

# *The World Has Changed, but Can the U.N.? Don't Hold Your Breath.*

Almost everyone agrees on the need for changes, but there is little agreement on what to do and nearly insuperable hurdles to doing anything.

**By Farnaz Fassihi**

Farnaz Fassihi led coverage of the just-concluded United Nations General Assembly

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For more than a week, world leaders gathered at the United Nations General Assembly to debate the world's most pressing problems: war in Ukraine, poverty, a warming planet and pandemics.

They also acknowledged that the U.N.'s premier body, the Security Council, is broken. The Council has been paralyzed by the inability of its permanent members to act in unison as a bloody war has raged in Europe.

As President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey put it last week, "The Security Council has ceased to be the guarantor of world security and has become a battleground for the political strategies of only five countries."

He was referring to the five veto-wielding permanent members: the United States, China, France, Britain and the nation that started that raging war, Russia, which has vetoed resolutions condemning its invasion of Ukraine and calling on it to withdraw its troops.



The Security Council's failure to respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine underscored its ineffectiveness in the 21st century. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

The U.N.'s secretary general, António Guterres, gave an even starker assessment, warning that the choice was between reform or rupture.

"The world has changed. Our institutions have not," Mr. Guterres said in his address to the General Assembly last week. "We cannot effectively address problems as they *are* if institutions do not reflect the world as it is. Instead of solving problems, they risk becoming part of the problem."

While calls to reform the Security Council have persisted for decades, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has underscored to critics that the diplomatic infrastructure put in place after World War II has run its course and is failing in the 21st-century world.

Deep divisions among the five permanent members have stymied collective action to stop deadly conflicts, human rights abuses and nuclear threats around the world, from Ukraine to Syria, Mali to Myanmar, South Sudan to North Korea.

But despite the widespread calls for change, and abundant evidence of the Council's failures, breaking the gridlock holding up change is a nearly impossible task.

The U.N.'s founding charter was designed to make alterations extremely difficult. And while several proposals and ideas for revising the Security Council have been floated, the necessary consensus is not within reach, according to world leaders, diplomats and U.N. officials.



"The world has changed. Our institutions have not," said the United Nations' secretary general, António Guterres, last week. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

"I think one of the challenges is everyone agrees that, you know, there needs to be significant improvements. Nobody agrees on what those improvements are," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada said in an interview last week with The New York Times. "Truly changing the architecture we have will require a level of consensus that I think is probably slightly beyond us right now."

Any revision of the Council requires a change to the U.N. charter — and that requires a two-thirds vote of all 193-member states — plus the approval of all five permanent members of the Council.

Even if the proposed changes were to clear the formidable, internal U.N. hurdles, they would then have to be "ratified in accordance with their respective constitutional processes" by two-thirds of the member states.

Since the Security Council's founding in 1945, when it was given the responsibility for preventing threats to global security and maintaining stability, the one and only change it has undergone came in 1965 when it expanded from 11 members to 15, adding four seats to the two-year elected membership.

But however much momentum there is now for change as a result of the invasion of Ukraine, removing Russia from the Council or stripping it of its veto power, as President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine has suggested, is not seen as realistic.



The Security Council meeting in New York this year. The only structural change in the Council in the postwar era came in 1965 with the addition of four elected seats. Justin Lane/EPA, via Shutterstock

That’s not to say the permanent members are opposed to changes — all five have expressed support for some type of change — though it is deemed unlikely that any of the five would ever surrender veto power.

“We need to be able to break the gridlock that too often stymies progress and blocks consensus on the Council. We need more voices and more perspectives at the table,” President Biden said in his address to the General Assembly last week. Mr. Biden called for overhauling the Security Council in his U.N. speech a year ago, putting Washington’s weight behind efforts for change.

One proposal calls for more permanent members to the Security Council — but whether they would be granted veto power is not clear. Japan, Brazil, India and Germany are contenders under this proposal. Leaders in Africa have demanded at least two permanent seats for member states from the continent.

Another proposal favors adding more members to the elected seats from different regions in the world and allowing them to serve longer, renewable terms. Proponents of this plan include Mexico, Argentina, South Korea, Turkey, Italy and Canada.

But any proposal could face intense opposition.

“For every country that wants a permanent seat, there are one or more that are determined to stop it. Italy wants to stop Germany, Pakistan wants to stop India, China wants to stop Japan,” said Richard Gowan, the U.N. director of the International Crisis Group, who has conducted extensive research on reform efforts.



“We need more voices and more perspectives at the table,” President Biden said in his address to the General Assembly last week. Tom Brenner for The New York Times

For the past year, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has reached out to about 90 countries, sometimes individually and sometimes as a group, to hear proposals for changes, said a senior U.S. administration official.

Both Russia and China have also in theory supported change as part of their efforts to champion the interests of the Global South against the West. But in practice, Russia has repeatedly thrown up obstacles to collective actions even beyond Ukraine. In July, it vetoed a draft resolution that would have authorized a nine-month renewal of cross-border aid delivery to northern Syria, vetoed sanctions on individuals in Mali and blocked a unified response to North Korea’s ballistic missile launches.

The push for change at the United Nations is not limited to the Security Council. The organization has also been under pressure to streamline its stifling bureaucracy and to streamline its many agencies, with the goal of both increasing efficiency and reducing costs.



The United Nations emblem is looking increasingly out of place in today’s polarized global world. Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times

The impetus for change at its financial institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have also gained steam, with a summit dedicated to this topic on the sidelines of the General Assembly this year. Mr. Guterres has championed this cause by calling for more diverse representation on the boards of these institutions and to change their

rules for poor and developing nations to allow for sovereign debt forgiveness and better loan terms.

Mr. Gowan said that the Security Council's credibility problem might be only partially restored with changes to its membership, with no guarantee that collective action would become any easier. A new, expanded Council could be just as paralyzed if the divisions and tensions among world powers continue.

"It's not just a mathematical game," he said. "One should not raise expectations too high."

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