

The Difficulty of Reforming the United Nations Security Council

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Abstract: In addition to the ongoing debate surrounding the imperative need to reform the UNSC, especially on the concept of veto power, this article offers another perspective. Using document analysis combined with triangulation of the secondary material as the methodology, this article explored the difficulty of reforming the UNSC. It adopts the realist theory as the framework that sees the concept of veto power as the main difficulty standing in the way of the reform despite the expressed commitment from the five permanent members of the UNSC and other countries.

Although this article did not explicitly proffer a remedy to the problem discussed. However, how the author intellectualized and articulated the main issue could draw attention to the ongoing debate and clamor about the need to reform the UNSC veto power.

Conclusively, this article doubts not the possibility but sees the use of veto power strategic to the interest of the U.S., China, and Russia as the major obstacle to the reform.

Keywords: China, National Interest, Realism, Russia, United States, United Nations Security Council, Veto Power,

I. Introduction

Judging from the history of the demand and clamors to reform the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), especially the veto power following the end of the Cold War in 1989, it is quite easy to infer the difficulties encountered despite the imperative needs.

A lot of scholars have offered their perspectives on the difficulties. For instance, Patrick, et al, (2023) outlined a good number of daunting challenges including “high procedural hurdles to amending the UN Charter; divergent member state positions on the acceptable size and terms of any enlargement; disagreement over current veto provisions and their potential extension to any new permanent members; and gnawing uncertainties over whether any plausible enlargement even if it made the council more representative would improve its functioning”.

In a slightly similar tone, Cheng Lin (2008) indicated that despite the acknowledgment from almost all the UN members about the necessity to reform the Security Council, no consensus has been reached among UN members, including the five permanent members (P5) on how to adjust the Security Council’s structure, and on how to increase the number of new permanent members.

As for Lukmaan (2023), historical conflicts and rivalries among nation-states present serious hurdles. This claim is supported by some practical examples such as how Pakistan has been a vocal opponent of India’s UNSC bid due to the long-standing Kashmir dispute and other issues. Pakistan argues that India’s entry would disrupt regional security dynamics, making the UNSC more contentious. China has serious objections to Japan being there in the Security Council. Italy trying to compete with Germany in Europe for a place in the Security Council. Argentina too does not agree with the fact that Brazil should represent South America in the UNSC as a permanent representative. Lukmaan (2023) also argued that because member states have different visions of what a reformed UNSC should look like makes it difficult.

Without the inclination to challenge or question the veracity of the different perspectives on the difficulties advanced by the above authors or scholars, this article seeks to add another perspective to the list of difficulties of reforming the UNSC. Precisely, it looks at the concept of veto power used as a tool by the P5 to protect their national and geopolitical interests to be the potential challenge.

It dives into the nitty-gritty from three segments termed as the structure of the paper. The first segment features the literature review. Particularly, it briefly provides a conceptual analysis of veto power, and thereafter reviews some of the clamors behind the UNSC reform with emphasis on the concept of veto power. The second segment considers the crux addresses the caption of the article. In other words, it explains the difficulty of reforming the UNSC. Finally, the third segment concludes the article.

II. Methodological Outline and Materials

The nature of this study topic subjects it to the qualitative method with an emphasis on document analysis combined with triangulation. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is the process of reviewing or evaluating documents both printed and electronic in a methodical manner. Similar to other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis helps the researcher examine and interpret secondary data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge

critical to logical inference or conclusion (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), (Rapley, 2007). The triangulation of data which is the materials is necessary to breed credibility that influences the quality of the study. The electronic materials were sourced from the internet through Google search engines.

Contribution to Knowledge

By adding to the list of difficulties of reforming the UNSC with a focus on the concept of veto power, this article provides insight useful to the discipline of international politics. It could be used for further study, especially for research gaps.

III. Literature Review

The literature review of this paper features the theoretical framework, the concept of veto power, and some of the clamors behind the UNSC reform.

Theoretical Framework – Realism/Realist

In the candid opinion of this paper, the realist or realism is assumed to be the most appropriate framework that provides significant insight into the caption of the article.

