



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Is the United Nations General Assembly Still Relevant?

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The Utility of the UNGA Beyond Speeches

Every September, New York becomes the temporary capital of world diplomacy. Presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and diplomats descend on the United Nations headquarters for the annual General Assembly. Television screens carry speeches from world leaders, while the world's crises, from wars and terrorism to climate change, poverty and artificial intelligence, are debated before an international audience.

Every year, however, the same question returns: what is the actual utility of the United Nations General Assembly? Critics have a point. Most General Assembly resolutions are recommendations rather than legally binding decisions. Governments sometimes use the podium to repeat familiar positions rather than negotiate compromises. The Assembly cannot compel a powerful state to change its policy simply because a majority disagrees with it. Yet judging the General Assembly solely by whether its resolutions are immediately implemented misses its larger purpose.

The UN General Assembly is the principal deliberative and representative organ of the United Nations. All 193 member states participate, with each having one vote. It remains the only major universal forum in which virtually every country can formally sit at the same table.

UNGA 81: A World Under Pressure

The relevance of this year's gathering is particularly apparent. The 81st session opened on 8 September 2026 under the theme "Restoring Trust, Managing Transformation: A United Nations That Delivers for All." The theme reflects the challenges confronting the international system. The session is dominated by wars and humanitarian crises, but also by artificial intelligence, climate change, sea-level rise, pandemic preparedness, development and demands for reform of global institutions.

The conflicts involving the United States, Israel and Iran, the war in Ukraine, Gaza and humanitarian emergencies in Sudan, Myanmar and Haiti are occupying substantial diplomatic attention. These crises demonstrate both the necessity and limitations of multilateral diplomacy. The General Assembly cannot itself impose peace on combatants. But it provides a universal political forum where governments can articulate positions, build coalitions and maintain diplomatic channels.

The Real Diplomacy Happens Beyond the Podium

Perhaps the greatest utility of the annual session is diplomatic rather than legislative. The speeches attract the cameras, but much of the important work occurs away from the podium. Leaders and ministers who may rarely have an opportunity to meet can

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hold bilateral and multilateral discussions. Countries with serious disagreements can explore possible compromises without immediately committing themselves publicly. The annual UN gathering is therefore also a gigantic diplomatic marketplace.

A meeting does not necessarily produce an agreement, but maintaining communication between adversaries can itself be valuable. Diplomacy often works incrementally, and an apparently inconclusive meeting today may preserve a channel that becomes important tomorrow.

AI: Governance of a Transformation

A newer issue illustrates why UNGA cannot simply be judged by its traditional role in war and peace. Artificial intelligence is emerging as one of the defining issues of UNGA 81.

AI is transforming economies, education, communications, intelligence and military affairs. Yet technological development is moving faster than international regulation. The session is addressing digital governance and the implementation of the Global Digital Compact, adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future. The challenge is to establish rules before technology creates new forms of inequality, surveillance, misinformation and strategic instability.

Military applications are particularly significant. Autonomous systems, AI-assisted targeting and increasingly sophisticated information technologies could alter the character of warfare. These developments require international discussion because technological standards established exclusively by major powers or private companies could leave much of the developing world as rule-takers rather than rule-makers. The General Assembly provides a forum where developing countries can participate in shaping these emerging norms.

Climate Change and Rising Seas

Climate change is another problem that does not respect national borders. UNGA 81 includes a high-level meeting on 24 September on the existential threats posed by sea-level rise, an issue of particular importance to small island

developing states and low-lying coastal countries. For vulnerable states, rising seas are not simply an environmental concern. They involve territory, displacement, food security, infrastructure and national survival. *Pakistan too has experienced the devastating consequences of climate-related disasters.*

The Assembly cannot change the climate through a resolution. But no individual country can solve climate change either. Its value lies in bringing together states with very different levels of responsibility, vulnerability and financial capacity to negotiate common approaches.

Pandemic Preparedness

The COVID-19 experience demonstrated another limitation of fragmented international action: *viruses do not require passports*. On 25 September, UNGA 81 will hold a high-level meeting on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response, seeking stronger international cooperation and greater equity in dealing with future health emergencies. This is precisely the type of problem for which multilateral institutions were created.

No country can guarantee that it will never face another pandemic. Countries can, however, strengthen health systems, improve surveillance, establish response mechanisms and cooperate over vaccines, medicines and medical supplies. The real test will be whether governments implement what they agree.

