Security Council Reform: Past, Present, and Future

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Even though it has been more than a year since I left the service of the United Nations, the one question people have not stopped asking me here in India is when our country, with 1.2 billion people and a booming economy, is going to become a permanent member of the Security Council. The short answer is "not this year, and probably not the next." But there are so many misconceptions about this issue that a longer answer is clearly necessary.

The problem of reforming the Security Council is rather akin to a situation in which a number of doctors gather around a patient and all agree on the diagnosis, but they cannot agree on the prescription. The diagnosis is clear: the Security Council (SC) reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945 and not of today. This situation can be anatomized mathematically, geographically, and politically, as well as in terms of equity.

Mathematically: When the UN was founded in 1945, the Council consisted of 11 members out of a total UN membership of 51 countries; in other words, some 22 percent of the member states were on the Security Council. Today, there are 192 members of the UN, and only 15 members of the Council—fewer than 8 percent. So many more countries, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the membership, do not feel adequately represented on the body.

Geographically: The current composition of the Council also gives undue weight to the balance of power of at least a half century ago. Europe, for instance, which accounts for barely 5 percent of the world's population, still controls 33 percent of the SC seats in any given year (and that does not count Russia, regarded by much of the world as another European power).

Politically: The Council's five permanent members (the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China) enjoy their position, as well as the privilege of a veto over any Council resolution or decision, by virtue of having won a

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war sixty-six years ago. (In the case of China, the word "won" needs to be placed within quotation marks.)

In terms of simple considerations of equity, this situation is unjust to those countries whose financial contributions to the United Nations outweigh those of four of the five permanent members. Specifically, Japan and Germany have for decades been the second- and third-largest contributors to the UN budget, at roughly 19 percent and 12 percent, respectively, while still being referred to as "enemy states" in the United Nations Charter (since the UN was set up by the victorious Allies of World War II). Further, the current Council membership denies opportunities to other states that have contributed in kind (through participation in peacekeeping operations, for example) or by size, or both, to the evolution of world affairs in the more than six decades since the organization was born. India and Brazil are notable examples of this latter case.

So the Security Council is clearly ripe for reform to bring it into the second decade of the twenty-first century. The UN recognized the need for action as early as 1992, when the Open-Ended Working Group of the General Assembly was established to look into the issue, in the hope—or so then secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali declared—of finding a formula for SC reform in time for the organization's fiftieth anniversary in 1995. But the Open-Ended Working Group soon began to be known in the UN corridors as the Never-Ending Shirking Group. Rather than identifying a solution or moving toward compromise, the group remains in existence to this day, having missed not only the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations but the sixtieth and now the sixty-fifth. Left to their own devices, they will be arguing the merits of the case well past the UN's centenary.

For a decade now, the Group of Four (or G-4)—Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan—have been in the forefront of an attempt to win passage of Security Council reform, fully expecting to be the beneficiaries of any expansion in the category of permanent members. They have been repeatedly thwarted. The problem is quite simple: for every state that feels it deserves a place on the Security Council, and especially the handful of countries that believe their status in the world ought to be recognized as being in no way inferior to at least three if not four of the existing permanent members, there are several who know they will not benefit from any reform. The small countries, which make up more than half the UN's membership, accept this reality and are content to compete occasionally for the five nonpermanent Council seats that come up for a vote every year. (These five seats are voted on by all members of the General Assembly, and the candidates

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are generally regarded as representing their various regions—thus, often creating vigorous lobbying and campaigning among the nations within a given region.)

At the same time, the medium-sized and large countries that are the rivals of the prospective beneficiaries (that is, the G-4) deeply resent the prospect of a select few breaking free of their current second-rank status in the world body. Some of the objectors, such as Canada and Spain, are genuinely motivated by principle: they consider the very existence of permanent membership to be wrong, and they have no desire to compound the original sin by adding more members to a category they dislike. Many others, however, are openly animated by a spirit of competition, historical grievance, or simple envy. Together, they have banded into an effective coalition—first called the "coffee club" and now, more cynically, "Uniting for Consensus"—to thwart reform of the permanent membership of the Council. They say they would accept some other formula that does not give a few countries privileges that they do not currently enjoy.

