THE RACE FOR THE NEXT UN SECRETARY-GENERAL: REGIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND GLOBAL REALITIES

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG | UN LIAISON OFFICE NEW YORK

Cepei

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Executive summary

The election of the next United Nations (UN) Secretary-General in 2026 will occur at a critical juncture for multilateralism. Growing geopolitical tensions, the financial crises affecting the development system, and the stagnation of its central decision-making bodies mean that this leadership will be decisive both for the direction of the Organization and crucial for major multilateral reform processes and negotiations —and thus, the direction of the world in the second quarter of the 21st century.

The selection process remains ambiguous. It combines specific mechanisms of openness with opaque negotiations in the Security Council, where the veto power of the five permanent members (P5) remains a decisive factor. Although Latin America and the Caribbean invoke the principle of regional rotation to claim the position, and global campaigns advocate for a woman as Secretary-General, what prevails is the logic of balance between powers, rather than individual merits, gender, or regional representation.

Under the principle of regional rotation, Latin America and the Caribbean are widely regarded as the next in line for the UN Secretary-Generalship. Yet, there remains a real possibility that a consensus candidate could emerge from outside the region. In this scenario, an external candidate—likely with strong diplomatic credentials, experience managing great power rivalries, and recognized administrative competence—could gain traction, challenging the region's claim to leadership.

Latin America and the Caribbean stand at a critical juncture. The region brings normative legitimacy, an active voice in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), and compelling agendas on sustainable development, climate change, biodiversity, clean energy, and peace. Just a year ago, these themes could have formed the ideal narrative for any candidate. However, shifting global priorities and a changing world order have eroded that advantage today. At the same time, internal political fragmentation, the 2025–2026 electoral supercycle, and the rise of governments openly critical of the UN undermine the region's ability to act as a bloc and weaken its real influence.

The outcome of this election will, to a large extent, be a test for the region. It will either succeed in articulating a common narrative, building cross-regional alliances, and projecting a renewed leadership role in the UN or risk consolidating a peripheral place in global governance over the next years.

In general, major powers remain skeptical of multilateral institutions, particularly regarding accountability mechanisms and perceived interference in areas tied to their strategic interests. Consequently, there is a possibility that the three most influential P5 members could align behind a candidate who shares this skepticism toward multilateral cooperation. Such a Secretary-General could, in effect, reduce the organization's political ambition and constrain its capacity for independent action.

The findings of this brief show that the room for manoeuvre is already narrowing, favoring consensus profiles over disruptive candidates. In this scenario, the next leadership should simultaneously have a political and technical profile, with strong communication skills, cross-cutting legitimacy, and the ability to translate principles into results.

Introduction

The appointment of a new Secretary-General in a context of multilateral system fragility, weakening international law, growing tensions between Member States, and a financial crisis has prompted a new cycle of structural reforms within the organization. The next incumbent will face a critical agenda: leading transformations in the organization's governance and operational capacity, its ability to mediate global crises, presenting the balance sheet of the 2030 Agenda, paving the way for a new sustainable development agenda, promoting effective responses to climate change, and shaping a global governance framework for digital technologies and artificial intelligence.

The election of the Secretary-General has always been a decisive moment in the history of the United Nations. Each term reflects the geopolitical dynamics of its time and the personal leadership style. While the process was dominated for decades by opacity and power diplomacy, the 2015–2016 reform introduced greater openness through public calls for applications, dissemination of programmes, and dialogues with candidates. Even so, the selection process remains a poorly regulated hybrid, where merit, diplomacy, and geopolitics converge, the Security Council proposes a candidate—subject to veto by any of the five permanent members—and the General Assembly formally appoints them.

The 2026 election raises questions such as: What geopolitical forces will shape this process? Will the principle of regional rotation, which favors Latin America and the Caribbean, be applied? What kind of leadership does the organization need at this time? Will this be the first time a woman assumes the position of Secretary-General?

This brief does not seek to profile possible candidates, but rather to analyse the scenarios, opportunities, and challenges that will define the next election at a critical moment for multilateralism. To ensure diverse perspectives and actionable insights, the analysis is based on official documents, press articles, academic literature, and interviews conducted under the Chatham House Rule with UN officials, diplomats, academics, journalists, and civil society actors.

