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UN Security Council Reform: What the World Thinks

Stewart Patrick, editor

*Adekeye Adebajo | Anjali Dayal | Richard Gowan | Zhang Guihong | Christoph Heusgen | Andrey Kolosovskiy
Phillip Y. Lipsky | Sithembile Mbete | Rohan Mukherjee | Joel Ng | Alexandra Novosseloff
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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

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Cutting the Gordian Knot: Global Perspectives on UN Security Council Reform

Stewart Patrick

The United Nations (UN) Security Council’s failure to act on Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has reignited long-smoldering global demands to overhaul the world’s premier body for international peace and security. U.S. President Joe Biden fanned these embers in his September 2022 speech to the UN General Assembly. After [reiterating](#) long-standing U.S. support for “increasing the number of both permanent and non-permanent representatives,” Biden added a new twist: the United States now endorses not only “permanent seats for those nations we’ve long supported”—that is, Japan, Germany, and India—but also “permanent seats for countries in Africa [and] Latin America and the Caribbean.” Biden’s surprise announcement kicked off the latest flurry of multilateral diplomacy on the perennial and seemingly intractable challenge of Security Council reform.

Few topics generate so much talk and so little action as Security Council reform. In December 1992, the General Assembly created an open-ended working group to review equitable representation on the council. More than three decades later, that (aptly named) body continues to meet—with no tangible results. In October 2008, the UN formally authorized [intergovernmental negotiations](#) on the “question of equitable representation and increase in the membership of the Security Council.” After fifteen years of fruitless discussion, the diplomatic impasse persists in part because member states have never agreed to negotiate on the basis of [a single rolling text](#).

The impulse for reform is understandable. Nearly eight decades after its creation, the Security Council retains the same five permanent members (P5)—China, France, Russia (following the dissolution of the Soviet Union), the United Kingdom, and the United States. Since 1945, however, major players like India and Brazil have emerged, to say nothing of

Japan and Germany, the long-rehabilitated aggressors of World War II. Even as the UN's overall membership has nearly quadrupled (from fifty-one to 193 member states) thanks to decolonization and the dissolution of multiethnic states, the council's composition has expanded only once, in 1965, when the addition of four elected seats grew the council from eleven to fifteen members.

Compounding these frustrations about membership, each of the P5 countries retains a veto permitting it to unilaterally block Security Council resolutions inimical to its national interests (as Russia has done with respect to Ukraine). The result is frequent council paralysis, exacerbated by deepening geopolitical rivalry between Western democracies and authoritarian China and Russia. To a growing proportion of the world's governments and citizens, the council today is both feckless and unjust, dominated by irresponsible and unrepresentative powers inclined to abuse their position rather than safeguard the peace. Restoring the council's effectiveness and legitimacy, critics contend, requires updating its anachronistic composition and unfair decisionmaking rules to better reflect ongoing shifts in global power and emerging centers of moral authority. Unfortunately, UN members are divided over the shape of any reform, not least whether it should focus on enhancing the council's capability or its representativeness. Thanks to this diplomatic deadlock, the Security Council is trapped in amber.

Although the council has suffered previous blows—among them the ill-fated U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003 without its authorization—Russia's brazen aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 and ability to veto any council response have radicalized reform demands. “Where is this security that the Security Council needs to guarantee?” Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy [thundered](#) in April 2022. With collective security paralyzed, another question [hung in the air](#): is the UN destined, like the League of Nations, for the ash heap of history?

The obstacles to council reform are daunting. They include the high procedural hurdles to amending the UN Charter; divergent member state positions on the acceptable size and terms of any enlargement; disagreement over current veto provisions and their potential extension to any new permanent members; and gnawing uncertainties over whether any plausible enlargement—even if it made the council more representative—would improve its functioning. Any change to the council's composition or voting rules would require the approval of two-thirds of UN members—including each of the P5—accompanied by relevant domestic legislation. Given intensifying geopolitical rivalry and deepening political polarization in many countries, prospects for updating the council appear slim.

Yet, pressure for Security Council expansion and veto reform will surely grow as the distribution of power and the nature of security threats shift ever further from what they were in 1945. Absent structural changes, the council's performance and legitimacy will inevitably suffer. Given these stakes, the world requires fresh thinking on reform pathways that will help the council meet the moment.

To illuminate this shifting diplomatic landscape and explore potential routes forward, Carnegie’s Global Order and Institutions Program invited fifteen scholars from around the world to contribute short essays responding to the following question: how should the UN Security Council be reformed, from the perspective of your country or region?

The program invited each author to assess the council’s current health and performance; to consider whether any changes to its composition and rules (notably the veto) might improve what ails it; to outline plausible diplomatic scenarios for achieving any recommended reforms; and to consider the potential consequences of a continued lack of reform. Authors were also asked to summarize, though not necessarily endorse, the official position of their country or regional bloc.

This compendium is the result. It includes separate essays from the perspective of each P5 nation; four long-standing aspirants to permanent seats (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan); two leading African candidates for permanent membership (Nigeria and South Africa); two important regional powers (Mexico and Türkiye); a small but influential island nation (Singapore); and the continent of Africa. Collectively, these essays provide a timely snapshot of the diplomatic debate over Security Council reform at a moment when the body’s credibility, effectiveness, and legitimacy have receded to their lowest ebb since the end of the Cold War.

Key Emerging Themes

The health of the Security Council is poor but not yet terminal. Most contributors believe the council’s performance and legitimacy have declined, particularly since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. To be sure, its effective functioning has always been contingent on trust among the P5 and their willingness to withhold the veto. In the benign post–Cold War context of the 1990s, optimism ran high that the council might finally fulfill the aims of the UN Charter. Such optimism gradually faded. Tensions between the P5’s democratic and authoritarian members reasserted themselves, exacerbated by the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the NATO-led intervention in Libya and its chaotic aftermath, the breakdown of UN diplomacy over the war in Syria, and the fallout from Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014, among other disputes. Even so, the council managed to insulate much of its business from these frictions. It continued, for example, to reauthorize peace operations in many conflict areas. Such compartmentalization still occurs but has become more difficult since February 2022, threatening the council’s ability to serve as a clearinghouse for the P5 to compromise in a divided world. East-West tensions now intrude on its everyday deliberations, including the release of basic presidential and press statements. As the International Crisis Group [warns](#), “worse may lie ahead.”

Three blocs continue to hold irreconcilable positions on reform. Virtually all UN members endorse council reform, but they disagree on whether its primary thrust should be to harness major power capabilities or increase equitable global representation. Three main blocs remain dug in. The first is the so-called G4 coalition, comprising the four main aspirants to permanent council membership—Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan—and their supporters. The G4 governments seek the same status as the existing P5, although they show some flexibility on the veto. They also advocate two permanent seats for Africa. The second bloc is the Uniting for Consensus (UFC) coalition, led by the G4’s regional rivals (including Argentina, Mexico, Italy, Poland, Pakistan, South Korea, and Türkiye, among others). As **Miguel Ruiz Cabañas Izquierdo** explains in his essay, the UFC advocates expanding the council’s elected membership from ten to twenty—a strategy that would allow more nations to serve on an egalitarian, globally representative council, rather than reinforcing great power hierarchy. The third major bloc is the African Union (AU). Its fifty-four members remain committed to the 2005 Ezulwini Consensus, which insists that the continent be granted two permanent seats, with full veto rights, as well as at least three additional nonpermanent seats.

The permanent members have stymied progress. Each of the P5 is determined to maintain its permanent seat and veto, but their positions on council reform vary. Russia, as **Andrey Kolosovskiy** notes, is skeptical about adding permanent seats or otherwise diluting its global status—an instinct reinforced by its relative decline and diplomatic isolation. China likewise opposes new permanent members, showing special animus to the aspirations of regional rivals India and Japan. Consistent with the UFC position, Beijing advocates up to ten additional elected members to increase equitable representation from all regions. More pointedly, as former German diplomat **Christoph Heusgen** observes, China has repeatedly used its diplomatic muscle to block text-based negotiations that might lead to an actual breakthrough.

Among the Western permanent members, France and Britain have been the most forward leaning on reform, aware of their relative vulnerability and critiques of Europe’s overrepresentation on the council. Since 2009, they have promoted a sort of interim solution: a new category of longer-term seats that could eventually become permanent (albeit without the veto). The United States, for its part, has historically supported a modest expansion in both permanent and nonpermanent seats, with the caveat that the resulting body have no more than twenty-one members. The practical impact of that U.S. precondition, as **Phillip Y. Lipsky** writes, has been to block progress on reform. Biden’s apparent support for a higher ceiling is thus significant, as it may remove a long-standing diplomatic obstacle.

The new U.S. position has clarified the diplomatic terrain. It is tempting to dismiss Biden’s overture as a costless rhetorical gesture—an act of political theater to engender goodwill among fence-sitting nations in a brewing Cold War context, with the United States secure in the knowledge that reform will never happen. In private, U.S. officials—who have conducted several rounds of intergovernmental consultations—adamantly deny they are just going through the motions. Regardless of Washington’s sincerity, the [new, forward-leaning](#)

[U.S. stance](#) has made it harder for other nations or regional groupings to hide behind ambiguous U.S. statements rather than putting their cards on the table. Most notably, it has put China and Russia on the defensive and applied pressure on AU members to explain how they will translate the Ezulwini Consensus into a specific blueprint for expansion.

Africa faces a moment of truth. The Security Council’s composition is particularly archaic and unjust from the vantage point of Africa. The continent occupies most of the council’s substantive agenda and hosts the vast majority of UN peacekeeping operations, yet it lacks a single permanent seat to shape council deliberations. Ironically, while the Ezulwini Consensus gives the AU unmatched leverage in UN negotiations, this very unanimity inhibits progress on council reform because the bloc has failed to specify *which* countries should occupy its two proposed permanent seats. Ending this impasse, as **Sithembile Mbete** concludes, will require the AU to “get its own house in order.”

The most logical candidates are Nigeria and South Africa. Yet, they face opposition from regional competitors like Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Senegal—mirroring the dynamics that pit the G4 nations against their UFC rivals. Complicating matters, as **Adekeye Adebajo** observes, the AU has declined to show flexibility (as the G4 have) on veto rights for new permanent members. Nor has the AU developed a diplomatic strategy to advance (rather than simply articulate) the Ezulwini Consensus. Even more surprisingly, as **Priyal Singh** writes, Biden’s historic declaration of support for a permanent African presence on the council has elicited “almost no discernible foreign policy reaction from Pretoria”—or from Abuja, either. Beyond mistrust of U.S. intentions and cynicism about UN negotiations, such reticence may reflect awareness that clarifying these pesky details could unravel the AU’s much-hyped consensus.

Security Council gridlock has reinvigorated the UN General Assembly. A striking repercussion of the war in Ukraine has been the General Assembly’s resurgent determination to hold P5 nations accountable and expand its own role in international security. Frustrated by Russia’s ability to block Security Council action, other council members resurrected the so-called Uniting for Peace resolution, first employed during the Korean War, to request an emergency assembly session. On March 2, 2022, the assembly [overwhelmingly approved](#) its own [resolution](#) deploring the Russian invasion, demanding Russia’s immediate withdrawal, and reaffirming Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. More pointedly, on April 26, 2022, the body passed another [resolution](#) requiring a special assembly debate within ten days of any use of the veto, including justification from the permanent member that wielded it. As **Joel Ng** notes, such bottom-up activism could place pressure on permanent members not to use their veto irresponsibly, lest they risk diplomatic isolation.

The tension between representation and effectiveness is real but complex. While most governments seek a Security Council that is both more representative and more capable, these goals [exist in tension](#). A large expansion could well increase the council’s authority and legitimacy but decrease its efficiency and effectiveness. **Alexandra Novosseloff** reminds readers that the council’s primary rationale was never to be truly representative—the

General Assembly is meant to be the putative town hall of the world. Rather, the Security Council exists to harness the collective might of the world's most-powerful countries. Confusing these two roles, she warns, could produce an unwieldy council even more subject to gridlock.

Still, the relationship between representation and effectiveness (as opposed to efficiency) is not black and white—or zero sum. As **Rohan Mukherjee** argues, extensive social science research suggests that “international legitimacy depends less on performance than on inclusivity and fairness.” Even more significantly, the *performance* of any institution tends to decline as its perceived legitimacy diminishes, since unjust arrangements tempt participants to reduce their compliance and seek alternative arrangements. In this regard, offering permanent membership to major regional powers could stimulate their enduring buy-in—and boost the council's effectiveness.

Security Council reform is about values as well as power. The topic of council reform is highly charged because it has normative as well as material implications for world order. **Zhang Guihong** notes that altering the council's composition will not only advance some national interests over others but also influence how the world defines and chooses to defend the concept of security itself. Such considerations help explain the United States' historic [ambivalence](#) toward extending permanent membership to large developing-country democracies, given their proclivity in UN settings to adopt nonaligned stances at odds with Washington's preferences. During U.S. president Barack Obama's first term, U.S. officials observed Brazil, India, and South Africa in action as elected council members. What they witnessed, former U.S. ambassador to the UN Susan Rice dryly observed, was “[not . . . frankly, encouraging.](#)” More than a decade later, the United States has been similarly frustrated by the inclination of emerging democracies to [sit on the fence](#) rather than move to isolate Russia.

Geopolitical competition could again add momentum for reform. Resurgent strategic rivalry between the council's democratic and authoritarian powers could help break the logjam on Security Council reform, as current P5 members seek to cultivate relationships with nations from the developing world. As **Richard Gowan** notes, the 2023 British national security posture identifies council reform as one way to nurture better relations with middle powers like India and Brazil. There is at least a partial precedent here. The council's sole previous expansion occurred in the context of decolonization and the Cold War, as the world's East and West factions jockeyed for support from newly independent states in a burgeoning “third world.” Something similar is at play today, with P5 states seeking to curry favor in the so-called Global South. It is worth noting, however, that the 1965 expansion involved only elected rather than permanent members.

The veto can be discouraged but not eliminated. No UN Charter provision is more resented than the veto, which allows the P5 to not only block collective action but also shield themselves and their allies from accountability. There is little prospect of eliminating this

prerogative, however. The drafters of the UN Charter anointed the permanent members as guardians of the postwar peace, with the authority to pass resolutions legally binding on all UN member states. In return, the P5 exacted a steep price: the right to block any Chapter VII enforcement actions they deem contrary to their fundamental interests. The UN may have been created, in the words of the UN Charter preamble, “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” but its supreme purpose remains to prevent catastrophic war *among the great powers*—including the nonnegotiable guarantee that the UN’s coercive powers can never be turned against them.

This can be maddening for anyone who cares about the international rule of law. As **Mukherjee** writes, the war in Ukraine “shows the natural limits of a system of collective security in which great power privilege can trump sovereign equality.” As a corrective, Zelenskyy has [proposed](#) convening a global conference in Kyiv to negotiate sweeping UN reforms. While his instinct is admirable, neither the United States nor China will endorse a collective security system without the veto. A more realistic prospect is to try to limit its actual use. France and the United Kingdom, for instance, have not cast a veto since the end of the Cold War. Since 2015, Paris has also proposed that the P5 not employ the veto in [situations of mass atrocities](#).

The most successful reforms to date have addressed the council’s working methods.

Given the obstacles to altering the council’s membership and decisionmaking rules via a UN Charter amendment, reform efforts have focused primarily on making the body’s informal working methods more inclusive and transparent. This has included urging permanent members to collaborate with elected ones in hosting meetings and drafting resolutions; encouraging elected members from the same region to caucus together to push regional priorities; broadening the range of thematic issues (such as humanitarian and human security topics) that the council addresses; and expanding the council’s interaction with regional and subregional organizations, as well as with civil society actors.

