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REFORM STALEMATE ON THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL

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Abstract

This article examines why persistent efforts to reform the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) have consistently failed. While this issue has lingered for some time in policy circles and scholarly discussions, the article argues that two principal factors are responsible for hindering meaningful reform: the deep divergence among pro-reformist states and the unyielding reluctance of the United States to endorse dramatic changes. The study employs a qualitative, theory-guided analysis combining historical-institutional and interpretive investigations of UNSC reform debates and proposals, with the U.S. treated as an illustrative case. By tracing the evolution of reform initiatives and identifying the thematic patterns in these proposals, this study emphasizes how four core issues—the Council's size, its membership category, veto privilege, and equitable regional representation—persist as key points of contention. Building on the analysis of major proposals, these contentious areas are scrutinized to unearth structural and political perplexities involved. Lastly, drawing on realist International Relations (IR) theory, particularly its key conceptual tools of relative gains and hegemony, the paper explains both the fragmentation among pro-reformist states and the strategic calculus behind Washington's resistance to shifting the established power structure within the UNSC.

Keywords: The United Nations Security Council, Realism, Relative Gains, Hegemon

JEL codes: F50, F59

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INTRODUCTION

The UNSC has been a subject of an ongoing dispute since its establishment due mainly to its perceived inability to adopt the shifting global power dynamics (Lee, 2011, pp. 408-409; Butler, 2012, p. 23). Created in the aftermath of the Second World War, the UNSC's structure was designed to reflect the postwar power balances and the victors' national preferences, which conferred permanent membership and veto-wielding power on themselves in the Council. While this ensured the ratification of the UN Charter and its operational functionality, it also institutionalized a power hierarchy that would be a fundamental point of contention ever since (Deudney & Maull, 2011; Lee, 2011, pp. 406-408). Critics contend that the UNSC is not representative, transparent, inclusive, and ultimately accountable, deficits that have called the legitimacy of the Council's decisions into question (Binder & Heupel, 2015). Consequently, the UNSC's effectiveness in fulfilling its obligations and mandates—maintaining international security and peace—has been increasingly probed (Hurd, 1999, p. 388; Lee, 2011).

Due to the growing discontent among member states with the structure of the UNSC, several proposals aiming to change the function and composition of the Council have emerged. They converge, if not exclusively, on four core issues: 1) the size of the Council; 2) categories of membership; 3) geographical representation; 4) the use of veto power. However, the most persistent challenge is reconciling two conflicting objectives: increasing the UNSC's legitimacy and representativeness while at the same time enhancing its effectiveness (Weiss, 2003, pp. 145-152; Lee, 2011, pp. 406-407; Gifkins, 2021, pp. 2-8). Although expanding the Council membership may enhance its legitimacy, as it becomes more representative of the existing global order, such expansion may risk paralysis in the UNSC's ability to take decisive action. Conversely, preserving the status quo may ensure an effective Council but may perpetuate concerns over legitimacy, transparency, and underrepresentation.

This challenge has become more acute, particularly since the post-decolonization period, during which the UN membership increased dramatically, intensifing the reform demands for a more equitable and representative Council. In response, the 1992 Open-Ended Working Group was a leading reform initiative for bringing the issue to General Assembly`s agenda (Weiss, 2003, pp. 149-152; Winther, 2020, pp. 74-75). By 2008, while the idea of reforming the UNSC had transformed into an issue of "intergovernmental negotiations" and the proposals seeking to adapt the Council to today`s realities proliferated, any meaningful structural reform remained elusive (Lee, 2011, p. 407).

