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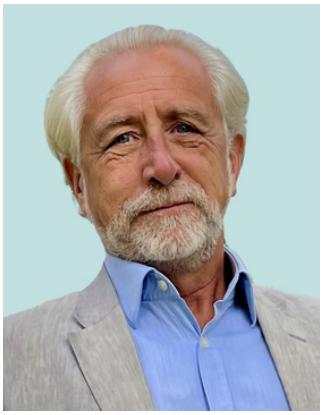
The General Assembly, the Secretary-General, and the international civil service

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Abstract

Debates on reforming the United Nations tend to focus on the Security Council, great-power rivalry, and the growing role of regional organisations, informal coalitions, and non-state actors. Less attention is paid to institutions already at the centre of the Charter organisation: the General Assembly, where all Member States participate on formally equal terms; the Secretary-General, who links political judgement to institutional action; and the international civil service, whose professional capability is needed to turn collective decisions into practice. A central challenge of reinvention is to ensure that knowledge and analysis inform political positioning and Member State decisions, and that those decisions are translated into mandates, resources, and implementation across the organisation and wider UN system. Drawing on the Charter principle of sovereign equality, General Assembly practice, the connecting role of the Secretary-General, and the principles governing the international civil service, the paper argues for clarifying and strengthening the operating relationships through which existing institutions connect legitimate authority with professional capability.[1]

1. Introduction: authority and capability in the UN Charter system

Debates about reforming the United Nations (UN) tend to follow two broad tracks. In wider discussions about multilateralism and geopolitical order, attention centres on the Security Council, including its inability to act in major crises and debates over veto use, composition, and alternative forms of collective action. Within the organisation, reform debates focus heavily on effectiveness and efficiency, including management, financing, staffing, and operational performance. Both are understandable responses to real pressures on the UN. Yet they can obscure a different question: what political and institutional capability already exists elsewhere in the UN and the wider UN system, and how fully is it being used to advance the purposes of the Charter and implement agreed mandates?

A distinction is important at the outset between the UN and the wider UN system. The UN is the single organisation established by the Charter, with the General Assembly and Secretariat among its principal organs. The wider UN system includes the funds and programmes established within the UN, specialised agencies brought into relationship with the organisation, and related organisations with their own governing bodies. The system is connected through mandates, legal arrangements, agreements, and coordination mechanisms, but it is not a single hierarchy. Neither the General Assembly nor the Secretary-General exercises general executive authority over the entire UN system.[2]

The General Assembly, the Secretary-General and the international civil service (ICS) perform distinct but connected functions. The Assembly provides universal Member State representation, political legitimacy, collective direction, and accountability. The Secretary-General connects Member State authority with organisational action through political judgement, good offices, and engagement with political organs. The international civil service provides independent professional analysis, institutional memory, implementation

[1] This paper was developed from discussions at the joint Toda Peace Institute and Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation Writers Workshop in Uppsala on 26 August 2026. The authors are grateful to the participants for their contributions to the discussions and for comments that informed the development of the paper. Responsibility for the arguments and conclusions rests with the authors.

[2] United Nations, "UN System"; *Charter of the United Nations*, arts. 57 and 63.

capability, and learning. It comprises the staff who serve the organisations of the UN system, rather than represent their national governments, guided by the principles of independence from external instruction, impartiality in professional judgement, integrity in conduct, and accountability for decisions, performance, and the use of resources.[3]

Together, these functions constitute what this paper identifies as the 'universal centre': a non-hierarchical relationship through which universal political authority, institutional leadership, and professional capability connect to a wider and increasingly distributed UN system.

A central challenge for UN reform is to strengthen the connections through which knowledge and analysis inform political positioning and Member State decisions, and through which those decisions are translated into mandates, matched with resources, and carried through into implementation across the organisation and wider system.