A criteria-based approach to enlargement is important. In an ideal world, the council’s permanent membership might adjust automatically, much as soccer teams rise to (and fall from) the English Premier League each season. Over the years, outside experts have proposed [multiple blueprints](#) to periodically readjust its composition based on weighted variables—such as national GDP, population, and defense expenditures—as well as more subjective criteria. Among the most elaborate is [Elect the Council](#), a campaign spearheaded by the pan-African Institute for Security Studies. As **Singh** describes, it envisions an elected council that balances proportional representation and weighted voting. While intriguing, such technocratic schemes are likely to face even higher political hurdles than what is currently on the table.

It does seem reasonable to require candidates for permanent membership to explain how they would contribute to global security. Brazil, for example, as **Matias Spektor** writes, justifies its council bid in terms of the “value diversity” it would bring to the body and its desire for equal status with other major powers. Brasília has never explained how a permanent seat

of its own would improve the council's functioning, nor has it pledged to ramp up its material contributions to the UN. In principle, any aspirant to permanent membership should be able to meet [certain criteria](#): it should be politically stable (and ideally democratic), have a robust diplomatic presence and military capabilities, contribute generously to the UN's regular and peacekeeping budgets, have a history of conforming to global security regimes, support universal human rights norms, and be prepared to authorize enforcement action under Chapter VII when necessary.

At least two reform pathways are possible, but each would involve major compromises.

The first plausible route would be to launch negotiations on the basis of a single, rolling text that allows UN member states to consider and bargain over specific models of council reform side by side. Such an outcome is likely to be possible only if the AU and the G4 coalition agree on a common approach. Both blocs would have to show flexibility on the veto (such as an agreement to forgo it entirely or for a transition period), and the AU must identify its specific candidates for permanent membership. If the United States, France, and the United Kingdom also endorse this approach, the momentum for textual negotiations could overcome Chinese and Russian objections. The alternative pathway to council reform, as **Heusgen** suggests, would be for the G4 countries to abandon their quest for permanent seats and pick up the UFC's proposal for a new category of semipermanent, renewable seats that allow powers to serve for longer than two years. This would be a major retreat by the G4, but the new tier of countries might at least enjoy a longer presence on the Security Council and, as **Barçin Yinanç** suggests, provide a partial check on the unbridled power of the P5. However, it is unclear whether India in particular would accept such permanent relegation.

A deteriorating status quo is the most likely outcome. International institutions are notoriously impervious to fundamental change. Once established, they create entrenched interests committed to the status quo. Accordingly, transformational change in world politics is most likely in the aftermath of catastrophes, when a major crisis wipes the slate clean, weakens attachment to existing arrangements, and encourages actors to consider novel norms, rules, and frameworks. It is [no coincidence](#) that the Security Council (and the UN itself) emerged after the bloodiest war in world history. The relevant question today is whether the war in Ukraine is a sufficient geopolitical shock to bring about another [moment of creation](#). Most contributors to this compendium believe it is not. Rather, they anticipate that the status quo will persist, at the cost of declining council performance and legitimacy.

The stakes for council reform are high. For all its shortcomings, the Security Council remains, as **Zhang** writes, "an indispensable stabilizing force" and a "cornerstone of the international order." There is simply nothing on the horizon to replace it. Failure to update its composition and rules, however, could imperil these enduring strengths. Disenchanted aspirants to permanent membership could resort to international civil disobedience, reducing their financial and diplomatic support for the UN, pursuing their security objectives in

alternative venues, and broadly undermining the council's centrality to international peace. Such disillusionment is likely to be especially acute in India—an emerging diplomatic, economic, military, and technological powerhouse that is also now the world's most-populous nation.

More generally, perceptions among the broader UN membership of the council's growing illegitimacy could intensify noncompliance with its resolutions, including those pertaining to arms control and sanctions. Letting the council go the way of the bygone League of Nations would be unacceptable. “Without the Security Council,” **Anjali Dayal** writes, “even nominal fidelity to norms of peaceful conflict management, individual rights, and the protection of civilians could fall away.” The world of the twenty-first century desperately needs a healthy multilateral body that is grounded in international law and capable of advancing global peace. Achieving that result requires adapting the council we have inherited to the new global realities we face.



Africa

Sithembile Mbete

A serious discussion about reforming the UN Security Council is long overdue. The structure of the Security Council—with five permanent members (P5) who wield veto power and ten nonpermanent elected members serving two-year terms—is anachronistic, reflecting the configuration of global power at the end of World War II. Rather than act as guardians of peace, the P5 have often contributed to violence. Russia, most egregiously, is embroiled in a war with Ukraine that [many fear could trigger](#) a third world war. Other permanent members have also been implicated in major conflicts on the Security Council’s agenda, including the United Kingdom’s support for Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen, France’s interventions in the Sahel, China’s support for Myanmar’s military junta, and the United States’ (as well as Russia’s) ongoing involvement in Syria.

As currently configured, the Security Council is unable to fulfill its mandate to maintain international peace and security. Its composition needs to be reformed, and Africa must be granted a greater presence and voice. This essay reviews the African case for reforming and expanding the Security Council, examines lessons learned from previous reform efforts, and outlines what is required to make the council fit for purpose in a new era of global uncertainty.

African states have long advocated for the expansion and reform of the Security Council. Two convictions inform this view. First, the council is not representative of the world’s people. Nations from the Global South make up more than two-thirds of the UN’s membership, while the Security Council represents only 8 percent of member states. When the UN was established in 1945, most of Africa was still under colonial rule. The only Security Council expansion to date took place in 1965, in the early stages of the continent’s decolonization. Although African conflicts take up [over 50 percent of council meetings and 70 percent](#) of its resolutions, no African country has a permanent seat—only three nonpermanent

seats that rotate among the continent's subregional blocs. Many African leaders see this as a "historical injustice" and have [argued](#) that the council must be reformed to better represent the world's population and reflect contemporary geopolitical realities.

Second, the nature of global threats and the definition of international security have changed dramatically since 1945. The Security Council must be adapted to respond to new and evolving challenges like climate change, novel pandemics, and global terrorism. Such threats can only be resolved, African leaders argue, by an institution that represents the interests and perspectives of all of humanity. African states have long lobbied the council to include development and poverty reduction, as well as controlling the flow of small arms, as essential strategies for conflict prevention, rather than focusing on only traditional big power priorities like peacekeeping and nuclear nonproliferation. During its presidency of the Security Council in February 2023, for example, Mozambique [convened](#) an open debate on "Peace and Security in Africa: The Impact of Development Policies in the Implementation of the Silencing the Guns Initiative." The [aim](#) of the event was "to facilitate a deeper understanding of the contribution that socio-economic factors can make in promoting social cohesion, peace, and stability, or, conversely, in triggering conflict, including the resurgence of unconstitutional change of governments in Africa and beyond."

Nearly twenty years ago, in 2004, then UN secretary-general Kofi Annan revived the debate on UN reform by appointing a High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change. It proposed enlarging the Security Council without advocating a single institutional solution. In response, the African Union (AU), in March 2005, adopted a common position known as the [Ezulwini Consensus](#). It [called](#) for, among other things, Africa "to be fully represented in all the decision-making organs of the UN, particularly in the Security Council," where the continent should have no less than two permanent seats, "with all the prerogatives and privileges of permanent membership including the right of veto," as well as five nonpermanent seats. Although African states maintained their opposition "in principle to the veto," they argued that "so long as it exists, and as a matter of common justice, it should be made available to all permanent members of the Security Council." The AU further declared that it alone should be responsible for selecting Africa's permanent and nonpermanent Security Council representatives and would determine the criteria for that membership. In June 2005, the AU issued the [Sirte Declaration](#), reaffirming that Africa should be granted two permanent seats with veto and two nonpermanent seats (in addition to its current three) on a twenty-six-member council.

The Ezulwini Consensus and the Sirte Declaration put Africa into conflict with the so-called G4 nations (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan), the leading contenders for permanent seats in an expanded council. In 2004, the G4 proposed expanding the Security Council to twenty-five members. Unlike the AU, however, the G4 signaled some willingness to forgo the veto power (at least during a transitional period) in exchange for permanent tenure on the Security Council. South Africa and Nigeria tried to bridge the gap between the G4

and the AU, hoping that a common stance would ensure their proposal would achieve the requisite two-thirds majority in the General Assembly. The two groups were unable to reach a consensus.

That reform effort failed in the General Assembly in September 2005. Since then, there has been persistent deadlock and no successful progress in launching single text-based negotiations. Several factors have contributed to this logjam. The permanent powers—especially China, Russia, and the United States—are generally unwilling to expand the number of permanent members and dilute their veto power. Rivalries within regions have pitted competing aspirants for permanent council seats against each other, as well as leading contenders against their historical adversaries. And different regions have disagreed about what fair and democratic representation on the council would actually entail.

This stubborn status quo suggests that reform cannot be achieved by moral appeals to principles like democracy or legitimacy. To advance reform, any diplomatic effort must tackle head-on the power relations embedded in the structure of the Security Council. In this regard, the current realignment of global power, triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, presents a potentially historic opportunity to recalibrate global governance institutions to meet the challenges of this new era.

Previous failed efforts to reform the Security Council have also exposed fault lines among African states themselves. Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa have all been touted as the main contenders for permanent seats in an expanded council. Egypt's dual identity as an African and Arab state, however, has led many African nations to question its suitability. Nigeria and South Africa, as the two largest economies in Africa, are generally accepted by non-African observers as having the most compelling cases to represent Africa—particularly because Nigeria has the continent's largest population and South Africa its most sophisticated economy. However, other regional powers—such as Kenya, Algeria, Ethiopia, and Senegal—have challenged the two countries' claims to continental leadership. Despite these frictions, the principle of African unity remains sacrosanct in the continent's diplomatic culture and practice. The Ezulwini Consensus shows no immediate signs of cracking. This enduring unanimity, as well as the size of its membership, has given the AU [outsized influence](#) in UN negotiations on Security Council reform. But for Africa to benefit from renewed attempts at council reform, the AU must get its own house in order by clarifying which two countries it will back for permanent leadership.

In the absence of reform efforts—and in the face of rising tensions among the P5 countries—the council's nonpermanent members have spearheaded certain [informal practices](#) to democratize the Security Council without actually amending the UN Charter. One welcome development has been the growing tendency for nonpermanent members, including from the African bloc, to share the pen with the traditional so-called penholders (France, the United Kingdom, and the United States) on important issues, allowing them to influence debate and shape resolutions on specific agenda items.

Another notable development has been the institutionalization of an informal caucus among the council's three elected African members, known as the A3, in the hope of promoting closer working relations between the Security Council and the AU. At the AU's December 2013 High-Level Seminar on Peace and Security in Algiers, the organization [agreed](#) to establish the A3 as "a caucus and a means of connection between the Council and the AUPSC [African Union Peace and Security Council] on issues of common concern." During their own elected terms on the Security Council in 2013–2014 and 2019–2020, respectively, Rwanda and South Africa made this a priority. Since the A3 formalized itself as a caucus, it has been able to shape Security Council decisions on African issues, especially when there is an explicit mandate from the AU. In the summer of 2019, the A3 conducted a joint visit to Washington to [lobby](#) U.S. Congress members to support the use of UN peacekeeping funds for AU peacekeeping efforts.

While U.S. President Joe Biden's recent [declaration of support](#) for expanding the Security Council to include permanent members from Africa is encouraging, any reform agenda inevitably runs into both historical and contemporary challenges. Africa has a vested interest in promoting multilateral cooperation as a foundation for global order. As a continent made up primarily of small- and medium-sized states, African nations do not have the power to act individually to achieve their interests. They need regional and international organizations to aggregate their power in pursuit of their goals. Given the extent and persistence of intractable conflicts on the continent, the Security Council is particularly important to Africa. But advancing council reform—and thereby advancing Africa's interests in it—depends on strengthening the continent's internal diplomacy and the daily practice of achieving consensus and unity within the AU. Without this foundation, the continent risks being sidelined yet again in the configuration of a new global order.



Brazil

Matias Spektor

Since the San Francisco conference established the UN nearly eight decades ago, the Brazilian government has advocated for its own permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Although the willingness and ability of successive national administrations to properly lobby for reform has ebbed and flowed over the years, the goal has become one of the most ingrained pillars of Brazilian grand strategy. The conviction that Security Council reform is necessary for international order to be legitimate—and that Brazil is an obvious contender for any expanded membership—has been stated so many times and repeated in so many documents that it is by now taken for granted across government, academia, and the wider foreign policy establishment. As with all deep-seated assumptions, however, this too has diverted attention from the silences and contradictions that recur in the country's official position on reform.

This essay summarizes the rationale and various tactics that Brazil has adopted to try to deliver Security Council reform. It unpacks the animating ideas that have informed this traditional posture, identifies recurrent patterns in Brazilian diplomacy, highlights recurring silences and contradictions, and offers some thoughts about the Brazilian position on this issue moving forward.

The central organizing idea behind Brazil's traditional claim to a permanent seat on the Security Council is the imperative of value diversity in world politics. According to the Brazilian view, the current composition of the council reflects the power realities of the 1940s rather than the range of voices that have emerged from the global struggle for decolonization, racial equality, and justice between the rich and poor. As a result, Brazil emphasizes that it deserves a seat on the council not so much for what it currently does in the international system or for what it might someday do, but for what it represents—its multi-ethnic character, unique history and culture, and own self-image as a natural representative

for developing-country perspectives on a rules-based order. Crucially, however, according to this line of thinking, securing a permanent seat on the Security Council would also represent Brazil's political recognition by third parties—proving that it deserves the same status as other major global powers, even if its material capabilities fall short. Value diversity may be the nominal rationale driving Brazilian demands for a permanent seat on the council, but the quest for special status undergirds the entire argument.

By and large, Brazil has pursued a permanent seat via tactics that are patently low cost. The official policy has seldom if ever been accompanied by any commitment to expand Brazil's engagement with international peace and security initiatives—politically, financially, or procedurally. Brazil does not seek to appoint as many Brazilian nationals as possible to relevant positions in the UN Secretariat, nor has Brazil expanded its mission to the UN to become an activist hub in the everyday conduct of business within the UN system (as some other nations have). Surprisingly, for a country of its size, Brazil itself lacks academic institutes devoted to the study of the UN, and there are no dedicated graduate programs for peace and conflict studies in Brazilian universities. Specialists with prior professional experience in UN missions in Geneva, New York, or in the field remain rare in Brazilian policy circles.

Financially, Brazil's position is hardly consistent with its quest for a seat. Between 2018 and 2022, Brazil's [annual budgetary allocations](#) for the UN dropped from \$92 million to \$56 million and, as of December 2022, Brazil's outstanding debts to the UN amounted to \$300 million. Although Brazil's decision to lead a Security Council–authorized mission to Haiti (from 2004 to 2017) can be interpreted as a sign of the country's commitment to beefing up its credentials for permanent membership by putting blood and treasure on the line, it is hard to disentangle this deployment from the [institutional benefits](#) that the mission accrued for the Brazilian Armed Forces at a time when the administration felt it needed to bolster domestic political support.

Brazil's campaign for Security Council reform has never even entailed an explicit vision of what a novel institutional design would look like or how new members might contribute to facilitating the council's work. No administration has published a white paper that outlines the contours of the country's reform proposal, lays out the principles for enlargement, or grapples with the issues of regional representation or the veto. Nor have there been any statements on how an expanded council would cope with the question of effectiveness. All in all, the Brazilian case for Security Council reform frames Brazil as a natural—indeed, obvious—candidate for permanent membership, but it takes for granted the intrinsic value of expanding the council.

