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# SECURITY COUNCIL REFORMATION AMIDST DIPLOMATIC GRIDLOCK

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## ABSTRACT

The UN Security Council (UNSC) still reflects the post-World War II power structure, not today's global realities. The five permanent members (P5)—China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US—hold veto power, which often leads to paralysis, as seen with Russia's vetoes on Ukraine-related resolutions. Countries like India, Brazil, Japan, and Germany have become major global players but lack permanent seats. President Biden's support in 2022 for permanent seats for countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean marks a shift toward addressing regional underrepresentation. UN efforts to reform the UNSC have dragged on since 1992 with no concrete results. Intergovernmental negotiations launched in 2008 have failed to yield progress due to the absence of a single negotiating text and broad disagreement among member states. The council is widely viewed as feckless, unjust, and unrepresentative, especially given recent crises like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which highlight its inability to act decisively. The veto power has increasingly come under fire as a tool of obstruction rather than protection. The legitimacy and effectiveness of the Security Council are at risk. Its credibility suffers when it cannot respond to major international crises. There is a clear clash between realism and idealism. P5 interests prevents the ideal of a more equitable and responsive Council. The Biden administration's shift signals growing pressure from the Global South and a recognition that international institutions must adapt or risk irrelevance. Reform proposals often fall into two camps: those prioritizing efficiency (streamlined decision-making) and those emphasizing representation (inclusion of underrepresented regions and emerging powers). The Security Council is facing a crisis of relevance. While the urgency for reform has intensified—especially post-Ukraine invasion—the same structural barriers that have always stymied change remain entrenched. Unless there's a significant political breakthrough or a galvanizing global consensus, the UNSC risks further erosion of its authority in international peace and security.

**Keywords:** UNSC, veto Power, invasion, representation.

## **Introduction**

UN Security Council reform is so difficult because any amendment to the UN Charter—including changes to the Security Council—requires approval by two-thirds of UN member states (i.e., at least 129 out of 193). Ratification by all five permanent members of the Security Council is *sine qua non*. This gives each P5 member a *de facto* veto over reform, even outside the Council. States may disagree on the number of new seats (both permanent and non-permanent) due to regional competition, especially in Africa and Asia. Whether new permanent members should have veto power is a core sticking point. Geopolitical Polarization and Intensifying rivalries—particularly between Western democracies and authoritarian powers (e.g., U.S., China, Russia)—make consensus nearly impossible. Political polarization within key countries (e.g., the U.S., India, Brazil) also complicates domestic support for reform. Even if the Council becomes more representative, there's no guarantee it will become more effective. Some fear an enlarged Council might increase gridlock rather than resolve it. Despite the obstacles, the drivers of reform are intensifying. Rising powers (India, Brazil, regional leaders in Africa and Latin America) demand a greater voice. From interstate wars to climate change, pandemics, cyberattacks, and terrorism—issues that require more inclusive governance. The Council's failure to act decisively (e.g., on Ukraine, Gaza, Syria) feeds global perceptions of irrelevance and injustice.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) stands as the central authority for international peacekeeping and conflict resolution. Its decisions are binding on all UN member states, setting it apart from the non-binding resolutions of the General Assembly. This gives the Council unparalleled power to authorize sanctions, peacekeeping missions, and, when necessary, military action.

However, the effectiveness and legitimacy of the UNSC depend heavily on its ability to represent the contemporary global order. The Council's composition—largely unchanged since 1945—no longer mirrors today's geopolitical landscape. Calls for reform have intensified as regions and countries long excluded from permanent decision-making seek equitable representation.

The Council's current structure—five permanent members (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the United States) with veto power, alongside ten rotating non-permanent members—reflects the power dynamics of the post-World War II era. This excludes major emerging powers like

India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan (the G4), who contribute significantly to the international system and advocate for permanent seats.

The lack of proportional representation diminishes the Council's credibility and legitimacy. A system that fails to account for the rise of new global actors undermines the very principles of inclusive and cooperative international governance.

