FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 29.04.2026 | Matthias Jobelius

Who will save the UN?

The election of the next UN Secretary-General is just around the corner. The future of the entire organisation will be determined by the outcome

It's election year for the global community. The United Nations is looking for a new Secretary-General and, last week, the four candidates announced so far made their first appearance together on the big stage at the General Assembly: Michelle Bachelet from Chile, Rafael Grossi from Argentina, Rebeca Grynspan from Costa Rica and Macky Sall from Senegal. But with voting not taking place until the end of the year, there is still plenty of time for surprises in the convoluted diplomatic contest for the top job. There is a great deal at stake for the world.

As we stand at a major geopolitical turning point, the election has become a matter of strategy for the international community. The United Nations is the most crucial mechanism we have for taking collective action to solve our collective problems. Will the institution survive? Or will it be left to drift into obscurity? This election will provide at least part of the answer.

Of course, a UN Secretary-General doesn't decide on the world order. Yet, every shift in that order affects the scope of what a Secretary-General can do. So the question of what makes a good UN chief is actually quite simple: someone with the political aptitude to turn a critical geopolitical situation into an opportunity to protect and strengthen the UN Charter. True to Goethe's philosophy: even the stones placed in your path can be used to build something worthwhile.

Whoever succeeds António Guterres will inherit an institution that is politically weakened and financially drained.

Many UN Secretaries-General have done this remarkably well. Dag Hammarskjöld, serving from 1953 to 1961, built on the political leadership of his predecessor Trygve Lie and transformed the UN from a conference platform into an acting organisation. He laid the foundations for what we now know as multilateral UN diplomacy. When the world was staring into the nuclear abyss during the

Cuban Missile Crisis, it was Hammarskjöld's successor, U Thant, who helped John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev find a path to de-escalation. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, who became Secretary-General in 1982, managed to restore the UN's credibility at the end of the Cold War through patience and persistence. He handed over an organisation ready for the new order of the 90s to his successor, Boutros Boutros-Ghali. And thanks to Kofi Annan, the UN continued to prove its relevance during the 'unipolar moment' in the early 21st century, when the United States stood as the world's sole superpower. He reformed the organisation politically and conceptually, opening it up to new partners and turning the office of Secretary-General into a diplomatic powerhouse.

Today, the challenges facing any new Secretary-General are no less daunting than those faced by their predecessors. Trust in multilateral negotiations to resolve ongoing wars and conflicts effectively is declining worldwide, and, in many instances, the UN is no longer even at the table. Whoever succeeds António Guterres will inherit an institution that is politically weakened and financially drained. Great powers acting without restraint and regional powers strategically hedging their bets repeatedly block any efforts to find a solution. The new leader will need to pursue a comprehensive reform agenda from the outset.

As the world's largest association of nation-states, the UN is shaped by routine. This does bring its advantages: even when countries are at war with each other somewhere in the world, state representatives will still come together to negotiate issues like high seas protection or deep-sea mining. But these routines also make the organisation sluggish. The balance tends to tilt towards the status quo. At a time when the UN must change in order to survive, clinging to the old and familiar leads to irrelevance. The next Secretary-General will need to actively use their authority to shape a global organisation that can face up to a growing number of cross-border problems in a geopolitically difficult era. A review of the UN Charter under Article 109 seems to be essential, a call that is being echoed by more and more governments and leaders. In his opening speech at the Raisina Dialogue in India, Finland's President Alexander Stubb recently said, 'What the world needs now is a new San Francisco moment. A moment where world leaders come together in the spirit of cooperation to think long and hard to reform the international

institutions that have served us since World War II.' And he's right.

A woman at the top would send a message of renewal to the public.

Many are urging the UN to go 'back to basics', calling for an administrative overhaul of the institution and a return to its core mission of peace and security. In a world torn apart by war, that does sound rather appealing. But it overlooks the fact that the UN's problems are less about ineffective or inefficient institutions, too many mandates or unclear priorities, and more about political deadlocks. If the UN were to focus exclusively on peace and security, it would relinquish its influence in areas crucial to coexistence in the 21st century — from climate change and artificial intelligence to pandemics and biodiversity loss. At the same time, it would still face the same political deadlocks that currently make it look toothless when it comes to conflict resolution: no funding for peacebuilding, no respect for the prohibition of the use of force and no Security Council reform. It is clear that making institutions more efficient, eliminating duplication, and streamlining mandates are the right things to do. But administrative fixes cannot solve political problems. The United Nations needs a leader with political savvy, not just a pencil pusher.

Many states and civil society organisations argue that the job should go to a woman. After nine men in the role, now is the time, they say. But this has gained little traction among the five permanent members of the Security Council, which wield veto power over the selection process. Still, the case for a female leadership at the UN is strong. A woman at the top would send a much-needed message of renewal to the public.

Whether a man or a woman is ultimately elected, one of the major political challenges facing the next UN leader will be the diminishing influence of the Charter. Even for European states, which champion themselves as defenders of international law, the decision on whether to uphold the UN Charter in a conflict seems to largely rest on their relationships with the parties involved. The German Chancellor Friedrich Merz described the abduction of Nicolás Maduro as legally 'complex' and avoided offering any legal opinion on the war in Iran altogether, saying it would 'have little effect anyway'. With friends like

these, a UN Charter hardly needs enemies.

Yet without its true friends, the Charter cannot survive. A new Secretary-General must convince leaders that their countries' security depends on upholding and defending the prohibition of the use of force at all costs. After the devastation of two world wars, embedding this prohibition globally was perhaps the most landmark normative development of the 20th century. Whether it will see the 21st century through depends on several factors… starting with who the next Secretary-General will be.



Matthias Jobelius
New York

Matthias Jobelius is Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in New York. Previously, he worked for the foundation in Romania, Georgia and India and was head of the European Union and North America Department and the Central and Eastern Europe Department at the FES headquarters in Berlin. He studied political science in Berlin and development studies in London.