



# The Effectiveness of the United Nations

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## The Effectiveness of the United Nations

*By Amanda Huan*

### SYNOPSIS

*Increasingly, the United Nations is seen as an ineffective body in managing conflicts in the world. The problem is the veto power of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Reform must be carried out readily to preserve the value of having this international organisation for securing world peace.*

### COMMENTARY

At the most recent United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) held on 28 September 2025, Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan called on the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to rein in their use of their veto power and to increase the organisation's inclusivity.

This comes at the back of yet another vetoed draft resolution that would have demanded a ceasefire in Gaza and the release of hostages. While all 14 other members of the UNSC had voted in favour of the resolution, the United States, as one of the five permanent members of the UNSC, vetoed the draft.

In his UNGA speech, Minister Balakrishnan raised two major points of criticism of the UNSC, namely, the increasing use of veto powers by the permanent members, and the need for greater representation and inclusivity that would better reflect the distribution of states in the present world order. These points are not new and have been raised repeatedly over the decades by policymakers and those in the academic and think tank communities who assert that these, among other factors, contribute to the UN's declining effectiveness.

Given the increasingly polarised landscape of today, the UNSC's perceived inability to address the world's conflicts once again raises key questions: How legitimate is the UNSC? To what extent is the UNSC the legitimate body to safeguard the world's security?

## **Problems with UNSC Membership**

As Minister Balakrishnan and several others have pointed out, the most common problem associated with the UNSC is its membership. The UNSC is made up of five permanent members (i.e., the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom) and ten non-permanent members, each serving a two-year term.

The UNSC's membership is problematic for two key reasons: representativeness and diversity. It is by no means representative as it is skewed to overly represent certain powers and states while other major economies and populous countries are not guaranteed seats. As a proportion of the UNGA, the UNSC represents only 7.8 per cent of all states today, while it stood at 22 per cent back in 1945.

In terms of diversity, developing countries are underrepresented in the UNSC and as pointed out by Minister Balakrishnan, small states are often overlooked. There have been multiple calls for the UNSC's diversity to better reflect the balance of power in the present international system but such calls for reform have come to naught thus far.

There were previous calls to expand the size of the UNSC, but experts pointed out the limitations of such an expansion as it would affect the nimbleness of the UNSC in conducting negotiations and inhibit decision-making. To be an effective body in dealing with conflicts and threats to world peace, the UNSC must be small and capable of making quick decisions.

Numbers aside, there are also difficulties in improving representation and diversity as states cannot agree on the factors that matter for membership in the UNSC: Should states be given a seat based on population size, geographical region, global influence, or financial contributions to the UN budget?

## **Problems with the Veto**

Representation aside, the increasing use of the veto power by the UNSC permanent members has effectively constrained the UN body. Permanent members of the UNSC are accorded certain special rights, such as the power of the veto – which allows any one of them to block the adoption of any resolution regardless of how the other members of the UNSC vote. This veto is powerful, as evidenced in the various vetoed resolutions on Gaza and it effectively blocks the UNSC and other UN bodies and states from taking decisive action in any conflict.

The veto has been used not just by the United States, but also by the other permanent members of the Council; Russia, for instance, used its veto on numerous occasions to block resolutions on Syria. China had joined Russia to veto UNSC resolutions on Syria, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe. Notably, China's first veto in the UNSC was to block the admission of Bangladesh to the UN when the latter broke away from Pakistan in 1971 to be an independent country.

The veto was put in place during the Council's establishment as the then Big Three (i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union) had decided that

the UNSC should possess power that would be able to bind the UN member states but that they themselves would be able to reject or stop. It was considered a vital element in the creation of the United Nations as the Big Three would have otherwise not been inclined to support it.

Regardless of its origins, the existence of the veto has created a distinct imbalance in decision-making power between the permanent and non-permanent members of the UNSC. In fact, the non-permanent members have essentially little decision-making power in the Council and are thus unable to exert any sustained influence on key matters before it.

### **Problems with Effectiveness of the UN**

The UNSC has long been criticised for its flaws and Minister Balakrishnan's comments have once again highlighted the limited ability of the UN. Issues with the representativeness and diversity of its membership and the veto power of the five permanent members of the UNSC call into question the effectiveness of the UN in dealing with contemporary problems faced by the international community. Is the UNSC still *the* legitimate body for safeguarding the world's peace and security?

To answer this, one must ultimately look at the UNSC's track record and discern if it has been accountable in preventing or addressing conflict. To date, the Council has had a mixed track record, intervening successfully in some crises (e.g., Somalia), but not in others (e.g., Rwanda and Gaza). While the Council has been historically successful in stigmatising the use of aggression by states, its more recent track record (e.g., US intervention in Iraq and Russia's actions in Ukraine) has highlighted that the Council's effectiveness is ultimately tied directly to the interests of the permanent members and their use of the veto power.

So long as its membership and the veto power remain unchanged, the UNSC is likely to continue its middling record. As such, the UNSC has a constrained role in maintaining international peace and security, and over time, the legitimacy of the UNSC may diminish. In turn, this will undermine the value of having the United Nations.

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