The UN Charter highlights the need for geographically balanced representation, yet many regions—especially Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean—remain underrepresented. Africa, for instance, holds no permanent seat despite comprising over a quarter of UN member states.

This imbalance leads to perceptions of inequality and disenfranchisement, undermining trust in the Council's impartiality and its ability to reflect diverse regional perspectives.

While financial contributions are not a formal criterion for UNSC membership, countries that make substantial monetary commitments to the UN often expect a greater role in decision-making. This raises a tension between merit-based influence and equitable regional representation. Balancing financial input with regional diversity is critical. Representation must not be reduced to a pay-to-play model, but rather incorporate both contributions to international peace and commitment to UN principles.

Without meaningful reform, there is a growing risk that key global decisions will increasingly shift to alternative forums—such as the G20, regional alliances, or ad hoc coalitions—that lack the UNSC's legal authority but may prove more agile.

While these groups can offer short-term solutions, bypassing the UNSC erodes its centrality and undermines the UN's collective security framework. A reformed and more representative Council is crucial to reasserting its global leadership role.

Efforts to reform the UNSC face daunting legal and political barriers. Amending the UN Charter requires Approval by two-thirds of the General Assembly, and ratification by all five permanent members, who are unlikely to support changes that dilute their power. Divergent views among member states—over the size, scope, and structure of reform—further complicate progress. The P5's entrenched interests remain the single largest barrier to reform.

Russia's veto of UNSC action following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine has reignited global calls for change. The inability of the Council to respond effectively to such a clear breach of international norms has exposed the flaws of the veto system and galvanized support for reform. Leaders such as U.S. President Joe Biden have echoed calls for expanding the Council, including permanent seats for Africa, Latin America, and other historically underrepresented regions. Support is growing for expanding both permanent and non-permanent membership to make the Council more inclusive and responsive.

The UNSC remains a vital institution for global security. Yet its legitimacy, representativeness, and operational effectiveness are increasingly in question. Reform is no longer just a matter of fairness—it is a strategic imperative to preserve the Council's relevance in a rapidly changing world. Achieving reform will require persistent diplomacy, creative negotiation strategies, and a willingness to compromise among UN member states. While entrenched interests pose real obstacles, the growing global consensus and urgency suggest that reform, though difficult, is not impossible.

The only major structural change to the Council occurred in the early 1960s, when the number of non-permanent seats was increased from 6 to 10. The number of affirmative votes needed to pass resolutions increased from 7 to 9 (including all P5). This reform responded to post-colonial expansion of UN membership, particularly from Africa and Asia, who were underrepresented in global decision-making. In 1963, the General Assembly passed a resolution urging reform to reflect the UN's growing and diversifying membership. After intense negotiations, a compromise was reached, balancing the interests of the P5 with broader representation demands—though permanent membership remained untouched.<sup>1</sup>

Persistent calls for reform reflect dissatisfaction with the unrepresentative nature of the P5. The veto's misuse, as seen with Russia's actions regarding Ukraine. Expanding permanent seats to include countries from Africa, Latin America, and Asia including rising powers such as India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan (the G4). India advocates for "reformed multilateralism" rooted in dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution along with mutual respect and sovereign equality by adhering to international law and giving leverage to technology for humanitarian and security challenges. India argues that its growing global role, long-standing peacekeeping

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<sup>1</sup> A/RES/1991(XVIII)

contributions, and democratic values make it a strong candidate for permanent membership. It promotes a UNSC that reflects current geopolitical realities and not the post-WWII status quo.

Reforming the UNSC remains a formidable task, due to the veto power held by the P5, which gives each the ability to block reforms threatening their dominance. Geopolitical rivalries and lack of trust among key players has created the difficulty of reconciling competing visions for reform—some prioritize efficiency, others representation. Despite growing consensus on the need for reform, there remains no agreement on a single reform model, nor on whether new permanent members should be granted veto powers.

