



Hopes Raised for UN Security Council Reform

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Discussions about reforming the Security Council, the main UN body responsible for maintaining world peace, have intensified in recent years. Prospects for change remain modest given the divergent positions of the Council's permanent members, who have the final say, but the Pact for the Future adopted in September and statements by representatives of some of the permanent members signal a slow shift in attitudes. Pressure for reform, particularly from developing countries, will grow, so Poland's more active involvement in the discussion could allow it to use its greater visibility to strengthen bilateral cooperation with them.

The Security Council and Its Weaknesses. According to the UN Charter, which governs the UN, the Security Council (UNSC) consists of 15 members, divided into two categories. Five are permanent—China, France, Russia, the U.S., and the UK (the so-called P5). Ten remaining non-permanent members are elected by the UN General Assembly (UNGA), five each for a two-year term within geographical groups: Africa (3), Asia and the Pacific (2), Latin America and the Caribbean (2), Western Europe and Others (2), Eastern Europe (1). The UNSC adopts resolutions by a majority of nine, but on substantive issues such as the establishment of UN peacekeeping operations or the imposition of sanctions in the event of threats to peace (including those involving the use of armed force), the P5 members have what is known as a “veto”, that is, the right to block the adoption of a resolution. Despite the near quadrupling of the number of UN Member States (from 51 in 1945 to 117 in 1965 and 193 today) and the increased role of some of them in the international order, the composition of the Council has only been expanded once, by four non-permanent members in 1965. This has led many states, especially developing countries, to accuse the Council of being unrepresentative.

At the same time, the Council's effectiveness in responding to conflicts is declining—its resolutions are often too late and too weak to influence the situation and counteract crises. This has been caused by conflicting interests and the resulting increase in tensions, especially between the three P5 members, China and Russia, and the U.S. Especially in the last three years, they have increasingly used their vetoes to protect their own narrow interests (particularly Russia, to block resolutions on the war it initiated in Ukraine) or to protect allies (Israel by the U.S., Syria by Russia). The lack of consensus is spreading to new areas: for example, since

2022, it has led to [the de facto dismantling of the sanctions regime against North Korea through vetoes by China and Russia](#). However, more serious changes to the UNSC (e.g., of the number of members) require not only the approval of two-thirds of the UN members but also the consent of all P5 members.

Reviving the Debate on Changes to the UNSC and the UN Summit of the Future. Since last year, the debate on reform has been fuelled by the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has undermined the legitimacy of the Security Council due to Russia blocking unfavourable decisions as both an aggressor and P5 member at the same time, along with the forthcoming 80th anniversary of the UN in 2025, and the growing ambitions of developing countries, especially African ones. The latter recognise the growing rivalry between Russia and the U.S. for influence on the continent and are trying to leverage it to have a greater voice. As the African Union (AU), these developing states they have been pushing since the early 2000s for at least two permanent and two non-permanent seats for Africa in the Council. They have strong arguments, including the need to redress the historical injustice of their under-representation in global governance institutions (54 African countries make up more than 25% of UN states, yet they have no permanent seat and only three non-permanent seats), and their importance to the UN (African affairs occupy almost 50% of UNSC meeting time, about 70% of UNSC resolutions concern them, around 50% of peacekeeping missions are stationed there, and almost 40% of their participants are from Africa).

Another important group, the G-4 (Brazil, India, Japan, Germany), calls for their inclusion in the UNSC as permanent members

pointing to their important role on the continents and their financial contributions to the UN budget (especially the last two countries). It accepts two additional permanent seats for Africa and up to four new non-permanent seats for African and non-African countries.

The third major group, United for Consensus, mainly composed of the regional rivals of the G-4 (including Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, Pakistan, South Korea, Italy and Spain), categorically opposes any increase in the number of permanent members and proposes instead that the number of non-P5 UNSC members be increased from 10 to 20 and that all of them be eligible for re-election at the end of their terms (currently impossible). It also rejects any extension of the veto to new members (as demanded by the AU and G-4, unless the veto is abolished altogether). Up to 40 countries support this position in various way.

