

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT  
Press Briefing  
**“Previewing the High-Level Week of UNGA 78”**

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Paige Montfort: Hi. Thank you, everyone, for coming, and apologies for the delay there. My line cut out for a moment. But good afternoon. Thank you so much for dialing in.

As our operator kindly introduced, I think, while I was away, my name is Paige Montfort. I am the media relations manager here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS – in Washington, D.C. Thank you so much for joining us for our press briefing previewing the high-level week at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly, which will begin on Tuesday of next week.

In terms of agenda, I will first be handing the call over to our four fantastic experts. They're each going to weigh in on key themes and context, as well as our expectations ahead of this high-level week of gatherings. And then we're going to move on to our Q&A for the duration of the call. And of course, we'll be sending out the transcript within just a few hours today. That's going to be sent directly to those of you who RSVPed and also it will be published on CSIS.org.

So, without further ado, I'd like to introduce my four colleagues in the order in which you'll be hearing from them today.

So, first, my new colleague Noam Unger. He is going to provide his insights and analysis. He is the director of our Sustainable Development and Resilience Initiative, and he's also a senior fellow with our Project on Prosperity and Development.

Next, we're going to hear from Caitlin Welsh. And she is the director of our newly rebranded CSIS Global Food and Water Security Program.

And after Caitlin, Joseph Majkut will be speaking. He serves as director of our CSIS Energy Security and Climate Change Program.

And finally, we're going to hear from Marti Flacks. Marti holds the Khosravi Chair in Principled Internationalism. She's also the director of our Human Rights Initiative here at CSIS.

So, with that, I'm going to hand it over to Noam to get us started.

Noam Unger: Thank you, Paige. And thanks to all of you who have joined us today.

Next week's areas of particular focus will really be Ukraine and the Sustainable Development Goals and associated summits. Ukrainian President Zelensky is expected to join in person to address the General Assembly on Tuesday, and the Security Council the following day as well. And meanwhile, the 2023 SDG Summit will be on the 18th and

19th. So Monday and Tuesday. And it's meant to mark the beginning of a new phase of accelerated progress.

The issues will likely come together in the sharpest way in connection to the Black Sea Grain Initiative. And my colleague Caitlin will speak more to that. But it's also important to keep an eye out for the broader geopolitical dynamics related to the United States and Western allies support for Ukraine in the face of Russia's war of aggression and the U.S. government's stances on issues of key interest to countries from the Global South, many of which are fence sitters with regard to Russia's invasion of and attack against Ukraine.

As many of you probably know, other high level meetings through the week will include health-related topics like pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response, universal health coverage, the global fight against tuberculosis, as well as the secretary-general's Climate Ambition Summit and ministerial-level preparations for the secretary-general's push to hold a summit of the future one year from now on how the U.N. can play a role with regard to regulating technological advances – things like artificial intelligence – and how such technologies and the economies around them can best advance human wellbeing.

But the SDG Summit is the biggest focus, and it falls at the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda. The litany of global development setbacks in recent years will make for a particularly gloomy backdrop to an event that is, among other things, a fancy, high-level photo op. It's important to remember that the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda were born out of a sense of optimism. The SDGs were intended to take the wins from Millennium Development Goals and expand upon them by combining social and economic development goals with environmental aims, and also recognizing universality. And by that, I mean that the SDGs have been goals for every country to make progress against, and all countries are on the same sort of continuum of development, as opposed to a divide between the developed and the developing.

The ambition was based on very real progress. Between 1970 and about a decade ago, global hunger was cut by two-thirds, for example. But progress against some of the goals stalled right around the time the world was coming together to support the SDGs. Including on hunger, for example, again, and those gains started to be reversed right around that time. Factors like conflict, climate change, and the global COVID pandemic have exacerbated all kinds of factors that undermine development and various goals. Add to that rising authoritarianism, democratic, backsliding, growing inequality, and you can see that many factors have dramatically changed the development landscape.

According to the U.N.'s own reporting, progress against the 17 goals are in deep trouble. There are many concrete targets associated with the goals, and for 140 of them that have trendline data half of the targets are off course and more than a third have seen no progress or, even worse, they have shifted in the opposite direction since 2015 when the goals were adopted by all U.N. member states. More than half a billion people are projected to still be living in extreme poverty in 2030, for example. Nearly 100 million children will not be in school. And for those that are, 300 million will leave unable to read and write. And you can find many more examples of lack of progress or backsliding.

Not everything is negative. Take internet connectivity, for example. In a session CSIS hosted just yesterday on digital public infrastructure for development, one of our invited experts noted that there are 2 billion more people online today than there were right before the pandemic. That speaks to tremendous potential for the advancement of human wellbeing from a variety of angles, ranging from learning, market access and representation, to financial inclusion. But overall, will this SDG summit reignite a sense of, quote/unquote, "hope, optimism and enthusiasm," as it's been billed? I'm really unsure and rather skeptical. Factors related to – that I've already talked about, rising authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, but also geostrategic competition and economic distress, those are likely to overshadow other fundamental issues related to climate change and global development.