Development and the Global South

The Assembly is also addressing the longstanding problem of unequal development. UNGA 81 includes discussion of the right to development, reflecting concerns among developing countries that the international economic system does not provide equal opportunities for all. This is particularly important as developing states face high debt, climate-financing requirements, food and energy insecurity and unequal access to new technologies. For much of the Global South, therefore, the UN is not primarily about speeches on geopolitics. It is about development space.

This connects directly to another important theme: *reform of the international order*. The UN was created in 1945, but the distribution of global political and economic power has changed dramatically. Many developing countries argue that institutions created after the Second World War no longer adequately reflect today's realities. The General Assembly is the natural venue for expressing these concerns because virtually every country is represented.

One Country, One Vote

The democratic character of the General Assembly is imperfect, but its principle remains significant. The United Nations has 193 member states, ranging from great powers to small island states. In the General Assembly, each has one vote. This contrasts sharply with the Security Council, where five permanent members possess veto power. The Assembly therefore provides something the Security Council cannot: a universal political forum in which every member can formally express its position.

This does not eliminate inequalities in international politics. A small state does not acquire the economic or military influence of a great power because it has one vote. But it does acquire a voice. For developing countries, that matters.

Non-Binding Does Not Mean Meaningless

One of the most common criticisms of the General Assembly is that its resolutions are generally recommendations rather than legally binding decisions. That criticism is valid—but incomplete. International politics is not conducted exclusively through enforceable commands. International norms develop gradually through declarations, resolutions, treaties, state practice and diplomatic consensus.

The Assembly has played an important role in this process. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, became a foundation of the modern human-rights system. In 2015, the Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In 2022, it recognized the human right to a clean, healthy and

sustainable environment. Such decisions illustrate how an aspiration can gradually become an accepted international norm.

The Assembly Also Runs Part of the UN

The General Assembly is sometimes portrayed as merely a forum for speeches. It is much more than that. It approves the UN budget, elects the non-permanent members of the Security Council and, on the Council's recommendation, and appoints the Secretary-General. It also elects members of other UN bodies.

The budget is particularly important. Peacekeeping, humanitarian programmes, development activities and the UN's institutional machinery all require financing. Decisions about money are ultimately decisions about priorities.

UNGA and Security Council are Different Organizations

It is misleading to judge the General Assembly against the Security Council as though they were competing institutions. The Security Council has 15 members, including five permanent members with veto power. It has primary responsibility for international peace and security and can adopt binding measures under the UN Charter. The General Assembly, by contrast, is universal and representative.

The Security Council has greater coercive authority; the General Assembly has greater representational breadth. When geopolitical divisions paralyse the Security Council, expectations naturally shift towards the General Assembly. But the Assembly cannot simply assume the Council's enforcement powers. Its strength is political legitimacy and universality rather than coercion.

The “Talking Shop” Argument

There is nevertheless a legitimate criticism to be made. If governments repeatedly pass resolutions without implementing them, the institution's credibility suffers. If speeches become exercises in propaganda rather than diplomacy, the General Debate can appear ritualistic.

The Assembly cannot abolish great-power rivalry, eliminate the Security Council veto or guarantee compliance with every recommendation. But this does not make it useless. Sometimes, a resolution matters because it changes policy. Sometimes because it establishes a principle. Sometimes its value lies in revealing the extent of international disagreement. And sometimes the most important outcome is simply that countries continue talking.

A Necessary Institution in an Imperfect World

The UN General Assembly should neither be romanticized nor dismissed. It is not a world government. Its resolutions cannot automatically stop wars or compel powerful states to change course. But neither can the world afford to dispense with the one forum in which virtually all countries can

meet, debate global problems and express their collective positions. The 81st session demonstrates why this matters.

Wars remind us why diplomacy is necessary. AI reminds us why new rules are needed. Climate change demonstrates that national borders cannot contain global problems. Pandemic risks show that security is not only military. Development reminds us that peace without economic opportunity remains fragile. And demands for institutional reform demonstrate that international organizations must evolve if they are to retain legitimacy.

The General Assembly does not possess the power to make the world obey. Its utility lies in something more modest but perhaps more enduring: It gives the world a place to talk before it runs out of reasons to talk to one another.

