



China

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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.