We live in an era of creaking multilateral institutions in need of recommitment and reform. But while the U.N. has always been an imperfect tool it continues to serve a useful purpose for broader convening and global agenda setting as well as the work of its programmatic agencies focused on protecting and supporting vulnerable people around the world. I think what you'll see this week is calls – things calling into question the U.N.'s role with regard to peace and security issues for sure, and that's where it runs into Ukraine as well.

I don't expect too much in the way of clear next steps at the U.N. level, but the drumbeat certainly helps and the pressure is mounting, especially from countries in the Global South with significant expectations for greater support on issues related to development and climate finance. There are connections between multilateral gatherings like the recent G-20 in India, UNGA, the World Bank and IMF meetings in October, and COP-28 in Dubai, and so specific areas like the India-led G-20's focus on digital public infrastructure or the push by the U.S. and others for significant reforms at the World Bank can ultimately lead to significant and specific positive changes.

So with that, let me close and I'll turn it over to my colleague Caitlin. Thanks.

Caitlin Welsh: Thanks very much, Noam.

I'll start by talking about water security and then I'll turn to the Black Sea grain initiative and Russia-Ukraine related issues.

First, on water security, in the opening – in his opening address the president, Dennis Francis, highlighted water security among his priorities for the 78th session of the General Assembly. This is in keeping with recent U.N. prioritization of the issue.

In March of this year the U.N. convened its first major conference dedicated to water since 1977. The main outcome of this conference was the Water Action Agenda with – which involved voluntary commitments from nations and many stakeholders across all sectors, industries, and interests with regard to implementation of SDG 6.

Since the water conference in March the U.N. held its first water meeting in August of this year in Sweden and, again, focusing on the Water Action Agenda and we expect the presentation of an updated Water Action Agenda during UNGA and at the SDG summit on September 18th and 19th that Noam just highlighted.

When it comes to SDG 6, which is ensuring access to water and sanitation for all, unfortunately, demand for water is rising because of population growth, urbanization, and increasing needs from agriculture, industry, energy, and other sectors.

At the same time demand is increasing access to water is decreasing due to the effects of climate change and simply because of increased usage for these reasons. Looking to SDG 6 in particular, despite progress billions of people still lack access to safe drinking water and achieving universal coverage by 2030 as SDG 6 aims to do is going to require significant increase in global rates of progress – sixfold for drinking water, fivefold for sanitation, threefold for hygiene.

That's an overview of issues related to water, which will likely be highlighted at UNGA next week.

Turning now to Russia and Ukraine issues and to the Black Sea grain initiative, as you know, Russia terminated the Black Sea grain initiative on July 17th and this was the deal that had allowed safe export of a significant amount of Ukraine's agricultural products through three of

its Black Sea ports, which helped both to keep Ukraine's agricultural economy afloat and also to help quell rising food prices over the past year.

It was negotiated by the U.N. secretary general with support from Turkey. I expect this to be a major topic of discussion at UNGA, and in the general debate – on day one of the general debate the Black Sea grain initiative is going to feature in the U.N. secretary general's report on the work of the U.N. over the past year.

I expect that when President Zelensky appears in person at the U.N. on September 19th that this will feature in his remarks. We saw that the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights already highlighted this issue. In the first meeting of this session of the U.N. Human Rights Council Commissioner Volker Türk began his address by condemning Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea grain initiative and condemning continued attacks on Ukraine's agriculture sector.

Since Russia backed out there have been negotiations to get Russia back into the deal. A number of countries have voiced opposition to this decision. Russia and Turkey held a summit two weeks ago in hopes from President Erdoğan to get this deal going again. That was not a – that was not a result. President Putin did not agree to do that. The U.N. has floated proposals to try to meet some of Russia's demands. Russia has not accepted those. There are likely other negotiations going on out of view of the public.

The bottom line, I think, is that Russia appears open to restarting the Black Sea Grain Initiative, and maybe it would under certain conditions. But for the time being, I don't think Russia has any intention of doing so. Why? Because I think that Russia sees nearly all upside and very little downside in remaining outside of the agreement. The upside that Russia sees is that Russia benefits from destruction to Ukraine's agriculture sector, that happens not only from Ukraine's lack of access to its flaxseed ports but from – but also from continued attacks across all aspects of Ukraine's agricultural sector, including its agricultural export infrastructure, resulting in significant decline to Ukraine's GDP.

Russia also sees upside in disunity within the EU with regard to trade disruptions. As Ukraine diverts a lot of its agricultural exports through neighboring countries, disagreements are happening within the EU and there's a major decision happening tomorrow about extension of a ban that the EU allowed. If that happens, Ukraine has threatened to take certain EU countries to the WTO. Russia sees all upside in disunity in the EU with regard to this.