Given the low-cost nature of Brazil's push for reform, successive administrations have prioritized securing official notes of support during bilateral meetings, including with the United States, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom, as well as Peru and Ecuador in Latin America. Brazil has also joined the so-called G4 group with India, Germany, and Japan—the other main aspirants for permanent seats—even if members of the group have never quite managed to harmonize their arguments for reform. Brasília has also sought to cultivate

the community of Portuguese-speaking countries, particularly in Africa, in the hopes of securing their formal expression of support for both Security Council reform generally and Brazil's own permanent seat.

Within the Brazilian foreign policy establishment, the five permanent members (P5) of the Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—are seen as the most stubborn obstacle to both council reform in general and Brazil's bid for a permanent seat. Over the years, Brazil has successfully extracted official notes of sympathy for its quest from the United States, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom. Unsurprisingly, Brazilian officials have been either cautious or unimpressed by U.S. President Joe Biden's [recent support](#) for reform. They are more likely to believe that Washington means business when an actual proposal for reform materializes.

This conventional wisdom underplays the impediments to Brazil's vision within Latin America itself. Brazilian views on the region's role in this process are twofold—and somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, official discourse claims the region is a potential source of solidarity and support for reform. On the other hand, the issue of reform has exposed regional rivalries with Mexico and, most notably, Argentina. These cracks mean the region will likely struggle to form a united front in any hypothetical reform scenario. Indeed, the friction with Argentina not only complicates prospects for Security Council reform but also endangers something more fundamental: the conviction that South America is and will for the foreseeable future remain a stable security community capable of curbing diplomatic frictions among its members.

How partisan is support for reform at home? There can be little doubt that Security Council expansion has become a [major component](#) of the foreign platform of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's Workers' Party. But the cause of reform is likely to have broad political appeal, as long as it remains low cost. Should they return to office in the near future, parties in the center right and extreme right are unlikely to disengage completely from reform if the momentum for expansion picks up in New York. But they are also unlikely either to try to own the issue of reform or to turn it into a flagship project in the hopes of securing voter support.

Moving forward—at least, as long as Lula's tenure as president lasts—Brazil will be expected to double down on its traditional support for Security Council reform. The argument is likely to be amended to highlight that reform is more necessary than ever, amid a return of great power competition and the impact of new and disruptive technologies. Lula's administration is bound to make the case that Brazil can act as an effective broker between the great powers, claiming moral authority from its commitment to peace and the nonviolent resolution of international conflict. However, this might be easier said than done (as evidenced by Lula's idea of creating a club of developing states to facilitate a negotiated solution to the ongoing war in Ukraine).

Brazilian officials will likely argue that global governance institutions are under severe strain and that the Security Council offers a minimum set of guardrails against international disorder. Therefore, bolstering its ability to meet the evolving challenges of the twenty-first century is imperative for its legitimacy. Little will be said, however, about how expansion might affect council effectiveness. The argument will remain that the safest way to reform the Security Council is by ensuring greater regional representation via the inclusion of the largest and most dynamic countries of the Global South—including Brazil.



China

Zhang Guihong

The UN Security Council is facing unprecedented challenges against the backdrop of increased geopolitical and strategic competition among major powers. The council's performance and role have been especially controversial since the Russia-Ukraine conflict began in February 2022. Reform has once again become a hot topic. As the wisdom and determination of UN member states, especially their leaders, are tested, will they allow the authority and effectiveness of the Security Council to be further eroded? Or will they instead use this opportunity to carry out substantive reforms to strengthen the council?

As a permanent member of the Security Council and the largest developing country, China [articulated](#) its principled [position](#) on Security Council reform in 2005. It includes five key points: (1) more developing countries should be represented in the council; (2) more countries, especially small- and medium-sized states, should have greater opportunities to serve on a rotating basis and participate in decisionmaking; (3) Security Council reform should adhere to the principle of geographic balance, ensuring representation of “different cultures and civilizations”; (4) all regional groupings should agree on reform proposals that concern their respective regions; and (5) any consensus on reform should reflect full democratic deliberations, as is consistent with the UN Charter.

There have since been no substantive changes to China's position. In November 2021, China's ambassador to the UN [added](#) that “hasty preparation of documents for negotiation and launching text-based negotiations will only aggravate division and confrontation among member states and undermine the momentum of reform.” China supports adding new seats to the Security Council for developing countries, especially from Africa, but it does not support any specific country becoming a new permanent member.

The Security Council is a unique institutional organ that distinguishes the UN from any other international organization. It provides a premier platform for its five permanent members (P5), who share joint responsibility for preserving international peace and security. Since it was established nearly eighty years ago, the body has played a critical role in ending conflicts, discouraging wars (particularly among the great powers), and generally maintaining world peace. Although it has been subject to various criticisms and reproaches, it is undeniable that the world would be a more chaotic and even dangerous place without it. Even if it fails to fully deter aggression and resolve certain conflicts, the Security Council is still an indispensable stabilizing force for the international community and a cornerstone of the international order.

However, reforming the Security Council remains a priority. The council's structure and size do not appropriately reflect the changing landscape of international power and the resulting shifts in global politics. This undermines its effectiveness and perceived legitimacy in responding to transnational and nontraditional security threats and challenges. Despite these increasingly obvious inadequacies, progress on Security Council reform continues to move very slowly. Each of the last four UN secretaries-general—Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Kofi Annan, Ban Ki-moon, and now António Guterres—has promoted council reform but achieved only modest results. Meanwhile, reform efforts through the intergovernmental negotiations (IGN) process, which has continued for decades, have little to show.

At present, the Security Council has two major problems: it is too small and too ineffective. Both the number of permanent states and the size of the body are disproportionate to the total membership of the United Nations, which has surged from fifty-one members in 1945 to 193 members today. About one-third of the UN's member states have [never served](#) on the Security Council as nonpermanent elected members. Meanwhile, the council's authority and effectiveness have been seriously undermined by a few permanent members' frequent use of their veto power. Even more worrisome, under the umbrella provided by the veto, major powers have been able to use force without Security Council authorization. Their unchecked and unpunished actions undermine world peace and security.

The vast majority of UN member states support Security Council reform, despite the IGN's slow progress. The central priority for reform is to make the council more authoritative, effective, and better able to serve all the member states and people of the world.

Most member states agree that the Security Council should be expanded to include more countries in its decisionmaking. However, the enormous challenges to increasing the council's permanent membership make that goal unlikely to succeed in the near future. Even among those who advocate increasing the number of permanent members, positions differ on the rationale and criteria for enlargement, on the desirable size and regional distribution of any expansion, and on whether any new permanent members should have the right of veto. The struggle to increase the number of permanent members also faces at least three daunting procedural difficulties: unanimous approval by the P5, endorsement by two-thirds of the General Assembly, and the passage of relevant legislation by those member states.

Given this context, any approach to Security Council reform that focuses solely on expanding its size—particularly increasing the number of permanent seats—is bound to be a dead end. To be successful, council reform must simultaneously consider several fundamental issues.

The first challenge is how to balance democracy and efficiency. While enlargement can enhance the democratic nature of the council by representation, too many members may reduce the efficiency of its decisionmaking and its ability to act with urgency.

A second challenge is how to weigh and balance the interests and values of disparate UN member states in the reform process. The Security Council, after all, plays a decisive role in determining what concept of security the UN will advocate for, what security order it will maintain, what ways the UN will seek to resolve conflicts, and what means it will use to guarantee peace. Any Security Council reform will inevitably entail a reorganization of power that advances some national interests over others. It is also likely to involve trade-offs among competing sets of values.

The third challenge pertains to diplomatic strategy—namely, whether to advance gradual, incremental change or to pursue a package solution that considers the interests and concerns of all parties. In the end, Security Council reform will require broad agreement among member states. But after more than thirty years of fruitless negotiations, such a consensus appears extremely difficult to achieve.

Is being a member of the Security Council a power or a right? Is it a responsibility or an honor? As the primary body that maintains world peace and security, the council has enormous responsibilities. Not every country inherently has the capacity to maintain peace when it joins the Security Council—nor does the size and strength of a country directly correlate with a high or low capacity for peace. Historically, at certain times and on certain issues, even members of the P5 have destroyed rather than defended peace and security. The question of how to make the council's membership representative while still ensuring that it can sufficiently and competently maintain world peace and security is a core dilemma for would-be reformers.

Given the deteriorating authority and effectiveness of the Security Council, as well as the myriad obstacles to its enlargement, advocates of UN reform should focus increased attention on strengthening the peace and security function of the General Assembly itself. This approach would help shift the UN's decisionmaking and agenda-setting processes from what might be called a logic of power to a logic of capacity—meaning that any actor, whether sovereign governments or nonstate actors like regional organizations, civil society groups, and private corporations, with the capacity to solve global problems should have a greater voice in the UN.

In April 2022, the General Assembly moved decisively in this direction by adopting [Resolution 76/262](#), which stipulates that permanent members who use their veto must provide justification within ten days to all UN member states. This unprecedented action by the General Assembly represents an important step forward in efforts to reform the Security Council, albeit one that comes from outside the council itself.

To be sure, member states may have different interpretations of the meaning and impact of this resolution. The General Assembly has yet to approve procedures for its implementation. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly major progress in the UN reform process, reflecting UN member states' determination to overcome the council's paralysis, limit the prerogatives of the P5, and expand the General Assembly's role in peace and security. The idea of restricting the veto in some way has been discussed for years. Now, a critical step has finally been taken.

More immediately, the resolution is also an attempt by the broader UN membership to overcome the council's current impotence on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. After the Security Council repeatedly failed to pass any resolution of its own on Ukraine, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 76/262 by an overwhelming majority—a feat that encouraged and inspired many member states. The resolution is not legally binding, so it cannot actually compel any change in P5 countries' use of the veto. But it will undoubtedly apply some political pressure to the P5's behavior, encouraging them to become more cautious and think twice before exercising the veto. If a permanent member fails to consider the interests of the international community as a whole or if its justification for using the veto is not accepted by the majority of member states, it may become isolated diplomatically and pay a moral, diplomatic, and political price. The Security Council's five permanent members will earn the continued trust and support of other member states only if they truly assume their primary responsibility for peace and security. Otherwise, the body's legitimacy and effectiveness will continue to decline.



France

Alexandra Novosseloff

The issue of UN Security Council reform reappeared on the UN General Assembly's agenda in 1979, just fourteen years after the council's first—and only—enlargement in 1965. It has since been one of the UN's longest-standing topics of discussion, debated not only among member states in working groups and intergovernmental negotiations but also among scholars, journalists, and members of the general public. Everybody seems to have a view on how the Security Council should be reformed. These disparate perspectives, however, typically reflect national or regional perspectives rather than implications for council decisionmaking.

Despite the lack of consensus on a way forward, reform is widely understood as imperative to reinforce the Security Council's legitimacy and authority. This outlook includes [France](#), which [believes](#) in the enlargement of the council, the [responsible use of the veto](#) in situations of mass atrocities, and the possibility of such reform based on a text and a calendar. It [supports](#) new nonpermanent as well as permanent members, envisioning “a greater African presence” in both categories, as well as permanent seats for the so-called G4 nations (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan).

The assumption, however, that a reformed council would be necessarily more efficient, less divided, and more prone to actually address the security challenges of the twenty-first century is flawed for at least two reasons. First, the goals of representativeness and efficiency are in tension. Second, reforms to international institutions rarely impact states' behaviors or interests.

The global debate over Security Council enlargement is heavily informed by concerns over its representativeness, particularly the lack of any permanent members from Africa or Latin America. Most member states, including France, regard this situation as unfair. It should be underlined, however, that representativeness is not in the DNA of the Security Council,

which has been structured with effectiveness foremost in mind. Under the [UN Charter](#), the General Assembly is the organ that represents all nations, while the council “acts on the behalf” of all UN member states “to ensure prompt and effective action” when peace is threatened. Despite this international legal mandate, an increasing number of UN members question the council’s legitimacy on representational grounds because it has failed to expand since 1965 despite the addition of seventy-five new member states. On closer examination, however, the council’s legitimacy crisis owes less to its lack of representativeness than to the unevenness with which its resolutions are implemented and to the tendency of its most powerful members to bypass the council entirely in favor of unilateral action (for example in Kosovo in 1999, Iraq in 2003, or Ukraine in 2022).

Although the debate over representation in the Security Council has been driven by the main aspirants to permanent membership, it has also increased regional rivalries on all continents. Opponents lobby against major candidates—Pakistan against the candidacy of India, Argentina and Mexico against Brazil, Italy and Spain against Germany, Algeria against Egypt, Kenya against Nigeria or South Africa, and so on. Such competition has undermined the political cohesion of regions and regional organizations. This is true even of the African Union (AU). Although the AU has adopted a common position, known as the [Ezulwini Consensus](#), its members have still been unable to agree on which two countries should serve as permanent Security Council members.

Two unwelcome and misleading ideas have complicated global agreement on a way forward. First, some member states have challenged the legitimacy of permanent seats for France and the United Kingdom on representational grounds, arguing either that they should make way for others or that, in the event of an enlargement that includes Germany, three permanent European seats would overrepresent the continent. This position ignores France’s and the UK’s inherent capacity to support international peace and security by virtue of their diplomatic agility and proactiveness, military strength, economic stability, and commitment to remaining fully involved in world affairs. Aware of their relative diplomatic vulnerability, France and the United Kingdom have been more progressive on council reform than the other three permanent members. Both together and separately, they have [supported](#) the G4 position. At the July 2009 [UK-France bilateral summit](#) in Evian, they introduced the “pragmatic option of an interim reform”—a new category of seats with a longer term of office for some nonpermanent members that could be transformed into permanent seats at the end of an interim phase. Since 2015, France has also supported a proposal for restraining the use of the veto in cases of mass atrocities, in line with UK [thinking](#) on the matter.

Second, some member states have proposed that the Security Council be adjusted to include regional seats. The council, however, like the UN more generally, is not composed of regional organizations but member states that represent their own national interests first and foremost. Accordingly, the idea of creating a consolidated seat for the European Union, a proposal regularly suggested by [some](#), is nonsense—all the more so in the absence of a truly independent European foreign and defense [policy](#). It is equally absurd to imagine

African states on the council voting according to positions decided by the AU. Adjusting the Security Council's composition to reflect regional bodies would not only be against the spirit of the UN Charter but also a recipe for disastrous decisionmaking.

More generally, prioritizing representativeness risks making a reformed Security Council unmanageable. A large expansion would complicate decisionmaking. While moving from eleven to fifteen members was feasible in the 1960s, a council of twenty—to say nothing of twenty-five or more—would be increasingly unwieldy. As all five permanent members (P5) surely recognize, any plausible reform will inevitably create an organ that is more diverse, more difficult to manage, and often more divided. An enlarged Security Council will result in more various and less stable or predictable alliances. While the P5 will be less dominant, they will still remain without peers if they deny the extension of the veto to any new permanent members—something they have the power to do and almost assuredly will. Any reformed Security Council would thus likely have three categories of members: the original P5, the new permanent members without veto rights, and the nonpermanent elected members. Ultimately, the shape of council reform will reflect what the incumbents are willing to accept, not what the candidates would like to achieve.

The Security Council, like the UN itself, was designed by the victors of World War II. As has been the case since its creation, the council can function properly only if its permanent members are united in fulfilling their unique responsibility under the UN Charter to maintain international peace and security. Russia's fateful decision to abandon that responsibility and invade another sovereign country in February 2022 has severely undermined the Security Council's global legitimacy and effectiveness, throwing the UN into crisis. The question today is whether this geopolitical earthquake offers a propitious moment to pursue significant UN Charter reform.