The realist school of thought is a significant approach to foreign policy. According to realists, states are the primary actors in the international system, and their foreign policy is driven by a desire to safeguard their national interests and protect their sovereignty on the global stage (Antunes and Camisã, 2018). This means that a state's political behavior in the international system is influenced by its national interest and foreign policy. For instance, in November 2022, Russia and China vetoed a U.S.-drafted UNSC resolution intended to strengthen sanctions on North Korea (Beech, 2022). In this example, Russia and China's political posture or behavior was motivated by their respective national interests that resonate with their foreign policies. Both countries embarked on the ballistic missile strategy to protect their national security interests. Similarly, it can be argued that the U.S. motive behind the draft resolution was driven by its national security interest critical to safeguarding its sovereignty against a perceived threat from North Korea.

The U.S. recent blocking of a backed U.N. resolution that would have paved the way for full United Nations membership for Palestine, a goal the Palestinians have long sought, and Israel has worked to prevent illustrates the U.S. national interest to protect the interest of Israel. (Lederer, 2024).

The most recent veto exercised by China was on 22 March 2024 draft resolution on Gaza, emphasizing the imperative to uphold international justice explains Beijing's interest in support for Gaza (Xinhua, 2024).

In summary, this article submits that the fundamental argument articulated by the realist is that states will always act according to their best interests, which embody their foreign policies that cannot be aloof from their right to protect their sovereignty against what it interprets as threats.

Conceptual Analysis of Veto Power

Premised that veto power occupies critical space in this paper, it is imperative to conceptualize veto power. As a concept, “veto power” refers to the power that the five permanent members of the UNSC have which enables them to prevent the adoption of any draft resolution presented by a nation. It can be used no matter the level of international support the resolution has gained. The Veto is used whenever a negative vote is cast on a draft resolution by a permanent member of the United Nations and automatically causes the resolution to fail (Patman, 2024).

The legitimacy of the veto power dates far back to the historical establishment of the UN in which the creators of the UN Charter, conceived that China, France, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and the Russian Federation, would continue to have important roles in the maintenance of international peace and security, due to their key roles in the establishment of the UN, they were granted the special status of permanent member States at the Security Council, along with a special voting power known as the “right to veto”. It was agreed by the drafters, that if any one of the five permanent members cast a negative vote in the Council, a resolution or decision would not be approved. However, if a permanent member does not fully agree with a proposed resolution, but does not wish to cast a veto, it may choose to abstain, thus allowing the resolution to be adopted if it obtains the required number of favorable votes (see, Article 27 of the UN Charter). For example, Russia and China abstained rather than use their veto on the UNSC vote on a Libyan no-fly resolution that easily paved the way for NATO intervention that decapitated Gaddafi’s regime in 2011 (Richburg, 2011).

In summary, it is worth noting, that Article 27 of the United Nations Organization, allows the P5 members to counter all resolutions of the Security Council, which jeopardize their national interests and that of their allies.

Brief History of the Use of Veto Power

A literature review on the number of times the P5 members used their veto power is quite interesting as mentioned or cataloged below.

The U.S. cast the first of its 82 vetoes to date on 17 March 1970. Since 1970, the US has used the veto far more than any other permanent member, most frequently to block decisions that it regards as detrimental to the interests of Israel (UN Security Council Report, 2024). The most recent was the blocking of a backed U.N. resolution that would have paved the way for full United Nations membership for Palestine, a goal the Palestinians have long sought, and Israel has worked to prevent (Lederer, 2024).

The United Kingdom: has 32 vetoes cast, 9 times with France regarding the Suez

Canal, 14 times with the US/France regarding the Rhodesia crisis. It is interesting to know that the UK has not cast a veto since 23 December 1989 (UN Security Council Report, 2024).

France applied the veto for the first time on 26 June 1946 concerning the Spanish Question (S/PV.49) and has cast 18 vetoes cast, 9 times with the UK concerning the Suez Canal, and 9 times with the US/UK, concerning the Rhodesian crisis. (Okhovat, 2006). For the record, France has not cast a veto since 23 December 1989 (UN Security Council Report, 2024).

Russia has the highest number of vetoes cast of 133, and mostly in the interest of its allies such as Cyprus, Balkans, Georgia, Zimbabwe, and Syria (Iyase and Folarin, 2018). Since 2011, Russia cast 19 vetoes, 14 of which were on Syria. The remaining were against two resolutions related to the conflict in Ukraine, one on the 20th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica, one on sanctions against Yemen, and one on Venezuela. Russia's most recent veto was on 28 March 2024 UNSC resolution to extend the mandate of the panel of experts responsible for monitoring North Korea's violations of UN sanctions (Howell, 2024)

China has about 40 veto cast, 9 times concerning Taiwan, 13 times with Russia in support of Zimbabwe/Burma, 13 times concerning Burma/Myanmar, 2 with Russia concerning Aleppo/Syria, 4 times concerning Yugoslavia, and 6 times concerning Guatemala (Iyase and Folarin, 2018). The most recent veto exercised by China was on 22 March 2024 draft resolution on Gaza, emphasizing the imperative to uphold international justice (Xinhua, 2024).

