

UNSC Power Imbalance and India's Push for Reform

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Abstract: *The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), while central to the institutional architecture of global governance, remains structurally anachronistic, reflecting the hegemonic stability of the post-1945 liberal international order. This article critically interrogates the entrenched power asymmetries within the UNSC, foregrounding the structural marginalization of the Global South and the normative disjuncture between contemporary geopolitical realities and institutional representation. Through a constructivist and critical institutionalist lens, the analysis situates India's long-standing reform agenda within broader discourses of global justice, multilateralism, and the democratization of international regimes. It examines both the formal veto-centric power configuration and the informal dynamics of elite persistence that constrain substantive reform. The article further explores the Council's ongoing legitimacy deficit and the erosion of its normative authority amid shifting global power constellations. It ultimately argues for a reconstituted and inclusive Security Council that better reflects the multipolarity of the 21st-century international system and enhances the democratic legitimacy of global governance.*

Keywords: Global South, Power asymmetry, Global governance, Legitimacy deficit, Multilateralism, Democratization of International institutions

1. Introduction

Since its inception in 1945, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has remained the apex body for the maintenance of international peace and security. However, its institutional architecture, particularly the privileged status of the P5 (United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China), equipped with permanent membership and veto power, manifests a rigid Westphalian logic rooted in post-World War II power hierarchies. This configuration stands increasingly misaligned with the contemporary international system, characterized by emergent multipolarity, diffusion of power, and the growing agency of the Global South. Despite constituting the numerical majority within the General Assembly and making substantial contributions to peacekeeping operations and norm diffusion, states from the Global South remain structurally marginalized in the Council's decision-making apparatus (Tharoor & Madsen, 2009). India, as an aspirational power and a normative stakeholder in global governance, has persistently advocated for comprehensive reforms aimed at enhancing the Council's representational equity, procedural legitimacy, and operational efficacy. Drawing on critical institutionalism and theories of international legitimacy, this work interrogates the path-dependent nature of UNSC reform, the systemic resistance by entrenched powers, and the broader contestations over the democratization of international institutions in the evolving global order.

2. Historical Context of the UNSC's Power Structure

The design of the UNSC was informed by the geopolitical realities following World War II, wherein the victors institutionalized their dominance through permanent seats and veto power (Luck, 2006). While this arrangement might have served the security needs of the mid-20th century, it no longer reflects the demographic, economic, or political

configuration of the world today. The Global South, comprising Asia, Africa, and Latin America, remains underrepresented despite being home to over 80% of the global population.

3. Power Asymmetry and the Global South

Power asymmetry remains structurally entrenched in the operational dynamics of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The institutional privileging of the P5 through permanent membership and the exercise of veto power facilitates strategic unilateralism, often impeding consensus on critical security issues (Weiss, 2013). This hierarchical configuration contravenes the principle of sovereign equality articulated in the UN Charter, thereby exacerbating the democratic deficit within global governance structures. The systemic exclusion of the Global South, particularly Africa, despite its numerical strength and centrality in peacekeeping theatres, underscores representational inequities (Adebajo, 2010). The absence of a permanent African voice on the Council reflects broader patterns of postcolonial marginalization and institutional path dependency, raising questions about the legitimacy, inclusivity, and normative authority of the UNSC in a multipolar international order.

4. India's Credentials and Aspirations for Permanent Membership

India has increasingly positioned itself as a pivotal actor in the evolving global order, underpinned by its demographic weight, economic prowess as the world's third-largest economy in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms and normative commitment to multilateralism. Its sustained contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations and advocacy for South-South cooperation further bolster its credentials as a responsible stakeholder in global governance (Mohan, 2021). Framing itself as a normative power and a voice of the Global South, India's reform agenda calls for the

restructuring of the United Nations Security Council to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. Central to its advocacy is the expansion of permanent membership to include developing states, thereby mitigating the democratic deficit and enhancing the representative legitimacy of international institutional architectures

4.1 The G4 and Broader Coalition for Reform

India, along with Brazil, Germany, and Japan, collectively known as the G4, has led advocacy for UNSC reform. Their proposal includes expanding both permanent and non-permanent categories of membership and addressing regional representation gaps. However, their efforts face resistance from existing permanent members, who are reluctant to dilute their exclusive privileges (Security Council Report, 2022). Moreover, regional rivalries and a lack of consensus within the Global South further complicate reform efforts.