The only previous enlargement of the Security Council provides just modest guidance and encouragement for would-be reformers today. In the 1960s, without prior consensus, a group of countries submitted a draft text to the General Assembly proposing to enlarge the council's composition from eleven to fifteen members. It easily cleared the two-thirds hurdle for approval (with ninety-six votes in favor, eleven votes against, and four abstentions). Subsequently, rising ratifications dissuaded any of the P5 from casting a so-called lonely veto against the growing influence of the nonaligned movement.

Today, as then, the P5 are cognizant of the need to cultivate geopolitical fence-sitters in the developing world. In other ways, however, the situation is starkly different. The previous enlargement only concerned the council's elected membership. New permanent seats are a separate matter entirely. Moreover, regional and international politics are arguably even more contentious today than they were six decades ago. In this context, the status quo is likely to remain the default position and Security Council reform will be limited to improving its working methods to enhance the transparency and inclusivity of its deliberations. The UN of "We, the Peoples" may consider Security Council reform to be politically necessary, but the UN of their respective governments seems to have concluded that it is practically impossible.



Germany

Christoph Heusgen

Security Council reform is one of the most frustrating issues at the United Nations. A large majority of member states want to reform the Security Council. Yet countries opposing it have held the upper hand for decades, helped by bitter infighting among those in favor of reform but on different terms. As a consequence, a fruitless diplomatic merry-go-round repeats itself every year at the annual opening of the UN General Assembly in New York. The assembled diplomats formally restart the so-called intergovernmental negotiations (IGN) process, with one or more facilitators appointed by the president of the General Assembly. The IGN, made up of representatives from blocs with differing opinions on Security Council reform, heatedly debates different proposals, themes, and texts without tangible results. Critics have said that IGN stands for “it goes nowhere”—and that sums it up quite well.

The basic flaw of the present IGN is that it allows China and its junior partner Russia, supported by other members who are afraid that they may be losers in any reform, to block any substantial progress. This has to stop. The IGN must be replaced by a more promising way forward. In recent years, the General Assembly has become more assertive. Rather than delegating this critical topic to fruitless IGNs, it should take matters into its own hands. What might this mean in practice?

The first step is recognizing the paramount role that China plays. Beijing obstructs Security Council reform out of fear that Japan and India, its main rivals in Asia, would become permanent members and thereby end China’s privileged position. Every year, China successfully prevents the General Assembly from considering and debating Security Council reform in one single document that outlines options for each of the main issues, including the total number of members on a reformed council, their continental distribution, the addition of any permanent members, and the extension of additional veto powers. Given the limited

number of issues and options, compromises can well be imagined. From a Chinese perspective, so-called text-based negotiations would be the beginning of the end. Thus, Chinese representatives put every effort into preventing such bargaining.

In my last year as Germany's ambassador to the UN (a capacity in which I served from 2018 to 2021), I invested a lot of work in the IGN. I assembled representatives from the different groups around my dining table, and we agreed on a way forward: we wanted to insist on reaching a consensus at the IGN on a single text as the future basis for reform. My friends and I failed miserably. We failed in part because the Turkish president of the General Assembly didn't have the courage to resist pressure from his own country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to follow our line. More importantly, Chinese officials intervened. When they learned that Sierra Leone's ambassador to the UN—then serving as chair of the C10 countries, which have a mandate to conduct negotiations on behalf of the African Union (AU)—was prepared to explore a single text, the Chinese president called his Sierra Leonean counterpart and demanded both the removal of the ambassador and a change in the C10's position. Both demands were met and our aspirations collapsed, with Russia—as well as the United States—effectively siding with China.

Despite these frustrations, the international community should not give up. If we continue to believe in the United Nations and its charter, we need a Security Council that can fulfill its mandate to preserve international peace and security. To play this role credibly, its composition must be reformed to reflect the realities of the world of today and not of the 1960s.

To achieve progress on Security Council reform, a number of tasks must be fulfilled.

First, proponents of council reform must positively work with the United States. For too long, Washington has stayed quiet or even blocked progress. President Joe Biden's [speech](#) at the 2022 General Assembly, in which he committed the United States to support Security Council reform including the addition of permanent members, was a positive surprise and should be taken at face value.

Second, African governments need to be seriously engaged. While they regularly complain about their underrepresentation in the Security Council, they themselves block progress. This has something to do with both China's pressure and internal rivalries among AU members. While they officially endorse the so-called African position—which calls for, among other things, two permanent seats, with veto power, for the continent—behind the scenes there is infighting over who deserves to eventually join the council. While South Africa and Nigeria see themselves as obvious favorites, Egypt and Kenya fear being left out and demoted diplomatically. Consequently, they have been dragging their feet in the IGN. Nevertheless, persuading AU member states to agree to text-based negotiations may still be possible, provided of course that the African position is reflected as an option. Special diplomatic attention should be paid to South Africa, which has deepened its already close relationships with China and Russia through the BRICS alliance but has failed to persuade

either state to lift their blockade on council reform. South Africa continues to roll out the red carpet for China and Russia, even as they treat the African nation as a second-class power within the UN. That can't be the position of Nelson Mandela's proud country.

Third, the infighting among countries in favor of reform but on contradictory terms needs to end. The G4 nations (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan) striving for a permanent seat are effectively blocked by continental rivals in the Uniting for Consensus (UFC) coalition that fear, like Egypt, that they will emerge as losers. For years, it seemed, the most important task for Italian diplomats was to block a permanent seat for Germany. Spain was similarly reluctant to see Germany join the council. In the Americas, Canada, Mexico, and Argentina have played the same spoiler role regarding Brazil's aspirations. In Asia, Pakistan militantly opposes India. To overcome this dilemma, the two groups should try seriously to mend their differences.

Fourth, Germany—as the fourth-largest economy in the world, the second largest donor (including voluntary contributions) to the UN system, and a country fully committed to the world body—should assume the lead in breaking the diplomatic logjam and brokering a compromise between the G4 and the UFC. It should be prepared to forfeit its claim to permanent membership, recognizing that Europe is not justified in asking for a third permanent seat, on the condition that France finally agrees to represent common EU positions in the Security Council. At the same time, Germany should consider the UFC's proposal to create semipermanent, or long-term, seats. While this would be a new category of Security Council membership, it is not new to the UN system: the UN Human Rights Council, for example, has a system of semipermanent seats that allow countries to stay longer than two years and to be regularly reelected after short intervals. This system would allow more countries to sit longer at the Security Council table. It could also help resolve demands for greater African representation, presuming that the major African countries would also agree on some kind of rotation. Of the other G4 aspirants, one could imagine Brazil and perhaps even Japan agreeing to this formula. India is unlikely to accept a lesser status than China, which it has surpassed in demographic terms. In the end, however, not all member states will have to agree to the reform for it to succeed.

Of course, many details must still be hammered out. Whether key players are ready to come along has yet to be tested. Provided that the General Assembly can agree to text-based negotiations, the next step would be for a cross-regional group of countries to draft a paper containing different options for the key reform issues. Once this paper enjoys a two-thirds majority, the UN should schedule a vote by the entire membership on the proposed solution.



India

Rohan Mukherjee

The UN Security Council’s paralysis over Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has revived calls to reform the institution. India has joined the chorus, urging action on what it has called a “[Sisyphian struggle](#)” and, without officially condemning Russia, [calling for](#) a “reformed multilateralism.” Although this stance may appear opportunistic to the West, it is a position India has held consistently for decades and expressed in previous times of crisis. In the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee [argued](#) that “until the UN Security Council is reformed and restructured, its decisions cannot reflect truly the collective will of the community of nations.”

From India’s perspective, the current international order is inherently unjust. It is dominated by a great power club comprising the five permanent members (P5) of the Security Council—who often flagrantly violate the very rules and standards to which they hold all other countries. It is also obsolete, privileging a group whose claim to centrality—being the victors of World War II—is outdated. For India, the distribution of power and moral authority in the world has shifted substantially since 1945. The [core issue](#), then, is one of equity, a vital precondition for the Security Council’s continued legitimacy in the eyes of those who aspire to join the great power club.

India’s official position on Security Council reform seeks to correct three existing sources of institutional inequity: membership, formal powers, and informal powers.

First, India advocates increasing both permanent and nonpermanent membership in the Security Council to approximately twenty-six members (up from today’s council of fifteen nations). The new permanent members would be India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan (the so-called G4 nations), as well as two countries nominated by the African Group at the UN.

Second, India insists that all new permanent members possess a veto. At the same time, it believes that all permanent Security Council members (new and old) should commit to using it only in exceptional circumstances and avoid blocking enforcement action in response to grievous acts such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

Third, India seeks to make the Security Council more transparent, consultative, and accountable. Some of its proposed reforms include: greater Security Council consultation with nonmembers; more institutionalized access to information about council deliberations; regular and robust reporting to the General Assembly; and curbing practices such as the so-called [hidden veto](#) and [penholding](#), which together give the P5 significant agenda-setting powers.

India's case for permanent membership has focused both on its existing contributions to peace and security and on the need for equitable geographic representation. Other G4 nations and groups such as the African Group and L.69 (a coalition of like-minded developing countries) have based their reform proposals on similar principles. Indeed, minor differences aside, the G4 has spoken with one voice on Security Council reform since the group's formation in 2005.

Despite three decades of UN discussions, including within the Open-Ended Working Group and subsequently the intergovernmental negotiations (IGN) framework, the only progress that has been made on Security Council reform relates to working methods, rather than its membership or formal powers. The council has adopted measures to engage the General Assembly more substantively and include more non-Security Council members in relevant deliberations. However, these measures fall far short of the G4's demands. India has repeatedly complained that, unlike other areas of General Assembly work, the IGN has never conducted negotiations based on a single rolling text that clearly delineates contrasting positions and attributes them to specific countries or blocs.

In terms of fulfilling its overall mandate, the Security Council's record over the same three decades has been mixed. Despite some glaring omissions, as in the case of Syria, it has addressed significant challenges to international peace and security in parts of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Americas. This includes launching and maintaining peacekeeping missions, which have been [shown](#) on balance to reduce violence. Overall, the world would be worse off without the council's management of the international order. Nevertheless, the Security Council's abject failure on Ukraine shows the natural limits of a system of collective security in which great power privilege can trump sovereign equality. Put simply, the council functions better when the P5 themselves are not egregiously undermining the international order.

If the only issue at stake was the council's net contribution to global security, most countries might give it a passing grade. India's claim, however, is that Security Council reform is necessary not only to improve its performance but also to sustain its legitimacy. A wealth of social science research [demonstrates](#) that institutional legitimacy depends less on

performance than on inclusivity and fairness. Moreover, institutional performance declines as legitimacy diminishes, because members gradually reduce their participation and compliance with rules they find exclusionary and unfair.

In other words, representational legitimacy is a necessary condition for good institutional performance—particularly when the objects of an institution’s decisions have little say in the decisionmaking process itself. India has made this argument with respect to African countries, which occupy most of the council’s agenda yet have no representation in its permanent membership. Including African countries, India argues, would produce better outcomes by enhancing the council’s legitimacy on the continent.

The broader reforms India proposes are all intended to safeguard the legitimacy of the Security Council, an institution that India values and hopes to lead. An expanded permanent membership would give major regional powers and developing countries a stable presence on the council from which to develop the institutional memory, organizational capability, and structural authority they need to advocate in service of their own (as well as global) interests. Extending equal veto powers for new permanent members would yield greater buy-in from traditionally excluded aspirants to global leadership. Finally, improved working methods to make the Security Council more accountable to the General Assembly would help constrain permanent members (new and old) and bolster the council’s legitimacy.

It is, of course, easier to list goals than to chart plausible diplomatic pathways to achieve them. Despite their rhetorical support for reform, the P5 have predictably done little to undermine their own privilege by opening their exclusive club to new members. The G4 countries, meanwhile, have detractors in their own regions, including many members of the Uniting for Consensus (UFC) group that seeks to limit expansion to nonpermanent seats only. It is unlikely that India’s proposals in toto would pass the threshold for a UN Charter amendment, which requires a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly and ratification by two-thirds of the world’s legislatures, including each of the P5 states.

An incremental approach might be more feasible. The G4 and L.69 groups could devote their initial diplomatic energies to rebalancing informal powers between permanent and nonpermanent members within the Security Council, as well as between the council and the General Assembly. This would not require a UN Charter amendment and could build on efforts already underway during the Ukraine crisis. One such example is the [General Assembly’s April 2022 veto resolution](#), which now triggers a General Assembly session each time a P5 member uses its veto to block action on an issue of critical global importance.

Empowering the General Assembly relative to the Security Council could nurture diplomatic support for India’s broader proposals to reform the council’s membership and formal powers. To date, India has proposed that any new permanent members have veto power but commit not to use it until further review; another option would be to add permanent members without veto, pending an overall review of the veto itself. Given the virtually

insurmountable obstacles to comprehensive reform, India might be wiser to accept partial equality today, while allying with new permanent members to achieve full equality in the future.

Although the war in Ukraine has created fresh impetus for Security Council reform, the IGN process remains mired in the restatement of ossified positions and the absence of a rolling text for countries to negotiate. If momentum is lost once again and the decades-long saga of only talking about reform continues, India is likely to become increasingly disenchanted. Signs of frustration have begun creeping into official statements, which [claim](#) that the IGN is “voiding its own purpose through a lack of activity” and that the persistence of “false promises” [may compel](#) India to “look outside the IGN . . . for a process towards genuine reform.” In the absence of near-term reform, India’s main recourse will be to lobby the General Assembly to dilute the Security Council’s authority and power.

A deeper and more dangerous cost of failed reform would likely be India’s eroding faith in the international order itself. The recent diplomatic sparring between the West and India over condemning and sanctioning Russia has exposed a rift on fundamental questions of inclusion and equity. Beyond its historic diplomatic and defense ties to Moscow, India has proved [unwilling](#) even rhetorically to defend an order that will not accommodate its aspirations for global leadership. India is also hedging its bets by joining Chinese-led institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Many Western observers have viewed India’s fence-sitting as evidence of its unsuitability for global leadership, presenting further obstacles to its aspirations. As India’s power and self-confidence on the world stage grow, this impasse will only deepen in the absence of progress on Security Council reform.



Japan

Phillip Y. Lipsky

Permanent membership in the UN Security Council has been a significant diplomatic objective for Japan since it joined the UN in 1956. Japanese policymakers have typically supported Security Council reform proposals that package permanent membership for several countries, such as members of the G4 (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan). There is a compelling substantive and normative case for Japanese permanent membership, but the diplomatic obstacles remain formidable.

Japanese policymakers have often made the case that their country's weight in the world and long-standing contributions justify permanent membership. Japan has the third-largest economy and eleventh-largest population in the world, and it consistently ranks among the top international aid donors. Although constitutional constraints have limited its military capabilities, Japan has contributed actively to UN peacekeeping operations since 1992. Recent [security policy shifts](#) announced by the government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida are set to position the nation's Self-Defense Forces among the top global militaries, as measured by defense expenditures.

Attaining a permanent Security Council seat also has symbolic importance for Japan. Until its ignominious departure in 1933, Japan had been a permanent member of the Council of the League of Nations. The current composition of the permanent five (P5) Security Council members still mirrors the leading allied powers of World War II, and the UN Charter singles out the defeated Axis powers in anachronistic so-called enemy clauses, though these are widely considered obsolete. It is not unreasonable for Japanese policymakers to feel that change is well overdue after nearly eighty years since the end of World War II, especially in view of Japan's postwar commitment to multilateralism and global peace.

