

# The United Nations in the New Global Disorder: Threats and Opportunities for Stateless Nations

Catalonia Global Institute

**November 2026**
10th Report

Catalonia Global Institute

The Catalonia Global Institute is a think tank specializing in international affairs, whose objective is to provide Catalan society with its own perspective on global politics. We believe that Catalan society and its institutions will be better equipped to project themselves and defend their interests at the global level if they adopt a renewed understanding both of Catalonia's place in the world and of what it can contribute to it. Our activities are grounded in the idea that the international system is shaped by the interests of states, and that Catalonia must define its national interests in accordance with its own identity, values, and aspirations.

Author: Catalonia Global Institute

Published by the Catalonia Global Institute
Available at: https://cataloniaglobal.cat/en/the-united-nations-in-the-new-global-disorder-threats-and-opportunities-for-stateless-nations/

Barcelona, 2026
cataloniaglobal.cat

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

# Table of contents

**Introduction** ..... **1**

**The UN System** ..... **3**

One amongst many: the authority of the UN versus other international organizations ..... 4

**Risks** ..... **9**

The decline of centrality and legitimacy of the UN ..... 9
The gridlock of the UN Security Council ..... 11
Liquidity crisis ..... 14
Member states and the growth of UN bureaucracy ..... 16
The dismantling of the UN Humanitarian System and the UN80 ..... 18
Geoeconomic confrontation and the weaponisation of trade ..... 20
The rise of selective multilateralism and threats from revisionist powers ..... 21

**Prospects** ..... **24**

The debate for Security Council reform ..... 24
Voluntary Veto Restraint ..... 25
Regional seats at the Security Council ..... 27
Strengthening the General Assembly: Backstopping Council Inaction ..... 28

**The Perspective of Stateless Nations** ..... **29**

Leveraging existing institutional shells ..... 30
Existing advocacy and paradiplomatic avenues for engagement in technical and specialised bodies ..... 34

**Proposals for Institutional Reform** ..... **37**

Representation and Non-State Actors ..... 37
The legal and political limits of regional seats ..... 37
The selection of non-state representatives ..... 38
Representation within member states ..... 39

**Conclusion: The UN between decay and indispensability** ..... **41**

# Introduction

This is not the first paper on the United Nations and the new international orders. Earlier iterations were written when the new world order was understood as the post-Cold War era or the turn of the millennium, and, crucially, when reflections on the UN's role were largely optimistic. Despite its peacekeeping failures in the 1990s, the organization was still seen as a central forum where states gathered to legitimize the use of force and, ultimately, to resolve cooperation problems in areas as diverse as climate governance and nuclear proliferation. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's efforts at the Security Council, justifying the intervention in Iraq in the winter of 2003, testify to an era in which projections of power had to be preceded by a defence at the United Nations.

Today, however, we find ourselves in a (new) world order best titled New Global Disorder. This leaves little room for optimism regarding international organizations in general, and the UN in particular. Challengers to the liberal script have altered the expectations of state behaviour and sidelined multilateral institutions. In the current state of affairs, the UN celebrates its 80th anniversary facing profound dangers it must overcome to remain the primary forum for international organization. The UN is currently navigating a dual crisis of liquidity and legitimacy. Financial pressures, driven by funding shortfalls from major donors like the United States and the centralization of contributions into only a few states, have triggered the downsizing and dismantling of both the political and humanitarian sides of the institution.

During the second Trump administration, the U.S. has increasingly retreated from the UN. In a series of executive orders, it has pulled back from key bodies like the WHO, UN Human Rights Council, and UNESCO. At the same time, middle powers have sought alternative international alliances, and China has positioned itself both as an emerging weight within the UN and as a leader of its own, non-Western-led circle of institutions. At the time of writing, all observers agree that global confidence in core UN operations has eroded, and that the Security Council and its decision-making are severely depleted of political backing.

This report is particularly timely as the United Nations prepares the transition of its leadership. In late 2026, the UN General Assembly will formalize the appointment of the 10th Secretary-General, who will officially begin a five-year term on January 1,

2027. This milestone offers a good frame to evaluate the organization's current state, reflect on its systemic challenges, and consider the strategic direction needed for the next era of global affairs.

For the Catalonia Global Institute, one fundamental question remains amid these changes. Are the United Nations still necessary? Despite its shortcomings, we believe the UN remains a positive force within the current international disorder. The UN long served as a symbol and a breeding ground for norms against the use of force between states and within states. Norms that have now collapsed in many parts of the world. We are witnessing a catastrophic erosion of International Humanitarian Law in conflicts around the world, dark episodes of internal repression in civil conflicts, and even a stark return to interstate warfare. And yet these norms and others that the UN has promoted remain essential for our protection as citizens, not only in disputes between states, but also within them. The more vitality and weight these ideas have within political elites, the easier it is to pursue dissent and political transformations without resorting to violence. Despite its deep structural flaws, the UN retains a privileged place at the centre of international affairs, which we believe must be protected and promoted.

In this report, we assess the United Nations' standing in two ways. First, we evaluate the UN's authority and legitimacy compared with a broader spectrum of international bodies. Ultimately, the authority of international organizations matters profoundly because the rise and decline of these institutions is the only channel through which political authority can transcend statehood. Second, we identify the threats it faces within the volatile geopolitical landscape of late 2026. Among these threats, we explore the rise of alternative global forums, the weaponization of global trade and the financial crisis it is facing, and the ongoing "UN80" initiative. We also devote space to an overview of where reform prospects stand today. Finally, we discuss how stateless nations such as Catalonia can leverage the UN's existing structures to exercise international influence, even within state-centric institutions. We review the tools of paradiplomacy, accessing existing institutional shells, and concentrating advocacy in technical and specialized bodies which hold consultations with diverse administrations beyond foreign affairs ministries.

# The UN System

When speaking about the UN we often describe it as one institution, or perhaps a collection of member states voting at the General Assembly or the Security Council. The UN is indeed one institution with these and many other bodies in which member states cast their votes on common resolutions. But the UN is best described as a complex system of entities with varying degrees of capacities and authorities. Some of the imagery we have from the UN, for example, acting to distribute relief at the frontlines of conflicts, belongs to parts of the UN which are very visible because of their size or functions, but which have a very limited amount of authority, because they are agencies executing what states have mandated them to do within strict guardrails. Other parts of the UN, instead, are much smaller and less visible, but have a much higher degree of authority, in the sense that they design and decide policies or standards on behalf of states.

To understand its weight in the international arena we must unpack the United Nations beyond its principal organs and see it instead as a constellation of international organizations possessing diverse levels of authority. The entire UN system is often described as consisting of three distinct tiers. The first is made of the principal organs and the secretariat, including key entities such as the Security Council and the General Assembly, which collectively govern high-level politics, diplomatic dialogue, and issues such as peacekeeping through the Department of Peace Operations. The humanitarian side of the UN is also represented in this institutional framework through the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), an arm of the secretariat. The second tier comprises the Specialized Agencies, which are legally and financially independent international organizations established by separate international treaties; these bodies, including the World Health Organization, the International Labour Organization, and the Food and Agriculture Organization, possess their own legislative assemblies and assessed budgets, and they coordinate with the UN through formal agreements. Although legally separate, these bodies operate in practice in synchrony with the UN, particularly in humanitarian operations, where several agencies work together, coordinated by a single figure, and share logistical resources. The third tier encompasses the Funds and Programmes, such as the World Food Programme, UNICEF, and UNHCR, which are subsidiary entities created directly by the General

Assembly. They have no independent treaty and rely almost entirely on voluntary, donor-earmarked contributions. Some of the most visible parts of the UN belong to this tier and are also the largest in terms of workforce and geographical spread. The WFP for example has well over 10 thousand employees globally.

## One amongst many: the authority of the UN versus other international organizations

Academic interest in global governance has shifted from analysing the rise and expansion of international organizations (IOs) in the post-Cold War era to examining their contestation, gridlock, and decline in the 2020s. Between the late 1980s and the 2000s, scholarship focused heavily on the rapid proliferation of IOs, the delegation of state authority, and how multilateral institutions help foster a range of goods from development to democratization. During this period, scholarly optimism about IOs peaked as liberal institutionalism, a school of thought in international relations, recognized them as central engines of global order. Wallace and Singer made the first systematic effort to track the rise of IOs in the 1970s as part of the Correlates of War project.[i] Their database shows a dramatic expansion of IGOs from the end of the Second World War through the 1990s.

In the 2020s, however, amid the broader crisis of the liberal international order, the academic agenda has pivoted toward understanding the drivers and mechanisms of IO decline and death. But rather than observing widespread collapse, recent literature has found instead that IOs experience a more subtle form of decline. Major IOs possess what researchers call institutional stickiness: the capacity to maintain institutional structures even as their political relevance erodes.[ii] Large IOs rarely dissolve; they instead dwindle in their productivity and international standing when states bypass them in favour of ad hoc coalitions, informal groupings, and short-term transactional arrangements.

The relevance and gravitas of an IO depends on geopolitical competition and how effectively an organization manages to expand its assigned policy domain. Organizations compete to attract and retain policy issues so that states entrust them with problem-solving. In this sense, the IOs of the UN system are among many IOs that vie for a role in international affairs, and as such they are just as vulnerable to the same pressures that are reshaping the form of international organizations at large. Ultimately, all IOs are subject to the level of demand that States have for

institutionalized cooperation and with which other states they wish to articulate it. Even if we treat its distinct bodies and agencies as separate IOs, the UN system can still be thought of as a particular group within the universe of IOs, which allows us to see how they stand as a group within the entire population of IOs. It also allows us to unpack the distinct levels and types of authority that they have, which differ according to their domain and function.

Although the data of the Correlates of War was invaluable for studying the creation, membership, and evolution of international organizations, it provides limited information on their internal characteristics, authority, and institutional capacities. To address this gap, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks developed the Measuring International Authority (MIA) dataset.[iii] Unlike datasets that include almost any treaty-based organization with three or more member states, MIA uses stricter criteria, requiring organizations to possess a permanent institutional structure, significant staffing, a formal constitution, regular decision-making processes, and an identifiable organizational presence. These are organizations with a standing in international politics. By concentrating on more institutionalized and influential organizations, the MIA dataset enabled researchers to examine not only how states cooperate through IOs, but also how the design, authority, and governance capacities of organizations themselves shape international relations.

Drawing on data collected by Hooghe and Marks, we assess the United Nations' institutional authority relative to other international organizations by examining their relative levels of authority. To do so, we unpack IO's authority across two dimensions. First, delegation: how much decision-making and operational autonomy is granted to independent secretariats and non-state bodies. Second, pooling: the extent to which member states entrust sovereignty to collective decision-making procedures by relinquishing the individual national veto. This comparison highlights the range of variation within the UN system, from highly intergovernmental principal organs like the Security Council focused on high politics and security to autonomous technical agencies. By placing UN entities alongside regional integration bodies and other IOs, we can see that the UN system is diverse, but also that it stands out as a group because of relatively high levels of authority, particularly considering that UN bodies have near-universal membership, while others are clustered regionally.

Hooghe et al. conceptualize delegation in terms of the capacities and independence of the international organization's bureaucracy, normally the body called the secretariat. This manifests in the capacity to set the IO's agenda without state interference, manage the budget, and other essential tasks. One must not confuse delegation with other measures of power, such as the budget volume or the size of the secretariat. Seen in this way we can unpack the authority of IOs in surprising ways. The European Union for example has the secretariat (The European Commission) with the highest delegation of all international organizations, but in terms of pooling it is not an extraordinarily authoritative IO, because their member states still require unanimity on most of the matters of high importance on which it rules.

These two dimensions of authority are measured through an index that looks at the formal decision-making rules of the IOs and takes into account the leverage that secretariats must propose and implement policies vis-à-vis States, amongst other elements. In both measures, pooling and delegation, levels close to 0 will indicate a high level of intergovernmentalism, in which states have total control in the organizations. Levels close to 1 indicate a high level of supranationalism, in which the IO has a high level of autonomy and authority over the member states that comprise it. When we plot the measures of delegation and pooling of different IOs in the last year of data in the MIA data set (2019) we observe that there is no clear relationship between the two dimensions.

