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Veto Power and the Dilemma of Global Governance: The Stalemate of UN Security Council Reform from Syria to Ukraine

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Abstract. The veto power of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), established in 1945 to ensure great power consensus, has become a major obstacle to effective global governance in the 21st century. While originally designed to prevent conflicts among the Permanent Five members (P5), the veto is now frequently used to protect national or allied interests, undermining the United Nations (UN)'s ability to address crises such as the Syrian civil war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This study examines the structural flaws of the veto system, its geopolitical misuse, and ongoing reform efforts. Using case studies of Russia's vetoes on Syria and the U.S.'s vetoes on Israel, as well as examining proposals such as expanding UNSC membership or limiting veto use in mass atrocity cases, the paper explores why reform remains stagnant. Findings indicate that the P5's entrenched privileges and the UN Charter's amendment rules create a reform deadlock. However, alternative mechanisms—including the UN General Assembly's Uniting for Peace resolution and regional organizations' interventions—demonstrate potential pathways for circumventing veto gridlock. The study concludes that while abolishing the veto is politically unfeasible, incremental procedural reforms offer the most realistic solution to mitigate its disruptive effects on global governance.

Keywords: UN Security Council veto power, Global governance reform, Great power politics, Institutional deadlock, Multilateralism crisis

1. Introduction

The veto power mechanism of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), as a cornerstone of the post-WWII international order, was originally designed to maintain world peace through the "great power unanimity" principle. However, with the evolution toward a multipolar world and changing global governance needs, this system has increasingly revealed structural flaws. Recent cases—such as Russia's 16 vetoes blocking international intervention in Syria and the United States' 45 vetoes shielding Israel from UN resolutions—have not only paralyzed the Council in critical crises but also exposed how the veto has been weaponized for geopolitical interests [1]. According to UN records, the P5 members cast 293 vetoes between 1946 and 2023, with a 37% increase in usage over the past

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decade compared to the Cold War era [2]. This trend starkly contradicts the growing complexity of contemporary global security challenges.

Existing scholarship remains divided between realist defenses of the veto's role in maintaining power equilibrium and global governance critiques of its "institutional paralysis" [3, 4]. Moving beyond this binary, this study employs a mixed-methods approach: (1) quantitative analysis of all 293 veto cases (1946–2023) to map spatiotemporal patterns and thematic linkages; (2) qualitative comparison of Russia's Syria-related vetoes (2011–2023) and U.S. vetoes on Israel (1972–2023) to decode decision-making logics; and (3) policy evaluation of reform proposals like the G4 expansion plan and the French-Mexican "Accountable Veto" initiative.

The central research question asks: As the veto transforms from a safety valve into a stumbling block, how can the UN balance institutional authority with 21st-century governance demands? The study holds dual significance: theoretically, it constructs a "diminishing utility of veto power" model to elucidate the interplay between power politics and institutional change; practically, it offers evidence-based options for the 2024 "Summit of the Future" negotiations, with direct implications for overcoming deadlocks on climate action and armed conflicts. The Council's renewed impotence during the Ukraine crisis (NYT, 2024) underscores the urgency of this inquiry.

2. The origin of the veto power

The contradiction between the original intent of the United Nations Security Council veto power and its current reality profoundly reflects the evolution of the international power structure and the imbalance in the global governance system.

Established by the UN Charter in 1945, the "great power unanimity" principle was rooted in the post-World War II international order, aiming to ensure cooperation among major powers by granting veto rights to the five permanent members (the U.S., Soviet Union, U.K., France, and China). This design was pragmatic at the time: it prevented conflicts arising from disagreements among major powers and reflected the post-war distribution of international power, assigning primary responsibility for maintaining world peace to the victorious nations with the greatest influence.

However, as the international landscape evolved toward multipolarity and the demands of global governance changed, this 1945 institutional arrangement increasingly revealed its anachronistic flaws. The most glaring contradiction lies in the fact that the five permanent seats remain locked in the post-war power distribution, failing to account for the rise of emerging nations today. Repeated attempts by countries like India and Brazil to join the permanent membership have been vetoed, highlighting the rigidity of the system. More critically, the veto power has often been misused to serve the self-interests of the permanent members or their allies, rather than the collective good of the international community.

The design of the UN Security Council veto power originated from the lofty ideal of great power unanimity in maintaining world peace. However, its operation has become deeply entangled in the complex and harsh realities of international politics. This significant gap between its original intent and practical implementation forms the logical starting point for understanding all subsequent controversies. Therefore, the following section will delve into an examination of the specific disputes and manifestations arising from the practical application of the veto power.

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3. The controversy surrounding the veto power

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the UN Security Council has repeatedly attempted to pass resolutions to halt violence and investigate chemical weapons use, seeking political solutions to the conflict. However, Russia, as a long-standing ally of the Syrian government, has exercised its veto power 16 times, disregarding its responsibility as a permanent member and preventing the international community from taking timely and effective action. The most contentious incident occurred in April 2017, when the Syrian government was accused of using sarin gas in Khan Shaykhun, killing at least 80 civilians. The U.S., France, and the U.K. pushed for a Security Council resolution to hold perpetrators accountable and enforce an arms embargo, but Russia (often joined by China) vetoed it, citing "insufficient evidence" and "interference in Syria's sovereignty." With the Security Council deadlocked, the international community had to respond through other means. The U.S. unilaterally launched missile strikes on Syrian military bases, but this failed to prevent further chemical attacks.

