POLICY NOTE

THE G20 AND UN SECURITY COUNCIL REFORM: MANAGING AN INTERNATIONAL ORDER IN TRANSITION

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Introduction

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reform has been on the UN General Assembly's agenda since 1979, with formal intergovernmental negotiations beginning in 2009. The Pact for the Future, adopted in New York in September 2024, has given this longstanding issue a renewed impetus. The Rio de Janeiro G20 Leaders' Declaration, coming on the Pact's heels in November 2024, included a call to render the UNSC more "representative, inclusive, efficient, effective, democratic and accountable", and to alter its composition to strengthen the representation of underrepresented regions such as Africa, the Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.[1] Identical language was inserted into the Johannesburg G20 Declaration one year later.

While a welcome development, reaffirming support for reform is not the same as taking the steps necessary to make it a reality. The UNSC's composition continues to resemble the world of 1945, when in reality, UN member states need to consider what it will look like in 2045 if the organization is to survive the mounting pressures of a multipolar world. Nor is this a challenge that can wait another two decades: the deepening crisis of international order already taking place today is partly the result of institutions that no longer appear fit for purpose.

With the Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) track, in New York, proceeding slowly, the G20 can provide the process of UNSC reform with an added jolt of energy. The current impasse stems not only from disagreements over the substance of reform, but also from the tendency to negotiate two distinct questions — UNSC composition and the veto — as though they must be resolved simultaneously. We propose a more sequenced approach to reform: expanding the range of options for UNSC membership while treating veto reform as a parallel, medium-term objective. Because Brazil and India have consistently championed a more representative Council while demonstrating flexibility on the modalities of reform, they are particularly well positioned to advance this agenda within the G20 and the wider UN membership.

[1] "G20 Rio de Janeiro Leaders' Declaration," G20 Information Centre, November 18, 2024, https://www.g20.utoronto.ca/2024/241118-declaration.html.

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State of Play

Increasing the size of the UNSC necessitates amending the UN Charter, which in turn requires the support of two-thirds of all UN member states, including all permanent members of the Security Council: the United States, China, Russia, France and the United Kingdom. But while these five countries – collectively known as the P5 – hold a veto over the process, it would be a mistake to conclude that they are the sole obstacle to reform. Given the complex and competitive political dynamics at play, no model advanced so far has managed to surmount the necessary two-thirds threshold.

The positions of the various political and regional groupings have remained ossified for decades. The G4 countries – Germany, Japan, India and Brazil – argue that the UNSC should be expanded to include new permanent members, including themselves, while showing flexibility on the immediate extension of veto rights. Africa's "Ezulwini Consensus" position also asserts that two permanent seats should be set aside for Africa, with the same rights and privileges as existing permanent members for as long as the veto exists. The L.69 Group, a coalition of developing countries, similarly supports expansion in both the permanent and non-permanent categories to strengthen the representation of the Global South. By contrast, Uniting for Consensus (UfC) – a group of twelve countries that includes Italy, Mexico, Canada, Argentina, Pakistan and South Korea – opposes expansion of the permanent category.

Debate over how to reform the Security Council centers on five interlinked negotiating clusters: categories of membership, the question of the veto, regional representation, the size of an enlarged Council and its working methods, and the relationship between the UNSC and the UN General Assembly. The G4 argues that discussions have advanced sufficiently to warrant immediate text-based negotiations (TBN), whereas UfC believes that TBN should begin only after substantially greater convergence has been achieved across all five clusters.

As such, not only do member states remain divided on the substance of reform; they cannot even agree on whether negotiations should move to a text-based format, despite growing acknowledgement that the deepening crisis of international order has rendered UNSC reform an increasingly urgent task.

