

# What'll it take to Reform the United Nations? Temporal Focal Points and the UN Summit of the Future

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## Abstract

Russian aggression in Ukraine has spotlighted longstanding calls for reform of the United Nations (UN). Yet, so far, the world organization has struggled to gain momentum for major reform proposals, such as those elaborated in the report of the UN secretary-general "Our Common Agenda." What are the short-term prospects for major reform? This article draws on new research on timing and temporality in world politics, explaining how the proposed 2023 "Summit of the Future" can be turned into a Temporal Focal Point that increases the likelihood of institutional transformation. It draws lessons from instances of major change in the field of global environmental governance. The article advances policy-relevant recommendations for using the proposed Summit to realize institutional change.

## Policy Recommendations

- The United Nations secretary-general should seek to crystallize the proposed 2023 Summit of the Future into a "Temporal Focal Point."
- Consciousness of the summit should be heightened significantly via public diplomacy, increasing awareness of the meeting as the chief avenue for negotiating UN reform.
- The UN agenda should be pared down significantly in 2022/2023 to strengthen the focus of international actors on the opportunity for major reform presented by the 2023 Summit.
- Public engagement surrounding the Summit should be enhanced substantially, reaching well beyond the usual UN players to involve civil society groups, sub-national actors, parliamentarians, media organizations, religious communities, and government departments not usually implicated in the activities of their national UN delegations.

In fall 2021, United Nations secretary-general, António Guterres, launched *Our Common Agenda*, his vision for the future of international cooperation (United Nations, 2021). The report proposes significant reform, seeking to increase solidarity among governments and with future generations. The UN, notes the secretary-general, faces a stark choice between breakthrough and breakdown, with governments holding the key to ensuring that the UN system remains fit for purpose. Alongside the General Assembly resolution following-up on the report, delegates recommenced debate on long stalemated negotiations over Security Council reform.

Rather than an abstract discussion of little interest outside of diplomatic or academic circles, the importance of effective multilateralism has been demonstrated by the coronavirus pandemic and extreme weather driven by a changing global climate. Effective UN reform is, and will be, essential to managing growing U.S.-Chinese geo-political rivalry. An unreformed UN, struggling with outdated institutional arrangements, is an increasingly poor fit for the current international environment.

Underperforming institutional mechanisms account for longer-term erosion of the world body. The emergence of alternative governance fora, such as the G20, and the UN's marginalization in managing recent international crises in Iran, Syria, and Venezuela, are illustrative of the UN's declining role as a hub for international cooperation. An underwhelming response to Russia's naked aggression in Ukraine has further underlined dysfunction (Dervis and Ocampo, 2022). Slow progress in fulfilling the 2030 Agenda and the inability of states to effectively use the organization as a vehicle to rapidly vaccinate the world, each in its own way owing to institutional deficiencies, discredit further the idea that the UN can be called upon when the world most needs it.

The situation has led some to call for a "San Francisco moment," where states gather to recast fundamentally the UN (Malloch-Brown, 2020; Stimson Center, 2020). The call harkens back to the UN's founding conference in spring 1945, when states gathered to

establish the institutional basis for the post-WWII order. The conference restructured global relations, in the process capturing the public imagination. The belief, now, is that shifting world political conditions necessitate an institutional transfiguration of similar magnitude.

The San Francisco conference, however, followed destructive global war and the collapse of the League of Nations. In reflecting on prospects for reform, former secretary-general, Kofi Annan, noted sharply: "It took World War I to establish the League of Nations, and World War II to create the UN" (Annan, 2012: 144). No such cataclysm is in the offing this time around. The 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the current pandemic, though each highlighted significant dysfunction, have failed to produce major institutional change. Should the international community, therefore, resign itself to long-term underperformance?

In new research, I (Manulak 2022) show that shocks—such as major wars—are not, and have not been, the only drivers of large-scale institutional transformations. In a multi-archival analysis of the 50+ year history of global environmental negotiations, as well as dozens of interviews, I found that shocks derive much of their power from the coordinative impetus that they generate among international actors. Shocks have a way of concentrating the minds, resource investments, and, importantly, the bargaining strategies of actors, precipitating change. In other instances, however, conspicuous, unique moments in the life of an institution—termed Temporal Focal Points (TFP)—can produce a similar result.