Any downside that Russia sees is likely in opposition from food-importing countries and so far there's been public opposition from Egypt, Kenya, South Africa, Turkey, China, and others. But in Russia's favor is the fact that global food prices are declining right now, potentially quelling opposition from food-importing countries, and also the fact that Russia is able to use its record-setting harvest to help to appease these countries through offers of free and low-cost grains to these countries.

So, again, it's in Russia's strategic interest to remain outside of the Black Sea Grain Initiative at this point. What I'll be looking for out of UNGA next week is, with regard to Ukraine's agriculture sector, any commitments to help Ukraine secure alternative trade routes or any commitments to invest in Ukraine's agriculture sector to help rebuild it in the context of this war. And with regard to global food security, I'll be looking for commitments to help improve food security among food-insecure populations and countries knowing that in the coming months the impacts of the cessation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, that could result in rising food prices once again.

So with that, I'm happy to turn over to my colleague Joseph Majkut.

Joseph Majkut: Thank you, Caitlin. And good afternoon, everyone.

I want to talk a little bit about framing of what we think about in terms of climate change in advance of UNGA. Of course, this follows closely after the G-20 meeting and is a prelude to COP-28 in the UAE. So let's talk a little bit about what we think is – what we think the main topics of discussion are going to be and what some positive outcomes might look like.

It's important to start with the – where we are in climate this year. This is the first year where we're taking stock of all countries' progress towards the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement. The U.N. published its stocktake draft earlier this month and it shows that we're not on track to meet the climate targets laid out in the Paris Agreement. We're, in fact, looking like we're going to miss them pretty significantly. To keep in line with a 1.5 degree Centigrade target, the report shows an emissions gap of 20 to 25 gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub> at 2030 – you know, roughly 50 to 60 gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub> are emitted each year right now. And it shows a daunting challenge. If my math is right, the IRA emissions impact in 2030 would need to be multiplied by 40 to help the world meet that climate goal. And so the dialogue is going to be – that actually is going to kind of cast a shadow over the dialogue and a lot of what we expect to see is calls to increase ambition. But what does it mean to increase ambition? We've seen profound improvements in the forecast for

climate change but we are still very far away from the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement.

There is, of course, some immediate progress that I think we're going to see built upon out of the G-20. There was an agreement to triple global renewable energy capacity by 2030. That's really good, and I think we'll see a lot of excitement around that goal and trying to enshrine it later at COP as well. We've also seen a lot of global attention this year on reducing methane emissions from oil and gas production. This is a really good way to reduce the climate effect of today's energy system as we talk about building toward tomorrow's. And given the role of the UAE as the COP president this year, it's really a – it's going to be potentially an area of high impact. But one thing I'd like to point out that I think has been a little bit missing is that attention to coal and the discussion around phasing down unabated coal use really does need to be at the forefront of people's minds. And I hope we see that at UNGA.

Here, the G-20 statement was less declarative. It was very strong on renewables, but rather soft on the need to face down unabated fossil fuel use, and in particular starting with coal. But if we look through what has actually happened, coal consumption was at record levels in 2022. There's no reason to expect a miraculous drop this year. And so I'm hoping – if we don't see discussion of unabated coal phase down at UNGA, then then I don't think we should expect to see it on the agenda at COP-28. And this is a big opportunity for governments and for the Climate Ambition Summit to highlight that this is – this needs to be a priority for the world if we're going to make progress toward our climate goals.

Obviously, the coal issue is a delicate one. Unabated coal uses in structural decline in America and in Europe, still thriving in China, India, and other parts of the developing world, and in emerging markets. So the U.N. has a – has a delicate role to play here. We need to talk about just transitions in countries and communities that are reliant on the coal economy. We also need to be really attentive to the energy security considerations that are driving a lot of countries to continue to use coal. So one question facing both UNGA and the international community more broadly is, how can – how can we bring solutions to the table that ease those real and binding constraints through just energy – just transition energy partnerships, or – just energy transition partnerships – excuse me – or other kind of deal making that happens on the sides of these meetings?

And we're going to see it at UNGA a continued call for Western and developed countries to meet the pledges they've made regarding climate finance. The need to secure that energy transition, particularly

away from unabated coal but also just to meet global economic growth, is going to require a lot of investment. And a lot of it has to happen outside the developed world. And the mechanisms to make that happen are still lacking. Western governments have been very slow to meet their pledged agreements for climate finance, but we even know that's not enough.

And so we need to see a more active role for multilateral development banks, better project pipeline pipelines, and a desire from both the public and the private sectors to get out there and get it done. The Climate Ambition Summit is going to really try and drive that message home. But we need to see concrete plans come out of it, otherwise it's mostly just a fancy meeting in New York. Thank you. And I can kick it to our final speaker before we take questions. Thank you.

Marti Flacks: Thanks, Joseph.

So I will bat clean up here and, I think, take this discussion to a little bit of a higher level, and try and touch on some of the strategic themes that have been implied in my colleagues' remarks. Chief among which is this question of, does UNGA still matter and does the U.N. still matter? And there's been a tremendous amount of focus in recent weeks on the emergence and expansion of regional organizations and thematic groupings, and their rising preeminence in trying to set international norms or trying to influence international politics.