To surmount this divide, the current co-chairs of the IGN process have recently advanced a bridging proposal that includes what they call "fixed regional seats." Under this model, additional long-term seats carrying the privileges of permanent membership would be allocated to the different regional groupings of states, with their occupants elected by the General

"Intergovernmental Negotiations on Security Amending the UN Charter requires the support of two thirds of UN member states. With 54 out of the UN's 193 member states, Africa alone nearly accounts for a blocking third.Council Reform: Consideration of the G4 Model," Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations, March 7, 2024, https://estatements.un.org/estatements/10.0010/20240307100000000/rcAGIzy42q07/hTEyeLkMvHY3_en.pdf.

Assembly for renewable terms.[2] The proposal seeks to reconcile competing reform models by offering the possibility of greater continuity and influence to advocates of permanent expansion, while (at least nominally) preserving democratic accountability by forcing the holders of these seats to stand for periodic re-election.

Without even considering whether the occupants of these seats might prove able to abuse their veto privileges and still get re-elected with the help of patronage and vote-buying schemes,[3] the bridging proposal suffers from at least two deficiencies.

First, it conflates the question of the veto with that of categories of membership. Brazil, for instance, has only cast one "no" vote across the eleven terms it has served on the UNSC, suggesting that permanence and participation in core decision-making are of greater practical importance than immediate access to veto power.[4] Permanent membership also confers significant diplomatic status and agenda-setting influence, including an enhanced ability to assemble blocking minorities on the Council even without a veto. (Currently, nine affirmative votes are required to adopt a resolution, meaning that seven countries can form a blocking minority.) Many states also support enlarging the UNSC's permanent membership as a means of diluting the relative dominance of the P5, but remain wary of granting new permanent members the veto for fear that this will further paralyze the Council's work.

Second, P5 countries are unlikely to support a system in which veto power could periodically be exercised by states whose identity they cannot predict or influence. As a result, any negotiations on the bridging proposal would likely come under pressure to drop the veto element, producing a model closer to the UfC proposal instead: new seats with longer and renewable terms but no new permanent members. This might help to improve fluency in Council business for a small group of states, but would not fully solve the central problem of how to reform the UNSC to reflect the emerging global distribution of power and thereby strengthen its legitimacy.

The Ball is in the G4's Court

If the G4 believe that the commencement of TBN will ensure that a variation of their position will prevail, the likely negotiation dynamics around the bridging proposal suggest a different

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[2] "Revised Co-Chairs' Elements Paper on Convergences and Divergences on the question of equitable representation on and increase in the membership of the Security Council and related matters," United Nations, June 10, 2026, https://www.un.org/en/ga/screform/80/pdf/2026-06-10-cochairs-elements-paper.pdf.

[3] See "Models for U.N. Security Council reform: an AI analysis," Better Order Project, https://betterorderproject.org/regulation-of-force-and-coercion/#models-for-un-security-council-reform-an-ai-analysis

[4] The resolution in question was UNSC Resolution 1929, imposing a fourth round of sanctions on Iran. See Ian Black, "UN approves new Iran sanctions," *The Guardian*, June 9, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/09/iran-sanctions-united-nations-nuclear.
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outcome. The G4's position has also been weakened by another surprise development: Germany failed this year, for the first time, to be elected to a non-permanent seat on the UNSC.

The reasons for Germany's defeat are varied. It was a late entrant into the race, meaning that many countries had already pledged their support to the other candidates, Austria and Portugal. Austria in particular had recently served as co-chair of the IGN and a member of the ACT group of member states that aims to strengthen the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency of the Security Council. Despite its small size, Austria had established itself as an influential and highly effective actor within UN diplomacy.

But the reasons for Germany's defeat run deeper. In recent decades, the relative influence of Western middle powers has declined as the global balance of power has shifted, casting reasonable doubt on whether there should be an additional permanent member on the Council from Western Europe in addition to France and the United Kingdom. Moreover, the positions Germany has expressed during recent international crises have led some countries to question whether it applies the principles of international law consistently, particularly where the actions of close allies are concerned.[5] This has made it more difficult for Berlin to present itself as a broadly acceptable candidate for permanent membership.