Disagreements within the P5 are not helping the negotiations. Statements by P5 representatives in August and September (including at the UNGA) show that France and the UK are the most liberal, supporting permanent membership for the G-4 and two African countries and an increase in the number of non-permanent seats. However, only France allows the veto to be limited, and only as regards resolutions relating to mass atrocities. In September, Russia supported the two permanent seats for Brazil and India, as well as the African position, but categorically opposed the permanent seats for Japan and Germany, pointing out that Western countries are over-represented in the UNSC (they actually have five seats in the UNSC, including three permanent ones, while their group has only 29 countries). In an equally significant statement in September, the U.S. representative to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, argued in favour of two permanent seats for African countries and one non-permanent seat for [small island states](#), in addition to the permanent seats for India, Japan, and Germany the U.S. already supported. China, on the other hand, avoids clear statements and now focuses mainly on supporting African states' ambitions, although in 2015 it also expressed support for permanent seats for Brazil and India. However, the P5 members are unanimously opposed to abolishing the veto altogether and extending it to new countries.

Negotiations are not facilitated by discrepancies within the P5. From statements made by P5 representatives in August and September this year (among others at the UNGA) show that France and the UK are the most liberal, supporting the permanent membership of the G-4 and two African countries and an increase in the number of non-permanent seats. However, only France allows a limitation of the veto right, and only that on draft resolutions on events where mass atrocities are committed. Russia in September this year supported the two permanent seats for Brazil and India, as well as the African position, but categorically opposed the permanent seats of Japan and Germany, pointing out that Western countries are over-represented in the UNSC (they actually have five seats in the UNSC, including three permanent ones, when their group has only 29 countries). In an equally significant statement, [U.S. representative to the UN Thomas-Greenfield](#) in September advocated, in addition to the support for permanent seats for

India, Japan, and Germany, two permanent seats for African countries, and one non-permanent seat for [small island states](#). China, on the other hand, is avoiding clear statements, focusing now mainly on supporting Africa's ambitions, although in 2015 it also expressed support for permanent seats for Brazil and India. Remarkably, all P5 members are unanimously opposed to abolishing the veto right altogether and for expanding it to include new countries.

The issue of the UNSC reform was included in the so-called [Pact for the Future adopted on 22 September at the UN Summit of the Future](#). The UN members jointly stressed in it the need to take particular account of the aspirations of African states, but also to enlarge the UNSC to include states from the Asia-Pacific region and Latin America and the Caribbean, and to examine the possibility of ensuring the representation of extra-regional groups (mainly small island states, as well as Arab and Islamic states). However, on issues such as the future and rules for the use of the right of veto or the determination of the number and categories of new members (permanent, non-permanent, those with the possibility of re-election), the Pact merely announced an intensification of efforts to reach an agreement as soon as possible.

Conclusions and Outlook. Although the provisions of the Pact for the Future on UNSC reform are vague, it is the first explicit commitment to Security Council expansion by all UN states since the 1960s. It will be used by developing countries, among others, to increase pressure for a P5 agreement on changes to the Council. Recent months have shown that, under this pressure, a consensus in principle has already emerged within the P5 to grant permanent membership to African states, due in large part to the growing competition among the superpowers for the favour of these states and the relatively strong and unified position of the AU group. However, without either granting new permanent members the same veto power as existing members, or abolishing the veto for all, the chances of reform are slim, and neither solution has yet been endorsed by any of the P5.

The alternative to changes in the UNSC is a further marginalisation of the importance of this body and the UN itself in favour of global governance institutions such as the G20. This would be detrimental to small and medium-sized countries who are beneficiaries of the UN's collective security system. The dynamics within the organisation make it necessary for Poland to clarify a new position on the various options for UNSC reform, especially in view of the moderate chances of success of the G-4 demands, which Poland has so far supported for the sake of relations with Germany. Stronger support for at least the candidacies of African states would be desirable. As a democratic Western state without a post-colonial past, Poland could be seen as a valuable and credible advocate of extending the UNSC to developing countries, which could lead to a revival of bilateral contacts. Support for increased influence of regional organisations such as the EU in the decision-making process of the UNSC is also worth considering, but granting the EU a permanent seat of its own seems unrealistic, as it would be tantamount to taking it away from EU member France, which will block the change.