Over time, authority, expertise, resources, and implementation capacity have become increasingly dispersed across the UN system and beyond it. This has made connections between political authority, institutional capability, and implementation more difficult to maintain. Knowledge may not reach decision-makers in actionable form. Decisions may be disconnected from resources or lack pathways for implementation. Capabilities may remain trapped in institutional silos, while experience from implementation does not always inform subsequent political positioning and decisions. Within the ICS, weaknesses in performance management, pressures on professional independence, and the politicisation of appointments can weaken integrity and institutional capacity.

Effective multilateral action depends on connecting increasingly distributed authority and capability to legitimate collective political responsibility. The GA, the Secretary-General, and the ICS provide an important part of that connection. Such an approach preserves the distinct Charter powers of the Security Council, the authority of Member States and the differentiated mandates and governing arrangements of the wider UN system. Reinvention, in this account, means clarifying and strengthening the operating relationships through which authority, knowledge, and capability are connected within the Charter organisation and across the wider UN system.

2. The General Assembly: the UN's universal political forum

The Assembly is the only principal political organ in which the entire membership formally participates on equal terms and therefore embodies sovereign equality. Its Charter responsibilities extend across deliberation, recommendations, norm development, institutional creation, elections, budgetary authority, and oversight. Each Member has one vote, and the Assembly receives and considers reports from the Security Council and other UN organs.

The Charter gives the Security Council primary, but not exclusive, responsibility for international peace and security. The Assembly has broad authority to discuss and make recommendations on matters within the scope of the Charter, including peace and security, subject to the limits in Articles 11 and 12, while coercive and enforcement authority remains distinctively with the Council.[4]

[3] United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, arts. 100–101; International Civil Service Commission, Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service, "Introduction" and "Guiding principles".

[4] *Charter of the United Nations*, arts. 10, 11, 14, 17 and 22; International Court of Justice, Certain Expenses of the United Nations, Advisory Opinion, 1962, pp.163–164.

The Assembly should not be rediscovered only when the Council fails. The Assembly's universal political role exists in its own right. The International Court of Justice has recognised the accepted practice of both organs considering aspects of the same situation in parallel.[5] The Security Council reports annually to the General Assembly, allowing the wider membership to scrutinise how Charter authority is exercised. Resolution 76/262 further institutionalised a General Assembly debate following use of a Security Council veto.[6]

The President of the General Assembly remains under the Assembly's authority but can strengthen this role by convening dialogue, facilitating negotiations and identifying areas of convergence.[7] Past practice illustrates this potential. During the sixtieth session, President Eliasson used the Presidency extensively to facilitate follow-up to the 2005 World Summit, including negotiations on the Peacebuilding Commission and Human Rights Council.[8] More recently, the *Assembly for Peace Handbook*, developed pursuant to resolution 77/335 through the Office of the President of the General Assembly, recovered institutional memory about the Assembly's peace and security practice and the authorities already available to Member States.[9]

The Assembly's institutional foundation is deceptively simple: one state, one vote. Formal equality is not the same as political equality. The UN is especially important for states that cannot rely primarily on military, economic, or geopolitical power. Small states have used coalitions such as the Forum of Small States and the Alliance of Small Island States to amplify their influence, while the G77 plus China demonstrates on a larger scale how numbers can generate negotiating power.[10] Small states are not politically homogeneous, however, and shared structural interests do not necessarily translate into common political positions.

Great powers present the reverse paradox, with one Assembly vote and extensive leverage outside it. The General Assembly does not neutralise this power but subjects it to another form of judgement. A powerful state may act despite a large Assembly majority in opposition, but it cannot automatically claim that its position expresses the judgement of the wider international community. The legitimacy of a particular General Assembly decision also depends on participation, process, substance, and its treatment of those affected.

Coalitions make formal equality more usable, yet the same coalitions can generate geopolitical blocs and favour established language over adaptation. This resistance should not automatically be treated as obstruction. For example, in fields such as artificial intelligence, important knowledge and technological capacity reside with private companies and expert communities, and opening governance processes indiscriminately to such actors can make an institution appear more inclusive while making its actual distribution of power less equal. The appropriate principle is structured openness: external expertise should inform collective governance without economic, technological, or financial power becoming a substitute for political authority.

