

Elevating the UN Peacebuilding Commission: Proposals for the Summit of the Future

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Introduction

Today, the UN is struggling to realize its core purpose of maintaining international peace and security, even as threats have multiplied and grown. Hampered by geopolitical polarization and very low levels of trust amongst great powers, the UN Security Council has failed to act in the face of major conflicts in places like Syria, Ukraine, and now Israel/Gaza. The calls for major reforms to the Security Council are increasingly loud, but also even more unlikely to succeed.

In this context, the Secretary-General's 2021 *Our Common Agenda* report reiterated the need to reinvigorate the Security Council reform agenda. But it also recommended the UN system explore how to bolster and expand its other peace and security institutions, including the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC). This recommendation was taken up by both the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB) and the New Agenda for Peace (NA4P).

This Technical Note is an independent product of the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research and considers several recommendations to improve the PBC. It provides a brief background on the PBC's current mandate and areas of work. It then explores the two sets of recommendations provided by the HLAB and the NA4P, offering a brief comparison and some additional ideas from expert consultations. On that basis, the Technical Note concludes with several possible pathways and decisions for consideration by Member States in the lead-up to the Summit of the Future.

The PBC's Current Mandate and Structure

The PBC was established in 2005 via joint UN General Assembly/Security Council resolutions.¹ The same resolutions created the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) and the UN Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), with a secretariat to support their work. The core mandate of the PBC is to:

- Marshal resources and advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery;
- Provide recommendations and information to improve the coordination of all relevant actors, to develop best practices, to help to ensure predictable financing for early recovery activities, and to extend the period of attention given by the international community to post-conflict recovery;

¹ United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1645, adopted by the Security Council at its 5335th meeting," United Nations, 20 December 2005, S/RES/1645; United Nations General Assembly, "Resolution 60/1, adopted by the General Assembly during its Sixtieth session," United Nations, 24 October 2005, A/RES/60/1

- To provide political accompaniment and advocacy to countries affected by conflict;
- To promote an integrated, strategic, and coherent approach to peacebuilding;
- To serve a bridging role among the principal organs and relevant entities of the UN by sharing advice on peacebuilding needs and priorities.

This core mandate was reaffirmed by the Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture in 2015² and again in 2020.³

In 2022, the Commission supported 14 separate country- and region-specific settings, broadening its geographical scope; including by holding meetings for the first time on Timor-Leste, South Sudan, and Central Asia. With these additions, the Commission has engaged with a total of 26 different countries and regions since its inception.⁴ Cross-cutting and thematic engagements were undertaken on women, peace and security; youth and peace and security agendas; institution-building; transitional justice and the rule of law; electoral processes; displacement; climate change; socioeconomic development; and partnerships for peacebuilding.⁵

The Commission's agenda is set at the request of (1) the Security Council, (2) the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or the General Assembly with consent of the concerned Member State, (3) the Secretary-General, or (4) Member States on the "verge of lapsing or relapsing into conflict." All decisions are made by consensus.⁶

The PBC and the PBF reinforce each other, with the PBC providing political support for Member States on peacebuilding, and the Secretary-General's PBF working as the UN's independent instrument to invest in peacebuilding efforts. Countries considered by the Commission are also recipients of support from the PBF.⁷

The PBC's Unique Contribution to Peace and Security

The PBC is the only global forum dedicated to assisting countries in their peacebuilding efforts.⁸ The main unique benefits of the PBC are:

- **National ownership:** Affected countries are encouraged to highlight their own challenges and successes in grappling with security risks, knowing that they have a say in the response. If an affected country or group of countries requests to discuss an issue in a country- or region-specific context, there is usually agreement among PBC members. This provides an opening

² United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1645, adopted by the Security Council at its 7680th meeting," United Nations, 27 April 2016, S/RES/2282

³ United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1645, adopted by the Security Council," United Nations, 21 December 2020, S/RES/2558 (2020); and United Nations General Assembly, "Resolution 75/201, adopted by the General Assembly during its Seventy-fifth session," United Nations, 28 December 2020, A/RES/75

⁴ Report of the Peacebuilding Commission on its sixteenth session (New York: United Nations, 2023. Available at: <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/n2305132.pdf>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ S/RES/1645 (2005) and A/RES/60/1 (2005)

⁷ Permanent Representative of Romania to the United Nations, *General Assembly Debate on the PBC and PBF annual reports Statement of the former Chair of the PBC*, 20 May 2019.