This stalemate exposes two persistent impediments to reforming the UNSC: the divergence among pro-reformist member states and the strategic reluctance of the great powers, especially the U.S., to alter a power structure ensuring their privileged position. To better ascertain these obstacles, this paper applies a realist theoretical framework drawing on the key realist concepts of relative gains and hegemony. It argues that while the logic of relative gains helps explain the inability of pro-reformist states to unify around an effective proposal, the notion of hegemon clarifies why, as a dominant power, the U.S. resists substantial changes in the Council. This study offers theoretical and policy insights into the dynamics hindering UNSC reform and, therefore, suggests pathways for policymakers and scholars to enhance the functionality of global peace-security governance.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Using a qualitative, theory-guided interpretive analysis of UNSC reform debates and proposals, the first section covers a brief historical overview of major UNSC reform proposals and their evolution. The second section examines a selection of major reform proposals, which identify four key recurring themes—Council size, representation, membership classification, and veto authority. The next section investigates the two primary obstacles to reform initiatives via the realist conceptual frameworks of relative gains and hegemony. The analysis treats the U.S. as an illustrative case of hegemonic resistance among the Permanent Five (P5) members of the UN Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The last section outlines the study and reiterates its theoretical and policy contribution to broader debates on UNSC reform and global governance.

A REVIEW OF THE REFORM DISCUSSION

Debates over reforming the UNSC date to the founding of the UN (Gould & Rablen, 2017, p. 146). During post-World War II decolonization, the UN expanded substantially, intensifying the calls for change. In the 1950s, Argentina and Cuba proposed changes to the voting procedure in the UNSC. In the same years, sixteen new members from Latin America sought an expansion of non-permanent seats, but the Soviet Union opposed their demands. Dissatisfaction with the Council's structure gradually grew in the 1960s (Lee, 2011, pp. 408-409; Gould & Rablen, 2017, pp. 146-150). Despite Article 109 of the UN Charter allowing for structural amendments, only meaningful reform occurred in 1963, when the General Assembly adopted an amendment, which was approved by the UNSC in 1965 and added four non-permanent seats to the Council, raising the membership from 11 to 15 and the required majority decision from seven to nine (Bennett, 1965, pp. 361-367; Weis, 2003; Pedrazzi, 2007, pp. 184-187; Lee, 2011, pp. 408-409).

The end of the Cold War signified a more focused phase in reform initiatives. A noticeable increase in the UNSC's activities and growing criticism of its unrepresentative structure defined the 1990s. In 1992, member states convened to discuss reforms to the UNSC's membership categories and size. The General Assembly formalized these discussions by creating "the Open-ended Working Group" in 1993, which was the first institutionalized attempt to address unequal representation in the membership (Lee, 2011; Gould & Rablen, 2017, pp. 152-154; Winther, 2020, pp. 79-86). This group sought to increase transparency and expand membership. To this end, Malaysian Razali Ismail offered the "Razali Reform Paper" in 1997. His reform paper proposed five new permanent and four non-permanent seats to the Council. Yet Razali's initiative failed, as key member states could not reach consensus given their conflicting national preferences (Valley, 2015, p.15).

The Open-Ended Working Group was unable to overcome the reform deadlock, leading to new proposals by the "High-Level Panel". Proposed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the 2005 "In Larger Freedom" report recommended enlarging the UNSC from 15 to 24 members, with two alternative models (Ataç, 2014, pp. 9-12). Model A offered six new permanent and three non-permanent seats while Model B offered nine renewable-term seats alongside a non-permanent seat. Yet neither proposal gained consensus, which emphasizes the enduring disagreements among member states (Schrijver, 2007, pp. 131-135).

In the early 2000s, three major proposals emerged, which demonstrated both the need for change in the UNSC and conflicting regional preferences. First, the Group of Four (G4)— Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan—demanded four non-permanent seats and six new permanent memberships without veto power (Schrijver, 2007, p. 134). However, their call for reform failed, as they could not secure the two-thirds majority of the General Assembly (Tharoor, 2011, pp. 398-399). Conversely, "the Uniting for Consensus" group, spearheaded by Pakistan and Italy and supported by countries such as Turkey and Argentina, opposed any new permanent seats and instead advocated expanding non-permanent membership from ten to fifteen seats to enhance regional representation. At the same time, the African Union advanced the "Ezulwini Consensus," which demanded two permanent African memberships with veto power to rectify historical injustice and ensure fair representation (Spain, 2013, pp. 335-337). These proposals were followed up by the pro-reformist member states, but the structure of the UNSC remains unaltered even today (Chen, Dai, Wang, & Ye, 2024, pp. 163-164).