Historical cases illustrate how the Assembly, Secretary-General, and ICS can work together. In 1956, after British and French vetoes blocked Security Council action over Suez, the General Assembly convened in emergency special session and moved towards establishing the United Nations Emergency Force. The

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[5] *Charter of the United Nations*, art. 12; International Court of Justice, Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Advisory Opinion, 2004, paras. 26–28.

[6] General Assembly resolution 76/262, 26 April 2022, establishing a standing mandate for a General Assembly debate following the use of a veto in the Security Council.

[7] United Nations General Assembly, Rules of Procedure, A/520/Rev.21 (New York: United Nations, 2025), rules 35, 36 and 38. These concern the President's conduct of plenary proceedings, authority under the Assembly and presidency of the General Committee respectively.

[8] United Nations General Assembly, verbatim records of the 66th plenary meeting, A/60/PV.66, 20 December 2005, pp. 1–3, and the 72nd plenary meeting, A/60/PV.72, 15 March 2006, pp. 1–3, including President Jan Eliasson's opening statements; Gaston and Day, Assembly for Peace, preface. United Nations, 2005 World Summit Outcome (A/RES/60/1), 2005. This resolution outlines the establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission and provides the framework for the UN Peacebuilding Architecture. General Assembly resolutions 60/180, 20 December 2005, and 60/251, 15 March 2006, established the Peacebuilding Commission and Human Rights Council respectively.

[9] Erica Gaston and Adam Day, Assembly for Peace: A Digital Handbook on the UN General Assembly's Past Practice on Peace and Security (New York: United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 2024).

[10] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, "Small States"; Alliance of Small Island States, "Member States"; Group of 77, "About the Group of 77".

Assembly created the political basis for action. Secretary-General Hammarskjöld exercised political and constitutional judgement in turning that opening into a workable proposition. The Secretariat developed the legal, operational, andadministrative arrangements, and the Assembly then authorised and supported the emerging force. Deployment depended on Egypt's consent; UNEF was a peacekeeping operation, not a Chapter VII enforcement action. The sequence was iterative: political opening, Secretary-General judgement, professional design, Member State authorisation and resources, and, finally, implementation.[11] Hungary, as another example from the same time period, illustrates a necessary caution: here the Assembly also acted after a Soviet veto, but Soviet power and refusal to cooperate prevented comparable implementation. Institutional ingenuity can enlarge political possibility; it cannot negate geopolitics.

Six decades later, after Council blockage over Syria, the Assembly established the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to collect, preserve, and analyse evidence for future accountability processes. Notably, for the argument of this paper, the Mechanism was established as a professionally staffed, independent body rather than one composed of Member State representatives.[12] These examples demonstrate both the possibilities and limits of Assembly action. Political blockage does not necessarily imply institutional immobility, and General Assembly action can draw on the professional capability of the ICS to translate intergovernmental decisions into institutional action.

This provides a practical test for reinvention. Before creating an additional global forum or political mechanism, reform proposals should ask what function is missing and whether an existing Charter body can perform it. Institutional proliferation should not be the default where relevant Charter institutions already exist.

3. The Secretary-General's connecting role

The Secretary-General plays a distinctive connecting role between the General Assembly's political authority and the professional capability of the international civil service. Article 98 requires the Secretary-General to perform functions entrusted by the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Trusteeship Council. In practice, the General Assembly has repeatedly used this relationship to request good offices, mediation, representatives, and operational follow-up.[13]

Article 99 gives Charter expression to the Secretary-General's independent political role, authorising the office to bring to the Security Council any matter that, in the Secretary-General's opinion, may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security. The provision is permissive rather than mandatory. Its wider significance, on the reading advanced here, lies in the principle that the Secretary-General has both the authority and the responsibility to exercise independent judgement rather than wait for consensus to emerge.