However, permanent Security Council membership is not simply a matter of status or symbolism. It would also enable Japan to exert international influence and assume its share of responsibility for matters of global peace. Under the current status quo, Japan can only join the Security Council as a nonpermanent member, and immediate reelection is precluded after a single two-year term. This creates lengthy gaps in Japan's presence. Although Japan has been elected to the Security Council more frequently than any other UN member, the country is still absent from the organ most of the time. For example, Japan was a rotating member from 2016 to 2017 but was only recently reelected after a gap of five years for a term starting in 2023.

This status quo imposes real costs for Japanese diplomacy. When Japan rotates off the council, it loses influence and access to critical information that comes from having a seat at the table. A Japanese diplomat once pointed out to me that countries are literally unsubscribed from the Security Council email listserv when they step down. Japanese officials attribute their botched response to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when Japan was widely criticized for offering too little too late, in part to being shut out of relevant closed-door discussions at the Security Council. More recently, nonmembership has made it difficult for Japan to shape resolutions regarding North Korea, which poses a major security threat to Japan and routinely launches missiles over Japanese airspace with little warning.

The need to periodically campaign for nonpermanent membership also imposes diplomatic costs on Japan. Election requires a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly. Although these votes are often uncontested, successful countries must secure widespread support from well over a hundred UN member states to be viable. Japanese diplomats note that this situation puts their country at a disadvantage amid intensifying geopolitical and geoeconomic competition with China. While Japan must expend precious diplomatic capital every few years just to secure a nonpermanent seat, China can leverage its permanent status and veto power as bargaining chips in support of its other diplomatic priorities.

Why has Japan failed to obtain a permanent seat thus far? Formal amendments to the UN Charter are difficult, requiring a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly and support from all P5 members. As a practical matter, the former condition implies widespread backing from the Global South, and the latter requires the unanimous consent of China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—countries often at geopolitical odds with each other.

Furthermore, Japan has no attractive outside options it can use to sidestep the Security Council and increase its bargaining leverage. It has significant influence in international institutions like the Group of Seven (G7) and Asian Development Bank, where its economic weight carries heft, but these are functionally distinct from the Security Council. Japan is not a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which the United States has occasionally used as a second-best solution for international legitimation, as in the 1999

intervention in Kosovo. Finally, potential multilateral alternatives like the Community of Democracies are either nascent or noncredible as alternative vehicles for multilateral security cooperation.

Perhaps counterintuitively, Japanese diplomats have historically seen the United States as a principal roadblock to its aspirations for a permanent seat. This is not because of direct U.S. opposition—Washington has consistently supported a permanent seat for Japan. Rather, traditional U.S. opposition to a major expansion of the Security Council’s membership—on the grounds that it would hinder the organ’s decisionmaking and effectiveness—has made it impossible to propose the sort of package deal necessary to secure two-thirds support in the General Assembly. In this context, the apparent willingness of U.S. President Joe Biden’s administration to [support permanent seats](#) for a wider range of countries, as well as new elected ones, represents a welcome development for Japanese policymakers.

Unfortunately, the new U.S. attitude does not imply smooth sailing for Japan. Security Council reform today is inevitably intertwined with intensifying geopolitical competition between the United States and its allies on the one hand and Russia and China on the other. As P5 members, the latter two countries can unilaterally veto any reform proposal. Japan has taken a firm stand against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which makes Moscow’s support highly unlikely for the foreseeable future. Chinese resistance will be no less formidable. Indeed, Japan’s diplomatic push for Security Council reform in 2005 was met with large protests across China, accompanied by violence and vandalism against Japanese business interests.

Nonetheless, Security Council reform is not a lost cause. It is conceivable that years of failed reforms, combined with a descent into Cold War–style paralysis in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, will severely delegitimize the Security Council and facilitate more serious discussion of potential alternative frameworks. The war has already revived the so-called Uniting for Peace [Resolution 377A\(V\)](#), first employed during the Korean War, which empowers the General Assembly to consider matters of peace and security when the council is deadlocked due to lack of consensus among the P5.

Both China and Russia have a stake in maintaining the primacy and legitimacy of the Security Council. Given their P5 status, they stand to lose from the proliferation of alternative institutions in which they exercise less authority. Furthermore, competition among the great powers to curry favor with countries in the Global South has intensified, creating conditions reminiscent of the only successful prior Security Council reform effort of 1965. Under these circumstances, developing credible alternatives for acting outside Security Council auspices—such as through a coalition of democracies that provides an alternative source of international legitimation—should be given serious consideration. Although the G4 countries have traditionally eschewed such alternatives, combining a credible outside option with a reform proposal popular in the Global South could be the most viable strategy to compel reluctant Chinese and Russian support for Security Council reform.

The success of such a reform effort, provided it results in a significant enlargement, will improve the representativeness, and thus reinforce the legitimacy, of the Security Council. An expanded council will still face significant challenges, of course. The P5 veto will continue to foreclose meaningful action on many major international issues where perceived great power interests are at stake. New permanent members will likely possess no veto power, creating a new form of second-tier status. Nonetheless, Security Council reform is long overdue, and there is no doubt Japan deserves a seat at the table.



Mexico

Miguel Ruiz Cabañas Izquierdo

Recurring calls to reform and expand the UN Security Council have run parallel to the global body's expansion from fifty-one member states in 1945 to 193 today. In fact, the steady growth in UN membership led the UN General Assembly in 1963 to adopt the only UN Charter amendment on Security Council reform that has been approved to date: expanding the number of nonpermanent council members from six to ten.

For the ensuing sixty years, the Security Council—with its primary responsibility to preserve international peace and security—has maintained its size at just fifteen members. Five permanent members (P5) represent the main victors from World War II—China, France, the Soviet Union (succeeded by Russia), the United Kingdom, and the United States. Ten nonpermanent members, elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms without the possibility of immediate reelection, represent each of the UN's regional groups to ensure geographical balance. In all, the council represents less than 8 percent of the UN's membership.

As the Cold War ended, an initial spark of international optimism yielded greater collaboration among the P5. Some analysts and governments hoped that this new era, which persisted through the mid-2000s, could be the moment to reform and expand this critical body, including through the addition of new permanent and nonpermanent members. Such an enlargement, reform advocates argued, would make the council more representative, enhance its legitimacy, and increase global support for its decisions.

In 2005, after years of lobbying, four countries publicly jumped onto the stage—the “Great Pretenders,” as veteran Mexican diplomat Manuel Tello called them. Arguing that the Security Council should expand to recognize the new international reality, Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan (the so-called G4 group) jointly [expressed](#) their aspiration to become permanent members. They emphasized that they should eventually possess the same

privileges the P5 have traditionally enjoyed, including the power to unilaterally veto resolutions. To gain the support of the large African Group, the G4 also proposed the election of two permanent members from Africa (without specifying which countries) and a total of four additional nonpermanent members, bringing their vision for the reformed council to twenty-five members—eleven permanent and fourteen nonpermanent.

The self-nomination of these four countries as permanent members—two of which had been defeated in World War II—provoked mixed reactions that persist to this day. The G4 position has been endorsed by many countries in all geographical regions, including the L.69 Group (a coalition of like-minded developing countries), but has fallen short of the two-thirds majority of the General Assembly needed to adopt amendments to the UN Charter.

The G4 proposal also provoked a strong backlash. Other countries belonging to the same geographical regions as the “Great Pretenders”—including Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Mexico, Italy, Poland, Spain, Türkiye, Pakistan, and South Korea—were not prepared to give the G4, or any other countries, permanent seats on the Security Council. They organized their own group, the Uniting for Consensus (UFC) coalition, which has [proposed](#) an alternative formula for council enlargement. It considers an increase only in nonpermanent members, without the right of veto but with the possibility of successive reelection, to give not only the G4 countries but also others the opportunity to contribute more to the council’s work. In 2010, the UFC proposed a new category of Security Council member: so-called long-term members, which would be elected for a period of four years with the possibility of an immediate reelection for another four years.

Mexico, a member of the UFC coalition, agrees that the Security Council should be expanded to include more nonpermanent and long-term members, but not additional permanent members with veto power. It recently [presented](#) its position formally to the General Assembly.

However, the most significant opposition to the G4 proposal came from three of the P5: China, Russia, and the United States. Without saying so openly, China opposes the accession of Japan and India. It also appears unconvinced of the merits of Germany’s accession, which would put a third permanent member from Europe on the council. Russia is opposed to the accession of both Germany and Japan. The United States—which claimed to support Japan’s accession during the presidency of George W. Bush, and India’s accession during the presidency of Barack Obama—has historically oscillated in its support for Germany’s candidacy and has never explicitly endorsed Brazil’s aspirations, although U.S. President Joe Biden said the United States was ready to support new permanent seats from Latin America as well as Africa. Former president Donald Trump’s administration did not support any candidate, opting instead to attack the UN in general.

Every year since the G4 made their aspiration explicit, the General Assembly repeats the same ritual. The president of the General Assembly organizes consultations with the membership to see if any progress has been made on the issue of reform. After numerous public

meetings and private consultations, the same result is always reached: there is no agreement on how to expand the membership of the Security Council, let alone on how to reform the veto power of the P5.

These consultations have revealed an apparent consensus on two points. First, all countries, including the P5, say that the Security Council must be reformed to adapt to new circumstances and to make it more representative, effective, and transparent. Second, nations generally support a significant increase in the number of nonpermanent members (between six and ten). Beyond that, there is no agreement on either electing new permanent members or eliminating or modifying the P5's veto power.

The P5 vehemently defend their veto power in the council. Since the 1945 Yalta Conference—where Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin agreed to the veto mechanism—they have regarded the veto as a *sine qua non* of their participation in the UN. And they are not likely to share their exorbitant privilege with anyone else.

Since the Security Council–authorized intervention in Libya in 2011, led by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, the council has been semiparalyzed due to Russia's and sometimes China's prodigious use of the veto power. That situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The immoderate use of the veto suggests that extending it to other nations would only contribute to further paralysis. Under current circumstances, reforming the Security Council by adding new permanent members or by making substantive changes to the P5's veto power seems impossible.

A more plausible alternative would be to expand the number of nonpermanent members from ten to twenty. Together with the five current permanent members, this would form a council of twenty-five members—representing about 13 percent of the entire UN membership. In addition, the UN Charter could be amended to allow countries with significant economic, political, and military capabilities to contribute more to international peace and security to be successively reelected for up to eight years. Such a reform would be incomplete and would not satisfy the aspirations of all countries, including the G4. But it would inject new dynamism and improve the legitimacy of the council. Most importantly, it may be the only possible reform at the moment.

To be sure, the current global context complicates diplomatic prospects for Security Council reform. We are witnessing a new hegemonic struggle between China and the United States, while Russia refuses to accept that it is no longer an empire with global reach. Accordingly, any efforts to improve the council's representativeness, transparency, and legitimacy will face stiff headwinds. But the need cannot be ignored. The continued absence of such reform pushes the Security Council toward greater impotence and irrelevance, which will inevitably have dire consequences for international peace and security.



Nigeria

Adekeye Adebajo

As far back as 1978, when the UN General Assembly first considered the “[Question of Equitable Representation or an Increase in the Membership of the Security Council](#),” Nigeria has consistently pushed to expand the fifteen-member UN Security Council to make it more democratic, legitimate, and representative. Forty-five years later, the council remains dominated, as it has been since 1945, by its five veto-wielding permanent members (P5): the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom. The failure to enhance Africa’s voice and weight in the Security Council is particularly glaring given the fact that the continent accounts for 28 percent of the UN’s membership, while over 60 percent of the council’s resolutions, on average, [focus on the continent](#). As of 2023, which marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of UN peacekeeping, [84 percent](#) of UN peacekeepers are deployed in Africa.

Nigeria’s case for reform has centered on the need for a body that reflects contemporary global and economic realities, especially as the number of UN member states has expanded from only fifty-one in 1945 to 193 today. Under the leadership of scholar-diplomats like Ibrahim Gambari, Nigeria’s permanent representative to the UN between 1990 and 1999, and Martin Uhomoibhi, its coordinator to the Security Council from 1993 to 1995 and later the UN and African Union’s joint special representative for Darfur between 2016 to 2017, Abuja has insisted since the 1990s that the Security Council should better reflect the world body’s geographic spread, include governments that play a key role in maintaining international peace and security, and consider the economic potential and demographic strength of potential members (a criterion used to admit China in 1971).

Nigeria, which has served on the Security Council five times (in 1966–1967, 1978–1979, 1994–1995, 2010–2011, and 2014–2015), first publicly announced its interest in becoming a permanent member of an expanded council in 1991. Abuja bolstered its case by noting that

the country had, since 1960, contributed over 150,000 troops and police to some forty UN and regional peacekeeping missions ranging from Congo to Chad and Liberia to Lebanon. In the 1990s, Nigeria also provided the bulk of troops and funding to two missions led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Abuja further underlined its contributions to the decolonization and anti-apartheid struggles at the UN. Finally, Nigeria argued that its size and significance—being Africa’s largest economy and most-populous state—strengthen its case for permanent member status.

Ironically, the African Union’s (AU’s) adoption in 2005 of the [Ezulwini Consensus](#)—which calls for two new veto-wielding permanent seats from Africa and two more nonpermanent African seats to add to its existing three rotating seats—effectively stalled Security Council reform efforts. Nigeria and South Africa, the two most obvious contenders for permanent membership, were ultimately unable to convince their fellow African delegates to drop their insistence on a veto for any new permanent members (as the other prospective candidates—Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan—were prepared to do) and to negotiate the issue of the veto from within an expanded council. The result has been an ongoing diplomatic stalemate.

In the absence of changes to the Security Council’s composition, African governments have sought to increase their influence in other ways. Encouragingly, Africa’s three nonpermanent members (known collectively as the A3) now report regularly to the other fifty-one African delegations through the AU’s permanent observer mission to the UN. The A3 also coordinate closely with the fifteen-member AU Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) in Addis Ababa to ensure that decisions on African conflicts taken at the AU’s headquarters in Ethiopia are considered by the Security Council in New York. This joint approach has increased the AU’s room for maneuver and leverage. During its own stint on the council in 2019–2020, South Africa worked strategically with its African allies to counter Western actions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Darfur, South Sudan, and Abyei by cooperating with China and Russia (two of its BRICS partners, along with Brazil and India), while simultaneously collaborating where possible with the Western P3 (France, the United Kingdom, and the United States). In 2020–2021, Africa’s three nonpermanent members also worked closely with fellow elected member St. Vincent and the Grenadines, demonstrating the practical potential of cooperating with the African diaspora.

While these are encouraging developments, improving the Security Council’s legitimacy and transparency will require changing its composition and customs. Four priorities stand out.

First, the anachronistic Security Council must be expanded to bring in African powers like Nigeria and South Africa, as well as others such as Brazil and India. After nearly eight decades of the same veto-wielding P5, the world body’s most-powerful organ does not reflect the contemporary world. It is no longer fit for purpose, and its legitimacy has become threadbare. Consistently strong African representation in the council would ensure that Africa’s views are taken more seriously on continental security issues.

Second, the penholder system—which enables members to draft Security Council resolutions—must be diversified to allow other countries to participate in what is currently an inherently unfair process. Perversely, the P3 write all the Security Council resolutions in eleven out of thirteen existing cases that deal with Africa, effectively maintaining their neocolonial spheres of influence on the continent. African and other regional powers must grab these pens from the domineering Western trio.