Similarly, the U.S. use of the veto in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has sparked controversy. The U.S. has long used its veto power to shield Israel from Security Council sanctions. Since 1972, the U.S. has vetoed 45 resolutions related to Israel, the most recent being in October 2023 during the Gaza war, when a Brazilian-proposed ceasefire resolution was blocked. The U.S. justified its veto by claiming the resolution "failed to condemn Hamas," but in practice, almost any resolution critical of Israel faces a U.S. veto.

These cases demonstrate that the veto power has transformed from a tool to "prevent great power confrontation" into a weapon for major powers to safeguard their own interests. When the permanent members prioritize geopolitical interests over international collective welfare, the Security Council not only fails in its duty to maintain peace but also becomes a symbol of global governance imbalance. Reform is challenging, but the international community must explore feasible solutions to limit the veto power; otherwise, the UN's authority will continue to erode.

4. Reform and great power politics

Calls for reforming the UN Security Council veto power have persisted to this day. In the history of veto power reform, there have been both successes and failures. Behind seemingly simple proposals lie intricate power struggles, with the goal of reform remaining constant while the focal issues shift.

Former General Assembly President Sheikha Al Khalifa proposed reforms in 2007 focusing on five key areas: the size of the Security Council, membership categories, the veto power issue, regional representation, and the Council's working methods and relationship with the General Assembly [5]. Clearly, veto power reform is the core issue, with many proposals being permutations of these key areas [6]. Overall, veto power reform proposals can be categorized into two types.

4.1. Expanding the security council

The first type involves expanding the Security Council's size, including increasing both non-permanent and permanent members, thereby diluting the veto power of the "P5" through numerical changes. The expansion of permanent membership has become a focal point of international political maneuvering, with competing factions forming a "tripartite standoff":

(1) The "G4" group (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan) advocates adding six permanent seats (including two for African nations). Their proposal suggests new members initially gaining permanent seats without veto rights, deferring the veto issue to future reforms.

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(2) The African Union demands at least two permanent seats with full veto power for African countries, emphasizing historical redress. African nations argue that the current Security Council structure perpetuates colonial-era power distribution, failing to reflect their growing influence.

(3) The "Uniting for Consensus" group (led by Italy, South Korea, and Canada) opposes new permanent seats, advocating instead for expanding non-permanent membership (from 10 to 20 seats). They argue that rotating seats better embody democratic principles and avoid creating new privileged classes.

4.2. Limiting the veto power

The second reform approach focuses on procedural reforms to restrict the use of the veto power, preventing the P5 from wielding it arbitrarily, reducing abuse risks, and improving the Council's decision-making efficiency.

Many countries propose categorizing substantive issues, allowing veto use for some but not others [7]. Early attempts included Peru's 2005 proposal that veto power should not apply when the Secretary-General or regional organizations call for action to prevent genocide, war crimes, or crimes against humanity [8]. A more radical "veto freeze" proposal sought to suspend veto rights in cases of mass atrocities, but the U.S. opposed it, citing potential harm to counterterrorism efforts. The "Accountable Veto" initiative, proposed by France and Mexico in 2015, is the most notable. It requires permanent members to justify their vetoes publicly and face General Assembly scrutiny. Despite garnering support from 105 member states, China, Russia, and the U.S. have refused to endorse it. On April 26, 2022, Liechtenstein proposed a resolution allowing the General Assembly to debate any veto use, requiring the vetoing member to explain its decision. Though non-binding, this resolution represents a new direction in veto reform [9]. For now, procedural reforms remain the most pragmatic approach, mitigating the veto's disruptive effects without addressing its monopolistic nature.

A minority of scholars and states have advocated for abolishing the veto entirely, arguing that it is outdated for the 21st century. However, such a move could provoke backlash from the P5, leading to disengagement from UN affairs and reduced efficiency.

Whether expanding the Council or limiting the veto, reform faces immense challenges, primarily because the P5 are both players and judges in the process. UN Charter Article 108 requires unanimous P5 approval for amendments, effectively giving them a "veto over reform."

5. Conclusion

The study reveals that the UN Security Council veto power, originally conceived as a mechanism to ensure great power consensus and prevent conflict, has become a significant obstacle to effective global governance in the 21st century. While the veto was pragmatically justified in the post-WWII era, its contemporary application often prioritizes national interests over collective security, as demonstrated by Russia’s repeated vetoes on Syria and the U.S.’s blanket protection of Israel. These cases underscore how the veto has evolved from a tool of stability into an instrument of geopolitical obstruction, exacerbating the UN’s inability to address urgent crises.

The research confirms that institutional reform remains stalled due to structural barriers: the P5’s entrenched privileges, the Charter’s amendment requirements (Article 108), and divergent interests among member states. However, alternative pathways—such as the General Assembly’s "Uniting for Peace" procedure and regional organizations’ interventions—offer pragmatic means to circumvent veto-induced paralysis. While abolishing the veto is politically unfeasible, incremental

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reforms (e.g., voluntary restraint in mass atrocity cases, mandatory justification for veto use) could mitigate its most damaging effects.

This study primarily focuses on high-profile veto cases (Syria, Israel/Palestine), potentially overlooking patterns in less-publicized disputes. Future research could employ machine learning to analyze all 293 veto instances for hidden thematic or temporal trends. Additionally, the role of non-Western powers (e.g., China's veto behavior) warrants deeper examination to avoid Eurocentric biases. Comparative studies of regional organizations' conflict-resolution mechanisms (e.g., AU, ASEAN) may further illuminate viable UN reform models.

Ultimately, the veto power's legitimacy hinges on its alignment with contemporary governance needs rather than 1945's power realities. As multilateralism faces unprecedented challenges, reforming—not discarding—this contested institution remains imperative for a more equitable international order.

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