

Time to Bring the United Nations Security Council into the 21st Century

Nancy Soderberg

Today, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is front and center in meeting key challenges central to the national security interests of the United States. The instability in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, Iran's nuclear program, terrorism, and humanitarian emergencies all call for United Nations (UN) involvement. Today, 130,000 UN peacekeepers—the second largest deployed military behind the US—keep the lid on crises across the globe.

However, continuing a decades-long downward trend, 57 percent of Americans think the UN is doing a poor job solving the problems it has faced, while only 35 percent consider it to be doing a good job.¹ This decline is occurring just as we need the UN more than ever to assist us in meeting today's global threats. In many cases, if the UN weren't taking on these challenges, instability would be worse and America's interests undermined. As the lone superpower, it is the US that has a target on its back from the extremists who take advantage of the voids.

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This fall will mark the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations but its most powerful body, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) remains stuck in an increasingly questioned Cold War structure. It is time to bring the body into the twenty-first century. Doing so will require strong leadership from President Obama.

Declining UNSC Legitimacy and Rising Importance. As the role and mission of the UNSC have grown more important in meeting today's challenges, modernizing its structure will be an essential part of improving its ability to protect

Germany which, after the US, are the UN's largest financial contributors? How can Africa, Latin America, and the Arab states remain on the sidelines? When the current system was last changed six decades ago, 142 of today's 193 member states did not yet exist and were either under colonial control or considered part of another state.

The institution has failed to adapt to changes in the last six decades, such as decolonization, the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and the MINT (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey) and globalization. As such, the UNSC today represents an outdated structure that is not responsive enough to the concerns

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and defend human dignity through increased legitimacy. Certainly, the UNSC remains the most authoritative international institution on international peace and security issues. It plays an important role in the authorization of peacekeeping missions, sanctions regimes, and efforts to resolve conflicts.

However, the most powerful body at the UN, the UNSC remains stuck in a Cold War structure—with most of the world left out of its decisions. How is it today that the P-5 retain a privileged role among nations, both with permanent seats and a veto? How is it that France and the United Kingdom (UK) retain their permanent privileges when they contribute far less funds to the global institutions than do Japan and

of peace and security in the twenty-first century. The lack of a more representative UNSC offers an excuse to those seeking to avoid implementing fully the UNSC's decisions.

To maintain its legitimacy and consequent support for its actions, UNSC membership must reflect the current reality of twenty-first century global power. Authorizing interventions and peacekeeping missions must involve the regions affected; those providing significant financial resources to the UN must have a stronger say in its decisions. The challenges the United States and the world are likely to face in the future—human protection, climate change, terrorism, economic development, nonproliferation, water resources—will become increasingly

global in nature, requiring global solutions that must include voices from all the world's regions.

Past efforts to expand the UNSC demonstrate that overcoming the political challenges from both the P-5

and regional representation. While the charter does not designate seats on a geographical basis, in practice the nonpermanent seats have been divided up among regional blocs.³ The regional groups include Asian, African (which

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and the other states will be an extremely difficult challenge. But in this second decade of the twenty-first century, the time has long since come.

History of United Nations Security Council Membership.

The UN Charter—created in 1945 and amended in 1965—established a fifteen-member Security Council, the principal organ of the UN charged with maintaining peace and security.² This body is charged as the premier international watchdog and guarantor of global peace with the authority to impose binding decisions on all UN member states. The great powers that were the victors of the Second World War received the most coveted positions as permanent members on the Security Council, with the all-powerful veto. The charter designates five permanent members, the P-5—China, France, the Soviet Union (with Russia as its successor), the United Kingdom, and the United States—which were seen as the primary guardians of global security.

In addition to the permanent members, ten additional members are elected for two-year terms based on their contributions to peace and security

includes the Arab states), Latin American and Caribbean, Eastern European, Western European and Others (which includes the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, and Israel).

When the P-5 disagree, the UNSC is hamstrung and largely ineffective, with the P-5 blocking any issue of its choosing. That means Russia will block interference in the crisis in Chechnya, China will do the same regarding human rights in Taiwan and Tibet, and both will water down any efforts to sanction their allies, such as Sudan, Syria, and Iran. The United States primarily uses the veto to protect Israel from unbalanced resolutions, and disagreements continue on the issue of terrorism, where some members continue to defend the use of terrorism by Hezbollah and Hamas against Israel. Where the P-5 disagree, the UNSC remains paralyzed.

These actions fuel resentment among the 188 other members of the UN that do not have the veto power. Yet, many of today's global crises need global responses. The US needs the leaders of Latin America in combatting drug and human traffickers; we need the leaders

of Africa to build effective peacekeeping missions on the continent and fighting infectious diseases and terrorism; we need the leaders of Asia beyond China to counter the threat of North Korea, help rebuild Afghanistan, and manage threats in the South China Sea. Without a voice on the UNSC, much less veto power, states are not equal decision makers with the P-5 and view the actions of the UNSC with skepticism.

Past UNSC Expansion Efforts.