And that leads to the question of, does a slower-moving and more deliberative organization, like the U.N., still matter in our international system? I should say that some of this focus on regional and thematic organizations is purely driven by an unusual calendar this year. We had a very early G-20. We had a BRICS summit just a few weeks ago. Both happened to be hosted in countries that are at the forefront of this debate about the future of international institutions, in India and South Africa. And so these things are coming together in a way that's slightly unusual this year.

At the same time, I think it's exactly because of the rising influence of these other organizations that this is actually a really strategically important UNGA. And I think this is a really important moment for the only truly global international organization sort of rise to the occasion and assert itself as the place where the international community can still come together and make decisions about important issues in an era where we are increasingly polarized across the international community. Last year, just after UNGA, the Biden administration's National Security Strategy declared the end of the post-Cold War era. Secretary Blinken reiterated that just yesterday in his speech at SAIS.

And so we are at a moment of reshaping how we think about the international legal order, and I think this is why it's so important that we strengthen the international organizations that are truly representative of the entire international community. That doesn't mean we don't engage in or don't have a need for these other groupings, but I think the two need to coexist side by side.

There's always been forum shopping. There's always been a sense that when you can't get what you want from the U.N. you go somewhere else. The NATO intervention in Kosovo is a prime example of that. I think what's different now is that these alternative cores that are developing are stronger, they're more dynamic, and there's more – there's more of them being led by U.S. competitors, particularly China. And so there's a sense that they are growing in strength.

So I will say that the emphasis on or the need for the U.N. to kind of step up and be able to demonstrate it has the wherewithal and the nimbleness, the flexibility, and the consensus to move is incredibly important, but it also highlights – I think this UNGA will also highlight, as all of my colleagues pointed to, the shortcomings in the current system that we have and the need for reform of that system. And so some of the things that I'm looking for in U.S. engagement at UNGA is how they address those challenging dynamics.

So if you look at last year's speech by President Biden to the General Assembly, it was heavily focused on sort of U.N. first principles. It was very focused on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in calling back to the U.N. Charter and the system that we've all agreed to. You can contrast that with Secretary Blinken's speech yesterday at SAIS, which had a very heavy emphasis on what he called these fit-for-purpose coalitions. So how does Biden manage that dynamic? How much does he point to the U.N. as a central component of the U.S.'s multilateral engagement strategy?

How strong of a case is he going to make for reform of the U.N. system? It's easy to agree in principle that the Security Council should be expanded to be more representative of current global dynamics. It is incredibly difficult to find a path towards executing that. So are we just seeing rhetoric from the U.S. on this to sort of pacify countries that want to see that, or are we actually taking action to set forth an agenda for achieving that reform?

How far does the U.S. push the U.N. to address some of the – not just the problems from 2015 that we agreed on in the SDGs, which as Noam pointed out we're struggling to meet, but the challenges that have emerged since then? The Summit for the Future process is meant to

address some of these issues – the role of technology, the issues in space – as well as some of these process issues at the U.N. It's not clear to me that there is substance behind that. And we all know that it's – the U.N. secretary-general can initiate a process and can push a process, but it's going to take countries like the United States putting their weight behind those initiatives to really give them substance and really give them the possibility to have substantive outcomes.

So I think that's what I'm looking for in terms of how the U.S. frames its engagement this week.

I think symbolically what may come out of this, Noam referenced the fact that President Zelensky will be at UNGA in person, and I think that visual – both his address to the General Assembly, but more importantly if he's given an opportunity to address the Security Council and to sit face to face with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov or whoever represents the Russians – could create one of those iconic U.N. moments that really kickstarts or refocuses attention on those institutions. So I'm watching to see how that – how that unfolds.

I think, otherwise, I would just wrap up by saying I think some of the key themes my colleagues mentioned around climate, food security, Ukraine, but also the democracy and human rights agenda I expect to be top of mind for Biden's speech and for the U.S. delegation. So I will stop there and look forward to the questions.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you, Marti, Joseph, Caitlin, and Noam, for your insights and analysis.

At this time, we're going to open it up to Q&A from those of you who have dialed in. So I'll hand it back over to our operator to instruct everyone on how to get into the queue.

Operator: Thank you.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

And it'll just be one moment. Our first question comes from the line of Patsy Widakuswara with the Voice of America. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi, this is Patsy Widakuswara with VOA.

So I wanted to pick up on what Caitlin – I think it was Caitlin – talking about kind of, you know, the U.S. engagement for a specific this push from the Global South. Also, as you mentioned, the calendars of the summit this year, with the BRICS and everything else, and also the G-20,

and ASEAN, and EAS – where we saw a really strong pushback against great powers setting the agenda. A strong pushback from the Global South. So I'm curious to hear your thoughts on whether we'll see that dynamic of the Global South continuing to say that we don't want this geopolitical division to hinder our development goals continue at UNGA? And how do you think the Biden administration should navigate this kind of new multipolar reality? Thank you.