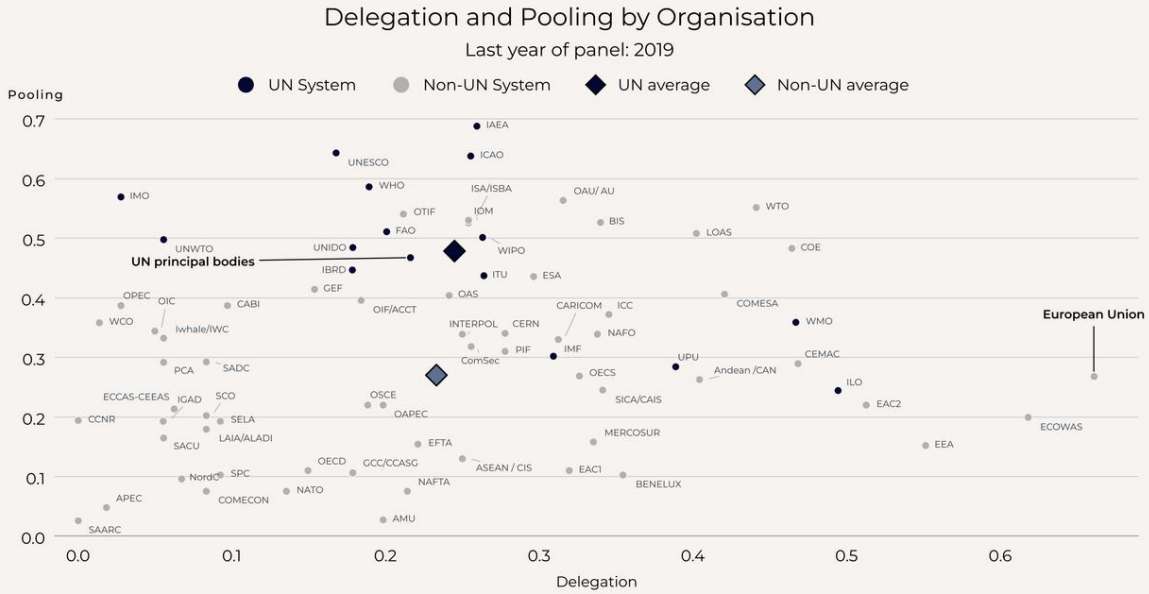
Within the UN system, only very technical organizations with low political weight have the highest levels of delegation, while the UN system's overall average delegation score sits at roughly the same global average as other non-UN organizations. One of the most persistent findings of this strain of literature is that technical specialization correlates with a high authority score. As it happens across the UN system, member states prove far more willing to delegate and share decision-making authority in specialized, non-security domains where uniform global coordination yields mutual benefits. Some technical bodies with important political consequences such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) are also much above average, but these are defined by narrow mandates that focus on regulatory standardization and technical monitoring. At the same time, however, the UN principal bodies maintain a level of international authority that is still not matched by many IOs

created much later. The UN was an early pioneer of multilateral architecture long before the wider surge of IOs with high levels of delegation during the post-Cold War era.

The power of UN system secretariats was much more prominent than that of other IOs before the 1990s. But organizations outside the UN system gained authority to rival the UN system during the mid-2000s. The upward trend in delegation among non-UN international bodies happened during the 1990s, a decade of multilateral optimism, with the redesign of existing organizations and the establishment of new, highly autonomous secretariats. Several regional groups overhauled their founding treaties to significantly expand their independent authority. For instance, the Economic Community of West African States vastly increased its delegation scores based on acquiring new areas of action and the capacity to propose regional policies. Other established regional integration initiatives, most particularly the European Union, also increased their capacities and acquired more autonomy.

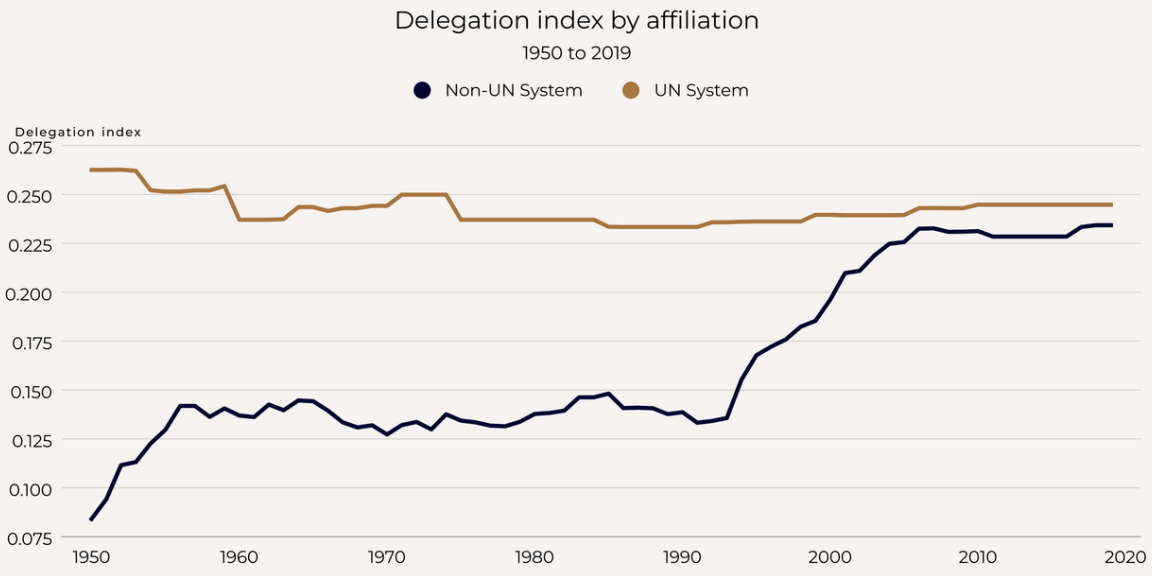
What distinguishes the IOs of the UN system, however, is their levels of pooling. Many UN bodies are technical and have very high levels of pooling because the topics they decide on are limited in scope and political consequence, but even the main UN bodies have a high level of pooling relative to other IOs. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) presents a particularly complex case within this framework. While it possesses unusually strong authority to adopt legally binding decisions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the veto power held by the five permanent members preserves national control for this selected group. At the same time, for non-permanent members and states subject to Council decisions, the UNSC represents one of the most consequential forms of pooled authority in the international system, as binding measures can be adopted without the consent of all affected states. Although the General Assembly does not emit binding resolutions, its members can still be outvoted and retain no veto.

**Figure 1: Delegation vs. Pooling in International Organisations**




[1]

**Figure 2: Evolution of Delegation Levels**




[1] Note: In the visualizations above, the "UN Principal Bodies (Security/Core)" category refers exclusively to the central United Nations organization (coded as "UN" in the dataset). This encompasses the primary organs established by the UN Charter, including the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Secretariat, and the International Court of Justice. All other UN-affiliated institutions (e.g., WHO, ILO, IAEA) are categorized as Specialized/Technical Agencies.

# Risks

## The decline of centrality and legitimacy of the UN

During the last decade, China and other rising middle powers like Turkey or India felt that existing institutional channels constrained their diplomatic leverage and international influence, leading them to seek more bespoke forums they could lead with fewer binding commitments. Observers of international politics have written extensively on the rise of forums that serve as alternatives to those provided by the UN system. There are now dozens of plurilateral clubs and minilateral groupings that have asserted themselves as platforms for political and economic coordination, with varying degrees of success and influence. Alongside this trend, another has emerged: these groups have become a tool for cooperation between groups of autocracies seeking to find international relevance and bypass isolation in the United Nations or other large IOs. A recent example is the alliance between the military juntas of the Central Sahel, which have abandoned ECOWAS in favour of their own group, the Alliance of Sahel States.

Many diplomatic processes have shifted from global or UN-led forums toward what some analysts call transactional minilateralism. That is, ad hoc, self-selected coalitions of States dedicated to solving narrow problems and aligning strategic, technological, and economic policies, rather than cooperating in permanent forums with broader purposes bound by universal charters. This shift is equally visible in health and crisis diplomacy: during the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, China often bypassed designated multilateral channels such as the WHO and COVAX, instead pursuing direct, bilateral vaccine agreements to maximize geopolitical leverage.

In crisis management and security, this minilateral turn is even more pronounced, with sub-regional security arrangements, and state-led deployments that operate outside traditional UN command structures. Some examples over the last five years include the deployment of the Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission in Haiti, a non-UN, lead-nation coalition authorized by the Security Council but managed independently through voluntary funding. Other examples are the African Union-led missions in Somalia and Southern Africa, which do have the endorsement of the Security Council and UN financing, but are left outside UN peacekeeping control.

Similarly, several host governments in Africa have turned away from UN peace operations. The prime example is MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali which ended in 2023 when the Malian government turned to Russian mercenaries to wage war on its northern rebellions.

Despite deriving its international legal foothold from UN Security Council Resolution 2803 (adopted in November 2025 to establish a temporary, two-year mandate for the external administration and governance of Gaza), the Board of Peace stands as the most glaring modern example of a major international stabilization effort that could have been a UN peacekeeping operation but explicitly was not. Chaired by Donald Trump himself and inaugurated in Davos on 22 January 2026, it represents a competitive threat that aims at diminishing UN established frameworks by bypassing them, skews towards authoritarian regimes, and excludes human rights protections. Rather than attempting to negotiate a tailored UN-backed peace operation or test the diplomatic waters for a hybrid mandate, the US administration bypassed the UN's peacekeeping apparatus entirely, delegating governance to an external, ad-hoc entity structured with an Assembly of States, an Executive Board, and an International Stabilization Force that mirrors the UN itself (for Aouardji, a US instrument intended to circumvent and hollow out UN multilateralism). Without a doubt, Israel would have revolted vehemently against any deployment of UN peacekeepers along its borders, given its deep-seated distrust of UN neutrality and severe diplomatic friction with the UN Secretariat and humanitarian agencies throughout the conflict.

The UN is being subverted by alternative forums. This trend, although real, coexists with efforts by all States to gain influence also within the UN. China's strategy is particularly relevant. The Chinese government does not aim to supplant the UN, but to shape it from within by embedding its own political narratives and governance concepts. President Xi Jinping’s Global Governance Initiative, unveiled in September 2025, does not challenge the UN’s centrality. Rather, it explicitly endorses the organization as the "core of global governance" and emphasizes the need to preserve its authority and indispensable role. As the UN faces budgetary constraints and institutional reform, Beijing has significantly increased its contribution and understands the opportunity to expand its influence and advance its preferred version of international order. This year, this policy line has been reinforced through the June 2026 white paper released by China’s State Council Information Office,

titled *More Just and Equitable Global Governance: China's Principles, Proposals and Actions*.

The document positions China's stance that upholding the UN's authority and status is fundamental to implementing the Global Governance Initiative, insisting that nations must adhere to the UN Charter and international law rather than "reinventing the wheel". China has integrated the Global Governance Initiative into its domestic agenda and institutionalized it internationally. At the October 2026 inaugural Global Governance Forum in the Xiong'an New Area, diplomatic addresses by Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi highlighted that over 160 nations and international organizations had supported the initiative, with more than 60 joining a formal "Group of Friends of Global Governance" alongside UN leadership.

Yet in tandem with this discourse, China has established a new entity designed to consolidate its global standing sitting outside the UN system. On July 16 in Shanghai, 29 nations signed the founding agreement for the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization (WAICO). Headquartered in China and referencing the UN Charter, this organization's membership coincides with China's allies and partners, with participants from BRICS, ASEAN, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and with Serbia as the only European member.

## The gridlock of the UN Security Council

The design of the veto system in the Security Council ensures that no binding resolution is passed that threatens a fundamental interest of a major power. Throughout the history of the Council, it has been used to block collective security action in virtually all major conflicts. During the last years it has stopped resolutions on Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine. In Ukraine, Russia has repeatedly wielded its veto to prevent the Council from condemning its military invasion and territorial annexations. In Sudan, Russian vetoes similarly derailed Council initiatives aimed at enforcing ceasefires amidst escalating conflict. This institutional stasis has caused a sharp contraction in the Security Council's output since 1991. This is, of course, not as low as the 10 to 20 annual resolutions during the paralysis created by the Cold War, but it still stands in contrast to the post–Cold War era when the Council frequently authorized ambitious, multidimensional peace operations and political interventions. Today's decision-making output regarding peace operations is largely

confined to mandate renewals and avoids language that can trigger vetoes. For instance, no new peacekeeping mission has been approved by the council since 2014, and the latest annual renewal of the UNIFIL mandate in Lebanon avoided mentioning Hezbollah and called for a general de-escalation. The mission in Lebanon will end its mandate at the end of 2026 and be dismantled likely before a replacement arrangement is agreed.