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Geopolitical dynamics in the election of the next UN Secretary-General

The selection process for the next Secretary-General will take place in an international arena marked by hostility towards multilateral consensus. The confrontation between Russia and the West over the war in Ukraine, the growing rivalry between the United States and China, and the deadlock in several UN bodies point to complex negotiations ahead. In this context, the major global powers will not accept a candidate perceived as contrary to their strategic interests, which reduces the range of viable candidates to moderate or low political risk profiles (Security Council Report, 2023).

The Pact for the Future, adopted by UN Member States in September 2024, reinforces calls for a renewed narrative around the selection of the Secretary-General. In particular, Action 42(c) underscores that the selection and appointment process should be guided by the principles of merit, transparency, and inclusiveness, with due regard for gender balance and regional rotation.

Meanwhile, on September 5, 2025, the General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/79/327 on the Revitalization of its work. The resolution excluded most of the proposals advanced by the 27-member Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) Group (2025), which had sought to strengthen the selection process for the next Secretary-General. A unified stance by the Permanent Five proved decisive in blocking these reforms. The only provisions retained concerned financial disclosure requirements for candidates and the obligation for current UN officials to step aside if they choose to run for office (Banjo, 2025).

It is unlikely that any country will succeed in imposing its candidate. The most plausible outcome would be the election of a consensus candidate: acceptable to all, ambitious to none. Recent statements suggest divergent preferences among major powers regarding the next Secretary-General. Washington (Rapp, 2025) and Moscow (Lavrov, 2025) favor a candidate with limited, security-focused functions, while Beijing seeks to reinforce the UN's development pillar (Li Qiang, 2025). France and the United Kingdom have yet to state their positions publicly, likely preserving room to act as intermediaries. Nonetheless, France appears more inclined toward a balanced approach across pillars, whereas the United Kingdom leans toward prioritizing international security.

Other actors will also play a relevant role. The President of the General Assembly (PGA), as a bridge between the Security Council and the General Assembly, can influence the organization of the process and fill regulatory gaps, especially if she has sufficient political support and diplomatic resources.

Although the G77+China has limited influence vis-à-vis the Security Council, it can impact the process. The G77 brings critical mass and political relevance to development matters. Its explicit support for a candidate could generate resistance among the P5, who might consider it "too sensitive" to the demands of the so-called Global South. Alternatively, coordination with China could strengthen positions in the Assembly.

In an extreme and unlikely scenario, the group could challenge the Council's proposal, opening up an unprecedented institutional conflict between the General Assembly and the Security Council.

Informal diplomacy is also expected to play a role in this process. Envoys, former diplomats, and think-tanks often act as intermediaries, testing ideas, identifying constraints, and signaling possible compromises before positions are publicly articulated. Such unofficial exchanges can soften rigid stances and allow governments to explore alternatives without incurring the political costs of formal negotiations.

In an increasingly polarized environment, these informal channels are particularly significant, as they can pave the way for agreements that may later be formalized (Pouliot, 2020).

[1]Michael Waltz, the recently designated U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, proposed a UN centered on conflict prevention and on the Secretary-General's role in dispute resolution (Rapp, 2025).

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Secretary or General? The leadership qualities required of the next Secretary- General

The election of the next Secretary-General will also be marked by tensions surrounding the desired leadership profile. Western liberal democracies largely support a managerial profile focused on efficiency and the peace and security agenda, while many Global South countries favor a more political figure, capable of denouncing crises and Charter violations, and more willing to advance the UN's development and human rights pillars. This historical dichotomy between exercising the position as "secretary" or as "general" (Chesterman, 2007) remains present, although today it is overlaid with new demands.

Interviews reveal an emerging consensus: **rather than choosing between an administrator or a political leader, the next Secretary-General must be an exceptional communicator, with a profile close to that of a CEO, capable of managing structural transformations within the UN and projecting political authority outside and inside the organization.**

This leadership will be conditioned by additional expectations: the possibility that, for the first time, a woman will hold the position; pressure for specific regions —particularly Latin America and the Caribbean— to gain access to the post; and the need to reconcile symbolic demands with effectiveness criteria.

Ultimately, what is needed is a pragmatic Secretary-General, a skilled negotiator and problem-solver, capable of connecting with the general public and not just with international "high diplomacy."

Immediate challenges facing the new UN leadership

The next Secretary-General will be judged less on their speeches than on their ability to translate commitments into tangible results. Only leadership with broad support and a clear mandate can exercise legitimacy and effectiveness in these areas.