Ms. Welsh: Thanks, Patsy. I think that's a question for my colleague Marti.

Ms. Montfort: OK, yes. Over to you, Marti.

Ms. Flacks: Oh, sure. Thanks.

Yeah, I do think we'll continue to see those dynamics at play. You know, what's happening with the expansion of the BRICS, and some of these other regional groupings that are dominated by countries that are not the United States or Europe, as I think that there are countries that have different views on a lot of things. They don't always agree. They don't all have the same systems of governance. But they are finding common ground on certain issues, like reform of the international system, the Security Council structure, things like that. And because they are more organized, and those the organizations are stronger than they used to be, the views are getting a stronger voice than they would if it was just an India, or just a Brazil trying to make this case on their own.

And so I do think that will continue to be part of the – part of the agenda, I thought it was really interesting that the BRICS statement that came out, the entire first substantive part of that statement was focused on their expectations or their demands of reform to the U.N. system. It's not that they're trying to replicate, or move out of the system, or create their own international order. It's that they're really pushing to reform the one that's out there. And to me, that point to the importance of U.S. engagement at those fora. So we agree with some of the reforms that some of the countries are proposing, and we're going to disagree with others. And we need to – but we need to be engaged strategically and at a high level in order to get to the right – to the end result that that meets U.S. national interests.

We are, obviously, seeing some nods by the U.S. to the demands of those countries. And you look at the G-20 statement on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the slightly watered-down language to be deferential to India as the host and to sort of give a nod to their interests. You know, there are some compromises that that the U.S. has started to make to acknowledge that point of view. And I think that's – I think that's fine. I don't think that – I don't think that it threatens kind of the international

norms or first principles around condemning the invasion, or the violation of a country's territorial integrity.

So, yes, I do think that that agenda is going to continue to be top of mind. And to me, the question is, is the U.S. just paying lip service to these – to agreeing to these reforms or are we actually going to put some political weight into making them happen?

Ms. Montfort: Thank you, Marti.

And I think, Noam, you had something to add.

Mr. Unger: Yeah. Thanks, Paige. And thanks for the question.

To the last point of the question, of expectations of how the Biden administration can or might respond, I think the Biden administration has an opportunity to really use this platform and the focus of the SDG Summit to embrace the agenda, despite or even especially because of all of the setbacks, in a way that aligns itself with a lot of the aspirations of many countries from the Global South, and to rightly point out that the SDGs were very strongly endorsed by the U.S. at the time of their creation. The U.S. played a big role, a very active role, in shaping what ultimately came out to be the SDG and the Biden administration should step in.

One way that countries are also demonstrating their commitment is through voluntary national reviews, which all countries who agreed to the SDGs are supposed to do. They're supposed to do a couple in the 15-year time period.

I believe the U.S. is actually on a short list of countries that have not done any. But the reality is that this administration could step up and, say, commit to doing a voluntary national review and talk about progress in the U.S. and how it is connected to the broader agenda.

And even though for political reasons oftentimes this administration and any administration don't like to associate their aims on progress with specific U.N. targets or goals the reality is there's a lot of alignment and many cities, municipalities, universities, private sector firms have embraced the SDGs and big pieces of recent successful domestic legislation have actually dovetailed with goals of the Sustainable Development Goals.

So I think that the administration has an opportunity to step up and embrace the goals and the Global South in that way and there are other

ways like its work to push for reforms at the World Bank as well.  
Thanks.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you.

We'll go on to our next question.

Operator: Thank you. Our next question comes from George Condon with National Journal. Please go ahead.

Q: Great. Thanks.

You know, two things you can always count on at UNGA are the motorcade traffic jams and the side meetings overshadowing the official program. Aren't the side meetings with Netanyahu and Zelensky likely to produce the real news for Biden's time there, particularly Netanyahu?

And, secondly, can you assess the president's position going into New York? Is he in a strong position internationally after his recent trip or weak because he's falling short on climate goals?

Ms. Montfort: Thank you, George. I think a few folks might have comments on that.

Marti, I'm not sure if you would like to start. Maybe over to Joseph, and then if others have comments.

Ms. Flacks: Yeah, I can say a few things.

I do think the G-20 timing with the president's trip to Vietnam does put him in a stronger position than he previously was. I think he is going in with some momentum from those relationships and those conversations that he built. There are absolutely always going to be issues that the U.S. is going to be criticized for, climate being one of them, and I'll let Joseph, you know, speak to how we're perceived on that front.

But I think the – you know, I think that engagement that the president is showing through his travel schedule and through his ongoing engagements with other heads of state and regional groupings is putting him in a good position and, of course, as always this president has relationships going back decades with, as he said, most of the people that he's meeting with, which is going to heavily influence, you know, how he is perceived.