Article 99 cannot compel agreement or overcome a veto. Where the Council remains blocked, the Secretary-General may use other Charter authorities, good offices and relationships with the wider membership, while the General Assembly within its own authority may still provide avenues for political or institutional action. The Secretary-General cannot substitute for Member State political will, but neither is the office limited to administering decisions once consensus has already formed. The office can bring together analysis from across the organisation, judge when an issue requires political attention, identify potential political constituencies, and help align Secretariat capability with political purpose.

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[11] United Nations General Assembly, resolutions 998 (ES-I), 4 November 1956, 1000 (ES-I), 5 November 1956, and 1001 (ES-I), 7 November 1956, and 1004 (ES-II), 4 November 1956; Gaston and Day, Assembly for Peace, annex 2, sections on Suez and Hungary, and annex 3, section on the United Nations Emergency Force. Resolution 377 A (V), "Uniting for Peace", 3 November 1950, provides a procedural route for the Assembly to exercise existing Charter authority; it does not confer new substantive powers.

[12] UN General Assembly resolution 71/248, 21 December 2016; Gaston and Day, Assembly for Peace, section on accountability mechanisms.

[13] *Charter of the United Nations*, arts. 98–100; Gaston and Day, Assembly for Peace, section on good offices, envoys and diplomatic action.

4. The international civil service: independence, capability, and accountability

The Secretariat embodies a Charter proposition that is easily overlooked. Collective international action requires a professional capability that belongs to the organisation rather than to individual governments.

Article 97 establishes the Secretary-General as chief administrative officer. Article 100 requires the Secretary-General and staff neither to seek nor receive instructions from governments or other external authorities, while Member States undertake to respect the exclusively international character of their responsibilities. Article 101 identifies efficiency, competence, and integrity as paramount considerations while requiring due regard to recruitment on as wide a geographical basis as possible.[14] Together these provisions establish more than an international bureaucracy. They establish an international civil service (ICS). These Charter provisions govern the UN Secretariat directly; corresponding constitutional provisions and staff rules uphold comparable principles across the wider UN system.

Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld articulated this concept most explicitly in his lecture at Oxford University in 1961, titled *The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact*. Independence, he underscored, does not mean autonomous political authority. Member States determine mandates and provide political legitimacy. The more appropriate way to interpret that principle, according to Hammarskjöld, is that officials must be able to exercise professional judgement within the Charter and the mandates of the organisation rather than adapt that judgement to the preferences of individual governments.[15]

The ICS also has a responsibility to uphold and help implement agreed normative frameworks, with the Charter at their core. Impartiality requires consistent application of those principles, including when powerful states contest them. Within their mandates, officials must explain their implications for policy and practice, identify departures from them, and resist pressure to apply them selectively.

Representation should internationalise the Secretariat, not nationalise its posts. Wide geographical recruitment is a Charter requirement, but geographical diversity and national ownership of posts are not the same. Where senior positions are treated informally as belonging to particular countries or groups, officials may feel expected to serve those interests rather than exercise independent international judgement, even without explicit instructions from a government.

Formal independence is insufficient if institutional culture discourages its exercise. Hierarchical clearance, concern over Member State reactions, financial dependence and uncertainty, competition between departments, and risk aversion can constrain professional judgement. Independent judgement may require identifying risks before consensus exists, presenting uncomfortable evidence, upholding Charter principles when they are politically inconvenient, acknowledging failure, or explaining legal and operational constraints honestly. Such judgement is a professional resource available to Member States, not political advocacy.

The causes of disconnection are both administrative and political. Administrative problems include silos, clearance chains, weak follow-through, and reporting that catalogues activity rather than presenting choices. Political problems arise when governments resist independent analysis, adequately financed implementation, or scrutiny of how authority is exercised. Better management can address the first; the second requires political choices by Member States.

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[14] *Charter of the United Nations*, arts. 97, 100 and 101.

