

The Mashariki Today

THE PROSPECTS FOR REFORMING THE UNITED NATIONS



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Introduction

The United Nations Organization, the UN, is in 2024 older than 90% of the 8 billion people on earth. Almost 80 years later, the UN has changed in size, activities, and expectations. Many of its current members, in 1945, had no say in world affairs because they were colonial 'property' of various Western powers in Africa and Asia. There was, however, a growing global movement to decolonize and de-imperialize the world which eventually led to the increase of members in the United Nations. The UN accommodated the decolonized and de-imperialized territories as new members of the General Assembly without restructuring its basic structure which had the Security Council as a powerful entity within the United Nations. The main purpose of the United Nations Security Council was to protect the interests of the big powers, through the use of the veto, against possible global democracy at the General Assembly. This was the only way to avoid the mistakes of the League of Nations which, for different reasons, had not included big powers like the United States and Soviet Union. Those who allocated themselves the power of the veto in the Security Council are not likely to remove or dilute it simply because there are

General Assembly members demanding that they be included in that exclusive club with the same rights as the original members. This commentary seeks to discuss the prospects for reforming the United Nations.

Key Issues

In 1945, those in the big power club were the allies comprising the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and China. They did not consider religion, regions, or race as factors in determining who qualified to be in the exclusive big power club. The club excluded defeated Germany, which was divided into four parts, and defeated Japan in the belief that they were not peace loving. Although the two countries have strong economies, they do not necessary qualify to be in the Security Council. They still have the image problem of being conceptual appendages to American unipolar desires. They, in addition, compete with Brazil and India for consideration as newly minted big powers especially in the emerging trend of diluting American singularity and promotion of the concept of global multi-polarity.

The demand for reforms at the United Nations is on the rise with UN Secretaries General doing their best. Boutros Boutros-Ghali had proposed an Agenda for Peace raising questions of veto power in the 15 member Security Council and the need for reforms. Kofi Anan talked of mainly Germany, Brazil, India, and Japan joining the Security Council as permanent members; they came to be referred as the “G4”. Although the General Assembly set up a working group on how to achieve equitable representation at the Security Council in December 1992, it has produced nothing more than three decades later. This inability to produce results has encouraged various countries to intensify demands for reforms as urgent. In some instances, those with veto power, the P5, have instigated chaos and violence instead of being promoters of peace. The powerful have, observed Kenya’s former UN Ambassador Martin Kimani, continued to assault the UN charter “breaching international law with little regard.” This reality increases calls for reforms.

There is thus new urgency with top UN officials calling for change. In January 2021, President of the UN General Assembly Volkan Bozkir called for UN reforms to reflect 21st century realities, make the Security Council democratic.



It could enhance “its very legitimacy ... if the Council was reformed to be more representative, effective, efficient and transparent.” In September 2022, US President Joe Biden said he would support African, Latin America, and the Caribbean countries becoming UNSC permanent members. Biden was joining a reform chorus spearheaded by middle level countries as India. Two years earlier, in September 2020, India’s Narendra Modi asserted that UN reforms were “the need of the hour” as he wandered about the relevance of the UN after 75 years. Insisting that India intended to have “a self-reliant future”, he demanded the inclusion of India in UN decision making structures. Turkey is another mid-level power aspiring for a seat at the top table. “The Security Council,” Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan argued in October 2023, “has ceased to be the guarantor of world security and has become a battleground for the political strategies of only five countries.” UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres joining calls for reforms asserted, “The world has changed. Our institutions have not. We cannot effectively address problems as they do not reflect the world as it is. Instead of solving problems, they part of the problem.”



African countries also raised their voices in demanding inclusion, in language that was similar to what others had used. Kenya’s President William Ruto added his voice arguing that Africa was under-represented at the UN Security Council which, he said, was a “matter of justice”. Claiming, at the UN in September 2024, that the existing international system was “dysfunctional, undemocratic, non-inclusive, unaccountable, autocratic, and opaque,” he called for urgent effort “to make the Security Council truly representative, inclusive, transparent, effective, and accountable.” He stressed, “We have no choice but to reject outdated systems and re-imagine of international cooperation that works for all 8 billion people.” Malawi’s President Lazarus McCarthy Chakwera stressed, “One fix that we in Africa demand is for the United Nations to embrace democracy in the Security Council by giving Africa two permanent seats with veto power” and that “the time to fix that is now.” Gambia’s President Adama Barrow called for “a more representative, just, and representative United Nations to shape the world we so dearly want.” The President of Mauritius Prithvirajsing Roopun, remarked that the world was “at a watershed moment” and that “inclusivity is a necessity and not a choice. Small states and large alike deserve a voice... in a reformed Security Council.”