In this article, I extend insights from this analysis beyond the environmental sphere to the subject of UN reform, arguing that international actors should seek to crystallize a TFP in the UN context. Drawing lessons from the experience in the UN environment field, I provide several policy recommendations. Indeed, in the 50-year history of UN environmental institutions, more than a third of global environmental conventions were concluded within a pair of two-year phases of institutional hyperactivity (Manulak 2020).

These phases—the first in the early 1970s and the second in the early 1990s—also saw the creation of the UN Environment Programme, the Commission on Sustainable Development, significant reforms to the Global Environment Facility, and major declarations on the environment that provide a foundation for international environmental law. After decades of frustration, states were suddenly able to come together to overhaul cooperative structures.

What is important to note is that these rare phases were not provoked by a sudden deterioration of global environmental conditions. While the state of the world environment had worsened steadily in the preceding years, there was no identifiable shock that precipitated change. Instead, transformation followed a convergence of expectations among state and non-state actors around already scheduled conferences that were not themselves organized to realize largescale change. These conferences became a focus for broad public concern and diplomatic activity bent on recasting fundamentally institutional structures. Governments used these focal phases to reassess their negotiating positions, consulting widely within their borders and exploring with new vigor what was within the realm of the diplomatically possible.

TFPs have three defining characteristics. First, they occur in a discrete and specific timeframe. Typically, some event or prominent anniversary anchors focal points. Second, TFPs are highly conspicuous. They must be noticeable to all within an institutional setting. TFPs provide an obvious coordination point for many, diverse actors. Third, they are unique. There is something exceptional or unusual about their arrival. If they were common or states could easily produce them, TFPs would not have the coordinative power that they do. In the UN environment sphere, focal points emerged surrounding the 1972 Stockholm conference and the 1992 Rio Earth summit.

Temporal Focal Points add impetus and coherence to negotiations, working against the tendency of intergovernmental discussions to drag on without a decisive

result. Institutions are inherently about the long-term, providing stable fora for governments to interact. While essential to facilitating cooperation, this characteristic means that actors can almost always negotiate another day. When a TFP emerges, however, actors behave as *if* major temporal discontinuity looms, making substantial political and analytical investments in institutional change processes. It is as if the “keep talking” option is temporarily removed from the table.

The shared expectation of important—and decisive—talks leads actors to clarify their preferences, consult stakeholders, and reassess their bottom line. This engagement reaches well beyond the state, attracting crucial contributions from non-state and civil society groups. Diplomacy is brought out of UN corridors and into the public square, enriching the bargaining process. In this way, TFPs are political and intellectual force multipliers. Research on TFPs adds to a growing literature in the International Relations field on timing and temporality in global policy (Fioretos 2017; Hom 2020; Jupille et al 2013). Within this wider structure, actors can exercise agency in *crystallizing* TFPs. They do this chiefly by enhancing the conspicuousness of potential focal timeframes.

Focal phases also lead to significant shifts in bargaining among governments. Absent a TFP or shock, uncertainty concerning the negotiation endgame incentivizes governments to reserve their position, withholding their true bottom line. Actors lack the structure necessary to sequence their concessions in relation to a negotiating endpoint. This results in the familiar pattern of inconclusive discussions that extend into the still to-be-determined future. Posturing, rather than purposeful, integrative bargaining, wins the day. The emergence of a focal timeframe changes this, allowing actors to structure their negotiating strategies and tactics around what, effectively, becomes a deadline. TFPs bring vital coherence to discussions, altering negotiating incentives and increasing the likelihood of agreement.