[15] Dag Hammarskjöld, "The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact", lecture delivered at Oxford University, 30 May 1961.

Independence does not remove accountability. The Secretariat remains accountable for implementation, resources, integrity, performance, and the quality of its advice. Managers must set clear standards, assess performance fairly, and address underperformance, misconduct and failures of management. Independence without accountability risks bureaucratic autonomy; accountability without independence risks politicised administration. Greater discretion should therefore be accompanied by clearer justification of decisions, transparency, professional accountability, and credible performance management.

Institutional memory creates another tension. The ICS preserves knowledge across changing governments, delegations, and Secretaries-General, but precedent can also harden into rigidity, and organisational boundaries can become more important than the problem being addressed. The test is whether institutional memory expands the range of viable options or merely explains why different options cannot be attempted.

A reinvented UN requires a renewed compact: Member States must respect the international character of the Secretariat; the Secretary-General must defend that space and uphold competence, integrity, diversity, and accountability; and international civil servants must exercise impartiality, professional judgement, and responsibility for performance.

5. Connecting authority and capability across the UN system: an implementation circuit

An effective operating logic should begin with the task and relevant mandates rather than the institutional arrangement. What is the task? Which institutions have the authority, relationships, expertise, and resources required to address it? How do their respective mandates connect? Only then should the appropriate institutional division of labour be determined. The purpose is to organise existing authorities and capabilities around the task while preserving distinct mandates and lines of accountability. This does not alter those mandates or confer authority on the General Assembly or Secretary-General that they do not possess.

In practice, this suggests a sequence: identify the task and relevant risks; provide independent analysis; determine what political positioning and support are required; identify the relevant intergovernmental authority and institutional mandates; align resources; mobilise capabilities across the UN system; and review implementation, evidence, and accountability. Together these stages form an ‘implementation circuit’: knowledge informs political positioning; political positioning helps connect relevant authorities, mandates, and resources; and experience from implementation feeds back into renewed analysis, learning, and adaptation.

The wider UN system makes this connecting function particularly important. Funds and programmes, specialised agencies, regional commissions, and other entities bring different mandates, expertise, governing arrangements, and resources to common challenges. ECOSOC has a particular coordinating role in the economic, social, development, and related fields.[16] Its Charter functions include coordination of the specialised agencies, while the wider ECOSOC system provides mechanisms for coordination among bodies operating under different mandates and governing arrangements. This provides an existing intergovernmental mechanism through which capabilities operating under different mandates can be brought into a more coherent relationship.

[16] *Charter of the United Nations*, art. 63; United Nations Economic and Social Council, “ECOSOC System” and “Coordination Segment”. Article 63 provides for ECOSOC coordination of specialised agencies through consultation and recommendations, while the contemporary ECOSOC system encompasses its subsidiary bodies, regional commissions, funds and programmes and specialised agencies.

Reinvention lies in strengthening these relationships while maintaining political responsibility and accountability. Secretary-General reports should identify risks, consequences, alternative courses of action, and lessons from implementation so that Member States have meaningful choices. Smaller delegations need access to analytical support, transparent processes, and formats that facilitate substantive engagement. Where implementation depends on capabilities distributed across specialised agencies, funds and programmes, regional commissions, or external partners, the connections between political authority, institutional mandates, resources, and accountability must remain explicit.

The circuit can be tested clearly at country level. The resident coordinator system coordinates UN development work in more than 160 countries and territories, bringing together entities with different mandates, governance arrangements, and funding structures around national priorities. Recent UN reporting identifies a persistent funding gap, illustrating the vulnerability that arises when political direction and institutional mandates are not matched by sufficient resources and professional capability.[17] For the Secretariat, uncertain resources can also constrain the institutional capacity within which independent professional judgement is exercised.

Effective action in a decentralised UN system requires legitimate authority, institutional mandates, professional capability, adequate resources, and accountability to be deliberately connected in support of agreed objectives.