Given the current trendline, the UfC group has little incentive to alter its negotiating position in the absence of new proposals. The ball is in the G4's court if they wish not only to shore up their position in the eyes of the global majority, but also to advance the crucial and pressing task of reforming the UNSC's composition to strengthen the foundations of international order. Without immediately calling into question their collective aspiration for permanent seats, there remain ways in which the G4 can evolve their position and bring reform closer.

Brazil and India should take the lead in proposing a compromise. In exchange for UfC dropping its opposition to TBN (and thereby risking the possibility that the permanent category will be expanded), Brasília and New Delhi should support the creation of a new category of "semi-permanent" seats and agree to champion changes to veto privileges in a subsequent stage of reform. This would require UfC to accept that reforming the UNSC's composition cannot remain entirely contingent upon agreement on veto reform, particularly when the P5 have shown little willingness to reopen the latter question. Equally, it would require the G4 to recognise that meaningful reform may need to proceed incrementally rather than through a single comprehensive package.

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[5] See Zachary Paikin and Trita Parsi, "Berlin Should Support the Case for "Semi-Permanent" UN Security Council Seats," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, July 6, 2026, https://ip-quarterly.com/en/berlin-should-support-case-semi-permanent-un-security-council-seats.
"Intergovernmental Negotiations on Security Amending the UN Charter requires the support of two thirds of UN member states. With 54 out of the UN's 193 member states, Africa alone nearly accounts for a blocking third.Council Reform: Consideration of the G4 Model," Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations, March 7, 2024, https://estatements.un.org/estatements/10.0010/20240307100000000/rcAGIzy42q07/hTEyeLkMvHY3_en.pdf.

After decades of deadlock, incremental progress may be the best way forward to circumvent maximalist negotiating positions.

Two Proposals

Many countries have joined UfC to block a regional rival from growing its relative influence at their expense: South Korea opposes Japan's bid for a permanent seat, Pakistan opposes India, Italy opposes Germany, and Argentina and Mexico oppose Brazil. It is natural to wish to prevent a scenario in which the only capital worth visiting or talking to in your area of the world is not your own.

To address this issue, India and Brazil should informally float the idea of establishing a third category of membership on the UNSC: "semi-permanent" membership. The UfC group has already indicated their openness to the creation of seats with longer terms and renewable mandates. New Delhi and Brasília should go further and propose that a reformed Council should not only create such seats, but that their occupants should be drawn from a pool elected by the General Assembly.[6]

For example, with a 15-country pool, being elected just once could entitle a country to serve two separate four-year terms on the Council, with five countries serving at a time. In other words, countries in the pool would sit on the Council for a guaranteed eight years out of 24 before new elections are held.[7]

Such a proposal would offer a marked improvement over the status quo for the middle powers that make up the bulk of the UfC group – and would benefit more of them than creating a small group of immediately renewable longer-term seats. Moreover, middle powers regularly cannibalize the UNSC's non-permanent seats, often serving more frequently than once per decade while leaving smaller states to wait their turn for several decades. Taking 15 middle powers out of the running would dramatically raise the frequency with which smaller states would serve on the Council. A rotating pool also provides creative opportunities to grow the representation of cross-regional groupings, such as Arab countries and small island states, without excessively increasing the overall size of the Council.

At first, the act of proposing this new category of membership may be interpreted as a way of placating UfC countries and mollifying their opposition to expanding the permanent category.

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[6] *Toward a Better Security Order*, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, January 2026, https://quincyinst-2.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/11161327/Toward-A-Better-Security-Order-Digital.pdf.

[7] One could also envisage other permutations, such as a 16- or 20-country pool. But a 15-country pool strikes a balance, offering sufficiently long terms to ensure a clear improvement over the status quo without resulting in an excessively long period before new elections are held.
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But in reality, the semi-permanent pool would also tacitly serve as a fallback option for Germany and Japan, whose relative global influence has declined since the G4's formation two decades ago. As such, the proposal would signal India and Brazil's openness to exploring new formulas for achieving a more representative Council without explicitly distancing themselves from the G4 format. Putting this idea forward at the leadership level on the sidelines of the G20 would also immediately place more content on the table for IGN talks to consider.