Let us remember that the bar to amending the UN Charter has been set rather high. Any amendment requires a two-thirds majority of the overall UN membership—in other words, 128 of the 192 states in the General Assembly. An amendment would further have to be ratified by two-thirds of the member states (and ratification is usually a parliamentary procedure, so in most countries this means it is not enough for the government of the day to be in favor of a reform; its Parliament or Congress must also agree to the change). Thus, the only "prescription" that has any chance of passing is one that will both (1) persuade two-thirds of the UN member states to support it and (2) not attract the opposition of any of the existing "Perm Five" (or even that of a powerful U.S. senator who could block ratification in Washington). That has proved to be a tall order, indeed.

After all, what countries would the world want to see on an expanded Security Council? Obviously, states that displace some weight in the world and have a record of making major contributions to the UN system. But when Japan and Germany began pressing their claims to permanent seats, the then foreign minister of Italy, Susanna Agnelli, wisecracked, "What's all this talk about Japan and Germany? We lost the war, too!" (Other historical factors intrude: neither China nor South Korea is keen on seeing Japan rewarded today, given its record of atrocities seven decades ago.) Even assuming such objections (notably from Italy, Spain, Canada, and Korea, and among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries) could be overcome, adding these two

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to the Council would, of course, further skew the existing North-South imbalance. So they would have to be balanced by new permanent members from the developing world. But which would these be?

In Asia, India, as the world's largest democracy, its fifth-largest economy, and a long-standing contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, seems an obvious contender. But Pakistan, which fancies itself India's strategic rival on the subcontinent, is unalterably opposed, and to some extent Indonesia seems to feel threatened by the prospect of an Indian seat. Similarly, in Latin America, Brazil occupies a place analogous to India's, but Argentina and Mexico have other ideas, pointing to Portuguese-speaking Brazil's inferior credentials in representing largely Hispanic Latin America. And in Africa, how is one to adjudicate the rival credentials of the continent's largest democracy, Nigeria, its largest economy, South Africa, and its oldest civilization, Egypt?

No wonder the search for a reform prescription—a formula that is simultaneously acceptable to a two-thirds majority and not unacceptable to the Perm Five—has proved so elusive. And while composition is the central challenge, it is not the only one. Questions of the eventual size of a reformed Council are also raised and further complicate the discussion. This is because it is generally agreed that once additional permanent members have been added to the Council, they must also be joined by additional nonpermanent ones in order to give more representation to such regions as Latin America and Eastern Europe, which would otherwise risk being marginalized in the new body. Might the Council, then, become too large to function effectively?

And what about the veto? Permanent membership currently comes with the privilege of a veto, but there appears to be less support across the full UN membership for new veto wielders than there is for the abolition of the veto altogether. The G-4, sensing the mood, announced they would voluntarily forgo the privilege of a veto for ten years, but this did not noticeably add momentum to their cause.

For all of these impediments, I do still believe the Security Council has to change sooner or later. The best argument for reform is that the absence of reform could discredit the United Nations itself. Britain and France have become converts to this point of view. I remember the late British foreign secretary Robin Cook saying in 1997 (on his first UN visit in that capacity) that if the Council was not reformed without delay, his own voters would not understand why. Mr. Cook, a fine statesman and a man of principle, did not realize that he was not destined to see any Council reform in his lifetime, let alone during his term of office. And

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yet he understood that reform was essential, because what merely looks anomalous today will seem absurd tomorrow. Imagine in 2020 a British or French veto of a resolution affecting South Asia with India absent from the table, or of one affecting southern Africa with South Africa not voting: who would take the Council seriously then?

There is perhaps another reason why the British and the French are genuinely keen on seeing the Council reformed right now. Currently, everyone is speaking only of expanding the permanent membership of the Council, not replacing the existing permanent members. If reform is delayed by another decade, there is a real risk that the position of London and Paris will no longer be so secure, and the clamor for replacing them with one permanent European Union seat could prove irresistible.

To date, the other three permanent members have been somewhat more lukewarm about reform. Russia has officially pledged to support it, and has explicitly backed the claims of Germany, Japan, and India to new permanent seats, but it is a matter for debate as to how enthusiastic Moscow really is. Its permanent seat on the Council was the one asset that, even during the shambolic years of the 1990s, allowed Russia to punch above its weight in international affairs. Few Russians really want to see that position of privilege diluted by having to be shared with several new countries.