On 24 February 2025, coinciding with the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Security Council adopted resolution 2774, calling for a swift end to the conflict without identifying the aggressor. Russia had vetoed two of the three amendments proposed by the European members; the third had failed to gain enough votes. The unamended text passed by ten votes to none, with all five European members abstaining. That same day, the General Assembly adopted resolution ES-11/7 by 93 votes to 18, with 65 abstentions; the United States voted against it alongside Russia.[iv] The contrast was revealing. In 2025 the Council adopted 44 resolutions, its lowest total since 1991 and thirteen fewer than in 2021. Only 61.4 per cent were unanimous, compared with an average of 83.9 per cent between 2014 and 2023, and it agreed on eight presidential statements, against an annual average of roughly 22 in 2011–2020.[v] Nor did the first half of 2026 suggest a recovery: the Council adopted 14 resolutions, 57 per cent of them unanimously, while the allocation of chairs for its subsidiary bodies was delayed longer than at any point since 1979.[vi]

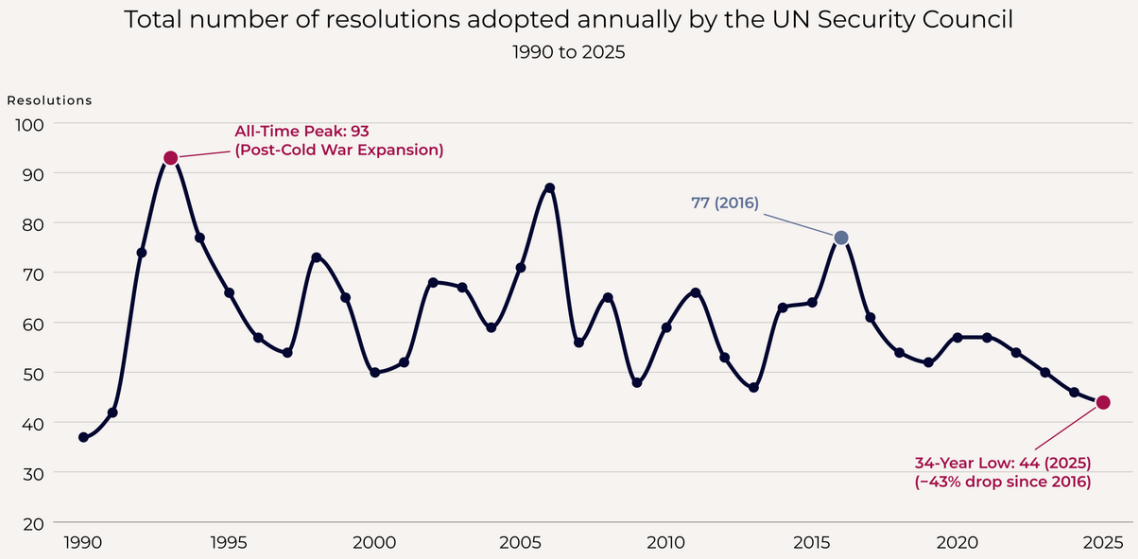
The number of resolutions, however, is less revealing than the conflicts on which the Council has been unable to act. The United States vetoed two Gaza drafts put forward by the ten elected members in 2025, each backed by the other fourteen members. The Council acted only on 17 November, when resolution 2803 endorsed an American plan and authorised a "Board of Peace" and an International Stabilization Force; China and Russia abstained.[vii] Agreement became possible once the permanent member most closely involved had written the terms. On Sudan, the Council made no formal response to the situation in Darfur during 2025 beyond renewing the sanctions Panel of Experts. Russia had vetoed a British and Sierra Leonean draft on civilian protection the previous November.[viii] On Myanmar, where China and Russia have blocked further action, the Council issued only one press statement in 2025. The crisis over the Strait of Hormuz offers a further example. On 7 April 2026 China and Russia vetoed a Bahrain-led draft; a second text on demining,

prepared by the United States and Bahrain, was not brought to a vote because it was expected to meet the same fate. Such cases show the limits of counting vetoes alone. The threat of one can keep a draft off the table or strip it of its substance before a vote takes place, the "pocket veto" that the Security Council Report has suggested an independent body should document.[ix]

It is essential to bear in mind that these absences follow from more than a defect of Council procedure. The international system is anarchic in the sense that no government stands above sovereign states with a general power to enforce its decisions. The UN is an organisation of those states. It can coordinate action, confer legitimacy and authorise coercive measures when its members agree, but it has no independent power comparable to a state's ability to police its citizens, least of all over the great powers. The Charter reflected this reality: it made the Council a concert of the great powers of 1945 and gave its permanent members the means to prevent enforcement against themselves and their closest allies. The authority the Council confers on the use of force depends, in turn, on agreement among those members. A Council capable of imposing a decision against one of them would no longer rest on the same bargain.[x] There is therefore little reason to expect it to resolve a war in which a permanent member or a close ally is a party. Reform proposals that assume a better procedure could make the Council an impartial world government begin from an expectation it was never designed to meet.

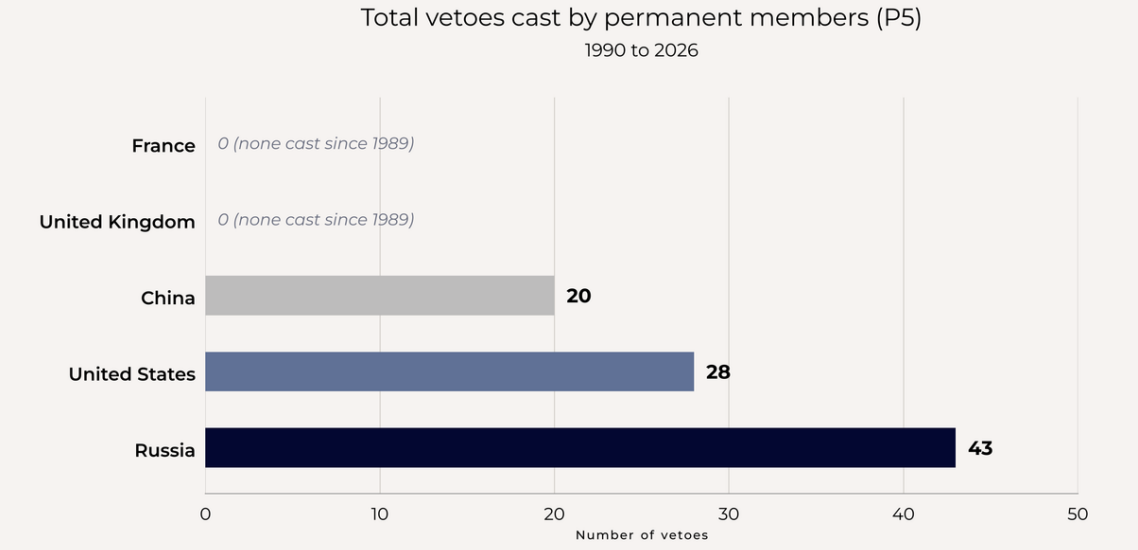
A more realistic expectation of the Council need not mean a weaker standard for its members. They may be unable to compel a permanent member or a close ally, but they can identify aggression and sustain political pressure more consistently. In March 2022 the General Assembly did so in resolution ES-11/1 on Ukraine, while the Council at least enabled the Assembly to take up the invasion after it could not agree on a response of its own.[xi] Nevertheless, the speed of that reaction makes the absence of comparable pressure over Sudan and Myanmar more conspicuous. It also gives governments in the Global South grounds to point to double standards when they explain their distance from the institution.

**Figure 3: UN Security Council Legislative Activity**




Source: Corpus of Resolutions of the UN Security Council (CR-UNSC) / Catalonia Global Institute

**Figure 4: Exercise of Veto Power in the UN Security Council**




Source: Security Council Report & UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library / Catalonia Global Institute

## Liquidity crisis

The lack of financing is perhaps the most tangible aspect of the institutional crisis of the UN. As it is completely dependent on member states for revenue, it is also highly exposed to political non-payment and delays from major donor states. Its financial risk is heavily concentrated, with the United States and China accounting for 42% of the regular budget. At the end of 2025, global unpaid regular budget assessments stood at a record $1.5–1.6 billion, of which Washington alone held about $1.5 billion

(roughly 95% of total regular budget arrears). Across all UN funding mechanisms—including peacekeeping missions and international tribunals—global outstanding assessments surpassed $6.5 billion at the end of 2025, with the U.S. share totalling nearly $4 billion. By mid-2026, cumulative U.S. arrears across all accounts reached an estimated $2.7 billion.

The share of the regular budget allocated to the top five contributing countries increased from 50.7% in the 2013–2015 cycle to 58.6% for 2025–2027. This shift is driven by China's assessment rate, which rose from 5% to 20% over this period, while the United States remained at its cap of 22%. Other major contributors have seen their shares decline or stagnate, with Japan dropping to 6.9%, followed by Germany at 5.7%, the UK at 4.0%, and France at 3.9%. China's commitment applies to the regular budget and does not extend to UN humanitarian agencies reliant on voluntary funding. This concentration amplifies liquidity risks, as these percentages reflect theoretical obligations rather than cash received. As of mid-2026, the United States owed $1.3 billion in unpaid regular budget dues for the current cycle alone.

The UN's financial crisis concerns the availability of cash as much as the size of its budget. Late or withheld assessments by its largest contributors have created a persistent liquidity shortage. With regular budget allocations forced down by 7.26% from $3.72 billion in 2025 to $3.45 billion in 2026,[xii] the Secretariat implemented an organization-wide hiring freeze and a 21% reduction in Special Political Missions. In peacekeeping operations, emergency budget cuts forced a one-quarter drawdown of troop levels, including the repatriation of over 13,000 blue helmets across vulnerable regions such as the DRC, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic. Simultaneously, the human rights pillar (OHCHR) faced a 16.7% budget cut, the elimination of 117 posts, and a sharp reduction in field monitoring missions and recorded country activities—falling from approximately 11,000 in 2024 to 5,000 in 2025—alongside reduced session times for treaty bodies.

For decades, appropriations left unspent at the end of a year were credited back to member states, even when the money had never arrived. In late June 2026, the General Assembly approved a four-year trial under which credits would be returned only when backed by cash.[xiii] The Working Capital Fund offers little protection in the meantime: it covered roughly thirty weeks of spending in 1946 and now covers fewer than four.[xiv] The Secretary-General warned that cash might run out by July 2026,

speaking of an "imminent financial collapse." That outcome was temporarily avoided, largely through China's early payment and a partial American payment.

Arrears also give states a means of exercising influence outside the formal vote. This has long been a feature of UN budget politics.[xv] In the American case, non-payment accompanies the January 2026 memorandum announcing withdrawal from 66 international bodies, including 31 UN entities, a move that Jean Galbraith characterizes as signaling "scorn for the global commons and disdain for the United Nations",[xvi] although Article 17 of the Charter still requires the United States to pay its assessed contributions.[xvii] Article 19 can deprive a member of its General Assembly vote once its arrears reach the contributions due for the preceding two full years. That threshold is a blunt instrument for a continuing cash crisis. Proposals by the Center on International Cooperation, including limited borrowing, a Working Capital Fund able to cover three months of spending and a voluntary reserve, would give the UN more room to manage late payments.[xviii] China has taken a different course. Paying in full and on time can increase its standing in an institution from which its principal rival is withdrawing. Both choices are political, and both have consequences well beyond the balance sheet.

These three problems have the same source. The Council cannot act where a permanent member refuses to let it act. Mandates multiply because states create them and choose which parts to finance. The organisation runs short of cash when its largest contributors delay payment or withhold it altogether. The UN's weaknesses are, to a considerable extent, the result of the choices of the states that compose it. Yet those same states have not found it in their interest to dismantle the institution. They continue to need the authority it can confer, even while weakening its capacity to act. Reform must begin with that dependence on states: more disciplined mandates, more reliable payment and more consistent pressure on aggressors are plausible aims. A coercive authority above the most powerful members is not.

## Member states and the growth of UN bureaucracy

The Secretary-General launched the UN80 Initiative in March 2025 to review the organisation's mandates, structures and working methods. Its second progress report, published in May 2026, sets out the scale of what has accumulated. Since 1946, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Security

Council have adopted more than 40,000 resolutions and decisions; about 4,000 mandates remain in active implementation. In 2024 the Secretariat serviced more than 27,000 intergovernmental meetings and over 240 bodies and produced more than 2,000 reports. Of those reports, 1,100 went to the General Assembly alone, and their average length has increased by 40 per cent since 2005. Yet only 30 per cent of UN entities have an integrated framework that links results to resources.[xix] The volume of work has grown far more readily than the means of deciding which parts of it still serve a purpose.

