INTERVIEWS 24.09.2024

‘The nervousness in New York was palpable’

Michael Bröning on the UN Pact for the Future, Germany’s role in the negotiations and Russia’s last-minute attempts to disrupt them

In New York, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted the Pact for the Future. Has multilateralism been saved?

Well, at least there is a sign of life. It really would have sent a rather dramatic signal if the negotiations on the Pact for the Future had failed after years of preparation. But, of course, the result is a document of ambivalence. After all, we are experiencing a time in which members of the Security Council are openly hostile towards each other. And now these same states are adopting a document that eulogises cooperation and the United Nations Charter. Naturally, it is right to ask what this language means in reality.

One thing is clear: this document, too, reflects the geopolitical tensions and the ongoing dysfunctionalities of the United Nations in times of confrontation. Even a ‘Pact for the Future’ is rooted in the present. In this present, however, the signs are still pointing to conflict. And the plain truth is that the United Nations has not yet been able to act as a game changer in the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Of course, this is not going unnoticed — nor are Western double standards when dealing with these conflicts. Nevertheless, the broad approval across continents also shows that there is a broad base for multilateralism and cooperation, and that, too, should not be underestimated.

What are the most important points of the pact?

The pact actually consists of three pacts: the main document with 56 action items to which the international community has committed itself – albeit, of course, not bindingly under international law – as well as a digital pact that primarily addresses the technical challenges of digital developments, for example in the field of artificial

intelligence, and a youth pact that focuses on the interests of the young and future generations. As is to be expected with such a comprehensive catalogue of demands, the scope is broad. It covers everything from peace and security, UN reforms, sustainable development, poverty eradication, discrimination and debt to climate change. It's like a big buffet: there's something for almost everyone, but, at the same time, there are also things that are hard on the stomach for almost everyone. This explains the different assessments. The glass is always half full or half empty.

In the areas of peace and security and the reform of the UN Security Council in particular, the results have thus remained predictably weak. The wording is vague and noncommittal. The chapter on a Security Council reform, for example, was initially left out of the drafts for months. In the end, a compromise clause was inserted without any prior discussion. The views, not least between the permanent members of the Security Council, were so far apart that it was apparently not even worth having a serious debate. But they were able to agree on a few ceremonial, non-binding words.

Germany and Namibia played a leading role in the negotiation of the pact. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz also addressed the General Assembly immediately after its adoption.

That is correct. The commitment of the German Permanent Mission here has been enormous. In a complex process that lasted years, not only diplomatic talks were held, but civil society voices were also brought into the deliberations. Of course, this is always a somewhat delicate matter. Authoritarian states perceive with great suspicion any engagement with civil society. This is because non-governmental organisations are often the only ones to speak frankly. At the same time, the UN remains an intergovernmental organisation. Sometimes it seems as if the presentation of civil society voices is supposed to console the fact that the support of some governments is ultimately rather half-hearted — especially when it comes to implementation.

There was a great deal of uncertainty in the run-up to the summit as to whether an agreement would be reached. Where did you see the greatest resistance?

The nervousness in the past few days here in New York was palpable. Even old UN veterans thought there was a non-trivial chance that the pact would be derailed in the final stretch. Right up to the end, there was massive resistance, led and orchestrated by Russia, and supported by some of the usual suspects, from Syria to Venezuela. Here in New York, one is accustomed to a good deal of disruptive tactics. And in

the diplomatic sphere, eye-rolling is almost chronic when it comes to last-minute comments by Russian representatives in complicated negotiations. But the last few days had taken this to a new level. A permanent member of the Security Council refusing to condemn nuclear blackmail? That's a new one. Nevertheless, the clarity of the result also shows that the opposition represents only a minority of the minority. In any case, Russia's attempt to disrupt the adoption process was rejected by a clear majority of the states represented.

What do the results mean for the future of the UN?

The United Nations has sent out a sign of life. No more, no less. Even a reform summit of this kind cannot just suddenly remove the structural obstacles of the present. In many respects, the timing was of course everything, but not optimal. Given the general climate, it was easy to get the impression that some things just didn't fit together here: was it the wrong process at the right time? Or was it the right process, but at the wrong time? Be that as it may, we now have a result. And it is to be expected that specific reform steps will follow, for example in the international financial institutions. Next June, for example, an international conference on development financing in Seville will address these and other issues. And in Hamburg, a summit on sustainability will be held. The Summit of the Future – abbreviated in New York, as with all UN processes, to SOTF – is now already a thing of the past. But the work will continue. And sometimes that in itself is a success.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



Michael Bröning
New York CIty

Michael Bröning heads the office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in New York.