The Charter grants the UNSC a wide array of powers like primary responsibility for peace and security<sup>2</sup>, binding decision-making authority on all member states<sup>3</sup>, formulation of arms control strategies<sup>4</sup>, creation of subsidiary bodies to address crises<sup>5</sup>, authorization of enforcement actions, including sanctions and military interventions<sup>6</sup>. These powers manifest the Council's central role in global security governance, making questions of its legitimacy and structure all the more critical.

The veto power held by the five permanent members (P5) of the United Nations Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—remains one of the most controversial aspects of the UN system. Established at the Yalta Conference (1945) and enshrined in Article 27(3) of the UN Charter, the veto was a condition for the participation of the major Allied powers in the formation of the UN. Without this assurance, the creation of the organization would have been jeopardized. While intended to prevent paralysis among the great powers—as had plagued the League of Nations—the veto was justified as necessary to maintain peace among the most militarily and politically powerful states. Yet, from the outset, smaller and newly decolonized nations decried this privilege as “victors’ justice”, contrary to the principle of sovereign equality. The veto has been used over 300 times since 1946. The USSR alone cast 75 out of the first 77 vetoes, often blocking Western-backed resolutions. It is marked by several inactions in Humanitarian Crises like failure to act decisively in 1994 during the Rwanda genocide due to P5 disagreements. In Syria (2011–present) dozens of vetoes,

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<sup>2</sup> Article 24 of UN Charter

<sup>3</sup> Article 25 of UN Charter

<sup>4</sup> Article 26 of UN Charter

<sup>5</sup> Article 29 of UN Charter

<sup>6</sup> Articles 39–51 of UN Charter

primarily by Russia and China, have prevented stronger international responses to the civil war and humanitarian catastrophe.

Under Article 27(2) of the Charter, decisions on procedural matters require 9 affirmative votes with no veto requirement, while under Article 27(3), substantive matters require 9 affirmative votes including all P5. The double veto allows a P5 member to claim a matter is substantive, thereby requiring a veto-capable vote. UNGA Resolution 267 (1949) and subsequent practices have narrowed the scope of such veto use, but the issue remains legally unresolved.

A P5 member abstaining from a vote does not block a resolution—e.g., Soviet abstention in 1946 on Spain. In recent years, initiatives such as the ACT Group Code of Conduct and French-Mexican proposal have advocated for voluntary non-use of veto in mass atrocity situations. While not binding, these reflect a growing awareness of the veto's reputational costs. Despite broad support for UNSC reform, veto reform is particularly intractable, due to Article 108 of the Charter which requires ratification by all P5 to change the veto rules. P5 members see the veto as an indispensable guarantee of their influence, especially amid rising global rivalry.

Common reform proposals may include abolition of the veto entirely though it may be politically unrealistic. Restrict veto use in cases of mass atrocities. Expand UNSC membership with new permanent members without veto (e.g., G4 proposal: Brazil, Germany, India, Japan) and time-bound veto restrictions for specific crisis categories.

### **India's Perspective on Veto and UNSC Reform**

India is a prominent voice in favor of comprehensive UNSC reform, arguing that the current structure reflects 1945 power dynamics, not today's geopolitical realities. Permanent membership should include rising powers from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It supports expanding the Council's size and questioning the appropriateness of veto use, especially in humanitarian crises. India advocates for "reformed multilateralism", emphasizing rule-based international order, promoting Sovereign equality providing for responsible global governance

The original logic behind the veto—to avoid direct conflict among major powers—is still relevant. However, the reality of misuse, inaction, and political gridlock in the face of modern threats (e.g., climate security, terrorism, pandemics) has raised legitimate questions about the moral legitimacy of the veto and its compatibility with the UN's own principles.

The UNSC can adapt and remain relevant in a multipolar world if it eliminated the veto which is politically improbable though several incremental pathways exist like voluntary restraint mechanisms during crises, greater transparency in veto explanations (e.g., justifying vetoes in the General Assembly). Expanding non-veto-holding permanent seats to improve representation, creating review processes for veto use, possibly via advisory opinions from the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Ultimately, the veto power remains a double-edged sword—ensuring major power participation while often paralyzing decisive action. As global challenges evolve, so too must the institutions designed to meet them.

