

Christian Manahl\* - 14 January 2025

## The UN Pact for the Future: Last Call to Save Multilateralism

### An ominous beginning

On 22 September 2024, world leaders gathered in New York ahead of the annual meeting of the General Assembly and adopted a “Pact for the Future” which focuses on peace and security, global governance, sustainable development, climate change, digital cooperation, and human rights. The Pact, which UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described as a “step-change towards more effective, inclusive, networked multilateralism”, was adopted together with a Global Digital Compact and a Declaration on Future Generations. It is the first time that world leaders have so decisively acknowledged our responsibility not only for our societies, but also for future generations.

The Pact is the outcome of several years of meticulous preparations and six months of intense inter-governmental negotiations. The sweeping coverage of critical current and future challenges, as well as its far-reaching objectives, should have earned the Pact front page treatment in international media. Instead, it was overshadowed by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the war in Gaza and its regional and international repercussions, and deepening humanitarian crises in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sahel, and Sudan.

Indirectly, all these events are reflected in the Pact, but whether the call for collective action and collaborative, diplomatic solutions will be heeded by those who signed it, remains quite uncertain. In fact, the deepening global geopolitical faultlines became increasingly evident during the process of adoption: A small group of countries, closely aligned with Russia, tried to scupper the Pact, or significantly water down its content by introducing a last-minute amendment

emphasising the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states.

The amendment was backed by Belarus, North Korea, Iran, Nicaragua and Syria but resisted by many other UN members. The day was saved by a motion to reject Russia’s move, introduced swiftly by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and this motion passed with 143 votes in favour, 7 against (Belarus, North Korea, Iran, Nicaragua, Russia, Sudan, and Syria), and 15 abstentions which notably included Algeria, China, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia; another 28 UN member states, mostly from the Global South, were absent during the voting. Following the defeat of Russia’s proposed amendment, Moscow and its closest allies did not endorse the Pact, but since it was adopted by the General Assembly and not the Security Council, Russia could not use its veto to block it.

It is hard not to see in this voting pattern a reflection of the alliances that Russia has been building with increased diligence after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Iran and North Korea are participating in the war effort by sending weapons, and in the latter case, by also deploying some 10,000 soldiers to help repulse Ukraine’s counter-attack in the Kursk region. China announced a “no-limits partnership” with Russia in 2022, days before the start of the invasion, and has since become a bulk buyer of Russian gas and delivered dual use equipment, thus indirectly supporting Russia’s invasion. Before Bashar Al-Assad’s overthrow, the Syrian regime was dependent upon Russian military for its survival, whereas Algeria, Belarus, Cuba, and Nicaragua have long-standing relationships with Russia dating back to the Soviet era and, apart from Algeria, they share an affinity in the form of authoritarian leadership.

\* **Christian Manahl** is an international civil servant with 30 years of experience in Africa, mostly dealing with political and security issues. He was the Political Director of MONUSCO, at the time the largest peacekeeping mission (2007-2010) and Deputy SRSG for Somalia (2011-12) and the EU Ambassador to Eritrea (2014-17) and Lesotho (2017-21). Since his retirement from EU public service, he is occasionally lecturing on geopolitical matters and undertaking mediation missions. He holds a PhD in Communications, Political Science and Philosophy from the University of Vienna, a *Diplôme d’études approfondies* in History of Philosophy from the University of Paris I – Panthéon-Sorbonne and a Diploma from the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna.

The UN Pact for the Future was supposed to be passed with unanimity, which means that all 193 member states of the United Nations endorse it. Instead, it was adopted by a vast majority of member states, which the UN Secretariat described, perhaps somewhat optimistically, as a “consensus”<sup>2</sup>. But the apparent solidarity of the group of objectors, led by Russia, foreshadows difficult negotiations in various international fora, notably on matters of peace and security. The abstention of China and many countries from the Global South further complicates matters, even if the latter countries have most to lose from a weakening or dysfunctional multilateralism. Their abstention or absence during the voting betrays their ambiguous position towards the war in Ukraine, for a variety of reasons that have been well explained<sup>3</sup>.

The adoption of international conventions is a complex exercise that is often fraught with controversy, even if the Pact for the Future largely reflects concerns and recommendations for action that should be self-evident. The Pact reiterates, and intentionally aims at revitalizing, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which were adopted unanimously by all UN member states in 2015. The fraying of this consensus in the past decade manifests a progressively fracturing international system.

Resolutions of the UN General Assembly are non-binding, and even if they were, like those of the Security Council, the United Nations lack the means and institutions of enforcement beyond peer pressure from its members. The implementation of the recommendations of the Pact for the Future will therefore rely on the goodwill and cooperation of member states, as well as the UN’s ability to promote and sustain such cooperation. It is going to be a tall order.

