



Secretary General Warns of UN's Uncertain Future

This editorial is based on [“The global order — a fraying around many edges”](#) which was published in The Hindu on 28/02/2024. The article discusses the Secretary-General of the United Nations expressing increased concern about the organisation's future. It emphasises the need for reform and underscores doubts about the long-term viability of the existing global order.

For Prelims: [Globalisation](#), [Climate change](#), [G20](#), [G7](#), [United Nations](#), [IMF](#), [World Bank](#), [BRICS](#), [African Union](#), [Association of Southeast Asian Nations \(ASEAN\)](#), [European Union](#), [Quad](#), [AUKUS](#), [Global South](#), [United Nations Security Council \(UNSC\)](#), [Membership of UNSC](#), [Peacekeeping missions of UN](#), [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#).

For Mains: Issues Associated with the Functioning of the United Nations, Need to bring reforms in the UNSC.

At the opening of the 55th regular session of the [United Nations Human Rights Council \(UNHRC\)](#), the [UN](#) Secretary General remarked that the ‘lack of unity’ amongst [United Nations Security Council \(UNSC\)](#) members had ‘perhaps fatally undermined its authority’. Reform is essential, but given the divisions, superficial changes may not be enough.

What is UNHRC?

- **About:**
 - The Human Rights Council is an inter-governmental body within the UN system responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the world.
- **Formation:**
 - The Council was created by the UN General Assembly in 2006. It replaced the former United Nations Commission on Human Rights.
 - The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) serves as the **Secretariat of the Human Rights Council**.
 - OHCHR is headquartered in **Geneva**, Switzerland.
- **Members:**
 - It is made up of 47 UN Member States which are elected by the UNGA.
 - The Council's Membership is based on equitable geographical distribution

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UN Security Council (UNSC)

The UN Charter vests the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security to the UNSC

About

One of the **6 principal organs** of UN; established in **1945** by UN Charter

Headquarters

New York City

First Session

17 January 1946 at Church House, Westminster, London

Membership

- 15 members - 5 Permanent Members (P5), 10 Non-Permanent Members elected for two-year terms (5 elected each year)
- P5 - the US, the UK, Russia, France and China

Presidency

- Rotates every month among the 15 members
- India's Presidency for year 2022 - December

Voting Powers

- 1 member = 1 vote
- P5 have **veto power**
- Members of UN sans membership of UNSC participate without vote

UNSC Committees/Resolutions

Terrorism

- Resolution 1373** (Counter Terrorism Committee)
- Resolution 1267** (Da'esh and Al Qaeda Committee)

Non-Proliferation Committee

- Resolution 1540** (against nuclear, chemical and biological weapons)

India and UNSC

- Served **7 times** as non-permanent member; elected for the **8th time** for 2021-22; **advocates for a permanent seat**
- Arguments for a permanent seat:
 - 43 peacekeeping missions**
 - Active participation in **formulating Human Rights Declaration (UDHR)**
 - India's **population, territorial size, GDP, economic potential, cultural diversity, political system** etc.



G4

Group of 4 countries (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) which advocate each other's bids for permanent seats in the UNSC

Uniting for Consensus (UfC) Movement

- Informally known as the **Coffee Club**
- Countries **oppose the expansion Permanent Seats** of UNSC
- Prime movers of the club** - Italy, Spain, Australia, Canada, South Korea, Argentina and Pakistan
- Italy and Spain are opposed to Germany's bid; Pakistan - India's bid; Argentina - Brazil's bid and Australia - Japan's bid

Major Challenges in UNSC

- Usual UN rules don't apply to UNSC deliberations; **no records of meetings kept**
- Powerplay in UNSC; **anachronistic veto powers** of P5
- Deep polarisation** among P5; frequent divisions end up blocking key decisions
- Inadequate representation** of many regions among of the world



What is the Role of the UN in the Present Status of the Global Order?

- Managing Power Rivalry Between Nations:**
 - At stake is the post-World War order whose foundations were built even as the Second World War raged on, reflecting a structure that the Allied powers felt would prevent another global conflagration.
 - This order is anchored in the UN itself, along with its specialised agencies, funds and programmes.
 - This is a system of international relations built to manage great power rivalry as it existed three quarters of a century ago.
 - In the years since, power and prosperity have flowed and shifted between and from the original signatories and the international community of states has more than quadrupled.
- Upholding Sovereign Equality:**
 - The UN was created to stop another global war by upholding the sovereign equality of all

nations subscribing to the principle of collective security.

- Sovereign equality, however, faltered at the doors of the Security Council, with its five Permanent Members of super equals, all of whom were Allied powers, and including, of course, two major colonial powers.
 - Emergence of bipolar world order further struck at the very roots of sovereign equality.

▪ **Strengthening Multilateral Institutions:**

- The Bretton Woods Conference in July 1944 established the [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#) and the [International Bank for Reconstruction and Development \(or the World Bank\)](#) and, in 1947, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which was succeeded by the [World Trade Organization \(WTO\)](#) in 1995.
- Together, this financial and trade architecture sought to create a shared international economic order that would not repeat the mistakes of the 1920s and 1930s, plan post-War reconstruction and liberalise global trade.