A brief analysis of the various proposals for reforming the UNSC reveals significant divergences among UN member states. A scholar uses an insightful analogy to portray the stalemate regarding the UNSC reform. He draws a close affinity with a situation in which a group of doctors agreeing on the diagnosis yet unable to decide on a treatment. The diagnosis is that the existing structure of the UNSC does not reflect today's global political and economic dynamics and that it needs restructuring (Tharoor, 2011, p. 397). However, member states cannot converge on proposals for how to execute reforms. For example, the G4 still advocates for expanding permanent membership and veto rights in the Council while the Small Five Group, including countries such as Switzerland and Jordan, rejects permenant seats and instead calls for procedural amendments to enhance accountability and transparency. These disagreements primarily revolve around four key issues, which persist to complicate the reform agenda today (Lee, 2011, pp. 406-407**).** Table 1 summarizes the main state coalitions involved in UNSC reform debates and outlines their core proposals.

Table 1: Main coalitions and proposals in UNSC reform

Reform Group	Key Members	Key Reform Proposal	View on Veto
G4	Brazil, Germany, India, Japan	Expansion of permanent memberships	No veto or deferred veto
Uniting for Consensus	Italy, Pakistan, Turkey, Argentina, etc.	Expansion of non-permanent seats	Opposes veto expansion
African Union (Ezulwini Consensus)	AU member states	Two permanent African seats	Full veto rights
Small Five (S5)	Switzerland, Jordan, Costa Rica, Liechtenstein, Singapore	Procedural reform, accountability	Veto restraint

The following section explores each of these four contested issues in detail, which demonstrates how competing reform demands persist to hinder meaningful institutional change.

THE FOUR DISPUTABLE ISSUES CONCERING REFORM DEBATES

Council Size

As membership in the UN has expanded, the call for a more inclusive and representative UNSC has become louder (Okhovat, 2012, p. 32). However, efforts to restructure have consistently stalled. Although it is widely recognized that the current composition—the P5 and ten non-permanent,

rotational memberships—does not reflect today's geopolitical landscape, the debate over how to enlarge the UNSC is deeply divisive. Some states suggest both permanent and non-permanent seats while others urge that expanding the body could diminish its capacity to take decisive actions (Hurd, 2008, pp. 200-207; Winther, 2020, pp. 74-79). Divergent views over who should obtain memberships further complicate the reform issue. The G4 insists on permanent membership whereas the Uniting for Consensus group dismisses this idea and instead suggests longer-term non-permanent membership. At the same time, the Small Five prioritizes changes in how the UNSC operates and advocates restraint in wielding the veto, particularly in circumstances involving serious human rights abuses. With such diverging approaches, securing the required level of approval from both the General Assembly and the UNSC, specifically the P5, appears highly unlikely (Spain, 2013, pp. 335-337; de Lecea Larrañaga & Villalta Puig, 2021, pp. 65-67).

Membership Categories

Additionally, the category of membership in the UNSC is equally contentious. Critics maintain that the post-World War II power dynamics do not align with present-day global power configurations. Nations such as Japan and Germany have sought permanent membership as a recognition of their growing influence (United Nations, 2023; Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations, 2023). Reform proposals differ significantly. Although the G4 and African Union suggest a combination of permanent and rotating seats, the Uniting for Consensus calls for only extended non-permanent roles (Spain, 2013, pp. 336-340). A recurring criticism is that pro-reformist members often focus more on the benefits, such as increased influence across UN bodies, than on the responsibilities linked to UNSC membership (Butler, 2012, pp. 24-32; Lee, 2011, pp. 72-73).

