

Does the UN Still Work

The Second Day of the General Debate at the 81st Session of the UN General Assembly

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From Diagnosis to Verdict

Argentine President Javier Milei called the UN a “useless organization” that sustains a caste of arrogant bureaucrats, and accused it of tolerating chaos and terrorism instead of defending security and human rights. Czech President Petr Pavel replied that diplomacy matters most not between friends but between adversaries, which is precisely why the UN remains indispensable as a forum for dialogue, even when agreement seems distant. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez came to New York, in his own words, to defend what so many are trying to destroy, and spoke out against “reactionary powers” that treat the world as a zero-sum game.

The first day of the debate produced a shared diagnosis of a collapsing order. The second produced a dispute over whether the UN is worth repairing at all. Rwandan Prime Minister Justin Nsengiyumva said that the Organization is better at responding to crises than at preventing them, and that institutions earn legitimacy through results rather than promises. Montenegrin President Jakov Milatović recalled that 65 armed conflicts were under way in 2025, the highest number since 1946, claiming more than 240,000 lives. Between Milei’s rejection and Sánchez’s defence, most speakers took a conditional position. The UN has value insofar as it delivers, and more and more states judge it by what it gives them.

The Eastern Flank Talks About Food

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy reported that between January and August the Russian army lost 248,964 soldiers in Ukraine, more than the population of 21 countries, and recalled that Vladimir Putin is once again promising to capture the Donetsk region within a few months. Estonian President Alar Karis called Russia’s aggression one of the biggest tests of the UN’s relevance, urged support for the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression and recalled that Tallinn will host the Ukraine Recovery Conference in 2027. Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs spoke about Russia’s shadow fleet, and Romanian President Nicușor Dan about manipulation on social media and his support for the target of 5 per cent of GDP for defence.

Most telling, however, was how many leaders from the region linked the war in Ukraine to food security beyond Europe. Karis recalled that Russian attacks on Black Sea ports had turned the war into a global problem, Rinkēvičs that what happens in Ukraine, in the Red Sea or in Sudan does not stay there, and Pavel that the effects of Russian aggression are felt most acutely by African countries dependent on affordable food. Bulgarian President Iliana Iotova went furthest, announcing an initiative for safe navigation in the Black Sea intended to prevent famine this winter in the Middle East and Africa. After a first day on which the South described wars above all through the prices of food and medicine, Central and Eastern Europe began to speak the same language. Bulgaria was the first to turn it into a concrete proposal.

The Baltic states and Romania spoke primarily about deterrence and the costs that must be imposed on Russia. Iotova, by contrast, warned that after the war ends Europeans cannot be offered nothing better than a new and worse Cold War, while Italian Deputy Prime Minister Antonio Tajani argued that a ceasefire would be the first step towards a security architecture that protects everyone, including Russia. The debate over what Europe should look like after the war is no longer confined to Western European capitals.

Nawrocki Between the South and Washington

President Karol Nawrocki opened with the argument that the UN was born with an original flaw. The Organization was created after the Second World War, but it was not founded on the principle of accountability for crimes, and the state responsible for the wrongs done to Poles helped shape the postwar order as a permanent member of the Security Council. The lack of accountability, he argued, signalled that aggression could go unpunished, and Russia's policy today is its consequence. Nawrocki described that policy as neo-imperial and neocolonial, likened it to a return to the concert of powers and recalled Russian attacks on ports and grain ships that hit people far beyond Europe.

In this part the speech was clearly addressed to the South. The President stressed that Poland has no colonial past, proposed partnership instead of dependence and called the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America natural partners with whom Poland shares the experience of development and the drive for sovereignty. He recalled that the African Union was admitted to the G20 in 2023 and called it a good decision, presenting Poland's bid for a seat in the group as a further step in the same direction. In this way the Polish demand became part of the same dispute over representation that Africa is waging at the UN. Portraying Russia as a colonial power may be the most effective argument Poland has in addressing the South, because it undermines Moscow's image as an ally in resisting Western dominance.

Yet this offer was weakened within the same speech. Nawrocki warned that ambitious climate policy leads to deindustrialisation, and set environmental protection against the actions of left-wing "fanatics". For countries such as Namibia, Mozambique or the Central African Republic, however, climate change is a matter of survival and basic justice. On the Middle East, the President confined himself to general formulas on the protection of civilians and a two-state solution. He did not refer directly to the situation in Gaza, which for the Global South has become the most important test of Western credibility and consistency. He did, on the other hand, welcome the agreement on Greenland and thanked Trump for the invitation to the G20 summit in Miami. The President thus tried to speak simultaneously to the Global South and to Washington, but where the expectations of the two diverged, he clearly chose Washington. Set against Bulgaria's concrete initiative on Black Sea security, the Polish proposal remained above all a declaration.