Third, the Security Council must introduce greater transparency by making more decisions in open sessions. As former Singaporean permanent representative to the UN Kishore Mahbubani [insightfully noted](#) during his 2001–2002 tenure on the council, although formal use of the P5’s veto has declined, the veto is still effectively exercised in the council’s closed-door consultations where its most serious business occurs. He noted that the P5 are not only deeply familiar with the council’s arcane procedures and policies but also have privileged access to UN documents from secretariat staff. Often, Security Council decisions are based on complex and opaque arrangements among the P5 that have been worked out over decades. Since no written records of these closed-door consultations exist, the P5 represent the council’s institutional memory—giving them an unfair advantage over the ten nonpermanent elected members who only serve two-year terms.

Finally, the UN Secretariat’s most strategic positions must be held by nonpermanent members to avoid overconcentrating power among the P5. The P3 have monopolized several key UN departments—including Peace Operations (France), Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (the United States), and Humanitarian Affairs (the United Kingdom)—using their positions to block genuine reforms. This situation must change to ensure greater transparency and representation.

If the Security Council is not reformed in a timely manner, the body will continue to lose legitimacy. An increase in strictly African-led and/or other regional peacekeeping missions have the potential to dilute the council’s primacy in maintaining global peace and security. If Africans conclude that the Security Council is obstructing necessary interventions to prevent regional instability or genocide (as in Rwanda in 1994), African regional bodies could decide to intervene without the explicit approval of the council (as in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s). This could create an unfortunate trend in international law where regional bodies report to the Security Council *after* they have already made decisions with regional and even global security implications.

The UN must therefore establish a more effective division of labor with Africa’s regional bodies, which need greater logistical and financial support to conduct peace operations. In Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali, the world body took over peacekeeping duties from ECOWAS in, respectively, 2000, 2003, 2004, and 2013. It likewise assumed AU missions in Burundi in 2004 and Darfur in 2007, as well as the Economic Community of Central African States mission in the Central African Republic in 2014. The Security Council has clearly not done enough to strengthen the capacity of Africa’s regional organizations.

The UN must enhance its collaboration with Africa's regional organizations in the field. In December 2008, a UN-commissioned panel led by former Italian prime minister Romano Prodi criticized the council for deploying peacekeeping missions to difficult environments without the means to keep the peace, [describing](#) this approach as a “recipe for failure.” Prodi's proposed solutions included enhancing the strategic relationship between the UN and the AU (particularly between the UN Security Council and the AUPSC), having the UN fund Security Council–authorized AU peacekeeping missions for six months before the world body assumes control of them, and establishing a multidonor trust fund as a sustainable way to finance future missions on the continent. African-led peacekeeping missions—such as the current AU operation in Somalia, the Southern African Development Community mission in Mozambique, the ECOWAS deployment in Guinea-Bissau, and the East African Community mission in the eastern DRC—would be greatly strengthened if Prodi's sensible suggestions were implemented.

Unfortunately, fourteen years after Prodi's report was published, very few of its recommendations have been operationalized. The P5 continue to retain as much flexibility in decisionmaking as possible to advance their parochial interests. The failure to reform the Security Council—especially in the interest of Africa, where the bulk of UN peacekeepers are deployed—will result in the body's continuing loss of legitimacy and runs the real risk of rendering the council irrelevant.



Russia

Andrey Kolosovskiy

The veto provision of the UN Security Council is the central decisionmaking function of the organization's cornerstone body. More flexible and pragmatic than a consensus rule, the veto provision is designed to push the council's five permanent members (P5) toward common ground, while also protecting them from Security Council decisions that might run contrary to their national interests. But despite its many accomplishments over more than seventy-five years, the council has often failed to fulfill its assigned task of maintaining peace. Its effective functioning depends on the quality of relations and the degree of trust among the P5. Just as the UN in general cannot be better than its members, the performance of the Security Council cannot exceed those relations.

Mounting frustration with the Security Council's frequent inability to adequately address conflict is intensifying discussions about expanding the council, including new permanent and elected members, and restricting the veto power. But the hurdles to reform are high. Any amendment to the UN Charter requires the consent of all P5 members, as well as two-thirds of the entire UN membership.

Amending the veto power, such as by limiting its applicability or sharing it with other potential new permanent members, will be key to any substantive Security Council reform. Faced with the growing demand for council reform, any P5 member will inevitably have to consider the risks—to its interests, to its role in the world, and to its ability to block council resolutions it opposes. This is certainly true for Russia, whose Soviet predecessors set the standard for veto use.

The most recent version of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved in March 2023, [clearly connects](#) the current official understanding of Russia's role in the modern world to its Soviet past:

Russia's place in the world is determined by its significant resources in all areas of living, its status of a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, participant in the leading intergovernmental organizations and associations, one of the two largest nuclear powers, and the successor (continuing legal personality) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Russia, taking into account its decisive contribution to the victory in World War II and its active role in shaping the contemporary system of international relations and eliminating the global system of colonialism, is one of the sovereign centres of global development . . .

After some initial hesitation, Joseph Stalin enlisted the Soviet Union in the creation of the UN in the hopes of [preserving Soviet influence and authority](#) after World War II. Envisioning future ideological and geopolitical competitions with its wartime allies and difficult relations with most of the UN's initial members, the Soviet Union devoted its primary attention to the composition of the Security Council. Stalin insisted that any permanent member should be able to veto any action by the council, and that the UN Charter limit the General Assembly's ability to take practical actions on peace and security or to unilaterally amend the Charter. The Soviet leader secured [most, but not all](#), of his stipulations at the Yalta Conference in 1945.

From the very start, the Soviet Union did not hesitate to use its privileges in the Security Council. Between February 1946 and October 1956, the Soviet Union was the only permanent member to use its veto—and did so fifty-seven times. Most instances were related to the admission of new UN members, but it also vetoed resolutions on regional issues concerning Greece, Czechoslovakia, and the Berlin blockade, among other topics. The Soviet Union's singular willingness to use its veto power persisted until the early 1970s, when veto use by permanent members became more common and more complicated.

In the waning days of the Soviet Union, ensuring a permanent seat on the Security Council for the Russian Federation became a priority objective for Russian diplomats. One day before Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev resigned, then Russian president Boris Yeltsin sent a letter to the UN secretary-general, [informing him](#) that “the membership of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the United Nations, including the Security Council . . . is being continued by the Russian Federation (RSFSR) . . . [and] the name ‘the Russian Federation’ should be used.” The letter was circulated to the Security Council; no objections were raised.

Addressing the Security Council at a high-level meeting one month later, Yeltsin [emphasized](#) the new face of Russian foreign policy. He described human rights and political rights as Russia's priority and urged the Security Council to contribute to the protection of these rights. The general atmosphere at that Security Council meeting was euphoric. The gathered heads of state acknowledged different challenges to the international community, but mostly they celebrated the end of the Cold War, the latest wave of democratization, and a renewed era in which the UN and the Security Council could enhance world peace and security.

These hopes were not completely in vain. During the 1990s, the P5 rarely used their veto in the Security Council. Many resolutions, including those that concerned tense conflict situations around the world, were approved unanimously. Permanent members often adopted positions beyond their Cold War–era affiliations and showed a general willingness to compromise and cosponsor complex resolutions on thorny issues. Over time, however, underlying divergences of interest increasingly took center stage.

By 2015, when Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the UN General Assembly live for the last time, the tone and tenor had changed completely from the heady days of Russia’s ascension. The Russian leader [chastised](#) the United States and the wider West for illegitimately bypassing UN procedures, counter to the UN Charter and international law, calling them “a single center of domination in the world.” He strongly defended the veto power.

Russia’s frustrations at the UN had been steadily building. A series of perceived U.S. and Western provocations—including NATO’s 1999 intervention in Kosovo, then U.S. president George W. Bush’s decision to lead an invasion of Iraq without UN authorization, and the Security Council–imposed no-fly zone in Libya, which Russia reluctantly permitted by abstaining—very much influenced Russian foreign policy and shaped its attitude toward the Security Council.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Security Council’s agenda was dominated by a single item: maintaining peace and security in Ukraine. After more than forty meetings, one resolution was passed, one draft was vetoed by the Russian representative, and three drafts did not receive enough votes. More drafts might have been submitted, but council members knew by that point that they would inevitably be vetoed by at least one permanent member.

Deeply frustrated by the Security Council’s incapacity to do anything about a major war in Europe, proponents of action resorted to unusual tactics. A procedural resolution in the Security Council [called for](#) an emergency special session of the General Assembly. On March 2, 2022, 141 member states [passed a resolution](#) that “reaffirms [the General Assembly’s] commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine,” “deplores in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine,” and “demands that the Russian Federation immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.” Out of 193 member states, thirty-five abstained and only five voted against the resolution.

Overall, Russia’s actions in Ukraine and its ability to block any response by the Security Council have contributed to an increasingly radical set of demands for reform. Many states are now urging a complete abolition of veto rights, as well as more frequent recourse to the General Assembly to circumvent the use of the veto in the Security Council. For its own part, Russia has portrayed itself as being broadly sympathetic to Security Council reform, declaring its general support but remaining vague and cautious on the details. At the

opening of the 77th UN General Assembly in September 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [spoke](#) in favor of more representation from Africa, Asia, and Latin America on the Security Council, naming India and Brazil as “worthy candidates for becoming permanent Council members.”

In April 2023, however, Russia’s ambassador to the UN, Vassily Nebenzia, was less forthcoming. He [stressed](#) the need to improve African representation, noting that there is no consensus on candidates for permanent membership and suggesting the possibility of a transitory model that would allow nonpermanent members to extend their terms in the council. Other Russian officials have [said](#) that Security Council expansion should be limited to no more than twenty members overall. Regardless of the messenger, however, one categorical imperative remains constant in Russia’s stance: the current number of permanent members with veto rights must remain intact.

Given the realities of contemporary Russian foreign policy, it is hard to be optimistic about Russian support for Security Council reform. Moscow perceives itself as being locked in existential conflict with so-called Anglo-Saxons and the wider West. It is isolated within the General Assembly on the Ukraine issue and will resist any effort to weaken the veto prerogative it enjoys as one of the P5.

If deliberations do not devolve into endless arguments about who deserves a seat, Russia might eventually be open to limited Security Council expansion—including additional permanent members—provided these candidates do not expect to receive veto power. One possible solution might be to designate some seats to regional groupings, rather than specific countries, through a mechanism of internal selection. While such measures would fall short of what some UN member states demand, it would be the first major step forward on Security Council reform since its expansion in 1965.



Singapore

Joel Ng

It has been more than three decades since the UN General Assembly adopted [Resolution 47/62](#) in December 1992 to review the equitable representation of membership on the UN Security Council. Since then, there have been no reforms that reflect the spirit of that decision. UN member states' perennial concerns with the use of the veto and the size of the Security Council's membership are unlikely to see progress as the world grows not only more multipolar but also increasingly fractured by deteriorating relations among major powers.

Paradoxically, changes to international institutions are most possible when the global distribution of power is at its most unequal (these almost always happen at the behest and acquiescence of the hegemons). The incentives for equitable redistribution, however, are weak. When the global distribution of power is more equal, powerful countries will strive to block changes, whether from fear of losing status and privilege or from distrust that others seeking greater representation will use their powers irresponsibly. The crux is that reform of the UN Security Council seems stuck in a Gordian knot that only major upheaval could possibly sever.

Given growing international tensions, prospects for that sort of disastrous, conflict-driven upheaval have risen. Even were it to occur, however, reconstructing any type of world order might well prove an impossible task. Accordingly, we are left with a more pragmatic question: What are the realistic prospects for incremental changes that could bring some measure of progress on Security Council reform, despite the current, unfavorable global circumstances?

This essay examines Singapore's position on Security Council reform, the implications of a General Assembly resolution to debate the use of Security Council vetoes, and the possibility of bottom-up multilateral developments. It argues that the inherent vulnerability of small states makes them ideal agents of reform, provided that larger states recognize their value.

From a small state's perspective, a multilateral rules-based order is essential for security. The UN system is the most universally accepted and legitimate platform on which to build. The UN's effective functioning is therefore of paramount concern to Singapore, which has [stated](#) that Security Council reform is necessary for the legitimacy, credibility, and accountability of the world's premier body for international peace and security. Singapore has also actively supported the inclusion of underrepresented nations at the Security Council, including from Africa and small island developing states. And it favors more avenues for countries to participate on the council, such as by increasing the number of both nonpermanent elected members and permanent members. However, it does not support additional veto powers for new permanent members. As with all small states, its influence in pressing for reform is limited.

Singapore was among the cosponsors of [Resolution A/76/L.52](#) in April 2022 (adopted as Resolution 76/262), which called for a General Assembly debate whenever a veto is cast in the Security Council. In a statement, Singapore's ambassador to the UN linked the specific issue of Security Council reform to the broader multilateral system, [explaining](#) that "greater transparency and accountability in the work of the Security Council will improve the Council's credibility and the legitimacy of its decisions. This will in turn strengthen the legitimacy and credibility of the United Nations as a whole, and of the multilateral system." In short, Singapore's specific attitude toward Security Council reform is consistent with its broader support for a rules-based order.

Singapore also envisions the General Assembly itself assuming a greater role in global security if the five permanent council members (P5) use their veto power to block Security Council action, as has been the case with the war in Ukraine. As Singapore's UN ambassador [suggested](#), the General Assembly should be permitted to take up "critical issues of international peace and security where the Security Council is unable to act because of a lack of agreement among its permanent members."

Such a change would accomplish at least three things. First, it would help shift the discourse on international peace and security from larger to smaller states, which represent the overwhelming majority of the General Assembly. Smaller states, of course, already enjoy an outsized voice on international affairs in the one-state-one-vote assembly. While the UN's representative body has a reputation for making largely symbolic resolutions, giving small states an expanded platform to shape deliberations on international security could have salutary consequences. All such countries, after all, require a stable, rules-based system in which to develop. Thus they have the least incentive to destabilize the system, even if they could secure significant short-term national gains (for example, in territorial disputes).

Second, elevating the role of the General Assembly would help isolate permanent members that wield a veto. Currently, the decision to use the veto carries remarkably few consequences. If nothing else, elevating the General Assembly would demonstrate that irresponsible use of the veto carries social cost. One should not expect this disincentive to halt use of the veto altogether, but permanent members will need to consider whether the perceived gain of using their veto is worth the resulting opprobrium. Such considerations could be especially relevant in cases where some permanent members have traditionally protected the parochial interests of smaller partners over the opposition of most UN member states, by imposing legitimacy costs on that behavior.

Third, the General Assembly's great diversity may itself be an underestimated source of innovation. While much of the post-World War II order, including the now calcified UN system, was a creation of the allied victors, the developing world has been the most affected by conflict ever since. During the Cold War, the relative stalemate and threat of nuclear war kept the peace between the first and second worlds (aligned, respectively, with the United States and the Soviet Union), but not in the third world, which saw myriad violent conflicts both between and within states. While these wars were not necessarily resolved through the wisdom of peacemakers or well-designed conflict resolution mechanisms, the states that lived through these experiences fully understand the consequences of violence and the preciousness of peace. Having such states and their respective regional organizations assume significant roles and devise mechanisms to reduce and resolve conflict should be embraced.

This suggestion to elevate global security cooperation in the General Assembly in the face of obstructed Security Council reform may seem impractical and even naive, particularly given the General Assembly's penchant for symbolic rather than substantive action. Three points are worth bearing in mind. First, the General Assembly would not replace the Security Council. The council would retain primary responsibility for taking effective action in response to threats to international peace and security. The General Assembly would only be mobilized when an impasse exists at the council. Under those circumstances, any relief from the impasse that reflects the general mood of the UN's membership would represent progress.