## TFPs and UN Reform

What are the implications of the TFP framework for UN reform? Could a TFP cure what ails UN reform efforts? Employing the TFP framework, the following section analyzes the record of change in the UN environment sphere and derives lessons for current UN reform efforts (Neustadt and May 1986). Given the large number of diverse actors in the UN environment field, lessons on temporal coordination dilemmas from this institutional space are highly applicable to current efforts. Severe distributive competition, moreover, marked institutional bargaining in the environment field and continues to define current reform negotiations within the United Nations.

The most likely candidate on the horizon for a TFP is the 2023 Summit of the Future, proposed in *Our Common Agenda*. The summit could provide a platform for consideration of institutional change proposals, such as repurposing the UN Trusteeship Council, which has laid dormant since 1994, providing a forum for governing the global commons. Discussions have also focused on strengthening the Economic and Social Council and have explored the possibility of Security Council reform. Some governments may also seek to use the Summit as a platform for tackling fragmentation in UN environmental governance.<sup>1</sup> Such changes would transform radically the United Nations.

Yet, as governments follow up on the secretary-general's report, much work remains to be done. Some of the secretary-general's proposals, such as those targeting the Trusteeship Council, would require changes to the UN charter. Any change to the UN charter would likely require a breakthrough on a larger range of issues. In a context of growing division and discord, particularly following the crisis in Ukraine, this transformation appears unlikely. The barriers to significant change include a need for the types of significant political and analytical

investments that trigger reassessments of state preferences and bargaining positions.

A repurposed Trusteeship Council would, for example, transform cooperation in outer space, Antarctica, as well as on the high seas and in the atmosphere. Notionally, there are enormous benefits available if states could achieve a greater measure of cooperation in these areas and plug governance gaps. There are also risks. For too many states, it is better the limited governance provided by existing arrangements than disadvantageous change. Any proposed revision of the UN charter could give rise to a "can of worms problem," creating openings for enemies of the UN to target and undermine the organization. Though the thought of reforming the Trusteeship Council has floated around for decades, it has never been taken seriously at the intergovernmental level.<sup>2</sup> Governments have yet to embark on the intensive intragovernmental and intergovernmental discussions needed to determine what such a governance structure would entail. Until they do, delegates will respond cautiously to the secretary-general's proposal.

A TFP could alter this situation, sparking interest in the topic and a spike in the types of political and analytical investments that allow governments to see their still unrecognized self-interest in reform. In the early 1970s, for example, the Swedish organizers of the Stockholm conference maintained initially that they did not believe that institutional change was needed in the UN environment sphere. The conference would be a relatively low-level, technical gathering targeting information exchange. As the conference grew in prominence, however, and states began to prepare for what was increasingly becoming a landmark event, views on the matter shifted. Conducting their own internal analyses, governments recognized their self-interest in cooperation and, by 1972, recommended the creation of the UN Environment Programme.

Another obstacle to reform is the absence of a clear and coherent negotiation endgame. So far, advocates of reform have been equivocal

<sup>1</sup> On fragmentation, see: Andresen, 2001: 22–23.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion, see: Biermann, 2014: 104–105.

on the relationship between the proposed Summit and reform proposals. Ambiguity in this regard is the enemy of purposeful negotiation and incentivizes states to reserve their position. Bargaining over the size, composition, and working methods of the Security Council, for example, a likely precondition if any other changes to the UN charter are to be contemplated, drag on with little movement in the positions of negotiating blocs. If change is to occur, this must change. To the extent that a TFP could precipitate the definitive negotiation on reform, states can move toward their bottom line in talks in search of solutions.

In the UN environment and development sphere, states welcomed the institutional change proposals of the Brundtland commission at the 1987 General Assembly session. Yet, ambiguity surrounded the timeline for follow-up on key recommendations. Instead of purposeful bargaining, states postured. There were risks in embracing the sustainable development agenda advocated by Brundtland. Rather than institutionalizing the concept, no significant change was realized until the emergence of a TFP in 1992. The prospect of a negotiating endgame altered the incentives of states. As the conference neared, negotiators sequenced their concessions to realize significant change.