5. Legitimacy and Effectiveness Concerns

The legitimacy of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) faces mounting scrutiny due to its selective interventions and institutional paralysis in addressing non-traditional security threats such as climate change, global pandemics, and cyber insecurity (Fassbender, 2004). Its normative authority is further eroded by the underrepresentation of emerging powers and populous democracies, which constrains its effectiveness and credibility. The Council's inaction during the COVID-19 pandemic and its inconsistent responses to conflicts in Syria and Ukraine underscore its strategic dysfunction (Patrick, 2020). Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has critiqued this stagnation, asserting that "anachronistic multilateralism" cannot effectively address contemporary challenges. He emphasizes the urgent need for a more inclusive and reformed multilateral architecture that reflects the realities of a rebalanced, multipolar world order.

6. Legal and Political Barriers to Reform

Structural reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) necessitates an amendment to the UN Charter, requiring ratification by two-thirds of the General Assembly and the unanimous consent of all P5 members. This procedural rigidity, coupled with entrenched realpolitik considerations, reinforces institutional inertia and obstructs transformative change (Bailey & Daws, 1998). The P5's reluctance stems from concerns over a potential recalibration of geopolitical alignments and the erosion of their strategic primacy. Harsh V. Pant critically observes that the UNSC has become emblematic of a "status quo institution," wherein power preservation overrides principles of equitable representation. He contends that the failure to accommodate rising powers like India reflects the Council's diminishing normative legitimacy and its disconnect from evolving global power configurations.

6.1 India's Strategic vision for a reformed UNSC

India's permanent membership in the UNSC would enhance multilateral legitimacy, democratize global governance

structures, and empower normative pluralism, fostering a more representative and equitable international order.

India's advocacy for United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reform is anchored in both strategic pragmatism and normative idealism. Strategically, India seeks a permanent seat as a recognition of its ascent as a major power demographically, economically, and geopolitically, which is reflective of its enhanced capabilities and role in shaping global outcomes. Normatively, India frames its campaign within the broader discourse of democratizing global governance, arguing that the current UNSC configuration lacks representational equity and fails to accommodate the aspirations of the Global South (Tharoor, 2016). India's candidacy has received widespread support from diverse regional blocs, including the African Union, CARICOM, and the G4 coalition, underscoring its transregional legitimacy.

Harsh V. Pant argues that India's position is rooted not merely in power politics but in a quest to rectify systemic imbalances that marginalize emerging powers. Ruchira Kamboj, India's Permanent Representative to the UN, emphasizes that "a truly representative Security Council is the most pressing reform for a rebalanced multilateralism." Both assert that institutional reform is essential to preserving the credibility, effectiveness, and normative authority of the UN system in an era marked by multipolarity, non-traditional threats, and contested global leadership.

6.2 Civil Society and Academic Perspectives on Reform

Scholars and civil society groups argue that without reform, the UNSC risks obsolescence. They advocate for inclusive, transparent, and accountable mechanisms for decision-making. Academic literature increasingly supports the expansion of the Council to include regional powers and to institutionalize accountability for the use of veto power (Chesterman, 2008).

6.3 The Role of Regional Organizations and the Global South

Regional bodies like the African Union, ASEAN, and CELAC have started demanding greater influence in multilateral institutions, including the UNSC. Their inclusion would enhance the Council's legitimacy and cultural plurality. India's position aligns with this broader call for an equitable global order rooted in multilateralism and mutual respect (Acharya, 2011).

7. The Way Forward: Towards a Just and Representative Council

While consensus on reform remains elusive, incremental steps like curbing the misuse of the veto, increasing transparency, and empowering regional actors which can pave the way for deeper structural changes. India's leadership, coalition-building, and diplomatic outreach will remain vital in sustaining global momentum for reform.

S.No.	Heading	Description
1.	Historical Context of the UNSC	Traces the origins of the UNSC structure and how it reflects post-World War II power dynamics.
2.	Power Asymmetry and the Global South	Discusses the imbalance in representation and influence between the P5 and countries from the Global South.
3.	India's Credentials and Aspirations	Highlights India's global role, peacekeeping record, and its claim for permanent UNSC membership.
4.	The G4 and Coalition for Reform	Explores India's partnership with Brazil, Germany, and Japan in seeking comprehensive Council reform.
5.	Legitimacy and Effectiveness Concerns	Analyzes criticisms of the UNSC's selective responses and its weakening legitimacy in global governance.
6.	Legal and Political Barriers to Reform	Details the procedural difficulties and political resistance to reform, especially from the P5.
7.	India's Strategic and Moral Imperative	Outlines both pragmatic and ethical reasons for India's campaign for a permanent seat.
8.	Civil Society and Academic Perspectives	Reviews scholarly and public views on why the UNSC must democratize its functioning.
9.	Role of Regional Organizations and the Global South	Emphasizes the growing demands by regional groups for representation and influence in decision-making.
10.	The Way Forward	Suggests incremental and long-term measures to make the UNSC more inclusive and representative.