Second, as has been the experience in regional organizations resistant to change—[like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations \(ASEAN\) or the African Union \(AU\)](#)—incremental shifts are most likely to be unobjectionable. They are also necessary for deeper reform. In the Organisation of African Unity, for example, [gradual changes during the 1990s](#) paved the way for greater collective security responsibility before the transition to the AU enabled their institutionalization. The mere act of expanding the space for debate in such bodies can alter approaches to defending and enforcing agreed-upon rules. Open debate at the General Assembly is a necessary step for this to take place.

Finally, it might be argued that this proposal is asking too much from small states or that they should not overstep their place. While such concerns are understandable, growing tensions between larger states may make this alternative the only viable pathway to reform.

The curious centrality of ASEAN in the regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific is instructive as to why. In that case, a group of small states achieved outsized influence because larger states—each competing for regional sway—could not countenance their major rivals taking a leading position. It was the unobjectionable quality of the small states that allowed them to drive the initiative. As an added benefit, these states have the greatest stakes in a stable and effective architecture because of their inherent vulnerability. Extending this logic to the global level, a bottom-up approach may be the most viable alternative route to strengthening the UN system, given competition among the big states.

The current impasse on Security Council reform is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. Lots of attention is being afforded to the structural details of various proposals, but the more significant issue at stake is really the rules-based order that the UN represents. This system needs reform more urgently than ever, even as prospects for its renewal grow dimmer. Empowering small states to take on new responsibilities might be the best way forward, given the lack of trust among the larger powers that is obstructing the formal reform process.



South Africa

Priyal Singh

UN Security Council reform has been a longstanding foreign policy priority for the post-apartheid South African government. As part of the country's broader efforts to champion a more equitable, representative, and efficient global system, Pretoria has consistently expressed its grievances with the current structure and composition of the Security Council. These concerns are grounded in, and informed by, the common African position on Security Council reform, known as the [Ezulwini Consensus](#), which was first presented to the UN General Assembly in 2005. Pretoria, like many other African capitals, has since remained firmly committed to this consensus, which has served as the default position of most African states in the UN's [intergovernmental negotiations](#) (IGN) process on council reform.

The Ezulwini Consensus seeks a reformed Security Council with no fewer than two permanent members from Africa, with all the privileges enjoyed by current permanent members, as well as two additional nonpermanent seats for African states (for a total of five nonpermanent seats). It expresses African opposition to the right and use of the veto, while insisting that so long as it exists, it should be made available to all permanent council members. Lastly, the common position contends that the African Union (AU) should be solely responsible for selecting Africa's permanent and nonpermanent representatives to the Security Council.

The common position has facilitated a united African front in the General Assembly and specifically the IGN, in which the continent is the largest regional voting bloc. It has allowed African states to champion a reformed Security Council distinct from other competing proposals, [most notably](#) those of the so-called G4 aspirants to permanent membership— Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan—and the Uniting for Consensus coalition, which contests the G4 bid.

Moreover, the Ezulwini Consensus has [promoted](#) broader international buy-in of the African position on Security Council reform, given the strategic value of the continent's collective weight within the UN as well as the perceived need to redress the historical and ongoing underrepresentation of African states in global policymaking and decisionmaking bodies. The co-chairs' [report](#) from the most recent IGN meeting, read alongside [speeches](#) from a number of African and non-African leaders during the UN General Assembly's annual debate in autumn 2022, confirms widespread diplomatic support for Africa's aspirations with respect to Security Council reform.

Despite this general support, however, key proponents of the common African position, including South Africa, have done little to break the impasse that has characterized the IGN on Security Council reform since their establishment. Major African players have failed to develop a strategy and invested only limited diplomatic effort to build global consensus on many of the finer but crucial details of a deal that might lead to a UN Charter amendment, entice or incentivize the council's five permanent members (P5) to seriously consider and support a reform process, or engage with competing reform proposals. Little progress has been made even toward updating the common African position to clarify *which* states could (or should) represent the continent's collective interests in the preeminent global body responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security.

Since the common African position was presented to the General Assembly in 2005, South Africa has served three terms as an elected member of the Security Council (2007–2008, 2011–2012, and 2019–2020). Key lessons learned during these terms have been [documented](#), and it is clear that Pretoria is now well versed in the council's procedures, working methods, and political dynamics, as well as capable of championing collective African interests. It is also clear that South African officials [view](#) the current structure and composition of the Security Council as deeply flawed, unjust, and unrepresentative of the contemporary international system—and that they believe these factors undermine the council's ability to fulfill its mandate, especially with respect to the African continent.

In its quest to bolster the legitimacy, credibility, and effectiveness of the Security Council, Pretoria has almost always grounded its critique by referencing the common African position on council reform. However, given the continued [political impasse](#) in the IGN, such an unwavering commitment to the Ezulwini Consensus will likely provide diminishing returns in the absence of a concerted effort to refine core elements of the common African position.

A diplomatic path toward Security Council reform seems particularly improbable if leading African states—including Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa—continue their business-as-usual approach. Curiously, U.S. President Joe Biden's endorsement in his September 2022 General Assembly speech of expanding the Security Council's permanent membership beyond Japan, Germany, or India stirred almost no discernible foreign policy reaction from Pretoria. Indeed, remarks on council reform by senior South African government officials [after](#) the opening of the seventy-seventh session of the General Assembly almost exactly mirror those they offered [beforehand](#). At best, this indicates the continent's general

disillusionment with the reform process and prospects for altering the status quo. At worst, it suggests a cynical [mistrust](#) of U.S. rhetorical commitments to the Global South—grounded in suspicions that Washington only offers such symbolic pledges when it suits its geopolitical interests.

Despite these challenges, Security Council reform remains desperately needed. Major challenges to international peace and security—including those related to climate change, armed conflict, violent extremism, and geopolitical tensions among the great powers—necessitate a more representative, credible, and transparent system of collective security that better reflects the contemporary international system and the evolving locus of power among states in the Global South.

In response to these demands, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), a pan-African policy research institute, undertook wide-ranging consultations between 2015 and 2017 with various international state representatives, think tanks, and civil society organizations to explore an alternative pathway to Security Council reform. These informed the development of a reform campaign, [Elect the Council](#), which provides a detailed proposal to circumvent an IGN process that remains mired in competing and ultimately irreconcilable national positions.

As its name suggests, *Elect the Council* advocates amending the UN Charter to produce a Security Council that is entirely elected. This scheme would eliminate permanent seats and the vetoes that go with them. Instead, the entire UN membership would elect a new council every three years, comprising twenty-six or twenty-seven members in total. These would be drawn from four categories: (1) top-tier global powers, as measured by certain objective criteria, such as the size of their respective populations, economies, and contributions to the UN system; (2) coalitions of states that collectively meet the objective criteria of the top-tier global powers (such as the European Union, for example); (3) regional powers; and (4) other countries that do not fit into these prior categories, whose rotational seats on the council would not be immediately renewable (and for which countries in the prior categories would not be eligible to vote).

The proposal also calls for the introduction of a system of differentiated voting weights. Countries that occupy the seats of top-tier global powers and global coalitions would count for three votes, while other rotational seats would count for a single vote. To incentivize P5 support for gradual council reform, the scheme envisions an eighteen-year transition phase. Each P5 vote would initially count for five votes (during the first six years), then four (for years seven through twelve) and eventually three (years thirteen through eighteen). The proposal also envisions regular reviews of the Security Council's structure, procedures, and working methods.

Such a shift toward proportional representation may seem like a radical departure from other ongoing efforts to reform the council's composition and rules. But it may be an idea

worth entertaining, given the longstanding deadlock within the IGN process, the growing demands placed upon the Security Council, and the body's failure to reinvent itself to match new global realities.

This proposed multiyear reform process provides a gradual pathway toward a much more representative Security Council. The current IGN process, by contrast, is likely to perpetuate existing concerns about the council's credibility and legitimacy, as global power dynamics continue to shift in coming decades. Greater proportional representation, encompassing distinct categories of states, offers a potential breakthrough. Irreconcilable national differences over *which* states may be best suited to have a seat at the high table can only be overcome if *all* states have the opportunity to assume a seat and contribute to international peace and security.

To be sure, a more representative Security Council is no cure-all. Member states will still need to consider trade-offs between greater representation and administrative efficiency, for instance. Still, differentiated voting weights for different categories of states may help alleviate these concerns. It could also provide a basis for global powers to collaborate with regional powers, small states, and global power coalitions to amend the UN Charter and create a more democratized Security Council. For this proposal to get diplomatic traction, a broad coalition of like-minded states will need to directly challenge not only existing council reform proposals (including the G4 plan and the Ezulwini Consensus) but also the formal IGN process. Senior leadership in the UN Secretariat itself may be well positioned to initiate thinking on such a radical reform process—one that overcomes the limitations of the IGN and offers an alternative pathway for member states to realize a democratized council.

Türkiye

Barçin Yinanç

“The world is bigger than five” is a [slogan](#) first coined by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2013. Nearly a decade later, it remains the core message of Türkiye’s ongoing campaign for UN Security Council reform. This slogan encapsulates the frustration and resentment that many member states feel toward the UN system and especially the veto power enjoyed by the five permanent Security Council members (P5), which is widely perceived as undermining the very ideals and purposes that the universal body was established to promote and defend in 1945.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is seen as the latest, and perhaps most egregious, example of the Security Council’s inability to preserve international peace, particularly when military aggression is perpetrated by one of the P5. Russia’s aggression, which violates the UN Charter, has given added urgency to the debate over Security Council reform. It has also made the realization of any meaningful reform more difficult. For many observers, the war in Ukraine signals the end of the post–Cold War period and the start of a new era of great power competition. These rising geopolitical tensions are creating a climate of wide-ranging instability and unpredictability that is likely to further complicate any efforts to make the Security Council more effective and functional.

The Security Council has not yet entered total gridlock, suggesting that the P5 still regard the UN’s so-called executive body as an important global platform when they are not directly involved in violent conflict. While the council often fails to prevent military aggression and sanction the aggressor, its role in peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding, as well as its contribution to tackling other urgent global challenges like nuclear proliferation, should not be underestimated. Despite justified criticisms, the Security Council continues to be the most crucial multilateral forum, and the UN remains the world’s only truly global organization.

As one of the founding members of the UN, Türkiye attaches great importance to the health and effectiveness of the world body. Within the UN, as in geopolitics more generally, Türkiye straddles two regions. It is a member of both the Western European and Other States Group (WEOG) and the Asia-Pacific States Group (although for voting purposes, it is considered a member of WEOG only).

Historically, Türkiye has been among the member states most eager to actively engage in efforts to modernize the Security Council. Indeed, its involvement in this process dates back to the earliest debates on the body's reform. Beyond arguing that the veto power of the P5 renders the council dysfunctional, Türkiye also [believes](#) that increasing the body's representativeness is the most pressing objective for reform. Türkiye is a member of the Uniting for Consensus (UFC) coalition, which opposes the aspirations of the G4 group—Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan—to become permanent, veto-wielding members of the Security Council. Increasing the number of permanent members with veto powers will “only worsen the current ineffectiveness of the Security Council,” [explains](#) Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu.

As the Security Council's size has not kept pace with the UN's growth, Türkiye has consistently criticized the council's exclusivity. The absence of permanent members representing South America, Africa, and the Islamic world not only attests to representational injustice but also demonstrates a failure to reflect multiculturalism. “Strengthening regional representation at the Security Council is a must,” says Çavuşoğlu.

Türkiye also proposes a formal review of the relationship between the General Assembly and the Security Council, with the ultimate aim of expanding the General Assembly's authority.

Türkiye's most radical—indeed, revolutionary—[proposal](#) is to abolish the veto power of permanent members altogether, as “the first step toward UN reform.”

Whether Türkiye can advance this maximalist agenda, however, seems doubtful. In an era of deepening great power rivalry, it has become even more unrealistic to expect the current P5 countries to relinquish their veto power. A more feasible path might be to concentrate on exploring how best to limit the use of the veto instead of demanding its outright abolition.

Overall, the UFC is justified in its warnings that any increase in the number of permanent seats will only exacerbate inequality among member states and aggravate existing frustrations and resentments. A more constructive and plausible reform agenda would be to create a new category of semipermanent members, with longer-term and potentially renewable seats. Under this scheme, certain countries would be eligible for periodic election (and reelection) on a rotational basis. This could provide an attractive option to key regional powers, such as Türkiye, that aspire to play a more active role in global affairs, while also helping to make the council more balanced and inclusive.

Eligibility criteria for this category could include, among other factors, a nation's overall financial contribution to the UN, its contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, the share of national GDP it devotes to development and humanitarian assistance, and its rate of participation in UN treaty bodies and specialized agencies. Ensuring fair representation from the Global South and the Islamic world would no doubt greatly enhance the credibility of this reform initiative. This new category of semipermanent members should include at least some seats earmarked for socioeconomic groupings like least-developed states or small island developing states, much as nonpermanent member seats are designed to enhance the geographical representation of different regions.

More generally, this new group of semipermanent members could be structured to act as a sort of shadow cabinet, providing a mechanism to check and balance the power of the P5. One potential option would be to give semipermanent members the right to accept or reject the justifications that P5 members offer when deciding to use their veto. While the decisions of the shadow cabinet might not have any operational effect, the possibility of expressed disapproval could still put additional pressure on the veto-wielding country.

There are obviously many obstacles to the realization of this formula. Member states may struggle to agree on the relevant criteria that should make countries eligible for semipermanent seats. Reaching a compromise on which countries actually fulfill these criteria—and how to choose among those that do—will likely prove a daunting task. While there is widespread global agreement about the need for Security Council reform, the deep divergence of views among UN member states ensures that the path will be extremely rocky.

The Russia-Ukraine war is widely seen as ushering in a new period defined by great power competition. In contrast to the bipolar nature of the Cold War, however, the unfolding era is anticipated to be multipolar, with key regional powers such as Türkiye expected to play more assertive roles on regional and global issues. These powers are generally inclined to act like so-called swing states, keeping channels and options open with respect to all the great powers while taking advantage of great power rivalries to maximize their own interests.

Increasing great power rivalry might push P5 countries to grasp even more tightly to their privileged position on the Security Council. But the growing influence of these swing states and the need to keep them onside could also incentivize P5 countries to accommodate the idea of council enlargement and seek various options for including regional powers.

As the risk of hot conflict in different parts of the world continues to escalate, the current gridlock in the Security Council will remain a serious challenge. The council's inability to prevent military conflict, particularly when it involves one or more of the P5, and its ongoing paralysis may push countries to breach international law by taking unilateral armed action in the absence of a Security Council resolution. In such a volatile and unpredictable era, giving more responsibility to regional powers by including them in the Security Council could increase their ownership of a rules-based order.

Against this background, it is imperative to keep Security Council reform on the global agenda. Even if prospects do not appear to be very promising at this stage, continued reform efforts will help maintain political and moral pressure on the P5 countries. While this reform agenda should also include improving the UN's working methods, it should not ignore the necessity of changing the composition of the Security Council itself.



United Kingdom

Richard Gowan

The idea of UN Security Council reform presents the United Kingdom with a set of conundrums. Its status as a permanent member of the Security Council is an asset to its diplomacy. But British officials recognize that its seat also risks looking like an anachronism—reflecting the world as it existed in 1945 rather than the current distribution of power and influence. At least rhetorically, the UK accepts that the Security Council’s composition must change to remain relevant in a shifting global environment. London has little to gain from retaining its seat in a sclerotic forum increasingly detached from international reality. At the same time, the UK worries that council reform could dilute its influence inside the body, especially if modernization efforts lead to more permanent members involved in decisionmaking.