Status quo seekers argue that maintaining privileges for great powers keeps them engaged and precludes the UNSC from becoming ineffective, as was the case with the League of Nations. However, this argument appears weak today, particularly as new global threats such as global warming cannot be addressed via military might alone (Friedman, 2022). Essentially, the membership debate pertains to a lack of consensus over what criteria, such as military capability and regional representation, should guide the selection process. This unresolved tension reflects broader disagreements over the kind of Council member states aspire to attain (Lee, 2011, pp. 414-416).

Regional Representation

Discussions about the UNSC expansion are not limited to size but also relate to regional representation, particularly whether seat distribution reflects geographic equity. The only

modification to the UNSC composition occurred in 1965, when its size expanded from six to ten non-permanent members. The General Assembly elects these members by a two-thirds majority vote for two-year terms to ensure regional representation. The allocation is as follows: three seats for Africa, two for Asia, two for Latin America, two for Western Europe, and one for Eastern Europe (Security Council report, n.d.-b). There is persistent criticism over the dominance of Western powers—four of the five permanent members, such as the U.S. and France, which together comprise virtually five percent of the world population but holds more than one-third of the seats in the UNSC (Tharoor, 2011, pp. 397-399). This highlights the underrepresentation of the Global South, which is represented by China as the sole permanent member from that region. The lack of permanent representation from Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East persists in raising the need for regional parity. However, achieving equitable geographical representation remains an unresolved issue because of significant divergences among member states (Lee, 2011, pp. 414-416; Winther, 2022).

Veto power

The debate over the use of veto power is as central and contentious as other issues in the UNSC reform literature. Although the Council has fifteen members, only five members— the United Kingdom, Russia, France, the United States, and China— possess veto authority, as enshrined in Article 108 of the UN Charter (United Nations, n.d.-b). Initially, this privilege was to ensure the participation of great powers to avert a League of Nations-style collapse. Yet this rationale has diminished in relevance today, as the veto-wielding powers no longer have the same level of global influence as they once had while rising powers such as Brazil and India have gained prominence in global politics (Binder & Heupel, 2020, pp. 93-99).

The undemocratic characteristic of veto authority has been echoed by the bulk of UN members. For example, a Pakistani UN representative emphasized the discrepancy between the privileges of the P5 and democratic principles within the UN's decision-making (Associated Press of Pakistan, 2025). Therefore, veto power persists as a primary obstacle to meaningful reform. The P5's ability to block any non-procedural resolution makes the veto an effective control tool, leading to proposals from nations such as Australia to limit its use. Correspondingly, the Small Five (S5) group has called for restraint in the use of veto in circumstances involving mass atrocities (e.g., genocide). However, views on reforming the UNSC remain divisive. For example, the African Union seeks two permanent seats with full veto rights while the Uniting for Consensus group advocates for expansion without veto rights (Lee, 2011, pp. 412-415; Spain, 2013, pp. 335-342).

The UN member states' contrasting visions partly reveal why calls for reforming the UNSC have consistently failed. Despite an extensive body of scholarship on UNSC reform, scholars have not yet analyzed the underlying resistance to changes in the UNSC through realist theory's concepts of relative gains and hegemony. In the next section, I address this gap by arguing that both the internal divergences among pro-reformist states and the reluctance of the U.S., as a dominant power, substantially reduce the odds of any meaningful reform to the Council's membership categories, regional representation, size, or veto authority.

A REALIST INTERPRETATION

Relative Gain and Hegemony

Realism is an International Relations (IR) theory that views states as the main actors in an anarchic international system devoid of a superior authority. This anarchic political setting incentivizes state to engage in competition with others for survival. Therefore, the distribution of power among states dictates their behavior, causing a perpetual struggle for security, power, and dominance. While defensive realists, such as Kenneth Waltz, argue that states seek an adequate amount of power for security, offensive realists, such as John Mearsheimer, maintain that states aim to maximize power to achieve hegemony not for domination but as a way of self-preservation (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 30-32; Dunne, Kurki, & Smith, 2013, p. 79).