One figure points more directly to the cause: 86 per cent of the Secretariat's mandates contain no provision for review or termination.[xx] These mandates are created by member states, not by the Secretariat acting on its own. Each government or coalition can secure a task it considers important; however, few have an incentive to relinquish an existing one. The resulting accumulation is the problem described by the UN80 review. The division of responsibility is also visible in the response to it. General Assembly resolution 80/251 establishes a framework for creating, implementing and reviewing mandates. The Secretariat has meanwhile examined possible mergers between UNDP and UNOPS and between UNFPA and UN Women, the transition of UNAIDS in 2026, the integration of the UN System Staff College into UNITAR and of UNICRI into UNODC, and the relocation of more than 2,300 posts to lower-cost duty stations.[xxi] Member states have not answered the Secretary-General's invitation to propose further structural changes. The organisation is being asked to rationalise a body of mandates, some of them overlapping, that its members continue to protect.

Funding reinforces the same pattern. Donors earmark a growing share of their contributions for particular projects, while core funding was expected to account for only about 17 per cent of pledges in 2026. They also finance agencies through separate governing boards and assign them work beyond their comparative advantage, encouraging duplication. UNHCR's coordination structures alongside those of OCHA are one example.[xxii] Research on UN financing has shown how earmarked contributions transfer influence from collective decision-making to individual donors, who can obtain through funding what they could not secure in a vote.[xxiii] This does not mean that the bureaucracy is free of responsibility. International organisations can extend their mandates and defend their own procedures, as a substantial literature has described.[xxiv] But most of the UN's

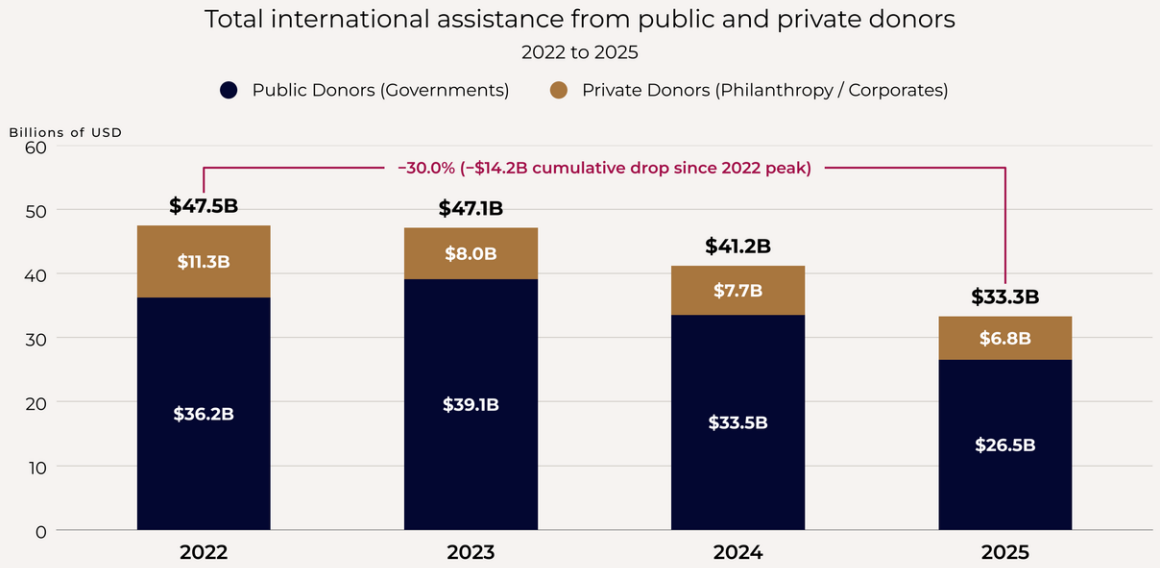
accumulated weight reflects the separate demands of its members. Merger plans and staff relocations may save money, but they will not by themselves change the incentives to create new mandates or to pay only for favoured ones.

## The dismantling of the UN Humanitarian System and the UN80

The contraction of the UN aid architecture is not an isolated adjustment, but rather the primary symptom of a broader "Great Aid Recession" sweeping global multilateralism. This is driven by reductions in humanitarian assistance budgets from major Western donors, most notably the United States, which eliminated its agency for international development and humanitarian assistance, USAID, at the start of the second Trump administration. Voluntary-funded UN humanitarian agencies have faced immediate operational shocks, from which they have not yet recovered. Although all humanitarian organizations have been affected, those of the UN system were particularly reliant on funds from USAID and other agencies which also have seen their allocations decrease dramatically.

In response to this shock, UN executive leadership framed institutional downsizing through sweeping reform initiatives, specifically Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher's Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) "Humanitarian Reset" and Secretary-General António Guterres's UN80 "New Humanitarian Compact". These frameworks have institutionalized a drastic reduction in the sector's operations and staffing. Major humanitarian entities have executed historic workforce retrenchments, with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) cutting global staffing costs by 30% and eliminating roughly 3,500 permanent roles, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) losing nearly 30% of its workforce, and UNICEF trimming over 10% of its staff. WFP is currently undergoing restructuring as well to adjust to more meager budgets. Other parts of the UN that are key pieces of humanitarian interventions have also seen widespread workforce reductions, such as the UN Department of Safety and Security, or UNOPS, the agency that handles the logistics of UN operations.

**Figure 5: Global Humanitarian Assistance Funding Trajectory**




Source: Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2025 & OCHA / Catalonia Global Institute

Launched by Secretary-General António Guterres in March 2025 to mark the organization's 80th anniversary, UN80 is (despite the rhetoric) first and foremost an exercise in corporate restructuring and cost-saving of an organization which has sprawled for decades towards most policy domains, and which has allowed for bodies, institutes, and affiliated entities to be created which have never had a clear financing strategy beyond voluntary contributions, mostly of the same group of large Western countries or governments hosting them. These dynamics are an expectable part of how organizations behave, but so are the political tensions created when they are dismantled.

But with this priority now in place, analysts and diplomats note that UN80 has effectively set aside structural political reform rather than galvanizing it. By channeling multilateral reform energy into internal administrative restructuring, mandate bookkeeping, and agency mergers, the initiative risks becoming a de facto austerity exercise that manages decline while leaving the fundamental power dynamics of the Security Council untouched. Major powers,most notably the United States under the Trump administration, which accumulated $2.7 billion in regular and peacekeeping arrears while demanding deep operational cuts, have championed UN80's administrative trimming. This focus allows powerful states to support UN reform in the form of cost reductions while deflecting pressure away from veto restraint or other political matters.

## Geoeconomic confrontation and the weaponisation of trade

Other risks faced by the UN and, more generally, the multilateral system arise from the growing trend towards geoeconomic confrontation. Once seen as a stabiliser during the liberal period, economic interdependence is increasingly perceived today as a source of vulnerability and, at the same time, of leverage of states against other ones. Farrell and Newman have shown that the asymmetric structure of global economic networks concentrates power in a few central nodes, and that the states controlling them can exploit "panopticon" and "chokepoint" effects, that is, gather strategic information or deny network access to their adversaries.[xxv] What during decades was presented as a depoliticised integration of regional and global markets has thus become a terrain of coercion. Roberts, Choer Moraes and Ferguson have described this period as the passage to a geoeconomic order, characterised by the "securitisation of economic policy and economisation of strategic policy".[xxvi]

The instruments of this confrontation are both of offensive and defensive nature. Among the offensive ones, tariffs are growingly used as an instrument of political coercion, together with export controls on critical technologies such as semiconductors and AI chips, sanctions and secondary sanctions, control over critical minerals and rare earths, and investment screening. The defensive ones include decoupling and de-risking, as well as reshoring and friend-shoring, reorganizing supply chains along lines of political affinity rather than efficiency, which often produces a fragmentation into rival blocs. IMF staff have warned that this policy-driven geoeconomic fragmentation is a multidimensional process, whose costs are transmitted through trade, capital flows, technology diffusion, migration and the provision of global public goods.[xxvii]

Although not a UN body, a multilateral institution such as the World Trade Organization has been so far the main institutional casualty of this shift. The paralysis of the Appellate Body since 2019 deprived the system of its second instance to resolve disputes. As Hoekman and Mavroidis have argued, though, what is really at stake is the principle of depoliticised dispute resolution reflected in the negative consensus rule.[xxviii] In parallel, the "national security" exception of Article XXI GATT has been invoked increasingly since 2019, even for measures on goods with no evident strategic relevance.[xxix] Rules are giving way to bargaining power, and small and middle states lose leverage; the confrontation spills over into non-economic domains such as access to finance, technology and food security; and development

goals become subordinated to strategic competition. At the same time, this is a process that generates opportunities. Diversification strategies among middle powers have accelerated, the signature of the EU–Mercosur agreement in January 2026 after more than two decades of negotiation being one of the most visible examples, even if its ratification on the European side remains uncertain after the European Parliament referred it to the Court of Justice of the EU. As it happens with several UN bodies, and the IMF, pressure to reform the WTO has also grown, and "connector" economies able to bridge the blocs may find a new room for manoeuvre, provided that a pragmatic path for preserving the gains of integration remains open.

## The rise of selective multilateralism and threats from revisionist powers

Over the last decade and a half, the world has witnessed how the authority and legitimacy of multilateral institutions have increasingly been called into question, not only by traditional revisionist states such as Russia, Israel, the UAE or Turkey, but also by the United States under the first and second Trump administrations. At the centre of this criticism are the institutions of the UN system. Rather than facing a terminal crisis, multilateralism is being cherry-picked, in a dynamic in which states engage where it serves them and exit or obstruct where it constrains them. Already in 2021, Lake, Martin and Risse warned that the liberal international order was under challenge "perhaps as never before", and that internal political and economic dynamics were combining with external threats to make it more fragile.[xxx]

Three simultaneous drivers are unravelling the basis of the old rules-based order: global or regional powers, notably Russia and China, that contest its norms while building alternative spheres through regional institutions; rising regional actors that find exit options in new patrons, or that seek to maximize their position by resorting to the use of force; and transnational illiberal movements, also within the United States and Europe. Russia openly violates core norms, such as sovereignty and the prohibition of the use of force, while remaining inside the institutions and using its Security Council veto when it serves its interest. China rather follows a "reform from within" approach: Lam and Fung show that Beijing sees the dispatching of its nationals into international organisations as "a means to shape these institutions from within", often with the goal of weakening human rights instruments and

mechanisms, although results remain mixed.[xxxi] The threats are funding gaps and loss of institutional capacity, normative dilution, a paralysed Security Council and a precedent effect, since if the hegemon exits, others feel free to do the same. The opportunities lie in middle powers, the EU and coalitions of like-minded states filling the leadership vacuum, in more diversified funding, in a revived debate on UN reform, and in a greater role for regional organisations and non-state actors.

The 2026 United States' mass retreat from international organizations has given this trend a new scale. Following initial withdrawals from bodies like the WHO, Human Rights Council, UNESCO, and UNRWA in 2025, the January 7, 2026 presidential memorandum targeting 66 entities (including 31 within the UN system such as the UNFCCC, IPCC, and International Law Commission) formalized this broader withdrawal strategy (as noted in the Liquidity crisis section).[xxxii] In some instances, withdrawals have been used to negotiate institutional change rather than as a definitive rupture. Overall, rejoining remains legally possible for future US administrations, but restoring its credibility as a long-term partner will be a much harder task. Meanwhile, funding cuts and the liquidity crisis that framed the UN80 reform initiative are already eroding the operational capacity of UN agencies.

In some instances, the retreat has been accompanied by the promotion of external architectures which compete with the UN. As such, the "Board of Peace" established under Resolution 2803 (2025) is the ultimate example of an initiative launched outside the UN system to circumvent traditional multilateral frameworks (as discussed above). Rules are, increasingly, made in clubs rather than in universal forums.