⁸ United Nations, *Evaluating Peacebuilding Commission's Performance over Past Year, Speakers Highlight Stronger Advisory Role, gains in Supporting Countries Emerging from Conflict*, 27 July 2022.

for the Commission to engage on more contentious issues, including climate-related security risks.⁹

- **Universality of peacebuilding:** The Commission has expanded its geographic scope and has considered a range of peacebuilding matters in recent years, including on reconciliation and transitional justice. This has demonstrated the PBC's value in promoting peer-to-peer learning as well as underscoring the universality of peacebuilding and prevention by exploring diverse cases, including in the Global North.¹⁰
- **Convening power:** The PBC's mandate allows it to convene diverse groups of stakeholders, both within and beyond the UN system, enabling affected States to raise political awareness and spur financial support, including from the PBF, development and humanitarian agencies, and international financial institutions.¹¹
- **Coherence:** The PBC plays a key role bridging the three pillars of the UN, and thus contributing to greater coherence in the UN's peacebuilding work.¹² It has also played a vital bridging role between the Assembly, the Security Council, and the Economic and Social Council. In 2022, the Commission advised the Security Council 17 times and the General Assembly four times, including in the form of letters and formal briefings. The Commission made a total of three submissions and briefings to the ECOSOC, focused on thematic and regional issues.¹³

Criticisms/Weaknesses of the PBC

While playing an important role in the UN's peace and security architecture, the PBC has some well-recognized weaknesses and has been subject to several critiques. The main shortcomings of the PBC are:

- **Limited resources:** Without resources of its own, one of the PBC's key tasks is pooling and raising resources for peacebuilding. These activities remain severely underfunded.¹⁴ As the only dedicated peacebuilding resource within the UN system, the PBF can currently only provide a fraction of the resources needed on the ground. The current inter-governmental approach and predominant focus on economic aid may essentially hinder the Commission's ability to marshal resources.¹⁵
- **Lack of enforcement powers:** The PBC lacks any enforcement mechanisms and its recommendations are entirely non-binding. As such, it relies on the willingness of Member

⁹ "Informal retreat of the members of the Peacebuilding Commission: The Peacebuilding Commission in a new era for peace", Dag Hammerskjöld Foundation and UN DPPA, 30 June 2023, https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/2023_pbc_retreat_summary_note.pdf; Jake Sherman and Florian Krampe, *The Peacebuilding Commission and Climate-related Security Risks: A More Favourable Political Environment?* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2018).

¹⁰ "Informal retreat of the members of the Peacebuilding Commission: The Peacebuilding Commission in a new era for peace", Dag Hammerskjöld Foundation and UN DPPA.

¹¹ Jake Sherman and Florian Krampe, *The Peacebuilding Commission and Climate-related Security Risks: A More Favourable Political Environment?*

¹² "Informal retreat of the members of the Peacebuilding Commission: The Peacebuilding Commission in a new era for peace", Dag Hammerskjöld Foundation and UN DPPA.

¹³ Report of the Peacebuilding Commission on its sixteenth session (New York: United Nations, 2023. Available at: <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/n2305132.pdf>

¹⁴ United Nations, "Peacebuilding Commission Should Advise More, Be Funded Properly, Speakers Stress in General Assembly While Spotlighting Its Successes", 24 July 2023.

¹⁵ Tarcisio Gazzini, *The Economic Dimension of Peacebuilding: The UN Peacebuilding Commission in Search of Its Identity* (Geneva: GCSP, 2017).

States and other partners to accept its advice. The lack of investigative or accountability-related functions means it is without any teeth.

- **Scope limitations:** While recognizing prevention at the heart of peacebuilding, the PBC focuses almost entirely on post-conflict peacebuilding. This means it often misses the wide range of settings where early action could have a significant result and may be less able to address root causes in many settings.
- **Political divisions:** The PBC's activities can be hampered by just one of its members due to its consensus-based decision-making process. This can mean that countries in which PBC members have national interests will not come before the Commission, or that affected countries themselves decline support from the PBC. It can also mirror the geopolitical gridlock in the Council. Furthermore, discussions on crucial but controversial topics like climate, peace, and security also tend to receive limited attention.
- **Lack of inclusivity:** While far more inclusive than many other forums, the PBC remains a State-led and State-oriented body. It has been criticized for being insufficiently inclusive of local actors, civil society groups, or other players beyond the participation of a civil society representative in its meetings.
- **Slow response:** As with any UN political process, the PBC's decision-making can be slow and inflexible, even in the face of fast-moving conflict dynamics on the ground.