### **The Summit of the Future: a TFP?**

Could the Summit of the Future emerge as a TFP? Currently, this appears unlikely. The scale of the transformation would be greater than that seen even during the Stockholm conference. The proposed Summit has so far generated limited profile beyond UN circles and governments have responded cautiously to the secretary-general's proposals. The war in Ukraine will further distract from reform efforts. Yet, focal points can emerge suddenly and alter swiftly the behavior of leading actors. Importantly, TFPs do not rely on the support of even the biggest states. In 1972, for example, a TFP emerged at least as much *in spite* of the U.S. and USSR as it did because of them.

While they cannot be manufactured, even by powerful states, TFPs can be

crystallized by strategic players. In Stockholm, for instance, conference secretary-general Maurice Strong proved adept at increasing the conspicuousness of the approaching conference. In the words of Strong's media advisor, the secretary-general set out deliberately to make "people feel that Stockholm was important and valuable," for the "more this feeling grew, the more Stockholm did become important and valuable" (Stone, 1973: 66-67).

With that in mind, what would crystallization of the Summit of the Future entail? First, reformers need to increase, quickly and substantially, the conspicuousness of the summit and its main objectives. Bringing the full weight of the UN Department of Global Communications, including its gifted under-secretary-general, Melissa Flemming, to bear on the event is a necessity. The secretary-general should provide the face of the reform effort, travelling the world, giving interviews, and delivering speeches. Communications over social media need to spotlight the Summit relentlessly, generating coverage. While this effort could run afoul of more resistant states, such engagements are within the mandate of the secretary-general and should be pursued.

Second, in tandem, the uniqueness of the Summit needs to be enhanced. While a safer bet for a good turnout, the scheduling of the summit during the UN's high-level segment in fall 2023 diminishes uniqueness. It risks becoming just one meeting alongside a series of other meetings for world leaders, making it unlikely that the summit will provoke the types of political and analytical investments required for large-scale institutional transformation. If the Summit of the Future is to emerge as a TFP, it will need to clearly dominate the UN agenda through 2022 and 2023. It needs to be the only—or at least the main—game in town.

To achieve this, reformers should work to pare down the rest of the agenda, particularly in 2023. Other summits should be kept to a minimum and, if possible, should be used to reinforce the focus on the Summit. Given the crowded agenda, including urgent crises, this will be extremely difficult. At the

same time, to the extent that reform-minded actors can reinforce the uniqueness of the Summit as *the* venue for negotiating reform, the more likely they are to succeed. Annual G7 or G20 meetings could, with effort, be used to reinforce this focus.

Third, talks need to extend well beyond governments and the usual UN players, attracting substantial intellectual and human resource investments from civil society groups, sub-national actors, parliamentarians, media organizations, religious communities, and government departments not usually implicated in the activities of their national UN delegations. As the UN's former deputy secretary-general, Louise Fréchette, has observed, momentum for change "usually develops outside the UN first." When the same old players dominate reform efforts, you often get the same outcomes. The secretary-general and his under-secretary-general of policy, Volker Türk, reflected this ethic by consulting widely in drafting the report. During the preparatory process, reformers should step this effort up a notch.

TFPs capture the public imagination in ways that vastly outstrip even current multistakeholder engagements spearheaded by the UN. These activities are both a *cause of* and a *response to* the opportunity presented by a highly conspicuous and unique timeframe for reform. Openness to and, indeed, cultivation of, such broad public interest creates risks for the UN and for governments, incurring reputational damage if reform efforts fail. There is a *leap in the dark* quality to change pursued in the wake of TFPs. Yet, absent a shock of greater magnitude even than the 2008 financial crisis and the pandemic, it may be the only way.

Is this realistic? Judging from the state of reform, the emergence of a TFP in the current context appears unlikely. My conversations with those currently involved in UN politics reflect this skepticism. The emergence of TFPs is, however, always inherently unlikely. With the arrival of a TFP, momentum can build rapidly. The history of UN environmental politics shows this clearly. As Fréchette notes, "what was deemed impossible yesterday can become the new orthodoxy tomorrow."

Strategic actions by reforms, such as those proposed here, can help to bring this about.

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