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Global politics

Is the UN Security Council fit for purpose?

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This A2 article evaluates the role played by the UN Security Council, reviewing its recent contributions and failures.

The UN Security Council (UNSC), established in 1947 to maintain international peace and security, has increasingly come under criticism. There has been particular focus on the Security Council's failure to agree action on Syria, where the 4-year civil war has cost 200,000 lives and seen the worst chemical weapons attack on civilians since the 1980s. In 2014, the outgoing UN human rights commissioner, Navi Pillay, condemned the Security Council for putting 'national interest and short-term geopolitical considerations over intolerable human suffering and grave breaches of international peace and security'. The refrain has been that the Security Council is no longer fit for purpose — is this fair?

A busy council

The Security Council has not been entirely paralysed in recent years. The permanent members — the USA, Russia, China, the UK and France — have agreed and passed legally binding resolutions across the full range of its powers. It has enforced economic sanctions in response to Iran's nuclear programme in 2010; authorised military action to protect civilians in Libya in 2011; supported the continued presence of troops training Afghanistan's security forces; sent new peacekeeping missions to Mali and the Central African Republic (over 100,000 UN peacekeepers already operate around the world under UNSC approval); and issued condemnatory statements against non-state actors ranging from Islamic State to Boko Haram. The ten rotating non-permanent members — from Angola to New Zealand — have played their part. Permanent members may have veto power, but the support of most non-permanent members is still needed to achieve the required two-thirds overall majority.

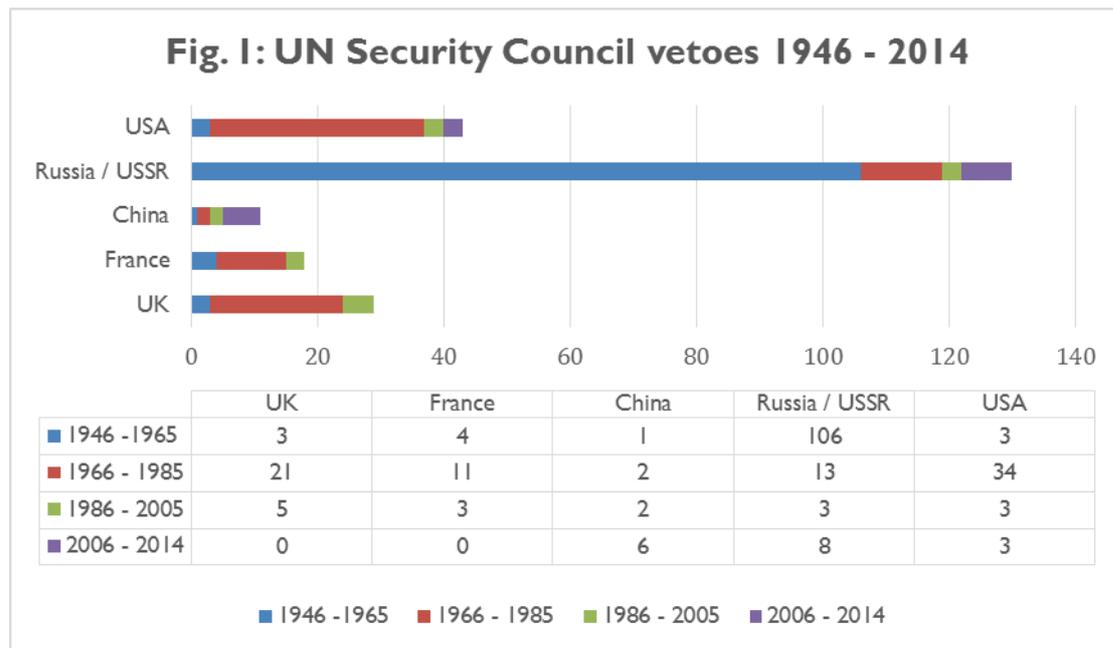
The veto and Syria

The recent history of the veto is one of relative restraint, rather than disagreement. By contrast, from the end of the Second World War to the height of the Cold War in the early 1960s, the veto was used far more frequently: 117 times compared with just 17 vetoes since 2006 (see Figure 1, next page).

On Syria, however, Russia and China have together vetoed four separate resolutions, including early calls for a comprehensive ceasefire in 2011 and the referral of Syria to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in 2014.