UNSC expansion was last attempted in a serious fashion a decade ago. At the 60th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations in September, 2005, most of the world's leaders gathered at the United Nations "World Summit" for what was supposed to be a strong endorsement of a visionary plan for global governance in the twenty-first century. While most of the world's attention focused on the failure of that plan, another key proposal also failed, expansion of the UNSC.

Secretary General Kofi Annan, acting on the recommendation of a distinguished panel, proposed two models expanding the UNSC to twenty-four seats.⁴ Neither proposal would alter the current veto system held by the five permanent members. The two options were: Model A) the creation of six new permanent seats. While no countries were specified, the most likely candidates were Japan, Germany, one from Latin America (most likely Brazil), two from Africa, and one from Asia (most likely India); or Model B) the creation of a new category of non-permanent four-year seats selected from a new configuration of four regional group-

ings (rather than the current five).

The second option was quickly rejected by those most hopeful of permanent membership, especially Germany. The first fell apart when the Africans could not decide which two nations should get the two seats, a task exacerbated by the fact that the Arabs are part of the Africa group. The three leading candidates, Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa, all have strong cases but could not reach an agreement, amongst themselves or the other members of the UNSC, on the way forward. The Africans also strongly opposed the P-5 maintaining the veto. No proposal has come close to the threshold of two thirds of the member states necessary for changing the UN Charter. As Kofi Annan admitted, "Here, too, there is agreement on the principle, but the devil is in the details."⁵

In the decade since, the conversation has continued but no serious push to reach agreement has been made by world leaders. The Open-ended Working Group on Security Council Reform, created in 1993, has ironically made good on its name, having failed to agree on a proposal. In 2009, the UN formed The Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) on reforming the Security Council and, while its members meet regularly, no actionable plan has emerged. The group of four aspirants, India, Brazil, Japan, and Germany (G-4) have indicated they would agree not to use their veto power until a review some fifteen years later.⁶ They have also suggested adding six more permanent seats and four non-permanent members, expanding the Council to 25. But the Africa states have never agreed to any proposal that

did not either eliminate the veto or give new permanent members the veto. The African initiative, the Ezulwini Consensus, supports two permanent seats with a veto, chosen by the African Union, along with five more nonpermanent positions for Africa.⁷

Other proposals, such as United for Consensus, have included granting regional organizations a permanent seat, which would then rotate among states in that region.⁸ For instance, the African Union would be guaranteed two seats, but that seat would rotate among African states. Others have proposed rotation of the non-permanent seats for longer periods of four to ten years. Yet, as all these proposals fail to give new members equal standing to the P-5, they have failed to garner significant support.

The United States claims it remains open to “modest Council expansion in both the permanent and non-permanent categories,” so long as new members can fulfill the responsibilities.⁹ When asked privately about the issue, US officials’ responses make it clear there is no serious effort to push the issue.

ing progress in meeting today’s threats from terrorism, infectious diseases, nuclear proliferation, climate, poverty, and many other challenges. And the only way to achieve UNSC reform is for the US to lead the effort.

The US should prepare to launch, at the 70th anniversary of the founding of the UN, a practical proposal to expand the permanent membership. It would build on previous efforts but make some key changes that will increase its chances of success. A key tactic in diplomacy is to make progress where you can and delay controversial issues for a later discussion. The US should therefore propose a phased approach, “The Phased 22 Deal,” expanding the UNSC now, the more controversial issues of the veto and permanent regional seats delayed for another decade.

Expand now to 12/22. The UNSC’s permanent membership should be expanded from five to twelve, to include Brazil, Germany, Japan, India, two nations from Africa (most likely Nigeria and South Africa), and one from the Arab world (most likely Egypt).¹⁰ With the current ten rotating

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US Leadership for UNSC Expansion, “The Phased 22 Deal.” It is a mistake for the US not to lead on UNSC expansion. As our global threats become more diffuse and increasingly require a global response, galvanizing support from the world is the only way the US can make last-

seats, the total members would number 22. This size would require adding an additional seat to the previously discussed two African/Arab slots. Debates will be intense on which countries to select so specific criteria should be developed as outlined below. These countries are already regularly elected onto the Council for the rotating seats.

Permanent membership will help them build regional acceptance of the UNSC decisions and, overtime, more direct support to the UN's funds and programs. This expanded UNSC will not necessarily make it more efficient but the time needed to accommodate the views of countries representing most of the globe is well worth the effort in terms of building global legitimacy.

Update regional groups and UNSC criteria in the General Assembly.

The General Assembly should review and revise the current regional groupings.¹¹ Certainly, separating the Arab group from the Africa group is a step that has long made sense, as would combining Eastern and Western Europe into one European Union seat. Turkey, which currently votes with Western Europe but also participates in the Asia group, may shift to Asia and others may shift as well. Specific criteria on contributions to the UN could be developed to determine (and justify to opponents) the selection of these new members. These could include financial and other support to the UN, political stability, and overall ability to participate in the UNSC's demanding activities.¹² This may result in changes to how the ten elected members would be selected. The request for small island states to have a non-permanent seat must also be addressed. Such criteria and process will make it easier for states like China and Argentina to accept new states from their regions.

No immediate change in veto.