Africa Does Not Plead, It Proposes

Kenyan President William Ruto recalled that Africa's 54 states make up almost a quarter of the UN's membership, yet the continent still has no permanent seat on the Security Council. He linked political reform to financial reform, pointing out that in 2024 developing countries accounted for less than a third of the world's \$102 trillion in public debt, yet paid around \$1 trillion in interest. Africa, he said, does not come to plead but to propose. King Mswati III of Eswatini asked how many more years African leaders will have to come to New York with the

same demand, and Ethiopian President Taye Atske Selassie warned that the South cannot remain a helpless spectator of the technological revolution.

Judith Suminwa, Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the world's leading source of cobalt, said that a decarbonised economy cannot be built on bloodstained minerals and announced that her country wants to process its raw materials at home. Mozambican President Daniel Chapo spoke of the paradox of a continent rich in resources that retains little of the value they generate, and called for a shift from extraction to value creation and from transactions to partnerships. For Europe, which is seeking supplies of critical raw materials, this is a signal that an offer based solely on buying raw materials will become less and less attractive. The formula of partnership instead of dependence put forward by Nawrocki matches these expectations exactly, but its test will be a willingness to invest in processing, not the declaration itself.

The theme of sovereignty introduced by Kyrgyzstan on the first day returned in African speeches. Guinean President Mamadi Doumbouya argued that development accelerates where the model of governance is tailored to local realities rather than imposed from outside, and Burundian President Évariste Ndayishimiye accused the Human Rights Council of being used to single out particular states. The point was put most sharply by Botswana's President Duma Boko, who said that rules that bind only the weak are not rules. This is almost word for word the argument Poland uses against Russia, and it shows that the language of the South and the language of Central Europe can meet on many issues.

The Trump Camp and the Middle East

Venezuela's Acting President Delcy Rodríguez thanked Trump for resuming diplomatic relations and announced elections. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić backed the US administration's efforts to build "a more just order" and contrasted the calls to respect international law in the case of Ukraine with the recognition of Kosovo's independence by part of the West. The group of states for which Trump has become a point of reference is thus clearly growing. Vučić also said that small and medium-sized states are under increasing pressure to take sides. His speech shows that the charge of selective application of principles, levelled at the West by the South on the first day, can also be made from within Europe, and against the very arguments on which Poland's policy towards Ukraine rests.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian spoke of the assassination of the Supreme Leader and of Iran being attacked during negotiations, insisted that his country does not seek nuclear weapons but will not accept limits on its peaceful programme, and pointed to double standards regarding Israel. It was a statement of position ahead of the decision Trump has announced for after the midterm elections. Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa, for his part, declared that Syria is rising, citing the return of 3.5 million refugees and internally displaced persons, the lifting of sanctions and removal from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, while demanding that Israeli forces withdraw to the lines of 8 December 2024. Syria shows how quickly a state can regain its place in the system once it settles its relations with Washington.

Who Comes After Guterres

Uganda, which chairs the Non-Aligned Movement, put forward Olara Otunnu, the first Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, as its candidate. Sánchez and Paraguayan President Santiago Peña called for the next Secretary-General to

come from Latin America, and Sánchez added that after nine men it is time for a woman. Pavel said the defining task of the next Secretary-General will be adapting the UN to a world of growing rivalry. Iotova warned that reform without resources is not possible, and Uganda that streamlining the system under the UN80 Initiative must not mean diluting agreed mandates. The dispute between reform through broader representation and reform through cuts, already visible on the first day, is thus carrying over into the choice of Guterres's successor.

Saida Mirziyoyeva, Head of the Presidential Administration of Uzbekistan, said that the region, until recently associated with border and water disputes, has moved to cooperation, and that Afghanistan cannot be treated solely as a source of threat. Uzbekistan will take over the chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement next year. Together with Kyrgyzstan's election to the Security Council, this means that a region which for years was an object of great power politics is beginning to act at the UN as an independent player.

The second day shows above all that states are asking less often whether the UN is needed and more often what it can give them. Central and Eastern Europe began to look for a common language with the South on food, and Africa presented its own offer based on raw materials, finance and representation. In New York, Poland used the right formulas, from the neocolonial nature of Russia's policy to partnership instead of dependence. Whether it will be treated as a partner, however, will depend above all on whether these formulas are followed by concrete proposals, like the one Bulgaria brought with it.