

**Special Commission**

Briefing Paper

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**Outline: The Question of Reforming the Powers and Membership of the United Nations Security Council**

**Background information:**

The United Nations Security Council, established in 1945, holds primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. Comprising 15 member states, including five permanent members with veto powers (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), the UNSC faces criticisms regarding its representativeness, effectiveness, and democratic legitimacy. The structure and decision-making processes have faced scrutiny, particularly regarding the powers and membership of its permanent members.

The Security Council addresses threats to peace and security globally. It convenes meetings to discuss and take actions on issues ranging from conflicts and humanitarian crises to nuclear proliferation and terrorism. Under the UN Charter, the Security Council has the authority to impose sanctions, authorize peacekeeping missions, and deploy military forces to maintain or restore peace in regions affected by conflict.

**Key definitions:**

Veto power: This refers to the authority granted to certain individuals or entities to reject or block a decision, proposal, or action.

Sanctions: This refers to measures imposed on a country or entity to encourage compliance with international law, treaties, or resolutions or to deter certain actions which are detrimental to global peace and security. Sanctions range from diplomatic to economic to military.

Thwart: This refers to a country or entity having the power to single-handedly block any proposed action or resolution within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) by exercising their veto power.

Penholding: This refers to a particular member, often a non-permanent member, who leads in drafting resolutions or documents related to a specific agenda item or issue being discussed in the council.

**History:**

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was founded along with the United Nations (UN) in 1945, following the end of World War II. Here is an overview of its history:

**Establishment**: The UNSC was established under the United Nations Charter on June 26, 1945, and came into effect on October 24, 1945. The UNSC was formed to maintain international peace and security and to prevent conflicts like those that led to World War II.

**Structure**: Initially, the UNSC comprised 11 members, with six elected members and five permanent members: China, France, the Soviet Union (later replaced by Russia), the United Kingdom, and the United States. Subsequently, the number of non-permanent members increased to 10.

**Function**: Under the UN Charter, the UNSC was granted primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. It can take various actions, including deploying peacekeeping missions, imposing sanctions, and authorizing military intervention.

**Cold War Era**: During the Cold War, the UNSC faced significant challenges as the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, frequently exercised their veto power, leading to deadlock on many issues.

**Post-Cold War**: Following the end of the Cold War, the UNSC became more active in addressing regional conflicts, humanitarian crises, and issues related to peacekeeping and peace-making.

**Reform Efforts**: There have been ongoing discussions and debates about the need for reform within the UNSC, particularly regarding the composition of its permanent membership and the veto power held by the five permanent members.

**Modern Challenges**: Recently, the UNSC has faced new obstacles, including terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the rise of non-state actors. It plays a significant role in responding to global crises and conflicts.

**Recent News about the UNSC about reformation and membership:**

1. In September, calls for Security Council reform were widespread, showing the importance of expanding its membership.
2. Recent discussions have been about shifting veto power from individual member states to sovereignty-pooling organisations like the EU.
3. President Biden's calls to increase the number of permanent and non-permanent members will likely face challenges.

**Key Issues:**

**Membership Expansion**: The current composition of the UNSC needs to reflect the geopolitical realities of the 21st century adequately. Many argue for including new permanent members representing regions such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia to ensure equitable representation and enhance the council's legitimacy for the future as geopolitical tensions rise across the globe. Including new member states may strengthen the role of the United Nations regarding the maintenance and consolidation of international peace and security.

**Veto Power Reform**: The veto power wielded by the five permanent members has been a subject of contention. Critics argue that it can obstruct decisive action in cases where humanitarian intervention is urgently needed. Discussions on limiting or reforming the veto power aim to strike a balance between promoting collective security and respecting the sovereignty of member states.

**Regional Representation**: The question of regional representation within the UNSC is paramount. Regional representation is ensuring that different regions around the world are represented in the council fairly to reflect the diversity of the international community. Many member states advocate for increased representation for regions currently underrepresented or underrepresented in the council, ensuring a more inclusive and diverse decision-making process. It prioritises the international community as a whole.