Although not a direct threat to the UN as such, BRICS+ has moved from an investment acronym to a political platform for Global South grievances that used to be channelled mainly through UN bodies, such as the G77, UNCTAD or the General Assembly. Intra-BRICS+ cooperation has aimed less at overturning the balance of power than at the gradual emergence of a multipolar order, and at pressing the United States and its allies to apply certain of the existing rules more consistently. The expansion since 2024 (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the UAE and, in January 2025, Indonesia), together with the partner-country category created at the Kazan summit, has given the group a greater demographic and economic weight, but also more heterogeneity; under India's 2026 chairship, eleven members and ten partner countries were listed. As the Carnegie Endowment notes, the meaning of this

expansion remains debated: some analysts anticipate that BRICS could evolve into "a coherent, anti-Western bloc" deepening divisions in the G20 and the UN, while members' motivations diverge, from Russia's wish to build a rival bloc to others' search for status and decision-making power.[xxxiii]

Its agenda (reform of the Bretton Woods institutions, de-dollarisation and alternative payment systems, the New Development Bank, and a critique of Western double standards, for instance in the case of Gaza versus Ukraine) coexists with deep internal tensions: the India–China rivalry, divergent positions on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and the cohabitation of democracies and autocracies. Whether BRICS+ is a coherent bloc or a loose forum remains, therefore, an open question. The main risks are that the UN loses its role as the main forum for the Global South demands, that Russia and China instrumentalise these grievances to legitimize their revisionism, and that development finance becomes fragmented. At the same time, opportunities are the pressure for overdue reforms, such as Security Council representation and IMF quotas, the role of India, Brazil and South Africa as bridge actors, and room for issue-based cooperation with Western partners on climate, debt and health; the exit options offered by new patrons cut, in this sense, both ways.

Another risk associated with revisionist trends is what is known as minilateralism. Post-war multilateralism, the international governance of the "many", in Kahler's words, implied relatively low barriers to participation.[xxxiv] On the contrary, minilateralism inverts this logic, as it instead consists of small, flexible, purpose-built coalitions that trade universality for speed and effectiveness. These alternative forms of collective action represent a complement, but often also a substitute, for traditional UN-based intergovernmental cooperation, offering speed, modularity and experimentation, but at a cost in accountability.

Having experienced a rise in number during the last years, the typology of minilateral fora is diverse, from security coalitions such as AUKUS, the Quad, or the recent Saudi-Pakistan-Turkish trilateral alliance, to economic and trade arrangements such as the Future of Investment and Trade (FIT) Partnership, launched in September 2025 by fourteen small and medium-sized open economies and now counting sixteen members, which works through non-binding declarations and a "variable geometry", a pragmatic pathway for trade-dependent small and middle powers whose utility will depend on delivering outcomes at scale.

Other examples include issue-specific coalitions such as technology alliances, the Ukraine Defense Contact Group or climate clubs. Their common logic is shared interests on specific spheres rather than shared values, low entry costs, no consensus requirement and, often, no treaty basis. The threats are the exclusion of most states, weak accountability and transparency, fragmented and potentially incompatible rule sets, a UN marginalised to a residual role, and a durability that depends on the domestic politics of the core members. The opportunities are that these coalitions may act as laboratories for norms to be multilateralised later (defended by authors such as Pedussel Wu et al. as the "building blocks" thesis),[xxxv] deliver effective action where universal forums are blocked, and give agency to small and middle states, as the FIT Partnership shows. The key analytical question is, therefore, whether they complement or substitute universal multilateralism.

Taken together, these trends point to a shift from a rules-based, universal order towards a more transactional, fragmented and power-based one. The common opportunity is that this vacuum opens space for middle powers, regional organisations and civil society to defend, and to adapt, universal norms.

# Prospects

## The debate for Security Council reform

When Claudia Sheinbaum assumed the presidency of Mexico in October 2024, her inaugural address touched upon the urgency of UN reform: true international security, she argued, cannot exist without eliminating the veto power at the United Nations. Her call to abolish the veto added voices to a consensus among world leaders—particularly non-Western ones—that the current architecture of global governance is out of step with the geopolitical aspirations of middle powers worldwide, the kind that Mexico harbours.

The architecture of the Security Council is the central element of all attempts at reforming the United Nations. This is, of course, because the Council is the only institution in the international system in which the use of force amongst states can be publicly legitimized. It was designed in 1945 to reflect the post–World War II geopolitical settlement among the 51 founding states of the UN. Eighty-one years later, the Council's composition and the concentration of permanent seats and veto

power to China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States diverges from 21st-century geopolitical realities. These oscillate now between the US-China bipolarity and a host of middle but important regional powers. In this configuration, there is no single great power that can claim to be left without a permanent seat, but an accumulation of countries which are regionally indispensable and which, together, make evident that the system is ill-fitted to capture current power equilibria.

While UN membership has expanded to 193 sovereign states, the Security Council has undergone only a single structural enlargement in its history, when a 1963 amendment expanded non-permanent seats from six to ten. Over the last decade, the core pressures for reform have intensified due to two main factors: first, the veto system has hindered the Council's performance and decision-making capacity during major global crises, which has eroded its legitimacy, and second, the understandings of fairness in the international system held by diplomatic elites in many countries have tilted towards greater preoccupation with representation and amplified demands for middle powers to have a stronger voice.

Formal structural reform through the UN Charter itself faces the legal obstacle of Article 108, which requires a two-thirds vote in the General Assembly and mandatory ratification by two-thirds of member states, including all five permanent members. Hence, states holding veto privileges can veto any reform that would modify or diminish those same privileges. Given the rigidity of amending Article 27 to abolish or formally restrict the veto, reform efforts have converged on two primary pathways: voluntary political restraint and reactivating binding Charter obligations.

## Voluntary Veto Restraint

The primary normative push to curb veto abuse during humanitarian catastrophes relies on two complementary pledges: the Franco-Mexican Political Declaration (2015), which proposes a collective, voluntary agreement among the P5 to refrain from using the veto in cases involving mass atrocities, genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (endorsed by 128 member states, with the United Kingdom formally joining on September 22, 2026, during the 81st session of the UN General Assembly to become the second P5 signatory alongside France), and the ACT Group Code of Conduct (2015), authored by the 27-member Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group, which invites all UN member states to pledge not to vote

against credible draft resolutions aimed at preventing or ending mass atrocities (endorsed by 130 member states, with support from France and the United Kingdom among the P5).

Although they are now more than a decade old, both initiatives received political reaffirmation in the September 2024 Pact for the Future and UNGA Resolution 79/327 (September 2025), which called on states to refrain from measures impeding Council action against mass atrocities. However, because these pledges remain soft-law commitments, their practical effect is limited by the refusal of the United States, Russia, and China to sign on.

To limit self-interested use of the veto without amending the Charter, a number of Member States and legal experts have advocated renewed application of the obligatory abstention provision in Article 27(3) of the UN Charter. The provision requires a Security Council member that is a party to a dispute to abstain from voting on decisions under Chapter VI and Article 52(3) (though it does not apply to binding enforcement actions under Chapter VII). The rule was applied on several occasions during the UN's early decades, including a series of cases between 1946 and the early 1950s and Argentina's non-participation in the Eichmann case vote in June 1960, but has since fallen largely into disuse. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, states such as Liechtenstein and members of the ACT Group, together with a number of legal scholars, have argued that Article 27 remains legally binding and should be applied more consistently, particularly where a Security Council member is directly party to the dispute under consideration.

Although the issue gained renewed visibility amid broader debates on Security Council accountability, the 2024 Pact for the Future did little to advance Article 27 beyond reaffirming general commitments to a rules-based order. The Pact neither clarified the provision's interpretation nor established mechanisms to enforce compliance. All in all, efforts to revive Article 27(3) are plagued by disagreements on terminology that mask the political non-commitment of member states with a stake in Security Council resolutions, and of course of China and the US—for example, differing interpretations of what constitutes a "dispute" rather than a broader "situation". To address these challenges, some States, legal scholars, and civil society organizations have advocated seeking greater legal clarity through a General Assembly resolution or an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice

on the interpretation and application of the article that clarifies the scope and binding nature of the obligation to abstain.

### Regional seats at the Security Council

Another branch of reform initiatives has looked at incorporating new seats in the Council based on regions rather than individual states, aiming to broaden representation and incorporate forces that can moderate disputes. Since the inception of this idea, Africa has led advocacy for regional representation. Addressing the UN General Assembly in 2024, President Lazarus Chakwera of Malawi called for two permanent African seats with veto power on the Security Council, noting growing international openness to addressing historical underrepresentation.

Under the Ezulwini Consensus adopted by the African Union (AU) in 2005, the African position demands two permanent seats equipped with full veto privileges and additional elected non-permanent seats. Notably, the Consensus specifies that these permanent seats would be held by individual African member states selected by the AU, rather than directly by the regional organization itself. Nonetheless, internal competition among leading regional contenders, most notably Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt, continues to complicate agreement on which specific nations should occupy potential permanent seats.

To overcome national rivalries, some proposals advocate the Regional Union Model, which would allocate permanent or long-term seats directly to regional bodies such as the AU, EU, ASEAN, or CELAC. However, establishing direct regional seats faces formidable legal barriers under the UN Charter: Article 4 restricts UN membership strictly to sovereign states, while Article 23 defines Security Council membership among UN members. Overcoming these restrictions would require a formal Charter amendment under Article 108. Furthermore, major powers such as the United States and Russia strongly oppose direct regional representation, while the co-chairs' 2026 Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) elements paper records ongoing disagreement over options ranging from additional non-permanent seats to new permanent member categories (see detailed discussion under "The legal and political limits of regional seats" on page 31).

In the European context, establishing a direct EU seat would align the Council with global economic and political realities: the EU and its member states currently supply 30 to 35 percent of the UN regular budget and hold enhanced observer status

in the General Assembly. Codified through a Charter amendment, regional seats would belong to the collective organization rather than a single country. The EU however, is not unlike other regional blocks in its notorious disunity on foreign policy matters, and it is difficult to imagine the voting direction on routinely divisive matters addressed in the Council, such as the conflicts in the Middle East.

Alongside proposals centred on regional representation, other reform models focus on expanding individual membership categories. The G4 alliance (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan) advocates enlarging the Security Council through the addition of six new permanent seats and four or five new non-permanent seats, arguing that the Council should better reflect contemporary geopolitical realities and regional representation. The proposal envisages new permanent members initially serving without veto rights. An alternative group emerged in the 1990s, formed largely by geopolitical competitors of the G4 countries, the Uniting for Consensus (UfC) group. They opposed the creation of additional permanent seats, proposing instead an expansion of elected membership through longer-term, renewable seats. Although the G4 and UfC proposals are still featured in reform debates, neither has secured the broad political consensus that would be required for a Charter amendment. Since the announcement of the UN80 initiative the focus has shifted to the management of the financial shock, and these debates lie now sidelined.

## Strengthening the General Assembly: Backstopping Council Inaction

When the Security Council deadlock prevents it from fulfilling its primary responsibility for international peace, the General Assembly can use Resolution 377 A (V) ("Uniting for Peace"), adopted in 1950. This procedure allows the Assembly to meet in an Emergency Special Session (ESS) within 24 hours to recommend collective measures to member states, including diplomatic isolation, targeted sanctions, and investigative mechanisms. Since its inception in 1950, the "Uniting for Peace" mechanism has convened 11 Emergency Special Sessions (ESS) of the UN General Assembly. Recent activations, such as the 10th Emergency Special Session on Palestine and the 11th Emergency Special Session on Ukraine, seem to prove that this mechanism is still a viable alternative to address crises. In the 11th session for example the Assembly established the International Register of Damage for Ukraine.

One of the most significant procedural innovations in recent Security Council reform efforts originated with Liechtenstein under the leadership of its Permanent Representative, Christian Wenaweser. Rather than seeking to curtail the veto itself, the initiative relied on the General Assembly's existing Charter powers to increase oversight of the Security Council deadlock. Gaining momentum after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Russia's veto of a Security Council resolution in February 2022, the effort culminated in the adoption by consensus of UNGA Resolution 76/262 in April 2022. Under this standing mandate, whenever a permanent member casts a veto, the President of the General Assembly must convene a formal plenary meeting within ten working days, with priority given to the veto-casting state to explain its position and the Security Council invited to submit a special report beforehand. While the mechanism imposes no legal constraints on veto use, it increases political accountability by subjecting vetoes to scrutiny by the wider UN membership. This compels P5 states to justify their actions with hopes of raising the political cost of casting a veto and institutionalizing public scrutiny.