Putin's motives seem mixed. Military action to remove Assad (contemplated by the USA and the UK in September 2013 but rejected due to lack of domestic support) would establish an unwelcome

precedent of military action by foreign countries to topple unpleasant regimes. Russia's strategic Middle East naval base on Syria's shores, provided in return for weapons, is a key asset it is reluctant to lose. More simply, uncompromising opposition against Western powers in the Security Council plays well at home for Putin and shores up popular support.



China's willingness to use its veto power is a new phenomenon. Since 1989, it has vetoed only seven times (see Figure 1). Six of its vetoes have come since 2008, four of these being in alliance with Russia on Syria. This suggests a change in China's foreign policy strategy, reflecting that its growth as an economic power is now being followed by a desire to become more active as an international power within key decision-making bodies including the Security Council. Previously, China abstained rather than vetoed; now, a new alliance with Russia — both economically and geopolitically — is opening up.

Both Russia and China have been suspicious about the risk of 'mission creep' arising from Security Council resolutions that authorise military action. In 2011, the Security Council drew on the UN's Responsibility to Protect doctrine (where nation states surrender their sovereignty if they fail to protect or actively threaten their population), approving 'all necessary means to protect civilians' from Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya. For Russia and China, the NATO air campaign that followed, and ended in Gaddafi's killing by his own people, stretched that mandate beyond breaking point into a charter for regime change. Both Russia and China felt duped, and have been keen ever since to constrain future military action.

However, the Security Council has made some progress on Syria. In 2013, it agreed the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons programme, which UN inspectors now estimate to be 96% destroyed. In 2014, it called for Syria to allow humanitarian access to aid agencies and condemned 'widespread violations of international law by the Syrian government'. Stronger Security Council action, such as military strikes against the Assad regime, has in reality been blocked not just by potential Russian and Chinese opposition in the Security Council, but also by reluctance from the American and British

publics to support another Middle Eastern intervention where the objectives and prospect of success were unclear. The Security Council is not the only opposition to tougher action in a conflict where it has been increasingly difficult to decide which side deserves support and protection.

Uncle Sam's veto

While Russia and China have attracted criticism over Syria, they are not alone in using the veto to allow clear-cut breaches of international law to continue. Since the 1970s, the USA has vetoed more Security Council resolutions than any other permanent member. In particular, the USA has vetoed 41 resolutions in relation to Israel and the Palestinian territories. These include resolutions condemning the construction of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestine, which have been widely accepted as illegal under the Geneva Convention, most recently by President Obama in 2011.

Most recently, the USA has argued that UNSC resolutions would only complicate efforts to resume stalled negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians on a two-state peace deal and would risk 'hardening the positions of both sides'. Critics say that Washington is under pressure from Israel and Congress, which has a strong pro-Israel lobby.

Old Guard

What of the other permanent members, the UK and France, whose status as world powers — although they are still nuclear weapons states — is under pressure? Many criticise the Security Council's membership as a relic of the Second World War. Calls for emerged and emerging powers, such as India, Japan, Brazil and Germany (and a Muslim or African nation), to join have so far stumbled. India appears the closest to membership, with no permanent members still opposed to it joining, but whether new permanent members would also be given veto powers remains in doubt.

The greatest threat to the authority of the Security Council remains permanent members' ability to act unilaterally. The US and UK invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Russia's annexing of Crimea in 2014 were unilateral actions where the Security Council was powerless to intervene. Security Council attempts to rein in unilateralist permanent members are of course doomed to fail. In 2014, Russia unsurprisingly vetoed a resolution which declared the Crimean referendum invalid and reaffirmed the sovereignty of Ukraine's territorial borders.

Liberalist and realist views

The Security Council has angered many for its inability to take action against Syria, for its impotence in the face of Russia's annexing of Crimea and for its silence on the Palestinian question. In those cases, it may reasonably be argued that the Security Council has not fulfilled its purpose of maintaining international peace and security. But assessing this question fairly depends on whether one takes a liberal or a realist viewpoint of the purpose of the Security Council. By design, it was — and is — a forum with a combination of liberal and realist principles in mind as a means by which major powers could work together in the common interest where feasible, but reserve the right to protect their national interests too.

The reality is that the more multipolar world politics is, and the more equal the global balance of power is, the more willing the major powers will be to use the veto and frustrate the liberal principle. An increasingly confident Russia and China, combined with an already confident USA, demonstrate that

as we enter a more multipolar era, we can probably expect greater disagreement at the Security Council, not less. Fit for purpose? It depends if you are a liberal or a realist.

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