Arguably, since its inception, the concept of veto power as illustrated by the number of times used to block resolutions has become a tool to defend the P5 members' national interests, to uphold a tenet of their foreign policy, or, in some cases, to promote a single issue of particular importance to a state.

The Nexus Between the Concept of Veto Power and Realism

Premised on the inarguable grounds that the prime focus of realism, as one of the dominant traditional theories of International Relations that emphasizes power and national interest, especially on national security, it is easy to connect the concept of veto power to realism. Realists ground themselves in a long tradition. The Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, who lived 2,000 years ago, advised the rulers of states how to survive in an era when war had become a systematic instrument of power for the first time (the "warring states" period). Sun Tzu argued that moral reasoning was not very useful to the state rulers of the day, faced with armed and dangerous neighbors. He showed rulers how to use power to advance their interests and protect their survival (Tzu, 1963). Against this backdrop, key proponents such as John Mearsheimer (2001), Hans Morgenthau (1960), and Kenneth Waltz (1979) opine that the concept of veto power is used as a key tool for the maintenance of power and influence in international politics. They see it as a way for major powers to ensure that their own national interests and security concerns are protected and prioritized within international institutions, such as the UNSC. Realists believe that veto power allows powerful states such as the P5, especially the U.S., China, and Russia to assert their dominance and prevent other countries from taking actions that may threaten their own strategic objectives. They also recognize that veto power can lead to gridlock and inefficiency within international organizations, but they view it as a necessary trade-off for maintaining stability and order in the international system.

Overall, realists see veto power as a reflection of the harsh realities of power politics and the pursuit of national self-interest in the international system or order.

In summary, it makes no fundamental flaw to assert that the history of the frequencies on the number of vetoes cast including the most recent by the U.S., China, and Russia repeatedly flagged by this paper bears attestation or affirmation of the nexus between realism and the concept of veto power. In short, it is safer to infer that the use of veto power to protect P5 members especially, the U.S., China, and Russia national interests explains a realist behavior or posture.

Some of The Clamors Behind the UNSC Reform

A copious literature review on the clamor to reform the UNSC, especially on the veto power reveals decades of history focusing on the dangerous effects of the reform on the international order. It dates far back following the end of the Cold War in 1989. Since then, many clamors or voices have been heard but to no avail. Below are some of the voices.

The African Union (AU), through the adoption of the "Ezulwini Consensus" in March 2005 has voiced its position. The consensus called for, among other things, Africa "to be fully represented in all the decision-making organs of the UN, particularly in the Security Council," where the continent should have no less than two permanent seats, "with all the prerogatives and privileges of permanent membership including the right of veto," as well as five non-permanent seats (African Union, 2005). Although African states maintained their opposition "in principle to the veto," The leaders argued that "so long as it exists, and as a matter of common justice, it should be made available to all permanent members of the Security Council." The AU further

declared that it alone should be responsible for selecting Africa's permanent and nonpermanent Security Council representatives and would determine the criteria for that membership. In June 2005, the AU issued the Sirte Declaration, reaffirming that Africa should be granted two permanent seats with veto and two nonpermanent seats (in addition to its current three) on a twenty-six-member council (African Union, 2005). To this end, Many African leaders see the downplay as a "historical injustice" and have argued that the council must be reformed to represent the world's population better and reflect contemporary geopolitical realities (Aydogan, 2022).

What could be considered support to reform the UNSC can be inferred from France's inclination to have advocated a voluntary restraint on the veto on the part of the permanent members since the mid-2000s (Security Council Report, 2024). It can be recalled that in September 2014, on the margins of the 69th session of the General Assembly, France, joined by Mexico, organized a ministerial-level event on this issue. Then High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein made a statement in support of the French initiative. In a summary of the event, the co-chairs called on the P5 to "voluntarily and collectively pledge not to use the veto in case of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes on a large scale." However, among the permanent members, only the United Kingdom (U.K.) has supported the initiative (Security Council Report, 2024).