In a self-serving system of political anarchy, states are attentive to relative gains, as they fear that others may gain more power from cooperation and threaten their security and survival (Grieco, 1988). The lack of a world government to enforce rules when non-compliance occurs exacerbates this insecurity, invoking uncertainty and fear because every state can possess varying capabilities to harm one another. Since states cannot be sure of each other's intentions, war becomes a constant possibility in the international system. Thus, states strive to increase their capabilities relative to others, which has implications for the nature of interstate relations, particularly cooperation versus competition. Mearsheimer underlines that the characteristic of global politics is persistently competitive, albeit periods of cooperative state engagement. He rejects the idea that great powers are committed to perpetual peace and cooperation. The U.S.'s prolonged presence in Europe even after the Cold War represents this everlasting strategic interstate competition. In an environment of relentless great-power competition, offensive realists argue that states should gain as much power as possible and bid for hegemony, where and when possible, to ensure survival (Mearsheimer, 1995, pp. 7-14; Mearsheimer, 2001; Layne, 2006).

While neorealism's understanding of hegemony differs in intra-realist debates, neorealist theory generally suggests that hegemonic power is necessary to create and maintain international order (Gilpin, 1981; Mearsheimer, 2001). Since the hegemon possesses far more might than its competitors, it is capable of structuring states` interactions and enforcing systemic rules. Robert Gilpin argues that the international order reflects the distribution of power among states, which can change over time, and shifts in relative power create tension among major powers competing for hegemony. Consequently, preventing power shift and preserving power preponderance becomes a strategic imperative for the dominant power. Therefore, the hegemon tends to refrain from sharing its power and authority and resist institutional constraints (Gilpin, 1981; Mearsheimer, 1995, pp. 14-21; Ikenberry, 1998).

These realist perspectives, namely relative gains and hegemony, offer theoretical lenses through which this study seeks to explain the persistent failure of substantial reform in the UNSC. Using realist conceptual frameworks, the following sections examine the two causal explications as to why reform initiatives persistently fail: the dissonance among pro-reformist states and the hegemon's position on the viability of reforms.

First Obstacle: The Divergence amongst Pro-Reformist States

In order for reform in the Council to be actualized, member states advocating for change must first reach a consensus in the UN General Assembly. In accordance with the UN Charter, every proposal must obtain the required two-thirds majority in the General Assembly before those proposals are submitted to the Council for approval (Security Council Report, n.d.-a). Yet a closer examination of reform discussions suggests substantial divergences among the reform-seeking states. These discords converge on the four chief issues formerly identified. For example, the G4 proposed permanent membership with veto power whereas the Uniting for Consensus group supported the expansion of the Council with new members without veto power. This strategic move sought to block proposals offering additional permanent seats, thereby leading to fundamental divergences over whether the veto power should be abolished or limited (Okhovat, 2012, pp. 32-42).

Japan and Germany as members of the G4 have long bid for permanent membership in the UNSC. In spite of their limited military strength, their primary justification is based on their economic capabilities and contribution to the budget of the organization (United Nations, 1996). Yet a number of member states in the General Assembly significantly opposed their bids for permanent membership. They refuse to grant a permanent seat to Japan due to its wartime atrocities. Especially, China and South Korea demonstrated significant opposition to endow Japan with a seat in the Council. Similarly, Germany faced as much

opposition for the same reasons. Critics viewed Germany as the architect of widespread destruction during World War II **(**Lee, 2011, pp. 411-413).

These opposing countries included, but are not limited to, Spain, Canada, and Italy. Specifically, Italy vigorously displayed its discontent with the idea of granting permanent membership to Germany. While Italy does not treat itself as a superpower, it nevertheless underscores the important role it plays in international politics. Therefore, Italy has consistently objected to reform proposals that offer Germany a permanent seat in the UNSC without extending the same to Italy. The counrty deems its exclusion not only as an imbalance of regional representation but also as a matter of national interest. In fact, Italy suggests provisional expansion of the Council, as it seeks to prevent Germany from acquiring disproportionate authority and influence on the Council (Hill, 2005, pp. 34-36, Pedrazzi, 2007; Global Affairs Canada, 2024; United Nations General Assembly, 2023).

