



**Better  
Order  
Project**  
A Quincy Institute Initiative

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QUINCY INSTITUTE  
FOR RESPONSIBLE  
STATECRAFT

# A Reformed U.N. Security Council for a Post-Unipolar Era

September 2024



# Executive Summary

The world is moving today toward two major crises that put the future of international peace and stability — and the institutions that underpin them — at grave risk. First, the global power balance has shifted rapidly over the last several decades, but the institutions and mechanisms of global governance have not been updated to reflect this fact. Second, the world faces a new set of interconnected transnational crises and challenges, which call into question traditional understandings of self-interest, security, and sovereignty — and will require new forms of collaboration and governance to address.

Instead of birthing a multipolar world, a multi-order world risks coming into existence — one in which states will no longer differ over competing *interpretations* of existing laws and norms, but rather will proffer competing sets of rules and norms. The result would be a hollowing out of crucial *universal* norms, laws, and institutions, and, by that, a removal of the constraints that have helped make conflicts less likely.

To prevent this outcome, the Quincy Institute's Better Order Project (BOP) brought together in 2023 and 2024 more than 100 leading scholars, experts, and former officials from more than 40 countries — including all P5 countries and a diverse grouping of states from the Global North and South — to develop a package of proposals and updated norms of international conduct that can help to stabilize an international order in transition.<sup>1</sup> This package of proposals will be published in October 2024.

This advance paper outlines the BOP's proposals for U.N. Security Council reform, which include the following:

- The size of the U.N. Security Council should be expanded to **23 members** in a fashion that creates a “win-win-win” outcome for countries of global influence, countries of regional influence, and smaller countries.
- We propose that **three new permanent UNSC** members should be elected by the General Assembly: one from Asia, one from Africa, and one from Latin America.
- The General Assembly should also elect a pool of **20 semi-permanent members**, five of whom would serve on the UNSC at any given time. These countries would rotate on and off the Council, serving for two out of every eight years. After three cycles of eight years (i.e., 24 years), the pool of semi-permanent members would be subject to review by way of fresh elections in the GA. The creation of this semi-permanent category would offer compensation for those who failed to be elected to a permanent seat. It would also benefit smaller countries, who would no longer need to compete against 20 influential semi-permanent members (along with the three new permanent members) for an elected seat on the Council.

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<sup>1</sup> See Trine Flockhart, “The coming multi-order world,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37, no. 1 (2016): 3–30.

- We propose that a permanent member of the UNSC casting a veto must also secure **at least one negative vote** from any other member of the Council for the veto to hold. If the permanent member were the lone country casting a negative vote, then a two-thirds majority of the General Assembly could overturn the veto. Moreover, a new prerogative should be extended to the permanent Security Council members, allowing them to vote “no” on a resolution **without exercising a veto**.
- Additional measures to empower the General Assembly and reduce veto usage are also proposed. For example, the Peacebuilding Commission should be elevated within the U.N. system: Cases that do not directly involve a threat to international peace and security should be transferred to the Commission, which should also be empowered to select the cases it chooses to take on independently. Moreover, going forward, the process for electing a Secretary-General should begin with the selection of a candidate by the General Assembly, followed by the UNSC’s assent.
- Finally, we propose that a Charter review be automatically held **every 24 years**, coinciding with the conclusion of three cycles of semi-permanent members rotating on and off the Security Council. This would render the task of Charter reform less politically charged, thereby enhancing both democracy within the U.N. system and the resilience of the organization (and the international order) as a whole.

The signatories to this paper hold a range of perspectives on the future multilateralism — a fact visible in the varied compromises that underpin the proposals below. By adding their names to this paper, members of this diverse group are not signaling their endorsement of every word, but rather their broad support for the desirability of its package of recommendations.

# Introduction

Based on current trends, relations among the P5 risk moving from dysfunction to total paralysis over the coming years. Besides their opposing interests in the realm of high-level geopolitics, the Security Council may prove consistently unable to adopt resolutions on issues such as peacekeeping, sanctions, and punishment for war crimes. Cardinal norms of international peace and security (e.g., sovereignty, territorial integrity, and respect for international law) appear likely to remain subject to contested interpretations, even if they continue to enjoy nominal support.