In contrast, a profile emerging from minimal compromise between the P5 or with weak support from the General Assembly will face severe limitations from the outset (Security Council Report, 2023).

The profile required of the next Secretary-General must be understood in light of the pressing challenges that will define the role from January 2027 onward. These include consolidating the reforms advanced under the UN80 Initiative to strengthen the organization's operational capacity; restoring the UN's centrality in peace and security after repeated failures to address structural crises; reversing the decline in sustainable development financing by mobilize partnerships and curb the diversion of resources toward defense; and strengthen international financial institutions and reinforce trade governance. Equally urgent are accelerating climate action through the energy transition and a more robust multilateral response; shaping a global governance framework for digital technologies and artificial intelligence while narrowing the digital divide; and ensuring coherence across global agendas by linking the 2030 Agenda with the Pact for the Future, translating commitments such as the Declaration on Future Generations and the Global Digital Compact into measurable outcomes, and laying the groundwork for negotiations on the post-2030 development framework.

The legitimacy of the next Secretary-General will rest on multiple dimensions that emerge throughout the selection process. Legitimacy of origin—derived from a consensual and timely selection in the Security Council with broad General Assembly support—would strengthen the Secretary-General's ability to coordinate UN entities, confront reluctant Member States, and build coalitions beyond the P5, including through the Assembly's post-veto debates to increase the political cost of Security Council paralysis. Legitimacy by track record will depend on a candidate's vision and capacity to link the UN's three pillars to enhance the organization's work and reduce mistrust among Member States. Institutional legitimacy will be shaped by the reception of the candidate's vision and mission statement, providing a validated agenda that can enable interregional coalition-building. Gender legitimacy, if a woman is chosen, would signal Member States' responsiveness and commitment to gender parity. Finally, by selecting a candidate from Latin America and the Caribbean, regional legitimacy would reinforce the rotation principle and mitigate future tensions with other regions.

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Regional rotation: Regulations and perceptions of obligation

The UN Charter does not establish geographical rotation as a formal criterion when selecting the Secretary-General. However, this principle has been repeatedly invoked as a guiding practice for decades. While some consider it a mere aspiration with no normative basis, others interpret it as an established, albeit flexible, practice. The election of Portugal's António Guterres in 2016, when Eastern Europe was expected to fill the position, showed that it is neither mandatory nor a binding policy, even though regions have repeatedly pushed for rotation.

Following the "interruption" of Eastern Europe's turn, the rotation narrative favors Latin America and the Caribbean in 2026, whose only Secretary-General was Peru's Javier Pérez de Cuellar. Pérez de Cuellar had not run for the position, yet was elected in 1981 as a consensus candidate among the permanent members of the Security Council after 16 rounds of voting during which China vetoed Austria's Kurt Waldheim (seeking a third term) and the United States vetoed Tanzania's Salim Ahmed Salim, promoted by the G-77. The situation was resolved when the then President of the Security Council, Olara Otunnu of Uganda, convinced both contenders to withdraw from the race and designed the basis for the current "straw poll" procedure to identify names that had the support of the permanent members of the Council.

No one from the Caribbean has held the position to date, and the region's strong focus on economic and environmental justice issues puts candidates from the region at a disadvantage in terms of gaining support from some of the current governments of the P5.

Latin America and the Caribbean's turn

The region again occupies an ambivalent position in its bid for greater relevance in the multilateral arena. It holds 17 percent of the votes in the General Assembly, benefits from recognized political and diplomatic leadership, and has a long tradition of multilateral engagement. Yet, without a permanent member, its absence from the Security Council significantly constrains its institutional influence. In this context, the region's weight will hinge on its ability to achieve internal political coordination and forge cross-regional alliances.

Historical political fragmentation, which is particularly polarized at present, limits the region's capacity for joint action in multilateral forums. Ideological polarization, the weakness of regional forums, and poor coordination between subregional blocs could further hinder the construction of a common position. Various Latin American governments have publicly rejected their support for the 2030 Agenda and multilateralism as a channel for shared solutions and have even downgraded the priority of the fight against climate change.

The opportunity to promote a Secretary-General from the region will depend less on absolute consensus —which is unlikely today— and more on the ability to forge flexible alliances within and outside the region, garnering strategic support in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and among the G77+China. However, it is essential to remember that this group operates on the principle of consensus decision-making, making it unlikely they will have a unified statement to endorse a single candidate.