India`s desire for permanent membership in the UNSC triggered a similar pattern of disagreement among the pro-reformist UN members. To justify its candidacy for a seat in the Council, India cites several compelling arguments. First, India is the world's largest democracy; second, it plays a significant role in UN peacekeeping operations; and third, India is one of the largest economies globally. These elements, coupled with India`s geopolitical relevance, were put forward to support India`s bid. However, Pakistan, a prominent member of the Uniting for Consensus group, raised a strong opposition to the G4 proposal particularly because of regional strategic rivalries. Pakistan considers India a strategic competitor but not a neutral global player in South Asia. Not only Pakistan but also Indonesia expressed concerns about the prospect of India gaining a permanent seat in the UNSC, indicating broader regional dissonance. Correspondingly, Mexico and Argentina expressed their displeasure with Brazil's bid, as they argued that Brazil cannot alone represent entire Latin America. Divergences are also evident across African nations, especially between Egypt, South Africa, and Nigeria, as they expressed ambitions for permanent membership. Yet they seem unwilling to advocate for the candidacy of one at the expense of others (Tharoor, 2011, pp. 399-403). These conflicting national preferences and regional rivalries further reflect the deep fragmentation among pro-reformist member states, substantially weakening the prospects for consensus on the expansion of the UNSC.

Moreover, the Small Five Group, composed of Jordan, Costa Rica, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, and Singapore, sought to focus primarily on improving the working methods of the Council. They remained disinterested in the initiatives by other groupings of states, such as the G4 and the African Union, to expand the UNSC. Instead of participating in the contest over permanent membership or veto authority, the Small

Five Group has worked toward enhancing efficiency, accountability, and transparency in the UNSC's decision-making processes (Schrijver, 2007, pp. 135-136).

One critical implication of the divergence among pro-reformist states rests with its effect on the voting dynamics in the UN General Assembly. Collectively, the enduring discord among these groupings, especially influential parties (e.g., the African Union with its 54 members), constitute a considerable share of Assembly votes. Consequently, any change to the UN Charter, which stipulates a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly, often fails to garner the required support. This failure effectively derails most amendment initiatives long prior to the proposals even reaching the UNSC Council for (dis)approval (Tharoor, 2011; United Nations, 2024).

This persistent inability raises key questions: Why does such fragmentation exist among pro-reformist states with the same goal of UNSC reform? Why is it so challenging for reform-seeking nations to agree on a unified proposal? At this juncture, realism in international relations offers insightful theoretical perspectives with which to explain this stalemate. As mentioned earlier, realism argues that the international system is by nature anarchic, as no overarching authority exists to enforce rules or ensure peaceful resolution of disputes. In such an anarchic political setting, states are primarily concerned with their relative power positions and their own security and survival. As uncertainty about other states' intentions persists, states are prone to fear that rivals may exploit any power imbalance to their disadvantage, incentivizing them to constantly maximize their relative power to deter potential threats (Grieco, 1988; Mearsheimer, 2001; Meibauer, 2023, pp. 350-352).

Pakistan-India rivalry exemplifies realist rationale of relative gain, which posits that states accumulate power at others' expense. Pakistan raises significant objections to India's candidacy for a permanent seat in the UNSC, as they have been engaging in a strategic competition for regional power preponderance. Thus, Pakistan fears that India would gain a significant amount of relative power and seek regional domination if it were granted permanent membership. Such an elevation in interstate power distribution would come at the expense of Pakistan, jeopardizing its national security interests. This power calculus is one of the reasons why Pakistan opposed the G4 proposal (Tharoor, 2011; Kaura & Singh, 2021, pp. 273-282). The same logic underlies Italy's resistance to Germany's bid. Italy is aware of its relative power position in global politics, which is unlikely to secure the country a permanent seat in the UNSC. Therefore, Italy strongly opposed the G4 proposal because it fears that if granted permanent membership, Germany would gain far more power at its expense and that a shift in regional power balances will jeapordize its security. Consequently, Italy

came up with a proposal including provisional membership as a countermeasure to Germany's bid for consolidating disproportionate influence in the UNSC (Hill, 2005, pp. 32-33; Pedrazzi, 2007).

