



Policy Brief

Setting the Stage for the UNGA's High-Level Thematic Debate on UN, Peace and Security: Reflections and Key Messages from Regional Meetings

by

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On its 70th anniversary, the United Nations (UN) finds itself at a crossroads. Old and new threats, challenges and risks to international peace and security are increasingly testing the ability of the organization and the efficacy of the instruments available to it as it attempts to fulfil its primary promise: to “*save succeeding generations from the scourge of war*”.

Against this backdrop, timely and potentially groundbreaking reviews of UN peacekeeping², peacebuilding³, and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325⁴ were carried out in 2015 to take stock of UN involvement in peace and security and to recommend reforms for the future of the global peace and security architecture. Although the reviews were initiated independently of each other, they produced notable synergies and shared recommendations on a host of vital reforms. If implemented, these recommendations would enhance the relevance, coherence and effectiveness of the UN, working in partnership with member states and regional organizations to prevent, manage and resolve conflict, as well as to build and sustain peace.

To draw conclusions from the larger picture in which the outcomes of the reviews connect, the President of the General Assembly (PGA), Mogens Lykketoft, has taken the initiative of organizing a “High-Level Thematic Debate (HLTD) of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on UN, Peace and Security”. The debate aims, in the words of the PGA, to move beyond “vaguely defined need for change” to focus on practical and concrete steps to effect that change. Scheduled for 10-11 May 2016, the debate will provide a platform for member states to reflect on the recommendations of the reviews, with the aim of identifying synergies, bridging gaps, and easing potential tensions. The ultimate objective of this initiative is to identify priority areas and to present recommendations for systemic and realistic reforms at the UN that enjoy the support of the majority of its members.

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² United Nations, Uniting Our Strengths for Peace - Politics, Partnerships and People: Report of the High Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/446.

³ United Nations, The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts on the Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/65/7.

⁴ UN Women, Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

Leading up to the HLTD, a series of regional and international expert meetings, consultations, workshops and retreats were organized in five continents⁵, with the objective of informing the HLTD. While varying in formats, the events were closely coordinated with the office of the PGA, and addressed a jointly developed set of themes and questions. They brought together hundreds of officials from national governments, regional and international organizations, with experts, academics, and representatives of civil society and the private sector. Viewed together, the recommendations that they collectively produced build upon bottom-up perspectives on the UN's future involvement in peace and security.

This brief does not attempt to summarize the outcomes of those regional meetings⁶. Instead, it tries to distill and highlight a few key messages and recommendations that emerged during these regional meetings, informed in great part by the recommendations put forward by the UN reviews, but not limited to them. It also aims to identify recurrent recommendations put forward during the regional meetings for operationalizing the major points of the UN review, with a particular focus on institutional reform and financing. These key messages are:

1. The Primacy of Politics; Prevention, Resolving Conflict & Sustaining Peace.
2. Democracy at the UN: Security Council Reform & Revitalizing the General Assembly.
3. Cooperation and Partnerships.
4. People-Centered Approach: Enhancing National Ownership.
5. Women, Peace and Security.
6. Institutional Reform.
7. Sustainable and Predictable Financing.

The Primacy of Politics; Prevention, Resolving Conflict & Sustaining Peace

Without exception, all regional discussions reiterated the call of the UN reviews for a paradigm shift that emphasizes the “primacy of politics” in leading the wide spectrum of UN peace and security interventions, ranging from conflict prevention, management and resolution, to peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

In this regard, “sustaining peace” - another term introduced by the reviews - was highlighted over and over again as an appropriate overarching framework to guide all UN interventions, with an emphasis on “prevention”, rather than “reaction”, and an equal emphasis on a “continuum” of interventions, rather than the current sequential approach. As defined by the recent UNSC and the UNGA's resolutions 2282 and 70/262⁷, “sustaining peace” emphasizes the importance of prevention, especially by addressing the root causes of conflict. It also frees peacebuilding from its erroneous characterization as a “post-conflict” endeavor. In addition to setting the stage for post-conflict reconstruction and development, peacebuilding must be equally regarded as a means of preventing and resolving conflict, as well as catalyzing efforts for addressing its root causes. In addition, the “sustaining peace” approach was also viewed as a positive driver for integration that can overcome fragmentation and address the silos hindering coherence amongst the three pillars of UN work: peace and security, development, and human rights, as well as their respective governance structures.

⁵ Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America.

⁶ For a list of these events and their outcome documents, see www.un.org/pga/70/events/hltd-peace-and-security/views-from-the-field-and-civil-society.

⁷ Passed on 27 April 2016.

The regional consultations emphasized the need for the UN and its member states to recommit to the peaceful settlement of disputes as per Chapter VI of the UN Charter. The use of force should be an option of last resort, and when employed it should be in the service of a political strategy that seeks a viable and sustainable political settlement.

Participants in the regional discussions were of the opinion that the current emphasis on managing, rather than resolving, conflicts has led to protracted crises, with damaging consequences for the countries and regions involved in the conflicts, as well as the credibility of the UN. In deploying tools available to it in the pursuit of political settlements, the UNSC and the Secretariat must shift from a mentality of “conflict management” to an emphasis on “conflict resolution.”

Democracy at the UN: Security Council Reform & Revitalizing the General Assembly

All regional consultations, without exception, highlighted that the unrepresentative nature of the UNSC is a major obstacle to the reform of the UN peace and security architecture. Deep frustration has been echoed for the lack of political will to address the issue, including membership of the Council and the veto power. The Arab African and Latin meetings, in particular, highlighted the unsustainable lack of permanent Arab, African and Latin American representation on the UNSC.

