

The Impact of Veto Power on Humanitarian Efforts in the UN Security Council

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Abstract: The essay addresses the pressing need for reform within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to enhance its effectiveness and align with the evolving global political landscape. It argues that the current mechanisms of the UNSC, particularly the veto power held by its permanent members, impede the Council's ability to address international crises promptly and equitably. The essay highlights the growing consensus for reform, aiming to make decision-making more transparent and responsive to global security threats. Historical and contemporary examples, such as the recent UNSC debate on the Gaza Crisis, illustrate the challenges posed by the abuse of veto power. The literature review underscores the historical origins of the veto and its problematic use, which has led to inaction in critical humanitarian situations. The author posits several hypotheses, including the need for veto reform, reconfiguration of Security Council membership, and reduction of major power competition within the UNSC. Overall, this article explores the diplomatic dialogues and propositions for reform, emphasizing the urgency of restructuring the UNSC to restore its authority and fairness in the international order.

Keywords: The United Nations Security Council, reform, veto power, global political landscape.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the reform of the United Nations Security Council has emerged as a hot topic globally, sparking substantial discussions and controversies. While the United Nations has made enormous contributions to the cause of peace and progress for humanity, it has also revealed numerous issues in its own mechanisms and institutional arrangements. The current world situation is constantly evolving, with some countries still embroiled in war and conflict. As the core institution of international organizations that maintain world peace and security, reasonable reforms to the Security Council would significantly foster the ongoing development of the United Nations, and align with the ever-changing world.

1.1. Thesis

The confluence of great power competition and abuse of the veto power makes the UNSC less effective as the global governance changing which obstructing the authority of the Security Council. After the end of the Cold War, the international political situation underwent tremendous changes. With the deepening of globalization, the focus of economic and political power is gradually shifting.

The issue of decision-making efficiency and transparency of the United Nations Security Council has also been widely mentioned. Many countries and observers believe that the current mechanism is too rigid, and the veto power of certain permanent members makes it difficult for them to respond and effectively to international crises.

2. Literature review

“When the Council does not take on such a role, there is widespread disenchantment with its performance.” [1] That was what Jennifer Trahan mentioned in her literature *the Origins and History of the Veto and Its Use*. This chapter explores the roots of the veto power granted to the permanent members of the UN Security Council, starting from the discussions at the San Francisco Conference to the finalization of the UN Charter. Following this historical context, the chapter delves into the initial reactions to the Security Council's gridlock; in the late 1940s, the General Assembly adopted a resolution advocating for a conditional veto. Additionally, the 1950 "Uniting for Peace" resolution is examined. Although the expectations for the Security Council may have surpassed the original intentions of the Charter's architects, the Council is legally capable of averting or mitigating numerous situations with severe consequences for communities, nations, and regions globally. In cases such as those in Rwanda, Darfur, Syria, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Yemen, where large-scale atrocities unfold with little intervention, the absence of a response has resulted in immense loss of life. Often, the Security Council's inaction can be attributed directly to the exercise or threat of veto power by one or more of its permanent members.

The other article focuses on others countries' criticism on UN Security Council for its inaction regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which brought renewed attention to the demands for reforming this key international institution.

“Efforts to reform the Security Council have been ongoing for decades, yet there's been little progress due to the lack of agreement on a unified approach among member states” [2]. The main issues include the static membership with the same five permanent members holding veto power since 1945, which does not reflect the change in global dynamics. The council's paralysis is made worse by geopolitical tensions, and its current structure is widely seen as outdated and unrepresentative.

Calls for reform have been intensified by Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine, which show how a P5 member can undermine collective security. The challenges to reform are significant due to the need for a two-thirds majority and the consent of all P5 members, coupled with the ongoing geopolitical rivalries and political polarization.

Despite the obstacles, there is a growing consensus that the Security Council needs to be reformed to remain relevant and effective in addressing global security threats. A compilation of essays by Carnegie's Global Order and Institutions Program presents various perspectives on how the Security Council should be reformed, considering the council's current state, the potential changes to its composition and veto rules, and the broader implications of inaction. This collection highlights the current diplomatic debate on this issue and the urgency felt by many regarding the future of the Security Council.

3. Statement of hypotheses

H1. The veto power of the Security Council should be reformed.

H2. The members of the Security Council need to make appropriate adjustments

H3. Power competition among major powers in the Security Council also needs to be avoided.

4. Case study analysis

4.1. Case1: security council debates Gaza Crisis, as civilian suffering continues unabated (2023.10.18/2024.02.14)

On October 18, 2023, the Security Council put the draft resolution submitted by Brazil to the table decisive. The draft received 12 votes in favor, 1 vote against, and 2 abstentions because the United States, a permanent member of the Security Council, exercised its veto power and the draft was not passed.