At its core, these examples illustrate that realist dynamics operate in a system where states are locked in competitive interactions and where none concede the ground so as not to strengthen another hand—that is, the anarchic political structure of international relations compels states to focus on relative gains. They are more concerned with ensuring that rivals do not gain more than collective benefits. This behavioral pattern underpins a zero-sum rationale in which constant power competition supersedes cooperation, even in pursuing common institutional reform (Snidal, 1991, pp.703-705). Such a logic explains why pro-reformist states cannot have a unified voice and why many proposals fail to reach consensus, and as long as states persist in focusing on relative gains, the odds of meaningful changes in the UNSC appear dim.

The Second Obstacle: Hegemonic Resistance to UNSC Reform

Although the P5 collectively enjoys systemic gains from the status quo, the U.S. occupies a structurally distinct position as the principal agenda-setter and the architect of the post-1945 order, making it a particularly illustrative case of hegemonic resistance (Gilpin, 1981). The U.S., as the hegemonic power of the current international system, is reluctant to reform the UNSC, as doing so is likely to constrain and diminish its ability to shape the Council's decisions and global outcomes unilaterally. The U.S.'s reluctance remains a significant obstacle to institutional transformation. The prospects for reform fundamentally lie in the hands of the permanent members, particularly Washington, as it possesses unparalleled global power and influence in the eyes of UN members. While the Biden administration expressed support for the UNSC expansion, including permanent membership for countries such as Germany and India, the U.S. has little incentive to allow any meaningful reform because it fears that an expanded Council would dilute its privileged status, which is enabled by its veto power. This apprehension has caused the U.S. to endorse the view of "don't fix it if it isn't broken", which signals a strong interest in maintaining the status quo (Weiss, 2003, pp. 149-150; Schaefer, 2024).

As discussed earlier, for a UNSC reform proposal to pass, it must first secure two-thirds of the seats in the General Assembly. However, this is just the first step because the proposal must then be approved by two-thirds of the members of the Council on the condition that none of the veto-wielding powers disapprove it, a stipulation that underscores the importance of the veto authority under the UN Charter. Among the P5, the U.S. deserves particular attention. As opposed to its counterparts, the U.S. has shown a sustained commitment to acting unilaterally, as exemplified by its invasion of Iraq in 2003 without UNSC authorization and its warning to withhold financial contributions to the UN when the General Assembly

endorsed Palestinian statehood. These instances clearly demonstrate the U.S.'s exceptional position both within the Security Council and the broader UN framework. As the U.S. has been able to pursue its strategic interests by bypassing any multilateral institutional constraints, the odds that Washington candidly advocates for reform that can potentially limit its power is very slim. Therefore, the U.S., as the hegemon, has little incentive to support any reform proposal that may dilute its veto privilege (Okhovat, 2012, pp. 43-44; United Nations, 2022).

The developments in the U.S. domestic and international policies play a significant role in the decision-making and agenda-setting dynamics of the Security Council. Given the degree of the U.S. influence on the Council and its past unilateral actions, the U.S. would, by no means, be willing to contribute to the UN either financially or politically if the organization were to restrict its power and authority, strengthening its power position as the hegemon and becoming one of the biggest hurdles to meaningfully reforming the UNSC (Weiss, 2003, pp. 152-157). If Washington deems reform efforts as a threat to its national interests and if pro-reformist states persist in pushing for amendments, the U.S. might consider withdrawing from both the United Nations and the Council (McDonald & Patrick, 2010, p.4; Okhovat, 2012, pp. 22-44).