The United States and China are even more skeptical. China shares Moscow's reluctance to see its stature diminished, but this is all the more true since it now sees itself, quite justifiably, as having no peer in the world other than the United States, whose economy it is on course to overtake within the next two decades. The thought of sharing permanent status with India and Japan is not one that evokes much joy in Beijing. As for the United States, it is still the sole superpower, and its isolation in recent years on various issues, notably relating to the Middle East, made the Bush administration profoundly wary of giving new powers to countries that may stand in its way. It was striking that Washington's support of a seat for Germany faded away in the wake of Germany's vocal opposition to the 2003 Iraq War, and it took years for the United States to formally endorse India's bid, because it was conscious that New Delhi votes more often against Washington in UN forums than with it. That reluctance was finally removed in November 2010 during a visit to New Delhi by President Obama that was aimed at sealing a strategic partnership, the credibility of which would have been undermined by continued reticence on a Security Council seat for

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New Delhi. In addition, the United States likes a Council it can dominate; Washington is conscious that a larger body would be more unwieldy and a bigger collection of permanent members more difficult to manage. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," American diplomats like to say.

But to much of the rest of the world, the Security Council is indeed "broke," and the more decisions it is called upon to make that affect many countries—authorizing wars, declaring sanctions, launching peacekeeping interventions—the greater the risk that its decisions will be seen as made by an unrepresentative body and, therefore, rejected as illegitimate. The United Nations is the one universal body we all have, the one organization to which every country in the world belongs; if it is discredited, the world as a whole will lose an institution that is truly irreplaceable.

And that could happen. My worry, as an old UN hand, is that if Security Council reform drags on indefinitely and inconclusively, key countries could begin to look for an alternative. Five years ago, as a candidate for secretary-general, I asked in a speech: "What if the G-8, which is not bound by any charter and writes its own rules, decided one day to expand its membership to embrace, say, China, India, Brazil, and South Africa?" That is precisely what has happened since, with the establishment of the G-20, albeit as the premier global macroeconomic forum, rather than the peace and security institution that the Security Council is. Nonetheless, China aside, the other countries could well say, "Well, we're now on the high table at last—why not focus our energies on this body and ignore the one that refuses to seat us?" The result could be a United Nations dramatically diminished by the decision of some of its most important members to ignore or neglect it, while the G-20 could well arrogate political responsibilities to itself, unrestricted by any charter constraint other than its own self-restraint.

If that were to occur, the loss will be that of the rest of the world, which at least today has a universal organization to hold it together under the rules of international law—something vastly preferable to a *directoire* of self-appointed oligarchs that an expanded G-8 could become. So those small and medium-sized countries that are throwing up petty obstacles to reform are being rather short-sighted, not only because they fail to address the fundamental problem that I described above but because their opposition, if it succeeds, could potentially undermine the very institution that many of these countries, now in the forefront of opposition to reform, have long seen as a bulwark for their own security and safety in an unequal world.

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So what's the answer? In 2010 the G-4 took the debate away from the feckless Open-Ended Working Group and into the General Assembly plenary, and persuaded the facilitator of the process, the ambassador of Afghanistan, to come up with a text for discussion. Though his efforts have been hailed by enthusiasts as heralding a genuine breakthrough in the process, his text is still replete with square brackets indicating unresolved language, and thus revealing entrenched and irreconcilable positions.

Tinkering with a reform resolution will continue, but no resolution can attract enough votes unless the 54-member African Union (AU) is persuaded to step off the fence that it has been straddling for years. African opponents of Council reform have adroitly maneuvered the African Union into an impossible position under the label "the Ezulwini Consensus" (named for the Swazi town in which the formula was agreed). The Ezulwini Consensus demands two veto-wielding permanent seats for Africa in a reformed Council, a demand couched in terms of African self-respect but pushed precisely by those countries that know it is unlikely ever to be granted. The AU's rules mean that African positions are adopted by consensus, thus taking 54 potential votes out of the equation in favor of a political compromise. (As an Indian minister of state lobbying in Addis Ababa for Security Council reform, I pointed out privately that "Ezulwini" meant "Paradise"; but that after years of insisting upon, and failing to obtain, Paradise, it was necessary for African countries to settle for what could be achieved on earth.) Africa's naysayers also know that insisting on a consensus decision makes it difficult for the majority favoring reform to move the process forward. After years of accepting this approach, such countries as South Africa appear to be challenging the time-honored emphasis on consensus. If the African Union were to agree to a free vote in the General Assembly, the prospects of a reform resolution attracting the necessary 128 votes would brighten immeasurably.

As with most global issues, the key to breaking the logjam lies in Washington. Most of the naysayers are U.S. allies who have been given a free hand by Washington's own lack of enthusiasm for reform. If a new U.S. administration could be persuaded that it is in America's self-interest to maintain a revitalized United Nations, credible enough for its support to be valuable to the United States and legitimate enough to be a bulwark of world order in the imminent future when the United States is no longer the world's only superpower, Washington could bring enough countries in its wake to transform the debate.