If the criteria for demanding reforms at the UN are new global realities that are distant from 1945, India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan, the G4, have an advantage over other claimants. They are economically powerful and are largely responsible for new realities as presumed regional leaders. While Germany and Japan are leading economies in the Conceptual West, Brazil and India lead in the Conceptual Global South that wants a voice in the world power realignment. The four, however, face serious challenges from their neighboring rivals for possible permanent seats. Spain and Italy challenge Germany. Brazil faces Argentina, Mexico, and Canada. India has Pakistan to worry about. China is not interested in Japan getting a permanent seat at the UNSC. The suggestions for reforms are thus not likely to yield fruits because none of the permanent five is really willing to dilute its privileged position in the world power pecking order.

There, however, have been reforms at the UN that did not disturb the protective structure of big power control at the Security Council. The reforms were associated with decolonization and the influx of the colonized, mainly African, into the global arena to play power politics. With time, they twice showed that the General Assembly could act on individual membership and force change to reflect new realities. In the process, regimes in two founder members in 1945 fell victim to the wave of decolonization and lost their acceptability in the 1960s. These were Apartheid South Africa and the island of Taiwan which claimed to be China, often operating under the umbrella of the British Empire or the United States. South Africa stopped becoming a pariah state at the United Nations instead of being the reference to Africa while the Peoples Republic of China replaced Taiwan at the UN General Assembly and the UNSC. The UN General Assembly was thus the determinant of who can be a member and who cannot.

The success in changing and in introducing the doctrine of regime acceptability into the General Assembly might have encouraged former colonies into imagining they could introduce other reforms that would increase their operating power in the United Nations system; they appeared to threaten the entrenched Conceptual West. They, in the 1970s, used the UNESCO as the reform platform to campaign for New Information Order and New Economic Order that Tanzania's Salim Ahmed Salim appeared

sign minister made his controversial remarks to reporters. Mr. Kittani also said at that time that hopes the question of who will be U.N. Secretary General for the next five years will be decided at the Cancun conference on October 22 and 23, which Mr. Waldheim has been invited to attend, along with the heads of government of 22 nations, including Austria's Chancellor Franz Vranitzky. Mr. Waldheim said a further development in the race for the succession, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Chairman of the Organization of African Unity, took the opportunity of his U.N. visit to give African delegates a pep talk, urging them to do all they can to win Salim's election. In his press to the General Assembly,

Iraq is at war with both Iran and Israel. Mr. Kittani made a point after his election of claiming that it was a tribute to Iraq. However, many delegates believe he was chosen despite, rather than because of, his citizenship. Long a popular figure around the U.N., he himself was reported to have said, during his pre-election campaign that if members couldn't vote for Iraq, "then vote for Kittani."

Coincidentally, Iraq succeeds Cuba next September as chairman of the Nonaligned Movement. His election to the U.N. office was a powerful boost for the Iraqis, according to some diplomats, who noted Cuba's vain bid to obtain a seat on the



Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim (right) chats with the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister, Zhang Wenjin, prior to the dinner Waldheim hosted for the Chinese minister at his residence.



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to spearhead. As a result, the US led the way in cutting funds for UNESCO and essentially crippling that organization. The message was clear that there are limits as to what was acceptable in calling for reforms.

The lesson from the 1970s and 1980s was that big powers would fight back and cripple the organization if they felt threatened. Expanding the big club membership that needs protection from global democracy is one such threat for it violates the spirit of 1945 to protect the winners of World War II in order to have all of them in the club. Removing the veto from the few is thus not an option and increasing the number of those to be protected from the rest of the world is contentious as to who should be the beneficiary to be included in the big power club as needing protection from the rest.

Although the principle of reforming the Security Council would appear acceptable, there are contentions as to what the criteria for acceptance should be. Would the stress be on global economic and military might? If so, the Conceptual West would dominate. Should the stress be on continental or regional representation, then Africa and Latin America would have a chance which might be diluted by Australia. Should geopolitical conceptual groupings like the Global South be the main determining factor, then the debate would arise as to who or how many states in the large Global South would get into the club. The prospects for Africa do not look very bright if economic, military, or technological might are part of the criteria.

Within the African context, there would be serious cluster competitors. As a continent, Africa occupies most of the discussions relating to conflicts at the UN Security Council and receives many peace keeping operations and yet it has little voice. It tries to operate through the African Union (AU), but the AU, despite the Ezulwini Consensus¹ has problems projecting one voice and it is indecisive. Three countries namely South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt lead in claiming the African slots at the UNSC but they have many obstacles to overcome before they can be accepted. South Africa and



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¹The Ezulwini Consensus is the AU position on the UNSC reforms debate. It called for at least two permanent seats and five non-permanent Security Council seats for African states.