I think you're right to say that the bilats always tend to dominate the news because there can sometimes be more concrete outcomes, and it'll

certainly be interesting to see what comes in particular from the Netanyahu meeting and potentially some other ones.

You know, but I think that it's – you know, this is one of those years where, as I was sort of saying in my remarks, I do hope that there is some attention to some of these thematic issues in some of these larger groupings, particularly because of the contrast with some of these regional organization meetings. I think there's a chance to potentially make some headlines there but it will depend on, yeah, how much effort the U.S. and other participants put into really creating solid outcomes from this meeting.

Ms. Montfort: Thanks, Marti.

Dr. Majkut: Stepping in on climate – this is Joseph.

Ms. Montfort: Yes, go ahead.

Dr. Majkut: Sorry. Stepping in on – this is Joseph stepping in on climate.

I think, you know, when we look across this there's a whole range of distributions on how other leaders are looking at the Biden – at President Biden and his administration. For a lot of our allies and friends and very climate-forward countries, we're still sort of living in the positive shadow of the Inflation Reduction Act, right? There's been so much investment going on in the United States in the clean energy supply chain and a sense that the United States is back on the field in terms of climate change that I think there is – there is some momentum there.

The challenge that the U.S. faces is the double-edged sword of the IRA; that it also is very focused on U.S. industrial policy and less, perhaps, on global decarbonization, which is why efforts to increase the amount of economic diplomacy that's going on alongside climate action is really important. And it – and it has to move beyond words; it really has to turn into action.

Q: Thank you.

Ms. Montfort: Thanks, Joseph.

Let's go on to our next question.

Operator: Thank you, and that comes from Victoria Kupchinetsky with Voice of America. Please go ahead.

Q: Yes, hi. I'm Victoria Kupchinetsky with the Russian Service of Voice of America. Thank you for doing this panel.

So after the meeting of President Putin and the leader of North Korea, Minister Lavrov declared that Russia was not going to follow the North Korea Security Council resolutions anymore because, according to him, the geopolitical situation in the world has changed since those resolutions were adopted and Russia is just going to fulfill and follow its own geopolitical interest. So this creates a really dangerous precedent and it's, ultimately, unprecedented that the minister – foreign minister declares that his country is not going to follow the Security Council resolutions. Do you think this issue will be addressed at the General Assembly? And how can – how can this be addressed effectively within the Security Council, and by the Biden administration as well?

Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much, Victoria.

Would anyone like to start with that one?

Ms. Flacks: I can say a couple things, Paige, just briefly, which is, you know, I don't think it's likely to be addressed at this UNGA or immediately. I think there may be an opportunity if, in fact, there is evidence of Russia avoiding or skirting North Korean sanctions. You know, there are mechanisms to bring that up in committee or even to bring it up at the Security Council, at least rhetorically. But you know, what tends to happen mechanically at the U.N. is that they're going to take a cautious, you know, let's wait and see what the actual evidence is, as opposed to the rhetoric. That, obviously, doesn't mean that political leaders, including President Biden, won't criticize that statement, both from a process point of view in terms of, as you said, not abiding by the Security Council resolutions, but also substantively as being incredibly dangerous.

You know, I think there's – so I think that there is an opportunity to address it rhetorically. I think substantively we're going to have to see how that plays out in reality, particularly whether – and again, I'm not a North Korea security expert – but how much the rhetoric is actually changing the underlying reality of the relationship between North Korea, or if they're just now publicly admitting what's been going on for some time.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much, Marti.

And, Victoria, I will also just add to that – this is Paige again – we have a few folks who have written a couple analyses already on that meeting, and we'll continue to be doing work on that. So feel free to reach out to

me after this call if you'd like some more insight from any of our folks who work on Korea, on Russia, or on security. So thank you so much.

And we'll head on to our next question.

Operator: Thank you.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

And we do have a question from Howard LaFranchi with Christian Science Monitor. Please go ahead.

Q: Hey, thanks so much for doing this.

I think it was – if I remember right, I think it was Marti who referred to, you know, President Biden knowing a number of these leaders for many years, maybe even decades. And it seems to me that he's something of a, you know, traditional internationalist kind of in the American postwar mold, and at this UNGA he may, in fact, be the dean or the – or the leader of that, you know, conception of international politics. And so I'm wondering what he can do – and you've already addressed this to some degree, but what can he do to – in this atmosphere of divisions and new organizations coming on? You know, what can he do to really make the case for, you know, a global order based on, you know, international multilateral institutions? Not, you know, global institutions like the U.N., you know, international legal order, and back, you know, democracy, as he tries to emphasize. So what can he do to kind of make the case that this is still the system that fits the world the best and serves the world's the best?

And then secondly, you know, what can he cite – you know, whether it's, you know, his democracy promotion – what can he cite to say that – and this is an example of, you know, what's happened over the past two years on my watch that demonstrates that this system really is the best and that democracy is the best political system for meeting people's aspirations and desires?

Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much, Howard.

Marti, do you want to start off, maybe over to Noam, and then Joseph or Caitlin if you have other things you want to add?