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That is a task that the Security Council "aspirants"—and notably the government of a transforming India now entering into a strategic partnership with Washington—are well positioned to perform. India clearly feels very strongly that there is a definite need for an expansion of the Security Council in both categories, permanent and nonpermanent. But it also sees the Security Council as part of a broader process of renewing the United Nations—not because it has failed, but because it has succeeded often enough to be worth reforming. Like many developing countries, India would like to see the General Assembly strengthened as the primary intergovernmental legislative body, which it is not yet; it has become too often a rhetorical forum, prone to declaratory effulgence without effect, rather than one that acts as a legislative body driving the action of the UN organization. The UN's Economic and Social Council, too, should become a more meaningful development-oriented body and a serious instrument of development governance. A greater sharpening is also required in the focus and the operational efficiency of the UN funds, agencies, and programs, whose effectiveness is so important for so many of the world's vulnerable people.

India is conscious, too, that the international financial institutions set up at Bretton Woods in 1944 are also in need of reform, since they too reflect the realities of a vanished era; till last year, for instance, Belgium disposed of the same weighted vote as China in these institutions. The G-20 summit in Pittsburgh in September 2009 set in motion a process for global redesign of the international financial and economic architecture, and is thus emerging as the premier forum for international economic cooperation. The G-20 has become a meaningful platform for North-South dialogue precisely because the South is not completely outweighed by the North in the composition of the G-20. In the years ahead, India will use its position in this grouping to pursue a long-term objective of broad parity between the developed countries and the developing and transitional economies in the international financial institutions. After all, the recent global financial crisis showed that the surveillance of risk by international institutions and early-warning mechanisms are needed for all countries. In other words, it is important that, in the context of global governance, the developing countries should have a voice in overseeing the global financial performance of all nations, rather than it simply being a case of the rich supervising the economic delinquency of the poor.

A reform package that incorporates both the Security Council and Bretton Woods institutions could transform global governance, whereas failure to reform could doom the prospects for an effective and equitable world order. The

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international system—as constructed following the Second World War—will be almost unrecognizable by 2030 owing to the rise of emerging powers, a transformed global economy, a real transfer of relative wealth and economic power from the West (or the North) to other countries in the global South, and the growing influence of nonstate actors, including terrorists, multinational corporations, and criminal networks. Over the next two decades this new international system will be coping with the issues of aging populations in the developed world; increasing energy, food, and water constraints; and worries about climate change and migration. Global changes, including India's own transformation, will mean that resource issues—including energy, food, and water, on all of which demand is projected to outstrip easily available supplies over the next decade or so—will gain prominence on the international agenda. The need for increased, more democratic, and more equitable global governance will therefore be even greater.

Let us look even further than the next two decades. Growth projections for Brazil, Russia, India, and China (the BRIC countries) indicate they will collectively match the original G-7's share of global gross domestic product by 2040–2050. All four, probably, will continue to enjoy relatively rapid economic growth and will strive for a multipolar world in which their capitals are among the poles. The experts tell us that historically emerging multipolar systems have been more unstable than bipolar or unipolar ones. The recent, indeed ongoing, global financial crisis underlines that the next twenty years of transition to a new system are fraught with risks. Global policy-makers will have to cope with a growing demand for multilateral cooperation when the international system will be stressed by the incomplete transition from the old to the new order. And the new players will not want to cooperate under the old rules.

The multiplicity of actors on the international scene could, if properly accommodated, add strength to our aging post–World War II institutions, or they could fragment the international system and reduce international cooperation. Such countries as India have no desire to challenge the international system, as did such other rising powers as Germany and Japan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But they certainly wish to be given a place at the global high table. Without that, they would be unlikely to volunteer to share the primary burden for dealing with such issues as terrorism, climate change, nuclear proliferation, and energy security—all of which concern the entire globe.

As someone who has devoted three decades of his life to multilateral cooperation at the United Nations, I will say very strongly that my big fear

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remains that if reform does not come, many countries will despair and lose interest in the working of the world body. Alternative structures of world governance could emerge that would in the end undermine the one truly effective universal organization the world has built up since 1945. "Reform or die" is a cliché that has been inflicted on many institutions. For the United Nations, at this time and on this issue, the hoary phrase has the merit of being true.

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