Nigeria have unsuccessfully tried to get the AU countries to drop the demand for veto power to make negotiation easy but others are not interested and stick to the Ezulwini Consensus.

South Africa, dominating Southern Africa, was in 1945 a racist founder member of the United Nations often operating under the umbrella of the British Empire. It tried to regain its stature once it abolished 'apartheid' and seeks to acquire a global moral high ground. Its performance at the International Court of Justice, ICJ, over the Israeli 'genocidal' inclinations towards the Palestinians in Gaza boosted its international standing. There are also contenders from the Eastern Africa clusters which include Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. Kenya has mixed images with its positive 'revolutionary' Mau Mau anti-colonial image on one side and also the negative post-colonial image of abandoning 'liberation' and embracing the role of promoting Euro interests in the world of black people on the other; the surrogate "nyapara" image. Nigeria leads the Western Africa



cluster but it has to contend with Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Senegal. Egypt, straddling the Arab world with a foot in Africa, has to contend with Morocco with its aspiration to be European while dominating Africa, and 'revolutionary' Algeria. The decision as to who from Africa would get into the Security Council is therefore difficult since African states cannot agree and they tied themselves in the 2005 Ezulwini Consensus.

The prospects for serious reforms at the United Nations Security Council, UNSC, are thus not high despite the effort. The issue of UNSC reforms started back in 1978 when the UN General Assembly considered "Equitable Representation" in the UNSC and thereafter the Group of Four comprising Germany, Brazil, India and Japan mounted campaigns to be included in the UNSC as permanent members with veto powers because they were economically powerful. Both Germany and Japan had been excluded from the original club because they were the enemies in World War II and therefore not peace loving. India did not exist as a country and Brazil was subsumed under the American Monroe Doctrine umbrella. Reform took a different dimension after 2004 when Kofi Annan was Secretary General and suggested a High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change which recommended enlargement of the Security Council.

As a result, the African Union joined the reform debate in 2005 with two statements, the Ezulwini Consensus and the Sirte Declaration, demanding two permanent seats with veto power and other privileges, and an additional five on permanent seats at the Security Council. The AU, reserving the right to determine which countries would represent Africa, had problems deciding which ones would be and the criteria for doing so.

Although those enjoying the veto privilege are supposed to keep and offer international peace and security and have failed to do so, they would not want to remove or dilute it just to accommodate those grumbling from outside. A half-way compromise might be to consider increasing the number of permanent members if the new members would not have the veto power. While the G4 have accepted the compromise, the AU is adamant that African members should have veto power. King Letsie III of Lesotho, for instance, insists, “We ... advocate for a comprehensive reform of the Security Council supporting the common African position known as the ‘Ezulwini Consensus.’” Teodore Nuema Obiang Manque, Vice President of Equatorial Guinea added the Sirte Declaration to the Ezulwini Consensus calling for two permanent seats as well as five rotational non-permanent seats arguing that the proliferation of conflicts was “further proof of the obsolescence and inefficiency of the UN Security Council today.” Even if the veto privilege was to be removed as part of the expansion package, there remains the issue of regional rivalries challenging not just the G4 of Brazil, Germany, Japan or India, but also claimants to regional leadership in Africa.

This would similarly be difficult, given the challenge of which criteria of whether regional, religious, and ideological interests are to be represented. In addition, the suggested UNSC reforms would negate the spirit of 1945, to protect the interests of big powers as inducement for them to become UN members. The impression back in 1945 was that the new organization, if it was to work, needed those big powers more than the big powers needed the United Nations. It is doubtful whether this reality changed. The alternative would be to dissolve the entire United Nations as a world organization and start afresh from the scratch but there does not seem to be any inclination in that direction. Instead, the clambering is for the strong few outside the club to get in and become global decision makers.



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Conclusion

The question is whether the logic of creating the Security Council in 1945, based on the fears and failures of the League of Nations, is still valid 80 years on. While there are issues of geopolitics, moral, global justice and fairness to consider, the bottom line is one of power politics as driven by the perceived national interests. Are those struggling to get into the UNSC club needed for the UN to survive or do they need the UN more than the UN needs them? They face the challenge of convincing the world, particularly members of the exclusive club, that the UN needs them so much that the UN has to beg them to enter that exclusive club. Given that members of the club, the P5, do not agree on many things except possessing the protection in the veto power, they are unlikely to accept the dilution of their privileges.

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