In this context, Latin America and the Caribbean can learn lessons from what happened with the election of U-Thant (Asia) and Kofi Annan (Africa), two elections when regional rotation was under strain. In both cases, Asia and Africa closed ranks behind the claim for the position for their region, regardless of the names of the candidates prioritized by each country.

Regional factors for Latin America and the Caribbean in the election of the next UN Secretary-General

The region faces a strategic trade-off: its assets—diplomatic diversity, normative legitimacy, and the absence of a Latin American Secretary-General since 1991—are offset by structural liabilities, including political fragmentation, divergent national interests, and limited public and political engagement with the selection process. The outcome will depend less on an individual candidate and more on the ability of Latin American and Caribbean countries to present themselves as a bloc with a strategic vision in a process that, otherwise, may dilute their aspirations once again.

Regional powers have limited capacity to define the playing field. However, due to their demographic, economic, and diplomatic weight, Brazil and Mexico have a certain gravitas as potential sponsors of candidacies or decision-makers with implicit veto power. Their external priorities are divided, though. Brazil privileges its role in the BRICS and its climate leadership. In particular, it has led to a sustained effort to raise the profile of regional aspirations, positioning the matter in forums such as the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States (CELAC), Southern Common Market (Mercado Común del Sur or MERCOSUR), and the China-CELAC dialogue. Meanwhile, Mexico is going through a phase in which it seeks to balance its international projection and the pressures exerted on both countries by the current U.S. administration.

It is likely that no major regional power will succeed in advancing an own candidate through the Security Council, increasing the chances that the nominee will come from a smaller or intermediate State.

The Caribbean—currently the only subregion capable of acting with relative unity—could present a consensus candidate. Recent dynamics indicate that Caribbean States align more closely with Africa and the Small Island States group than with Latin America—an orientation that could prove advantageous once cross-regional alliances become decisive in the General Assembly voting process.

Added to this are disruptive actors or "spoilers" such as Argentina, Paraguay, and El Salvador, whose more unpredictable positions could strain regional coordination and fragment consensus.

Regional institutional frameworks present both opportunities and constraints. CELAC offers potential as a platform to articulate a Latin American and Caribbean position, but once again, persistent political heterogeneity hampers the prospects for durable consensus. Though less central to this process, the Organization of American States (OAS) retains symbolic significance, particularly in relation to Washington. Subregional bodies, such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Andean Community, and Mercosur, may also play a minor role in shaping the balance of support.

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Political and media interest in the process is limited. The succession of the Secretary-General does not usually occupy a priority place on national agendas or in public coverage in the region, which reduces social and political pressure to promote strong and sustained candidacies over time. This leaves room for pragmatic decisions and the dispersion of support.

The 2025-2026 super election cycle, which we will discuss later, is likely to lead to domestic priorities absorbing the resources and attention of presidencies and foreign affairs ministries, thereby reducing the capacity to build and sustain a concerted diplomatic strategy. At the same time, a leadership transition could close opportunities for specific candidates and open a window of opportunity to launch or reposition candidacies with new backing.

The unofficial candidates currently under discussion represent a wide range of political, technical, and institutional backgrounds, positioning the region to build on the enduring legacy of Javier Pérez de Cuéllar. As the only Secretary-General from Latin America and the Caribbean, Pérez de Cuéllar is widely remembered as a "Secretary-Diplomat" who restored the UN's credibility during a difficult period. His discreet and respectful style earned broad international recognition, and his tenure is closely associated with successful UN mediation efforts in the Iran–Iraq conflict, Namibia's transition to independence, and the Central American peace processes.

[2] At the CELAC Summit in Tegucigalpa on April 9, 2025, Brazil formally proposed that the bloc advance a joint candidacy for the position of UN Secretary-General. The resulting Tegucigalpa Declaration, adopted without unanimity, underscores this initiative in paragraph 3 that: "They affirm their common conviction that it is timely and appropriate for a national of a Latin American and Caribbean State to occupy the post of Secretary-General of the United Nations, considering that of the nine Secretaries-General the UN has had to date, only one came from a State of the region and recalling that the position has never been held by a woman." The same paragraph was included, once again at Brazil's initiative, in a joint communiqué adopted by the presidents of Mercosur on July 3, 2025.