There would be no immediate change in the veto, although the current P-5 states would agree to limit even further

their use of it. The issue of the veto would be reviewed every ten years, with the ultimate goal being its elimination. Such assurances may make some of the more reluctant P-5 nations, such as China, more willing to agree to a consensus.

Permanent regional seats.

Every decade, there should also be discussion of whether to collapse permanent member state seats into permanent regional seats, which would then sponsor rotating seats. Thus, the African Union could have two seats, the Arabs one, the Latin Americans two, and the European Union two, reducing the overall number of members to something like twenty-one members. However, officials of both France and the UK turn pale at such a suggestion, and the U.S. certainly supports their continued presence on the Council. But the current financial contributions of neither France nor the UK merit their seat in today's world and an over-representation of Europe will continue to hamper meaningful UNSC expansion.

Conclusion—UNSC Expansion is a vital, if imperfect, pursuit.

Overall, expanding the membership would give the UNSC more credibility and legitimacy in the global arena and thus more support for its actions. The addition of seven permanent members will mean that billions of people will have a more direct role in the actions for the UNSC -- at a time when global buy-in is critical. While an expanded UNSC will not necessarily work better, be more efficient, or produce bolder solutions to these challenges, it will

make the decisions more legitimate and achieve stronger regional buy-in—a key element to maintaining support for its decisions and lasting stability. It is thus a vital, if imperfect, pursuit.

Such a deal will be very difficult to achieve, as strong divisions remain over the veto and the appropriate regional

clear support for UNSC expansion and then work within G20 countries and the various UN groups mentioned above, especially The Open-ended Working Group on Security Council Reform, to develop a coalition of support for the expansion. Russia and China will continue to oppose the effort but as

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candidates. In fact, the P-5 are content with the current makeup and, while never acknowledged publicly, view an expansion as an erosion of their own privileged status. They fear an expansion will make the UNSC less, not more effective. That is why this phased approach has the best chance of success. With the P-5's strong objection to any change in the veto, agreement on expansion now is only possibly if that issue is decided later down the road.

The best way for President Obama to begin the discussion is to announce his

support grows, their objection will lessen. Without the United States leading, no serious effort will emerge. A clear US position and effort to build support will change the dynamic.

As the US relies more heavily on the rest of the world to share its superpower burden, the legitimacy of the UNSC is increasingly critical. One of President Obama's lasting legacies should be to jump start this new approach to bring the UNSC into the 21st century, starting at this fall's 70th anniversary of the founding of the UN.

NOTES

1 February 6-9, 2014, Gallup World Affairs Poll, www.gallup.com.

2 In 1965, the UN Charter was amended to expand the UNSC from eleven to fifteen members, adding four impermanent members. Amending the charter requires approval of two-thirds of the UN General Assembly and ratification of domestic implementing legislation by two-thirds of the member states, including all of the P-5.

3 Kara McDonald and Stewart Patrick, "UN Security Council Enlargement and U.S. Interests," Internet, <http://www.cfr.org/international-organizations-and-alliances/un-security-council-enlargement-us-interests/p23363> (date accessed: 9 April 2015).

4 See Note by the Secretary General; General Assembly A/59/565, 2 December 2004. Members of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change included: Chair: Anand Panyarachun, former Prime Minister of Thailand, Robert Badinter (France), João Baena Soares (Brazil), Gro Harlem Brundtland (Norway), Mary Chinery Hesse (Ghana), Gareth Evans (Australia), David Hannay (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), Enrique Iglesias (Uruguay), Amre Moussa (Egypt), Satish Nambiar (India), Sadako Ogata (Japan), Yevgeny Primakov (Russian Federation), Qian Qiqian (China), Salim Salim (United Republic of Tanzania), Nafis Sadik (Pakistan) and Brent Scowcroft (United States of America).

5 Kofi Annan, "A Glass at Least Half-Full," *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 September 2005.

6 See Global Policy Forum Statements on Security Council Reform. <https://www.globalpolicy.org>.

7 Council on Foreign Relations, Common African Position on the Proposed Reform of the United Nations (Ezulwini Consensus), 7 July 2011.

8 United for Consensus, also called the Coffee Club, was initiated in the mid-90s by Italy to oppose expansion of permanent seats. Others soon joined, including Pakistan, Mexico, Egypt, Spain, Argentina, and Turkey. Over 100 countries have at some time participated in the group. For more information on the various groupings, see <http://www.centerforunreform.org/?q=node/45>.

9 Remarks by Ambassador Rosemary DiCarlo, Deputy Permanent Representative, General Assembly Plenary Debate on Security Council Reform and Annual Report, November 7, 2013.

10 Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa have long vied for permanent seats. The region hotly debates the issue and there is no consensus. However, Nigeria is a rich oil producer and its recent democratic election will bolster its case. The recent turmoil in Egypt and overthrow of a democratically elected government will complicate its bid, although its sheer size will most likely keep it as the top contender. South Africa's democracy and strong economy keep it as the most likely certain choice.

11 Again, the current five regional groups include Asian, African (which includes Arab states), Latin American and Caribbean, Eastern European, Western European and Others (which includes the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, and Israel).

12 McDonald and Patrick, 2010.

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