The world is currently witnessing the proliferation of armed conflicts, a descent into great power competition, and mounting violations of international norms. Under these conditions, prospects for a universal order based on shared principles of global governance will become increasingly remote. And as mutual recriminations mount, there is a growing sense that the international order is reaching a tipping point.

Yet despite the sharp — and seemingly sharpening — differences exhibited in today's international community, we must not forget the extent to which states still hold shared interests when it comes to preserving multilateralism and the role of the U.N. Security Council. Established powers have an interest in preserving the Security Council, given the avenues of influence it provides them. For their part, rising powers adamantly demand Security Council reform, but still prefer it to be preserved as a forum for advancing their interests and mitigating conflict rather than have it drift into irrelevance. But structural and working methods reforms are urgently needed if the U.N. is to preserve its status as the premier forum for upholding international peace and security.

To that end, **before the end of 2025**, U.N. member states should vote to initiate a review of the U.N. Charter. According to Article 109 of the Charter, the decision to hold such a review can be taken with the support of two-thirds of General Assembly members and any nine Security Council members, and is not subject to a veto.

In the course of this review, U.N. member states should consider backing the compromise proposals outlined below, which have been designed to be equitable to all regions and broadly acceptable to the current P5. These proposals are mutually reinforcing but are not strictly interdependent — the adoption of any of them would be a welcome development. Indeed, if the P5 are not prepared to countenance some of the proposed modifications to their veto privileges, then this may increase political pressure for them to accept proposals for reforming the composition of the Security Council.

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The drafting process of the Pact for the Future has made clear that reforming the Security Council remains a priority for member states. The proposals outlined below carry forward several priorities identified during negotiations over the draft, including improving the representation of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean; enlarging the Council in a fashion that improves the representation of small- and medium-sized states; finding an agreement on the question of the categories of membership; balancing representativeness and effectiveness; limiting the scope and use of the veto; and including a review clause to ensure that the Security Council remains fit for purpose over time.

In addition to the proposals outlined below, amendments to the U.N. Charter should explicitly account for the importance of issues of planetary concern, making clear that the remit of the international community's most inclusive body is no longer limited to issues of international or even global scope.

## Proposal 1:

# Reforming the composition of the U.N. Security Council

Two specific reforms to the composition of the UNSC should be envisaged. First, given the growth in the number of countries of *global* influence since 1945, the number of permanent members should be increased. Second, a new semi-permanent category of members should be created to reflect the proliferation of countries of *regional* influence. The existing category of 10 elected members would remain untouched.

The creation of three categories of states on the Security Council does not signal that multipolarity should be equated with hierarchy. Rather, the purpose of this reform is to create a “win-win-win” formula through which countries of global influence, countries of regional influence and smaller countries **can all improve their position** in the institutional architecture of the international order.

The proposed reforms would result in a total of 23 seats on the Council — eight permanent, five semi-permanent, and 10 elected members — a manageable number not considerably higher than the current 15 and therefore more likely to win political approval. Of these 23 members, 14 affirmative votes should be required for the adoption of a UNSC resolution — a roughly equivalent share to the current 9 out of 15.

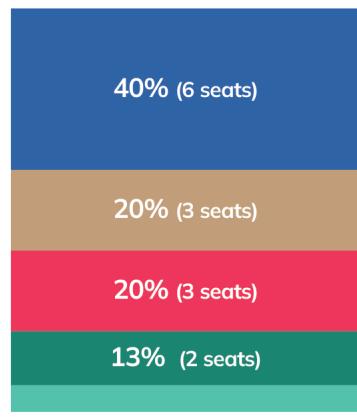
- First, early in the Charter reform process, a critical mass of U.N. member states should agree to add three new permanent members to the Security Council: one from Asia and the Pacific, one from Africa, and one from Latin America and the Caribbean. These new permanent members should be elected by the General Assembly in a vote held two years after member states agree on this formula.
  - These new permanent members would be encouraged to limit or even waive their veto privileges on the Council. A country that promises never to cast a veto — or to resort to one only in exceptional circumstances — might increase its chances of being elected to the Security Council. Allowing the GA to elect new permanent members strengthens the likelihood that the latter will be countries known for their positive contributions to international peace and security.
  - The Group of African States would be able to decide whether it wanted its permanent seat to be a rotating one, based on a formula agreed upon among its members.

