because their principal instruments actually match their mandates. The Bank lends and provides policy support. The Fund runs surveillance and provides balance-of-payments financing. When they fail, at least the argument is about powers they genuinely possess. In the UN development system, responsibility is often collective while implementation stays dispersed — and collective responsibility has an unfortunate way of becoming responsibility that belongs to no one in particular.

This is why the development debate matters for the Secretary-General, though perhaps not for the reason usually given. The point is not to diminish development as a priority, but to protect the political core of the SG's office from being absorbed into the management of a system whose real operational levers sit elsewhere. The greatest contribution a Secretary-General can make to development may, in the end, be the preservation of peace. War destroys fiscal space, human capital, institutions, infrastructure, and private investment faster than any development program can offset. Peace is not one goal among seventeen; it is the condition that makes the rest possible.

V. A STRONGER SECRETARY-GENERAL REQUIRES A MORE DISCIPLINED SECRETARIAT

If this diagnosis holds, the next Secretary-General should start not by asking what new agenda to launch, but what the Secretariat should stop trying to lead. That question cuts against the institutional grain — international organizations, like national bureaucracies, find it far easier to acquire mandates than to give them up. But strategic discipline requires subtraction as much as expansion.

The first priority should be restoring peace and security to the unmistakable center of the office. This requires no Charter amendment. Article 99 already gives the Secretary-General a distinctive instrument of preventive diplomacy. It has been invoked formally only a handful of times; António Guterres did so in December 2023 over Gaza, which underscored both how exceptional the provision is and how relevant it remains.[6] The next Secretary-General should treat Article 99 less as a constitutional curiosity than as part of a broader doctrine of early political engagement — bringing threats to the Council, opening mediation channels before positions harden, using the office's legitimacy to keep communication alive among adversaries who would otherwise not speak.

The Secretary-General's calendar should reflect that priority. The office should be judged less by how many global initiatives it sponsors and more by how seriously it engages diplomatically in crises where escalation can still be prevented. Its main interlocutors should be leaders capable of making war or peace, regional organizations with real leverage over conflicts, and states able either to sustain or to block collective action. Public advocacy still matters, but it should support diplomacy rather than stand in for it.

Second, the Secretariat should run a subsidiarity test on every major cross-system initiative before launching it. Is there already an institution with a clear mandate in this field? Does it have stronger operational or financial instruments? Would Secretariat leadership add political value that no one else can supply? And if the UN does act, is there something else it can stop doing to preserve institutional focus? The presumption should shift from automatic addition toward a burden of justification.

Third, development leadership needs clearer differentiation. The World Bank and regional development banks should lead where financing, country policy, and investment decisions are what matter. The IMF should lead on macroeconomic stability, debt, and monetary cooperation. Specialized agencies should exercise real technical leadership within their own sectors, and governments should remain accountable for national delivery. The Secretariat can and should convene across these institutions when a political obstacle demands it, but it should stop trying to become their operational center.

Fourth, ECOSOC and the Chief Executives Board should function as forums for strategic coordination, not as gateways to deeper administrative fusion. Coordination earns its keep when it resolves a genuine interdependence among specialized actors. It earns nothing when it becomes a standing substitute for clear mandates. A system of strong institutions, each accountable for a defined function, is likelier to cooperate well than a system in which everyone has a hand in everything.

Finally, reform should include the politically uncomfortable practice of retiring mandates. Every new system-wide initiative should come with a review date attached. Panels and envoys should sunset automatically unless Member States can point to a real gap that no existing institution can fill. Reporting obligations should be consolidated wherever they no longer change any decisions. Coordination structures should be judged against their transaction costs, not just their stated goals. None of this is austerity for its own sake — the aim is simply to return scarce attention and institutional credibility to the functions only the United Nations can perform.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF RESTRAINT

The next Secretary-General will face strong incentives to promise more. The harder—and ultimately more consequential—choice will be to exercise restraint: to recognize that not every global challenge requires another UN initiative, and that institutional relevance does not grow simply by expanding the agenda.

Restraint is not retreat. It is a form of institutional power. The authority of the Secretary-General ultimately depends less on the breadth of the office's ambitions than on its ability to matter when it matters most. At a time of renewed great-power rivalry, proliferating conflicts, and weakening confidence in multilateralism, that means recovering the political purpose at the heart of the Charter.

The next Secretary-General should therefore be judged less by the initiatives launched or declarations adopted than by the crises defused, the channels of dialogue preserved, and the wars the United Nations helped prevent. This is a demanding measure of success, but it is also the one closest to the unique authority of the office.

History rarely remembers international organizations for how busy they were. It remembers them for the moments when they proved indispensable. The ambition for the next Secretary-General should therefore be at once narrower and greater: not to become the world's chief development officer or the coordinator of every global agenda, but to become again its foremost diplomat, mediator, and guardian of international peace.

A United Nations that does fewer things, but makes itself indispensable in the things only it can do, would not represent a retreat from multilateralism. It might be the surest way to make multilateralism credible again.

NOTES

- [1] António Guterres, remarks on repositioning the UN development system, 5 July 2017 and 31 May 2018; United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 'Our Impact in Coordination' (2026). The 2017 remarks stated that UN country offices then had an average of 18 agencies and proposed stronger Resident Coordinator reporting lines and headquarters accountability; the 2018 reform was described by the Secretary-General as the most ambitious transformation of the UN development system in decades.
- [2] António Guterres, remarks to ECOSOC on repositioning the UN development system, 5 July 2017; remarks on the second report on repositioning, 22 January 2018.
- [3] United Nations General Assembly, Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1 (2015).
- [4] United Nations Sustainable Development Group, official website, 2026: 37 agencies, funds and programmes; 130 UN country teams; operations across more than 160 countries and territories.
- [5] United Nations General Assembly resolution 72/279 (2018) and Secretary-General's statements on implementation of the repositioned development system.
- [6] United Nations, Letter by the Secretary-General invoking Article 99 of the Charter, 6 December 2023, concerning Gaza.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

FERID BELHAJ

Ferid Belhaj took up the position of World Bank Vice President for Middle East and North Africa on July 1, 2018. Prior to this, he served as the Chief of Staff of the President of the World Bank Group for 15 months.From 2012 to 2017, Mr. Belhaj was World Bank Director for the Middle East, in charge of work programs in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Iran, based in Beirut, Lebanon. In this capacity, he led the Bank's engagement on the Syrian refugee crisis and its impact on the region, including the creation of new financing instruments to help countries hosting forcibly displaced people; the ramping up of the Bank drive towards the reconstruction and recovery of Iraq during and after the ISIS invasion and the scaling up of the Bank's commitments to Lebanon and Jordan...Read More

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Rabat Campus of Mohammed VI Polytechnic University,
Rocade Rabat Salé - 11103
Email : contact@policycenter.ma
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www.policycenter.ma

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