## The Perspective of Stateless Nations

The fragmentation and growing challenges faced by the multilateral order, as described in the previous sections, are usually analysed solely from the perspective of states. This is based on the fact that states are the main actors in international relations, and, as such, the main subjects of responsibilities vis-à-vis institutions, obligations between them, and when it comes to upholding human rights. Yet, the current trends, as well as the challenges faced by the UN multilateral system, are also reshaping the space available for stateless nations, that is, national communities with distinct political identity but without sovereign statehood, although in cases such as Catalonia, the Basque country or Flanders they possess their own institutions of self-government. The external action of non-central governments distinguishes between paradiplomacy, the international activity of sub-state governments within their own competences, and protodiplomacy, an external action aimed at gathering international support for a future secession. Motives, opportunities and strategies range from economic promotion to cultural and political projection. For nations that have a distinct national identity, such as Catalonia, Scotland, Quebec or Flanders, paradiplomacy can be used in a highly political manner, as an element in stateless nation-building. In the context of the

current global disorder, the most promising strategy for them is not to engage in alternative arenas (although this could prove advantageous in some instances), but to insert themselves into existing institutions and to concentrate advocacy in the technical and specialised bodies of the UN system, where sovereignty is less of a barrier.

## Leveraging existing institutional shells

International organisations remain the most accessible avenues for projecting soft power and for legitimising political action. In this regard, even weakened, regional and universal institutions continue to be the place where the rules of membership in international society are written and where recognition is, in practice, distributed. They constitute a game field marked by two features. On one hand, according to authors such as Elin Royles, international agency of sub-state governments is poorly assessed by the formal constitutional powers of the states they do belong, and that it depends much more on the opportunity structures offered by each policy domain, including international institutions and non-governmental networks.[xxxvi] The general practice on state recognition adds a second argument. Using data on secessionist movements and Great Power recognition between 1931 and 2000, some studies have shown to what extent the emergence of new states depended decisively on the strategic recognition decisions of the great powers, and therefore on geopolitical criteria of opportunity, rather than only on the internal qualities of secessionist movements or their action in the framework of international institutions.[xxxvii] In other words, "the right of statehood" is collectively conferred by existing states, and the multilateral institutions in which they meet act as determinant fora where these processes occur.

From this perspective, stateless nations that aspire to statehood should aim to operate within these institutions, rather than creating parallel ones. The case of Kosovo illustrates how partial institutional insertion can accumulate de facto international standing: without formal UN membership (due to the opposition of both Russia and China at the Security Council), it became the 186th member of the IMF in June 2009 and joined the World Bank Group institutions at the same time.[xxxviii] Conversely, the experience of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), founded in The Hague in February 1991 as a platform for stateless peoples with denied international representation, shows the limits of parallel bodies. It offers

visibility and solidarity platforms, but the former members that achieved full-recognized statehood did so through other channels, after which they left the organisation, such as Armenia, Georgia, Estonia or Latvia.[xxxix] In any case, the main relevance of this kind of fora lies in the fact that they serve as a platform which may facilitate engaging more effectively with multilateral bodies, especially within the UN system, through technical assistance and expertise, and consolidated networks.

When it comes to the alternative architectures that proliferate today, they are even more closed in terms of access than the UN itself. Organizations such as BRICS+, the Board of Peace or security minilaterals are exclusively intergovernmental clubs, and their flexibility comes at the cost of weaker accountability and of the exclusion of those who are not invited.[xl] These, of course, do include stateless nations.

The UN system, however, is not as closed as it seems, and a typology of access routes can be identified. Four routes stand out, which belong to two distinct families. The first is *associate membership,* in certain bodies of the UN system. The UNESCO Constitution foresees that "territories or groups of territories which are not responsible for the conduct of their international relations" may be admitted as Associate Members, but only "upon application made on behalf of such territory [...] by the Member or other authority having responsibility for their international relations".[xli] Flanders, for its part, has been an associate member of the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) since October 1997, a status that the UN Tourism Statutes likewise make conditional on the "prior approval of the Member State which assumes responsibility for their external relations" and on a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly.[xlii] The second route is *participation within the state delegation*: since the agreement of 5 May 2006 between the governments of Quebec and Canada, a representative of Quebec sits within the Permanent Delegation of Canada to UNESCO.[xliii] The third is *financial and technical contribution*: Flanders created two UNESCO trust funds, devoted to science and to heritage, and contributed some 33 million euro between 2000 and 2018, which has made it, in its own words, "a very reliable and well-regarded UNESCO donor".[xliv] The fourth is *networks of sub-state governments* with recognised status in UN processes, such as Regions4 (formerly nrg4SD), which became an organising partner of the Local Authorities Major Group within ECOSOC and UN-DESA, and in

which Catalonia has held the chair for the North; the Generalitat has also used the High-Level Political Forum to present its national plan for the 2030 Agenda.[xlv]

These routes, however, do not operate under the same conditions. The first two are routes of *formal representation*, and both are subject to the gatekeeping of the central state: associate membership requires the application, or at least the prior approval, of the state to which the territory belongs, while delegation-sharing frameworks rest on an *intra-state* agreement between the central government and the sub-state government, as in the Canada–Quebec agreement of 2006. The third and fourth are routes through which sub-state actors engage UN bodies directly, as donors, technical partners or members of transnational networks, without the formal consent of the host state. This second family is not free from constraints: it depends on the domestic competences of each sub-state government (Flanders' role as a UNESCO donor rests on the broad external powers that Belgian federalism grants to its federated entities), and the access of networks to UN processes remains mediated by intergovernmental rules, as in the case of ECOSOC consultative status, which is granted only on the recommendation of the nineteen-member Committee on NGOs.[xlvi] These filters, however, are collective and do not give the host state a formal veto. This distinction explains why the opportunity structures of sub-state actors are multilevel, combining the domestic constitutional frameworks and/or power-sharing agreements, the international institutions and the non-governmental networks. For stateless nations, engagement with states operates at three levels. First, with the host state, whose cooperation or blockage often determines the scope of the external action. Second, with like-minded small and middle states, which, as the Future of Investment and Trade (FIT) shows, also look for partners to preserve agency in a weakened multilateral system.[xlvii] And third, with the European Union, which offers an intermediate layer of multilevel governance and coordinates the positions of its members in many UN bodies.

In the Catalan case, this dependence is written into the legal self-government framework itself. The 2006 Statute of Autonomy obliges the Generalitat to promote the presence of Catalonia abroad, within it sphere of competence, it allows the opening of offices abroad and the signature of collaboration agreements within its competences and provides that the Generalitat may ask to take part in state delegations negotiating treaties that affect it. Article 198 goes further and establishes that the Generalitat "must participate" in the international organisations competent

in matters of relevance to Catalonia, with an explicit mention of UNESCO and other cultural bodies, but "in the manner established by the applicable regulations".[xlviii] The provision thus recognises the objective of institutional presence while leaving its realisation in the hands of the State, so that, unlike the formulas secured by Quebec or Flanders, its effective participation depends on the willingness of the central government. While legal openings do exist theoretically, they can only be activated through political negotiation with the host state, or through the alternative routes, financial, technical and associative, that do not require its formal consent. In the case of the Spanish state, unstable internal political dynamics, difficult parliamentary equilibriums, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' inherent tendency towards centralization, and growing polarization, make it difficult to reach agreements in this sense. When they do occur, they tend not to be stable or to last over time, which has a negative impact when it comes to defending the rights and interests of Catalans in international multilateral fora.

The threats posed by the current global dynamics are evident. Selective multilateralism makes states more jealous of their sovereignty and less tolerant of sub-state actors. States such as Russia, China, Turkey, but also Western ones such as France or Spain, are structurally hostile to any language or initiative that may implicitly suggest prospects of secession, and normative dilution may have a negative impact when it comes to the principles of self-determination and the rights of minorities. Above all, the financial crisis of the UN shrinks precisely the most open and least costly entry points, such as the UN Human Rights Council, and human rights mechanisms and instruments. In 2026 the regular budget of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights was cut by more than 25 million dollars and 117 posts were suppressed, affecting the capacity of human rights mechanisms to implement their mandates.[xlix] The opportunities, nevertheless, still do exist. The withdrawal of the United States from dozens of entities leaves leadership and funding gaps that reliable mid-sized contributors can partially fill, including sub-state entities; the UN80 reform goals include increasing the value of expertise, secondments and hosting capacity. Likewise, a cumulative record of responsible, consistent engagement and participation represents, in the long term, a political asset in itself.

## Existing advocacy and paradiplomatic avenues for engagement in technical and specialised bodies

The technical and specialised bodies of the UN system, where state sovereignty represents less of a barrier to meaningful participation, continue to offer significant opportunities for engagement for stateless nations. The rationale lays on a functionalist logic that has been described by authors such as Mitrany, according to which international cooperation could be built around concrete functions rather than around territorial sovereignty.[l] What is new is that several UN regimes have institutionalised multistakeholder or multilevel formats in which expertise, data and implementation capacity work as a currency of influence. In this sense, three fields are particularly relevant.

The first of them is climate change. Hale has described how the Paris Agreement transformed the climate regime into a "catalytic and facilitative" one, whose centre includes the action of subnational and non-state actors.[li] Stateless nations have been early actors in this space. In this sense, Catalonia signed the Under2 memorandum in Sacramento in May 2015 together with eleven other sub-state governments, committing to emission cuts of 80–95 per cent by 2050, and it has been active in Regions4, whose role was acknowledged by the Convention on Biological Diversity.[lii] The paradox is that the US withdrawal from the UNFCCC in November 2019, and, once again in January 2026, weakens the regime while opening space for other actors to sustain it.

Secondly, there is the field of digital governance. Internet governance has been, since its origins, the most open arena to non-state actors, and it offers a precedent of particular value for stateless nations. In September 2005 the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers approved .cat, the first top-level domain dedicated to a specific language and culture, after a campaign that faced the opposition of the Spanish government of the time.[liii] The WSIS+20 review, adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 2025, made the Internet Governance Forum a permanent UN forum and reaffirmed the multistakeholder model.[liv] Likewise, the Global Dialogue on AI Governance created in August 2025 involves "Governments and all relevant stakeholders" and includes a multistakeholder plenary, with its first meeting scheduled in Geneva in 2026.[lv] For stateless nations with strong research and technology ecosystems, these forums are an opportunity

to contribute expertise on issues, such as linguistic diversity in AI, in which they hold a specific legitimacy.

Lastly, culture, language and human rights. This is the natural niche of stateless nations, but also the one where the state filter is most visible. In UNESCO, nominations to the intangible heritage lists are submitted by state parties. Catalan heritage such as human towers or Berga's *Patum* were inscribed on the nomination of Spain. By contrast, the UN human rights system is more porous, although its normative basis is narrow, since the core treaties protect persons belonging to minorities rather than as citizens as such. Article 27 of the ICCPR guarantees their right to enjoy their own culture and to use their own language, as interpreted by the Human Rights Committee in its General Comment No. 23,[lvi] and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has linked the right to take part in cultural life to the freedom to express oneself in the language of one's choice.[lvii] These instruments, however, come with monitoring mechanisms open to non-state actors. Special procedures, notably the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, created in 2005, and the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, created in 2009, receive communications from individuals and organisations, issue thematic reports and undertake country visits.[lviii] The 2019 visit to Spain of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, whose report criticised the authorities' policies with regards to the Catalan independence movement, counted Catalan speakers among the country's linguistic minorities and was contested by the Spanish government, which shows both the visibility these channels can offer and the resistance they meet.[lix] The Forum on Minority Issues, created in 2007, is open to NGOs with or without ECOSOC consultative status, to academics and to national institutions,[lx] and stakeholder submissions to the Universal Periodic Review and shadow reports to treaty bodies offer additional channels. Where the state has accepted them, individual communication procedures before treaty bodies add a quasi-judicial avenue, although confined to individual claims. For its part, the UN Human Rights committee has been a platform where demands concerning human rights violations and/or discrimination against Catalans have been raised,[lxi] and, more recently, also the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD).[lxii]

Across these fields, the instruments of influence in multilateral fora available to stateless nations are similar. The first is expertise, often based on data, evaluations

and policy experiences that specialised bodies need and that are not always available from central governments. The second is presence, to the extent that hosting UN offices and programmes creates daily contact with international civil servants and turns the territory into a node of the system. The city of Barcelona, for instance, hosts at the Sant Pau site the WHO Barcelona Office, a centre of excellence in health financing for universal coverage, and the UN-Habitat City Resilience Global Programme.[lxiii] The third is the human dimension, secondments of experts, funding of junior professional positions where the rules allow it, and training programmes that build a community of professionals familiar with the UN system. Finally, they constitute platforms for coalition-building, both with civil society organisations accredited to UN bodies and with other stateless nations, such as Scotland, Flanders, Quebec or the Basque Country, which share interests even though their constitutional positions differ considerably. In a moment of scarce resources, pooling efforts in joint initiatives multiplies the visibility of each actor and reduces the perception of these initiatives as a challenge to the host state.