### **Decadewise developments**

The post-1970s era saw a gradual yet marked shift in the dynamics of veto usage within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This period was characterized by shifting alliances, evolving geopolitical interests, and the growing influence of non-aligned and developing nations in shaping the Security Council's agenda. Between 1972 and 1985, the U.S., UK, and France consistently aligned their vetoes on issues concerning Southern Africa, particularly in response to draft resolutions condemning apartheid and regional interventions by South Africa. From 1982 to 1985, notably, no vetoes were cast on Southern Africa—signaling a temporary shift towards consensus or de-escalation of conflicts. Between 1985 and 1988, the UK and the U.S. resumed veto activity on these issues, reflecting a renewed sensitivity to perceived anti-Western resolutions. Post-1988, no further vetoes related to Southern Africa were recorded. This decline coincided with significant regional changes, such as Namibia's independence in 1990 and South Africa's gradual dismantling of apartheid, reducing the geopolitical salience of these disputes at the Council level. Between 1972 and 1997, the Security Council was frequently divided over Middle East resolutions, particularly those concerning the Israel-Palestine conflict. The U.S. often stood alone in vetoing resolutions critical of Israel, while France, the UK, China, and the Soviet Union/Russia frequently voted in favor or abstained. Since 1997, the U.S. has vetoed ten Middle East-related resolutions, reflecting its continued strategic alliance with Israel. France has abstained once and supported all other such resolutions. The UK has abstained on eight occasions and supported two, in 2002 and 2011, indicating a more cautious and less interventionist stance. This continued divergence underscores the enduring complexity of Middle East diplomacy within the UNSC framework and the difficulty in achieving consensus on Palestine-related matters. Period of 1991–1992 was marked by unprecedented cooperation following the Gulf War and the dissolution of the

Soviet Union. Additional veto-free stretches occurred during 1995–1997, 1997–1999 & 2004–2006. These episodes illustrate a broader trend toward preventive diplomacy and a commitment to resolving disagreements through consensus-building before formal votes are held. Since the mid-1980s, there has been a substantial decline in overall veto use, reflecting broader diplomatic shifts. Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) remains the most frequent veto user, with 123 vetoes. However, many were concentrated in the Council's early decades. China has historically used the veto sparingly, with only ten instances overall, but its use has increased notably since 2007, often in alignment with Russia. A notable exception was Russia's solo veto on Georgia in 2009, which China abstained on—signaling selective divergence. The United States remains a dominant veto user, especially on Israel/Palestine issues, with 13 vetoes between 1995 and 2011 alone. France and the UK have not used the veto since 1989, suggesting a strategic shift toward multilateral cooperation and diplomatic consensus.

The evolution of veto use in the UNSC reflects broader geopolitical transitions, including the decline of Cold War-era bloc politics and the emergence of multipolar diplomacy. The increased assertiveness of Global South and non-aligned countries, particularly in setting the agenda on issues such as Palestine, Southern Africa, and decolonization. A growing inclination among Permanent Members—especially France and the UK—toward diplomatic negotiation over unilateral vetoes. Despite declining overall usage, the veto remains a potent political tool, especially in deadlocked geopolitical crises. Persistent divergences on issues such as the Middle East, humanitarian interventions, and state sovereignty continue to challenge the Council's effectiveness, reinforcing calls for veto reform and institutional modernization.

## **Conclusion**

The UN Security Council's structure and powers were forged in a post-war world that no longer exists. As new powers emerge and new challenges—from cyber threats to climate conflict—demand global solutions, the UNSC's continued relevance depends on meaningful reform.

While legal and political obstacles remain steep, failure to adapt risks institutional obsolescence. To maintain credibility, legitimacy, and effectiveness, the UNSC must evolve to reflect a more representative and multipolar world.