### What’s in the Pact ?

Initial comments have been reserved as to the quality and impact of the Pact<sup>4</sup>, but criticism that it represents the “lowest common denominator” is disingenuous because international conventions are inevitably limited to the achievable common ground. In reality, the Pact is very explicit about the severity of the challenges and it spells out specific actions to tackle them; if anything, it is overly ambitious in its objectives.

“We are confronted by rising catastrophic and existential risks”, the second paragraph reads, and “we

risk tipping into a future of persistent crisis and breakdown”<sup>5</sup>. While this is unambiguously a wake-up call, the Pact also expresses optimism when it states that “there is a path to a brighter future for all of humanity” and that the world leaders who adopted it collectively pledged to strive “for a world that is safe, peaceful, just, equal, inclusive, sustainable and prosperous, a world in which well-being, security and dignity and a healthy planet are assured for all humanity.” Although the Pact is thoroughly positive in the introductory paragraphs, it reflects, both in its general descriptions and its specific aims, the current shortcomings that have brought the world to the brink of “existential risks”.

The Pact mentions the need to strengthen international cooperation and for a reaffirmed commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, thus implicitly recognising that the current level of commitment and cooperation is insufficient to address the challenges and to achieve the SDGs in time. Where the Pact says “we must abide by international law, ... resolve our disputes peacefully, refrain from the threat or use of force, or acts of aggression, ... (and) end impunity”<sup>6</sup>, it mirrors a litany of recurrent violations of the UN Charter. Similarly, the commitment to “reduce inequalities within and between countries” points to the persistent and aggravating problem of inequality that has caused indignity and instability around the world.

On the development side, the actions that the Pact spells out focus on accelerated implementation of the SDGs; a rules-based, fair and inclusive international trading system; ending poverty and hunger; gender equality and empowerment; addressing climate change; environmental protection and – for a universal convention a novelty – environmental restoration. In peace and security, the pact explicitly recognises the “growing risks of a nuclear war”<sup>7</sup> and mentions outer space and cyberspace as areas of concern as well as the negative trade-off between the global increase in military expenditures on the one hand, and stagnating development spending on the other. The pledge, in action 14, to “protect all civilians in armed conflict” is an impassioned appeal in light of the tremendous number of civilian casualties in Gaza, Sudan, or Ukraine. The aim of advancing a world free of nuclear weapons is at odds with reality at a time when international non-proliferation is threatened by a multi-faceted new arms race.

The chapter (III) on science, technology and innovation, and digital cooperation aims to strike a balance between recognising opportunities and risks, including the risk of aggravating inequalities that rapid technological change can generate. There is an important chapter on youth and future generations (IV) with a focus on education, health, and employment as well as social and political inclusion. Finally, there is a pledge to transform global governance to make it fit for purpose and specifically to reform the Security Council and the international financial architecture, both appeals that have gone unfulfilled for several decades.

### Empty rehearsal or genuine commitment?

The contrast between the ambitious aims of the Pact and the current global geopolitical reality is striking, and over large parts, the Pact reiterates past intentions that were only partially fulfilled, notably on the SDGs and the reform of global governance institutions.

The Pact will face significant headwinds, and not only from Russia and its allies, as mentioned in the introduction. The West's commitment to multilateralism is also faltering. The new – and returning – US president, Donald Trump, is known for his disdain of multilateralism and his inclination towards transactional politics. In his remarks about making Canada the 51st US state, buying or otherwise incorporating Greenland into the US for security reasons, and not ruling out the use of force to take the Panama Canal<sup>8</sup>, Trump seems to have fully adopted the concept of spheres of influence that underpin Putin's war against Ukraine. This is in stark contrast to the sovereign equality of all UN member states, irrespective of their size, and it unwittingly reinforces Russia's revisionism.

The situation is similarly worrying in Europe, where populist radical right parties rank among the top three most powerful political forces in one third of the countries, and these countries include the three most populous and economically powerful member states of the European Union, namely Germany, France, and Italy. The European Union as an institution remains a strong advocate of multilateralism, as expressed in the 2021 joint communication by the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy<sup>9</sup>, but whether this honeymoon between the EU and the UN will

withstand growing pressure from populist right wing parties is uncertain. There is a risk that the scepticism towards the so-called 'Brussels bureaucracy', which all right wing parties share, will eventually also translate into diminished interest in, or disregard for, global multilateral institutions.

