



Reform, Rupture, and Reality: A Balanced View of the United Nations Security Council

The United Nations Security Council faces constant criticism. Recent conflicts in Israel, Syria, and Ukraine highlight growing tensions among its five permanent members (P5). Instead of acting in line with their core mandate to maintain global peace, the national interests of the major powers China, Russia, and the United States often take precedence and lead to paralyzing deadlocks. However, while these failures dominate headlines and reinforce calls for reform, they only tell part of the story. Research shows that even in its imperfect state, it addresses urgent crises, sparks diverse debates, and delivers measurable progress once resolutions are passed. The UNSC is undeniably far from perfect, but it is not broken either. It is time to move beyond one-sided criticisms and adopt a more nuanced perspective – one that recognizes UNSC's shortcomings and often overlooked strengths.



Pauline Hoffmann
Research Fellow,
Lehrstuhl für Public
Administration & Public Policy,
Zeppelin Universität

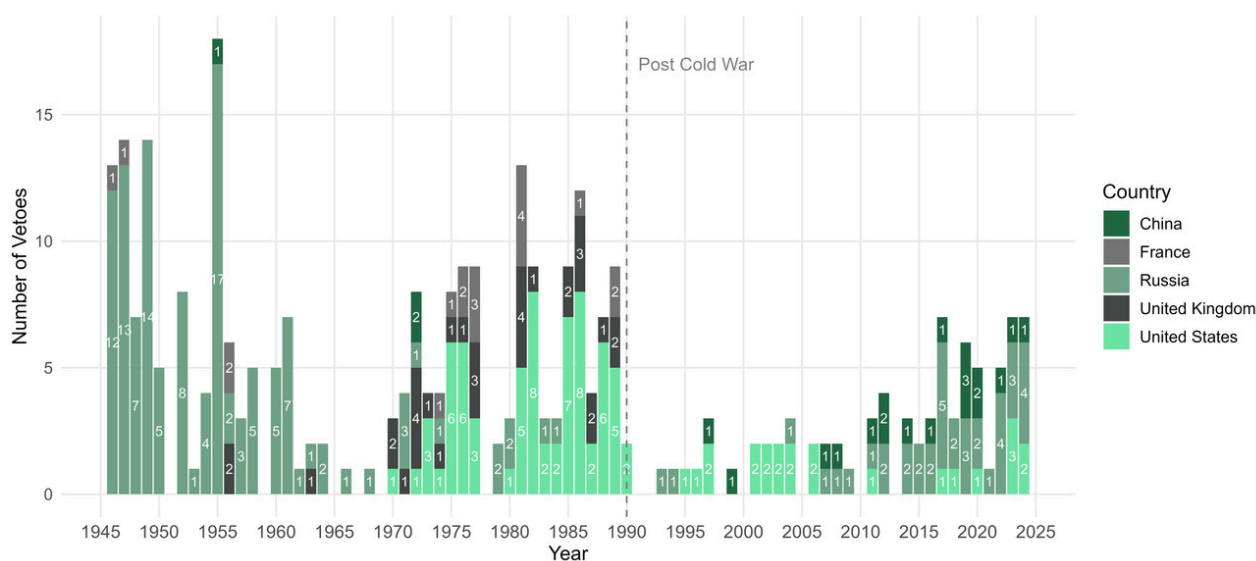


Daniel Baumann
Research Fellow,
Lehrstuhl für Public
Administration & Public Policy,
Zeppelin Universität

A Short History of Veto Power and Deadlocks

On 24 October 1945, the Charter of the United Nations (UN) came into effect, along with the most powerful body of the UN system: the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Immediately established after the Second World War, the UNSC was commissioned with the “primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security” (Article 24). While ten of its members are elected by the General Assembly for two years with a two-thirds majority (E10), China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have been permanent members for more than 79 years. These five countries wield veto power, enabling them to block decisions or binding resolutions regardless of majority opinion within the Council. Since its introduction, the veto has been exercised 322 times but since the end of the Cold War, it has been dominated by the three major powers – China, Russia, and the United States – often to advocate their geopolitical interests.