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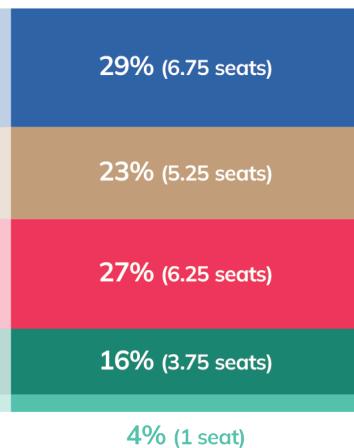
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## CURRENT DISTRIBUTION 15 TOTAL SEATS



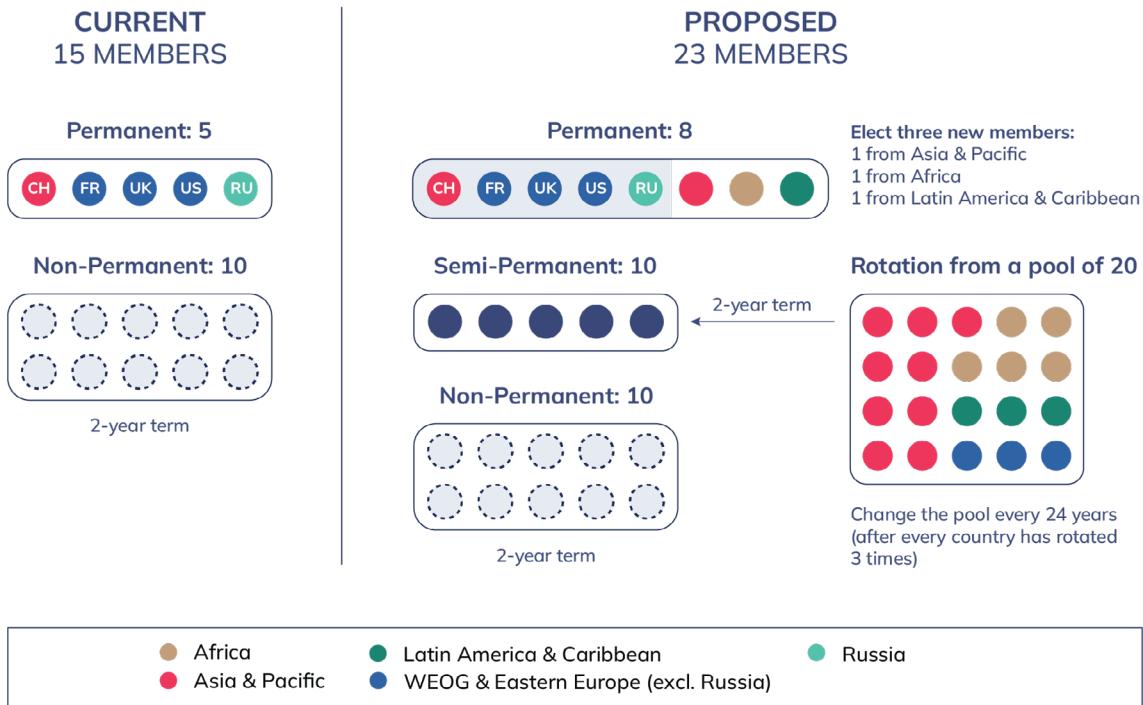
## PROPOSED DISTRIBUTION 23 TOTAL SEATS



- WEOG & Eastern Europe, excluding Russia
- Africa
- Asia & Pacific
- Latin America & Caribbean
- Russia

- The existing P5, in fact, have an interest in growing their own ranks. By agreeing to extend permanent membership on the Council to regions that are currently underrepresented (or not represented at all), the P5 would strengthen the legitimacy of a body in which they would continue to occupy a privileged position.
- An expanded Council may also strengthen the UNSC's effectiveness, as a permanent member may be more reluctant to bear the political costs of casting a lone negative vote in the face of opposition from an even greater number of permanent and non-permanent members. This would further increase the likelihood that vetoes are cast solely on issues of international peace and security or where a permanent member's core interests are concerned.
- To avoid setting a potentially destabilizing precedent in which a permanent member is stripped of its seat, the current P5 should retain their status as permanent members of the Security Council.
- Second, once the election of three new permanent members has been completed, the General Assembly should elect a **pool of 20 semi-permanent members**, five of which would serve on the Security Council at any given time.<sup>2</sup> U.N. members elected to this category are likely to be countries of regional influence with a demonstrated record of contributing positively to international peace and security. These 20 countries would rotate on and off the Council, **automatically serving for two out of every eight years**.

