

Breakdown or breakthrough: the UN Summit of the Future

by Russell Rollason

22 August 2024



High Commissioner for Human Rights in underground shelter, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2022

Photo Credit: [Twitter/volker_turk](#)

The world is moving closer to the brink of instability, according to United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres. “Climate change is contributing to instability and is affecting livelihoods, access to resources and human mobility trends; risks to peace and security are growing with new technologies placing the capacity to disrupt global stability in the hands of far more actors,” he said in the *Our Common Agenda* report.

The conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and Myanmar cannot be solved by one or two countries acting alone. “Our collective peace and security is increasingly under threat as a result of emerging risks and dangerous trends for which traditional forms of prevention, management and resolution are ill suited,” says Guterres. The release of *Our Common Agenda* in 2021 initiated a process that will come to fruition on 22-23 September this year in New York at the **Summit of the Future** where a “Pact for the Future” will be adopted by UN member states.

Australia is participating in the negotiations on the draft pact and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Penny Wong, is expected to lead Australia’s delegation.

The summit has a range of goals including a boost to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are seriously falling behind; a recommitment to peace and security and a rethink of how best the UN can contribute; the control of new technologies and AI; empowerment of young people; and reform of the UN architecture, especially **the UN Security Council**.

The summit comes at an important time for Australia because in 2025 Australia will take up a two-year seat on the **UN Peacebuilding Commission** (PBC). Australia is also standing for election to the Security Council for 2029-30 and our performance at the summit is an opportunity to influence other countries’ views of Australia’s goals, policies and strategies to strengthen peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

Addressing the UN General Assembly in September 2023, Wong emphasised how

Australia has been active in the UN's peacebuilding agenda since its inception, "focused on addressing the underlying factors that contribute to conflict". Minister Wong observed how "military power is expanding" and the "modern arms race forever transformed the scale of great power competition and pushed all of humanity to the brink of Armageddon". She called for a new commitment to "building ... preventive infrastructure to reduce the risk of crisis, conflict and war by accident". In February 2024, Wong told the Indian Ocean Conference in Perth that, "Peacebuilding today must rise to this potentially catastrophic challenge [expanding military power]."

These strong statements have increased expectations that Australia will take a lead in the negotiations on the Pact for the Future. However, on two key issues — [signing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) for which Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has previously expressed strong support, and support for a legally binding instrument on the development and use of [automatic weapons systems](#) — Australia appears not ready to act.

In preparation for the summit, the University of Melbourne Initiative for Peacebuilding, the UN Association of Australia and the Australian Institute for International Affairs (ACT) convened a roundtable in Canberra in early August. Background papers on six key issues were prepared ahead of the roundtable: on impunity, accountability and respect for human rights and the rule of law; preventive diplomacy and dialogue; strengthening the UN Peacebuilding Commission; the prohibition of nuclear weapons and lethal automatic weapons systems; and reform of the United Nations Security Council.

At the roundtable, representatives from DFAT said Australia will focus on the founding pillars of the UN: peace, human rights and development. Australia supports reform of the UN to make it more effective and is committed to supporting the SDGs.

Concern over the conflicts raging in several regions were reflected at the roundtable through a call for Australia to support a stronger emphasis in the pact on prevention of conflict, and to "lean into national prevention strategies making the link between prevention of conflict and the SDGs". As one participant said, "we need to repeat: 'Don't bomb schools!'"

Prevention of conflict should become a key theme for Australia's engagement in the PBC along with improved mechanisms that support consultative and inclusive approaches, for women, First Nations people and civil society. Specifically, in [a background paper](#) I wrote with Simon Richards and Jacob Berah, we point out that Action 15 in the pact calls for "support and assistance to States, including through

the [PBC] and the entire United Nations system, upon request, to build national capacity to develop and implement their national prevention strategies”. Australia could support Action 15 and the move to assist fragile states to develop prevention strategies at the national level. This approach has been supported by the G77 countries including some in our region.

Australia is a strong supporter of the rule of law and is well placed to reinforce human rights in the pact. In [her background paper](#), Erika Feller calls for Australia to promote measures that reinforce the accountability of all states, including but not limited to parties to a conflict, to respect International Humanitarian Law, and for a comprehensive review of existing accountability processes (including at the national level within Australia). Furthermore, she calls for support for more funding for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The regular budget for human rights in 2023 represented just over 5% of the total United Nations regular budget. Peace and Security pillar funding was more than 17 times that of OHCHR. With a budget of \$US392.6 million, OHCHR ranks way down the list, at 21st among the 23 leading agencies of the UN for funding. By way of comparison, the budget of the World Intellectual Property Organization is some \$US541.3 million, UN Women \$US671 million, the UN Environment Programme \$US929.4 million, and the UN Population Fund \$US1.6 billion.

The importance of the Summit and the commitment of UN member states to the Pact for the Future is underlined by Guterres: “We are at an inflection point in history. In our biggest shared test since the Second World War, humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: a breakdown or a breakthrough.”

Read the [six background papers](#) published by University of Melbourne Initiative for Peacebuilding.

Author/s:

Russell Rollason

Russell Rollason is an Adviser to the University of Melbourne Initiative for Peacebuilding. He has been a diplomat with the Department of Foreign Affairs and has twenty-five years’ experience in NGOs including 12 years as Executive Director of ACFOA (now Australian Council For International Development).

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/breakdown-or-breakthrough-the-un-summit-of-the-future-20240822/>