

Despite the recent crises in Syria and Ukraine, reforming UN Security Council decision-making remains a pipe dream

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*The decision-making procedures used in the UN Security Council – chiefly the veto granted to its five permanent members – have frequently been criticised on the basis that they prevent agreements being reached on key issues. This criticism has been particularly acute with respect to the failure of the Security Council to agree joint positions on the ongoing crises in Syria and Ukraine. **Thomas G. Weiss** argues that while such arguments have been made for decades, there remain no easy answers. Nevertheless, despite the recent criticism, the Security Council is likely to remain as relevant to international peace and security as it ever was.*



The ongoing weeping and gnashing of European and other teeth over Ukraine reflects the most serious East-West confrontation since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The inability of the United Nations to agree on concerted action in the face of the downing of the Malaysian Airlines flight in July by Russian-backed rebels – like earlier paralysis before Russia's February invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea – brings sharply back into relief an issue that was front-and-centre for the first 45 years of the world organisation's history.

Tempered somewhat after the end of the Cold War, the shape and functioning of the UN Security Council now figure prominently in headlines. In particular, a single state can prevent robust action to counter, or even condemn, aberrant behaviour that contravenes international law. Along with international inaction to halt Syria's abattoir, it is logical to point a finger at the Security Council and declare that it is unfit for purpose.

Of course, but so what else is new? Notwithstanding the dyspepsia from dour diplomats, the Security Council will remain as central, or peripheral, to international peace and security as in the past. Is it not possible, shrieks the usual chorus of observers, to increase the membership and eliminate the veto in the Security Council enjoyed by the five permanent members? If not, are there clever ways around it? The answer to both questions is "no."

The pipe dream of Security Council reform

No question has uselessly spilled more ink or printer toner than reforming the Security Council. The 1965 UN Charter amendment that increased the numbers of elected members from 6 to 10 is one of the few (along with increased membership in the Economic and Social Council) such changes, which reflected the influx of new member states following decolonisation. The demand for further changes – increasing the numbers of elected and permanent members as well as eliminating or expanding the veto – has been a permanent feature of UN debate ever since. Unfortunately, everyone agrees that the Security Council reflects the world of 1945 and not the twenty-first-century's distribution of power, but no one has a solution that satisfies the various churlish factions.

Proposals for additional members include numbers ranging from 19 to 26 (rather than the current 15), with variations of increased numbers of two-year elected members, the addition of new four-year renewable members, and the



UN Security Council chamber in New York, Credit: tomz (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

creation of 4 to 6 additional permanent members, with and without veto. The most frequently mentioned possible candidates as permanent members – the so-called Gang of Four consisting of Germany, Japan, India, and Brazil – are resisted by at least some of the permanent members, and regional rivals are actively hostile or passively aggressive about certain candidates.

Concerning the veto, some proposals favour no new vetoes for permanent members while others insist upon them – no second-class citizens for Africa, the argument goes, even new permanent ones. Other proposals favour eliminating the veto or agreeing not to use it in humanitarian catastrophes, but the P5 must agree to voluntarily give up such power. Those wishing to bet on that likelihood are hard to find with odds below zero.

The cacophony, jealousies, and vested interests that have plagued this issue since 1965 remain. Will the inability to move ahead with dramatic reforms compromise UN credibility? Not more than in the past. One should recall that despite the international inability to halt mass murder in Syria, the Security Council was still relevant. When the politics were right and the need arose for a face-saving way to dispose of Bashir al-Assad's chemical weapons, the universal UN was still called upon to authorise and work with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Permanent Security Council membership and the veto in particular seem like anachronistic relics; but these traces of a bygone era are here to stay because every proposed change raises as many problems as it solves. If it was not clear earlier, the ongoing crisis in Ukraine as earlier ones in Crimea and Syria demonstrate why Russia will not agree to set aside the veto just as ongoing troubles in the Middle East indicate unequivocally why the US Senate will not agree to any such change.

It is redolent not only of the Cold War but also of the paralysis in the UN Security Council during that period because of actual or threatened vetoes by permanent members. Alas, there were no procedural gimmicks or structural constitutional changes then, nor are there any today. The death knell for Security Council reform, but not the Security Council, has tolled.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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