# Proposed reform of the composition of the U.N. Security Council



- These 20 countries should be distributed across the U.N.'s regional groupings as follows: nine should be drawn from Asia and the Pacific, five from Africa, three from Latin America and the Caribbean, and three from Eastern Europe and the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) combined. This formula is based on an approximation of the population of these respective U.N. groupings and the number of countries of regional influence each possesses. Building on the existing practice of ensuring Arab representation, at least one of the Asian and one of the African seats should be reserved for an Arab country.
- Having a guaranteed turn on the Council once every eight years would represent a marked improvement for countries of regional influence in comparison with the status quo. It would also offer compensation for those who failed to be elected to a permanent seat. With advanced knowledge of when their tenure will take place, semi-permanent members would be well prepared to make the most of their time on the Council.

<sup>2</sup> A variation of this proposal was first advanced by BOP Expert Group member Kishore Mahbubani.

- o By diversifying the Council's composition, the creation of the semi-permanent category would offer the 10 elected members of the Council more space to pursue their own agendas. The latter would also benefit from no longer needing to compete against 20 influential semi-permanent members (along with the three new permanent members) for an elected seat on the Council.
- o After three rotations of eight years (i.e., 24 years), the pool of semi-permanent members would be subject to review by way of fresh elections in the General Assembly.

To empower the 10 elected members of the Council even further, UNSC members should consider agreeing on rules of procedure by which the chairmanship of the Council's subsidiary bodies rotates annually. Such a reform to working methods would not require a Charter amendment. But even without this change, the expansion of the UNSC's membership would, on its own, offer more opportunities to increase the number of resolutions tabled by members with no veto, as well as to reduce the extent to which established powers wield control over chairmanships and penholderships.

## Proposal 2: **Limiting the veto**

As relations between the great powers have deteriorated over recent years, the Security Council has become increasingly paralyzed. Although the veto's purpose is to provide great powers with a stake in upholding the international order and to encourage them to remain invested in its institutions, it has also called into question the legitimacy and effectiveness of the primary body tasked with upholding international peace and security.

Any changes to veto privileges should be careful not to encourage further dissociation from multilateralism. Such an outcome may present itself if certain great powers conclude that the U.N. can no longer be trusted as a vehicle for upholding their core interests. Moreover, the employment of a veto can sometimes have positive effects, for example, protecting the sovereignty of smaller states by refusing to authorize a military intervention.

Nonetheless, several limited yet ambitious ways in which veto use could be reduced or restricted can be considered. These changes should aim to enhance the body's efficiency and thus support the interests of the international community, including the interest that the permanent membership has in preserving a functional and legitimate UNSC.

The following proposals are the product of a compromise between project participants who defended the veto as a necessary prerogative and those who demanded restrictions on its use:

- First, the following restriction on veto privileges could be codified in the U.N. Charter: A permanent member of the Security Council casting a veto will need to secure **at least one negative vote from any other member of the Council** for the veto to be secure from potential override. If the permanent member is the lone country casting a negative vote, then a **two-thirds majority of the General Assembly** can overturn the veto.
  - In the context of an expanded Security Council membership, a country of global influence should be encouraged — and should easily prove able — to secure the support of just one of the other 22 Council members for its position. The overturning of a veto would be an exceptional development — one that is likely to occur only when an isolated great power has manifestly failed in its commitment to

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uphold international peace and security. (A more ambitious proposal, if the permanent members were willing to entertain it, would require three total negative votes — one veto plus any two other countries — as a means of discouraging permanent members from voting regularly in blocs.)

- Second, a new prerogative should be extended to the permanent Security Council members, allowing them to vote “no” on a resolution without exercising a veto. This would offer them a new way to respond to domestic political pressures while, at the same time, acting constructively in the face of a pressing need from another U.N. member state to pass a Security Council resolution. It would also raise the political cost of casting a full-blown veto, thereby disincentivizing permanent members from blocking resolutions in instances where the primary considerations are political and do not directly relate to the task of upholding peace.