Power dynamics in the region: Key players and scenarios

The election of the next United Nations Secretary-General offers Latin America and the Caribbean a strategic opportunity to consolidate their presence in global governance. As expressed earlier, without a permanent seat on the Security Council, the region depends on its ability to coordinate politically, leverage multilateral platforms, and mobilize its various state and non-state actors.

During the election process, Panama (2025-2026) and Colombia (2026-2027) will be the region's non-permanent members of the Security Council.

The regional powers, Brazil and Mexico, stand out here, with governments defending multilateralism and the 2030 Agenda. Brazil, in particular, acts as a channel for direct communication with other regional and global powers through BRICS, where it also shares the table with two of the P5 (Russia and China).

A group led by Argentina, El Salvador, and Paraguay has adopted openly critical positions towards the multilateral system, questioning its legitimacy and denouncing ideological capture. This "spoiler" bloc could resonate with political leaders in the United States, adding complexity to negotiations in the Council.

Despite its institutional fragility and internal divisions, CELAC remains the main political forum for regional cooperation, where subregional integration and dialogue processes provide channels for negotiation, often complemented by informal exchanges among governments to uphold Latin America and the Caribbean's claim to the Secretary-Generalship. Within the UN, the Group of Latin American and Caribbean Countries (GRULAC) plays a more institutionalized role as the regional coordination mechanism, responsible for agreeing on candidates for posts allocated to the region. Its semi-permanent working dynamic, composition of permanent mission heads, and the negotiation experience of its members position GRULAC as a potentially influential actor in shaping coordinated strategies at UN headquarters to advance regional candidacies.

Beyond Member States, a range of other actors may shape the election of the next UN leadership. Transnational civil society initiatives, such as 1 for 8 Billion, have been vocal in advocating for the appointment of a female Secretary-General with a feminist agenda that strengthens the UN's three pillars, while also pressing for greater transparency and a more decisive role for the General Assembly in the selection process. At the same time, internationally recognized figures are likely to try to exert influence through informal diplomatic channels, mobilizing support and shaping discreet negotiations. By contrast, the private sector has thus far played only a limited role, remaining largely absent from a debate that will have significant implications for the future of multilateralism.

Seizing an opportunity: Global integration, influence, and the need to articulate common positions to achieve collective impact

The idea that regional rotation should lead to a person from Latin America and the Caribbean being appointed Secretary-General can be used to strengthen the region's profile of international integration and draw strength from it.

The region is often portrayed in multilateral diplomacy as a "region of peace," a narrative grounded in the absence of major inter-state wars since the late 20th century and the region's consistent commitment to principles such as non-intervention, nuclear disarmament, and international cooperation. Yet this characterization contrasts sharply with the region's internal realities, marked by pervasive violence, organized crime, and deep structural inequalities. This duality positions the region to bring a nuanced perspective to UN debates on peace, security, and development, enriching discussions by highlighting the interconnections between traditional state-centric notions of peace and the broader challenges of societal violence and governance.

Linking the candidacy to issues where the region has symbolic capital, such as sustainable development, biodiversity, the Amazon, human rights, and the fight against climate change, can raise its profile and appeal to other regions, especially Africa and the Asia-Pacific.

For this to be possible, Latin America and the Caribbean must avoid multiple candidacies with similar profiles that neutralize each other, presenting an international image of regional weakness. Instead, a joint effort to support a limited number of candidacies with different profiles would allow the region to be seen as an actor capable of collective action in a fractured international arena.

Based on these considerations, the logic of supporting a single candidate could prove counterproductive; if that candidate were vetoed, it would remove the region from the playing field. Therefore, it seems more prudent and tactically smarter to promote a strategy of controlled pluralization of candidacies, taking advantage of the multiple profiles available in the region.

Regardless of individual national preferences, capitals and permanent missions in New York will need to mobilize support—particularly within the G77+China,—to amplify Latin America and the Caribbean's voice through cross-regional alliances.

The 2025-2026 super election cycle and its possible effects on candidacies

Between 2025 and 2026, Latin America and the Caribbean will hold over 20 electoral processes, including legislative elections in Argentina and the Bahamas and presidential contests in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, and Jamaica. These outcomes will shape the profiles and backing of potential UN candidates, particularly if governments adopt more nationally focused agendas that downplay multilateral commitments on issues such as the environment and human rights.