The challenges and threats that these avenues do represent are of a different nature. The first is a glass ceiling, to the extent that technical participation does not amount to political recognition, and it may become a depoliticisation trap, in which a national claim is converted into a sectoral, pure technical role. The second is the capture of outputs and credit by state delegations, in some cases with a pure regionalist mindset towards the stateless nations within, as they formally represent those territories. The third is financial, to the extent that the very bodies where access is easier are those that, until today, have been hit hardest by the cuts and withdrawals, as shown by the US exit from UNESCO, effective on 31 December 2026.[lxiv] The fourth is the possible fragmentation of digital governance into rival blocs, which would reduce the value of UN forums. The opportunities, on the other hand, follow from three facts: stateless nations often hold real competences in environment, culture, language, education and health; they can claim niche leadership on agendas, such as linguistic diversity, where states are less invested, although retaining veto power. As such, they can build a reputation as reliable, rules-abiding partners, which is precisely what a transactional order undervalues and what universal institutions now need most.

# Proposals for Institutional Reform

## Representation and Non-State Actors

The Pact for the Future, adopted by member states in September 2024, reaffirmed the UN's "intergovernmental character" and left aside the proposals for a UN Parliamentary Assembly, a World Citizens' Initiative and a special envoy for civil society participation.[lxv] The question of representation, however, remains open. One set of proposals would replace national seats with seats for regional organisations, most often through a European Union seat on the Security Council. Another would give civil society organisations, businesses or city networks a formal role in UN decisions. Both stem from a real weakness: the Council still bears the imprint of the power settlement of 1945, and governments do not always represent the societies in whose name they speak. Yet neither proposal addresses these weakness at its source. In an organisation whose members are states, the more relevant question is how these states represent their own societies, and whether any alternative form of representation could be realistic.

### The legal and political limits of regional seats

A regional seat would first require a fundamental change in the UN Charter. Article 4 limits UN membership strictly to sovereign states, and Article 23 specifies that the Security Council is a body composed of UN member states. Allocating a seat directly to the European Union, or any other regional organization, would therefore require a Charter amendment under Article 108, demanding the approval of two-thirds of the General Assembly and ratification by two-thirds of the membership, including all five permanent members. Nor would such an arrangement remain confined to the EU, as the African Union, the Organization of American States, and the Arab League would hold equal standing to request similar regional seats.

Political obstacles to direct regional representation are equally formidable. Both the United States and Russia explicitly oppose allocating seats to regional bodies rather than nation-states. Even the African Union's Ezulwini Consensus, which demands two permanent and five non-permanent seats for the continent, specifies that these seats would be occupied by designated individual African states rather than the AU as an organization. As noted in earlier sections, even this ambitious collective demand stops short of conferring direct Council membership on a regional body.

The EU's internal dynamics further highlight these constraints. General Assembly resolution 65/276 granted the EU enhanced observer status in 2011, allowing it to speak but not vote. While Article 34 of the Treaty on European Union obliges member states to coordinate in international forums, it also explicitly preserves their individual UN Charter responsibilities. France, currently the EU's sole permanent Council member, has shown no willingness to yield its national seat for a collective European one, while Germany continues to pursue a permanent national seat alongside Brazil, India, and Japan within the G4 framework. The co-chairs' 2026 elements paper for the Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) reflects this enduring reality: reform proposals range from expanding non-permanent seats to introducing long-term re-electable options (such as Liechtenstein's model), but none of the options under active consideration would replace nation-states with regional blocs.

### The selection of non-state representatives

The case for non-state participation deserves a closer look. In 2023 the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism proposed a special status for cities and regions, including a role in some treaty processes.[lxvi] The International Labour Organization offers an older example, since workers' and employers' delegates have voted alongside governments there for more than a century. These precedents show that the UN system can make room for voices beyond governments. They do not settle who would choose those voices if they were given formal seats in the UN itself.

Selection is where the proposal runs into trouble. Governments that restrict independent civil society have learned to use the existing channels of access for their own purposes. China has backed government-organised non-governmental organisations, or GONGOs, and has used its seat on the ECOSOC Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations to delay the accreditation of independent groups while favoured organisations obtain consultative status.[lxvii] The ILO precedent does not remove the difficulty, because in authoritarian states workers' and employers' delegates may answer in practice to the government, as China's single official trade union federation illustrates. A vote assigned to a civil society group, a business organisation or a city could thus become one more vote for the state that controls it. Democratic states face a milder version of the same problem, since business associations tend to reflect the interests of domestic industries and local authorities

act within national legal and financial limits. The negotiations on the Pact for the Future already gave a hint of what formal seats would provoke: authoritarian governments blocked references to democracy and wider participation, and they would hardly accept non-state representatives beyond their control.[lxviii]

This does not amount to a case for closing the UN to civil society. Consultative access and the right to submit evidence or be heard have improved its work in human rights, development and climate policy, and they should be defended against attempts to exclude independent organisations. Access and membership, however, serve different ends. The first gives states better information before they decide; voting seats for non-state actors could hand some governments additional votes through representatives they have chosen or can influence.

## Representation within member states

The UN's representation deficit begins, then, within its member states. An organisation composed of states will speak for societies only to the extent that the governments of those states do. Democratic accountability, the place of sub-state communities and national minorities in state delegations, and the freedom of citizens to organise determine how much of a country's political reality reaches the General Assembly or the Council. Improving these conditions requires no Charter amendment, although it does require political changes that many governments will resist. Adding seats without changing who speaks through them would leave the underlying problem intact: a larger Council could still be paralysed by selective commitments, as the present one is, while the same states went on multiplying mandates and withholding funds.

National minorities expose the problem more sharply than any other group. International law has approached them almost exclusively as holders of individual rights exercised within the state, and not as communities entitled to a voice of their own beyond it. Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects persons belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities in the enjoyment of their own culture, religion and language, and the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities follows the same formula. Its Article 2(3) recognises the right of such persons to participate effectively in decisions concerning their minority or the regions in which they live, but only at the national and, where appropriate, regional

level and in a manner not incompatible with national legislation, while Article 8(4) rules out any reading contrary to the territorial integrity and political independence of states. The institutional machinery built on this basis is accordingly modest. The Forum on Minority Issues, created by Human Rights Council resolution 6/15 of 28 September 2007, meets in Geneva for two days a year and adopts thematic recommendations which the Council may or may not take up.[lxix] Stateless nations can thus be heard on their rights, but whether and how they are represented in the UN's decision-making bodies remains for the state in which they live to decide.

This deference to the state is not unconditional in the UN's own doctrine. The Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations, adopted by General Assembly resolution 2625 (XXV) of 24 October 1970, protects the territorial integrity of states that comply with the principle of equal rights and self-determination and are thus "possessed of a government representing the whole people belonging to the territory without distinction as to race, creed or colour", a condition that the 1993 Vienna Declaration extended to distinctions of any kind.[lxx] The UN's legal framework therefore ties a state's claim to speak for its whole population to the representativeness of its government, which is precisely the question raised in this section. The clause, however, has remained a premise rather than an operative rule. States have invoked it far more often to defend territorial integrity than as a standard of internal representation, and when the International Court of Justice was asked about Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2010, it found it unnecessary to decide whether international law confers a right of separation on peoples whose state does not represent them.[lxxi] The doctrine that could give stateless nations a claim on the quality of state representation exists, then, in the texts, but UN bodies have seldom used it as a test of how states represent their populations.

The experience of indigenous peoples shows how far states are prepared to go. They have obtained more institutional recognition than any other group without a state of its own: a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, established by the Economic and Social Council in 2000, and a Declaration adopted in 2007 whose Article 18 recognises their right to participate in decision-making through representatives chosen by themselves.[lxxii] The effort launched by General Assembly resolution 71/321 of 2017 to give their representatives and institutions a status in UN meetings, however, has yet to produce one, and in 2024 the Assembly merely decided to keep

the matter under consideration.[lxxiii] If states have not agreed on this for peoples whose own Declaration expressly preserves the territorial integrity of states, the prospects for national minorities are still narrower.

## Conclusion: The UN between decay and indispensability

International orders are the set of conditions that describe which states can project power, how they do so, and through what ideas. At this moment, an overlapping set of orders combines the great-power rivalry between the US and China with a host of regional realities marked by competition among aspiring but assertive powers like Turkey, Russia, the UAE, or Iran. The ideas that structure these orders, and the ones likely to dominate this decade, emphasize the State's capacity to secure resources and establish facts on the ground. Soft power and commercial instruments remain active in the new global disorder. Still, geopolitical rivalries increasingly point toward strategies driven by friction, in which the resort to force is no longer a final option, but a standard tool of statecraft.

As the UN enters its ninth decade, the world that it helped create has morphed. Today, the organization faces simultaneous crises of capacity, authority, and political cohesion. Financial constraints, driven by chronic arrears and austerity pressures, have forced varying levels of restructuring across the UN system. At the same time, the rivalry among permanent members of the Security Council over conflicts such as Ukraine, Gaza, and the crisis over the Strait of Hormuz has rendered it unable to produce mandates that the UN peacekeeping mechanisms could implement.

In the global disorder, the future of the UN is unlikely to be defined by either renewal or obsolescence; rather, it will be characterized by adaptation. On the one hand, as a set of institutions, the UN system will adjust to new budgets and adapt to new policies requested by member states. The same could be said of all other multilateral institutions. On the other hand, the organization will adapt to the efforts that new US administrations, China, and other prominent members will make to gain influence within it. Even if a post-Trump America backtracks on its retreat from multilateralism, it will find a UN that hosts many more of the ideas and interests its geopolitical rivals have endowed it with. Whether this transformation ultimately represents decline or resilience will depend less on institutional design than on

member states' willingness to treat multilateralism not as a constraint on power, but as a mechanism for managing it. In that sense, the central question facing the UN is not whether it remains indispensable, but whether its members still believe that the international system requires institutions capable of placing limits on unilateral power in the first place.

The plunge into the global disorder of the coming years is dangerous but might unexpectedly create opportunities for stateless nations. While traditional state-centric multilateralism largely excluded sub-state actors, the multistakeholder, multilevel, and technical governance formats evolving within established multilateral institutions provide new inroads for stateless voices. Historical experience suggests that engaging with established international organizations is more effective than building parallel structures, as demonstrated by Kosovo, which gained access to major international institutions despite lacking full UN membership. Stateless nations can leverage avenues in climate or digital governance, and human rights mechanisms to gain visibility, political projection and influence, while contributing expertise, funding, and capacity to international organizations. As global governance grows more complex and the United Nations seeks its place amid disorder, stateless nations can strengthen both their international presence and the multilateral system itself by acting as partners rather than subordinates within their states.

---

# References


[i] Michael Wallace and J. David Singer, "Intergovernmental Organization in the Global System, 1815–1964: A Quantitative Description," *International Organization* 24, no. 2 (1970): 239–287.

[ii] Debre, M. J., & Dijkstra, H. (2022). Are international organisations in decline? An absolute and relative perspective on institutional change. Global Policy, 14(1), 16–30

[iii] Hooghe, L., Marks, G., Lenz, T., Bezuijen, J., Ceka, B., & Derderyan, S. (2017). Measuring International Authority: A Postfunctionalist Theory of Governance (Vol. 4). Oxford University Press

[iv]UN Security Council, resolution 2774 (2025), S/RES/2774, 24 February 2025; UN General Assembly, resolution ES-11/7, A/RES/ES-11/7, 24 February 2025. Security Council Report, "In Hindsight: The Security Council in 2025 and the Year Ahead", Monthly Forecast, January 2026, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-01/in-hindsight-the-security-council-in-2025-and-the-year-ahead.php

[v]Security Council Report, "In Hindsight: The Security Council in 2025 and the Year Ahead", Monthly Forecast, January 2026, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-01/in-hindsight-the-security-council-in-2025-and-the-year-ahead.php

[vi]Security Council Report, "In Hindsight: The Security Council in 2026, Mid-Year Scorecard and Looking Ahead", Monthly Forecast, August 2026, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-08/in-hindsight-the-security-council-in-2026-mid-year-scorecard-and-looking-ahead.php

[vii]Security Council Report, "In Hindsight: The Security Council in 2025 and the Year Ahead", Monthly Forecast, January 2026, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-01/in-hindsight-the-security-council-in-2025-and-the-year-ahead.php

[viii]UN Security Council, 9786th meeting, S/PV.9786, 18 November 2024, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4066876/files/S_PV.9786-EN.pdf

[ix]Security Council Report, "In Hindsight: Living with the Veto", Monthly Forecast, April 2026, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-04/in-hindsight-living-with-the-veto.php

[x]E. Voeten, "The Political Origins of the UN Security Council's Ability to Legitimize the Use of Force", International Organization, 59(3), 2005, pp. 527-557; I. Hurd, After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council, Princeton University Press, 2007.