Proposals for Improving the PBC

Several recent proposals have been put forward to address these shortcomings and empower the PBC to be a more meaningful actor in the UN's peace and security architecture. Two of the highest-profile sets of recommendations were made earlier this year by the HLAB¹⁶ and in the Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace policy brief.¹⁷ Earlier proposals – such as the Gambari/Albright Commission of 2015¹⁸ – also offer important recommendations that are considered below.

Reforming the PBC

An ambitious set of proposals has been put forward by HLAB, NA4P, and others that may require legislative reforms, UNSC resolutions, or decisions by Member States.

Complement and support the Security Council:

- An expanded mandate to address a broader range of risks, including non-military threats, climate-driven risks, socioeconomic inequalities, and technological threats;¹⁹
- Greater investigative and decision-making powers, potentially similar to some of those currently granted to the Human Rights Council (such as the use of special rapporteurs);²⁰

¹⁶ High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB), *A Breakthrough for People and Planet: Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future* (New York: United Nations University, 2023)

¹⁷ *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 2023).

¹⁸ Commission on Global Security, Justice and Governance, *Confronting the Crisis of Global Governance* (Washington, DC: The Hague Institute for Global Justice and the Stimson Center, 2015).

¹⁹ See HLAB, *A Breakthrough for People and Planet*.

²⁰ See HLAB, *A Breakthrough for People and Planet*.

- An explicit PBC role for countries that exit the Security Council’s agenda, including possibly establishing UN peacebuilding operations reporting to the PBC;²¹
- A resolution to require the Security Council, General Assembly, and ECOSOC to request formal peacebuilding recommendations from the Commission to inform their decisions and resolutions;
- Mandate the PBC to become a forum for formulating and discussing national prevention strategies;
- Enable the Commission to mandate and support a new generation of civilian UN peace operations, including follow-on operations to outgoing peacekeeping operations;²²

Financing and resource mobilization:

- Expand funding sources by establishing a voluntary trust fund for the PBC;
- Establish a mechanism within the PBC to mobilize political and financial support for the implementation of national and regional prevention strategies;²³
- Upgrade the PBC’s status so that it can receive full conference assistance, including interpretation and meeting transcripts;
- Upgrade the PBC support branch to a PBC support division which can both house the Office of the Chair, with dedicated capacities for peacebuilding analysis and strategy, communications, data analytics, knowledge management, and monitoring and evaluation.

Accountability:

- Provide the PBC with a ‘Peacebuilding Audit’ tool, modelled on the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review instrument for tracking the human rights records of all UN Member States.²⁴
- Establish a follow-up mechanism to hold countries that come to the Commission accountable for their plans;
- Establish a follow-up mechanism to hold the Commission members accountable for the recommendations and commitments they make to the Commission.

Work with regional organizations:

- Create ‘regional resilience councils’ or other regional bodies tasked with conflict prevention.²⁵
- Formalize the participation of regional and other organizations in the PBC.²⁶

Inclusivity/universality:

²¹ Requires a decision/resolution by the Security Council for each country, and a GA and SC mandate for the PBC to make formal recommendations

²² *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 2023).

²³ See: *A New Agenda for Peace*.

²⁴ Commission on Global Security, Justice and Governance, *Confronting the Crisis of Global Governance* (Washington, DC: The Hague Institute for Global Justice and the Stimson Center, 2015).

²⁵ See: HLAB, *A Breakthrough for People and Planet*.

²⁶ See: *A New Agenda for Peace*.

- Revisit the Commission’s membership structure and rotation schedule to ensure better geographical balance and more frequent rotation of members;
- Enable the Commission to make decisions on a qualified majority.

A new body:

- While not a recommendation of HLAB or the NA4P, at least one organization has recommended the creation of a Global Resilience Council as a separate entity to address all non-military threats to peace.²⁷

Improving the PBC’s Practice

A range of ideas and proposals have been advanced to improve the current PBC without requiring a major mandate or resource changes. Some of these can be done through a UN Security Council decision or the Review of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture. Some may require limited additional resources:

Complement and support the Security Council:

- Emphasize the role of the PBC as a convener of thematic discussions on cross-pillar issues, with a focus on the interdependent and mutually reinforcing nature of peace and development,²⁸
- Ensure regular consultations are held between the PBC and the Security Council, General Assembly, ECOSOC, and the Human Rights Council, including a requirement that the Security Council consult ahead of any peace operation mandate discussions,²⁹
- Hold regular informal interactive dialogues with the Security Council to proactively bring to its attention peacebuilding issues as they relate to the Council’s work;
- Mandate the PBC to take on countries that exit the Security Council’s agenda to support their peacebuilding processes. This could include establishing UN peacebuilding operations that report to the PBC.