Early signals from elections in Ecuador and Bolivia, reinforced by polling in other countries, suggest a broader regional shift to the right of the political spectrum.

Possible effects if the region fails to position the next Secretary-General

If Latin America and the Caribbean fail to put forward a candidate capable of passing both the Security Council and General Assembly thresholds, intra-regional tensions could intensify. Mutual accusations of insufficient support for particular candidacies risk portraying the region as fragmented, weakening its capacity to influence future debates. Such a perception would diminish the political weight of its collective membership across international fora—including the General Assembly, Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and global conferences—and reinforce the region's image as peripheral, despite its demographic significance and wealth of natural resources.

The implications extend beyond individual candidacies to the region's broader international standing, which will be shaped by how effectively it manages the selection process. Three possible scenarios can be envisaged. First, minimal influence, where a lack of coordination around viable candidates and priorities results in marginal impact. Second, moderate influence, where several candidates emerge without strong institutional support or cross-regional alignment, offering visibility but limited negotiating power. Third, maximum influence, where a strategically curated portfolio of candidates—balanced by gender, professional background, and geography—avoids early vetoes and positions the region as a credible global actor with enhanced leverage.

The profiles under consideration

The definition of the profile will depend on the region's ability to agree on a common narrative about the type of leadership that Latin America and the Caribbean seek to project, which, as we have pointed out, is not yet firmly established.

Despite its importance for the future of multilateralism, the region has yet to engage in debates on the imminent election of a new Secretary-General. These debates are limited to a few experts and far from the central concerns of government agendas and the media.

This leaves ample room for governments to adjust their positions in response to contextual changes, which may ultimately affect their ability to promote diplomatic campaigns and reduce the international visibility of the region's candidates vis-à-vis potential extra-regional competitors.

To date, the profiles of candidates circulating reflect the diversity of possible approaches, which—far from being a problem—can be an asset in avoiding vetoes in the Security Council. However, it requires basic agreements to ensure that whoever is elected will give special consideration to the most sensitive issues for the region.

Broadly, three types of profiles can be identified: political figures, such as former presidents and ministers or nationally prominent leaders with strong symbolic capital and international recognition; technical experts from multilateral organizations, academia, or think tanks, valued for their capacity to convene stakeholders and build consensus; and institutional insiders from within the UN system, whose operational expertise offers credibility but whose limited political visibility may constrain their influence.

The scenario of a consensus candidate from outside the region

Even though Latin America and the Caribbean are widely seen as next in line under the principle of regional rotation, a consensus candidate could emerge from outside the region. This outcome would reflect both structural shifts in the multilateral system and the realities of Security Council politics, where the preferences of the permanent members ultimately carry decisive weight.

A candidate from another region could be advanced under several rationales: the need for a "safe" choice perceived as politically neutral, the argument that regional rotation is not binding, or the calculation that current geopolitical rivalries make converging on an external figure easier. In such a scenario, the candidate would likely be someone with strong diplomatic credentials, a proven ability to navigate significant power tensions, and a reputation for administrative competence within the UN system or other multilateral organizations.

The Trojan Horse within the UN: a possible scenario

While the election process has traditionally oscillated between moments of compromise and geopolitical bargaining, the current international climate introduces a more disruptive possibility: the emergence of a "Trojan Horse" candidate. In general, major powers are sceptical towards multilateral institutions, particularly with regard to accountability and potential interference in areas tied to their strategic interests. They increasingly regard the UN less as a collective guarantor of norms and more as an instrument to project their own agendas. In such a context, the temptation may arise to promote a candidate who, while appearing to uphold the principles of neutrality and efficiency, quietly advances an agenda that weakens the UN from within. This would not necessarily dismantle the organization overtly, but rather dilute its relevance, obstruct its ability to mediate global crises, and reinforce the primacy of great power competition over collective solutions.

The opacity of the selection process creates fertile ground for such a possible outcome. Public debates and commitments to transparency have not eliminated the reality that final negotiations take place behind closed doors.

A candidate might therefore emerge not for their capacity to defend the Charter, but for their willingness to avoid confrontation with the P3's strategic agendas. In this sense, it would embody consensus without conviction: a Secretary-General with limited ambition, hesitant to confront violations of international law, and inclined to reduce the UN's political role to the lowest common denominator.