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***A permanent member of the Security Council casting a veto will need to secure at least one negative vote from any other member of the Council for the veto to be secure from potential override.***

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- Third, the Peacebuilding Commission, which currently focuses on post-conflict

peacebuilding and recovery, should be elevated within the U.N. system and be assigned some of the current responsibilities of the Security Council. One way to achieve this might be for the Trusteeship Council to be de facto transformed into a Peacebuilding Council. This development would foster a more democratic and a more efficient international order, while also helping to limit use of the veto to genuine and unquestioned issues of peace and security.

- Cases that do not directly involve a threat to international peace and security should ideally be transferred to the Peacebuilding Commission, allowing the UNSC to tackle a more focused agenda. This should be accomplished by way of a joint decision of the General Assembly and Security Council case by case.
- The General Assembly and Security Council might also consider empowering the Commission to select the cases it chooses to take on independently, including cases taken on at the request of an affected U.N. member state. It should be stipulated that this would not alter the current prerogatives of the UNSC under the U.N. Charter, up to and including the responsibility for authorizing the use of force.
- Topics that an elevated Peacebuilding Commission should address include environmental issues, health issues, education, and infrastructure, all of which fall under a broad sustainable development for peacebuilding definition. Neither peace operations, arms embargoes, sanctions, nor military interventions are pertinent to these issues, making the UNSC a less suitable forum for addressing them. Moreover, the permanent members of the UNSC do not hold special veto privileges on the Commission, and the affected country can be present.

- Resource allocation within the U.N. system should reflect the Commission's higher caseload, and countries should be reassured that their cases will remain just as "high-profile" on the Commission as they were on the UNSC, given the redistributed workload. One might also consider adopting changes to the Commission's voting structure, which currently operates on consensus, as it acquires a more robust mandate. If a country that does not pose a manifest threat to international peace and security (as determined in consultation with its immediate neighbors) wishes to remain on the UNSC agenda, it should be required to provide compelling arguments for this choice.
- Fourth, going forward, the process for electing a Secretary-General should begin with the selection of a candidate by the General Assembly, followed by the UNSC's assent. This could allow for a stronger and more representative Secretary-General to emerge.
- Finally, certain changes to working methods aimed at reducing veto use and strengthening accountability can also be envisaged.
  - Building on Liechtenstein's veto initiative, which allows the General Assembly to convene within 10 working days of a UNSC resolution being vetoed, the GA should proactively make recommendations to UNSC members on how to avoid the disputes and disagreements that led to the casting of a given veto. This would strengthen intra-body dialogue at the U.N. and help ensure that the casting (or threat) of a veto does not entirely shut down debate.
  - Relying on legal advice and drafting assistance provided by the Secretariat, a special working group should be established to draft UNGA resolutions in advance on issues that are frequently subject to UNSC vetoes. This would allow the GA to act swiftly when needed in the context of a veto initiative meeting. The working group should be established — and its members selected — by way of a two-thirds majority vote of the General Assembly.

### Proposal 3:

## Automatic Charter reviews

An amendment to the U.N. Charter should stipulate that a Charter review will be automatically held every 24 years. This would coincide with the conclusion of three cycles of semi-permanent members rotating on and off the Security Council, an appropriate juncture at which the entire package of reforms proposed above can be revisited. Those proposals listed above that fail to garner the requisite support could be revisited during the next Charter review, by which point the diffusion of power and influence in the international order would have become even more manifest.

Automatic Charter reviews would render the task of Charter reform less politically charged, thereby enhancing both democracy within the U.N. system and the resilience of the organization (and, by extension, the international order) as a whole.

Individual member states would be given the right to table amendments for debate, subject to existing adoption and ratification procedures.

# Better Order Members

The following members of the Better Order Project's expert and stakeholder groups are signatories to this paper, by which they signal their broad support for the above proposals:

## **Australia:**

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**Switzerland:**

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- Eric Haseltine, *Chairman of the Board, U.S. Technology Leadership Council*
- Stephen Heintz, *President and CEO, Rockefellers Brothers Fund*
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