In theory, every U.S. administration since 1990 has embraced the need for reforming Security Council membership. The Clinton administration backed permanent seats for Germany and Japan. George W. Bush's team narrowed the focus to Japan. President Barack Obama thrilled India by endorsing its bid for a permanent seat during a trip there in 2010 (Bosco, 2015). Most recently, the Biden administration through its Representative to the United Nations announced its commitment to reform including the expansion of both permanent and non-permanent seats on the Security Council, with permanent seats for countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The U.S. support for the reform stems from its recognition that the UNSC, as it is constituted today, doesn't represent the realities of today (United States Mission to the United Nations, 2023).

Russia has also recognized the need to reform the UNSC. Through Moscow spokesman Dmitry Peskov, Russia welcomes the need for expanding the body with new states that have gained international influence necessary to increase the UNSC efficiency (Teslova, 2023).

The United Kingdom (UK) positioned its support for the reform on the core principles of the UN Charter: that the Council should represent the world whose peace and security it seeks to protect and should draw on diverse perspectives and expertise. The UK believes that to fulfill its important mandate, the Security Council must be efficient, effective, and accountable. In the opinion of the UK, the reform remains the only means to make the UNSC more representative of the international community it serves (Kariuki, 2023).

China's official position has been in the affirmative as well. Through its Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Beijing supports the steady progress of Security Council reform in the right direction, increasing the representation and voice of developing countries, allowing more small and medium-sized countries to participate in decision-making, and enabling all member states to benefit from the reform (Xinhua, 2024).

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been one of the most vocal advocates for restructuring the UN's top decision-making body, leading the charge with his mantra that "the world is bigger than five." (Turan, 2022).

The Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) position cannot go unrecognized in this paper. Starting from the UNSC's early establishment, the LAC has been critical of the right of veto exercised by the Security Council's permanent members. Brazil is the only country in Latin America that has been campaigning for a permanent seat publicly supported by France, the U.K., and Russia. In fact, during President Obama's visit to Brazil in 2011, he stressed that no other countries in the region matched the hegemonic influence of Brazil (Bhoolaton, 2015). Arguably, Obama's characterization of Brazil may be used as a clutch to make the case for Brazil to represent Latin America.

The One Million Dollar Question

A careful analysis of the clamors behind the UNSC reform, especially the concept of veto power shows that in theory or principle, no country is opposed to the reformation of the UNSC. Interestingly, all the P5 members have welcomed the need for the reform. However, the prolonged delay of the fruition presents the one million dollar question: despite the expressed commitment, why has the reform remained in limbo or yet to happen? How sincere are the U.S., China, and Russia, who are now at the center stage dictating the trajectory of international politics to the reform UNSC? To answer this question, the next segment provides insight.

The Difficulty of Reforming the UNSC

In theory, no doubt about the expressed commitment by all the P5 members to reform the UNSC, especially the veto power. But why this expressed commitment cannot come to fruition? When will the expressed commitment be put on the table through the UNSC formal procedure? Why is it taking so long? In the opinion of this paper, the answer lies in the concept of the veto power that is so strategic to the national interests of the P5 members, especially the U.S., China, and Russia. For a moment, ponder on this logic; if the veto power is used as a tool to defend the P5 members' national interests, to uphold a tenet of their foreign policy, or, in some cases, to promote a single issue of particular importance to a state, how is it possible or likely to reform the UNSC that may likely have implications for the U.S., China, and Russia foreign policies? Even if France and the UK, were to introduce a

draft resolution on this matter, would not Russia, China, or the U.S. employ their veto power to block that draft resolution? To prove this assumption or claim behind the logic, it is important to categorically state that the numbers or frequencies of the use of the veto power that blocked UNSC critical draft resolutions by the U.S., China, and Russia, especially the most recent in the Russia-Ukraine war, and Israel and Gaza war are the manifestations of the protection of their national interest articulated in their respective foreign policies. To make this claim empirical, citing a few excerpts of how veto power has been used as a tool to safeguard national interest is imperative.

“In addition to vetoing the December 8, 2023 cease-fire resolution, the U.S. vetoed an October 18, 2023, resolution calling for “humanitarian pauses.” The latter vote happened during President Joe Biden’s trip to Israel, and the U.S. delegate on the Security Council said the council needed to let U.S. diplomacy “play out.” The delegate expressed disappointment that the resolution draft didn’t condone Israel’s right to self-defense” (O’Dell, 2024).