In general, major powers are skeptical of multilateral institutions, particularly regarding accountability and perceived interference in areas related to their strategic interests. They increasingly view the United Nations less as a collective guarantor of global norms and more as a vehicle for advancing their own strategic agendas. By insisting on a balanced profile—capable of defending the UN's development, human rights, and security mandates—they could resist the temptation of settling for a purely transactional choice. Yet their influence would depend on their willingness to challenge the other permanent members of the council and build cross-regional coalitions around a candidate who embodies reform and credibility.

What comes next?

The immediate milestone in the race for the next Secretary-General will be the joint letter from the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Security Council, formally inviting nominations. This communication—expected between mid October and early December—will mark the official start of the process.

From that point onward, the dynamics of quiet diplomacy are expected to intensify. Potential candidates and their teams will discreetly engage with capitals—particularly the Security Council's permanent members—while refining the narratives that will shape their vision statements. Although the debate will reach its peak in the second half of 2026, the weeks following the official call will mark the moment when candidacies move from speculation to formal visibility. This phase, blending behind-the-scenes consultations with public positioning, is likely to culminate in the first straw polls designed to test potential vetoes by permanent members.

Bolivia was the first country to act in April 2025, nominating David Choquehuanca (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, 2025)—a move widely considered premature. In September 2025, President Gabriel Boric announced Chile's nomination of former president Michelle Bachelet during his address to the 80th General Assembly. Rebeca Grynspan, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), officially entered the race in October after being nominated by the government of the Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves. Meanwhile, other potential contenders are raising their visibility without formal government backing. Notably, Alicia Bárcena of Mexico (Staff Editorial, 2025) and Rafael Grossi of Argentina (Buenos Aires Times, 2025) have expressed interest more openly, while many others remain cautious to avoid premature exposure.

The Pact for the Future shapes the broader political context by reinforcing, as reflected in the Security Council Repertoire, commitments to merit, transparency, inclusiveness, gender balance, and regional rotation in senior UN appointments. While this framework appears to favor female candidates from Latin America and the Caribbean, major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia have shown limited interest in advancing gender considerations. By contrast, France and the United Kingdom have engaged the issue more explicitly, signaling divergent approaches among the permanent members.

Absolute unanimity is not required. What matters is the ability to present a credible slate of candidates capable of reaching the "magic number" of 9+0 in the Security Council (nine votes with no vetoes), followed by General Assembly endorsement.

The outcome of the 2026 process will extend well beyond the identity of the next Secretary-General. It will test whether the UN can reconcile democratic legitimacy with political realism, uphold regional rotation, and advance gender parity at the highest level. **A credible and transparent selection process would strengthen the legitimacy of the Secretary-General and reinforce the UN's moral authority in navigating global crises. Conversely, if vetoes, opaque deals, or paralysis prevail, skepticism about the UN's effectiveness will deepen—leaving Latin America and the Caribbean at the heart of a critical juncture for multilateralism.**

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Annex

A consolidated list of persons who have either been officially nominated, publicly confirmed, or strongly cited in press reporting as potential candidates for the next UN Secretary-General, based on available sources. Some have formal government backing, others are in the speculative / interest-expression stage.

David Choquehuanca: Former Vice-President of Bolivia (2019–2024); long-time indigenous movement leader and diplomat.

Michelle Bachelet: Former President of Chile (two terms), former Executive Director of UN Women and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Rebeca Grynspan: Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), former Vice President of Costa Rica.

Alicia Bárcena: Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources and former Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, former Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

María Fernanda Espinosa: Former Ecuadorian Foreign and Defense Minister, former Permanent Representative to the UN in New York and Geneva, and President of the UN General Assembly (73rd session).

Rafael Grossi (Argentina): Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Mia Mottley: Prime Minister of Barbados.

Other figures who have been mentioned at a speculative or interest-expression stage:

Amina J. Mohammed (Deputy Secretary-General of the UN since 2017, former Nigerian minister of environment), **Natalia Kanem** (Executive Director of the UN Population Fund – Panama), **María Emma Mejía** and **María Ángela Holguín** (former Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Colombia), **Maria Luiza Ribeiro** (former Permanent Representative of Brazil to the UN), **Vuk Jeremić** (former Serbian Foreign Minister; former President of the UN General Assembly -67th session), and **Achim Steiner** (former Administrator of the UN Development Programme – Brazil/Germany).

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