

Reform of the UN Security Council is Possible¹

The main UN body is blocking itself. Changing the veto principle is considered hopeless. All it would take however, is the right reform proposals, a smart approach and sufficient pressure.

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Illustration Creser & Lenz

The Russian attack on Ukraine has triggered many fundamental debates in the West and called for a repositioning of social, security and energy policy. What was acceptable to the majority until a few years ago is no longer so today. Finland and Sweden, two previously non-aligned countries, have even decided to join NATO, and Switzerland is considering a redefinition of its centuries-old neutrality. These are all changes that would have been unthinkable two years ago. Nevertheless, they are a reality today. Because the context has changed.

There has been much debate since the outbreak of war. Conspicuously absent, however, is the discussion of an urgently needed reform of the UN Security Council. Although mandated to maintain international peace and security, the Security Council remains unable to make decisions and virtually toothless due to Russia's veto power in this conflict. The fact that this blocking option exists at all is due to a systemic flaw.

While in other areas existing systems are adapted to the changed circumstances, in the case of a reform of the Security Council either the sheer impossibility is hastily pointed out. Or one resorts to well-intentioned "mini-reforms," such as increasing accountability when a veto is used. Instead of getting to the root of the problems, such reforms have a counterproductive effect by indirectly lending more legitimacy to the status quo. While the impossibility argument may sound understandable, it does not justify not addressing the issue. This is what we would like to do in the following.

Proposal

Our proposal is not intended to alter the fundamental structures of the Security Council: We will continue to distinguish between permanent and non-permanent members and give permanent members greater weight in voting. The regional distribution criteria for the allocation of seats on the Security Council are also to be retained. This is a preservation of the tried and established, so as not to overstretch the already weakly developed will to reform. Although a new collective security system designed from scratch might be better.

¹ Published in the Frankfurter Allgemeine on 15 June, 2023 (German original translated with DeepL).

Three Elements of Reform

The aim of our reform proposals is to introduce a voting rule with less blocking potential and to increase the representativeness and legitimacy of the Security Council. It must not be the case that India, for example, with a population of 1.4 billion, has less weight than its former colonial power, Great Britain, with 60 million. Our proposal has three elements:

First, an increase in the number of members. In the current 15-member system, 5 states (the Permanent 5, "P5") are permanently represented in the Security Council (China, France, Russia, UK and USA). In addition, 10 other non-permanent states sit on the Council for two years at a time. In our proposal, the permanent seats would be increased from 5 to 10 and the non-permanent seats from 10 to 15. The Security Council would consist of 25 states instead of 15.

Second, a determination of permanent members on the basis of objective criteria. Here, the population size, the GDP and the voluntary contributions to the UN budget would be suitable. From our point of view, it would be justified to weight the population equally with the two criteria GDP and voluntary contributions together, which in turn would have the same weight among themselves: i.e. 50 percent, 25 percent, 25 percent. Depending on the weighting of these criteria, a different ranking of states would naturally result. Interestingly, Russia - a P5 country - would not make it into the top 10 in any of the numerous weighting variants we analyzed. The country has too small a population and its GDP is only that of a middle power, such as Spain. France, another P5 country, is also too small to be included in the P10 using the three criteria.

Secured places would exist for the USA, China, India and especially Germany. However, the unrestricted application of the criteria rule would mean that not all 5 UN regions would be permanently represented in the Security Council: Africa and Eastern Europe would be missing. To remedy this shortcoming, an additional condition is needed: Each region should receive at least one permanent seat. This would allow Russia as the Eastern European representative and Nigeria as the African representative to join the P10 club. What remains is the problem of the current P5 state, France. If a reform does not succeed in "Europeanizing" its seat (which it does not look like doing), a solution would have to be found that protects its "acquired rights." Thus, the 10th seat could be allocated to France. This would result in the following distribution of seats for the P10: Brazil, China, Nigeria, Russia, USA followed by India, Germany, Japan, UK and France. All states meet the objective selection criterion except Russia and Nigeria, which would make it into the Security Council under the title of "regional representative," and France, which would make it into the Security Council under the title of "acquired rights." This list should be reviewed periodically (e.g. every 15 years) and it should be possible to adjust it by a simple majority.

Third, a revision of the voting rule. The current unanimity rule (veto) for the P5 cannot, of course, be extended to the P10. Otherwise, the Council would be even more blocked. For decision-making, we propose that a simple majority is required in the 25 club (13), supplemented by the additional condition that no more than 2 of the P10 may oppose. In other words, 3 of the P10 could prevent a resolution. The "right of veto" would thus be moderately restricted. A "Russian case", in which a member could prevent effective measures against itself with a sole veto, would be impossible. The numerous Chinese-Russian so-called "double-pack vetoes" would also no longer be sufficient in the future.

If not now, when?

So far so good, but how do you get such a reform through? It requires an amendment to the UN Charter and must therefore ultimately be approved by the 5 current veto powers. These seem - as all previous reform attempts show - to feel little desire to scratch their privileges acquired in 1945. In his book "Leadership" (2022), Henry Kissinger impressively described the failure of the old foreign policy aristocracies, which - although often at odds - were quick to agree in defending their privileges. The behavior of today's P5 strikes one as similar. However divided they may be on the brutal Russian campaign against Ukraine, it would not have occurred to any of the P4 to question the Russian veto in principle. Would it take the use of Russian nuclear weapons before any serious changes are considered? Hopefully not! What is needed is (i) moderate reform proposals, combined (ii) with a smart approach in the UN, complemented (iii) by determined diplomatic pressure from those willing to change.

No radical change, several winners

Our proposals do not lead to a radical change of system: on the contrary, they are based on the existing blueprint of the Security Council and even leave certain privileges of the P10 to increase the likelihood of acceptance. They also violate the principle of "sovereign equality" of members as stipulated in Art 2(1) of the UN Charter. It is actually a cynical paradox that it takes a violation of this principle of equality to improve the chances of reform. A remnant of monarchist thought patterns in which inequality is the program?

As for the procedure: In all previous reform plans, failure was always anticipated because of the veto right. In a reform process, however, the veto would only come into play at the very end. According to Art. 109 of the Charter, the reform proposals could be recommended for adoption in a so-called "General Conference" with a 2/3 majority of the members of the General Assembly. The P5 could therefore not prevent the proposals from being put on the table. They could only refuse ratification and thus sabotage a reform project.

Regarding diplomatic pressure: Many countries will benefit from the proposed changes: Africa will receive the permanent seat it has long demanded. So will the G4 countries Brazil, Germany, India and Japan. And no current P5 state would lose its seat. The potential winners should join forces and insist on reform. As a last resort, they could consider boycotting Security Council meetings. It would only take 7 members staying away from meetings to render the Council inquorate.

The Russian attack on Ukraine should be used to launch a debate on reform. This requires creative proposals for solutions that propagate new ideas without ignoring the realities of international politics. Our proposal preserves what can be preserved, but brings greater representativeness and a composition of the Security Council based on objective criteria. This would mean that the African continent, but also the most populous country India or the European heavyweight Germany would be represented in the UN according to their importance in world politics. This is particularly true for Germany, which has had to assume a leading role in the EU since the Ukraine war and is likely to be given more responsibility in NATO sooner or later. The proposed voting rule also means that the UN's birth defect - the right of veto - is finally being countered.

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