The voting result is as follows:

Table 1: The voting result on Gaza Crisis (2023.10.18) [Owner-draw]

	COUNTRY
In favor	China, UAE, Gabon, Mozambique, Brazil, Ecuador, Ghana, Malta, Switzerland, France, Japan, Albania
Oppose	United States
Abstention	United Kingdom and Russia

On February 12, 2024, the United Nations Security Council voted on a draft resolution proposed by Algeria, which called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire to be respected by all parties. The resolution received 13 votes in favor, 1 against, and 1 abstention. However, due to the veto cast by the United States, a permanent member of the Security Council, the resolution was not adopted. The voting result is as follows:

Table 2: The voting result on Gaza Crisis (2024.02.14) [Owner-draw]

	COUNTRY
In favor (13)	Mozambique, South Korea, Sierra Leone, Slovenia, Switzerland, Russia, France, China, Algeria, Ecuador, Guyana, Japan, Malta
Oppose (1)	United States
Abstention (1)	United Kingdom

Analysis 1: Tables 1 & 2 indicate that certain Security Council members, like the United States in this case, used their veto power for their own private interests, resulting in the failure to pass. In the United Nations Security Council, any substantive draft resolution must obtain at least nine affirmative votes, including those from the five permanent members in order to be adopted. If any of the permanent members cast a dissenting vote, the resolution cannot be adopted even if it secures more than nine votes in favor. On April 26, 2022, the 76th United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution stipulating that upon the exercise of veto power by the permanent members of the Security Council, the Assembly shall automatically convene a formal meeting, during which all UN member states may review and comment on such veto exercise. During this session, the Permanent Representative of the United States expressed that the proposed resolution would not establish enduring peace and would further extend the hostage-taking and humanitarian crises. She stated, "As sensitive negotiations are ongoing among various parties, this is not the appropriate time to adopt this draft, as it would jeopardize these efforts." This indicates that despite the United States' explanation at the General Assembly of its reasons for exercising the veto, the draft resolution remained unadopted. Therefore, further progress is necessary in the reform of the veto power in the Security Council.

4.2. Case2: russian and american ambassadors' debates about Ukraine Crisis

Russian Foreign Minister and July rotating President of the Security Council, Lavrov, accused the United States of the implementation of a "rules-based order"[3] that threatened and international law. He said that Washington "harms the interests of these countries".

In response, US Permanent Representative to the United Nations Thomas Greenfield accused Russia of being "hypocritical" and "blatantly violating" the core principles of the UN Charter on territorial integrity, respect for human rights, and international cooperation while convening multilateral cooperation conferences.

Analysis 2: The United States and Russia are both permanent members of the Security Council and they both have veto power. The two countries often have completely different positions when dealing with international security issues, especially those involving their respective national interests. When the interests of the two conflicts, the common result is that one party uses its veto power to obstruct the resolution proposed by the other party, making it difficult for the Security Council to take effective measures on some key issues. The confrontation between the two countries will also affect the speed and efficiency of the Security Council's decision-making.

4.3. Case3: UN general assembly president: Security Council reform must reflect the current situation of the 21st century

The Security Council was established in 1945 in accordance with the United Nations Charter. At that time, the victorious countries of World War II, namely the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China, "played a crucial role in the establishment of the United Nations" [4] and obtained five permanent seats on the Security Council. They are able to represent all member states of the United Nations, assume the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, and have special voting rights, known as the "veto power". The figure 1 below shows the total vetoes by five permanent members since 21st century.



Figure 1: Total vetoes by five permanent members (2000-2024)

In 75 years, the world geopolitical situation has undergone tremendous changes, but the structure of the Security Council has remained unchanged. The only reform occurred in 1965, when the United Nations Charter was amended to increase the number of non-permanent seats from six to ten.

President Bozkel stated that if the Security Council is reformed to make it more representative, effective, efficient, accountable, and transparent, the implementation and legitimacy of its decisions will be strengthened.

Analysis 3: The current structure of the Security Council reflects the distribution of international power after World War II, which no longer conforms to the global reality of the 21st century. Many rapidly developing countries and emerging economies in the world believe that they should have a greater say in international affairs. Expanding the membership of the Security Council can make it more representative. Moreover, the current membership structure of the Security Council is unevenly distributed geographically, with a relative lack of sustained representation in Africa, Latin America, and other regions [5].

5. Conclusion

In order to better strengthen international governance and efficiency, and promote global security, the Security Council must reform from multiple aspects. Through reform, the Security Council can effectively fulfill its responsibility of maintaining international peace and security, further promoting global stability and development. Therefore, despite facing numerous challenges, the successful implementation of the reform will inject new vitality into the global governance system.

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