

TRANSFORMING THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

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No part of the United Nations system has been the object of as much criticism as the Security Council (SC). That unrepresentative, undemocratic and anachronistic agency is composed of fifteen members. Five of them, the so-called P-5, are the major victors of World War II: China, France, Russia (formerly the USSR), the UK and the USA. Their seats are “permanent” and they are endowed with the power of the veto, enabling each of them to nullify the wishes of the rest of the world combined and to be effectively immune from UN censure for any wrongdoings they commit. The other ten members are elected to staggered two-year terms, five each year, for seats supposedly representing large regional caucuses, but, in practice, representing only the seat-holding nation. Japan and Brazil have held temporary seats for a total of twenty years, longer than any other nation. On average, SC members have accounted for roughly 40% of the world’s population since 1972, when mainland China took over the P-5 seat previously held by Taiwan.

Although there have been crises when the SC has acted with sufficient common purpose to maintain or restore peace in troubled areas, the overall record has been disappointing. Presently, civil conflicts are raging in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, the Central African Republic, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Indonesian portion of New Guinea, Colombia and elsewhere that the UN seems powerless to stop. Some of these conflicts spill over national borders and a few, such as the Russian-Ukrainian altercation, threaten to become full-scale international wars.

Since, the UN is not a world government, but rather a weak confederation of sovereign states, each member nation retains the right to do whatever it wishes within its own borders and the prerogative, in international law, of waging war. And since there is no generally accepted method for resolving conflicts equitably, wars remain inevitable under the present system. Powerful nations continue to impose their will on the weak (including domestic minorities) by the actual or threatened use of military force, or, alternatively, by applying crippling economic measures. Surely, there must be better ways to deal with conflict. In what follows, I shall outline one such way.

The make-up of the Council must be changed. There is no valid reason for the P-5’s retention of special privileges based on their military success in a war that ended seventy years ago. Germany, Japan, India and Brazil – all now democracies – have achieved greater economic capability than one or more of the P-5 nations and they, as well as a host of other states, have larger – often much larger – populations. There is also no persuasive rationale for retaining the current one nation – one vote rule, in the SC as a whole. (In 1992, for example, when Cape Verde and India were both non-permanent members, Cape Verde’s vote counted the same as that of India, whose population was roughly 2,500 times as great.) Nor can one easily justify the fact that 68 of the UN’s 193 members have never served on the SC at all. When power is so arbitrarily and irrationally distributed among nations within a decision-making body, the legitimacy of that body’s decisions will be widely questioned. And, since the UN so often has neither the will nor the power to enforce its decisions, the United States and other nations will bypass the system with impunity and resort to making decisions by other means, including the use of force.

Power is a delicate subject to discuss. It is often, and justifiably, seen in a negative light, especially among peace and justice advocates. “Power corrupts,” it is said. But power has multiple dimensions and can be harnessed for good as well as harm. Among those dimensions – apart from military power, which ought not to be rewarded – are demographic/democratic power (i.e., population), economic power, and what is widely referred to as “soft power,” the influence that political actors exert by their contemporary behavior and historical legacies. Regrettably, soft power is subjective and not easily measured. Demographic and economic power, however, are quantifiable and, on practical grounds, in a world as diverse as ours, they call for recognition in a weighted voting formula.

We turn now to the question of membership. Literally, scores of proposals have been advanced for increasing the SC’s membership, by anywhere from one to a dozen seats. Virtually all these proposals are intended to enhance the power of specific states by giving them either permanent seats, sometimes also with power of the veto, or longer-term seats, say for up to five years. Few propose elimination of the veto altogether, despite its frequent misuse. However, implementation of any of the expansion plans would inevitably create a new set of discontented “wannabe” nations, who didn’t quite make the cut and who resent the power enhancement for the anointed few: Pakistan vis-à-vis India, Argentina and Mexico vis-à-vis Brazil, etc. Why not, instead, make SC membership universal? But, whoa! Wouldn’t a Council with 193 members be hopelessly slow in making decisions in emergency situations calling for swift responses? Indeed, it would. The way to circumvent this problem is to allocate SC membership primarily on a regional basis.