Financing and resource mobilization:

- Establish formal or informal links to international financial institutions (IFIs) and regional development banks, helping to align global financial flows with peace outcomes. This could include joint field visits with the World Bank and African Development Bank.³⁰
- Establish formal partnerships with a group of ‘friends’ from the private sector to increase funding for peacebuilding.³¹

²⁷ “Global Resilience Council”, Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability, last accessed [29 November 2023], <https://www.foggs.org/grc-global-resilience-council/>

²⁸ See: *A New Agenda for Peace*.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ See See HLAB, *A Breakthrough for People and Planet* and *A new Agenda for Peace*.

³¹ GPPAC, Evolution of the Leadership on Sustaining Peace: Lessons Learned from the Peacebuilding Commission (The Hague: GPPAC, 2021); “The Peacebuilding Commission: Purpose, Work and Opportunity, IPI, 16 March 2018, <https://www.ipinst.org/2018/03/ipi-peacebuilding-commission-workshop>

Accountability:

- Increase the transparency of the Commission’s work by publishing a wider range of its documentation (concept notes, remarks, and outcome documents);
- Establish a capacity for measuring the Commission’s impact on an ongoing basis, including more independent assessments and better data management;
- Commission an independent report every five years in conjunction with the *Peacebuilding Architecture Review* focused on root causes of conflict and peacebuilding, based on UN data, independent research, and consultations;
- Organize every five years, in conjunction with the *Peacebuilding Architecture Review*, a global consultation on peacebuilding to discuss and validate the independent report’s findings and help set a vision for the Commission’s next five-year cycle;³²
- Hold biennial consultations with all key regional organizations to identify root causes of conflict and align peacebuilding strategies for better outcomes;
- Involve the General Assembly in annual regional consultations. This could involve encouraging all PBF-eligible countries to share their peacebuilding plans so the necessary political accompaniment can be provided to complement the PBF’s catalytic funding support;
- Establish a ‘group of friends’ for engaged countries comprised of Commission members to facilitate follow-up and implementation of the Commission’s recommendations.³³

Regional organizations:

- Create a ‘Sustaining Peace Network.’ The PBC could connect with regional and subregional organizations and become a network that advises the Secretary-General General Assembly together. An initial foray into this approach is being explored with the African Union’s Peace and Security Council (AUPSC).

Inclusivity/universality:

- Create innovative ways to conduct, document, and share cross-regional exchanges:
 - Organize regular cross-regional field visits;
 - Hold meetings which facilitate mutual learning and exchanges across all regions;
 - Cooperate with innovation centres to harness new technologies and innovations that facilitate learning at global and regional levels;
- Meet annually with global women peacebuilding networks in a dedicated and extended (full day) session of the Commission;

³² Can be done by PBC decision but mandate by GA and SC would make this action stronger

³³ Some of these proposals can be found in: “The Evolution of the Role of the Peacebuilding Commission: Strengthening Financing for Peacebuilding through Convening and Political Accompaniment”, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, GPPAC, GNWP and NUPI, 13 October 2022, <https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/the-evolution-of-the-role-of-the-peacebuilding-commission-strengthening-financing-for-peacebuilding-through-convening-and-political-accompaniment-draft-summary-note-22nov2022-final-v2.pdf>

- Include civil society, women peacebuilders, and youth representatives in all meetings of the Commission;
- Establish an annual civil society forum for the PBC;³⁴
- Hold an annual ‘model’ PBC with youth.³⁵

Going Forward

While there is a convergence of views on the need to expand and capacitate the PBC to address a broader range of risks, there are significant differences across the specific recommendations, and some may be much more difficult to implement than others (both procedurally and politically). Some of the most important considerations for Member States as they deliberate the PBC question include:

1. **Overlapping versus complementary mandates:** If the PBC’s mandate is to be expanded, the risks of overlap with existing institutions will increase. A substantive mandate expansion (into socioeconomic and environmental issues, for example) could mean the PBC is working alongside other major departments in the UN system. How will a mandate expansion create positive synergies and not lead to ‘turfiness’ or confusion?
2. **Links with International Financial Institutions:** Attempts to align the UN Secretariat and World Bank have been ongoing for years, but there is a general recognition that the two organizations remain largely in their own silos at a strategic level. How would efforts to connect the PBC with IFIs be different? What would a formalized relationship look like in practice? And what specific effects would indicate that the partnership/links were functioning well?
3. **Creation of new investigative/reporting capabilities:** Adding these capabilities to the PBC could lead to a significant increase in its ability to generate real-time information about emerging and ongoing conflicts. And as happened in the Human Rights Council, these investigative functions could help link the PBC to other bodies, including ones focused on legal accountability. The positive aspects of this change are clear. But are there possible downsides that need to be considered? Would investigations weaken the likelihood of achieving consent from host countries, for example? Finding a balance that maintains the constructive relationship the PBC has with affected governments will be important.
4. **Regular consultation with other UN bodies:** While briefings and consultations with the General Assembly, the Security Council and ECOSOC are firmly rooted in the Commission’s mandate, these relationships do not always work as smoothly as they should. Improving these mandated functions appears like low-hanging fruit and makes a great deal of sense. Beyond the current mandate, the PBC should explore how to better engage with the Human Rights Commissioner and other UN organs in Geneva for a truly inclusive approach to peacebuilding.
5. **The PBC’s relationship with regional bodies:** One of the most frequent refrains in the Our Common Agenda, NA4P, and HLAB reports is on the need to place regional organizations in the driving seat. The PBC recommendations follow suit in calling for greater connectivity with key regional organizations, including the AUPSC. While this sounds positive in principle, and accords with the principle of subsidiarity, it may be difficult to implement

³⁴ To be established through the PBC’s annual PoW

³⁵ To be established through the PBC’s annual PoW

effectively in practice. How should the PBC engage with the League of Arab States on challenges in Yemen, for example? What specifically should the PBC do with the AUPSC in the face of coups in the Sahel?

6. **Where will the money come from?** Most of the proposals to bolster the PBC would require new resources. Where would these new sources of funding come from? Are there champions of these reforms who would also be willing to fund them?
7. **What are the legal implications of PBC reforms?** Some of the changes to the PBC could happen without any major legal process. For example, it seems likely that a formalized relationship between the PBC and IFIs could be done absent a Security Council or General Assembly resolution. Other steps, such as changing the core mandate of the PBC, or empowering it to generate peace operations, would almost certainly require Security Council and/or General Assembly resolutions. To move in the direction of a Peacebuilding Council, a UN Charter Conference may be required (though not necessarily, as the 2005 Human Rights Council process demonstrated). Having clarity on the legal implications of these recommendations will be important.

The September 2023 ministerial statement on the PBC was a positive indication of the willingness of Member States to seriously consider some of these reforms. Indeed, it appears that the discussions around the scoping of the Pact for the Future later this year will include some dedicated sessions on this issue. With current plans for a draft Pact to be agreed by the end of January 2024, time is very short for a meaningful discussion of these questions.

One way to move forward between now and January 2024 would be to agree on the scope of changes that should be considered for the PBC. Without identifying exactly the reforms needed, Member States could use the coming three months to agree on broad language about empowering, expanding, or otherwise reforming the PBC. This would then provide ‘top cover’ for subsequent processes, including a more specific set of discussions in the first two quarters of 2024, and a more specific formulation in the final Pact for the Future in September 2024. This, in turn, could shape the *2025 Peacebuilding Architecture Review*, leading to an eventual decision by the Security Council and General Assembly.

It should be noted that many of the smaller reforms would not need to wait for this process, but could move ahead under the authority of the Secretary-General.

Annex

Recommendations of the High-Level Advisory Board for Multilateralism on the Peacebuilding Commission

Shift Five | Peace and Prevention Empower Equitable, Effective Collective Security Arrangements

Recommendation 2: Reform the United Nations Security Council and strengthen the Peacebuilding Commission

While a process to reform the Security Council would help to address long-standing problems of representation and legitimacy, it should be accompanied by several steps to strengthen the ability of the United Nations to respond to a broader range of non-military threats to our collective security. To that end, we propose that the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) be provided with an expanded mandate to address a broader range of risks and resourced with greater investigative and decision-making powers. Specifically, an upgrade of the PBC should include more formal links with international financial institutions, helping to align global financial flows with actions addressing the root causes of violent conflict.

It should be mandated to identify and address a wider range of gender-related security issues including, for example, the relationship between violent misogyny and violent extremism. Its mandate should include the growing impacts of climate change and environmental changes on security risks.

An empowered peacebuilding body could also strengthen regional prevention by supporting the creation of “regional resilience councils” or other regionally-based bodies tasked with prevention and peacebuilding work. Such a body could support a new generation of peacebuilding operations that would aim to more effectively address the root causes of violent conflict. This expansion and strengthening of the United Nations’ peacebuilding mandate could lead to the transformation of the PBC into a Peacebuilding Council.