Ms. Flacks: Yeah. And happy to let someone else kick off first if they want to. I feel like I've been talking a lot. But if not, I can take it.

Ms. Montfort: Sure.

Noam, do you want to start?

Mr. Unger: I can jump in. Yeah, this is Noam.

I mean, I'm not sure, Howard. I think that, you know, in short, you know, his team could write him a great speech. But to your point of what you can show, I mean, I think that the administration and the president can at this time use this particular moment in history to lean into (a calm ?) leadership and humility. The reality is this week is going to be – this UNGA, more than some others, is going to focus, again, on the Sustainable Development Goals. A key element of the Sustainable Development Goals, which are very much an interest especially in the Global South – but a key element of that is universality.

And recent history in the U.S. has shown that we too have our challenges, especially with democracy. And so for President Biden to basically lean into that narrative, while also leaning into the point that you made, which is that he is actually of the mold of a sort of, you know, statesman long on the scene and in international affairs. I think he can balance both. And by infusing American commitment to continued progress and the repair that is built into democratic systems, I think he can sort of make that case. But it's a challenging one to make.

Ms. Flacks: Yeah, I'll agree with that. This is Marti. You know, Noam's exactly right.

I think two points on age. One is that, yes, President Biden is among the older group of leaders. Leaders as a whole are an older bunch. But I think, interestingly, there's been some analysis that more authoritarian regimes tend to have older leaders and more democratic regimes tend to have younger ones. And so Biden is the exception. I think he's one of the few leaders of a democracy that is – that is older. So it's interesting, because a lot of his counterparts in our like-minded countries that are democratic friends do have much younger leaders. So it's a different – it's a different dynamic there.

But the other thing that I think is really interesting on age is that the Open Society Foundation just, I think, this week put out a really broad global survey, I think across, like, 30 countries, asking questions about support for democracy versus authoritarianism. And they found that, I think contrary to some of the perceptions that are out there, populations overwhelmingly still support democracy and want to live in a democracy. I think 86 percent of their respondents said they want to live in a democracy. So there is this perception that maybe people are losing faith in democracy. And they didn't find that across the board.

What they did find, though, is a very big age gap. That the older you get the more you support democracy, and that the younger demographic that they surveyed – the kind of 18-to-35s – had a much slimmer majority of folks that thought democracy was the best form of government. Still a majority, but a slimmer majority. And that's concerning, right, because they are obviously the ones who will be making decisions about their governance in the future. And so I think it is really important that we're making the case specifically to that younger audience.

You know, this president has a fairly unique and well-documented sort of ability to empathize, an ability to identify with a lot of people in a lot of circumstances. And I think that what Noam was implying around humility is really important here in that this administration has been very forward-leaning in acknowledging the challenges that we have in the United States and trying to turn those into advantages – to talk about the fact that our democracy is not perfect, that we have made mistakes, that we are backsliding in some ways, but that our system is open enough that we can acknowledge that and that we can learn from it and we can continue to improve. And you contrast that with places where, if you criticize a government, you know, you're arrested or even killed. So I think that we have the ability to make the case for the system, the democratic system self-correcting, but, you know, we have to continue to do that work and we have to continue to show our work in order to make that case. And I think that these steps that the administration is taking to engage with these other groupings, in India or in Vietnam or elsewhere, that are, in some cases, democracies with challenges like us, in some cases not democracies at all – you know, acknowledges that there are different conversations happening in different places about what democracy looks like and everyone's on their own path, and we have to keep pushing them on that path, but everybody's on a journey. It's not – democracy is not an on-off switch; it's a process and that it needs continuous work, including here at home.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much. Thanks to you both, actually, for your comments.

And we will go on to our next question.

Operator: Thank you.

Our question comes from Vero Balderas with the Voice of America. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi. Thank you, everybody. This is very helpful.

I would like to talk a little bit about the African continent. What are, if any, concrete outcomes that you expect on the situation of the latest coups, as well as climate change and inequality and health coverage?

Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much, Vero. I think some of the colleagues on the call will be able to address these, particularly climate.

Caitlin, I'm sure you can speak to food security and water.

And then happy to connect you with other folks after the call. But maybe first I'll turn it over to Caitlin and Joseph.

Ms. Welsh: Sure. I'm happy to start.

With regard to food security, I expect reference to Africa on discussions with African leaders about the impact of the cessation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative on African countries. Many countries across the continent are major importers of products exported by Ukraine and by Russia. And I expect discussion of the ways that Africa has been affected, particularly in the context of lack of progress against SDG 2. We're predicting right now that by 2036 hundred million people will remain food-insecure, in large part because of Russia's war in Ukraine. So that's one context in which I expect discussion with regard to Africa. Likewise, with regard to water security: Again, progress against SDG 6 has been going – is going backwards in some instances and we're seeing, particularly in African countries, uneven progress against some of the targets within that goal. So both with regard to food security related to Russia and Ukraine and with regard to water security writ large, I expect focus on countries in Africa.