Preparatory meetings reluctantly recognized that as reform of the Security Council, including expanding its membership, is unlikely to be achieved in the short-term, other steps need to be taken to compensate for this lack of participatory decision-making in the UNSC. In this context, the regional consultations yielded suggestions, such as enhancing cooperation between the UNSC and regional organizations, and consulting troop and police contributing countries (TCCs/PCCs) in the decision-making process.

The issue of revitalizing the UN General Assembly as the main body of the Organization—one that gives legitimacy to the UN’s actions and decisions - has been echoed in all regional consultations, without exception. Participants in the Arab, African and Latin American consultations all expressed acute frustration at the lack of the UN Security Council reform, and all highlighted the need to empower the UN General Assembly to be able to effectively act in the realm of peace and security.

The African, Arab, European and Latin American consultations affirmed that the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) is best placed to steer the organization away from military responses towards a “culture of prevention,” and they highlighted that the UNGA’s role in reconciling the interests of the P5 is key for a more balanced and representative UN peace and security architecture.

Preparatory meetings also underlined the importance of reviving and implementing UNGA resolution 337 A (Uniting for Peace) and UNGA resolution A/691007 (Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly). If implemented, these resolutions would empower the UNGA to respond to conflict where the UNSC has failed to act.

Cooperation and Partnerships

All regional consultations highlighted the importance of strengthening UN and regional cooperation, as an integral part of reforming the global peace and security architecture. The discussions highlighted that, while the international peace and security field is crowded with state and non-state

actors, the UN is uniquely positioned to pursue and incentivize strategic partnerships that lead to timely, coherent and effective international response.

Partnerships with regional organizations under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, most notably with the African Union (AU) and the League of Arab States (LAS), received considerable attention. The recommendation by the UN reviews for the UNSC to cooperate more closely with regional organizations in a new peacekeeping partnership was welcomed. The African and Arab, as well as the European and Latin American, consultations demonstrated considerable political willingness by these regions and their respective organizations to engage in meaningful partnerships with the UN. A common call that emerged, however, was for moving beyond capacity-building, information sharing and exchanges of views, towards a more strategic partnership between the UN and regional organizations.

Other important partnerships were highlighted during the regional consultations. On one hand, trilateral cooperation between the UNSC, the Secretariat and major troop- and police-contributing countries (TCCs/PCCs) was underlined as one of the most important partnerships in peacekeeping. TCCs/PCCs must play an important role not only in mandate design, review and extension, but also in doctrinal and policy development. This is crucial for the effectiveness of the UN response. On the other hand, partnerships with international/regional financial institutions, the private sector and civil society organizations are all crucial elements for sustaining peace.

People-Centered Approach: Enhancing national ownership

National ownership must be seen as a benchmark for the work of the United Nations in peace and security. It requires inclusive engagement with a wide variety of local actors, not only governments. This inclusiveness would allow UN missions and country teams to better analyze each conflict and its root causes, to tap into local resources for peace, and to monitor and evaluate the impact of UN interventions. For national ownership to be meaningful, it should not be treated as a box-ticking exercise.

The Arab and African consultations underlined that elections tend to be seen by the UN and the international community as the main indicator of national ownership of peace processes. Instead of a narrow focus on elections, the consultations called for an approach that emphasizes participatory democracy throughout the governance cycle. The consultations also pointed out that in situations where societies lack the institutional capacity to manage local and national disputes, rushing into elections prematurely can sometimes be a “driver of conflict.”

Women, Peace and Security

A common key message, reiterated across the regional discussions, was the importance of regarding women as a “driver of sustainable peace.” Women’s participation in peace processes and agreements result in a more durable peace. It is also a precondition for achieving national ownership, inclusivity and the people-centered approach, suggested by the UN reviews

The regional discussions cautioned, however, against reducing the women, peace and security agenda to appointing women to high-level positions in the UN Secretariat and missions or to insist on the participation of women for purposes of checking the box of representation. The discussions called instead for using the cross-cutting nature of the women, peace and security agenda in New York and in the field to integrate the organization’s work and achieving synergies across the silos of the UN system. The Women, Peace and Security agenda must be mainstreamed into national institutions through

concrete and effective mechanisms like National Action Plans. The Latin American consultation in particular stressed the need for more action to end impunity with all sexual and gender-based crime.

Institutional Reform

To achieve all the above, one of the strongest messages voiced in all regional meetings was the call to transform the way the UN works so that it can escape from the silos in which it appears to be trapped.

On the strategic and policy level, this translated into a clear call for both UN member states and the Secretariat to build on the momentum created by their recent successes, most notably the adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, to work together across silos in the face of mounting threats to peace and security. As mentioned previously, the concept of “sustaining peace” was repeatedly referred to as a potential new organizing principle.

On the operational level, an integrated response was highlighted as a must. All regional meetings identified the “fragmentation” of UN system, both at the headquarters and in the field, as the biggest risk to the organization’s future relevance, coherence and effectiveness. It was also singled out as the most daunting and pressing task to be carried out by the new UN Secretary General (UNSG). The next UNSG must champion a set of concrete, ambitious, yet practical, reform proposals that would: a) garner the support of the majority of member states; and b) incentivize the various parts of the UN system to work together in more a coherent way.

Sustainable and Predictable Financing

Regional consultations addressed the issue of predictable and sustainable financing. Funding for the continuum of peace interventions must be predictable, including from the UN’s assessed contributions and voluntary contributions.

Regional discussions also addressed financial arrangements as one of the major impediments to achieving UN system-wide integration and coherence. Structural disincentives and prohibitions on pooling of funding streams must be overcome. At the same time that financing streams must be increased, the UN must be more effective in identifying and promoting innovative approaches to peace and security, for instance by providing greater support to South-South and triangular cooperation and helping stakeholders better integrate these modalities into broader efforts to prevent conflict and promote peace.

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