G1: Veto Power Unveiled: A Breakdown of P5 Influence in the UNSC (1946 – 2024)



Dataset available online at: <https://psdata.un.org/dataset/DPPA-SCVETOES>



This dynamic is especially evident in the UNSC's handling of major crises in recent decades. Take Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: Between 2010 and 2023, 75 meetings have been held on the conflict, and four resolutions have been drafted to condemn Moscow's actions and demand de-escalation. Yet, despite Article 27 of the UN Charter, which states that a party to a dispute must abstain from voting, Russia has consistently wielded its veto to block these efforts. Similar patterns emerge when P5 members protect their allies, as seen with Russia often joined by China backing Syria or the United States supporting Israel in the Middle East.

The Illusive Quest for Reform

These recurring deadlocks have sparked widespread debates about the design of the UNSC, which has remained largely unchanged since its creation in 1945. Critics rightly argue that the Council does not reflect the geopolitical realities of the 21st century and has difficulty adopting resolutions when the interests of the P5 are involved. Even UN Secretary-General António Guterres echoed this concern during his impactful speech at the 78th session of the General Assembly, warning that the future of the Council is obvious: "It's reform or rupture".

And yet, while this decision between reform or rupture may seem straightforward, its implementation is far more complex. Among the 193 UN member states, opinions on the reform differ widely. Some members like the G4 consisting of Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan argue for an expansion of the Council to more than ten elected and five permanent members. Others call for a more far-reaching reassessment of the P5's veto power. Procedural hurdles complicate matters further. To modify the Charter, a two-thirds majority vote in the General Assembly and unanimous consent from the P5 is required. In a world dominated by leaders such as Xi Jinping in China, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and, once again, Donald Trump with his "America First" attitude, achieving such consensus is illusional.

Beyond "Reform or Rupture" through Scientific Evidence

If one were to follow Guterres' warning, the future of the UNSC in the absence of reforms seems clear: "rupture". However, such a binary perspective oversimplifies a far more nuanced reality. Not everything the UNSC does is as flawed as it might seem in the currently prevailing public discourse. A closer look at academic literature offers a more balanced view. Alongside the Council's well-documented shortcomings, studies highlight at least three significant contributions that demonstrate the UNSC's continued relevance in present days: (1) it addresses critical global crises, (2) fosters increasingly diverse debates, and (3) once the Council manages to adopt resolutions, they have a measurable impact, particularly in the realm of peacebuilding.

The UNSC agenda reflects the severity of crises

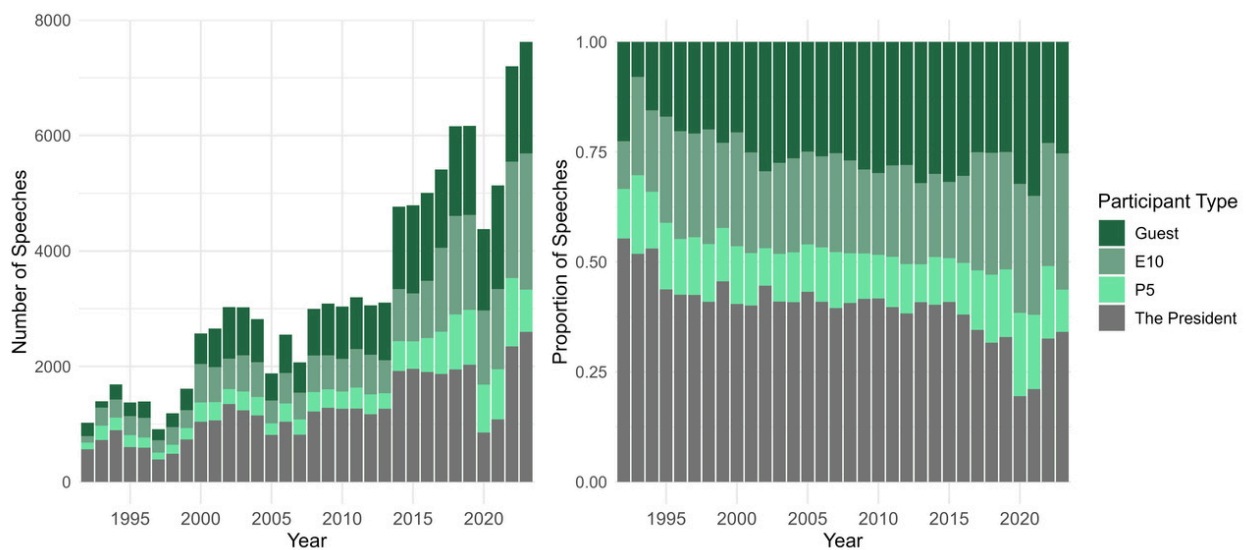
The UNSC addresses international crises even when the interests of the P5 diverge, and this is particularly evident in the agenda-setting process. For the Council to act, disputes must first be placed on its agenda – a critical step that initiates formal discussions and paves the way for potential resolutions. While the P5 are often seen as dominating this process, research shows that the Council's responsiveness is primarily shaped by the severity of crises, with urgent and far-reaching situations taking precedence, in line with the principles of the UN Charter. Moreover, the E10 have increasingly influenced the Council's agenda, introducing more inclusive dynamics and enhancing their ability to tackle complex and multifaceted challenges, such as the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or the long process to establish the Ombudsperson 1267 for the Al-Qaeda sanction regime.