**Responsibility to Protect (R2P)**: The principle of Responsibility to Protect asserts that the international community intervenes when states fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. It was adopted at the 2005 World Summit. The UNSC plays a pivotal role in authorizing such interventions, but the process and criteria for invoking R2P are subject to debate and contention. The UNSC’s role in implementing R2P highlights the complexity between sovereignty, human rights and international peace/security.

**Recent news about the UNSC:**

Recently, there have been complex power dynamics within the UNSC, from the limitations of formal reform effects to the potential for changes to shape the council's effectiveness in addressing global conflicts.

The UNSC has 5 permanent members - the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China and France (known as the P5) — which wield a veto that allows it to unilaterally thwart any action.

**Gridlock and Veto Power**: The UNSC's structure, with veto power held by the five permanent members (P5), leads to gridlock and prevents decisive action on significant global issues, particularly when one of the P5 members is involved in a conflict.

**Calls for Reform**: There are widespread calls for fundamental revisions to the UNSC's membership and powers. Suggestions range from expanding permanent membership to stripping the P5 of their veto power.

**Challenges to Reform**: Efforts to reform the UNSC face substantial challenges, including resistance from powerful member states who benefit from the current structure. Past reforms, like increasing the number of non-permanent members in 1963, did not significantly alter the power dynamics within the council.

**Incremental Changes**: Despite the challenges of formal reform, the UNSC has changed over time. These relatively minor changes have empowered other members to take on new roles and initiatives within the council, leading to innovative approaches to multilateral action.

**Outdated USNC?**

Formed in 1945, the council consists of 15 members. The five permanent members were the coalition that defeated Japan, Germany and Italy in World War Two. In 1945, these were the world's powers, but now global powers have shifted. If the United Nations is to stay relevant, then the make-up of the permanent members needs to be updated. Some new members would be added; some current members would lose their permanent status. With tensions in the Middle East to the war in Ukraine, how should the membership be changed?

**Penholding in the UNSC:**

Penholding in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is an informal yet crucial process that shapes the content of the Security Council's work. Traditionally dominated by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, the role of the penholder has expanded to include other members, particularly the elected members of the E10.

Penholding involves more than just drafting resolutions; it involves leadership on specific issues and collaboration with other members, including the P3 (permanent members) and fellow elected members. Elected members have used penholding to challenge the P3's dominance and have succeeded in complex negotiations, such as those concerning the cross-border humanitarian corridor in Syria.

The effectiveness of the E10 in penholding varies, but successive members have passed the role to each other on critical issues. While these efforts have not resolved significant conflicts like the Syrian crisis, they have facilitated aid delivery and contributed to incremental progress amid broader political challenges.

**Questions to consider:**

Should the UNSC membership be expanded to include more permanent members, and if so, which countries should be considered for permanent seat and how can the inclusion of new member states ensure better representation?

Should the permanent members retain the veto power, or should it be modified or abolished to enhance the council's effectiveness?

How can the UNSC better represent different regions and ensure equitable geographical distribution among its members?

Should regional blocs be significantly influenced by selecting UNSC members to enhance regional representation?

How can the role of non-permanent members be strengthened to ensure meaningful participation in decision-making processes?

What measures can be implemented to empower non-permanent members and increase their involvement in shaping UNSC agendas and initiatives?

What challenges and opportunities are associated with revising the UN Charter to reform the UNSC?

How can UNSC reform contribute to addressing contemporary global security challenges, such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and climate change?

**Useful Links:**

<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/>

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/un-security-council-was-designed-deadlock-can-it-change>

<https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12473.doc.htm>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Nations-Security-Council>

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/06/28/un-security-council-reform-what-world-thinks-pub-90032>

<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/internationale-organisationen/vereintenationen/reformsr-fragen/231618>