7.1 Comparative Models of Institutional Reform

When analyzing reform models for the Security Council, scholars often refer to historical precedents from other international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These bodies, under sustained pressure, have modified their voting quotas and representation mechanisms to reflect the rise of developing economies. The IMF's 2010 quota reforms, for instance, shifted over 6% of quota shares to emerging markets, including India and China, recognizing their growing influence in the global economy (IMF, 2011). While not perfect, such models show that institutional reform, though difficult, is possible with sustained political will and multilateral negotiation. Applying similar principles to the UNSC—such as weighted voting, regional representation, or rotating permanent membership—could make it more democratic without entirely dismantling its existing structure.

7.2 The Role of Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

India's reform efforts are not solely reliant on formal diplomacy; they are also backed by extensive public diplomacy and soft power projection. Through platforms like the International Day of Yoga, development aid programs under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC), and leadership in forums like the International Solar Alliance (ISA), India builds moral credibility and partnership-based influence across the Global South. These initiatives foster goodwill and position India as a representative voice of developing nations. By promoting an inclusive, multicultural vision of global governance, India leverages its soft power to bolster support for its Security Council bid and strengthen its role as a mediator and reform advocate in multilateral forums.

7.3 Opposition and Regional Politics

Despite India's compelling case for permanent membership, regional politics create hurdles. Pakistan has consistently opposed India's inclusion, citing unresolved bilateral conflicts and concerns about regional hegemony. Similarly, China, a P5 member, remains cautious about India's rise, often stalling its inclusion efforts through strategic silence or indirect vetoes. Africa, too, remains divided between

contenders like Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt, with no consensus on a single African permanent representative. These rivalries weaken the collective voice of the Global South, which should ideally push for broader reform rather than fragment into national interests. Overcoming these obstacles requires diplomatic finesse, coalition-building, and perhaps a re-imagined model that rotates permanent representation regionally.

7.4 Youth, Academia, and Global Civil Movements

A relatively underexplored yet powerful lever for UNSC reform is the mobilization of youth, academia, and global civil society. Universities, think tanks, and activist networks increasingly demand a more equitable and accountable system of international governance. Youth-led organizations have submitted reform petitions to the UN General Assembly, organized global campaigns on peace and justice, and used digital platforms to amplify Global South perspectives. India, with its vast youth population and intellectual capital, can lead in integrating these actors into its reform narrative. A democratized UNSC must not only represent states but also consider people-centric legitimacy—a growing expectation in the era of global citizenship.

7.5 Security Council Reform and the Future of Multilateralism

The broader significance of UNSC reform extends beyond procedural adjustments it is emblematic of the future of multilateralism. If the Council remains static in a world that is rapidly evolving, it risks becoming irrelevant or losing its normative authority. A reformed Council, inclusive of the Global South and responsive to emerging security challenges, can act as a pillar of a fairer world order. India's reform agenda, therefore, is not just a national aspiration; it is a call to rejuvenate multilateralism by ensuring that the institutions meant to uphold peace and justice reflect the principles they claim to champion. The reform debate is, fundamentally, a debate about the kind of world we want to build.

8. Conclusion

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) functions as both a cornerstone of the international security architecture and a manifestation of entrenched institutional asymmetry. In an increasingly multipolar world order, the perpetuation of a structure that disproportionately privileges the P5 is normatively and functionally indefensible. The persistent underrepresentation of the Global South, particularly of demographically and geopolitically salient states like India, erodes the Council's legitimacy, normative authority, and operational efficacy in confronting complex, transnational challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and cyber threats. India's reform agenda, grounded in principles of democratic multilateralism and equitable representation, articulates a normative critique of the status quo and a strategic vision for inclusive global governance.

Nevertheless, the pathway to reform remains obstructed by legal formalism, geopolitical contestation, and veto-based realpolitik. The opposition of status quo powers, coupled with intra-regional rivalries, reinforces institutional inertia. As scholars and diplomats argue, including Harsh V. Pant and Ruchira Kamboj, substantive reform necessitates a broad-based coalition of Global South actors, regional organizations, civil society, and reform-minded P5 members. Transforming the UNSC is not merely a procedural reform but a normative imperative central to re-legitimizing multilateralism and safeguarding the UN's foundational mandate of maintaining international peace and security through representative global governance.

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