“Russia and China also vetoed an October 25, 2023, resolution backed by the U.S. The resolution demanded the immediate release of the hostages taken by Hamas and called for “all measures” to be taken to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza, including humanitarian pauses. The Chinese representative on the council said they vetoed it because the resolution didn’t call for a cease-fire, a sentiment Russia reflected in a cease-fire resolution it brought to the council after China and Russia vetoed the U.S. resolution” (O’Dell, 2024).

History reminds the world that the first time the U.S. used its veto to support Israel was in September of 1972 when it vetoed a resolution that called on Israel to cease its aggression in Lebanon. This was the second time the U.S. had ever used its Security Council veto; the first was on a resolution regarding Southern Rhodesia. After that, the U.S. used its veto to halt resolutions critical of Israel frequently. Between 1982 and 1990, the U.S. used its veto in support of Israel 21 times – nearly half of the U.S.’s total vetoes in support of Israel. The vetoed resolutions criticized Israel’s aggression in Lebanon and its occupation of Palestinian territories (Asrar and Hussein, 2023).

Besides the October 18, 2023, and the December 8, 2023, resolutions, look at other key resolutions critical to Israel blocked by the U.

After the Great March of Return, in 2018, the UNSC drafted a resolution condemning “the use of any excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate force by the Israeli forces against Palestinian civilians” and calling for “lasting, comprehensive peace” with “two democratic States, Israel, and Palestine”. The US vetoed the resolution, with then-US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley saying it presented “a grossly one-sided view of what has taken place in Gaza in recent weeks” (Asrar and Hussein, 2023).

After the US recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in 2017, a draft resolution said, “actions which purport to have altered the character, status or demographic composition of the Holy City of Jerusalem have no legal effect, are null and void”. It demanded the status of Jerusalem to be determined in line with UN regulations. All the 15 UNSC members voted in favor except the US, which vetoed it (Asrar and Hussein, 2023).

Following the second Intifada or uprising that started in 2000, a UNSC resolution expressed “grave concern at the continuation of the tragic and violent events that have taken place since September 2000”, condemned attacks against civilians, and called for Israel “to abide scrupulously by its legal obligations and responsibilities under the Fourth Geneva Convention”. Then-US Ambassador to the UN John Negroponte said the resolution intended to “isolate politically one of the parties to the conflict through an attempt to throw the weight of the Council behind the other party”. Twelve countries voted in favor, but the US vetoed it (Asrar and Hussein, 2023).

The mentioning of the above excerpts and the key resolutions vetoed does not in any way or manner seek to demonize or vilify the U.S., China, and Russia. Instead, it is mentioned to help you understand the difficulty of reforming the UNSC despite an expressed commitment from the P5 members. More importantly, the excerpts and all the instances of UN draft resolutions vetoed by the U.S., China, and Russia this article unpacked or flagged are enough to explain the protection of their vested national interests regardless of what the world may think about the use of their veto power.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, the intent behind this article was not to question the veracity of the difficulties flagged by other scholars about reforming the UNSC veto power. Instead, this article has added to the list of the difficulties or challenges standing in the way of the reform.

Even though this article did not explicitly proffer a remedy to the problem discussed. However, how the author intellectualized and articulated the main issue could draw attention to the ongoing debate and clamor about the need to reform the UNSC veto power. This attention could be seen as an implied remedy.

Given the entire analysis especially on how veto power has been used as a tool to protect the national interests of the U.S., China, and Russia, this article concludes that it would be difficult for the reform to come to fruition. In other words, this article doubts not the possibility but sees the use of veto power strategic to the interest of the U.S., China, and Russia as the major obstacle to the reform.

Disclaimer

The author of this article is solely responsible for the views expressed herein. The organizations including the academic institutions the author is attached to do not take positions on the scholarship of the faculty and this article should not be interpreted or portrayed in any way as reflecting the official position of either organization.

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4. Liberian Society in Focus: An Introduction to Sociology available at: <https://www.amazon.fr/LIBERIAN-SOCIETY-FOCUS-INTRODUCTION-SOCIOLOGY/dp/1639024425><https://librotterra.com/shop/social-science/liberian-society-in-focus-an-introduction-to-sociology/>

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