The demise of the League of Nations, the UN's predecessor, in the face of rising fascism in Europe and American isolationism, should serve as a historical warning. Political and identitarian nationalism, economic protectionism, transactional diplomacy, and an over-reliance on military force or military coalitions to ensure one's own security, do not combine well with genuine, rules-based cooperation, which the UN Pact for the Future tries to promote.

Should the Pact therefore be discarded as yet another empty declaration that will not withstand the pressures of hard realpolitik, and which will end up in the dustbin of history? I don't think so.

International conventions are as strong or weak as the international system itself, and most of the time, international affairs navigate perilously between noble pledges and cynical power politics. While the existence of international conventions does not prevent malevolent actors from breaking them, it gives those who adhere to them the moral authority to take collective action. The prohibition of aggression in the UN Charter has not prevented Russia from attacking Ukraine, but it has given those countries which support Ukraine sound legal grounds for doing so, and for imposing punitive measures. Even those which support Russia politically, like China<sup>10</sup>, feel compelled to temper their support by mediation efforts, and those which support Russia militarily, like Iran, publicly deny their actions – be it for fear of further isolation or additional sanctions.

In spite of the Pact for the Future, some – perhaps many – of the SDGs will not be achieved by 2030; military spending will increase in many countries in view of aggravating threats, at the expense of humanitarian or development aid; the multilateral system of non-proliferation will come under increasing pressure as major nuclear powers revise their doctrines or withdraw from agreements; human rights will continue to be violated and vast inequalities within and between countries will persist. But a strong collective commitment to address these challenges can mitigate the damage and promote global cooperation for positive action. The fact that the law is broken

recurrently in every country does not mean that law is useless altogether.

Most important, the vast majority of UN member states are at risk if the multilateral system is further debilitated, because they do not have the military means to fend off an aggressive bigger neighbour, and they are disproportionately exposed to the spill-over effects of environmental degradation or of trade protectionism. A significant number of countries from the Global South do not want to be dragged into superpower competition and therefore adopt a hedging position. They are well aware of the tremendous risk of getting caught in the crossfire of geopolitical conflict, as the people of Libya, Syria and Sudan have experienced.

The endorsement of the Pact by all UN member states, except for a very small minority, is a significant recommitment to multilateralism at a time when international cooperation is coming under increasing pressure. This commitment can be a basis for cooperation on issues that are essential for the survival of humanity in spite of continuing geopolitical tensions. It can help refocus political attention on challenges that are common to all countries and that can only be solved through collective and coordinated action.

## References

1. UN press release, 22nd September 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sgsm22372.doc.htm>, retrieved 7th January 2025
2. "World leaders adopt pivotal UN Pact for the Future", UN News website, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154581>, retrieved 24th September 2024
3. "The Trouble With 'the Global South' - What the West Gets Wrong About the Rest", Comfort Ero, 1st April 2024; "The Return of the Global South. Realism, Not Moralism, Drives a New Critique of Western Power", Sarang Shidore, 31st August 2023, *Foreign Affairs*
4. UN adopts pact promising to build 'brighter future' for humanity, Associated Press, 22nd September 2024
5. Summit of the Future Outcome Documents, September 2024, UN website, retrieved 24th September 2024
6. Paragraph 12 of the Pact
7. Paragraph 32 of the Pact
8. 'Hell will break out': Trump hints at military moves in Mideast, Americas, Al-Jazeera, 7th January 2025, retrieved 7th January 2025
9. EU agenda for a renewed multilateralism, retrieved 7th January 2025
10. Recent evidence suggests that China is going beyond political support and contemplates cooperating with Russia on the production of attack drones. But the limited scope of this cooperation suggests that Beijing is still testing the ground as to the reaction of its western trading partners ("China, Russia: Chinese Factory Producing Attack Drones for Russia", RANE/Stratfor, 25th September 2024, retrieved 26th September 2024).

## It all depends on us

International conventions do not exist independently from those who draft, negotiate, and eventually implement them. The Pact itself affirms that the choice between a persistent crisis on the one hand, and a "breakthrough to a better and more sustainable future for all" is ours. It states repeatedly the need to "turbocharge" multilateral cooperation in order to implement the 56 actions listed in the Pact.

History will judge all of us for the legacy we leave to future generations, which features more prominently in the Pact than in previous UN conventions. It is either a legacy that builds on the opportunities offered by the unprecedented scientific advances and technological inventions of the fourth and fifth industrial revolution, or a legacy of mayhem and destruction that can bring human civilisation to the brink of extinction. The Pact acknowledges that the choice between one or the other depends largely on the willingness towards multilateral cooperation. With the adoption of the Pact, nobody can claim that political leaders, and those who elect or support them, were unaware of this drastic choice in front of us.