Twelve regions are proposed, each with one seat and a rationally determined weighted vote. Three of these regions would consist of single nations, the world’s three most populous states: China, India and the United States. The other nine regions are multi-national, with memberships ranging from a low of six nations to a high (in the case of Africa south of the Sahara) of 43

The proposed weighed voting formula is the following:

$$W = (P + C + 8.33) / 3$$

Here, W represents the region’s vote expressed as a percentage of the total, based on the average of three terms: P, the region’s population as a percentage of the world total; C, the region’s combined contributions to the total assessed UN budget; and 8.33 (1/12), a constant, signifying that the world views of all twelve region s are equally worthy of respect.

By way of illustration, the United States would have a weight of 12.53%, which is the average of 4.56% (its population), 24.71 (its UN contribution, assuming it to be in direct proportion to its gross national income), and 8.33% (the specified constant).

If the proposed formula were in place as of 2010, the weights of the twelve regions, n descending order, would have been as follows: Europe, 15.86%; United States, 12.53%; China, 12.24%; India, 9.30%; Latin America and the Caribbean, 7.90%; East Asia, 7.24%; Africa South of the Sahara, 7.16%; Southeast Asia, 6.61%; West Asia [the non-Arab states], 6.49%; The Arab League, 5.45%; Russia and [specified European] Neighbors, 4.67%; and The Westminster League [Canada, Australia, New Zealand and 12 Pacific island states], 4.54 Obviously, weights

would have to be periodically recalibrated, just as is done for the US House of Representatives after each decennial census.

Presently, elections to SC seats seldom have more than a single candidate from each regional caucus. Cronyism and political maneuvering characterize the selection process.

An alternate truly competitive system, one designed to promote meritocracy, is needed. In such a system each multi-national region would nominate from two to five worthy individuals for the positions of regional delegate. From each regional slate the General Assembly would select one nominee for the delegate's position and a runner-up to be his/her alternate. Each region would also devise its own set of rules for guiding its delegate in debates and ultimately in voting. On issues of perennial concern (e.g., disarmament or terrorism), each region would presumably develop a general approach, which it would expect its delegate to promote. To do this, it would require frequent meetings (actual and/or virtual) of representatives of the foreign ministries of the member countries and an intra-regional system of weighted voting. Since consensus will not always be achieved, each region will have to develop its own set of voting protocols. On procedural matters, the delegate might exercise his/her own judgment when voting. On other matters s/he might be guided by varying simple or qualified majorities in internal debate within the region. Voting to impose economic sanctions, for example, might require a two-thirds regional majority, while decisions relating to the authorization of a new peacekeeping mission might call for a 75% majority. Similarly, for the SC as a whole, various qualified majorities would likely be called for.

Would nations be inclined to adopt the reforms proposed in this essay? Most small nations that have never before enjoyed membership in the SC or who have served only one or two terms would probably do so readily. Nations that would be major players within their respective regions, but which are not presently leading contenders for a seat within an expanded SC (e.g. Indonesia in Southeast Asia, or Mexico within Latin America and the Caribbean), would also come aboard. Countries such as India, Japan, Brazil and Germany, which aspire to SC seats in their own right, would be more hesitant (though I can confidently state, based on multiple visits to their respective UN missions, that they take this proposal quite seriously). Most resistant, of course, would be the P-5, who zealously protect their anachronistic and patently unfair privileges. But they do so at a cost, the alienation of the rest of the UN community. And there are tradeoffs that should mitigate the P-5 concerns. Presently, for example, the United States' vote in the SC (when no veto is contemplated) is one out of fifteen, 6.7% of the total. In the system now proposed, its vote would have almost double that weight, 12.5%. The greatest gain, however, would be to the people of the earth as a whole, in moving from an unjust system derived from an outmoded system of power politics to one that is more workable and aspires to rationality and fairness.