Ms. Montfort: Great. Thank you.

And over to you, Joseph.

Dr. Majkut: Yeah, sure. Happy to discuss it.

I mean, Africa, by and large, is a place where the climate finance discussion is incredibly important, right, so very low capita emissions, lots of people with no access to energy or very insecure access to energy. That's a place where the discussion really revolves around meeting universal energy access goals through scaling up clean energy, involving the private sector, the government, MDBs, accelerating our ability to move capital finance into projects.

Part of what we need to also do is shorten the project pipeline, get a better – reduce the risk that investors face when they try to build

infrastructure in countries with unstable governments, with corruption, or with just kind of lower state capacity to plan a power sector and build a bunch of things. These are – these are challenges that UNGA and the international community can definitely address. Whether we'll see big watershed moments I'm unsure, but we're definitely going to see that conversation – the developed world meeting its obligations, the promises it's made to help the developing world to decarbonize quickly.

Regarding the role of the United States and the leadership of the Biden administration, we have seen this administration take efforts to engage with countries in Africa on infrastructure and energy investment, and establishing better trade relations in the context of the U.S. and Western companies then being able to access minerals, and figuring out a fair deal between mineral-rich countries in Africa and the broader world when it comes to mining things like cobalt, lithium, et cetera.

Again, I think that's a longer-term conversation than is going to be resolved next week. But it is an interesting place where the Biden administration really is bringing a lot of the high standards associated with doing business in the West.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much, Joseph. I'm not sure if my line is cutting out. Apologies there, Joseph. To make sure, can you hear me now?

Dr. Majkut: I can hear you, and I'm finished.

Ms. Montfort: Amazing. Thank you so much. Sorry, tough connection today. But thank you so much for that. We'll make sure to get everything in the transcript, if anyone else's line cut out, like mine. I know we're getting close to 2:00 pm. I'd love to get one last question in before we wrap up.

Operator: Thank you. Our question comes from Jion Kim with VOA. Please go ahead.

Q: Yes. I'm Jion Kim from Voice of America Korean Service.

And my question is issues of human rights and sanctions violations. North Korea's and Russia summit, the issues of pending arms deal and sending workers between North Korea and Russia, North Korea's – (inaudible) – attend the summit. And this raise these concerns about violations of U.N. Security Council resolutions against North Korea that prohibit the same thing of North Korean workers. And what human rights abuse will the workers face? And what is the approach to violating U.N. sanctions?

Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much.

Marti, perhaps first over to you as director of our Human Rights Initiative.

Ms. Flacks: Yeah, sure.

And I was now cutting out a little bit, but I think I heard most of the question on North Korean – the North Korean agreement with Russia and human rights issues there, I think. Yeah, look, there's a – there's a fairly comprehensive U.N. sanctions system in place that is meant to constrain the ability of the North Koreans to generate funds that support their nuclear weapons program, among other things, and that facilitate their egregious human rights abuses of their own population.

One of the ways the North Koreans have traditionally tried to get around this is by sending workers overseas. Those workers then are forced to remit the vast majority of their salaries back to the North Korean state. And that's one of the ways they make – they make money. A lot of that shut down during the pandemic because of the global shutdown. And it's now, I think, picking up again. Many of those North Korean workers are in China, but as I think you were saying there may be an opening for more of them to go to Russia now after this agreement. So that is, you know, both in violation of U.N. sanctions and also a concern in terms of facilitating the government's ability to abuse its citizens and to pose a threat to international peace and security.

In terms of the workers themselves, there's been a wide variety of experiences that they have had working overseas. We've seen situations where North Korean workers didn't want to go back to North Korea because they found themselves in better circumstances overseas even though they were making hardly any money because they had to send the money back. But at least their living and working conditions were improved. We've also seen situations where they found themselves in really egregious human rights situations with really egregious labor rights violations that really had very little opportunity for remedy because of the system in which they were sent, or the country in which they were working.

So it's a really very risky – it's a very risky thing for these North Koreans to try and work overseas. And it's something that the U.N. system, the U.N. special rapporteur and others have tried to highlight in their reporting on this, particularly the situation of women workers but workers in general. So I would expect if we see an uptick in traffic of North Korean workers to Russia, that would be the focus of the U.N. special rapporteur's work as well.

Ms. Montfort: Great. Thank you so much, Marti.

And we are right at 2 p.m., so we will wrap up the call there. Thank you to those of you who dialed in and stayed on with us throughout the Q&A. If you were in the queue, did not get to ask your questions, please feel free to reach out to me. Again, my name is Paige Montfort. I am the media relations manager here at CSIS. And you can call me, email me; I'm glad to help connect you with any of the experts who were on the call today or any of the other experts around the Center ahead of UNGA's high-level week next week.

As a reminder, the transcript from this call will be available within just a few hours today. It'll be sent to those of you who RSVPed and then it'll also be published online at CSIS.org.

So thank you so much, everyone, and have a great rest of your day.

(END)