[xi]M. Ramsden, "Uniting for Peace: The Emergency Special Session on Ukraine", Harvard International Law Journal (online), April 2022, https://journals.law.harvard.edu/ilj/2022/04/uniting-for-peace-the-emergency-special-session-on-ukraine

[xii]UN Press, GA/12748, December 2025, https://press.un.org/en/2025/ga12748.doc.htm

[xiii]UN News, "UN scraps rule forcing it to repay money it never received", June 2026, https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/06/1167849

[xiv]Camelli and R. Patz, How to End the United Nations' Current Financial Crisis, NYU Center on International Cooperation, March 2026, https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/How-to-End-the-United-Nations-Current-Financial-Crisis-2026.pdf; UN News, June 2026.

[xv]P. Kennedy and B. Russett, "Reforming the United Nations", Foreign Affairs, September/October 1995, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1995-09-01/reforming-united-nations.

[xvi] Jean Galbraith, "Retreating from Internationalism: The Announced U.S. Withdrawal from Many International Entities," *Verfassungsblog*, January 10, 2026, https://doi.org/10.59704/ebe2b1ebc0ba6ed7.

[xvii]J. Galbraith, "The Announced U.S. Withdrawal from Many International Entities", Verfassungsblog, January 2026, https://verfassungsblog.de/the-announced-u-s-withdrawal-from-many-international-entities/

[xviii]Camelli and R. Patz, How to End the United Nations' Current Financial Crisis, NYU Center on International Cooperation, March 2026, https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/How-to-End-the-United-Nations-Current-Financial-Crisis-2026.pdf; UN News, June 2026, https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/06/1167849

[xix]United Nations, UN80 Initiative Progress Report, May 2026 (advance version), https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/sites/default/files/2026-05/UN80-PR2_260526_0833_WEB.pdf; see also A/80/318, Mandate implementation review, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4087084/files/A_80_318-EN.pdf

[xx]United Nations, UN80 Initiative Progress Report, May 2026 (advance version), https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/sites/default/files/2026-05/UN80-PR2_260526_0833_WEB.pdf; see also A/80/318, Mandate implementation review, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4087084/files/A_80_318-EN.pdf

[xxi]United Nations, UN80 Initiative Progress Report, May 2026 (advance version), https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/sites/default/files/2026-05/UN80-

PR2_260526_0833_WEB.pdf; see also A/80/318, Mandate implementation review, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4087084/files/A_80_318-EN.pdf

[xxiii]Hastings, "Advancing UN Reform: What Member States Can Do Now", IPI Global Observatory, June 2026, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2026/06/advancing-un-reform-what-member-states-can-do-now/

[xxiii]E. R. Graham, Transforming International Institutions: How Money Quietly Sidelined Multilateralism at the United Nations, Oxford University Press, 2023.

[xxiv]M. Barnett and M. Finnemore, Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics, Cornell University Press, 2004.

[xxv] Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 42–79.

[xxvi] Anthea Roberts, Henrique Choer Moraes, and Victor Ferguson, "Toward a Geoeconomic Order in International Trade and Investment," *Journal of International Economic Law* 22, no. 4 (2019): 655–76.

[xxvii] Shekhar Aiyar et al., *Geoeconomic Fragmentation and the Future of Multilateralism*, IMF Staff Discussion Note SDN/2023/001 (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2023).

[xxviii] Bernard M. Hoekman and Petros C. Mavroidis, "To AB or Not to AB? Dispute Settlement in WTO Reform," *Journal of International Economic Law* 23, no. 3 (2020): 703–22.

[xxix] Gordon Kang Yu Xuan, "Prospects for Advancing Economic Resilience through the Future of Investment and Trade Partnership (FIT-P)," RSIS Commentary CO26018 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, January 30, 2026).

[xxx] David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on *International Organization*," *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): 225–57.

[xxxi] Shing-hon Lam and Courtney J. Fung, "Personnel Power Shift? Unpacking China's Attempts to Enter the UN Civil Service," *Global Policy* 15, no. S2 (2024): 135–47.

[xxxii] Jean Galbraith, "Retreating from Internationalism: The Announced U.S. Withdrawal from Many International Entities," *Verfassungsblog*, January 10, 2026, https://doi.org/10.59704/ebe2b1ebc0ba6ed7.

[xxxiii] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Global Order and Institutions Program, *BRICS Expansion and the Future of World Order: Perspectives from Member States, Partners, and Aspirants* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 31, 2025).

[xxxiv] Miles Kahler, "Multilateralism with Small and Large Numbers," *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (1992): 681–708.

[xxxv] Pédussel Wu, J., Banach, C., Goulas, S., & Silva Neira, I. (2024). Building BLOCS and stepping stones: Combined data for international economic and policy analysis (Working Paper No. 239/2024). Institute for International Political Economy, Berlin School of Economics and Law. https://aletheia-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Building-BLOCS-and-Stepping-Stones_jpw_isn_sg_cb.pdf

[xxxvi]Elin Royles, "Sub-State Diplomacy: Understanding the International Opportunity Structures," *Regional and Federal Studies* 27, no. 4 (2017): 393–416.

[xxxvii] Elin Royles, "Sub-State Diplomacy: Understanding the International Opportunity Structures," *Regional and Federal Studies* 27, no. 4 (2017): 393–416.

[xxxviii]International Monetary Fund, "Republic of Kosovo Becomes the International Monetary Fund's 186th Member," Press Release No. 09/240, June 29, 2009.

[xxxix]Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, "About UNPO," accessed October 26, 2026, https://old.unpo.org/section/2

[xl]Stewart Patrick, "The New 'New Multilateralism': Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?," *Global Summitry* 1, no. 2 (2015).

[xli] Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, November 16, 1945, art. II(3).

[xlii] Statutes of the World Tourism Organization, September 27, 1970 (entered into force January 2, 1975), art. 6(3).

[xliii] Gouvernement du Québec, "Representative of Québec within the Permanent Delegation of Canada to UNESCO," accessed October 26, 2026.

[xliv] Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs, "Flanders UNESCO Trust Funds," accessed October 26, 2026, https://fdfa.be/en/flanders-unesco-trustfunds.

[xlv] Regions4, "We Are Regions4," accessed October 26, 2026, https://regions4.org/about-us/regions4/; Government of Catalonia, "Minister Romeva Concludes Catalonia's Participation in the Forum on the 2030 Agenda," press release, July 16, 2017.

[xlvi] United Nations Economic and Social Council, "The Committee on NGOs," accessed November 9, 2026, https://ecosoc.un.org/node/12582.

[xlvii] Gordon Kang Yu Xuan, "Prospects for Advancing Economic Resilience through the Future of Investment and Trade Partnership (FIT-P)," RSIS Commentary CO26018 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, January 30, 2026).

[xlviii]Llei Orgànica 6/2006, de 19 de juliol, de reforma de l'Estatut d'Autonomia de Catalunya, arts. 193–198.

[xlix]International Service for Human Rights, "UN Financial Crisis: Mapping the Impact for Human Rights," last updated March 5, 2026, https://ishr.ch/toolbox/resources/un-financial-crisis-mapping-the-impact-for-human-rights/.

[l]David Mitrany, "The Functional Approach to World Organization," *International Affairs* 24, no. 3 (1948): 350–63.

[li]Thomas Hale, "'All Hands on Deck': The Paris Agreement and Nonstate Climate Action," *Global Environmental Politics* 16, no. 3 (2016): 12–22.

[lii]Government of Catalonia, "Catalonia Signs Pioneering Climate Change Agreement with Eleven State and Regional Governments in California," press release, May 19, 2015; Regions4, "We Are Regions4."

[liii]Peter Gerrand, "Cultural Diversity in Cyberspace: The Catalan Campaign to Win the New .cat Top Level Domain," *First Monday* 11, no. 1 (2006), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v11i1.1305.

[liv]Israel Rosas, "WSIS+20 Reaffirms Multistakeholder Governance and a Lasting IGF," Internet Society (blog), December 2025, https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2025/12/wsis20-reaffirms-multistakeholder-governance-and-a-lasting-igf.

[lv]UN General Assembly, Resolution 79/325, "Terms of Reference and Modalities for the Establishment and Functioning of the Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence and the Global Dialogue on Artificial Intelligence Governance," A/RES/79/325 (August 26, 2025).

[lvi]UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 23: Article 27 (Rights of Minorities), CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.5 (adopted at the fiftieth session, 1994). Exact adoption date not verified: sources give 6 April and 8 April 1994; the document itself is dated 26 April 1994.

[lvii]UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 21: Right of Everyone to Take Part in Cultural Life (art. 15, para. 1 (a)), E/C.12/GC/21, December 21, 2009, para. 15(a).

[lviii]UN Commission on Human Rights, Resolution 2005/79, April 21, 2005, which created the mandate as an Independent Expert; UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 25/5, March 28, 2014, which renamed it Special Rapporteur on minority issues; UN Human Rights Council,

Resolution 10/23 (2009) [exact date not verified], and Resolution 19/6, "Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights," adopted March 22, 2012.

[lix]UN Human Rights Council, *Visit to Spain: Report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues*, A/HRC/43/47/Add.1, March 9, 2020; UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues on His Visit to Spain: Comments by the State*, A/HRC/43/47/Add.2, March 9, 2020.

[lx]UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 6/15, "Forum on Minority Issues," adopted September 28, 2007.

[lxi] European Free Alliance. (2022, August 31). UN Human Rights Committee finds that the Spanish State violated Catalan political prisoners' political rights. European Free Alliance. https://efaparty.eu/news/un-human-rights-committee-finds-that-the-spanish-state-violated-catalan-political-prisoners-political-rights

[lxii] Unrepresented Peoples and Nations Organization (UNPO). (2026, April 17). UNPO, ANC and GDH submit a joint report to CERD regarding discrimination against Catalan people in Spain. UNPO. https://unpo.org/unpo-anc-and-gdh-submit-a-joint-report-to-cerd-regarding-discrimination-against-catalan-people-in-spain/

[lxiii]Recinte Modernista de Sant Pau, "Resident Organisations," accessed October 26, 2026, https://santpaubarcelona.org/en/recinte-modernista/organitzacions-residents.

[lxiv]U.S. Department of State, "The United States Withdraws from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)," press statement, July 22, 2025.

[lxv]A. Bummel, "The future must wait: little outcome on global participation at UN Summit", Democracy Without Borders, November 2024, https://www.democracywithoutborders.org/34111/the-future-must-wait-little-outcome-on-global-participation-at-un-summit/

[lxvi]Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, "UN High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism recommends special status for cities and regions", April 2023, https://www.global-taskforce.org/news/un-high-level-advisory-board-effective-multilateralism-recommends-special-status-cities-and

[lxvii]International Service for Human Rights, China's efforts to block civil society access to the UN, April 2025, https://ishr.ch/resources/un-access-china-report; Human Rights Watch, The Costs of International Advocacy: China's Interference in United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms, 5 September 2017, https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/09/05/costs-international-advocacy/chinas-interference-united-nations-human-rights

[lxviii]A. Bummel, "The future must wait: little outcome on global participation at UN Summit", Democracy Without Borders, November 2024, https://www.democracywithoutborders.org/34111/the-future-must-wait-little-outcome-on-global-participation-at-un-summit/

[lxix]Human Rights Council, resolution 6/15, "Forum on Minority Issues", 28 September 2007; Human Rights Council, resolution 19/23, "Forum on Minority Issues", 23 March 2012.

[lxx]UN General Assembly, resolution 2625 (XXV), "Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations", 24 October 1970, annex; Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, 25 June 1993, Part I, paragraph 2.

[lxxi]International Court of Justice, Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect of Kosovo, Advisory Opinion, 22 July 2010, paragraphs 82–83.

[lxxii]Economic and Social Council, resolution 2000/22, 28 July 2000; UN General Assembly, resolution 61/295, "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples", 13 September 2007, Articles 18 and 46.

[lxxiii]UN General Assembly, resolution 71/321, "Enhancing the participation of indigenous peoples' representatives and institutions in meetings of relevant United Nations bodies on issues affecting them", 8 September 2017; UN General Assembly, resolution 78/328, "Enhancing the participation of indigenous peoples' representatives and institutions in meetings of relevant United Nations bodies on issues affecting them", 11 September 2024, https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/78/328