Indeed, one may argue that the U.S. does not genuinely support specific states' candidacies for permanent seats in the UNSC; instead, it makes strategic calculations based on its changing geopolitical preferences. For instance, the Bush administration initially advocated for Germany's candidacy for permanent membership. Yet this support was discontinued following Germany's public opposition to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Around a decade later, Washington expressed its support for India's bid. But these shifts in the U.S.'s position are not based on commitments to reforming the UNSC but on its intent to dominate the Council's decision-making. In fact, the U.S. objects to any expansion of permanent seats in the Council, as it recognizes that a larger UNSC would be more challenging to control and could limit its ability to shape global outcomes unilaterally. Any reform bid perceived to undercut Washington's authority is thus likely to be blocked (Tharoor, 2011, pp. 401-402). In essence, the P5 generally oppose expansion, but they often conceal this opposition by publicly endorsing select candidacies, as they are almost sure that regional rivalries will block these efforts (Okhovat, 2012; Weiss, 2003).

Overall, the theoretical and conceptual analysis of relative gains sensitivities among pro-reformist states and the hegemon's reluctance to dilute its privileged position stresses the structural and political constraints on significant UNSC reform. Competitive interstate behavior and hegemonic resistance, as the two key causal dynamics, interact to maintain the status quo in global governance, significantly diminishing

the odds of meaningful institutional changes. The next section synthesizes the discussion and findings and reflects on their broader implications for global governance.

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of the Cold War, reform debates over the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) gained renewed momentum, as the Council's outdated structure, which is based on the post-World War II order, underwent increasing scrutiny. While numerous proposals emerged, particularly from the G4 states, they could not achieve any substantive reform. Even the G4's moderate initiative, which initially waived the bid for veto authority, eventually failed to surmount the structural rigidity sustained by the privileged status of the Permanent Five (P5) members (Hill, 2005, pp. 32-33; Kaura & Singh, 2021, pp. 273-282).

This study has demonstrated that two fundamental obstacles persist in preventing meaningful UNSC reform. First, the concept of relative gains, derived from realist international relations theory, explains the persistent divergence among pro-reformist states. Given the anarchic political settings in which states gain at others' expense, rivalries and fears over relative losses, especially among rising powers, have fractured any collective initiative for meaningful reform. These concerns fueled opposition to many bids, including those from Brazil, India, Germany, and Japan. Second, the U.S.'s hegemonic resistance remains a critical obstacle. As the dominant power within the current international system, the United States perceives any expansion of the UNSC's structure as a potential dilution of its influence and veto privilege, prompting strategic resistance to changes that could constrain its authority.

By employing the realist concepts of relative gains and hegemony, this study offers a coherent theoretical exposition for the persistent stalemate in Security Council reform efforts. The analysis suggests that unless these deeply embedded structural and strategic dynamics are addressed, proposals centering solely on expanding membership or redistributing veto rights are likely to fail. This study contributes to scholarly and policy debates over UNSC reform by synthesizing realist theoretical insights with institutional analysis to explicate the enduring deadlock within the UN.

Even though far-reaching structural reform appears politically remote, modest progress may nonetheless be achievable through incremental and low-cost approaches. Rather than the immediate reallocation of formal authority, reform initiatives prioritizing working methods (e.g., procedural modifications and greater transparency) may be more negotiable, as they may reduce the perceived risks for the hegemon and temper the relative-gains concerns of reform-seeking states. In parallel, future research could further explore how shifts in hegemonic strategies shape the UN`s institutional adaptation. While this analysis does not explicitly engage with the internal political factors of reform preferences, it nonetheless

offers pragmatic insights for scholars and policymakers seeking to strengthen the Security Council's effectiveness and legitimacy.

AUTHOR STATEMENT

The author declares that all contributions to this manuscript were made solely by the author. The author also declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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