The UNSC fosters diverse debates

Once a topic is placed on the agenda, public debates within the UNSC are not monopolized by the P5. As indicated in the figures below, the number of speeches and speakers per meeting has grown significantly over the years from an average of 7.64 speakers pre-2010 to 13.4 speakers in the post-2010 period. In addition to the P5, the E10 and guest participants – including representatives from non-member states and international organizations – have taken on an increasingly prominent role in discussions. This diversity ensures that the voices of smaller nations and regional bodies contribute meaningfully to the Council’s deliberations, fostering richer and more inclusive dialogues.

G2: Expanding Perspectives: Evolving Trends in UNSC Speech Contributions



Figures created based on the updated version of the UNSC debates corpus by Schönfeld et al. (2019).
 Online available at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/KGVSYH>

The UNSC resolutions have tangible impacts

Finally, while it is no secret that it is difficult to adopt meaningful resolutions in the UNSC, research shows that once adopted, resolutions can work. These resolutions take various forms. They range from lower-level measures, such as official statements, demands for action, or calls for diplomatic engagement, to high-level actions like economic sanctions, arms embargoes, or even the authorization of military intervention. Particularly peacebuilding missions, which fall into the latter category, have shown measurable success when implemented effectively. Studies reveal that such missions reduce violence and foster more enduring peace agreements, as evidenced in Namibia and El Salvador. Combined with the observation that the number of interstate conflicts has declined since the UNSC’s creation – though partly attributable to broader trends such as economic interdependence – this indicates that the body plays a vital, albeit imperfect, stabilizing role in an increasingly fractured international system.

A Call for a Nuanced Perspective on the UNSC

The debate surrounding the UNSC is unlikely to fade as it approaches its 80th year of existence. The Council suffers from far-reaching shortcomings, such as the misuse of veto power, imbalances in representation, and inconsistencies in enforcement, all of which unquestionably require attention. However, the attention to these issues must not remain as one-sided as it currently is. Nearly all existing discussions – of which there are many – follow a black-and-white logic, or as UN Secretary-General António Guterres puts it, the stark choice between “reform or rupture”. A more nuanced perspective is ab-



absent and long overdue. Therefore, the discourse should urgently shift from merely emphasizing the weaknesses of the UNSC to also highlighting its strengths.

In this context, taking a closer look beyond headlines and into academic research can help. Since 2000, the Web of Science has listed nearly 500 studies addressing the UNSC. These studies examine processes ranging from agenda-setting to the effectiveness of adopted resolutions and provide novel data, like speech data, which allow the UN and other stakeholders to develop a comprehensive understanding of the UNSC's functioning. Only by incorporating these insights into discussions can a more nuanced view be established – one that enables the design of a realistic path forward beyond “reform or rupture”.