Another major issue concerns the question of the veto. Recent years have seen P5 countries use their privileged position on the Council to shield themselves or their partners from accountability, even in the face of clear-cut violations of the UN Charter, such as when Russia invaded Ukraine. Sustained use of the veto has also impeded humanitarian action in places such as Syria and Gaza.

Many countries remain wary of expanding the veto. Given the degree of gridlock that already paralyzes Council business, compounding the UN's "original sin" risks a perverse outcome in which reform leads to a less effective body, perhaps fatally weakening the UN if this encourages the great powers to operate more and more outside its confines. The G4's proposal, when combined with Africa's demand for two permanent seats of its own, risks more than doubling the number of veto wielders. This is not an appealing prospect, given that the mere *threat* of casting a veto is often used to shut down debate.

The G4 have tried to assuage member state concerns by offering to forego any veto privileges for fifteen years after becoming permanent members, by which point the global political climate may have shifted.[8] They should go further by committing to use this interim period to build a global coalition around new restrictions on the exercise of the veto that would apply equally to all permanent members, including the P5. The Charter amendment establishing new permanent seats should also mandate a review conference after fifteen years devoted exclusively to the question of the veto. This would ensure that the issue remains firmly on the international agenda while allowing reform of the UNSC's composition to proceed without requiring immediate consensus on veto reform.

One possible model for reforming veto privileges would be the following: a permanent member casting a veto must obtain one (or even two or three) negative votes from other sitting members of the UNSC for the veto to be secure from potential override, and if they fail, then a two-thirds majority of the General Assembly can overturn it. The latter would be an exceptional development – one likely to occur only when a great power has manifestly failed in its commitment to uphold international peace and security, so much so that it is unable to find a single ally on the UNSC or to construct a blocking one-third minority in the General Assembly.

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As such, while a meaningful reform, it would not curtail veto privileges to the point where it encourages great powers to dissociate from multilateralism for fear that their core interests will no longer be protected.

Such a proposal is likely to garner support from a large majority of UN member states. Over the fifteen-year period following the reform to the Council's composition, continued refusal on the part of the P5 to engage in meaningful negotiations on veto reform would inevitably erode the legitimacy of UNSC decisions and increase pressure for member states to pursue alternative avenues for collective action through the General Assembly.

Conclusion

As a forum that has increasingly centered the aspirations of the Global South, the G20 is well placed to inject new momentum into the debate on UNSC reform. It brings together all five permanent members, the G4 countries, several members of the UfC group, and – following the accession of the African Union – the continent whose support will ultimately be indispensable to any Charter amendment.[9] While the IGN remains the formal venue for reform, the G20 offers a valuable political space where leaders can test new ideas, build confidence across negotiating blocs, and move beyond the formulaic language that has characterized discussions for decades.

Now is the time to shift the conversation from reaffirming the need for UNSC reform to more concrete institutional options capable of breaking the current impasse. If creative ideas for reform can be advanced in fora such as the G20, it may allow Leaders' Declarations to move beyond standard language and give the IGN a much-needed boost. And rather than focusing solely on their objections to the co-chairs' bridging proposal, which encourages member states to default back to their official positions, placing several proposals on the table at once can help participants in the IGN to compare various options, internalize the trade-offs between the clusters, and identify more reliably what they can live with and what their red lines are.

Meaningful reform is unlikely to emerge from a single grand bargain. It is more likely to result from a series of carefully sequenced compromises that recognize the changing distribution of global power and the political constraints under which reform must occur. Linking UNSC composition and veto reform as part of a shared long-term vision, while decoupling them procedurally in the negotiations themselves, offers a more politically feasible path out of decades of deadlock. If successful, such an approach would not merely enlarge the UNSC, but strengthen its effectiveness and legitimacy in an increasingly multipolar world.

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