From a British perspective, it is necessary to balance the upsides of reinforcing the Security Council’s credibility through reform with the potential downsides for British influence in New York—and globally.

The UK takes seriously its role as one of the five permanent council members (P5). British officials hold that while the nation’s clout may have declined since the end of World War II, it still qualifies for a seat at the top table as a nuclear power and Europe’s leading military spender. However, they are also keen to justify their presence on the council through active diplomacy. Like France, the UK is the so-called penholder (or diplomatic lead) for eight country-specific files on the body’s agenda. This role has generated significant controversy. Many council members have objected to the UK holding the pen on Yemen, for instance, since British forces have backed the international coalition fighting inside that country. Conversely, the UK has also been able to extend its influence to countries where it might otherwise exert limited sway, such as by acting as penholder on the peace process in Colombia.

During the Cold War, the UK [used](#) its veto twenty-nine times on issues ranging from the Suez crisis to the Falklands War. Yet, like France, it has not cast a veto since 1989. Some diplomatic observers argue privately that London and Paris have effectively established a convention of non-use of their veto power and suggest that global support for their permanent seats could diminish were they to break with this practice. British officials reject this interpretation, which they fear would make both them and their French confreres essentially second-class members of the P5. What the UK and France have agreed to is something far more limited that is applicable to each of the permanent members: a proposed norm that P5 countries avoid using their veto in situations involving mass atrocities. The rest of the P5—the United States, China, and Russia—have not bought into this idea, though U.S. President Joe Biden has [promised](#) to “refrain from the use of the veto, except in rare, extraordinary situations.”

The UK’s ability to affect Security Council decisions—and, potentially, Security Council reform—is especially of value to London as some of its other sources of multilateral influence have waned. Prior to Brexit, British diplomats were able to effectively shape EU positions in UN forums. Since exiting the EU, UK officials have fostered beneficial ties with their European counterparts in New York, but that outreach cannot completely compensate for being outside the bloc. The decline of UK development aid spending—once one of its main calling cards at the UN—has also reduced its ability to influence the global agenda. From the perspective of London, retaining its permanent seat on the Security Council is critical to any aspirations to play the role of so-called [Global Britain](#). The fallout from Russia’s war in Ukraine has raised British ministers’ awareness of shifting political dynamics at the UN. The [2023 refresh](#) of the UK’s 2021 national security review highlighted the need to build better relationships with middle powers, such as Brazil and India, to offset China and Russia in multilateral bodies—and it identified Security Council reform as one way to achieve this.

London has also not been able to ignore the Biden administration’s recent interest in Security Council enlargement. Although the United States has not said anything about the future of the council that jibes poorly with UK interests, both London and Paris see risks in the United States taking the lead on reform.

The worst-case scenario is that Washington cuts a council reform deal with the non-Western P5 powers that overlooks UK and French interests—but which London finds hard to refuse. This is admittedly unlikely, given the deep rifts today between the United States, China, and Russia. But the United States could still take smaller steps that annoy the British. The Biden administration has, for example, been happy to share penholding duties with nonpermanent Security Council members on some key files (such as with Mexico and Ecuador on the crisis in Haiti). While the UK has also shared the pen with elected members in the past, it does not want to be nudged into doing so more often. That could ultimately reduce its influence in the council.

Not wishing to be outflanked, the UK government has reasserted its past positions on the need to overhaul the Security Council—although not necessarily without qualms. In formal terms, London [supports](#) the creation of new permanent council seats for the so-called G4 nations (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan), plus “permanent African representation on the Council.” The UK remains, however, deliberately ambiguous about whether it supports giving these new permanent members the veto. In practice, British officials are well aware that giving non-Western powers a greater say in Security Council decisionmaking could create challenges for London. Over the last year, Brazil and India have taken markedly different stances than Britain on Russia’s war in Ukraine, preferring to engage rather than isolate the Russians. (Older diplomatic hands recall similar divisions, with India in particular, over Libya in 2011 and Syria in 2012.) The UK accepts that if its preferred model of Security Council reform becomes a reality, the council’s deliberations might become trickier and non-Western powers will be able to launch more initiatives that run counter to British interests.

Such a potential outcome helps explain the UK’s defense of its veto prerogative, as well as its ambivalence over extending veto rights to any new permanent Security Council member. Safeguarding the UK’s veto enables London to kill resolutions it considers misguided; refusing to give new permanent members veto power ensures that it will remain difficult to block Western-supported initiatives.

These challenges remain hypothetical for the time being, as actual Security Council reform (of any kind) remains a remote prospect. The UK may find more short-term political advantage in investing in other tracks of multilateral reform, such as overhauling the international financial institutions, rather than focusing on council reform. London has also recently shown more interest in the UN General Assembly, after years of viewing the UN’s representative body as a rather poor relation of the Security Council. It now recognizes the importance of engaging non-Western countries in this venue, particularly on issues such as development and human rights. The assembly has also proven to be an important platform for rallying states to criticize Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

For the foreseeable future, the UK is likely to continue its balancing act on the Security Council—both encouraging reform and attempting to protect its influence. It can probably keep doing so for some time. After all, the British invented the notoriously drawn-out sport of test cricket, where even exciting matches can end in a stalemate. They are perhaps especially well-suited for playing the long game of Security Council reform.



United States

Anjali Dayal

U.S. President Joe Biden’s administration [says it wants](#) UN Security Council reform, and the council plainly needs it. “The question before us,” U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield [told](#) UN General Assembly delegates in November 2022, “is whether we will defend an outdated status quo—or reform the Security Council and empower the UN to take on the challenges of the 21st century.”

Publicly supporting Security Council reform is an easy political win for diplomats. The council is an explicitly unfair body [designed](#) to sideline most UN member states on questions of international peace and security, to tip international law toward the advantage of its permanent five members (P5), and to allow these powers to protect and exonerate themselves and their allies when they violate the UN Charter. But these same flaws that make reform a universally popular goal also make real efforts for change a quagmire at best—and an obvious nonstarter at worst.

Every few years, a permanent member advocates adding new permanent seats, secure in the [knowledge](#) that regional groups are deadlocked over representation and that the Security Council’s other permanent members would veto any proposed structural changes. Indeed, these proposals from the P5 risk becoming what Richard Gowan has called “[diplomatic populism](#)”—dead-end gambits that gin up short-term goodwill without yielding any real change.

Yet the Biden administration’s proposals recommend shifts in diplomatic practices that actually could change the Security Council, albeit slowly and incrementally. There are two main routes for the council to become more just and equitable: one is expanding its membership to be more representative; the other is promoting more equitable outcomes via mechanisms like enhanced transparency or agreements to restrict veto use. The former, which would

require UN Charter revisions to add new, veto-wielding permanent seats, is extremely unlikely to happen. Instead, if the United States wants to push the body in a more just and democratic direction, it is likely to have better luck embracing the multilateral norms and new working methods and diplomatic practices that other member states have championed at the UN.

The Security Council's [immediate](#) paralysis in the face of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine exposed the council's fundamental flaw to a [broad audience](#): that it is powerless when a P5 member explicitly contravenes the UN Charter and then exercises its veto to protect itself. But while cases of direct P5 aggression draw headlines, the much more frequent P5 practice of sheltering allies also stalls the council's work and erodes its legitimacy. Permanent members' willingness to block multilateral action on crises in Syria, Myanmar, Israel and Palestine, and elsewhere has prolonged human suffering and reinforced the Security Council's enduring reputation as a mere forum for great power interests.

When the P5 *can* [agree](#), of course, the council can do its work. [Between 2013 and 2016](#), for example, the P5 agreed to all proposed new peacekeeping force authorizations, notwithstanding significant fractures over Syria and Ukraine. Even today, when reauthorizing peace operations has grown increasingly [contentious](#), the P5 have mostly managed to cordon off disagreement over Ukraine from their other ongoing [work](#).

Still, the fact that the Security Council only works when the P5 *want* it to work underlines its unfairness and rigidity. It took over fifteen years of crisis, for example, for the council to pass a [single resolution](#) on Myanmar (with two P5 abstentions). Likewise, a Russian [veto](#) killed a resolution backed by 113 UN member states (the [second-highest](#) total in UN history) identifying climate change as a threat to international peace and security. In a world where small island nations [fear](#) for their very survival, such an ossified international body appears decreasingly legitimate.

The Security Council's fundamental biases pose a problem even for the P5, endangering their exclusive [status](#) under international law. The more they violate their legal obligations, the more they undermine the [reciprocity](#) on which international law depends. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, nearly twenty years after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, reveals this to be a recurring problem. As Martin Kimani, Kenya's ambassador to the UN, [puts](#) it, "The charter of the United Nations continues to wilt under the relentless assault of the powerful . . . breaching international law with little regard."

The U.S. reform proposal comes at a critical moment, on the heels of UN efforts to curb irresponsible use of the veto. In April 2022, the [General Assembly passed a resolution](#) (initially spearheaded by Liechtenstein and eventually cosponsored by eighty-three member states, including France, the United Kingdom, and the United States) requiring any P5 state to explain its use of the veto to the General Assembly. A parallel [initiative](#), initially led by France and Mexico, calls for the P5 to exercise voluntary restraint of their veto use in cases of mass atrocity; by mid-2022, it had won the support of 104 member states and two observer states.

The Biden administration has advanced [six key principles](#) for responsible behavior by Security Council members. These include commitments to: (1) “defend and act strictly in accordance with the UN Charter”; (2) “engage pragmatically with all Council members to address threats to international peace and security” (regardless of any [bilateral disputes](#)); (3) use the veto only in rare and extraordinary circumstances; (4) “demonstrate leadership in defending human rights and fundamental freedoms”; (5) “enhance cooperation, inclusivity, and transparency” [via](#) frequent, substantive engagement with the General Assembly and other relevant bodies; and (6) advance efforts for Security Council reform.

In accordance with this sixth [principle](#), the United States cosponsored the Liechtenstein-led resolution requesting permanent members explain their vetoes to the General Assembly. In a historic first, Biden himself also endorsed permanent Security Council seats for Latin America and the Caribbean during his 2022 General Assembly [address](#).

In theory, proposals to expand Security Council membership and restrain the veto should enjoy broad support—yet both evidence and theory suggest that formal reforms are likely nonstarters. First, as Susan Allen and Amy Yuen [argue](#), Security Council expansion requires agreement not only to open the UN Charter for amendment, but also on the size of the expanded council, the number and identity of any permanent members, and revised voting rules (including possible extension or qualification of the veto). The charter has only been amended five times since 1945, and the process requires approval from two-thirds of the UN’s membership and each of the P5. Second, Russia has already [said](#) it will not agree to any reforms that would erode the P5’s formal veto power, including by extending it to others. It is doubtful other permanent members, regardless of what they say publicly, would do so either. A more democratic, representative council is therefore unlikely to emerge anytime soon.

What is still possible are reforms that depend on shifts in diplomatic practice to produce more equitable outcomes. The Security Council’s sole formal reform to date, negotiated in 1963 and implemented in 1965, left the P5 and their veto untouched but expanded the nonpermanent elected membership (from six to ten). In the process, it genuinely [changed](#) the way the Security Council works. The larger [nonpermanent membership](#) built new coalitions and introduced new working methods, concepts of peace and security, and thematic issues and agendas. They also worked to break the P5’s monopoly on power and information, including by [taking the lead](#) on some conflict cases to facilitate humanitarian work even when the P5 were at loggerheads. And neither the United Kingdom nor France has [cast](#) a veto since [1989](#).

Given these trends, most other UN member states are likely to welcome the Biden administration’s principles for responsible Security Council behavior. Its pledges—to limit its own use of the veto, to adhere strictly to the UN Charter, to engage pragmatically with other UNSC members, to show leadership on human rights, and to embrace inclusivity and transparency with other UN member states—are potential engines of real change at the Security Council, particularly if U.S. diplomats continue to support multilateral demands for council

accountability spearheaded by other member states. Success will require the United States to stop using its veto to shelter its allies (notably Israel), and to cede leadership on some grid-locked conflict situations to other member states.

In short, while improving representation in the Security Council remains a worthy political goal, the United States has a unique ability to buttress multilateralism even without formal charter amendments. As Natalie Samarasinghe has [written](#), the United States can enhance global cooperation by helping strengthen the General Assembly's tools for managing peace and security, supporting General Assembly mechanisms for accountability in mass atrocity situations, emphasizing humanitarian action, and expanding the voices of other states, civil society actors, and local governments in mediating conflicts and shaping global norms.

The Security Council is a flawed, unjust, and antidemocratic institution whose shortcomings are baked into the structure of contemporary multilateralism. As its legitimacy wanes, the temptation and incentives for dissatisfied countries to bypass it are likely to become greater and more understandable. Addressing this legitimacy crisis is thus imperative, since there is no substitute multilateral venue for global coordination on critical questions of international peace and security. Without the Security Council, even nominal fidelity to norms of peaceful conflict management, individual rights, and the protection of civilians could fall away.

Biden closed his 2022 General Assembly [address](#) by reflecting on the UN's founding. "This institution . . . is at its core an act of dauntless hope," he said. Today, believing in the UN's capacity for good work can itself seem like an act of dauntless hope. Yet even if its most powerful organ remains unreformable, changing diplomatic practices can still change the Security Council. Behaving as though multilateralism matters makes multilateralism matter.



About the Authors

Stewart Patrick is senior fellow and director of the Global Order and Institutions program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Adekeye Adebajo is a senior research fellow at the University of Pretoria's Center for the Advancement of Scholarship in South Africa.

Anjali Dayal is a senior scholar in residence at the United States Institute of Peace and an associate professor of international politics at Fordham University's Lincoln Center campus. She is the author of *Incredible Commitments: How UN Peacekeeping Failures Shape Peace Processes* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Richard Gowan is UN director at the International Crisis Group. This article is written in a personal capacity.

Zhang Guihong is a professor and the director of the Center for UN Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai. He can be reached at ghzhang@fudan.edu.cn.

Christoph Heusgen is chairman of the Munich Security Conference. He served as Germany's ambassador to the UN from 2017 to 2021, and from 2005 to 2017 he served as diplomatic adviser to then chancellor Angela Merkel.

Andrey Kolosovskiy is a public policy and IT industry consultant and a former Soviet and Russian diplomat. He served as permanent representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations and other international organizations in Geneva from 1994 to 1997.

Phillip Y. Lipsky is professor of political science at the University of Toronto, where he directs the Center for the Study of Global Japan at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. He is also professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Tokyo.

Sithembile Mbete is director of programs at Futurelect, a Johannesburg-based nongovernmental organization that seeks to empower a new generation of ethical government and political leaders in Africa.

Rohan Mukherjee is assistant professor of international relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is the author of *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Joel Ng is deputy head of the Center for Multilateralism Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Alexandra Novosseloff is a research associate at the Centre Thucydide, Université Paris-Panthéon-Assas. She is the editor of *Le Conseil de sécurité, entre impuissance et toute puissance* (2021, 2nd edition).

Miguel Ruiz Cabañas Izquierdo is an ambassador and former undersecretary for multilateral affairs of Mexico. He is currently professor of International Affairs and Director of the SDGs Initiative at Tec de Monterrey, the largest private university in Mexico.

Priyal Singh is a senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies.

Matias Spektor is professor of international relations at the Fundação Getulio Vargas in São Paulo, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and a visiting scholar at Princeton University.

Barçin Yinanç is a journalist and foreign policy analyst at the T24 news website.



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