[17] United Nations Development Coordination Office, "RC Funding and Moving Forward," Report of the Chair of the UN Sustainable Development Group 2026: Impact of the UN Resident Coordinator System in 2025, "Funding Reality." The US$45.7 million gap is calculated from reported income of US$236.1 million and requirements of US$281.8 million for 2025.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The Charter contains more political and institutional possibility than contemporary practice demonstrates. As authority, expertise, resources, and implementation become more distributed across states, UN entities, and other actors, greater attention is required to the relationships connecting dispersed capability to Member State political responsibility and accountability. Existing Charter authorities provide the constitutional foundation for a more connected way of organising collective action; clarifying and strengthening the relationships through which they are exercised is the work of reinvention.

1. Use the General Assembly's existing authority before creating new political machinery

Member States, working with the President of the General Assembly, should use the Assembly's Charter authorities more deliberately for political deliberation, accountability, norm development, institutional innovation, and oversight. Reform proposals should consider whether existing Assembly authority can address an institutional gap before additional machinery is created. The Assembly should exercise its own authority while respecting the Security Council's distinct responsibilities and ensuring that Council inaction does not become an assumption that the wider membership possesses no political agency. Member States should also support the effective participation of smaller delegations and encourage cross-regional coalitions around substantive problems.

Presidents of the General Assembly should use their convening and facilitating role to build cross-regional dialogue, sustain political attention, and strengthen interaction between the Assembly and other principal organs.

2. Exercise the authority and connecting role of the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General should use the political and institutional authority of the office to connect independent analysis, political judgement, and institutional action, including through good offices, and engagement with relevant Member States and other Charter authorities.

Article 99 should be used when independent assessment warrants bringing an emerging threat to the attention of the Security Council. It cannot compel Council agreement or overcome a veto, but it can ensure that political blockage is not preceded by institutional silence. Where Council agreement is unavailable, the Secretary-General should continue to use the office's relationships with the wider membership and other relevant actors within the limits of existing Charter authority.

3. Recommit to the international civil service compact

Member States should reaffirm and honour Article 100 by respecting the international character of the Secretariat, refraining from attempts to direct staff or suppress independent analysis, and resisting the politicisation or progressive nationalisation of senior appointments. Professional independence is a constitutional principle and a practical condition for translating collectively agreed norms and mandates into credible action.

The Secretary-General should ensure that appointment and management systems reinforce competence, integrity, geographical diversity, professional independence, and accountability, and should report to the General Assembly on how senior appointments meet those criteria. International civil servants should account for their conduct, advice, and performance, while managers should address underperformance, failures of management, and misconduct through credible and consistent procedures. The Secretary-General should protect staff who discharge their responsibilities in good faith under political pressure.

4. Strengthen the implementation circuit across the UN system

Knowledge and analysis should inform political positioning and decisions, and those decisions should connect more consistently to mandates, resources, implementation, review, and learning. Secretary-General reporting to the General Assembly should become more strategic and option-oriented, presenting emerging risks, alternative courses of action, institutional implications, and lessons from implementation. Where political action is required, the Secretary-General should identify the Member States, coalitions, regional actors, and other constituencies capable of generating political traction.

The General Assembly should translate its decisions more clearly into responsibility, mandate, resources, accountability, and review. ECOSOC and other relevant governing bodies should use their coordinating roles where implementation depends on capabilities distributed across the UN system. Where implementation lies elsewhere in the UN system or with external partners, mandates, responsibilities, and accountability relationships should remain explicit, while experience from implementation feeds back into renewed analysis and political judgement.

These recommendations point to a more connected way of organising collective action across the UN system. They require clearer relationships between the political authority of Member States, the professional capability of the international civil service, the leadership and independent judgement of the Secretary-General, and the wider capabilities of the UN system. The Charter already provides the institutional basis for stronger collective action; the principal constraint is political power, and reinvention must ensure that vetoes and geopolitical blockage in one organ do not translate into institutional inaction across the wider UN system.

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