▪ **International Law and Human Rights:**

- The UN promotes the development and adherence to international law and human rights standards. The organisation has established numerous treaties, conventions, and declarations that govern areas such as human rights, humanitarian law, environmental protection, and disarmament.
- The UNHRC and various specialised agencies work to monitor and address human rights abuses globally.

▪ **Sustainable Development:**

- The UN plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable development worldwide. The [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), adopted by all UN member states in 2015, sets out a comprehensive framework for tackling global challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation.
- The UN's development agencies, such as the [United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\)](#) and the [United Nations Environment Programme \(UNEP\)](#) work to support countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

▪ **Humanitarian Assistance:**

- The UN plays a vital role in providing humanitarian assistance to populations affected by conflicts, natural disasters, and other emergencies.
- Through its agencies like the [United Nations Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#) the [World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#) and the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), the UN coordinates and delivers aid, supports refugees and internally displaced persons, and works to alleviate suffering and protect vulnerable populations.

What are the Challenges to Multilateralism in the 21st Century?

▪ **Reforming Multilateralism, a Difficult Task:**

- Reforming multilateralism is a difficult task for various reasons as it is deeply entrenched in global power politics. As a result, any action in reforming multilateral institutions and frameworks automatically transforms into a move that seeks changes in the current distribution of power.
- Modifications in the distribution of power in the global order are neither easy nor normal. Moreover, it may have adverse implications if not done cautiously.

▪ **Lack of Consensus Among Status Quo Powers:**

- The status quo powers see multilateral reforms as a zero-sum game. For instance, in the context of the Bretton Woods system, the US and Europe believed reform would reduce their influence and dominance.
- This makes decisions about reform in these institutions, by consensus or voting, hard. Multilateralism appears at odds with the realities of the emerging multiplex global order. The emerging order seems more multipolar and multi-centred.

▪ **Clash of Chinese and US Values:**

- The clash between China and the US marks the end of the multilateralism of the past 70 years. It marks another seismic shift within the UN. The US faces an uphill task in seeking to lead a new multidimensional institution as China's re-emergence is based on technology, innovation and trade balancing US military superiority at a time of declining global trust in free-market liberalism, central to western civilisation.

- **Multiple Crisis Confronting Multilateralism:**
 - Multilateral cooperation today is confronting multiple crises. First, due to **persistent deadlocks**, multilateralism has lost the majority's trust. Second, **multilateralism is facing a utility crisis**, where powerful member-states think it is no longer useful for them.
 - Moreover, increasing great-power tensions, **de-globalisation, populist nationalism, the pandemic, and climate emergencies** added to the hardships.
 - This impasse led states to seek other arenas, including bilateral, plurilateral and minilateral groupings, which subsequently contributed to further polarisation of global politics.
- **Challenges to Multilateralism in Terms of Concepts, Methods and Institutions:**
 - **Concepts** of multilateralism are becoming volatile, eroded by problems of global dimension that have to be handled over national borders. Some examples include national sovereignty versus human rights concerns or international criminal justice decisions, environmental and health problems.
 - **Negotiation methods** and techniques do not capture the complexity of modern society.
 - Analogies from IT such as open software mode in terms of organisation, contributions, negotiation and decision-taking might be better suited to the modern challenges.
 - The negotiation experience from the scientific and technical communities could provide helpful information in learning how to handle those challenges that are not purely political.
 - The use of sectoral approaches in practice runs counter to intrinsically transversal concepts such as that of sustainable development.
 - The **existing institutions** do not reflect the increasing role of regionalism and the changing balance of power. The Security Council reform is still being discussed after a few decades, and there is a problem of inadequate voting rights of emerging and African economies in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, despite recent progress.
 - The rapid emergence of new global players such as **BRICS** has profound implications on negotiations and international governance. Emerging powers are building alliances and common positions in various international fora. African countries increasingly realise that they can better defend their interests when speaking with one voice.

What are the Different Issues in Functioning of UNSC?

- **Reflecting Colonial Mindset:**
 - The UN effectively granted these major Allied powers a permanent veto. After **World War II**, the newly independent states were not consulted when the US imposed global institutions fostering trade, capital and technology dependence, ignoring socio-economic development. This occurred at a time when mounting calls for decolonization and the impacts of a global conflict were eroding the dominance of imperial powers.
- **Disproportionate Powers to Select Few:**
 - The old world clung on to the power structures of the new institutions, as reflected in the governance of the Bank and the Fund. The World Bank is always headed by an American citizen; 'Europe' (Western Europe, in practice) gets to nominate the head of the IMF.
 - **Voting Rights:**
 - The voting rights of member-states of the Fund are virtually frozen in time, despite some limited reform. Currently, the percentage voting rights for, say, the original BRICS members are 2.22, 2.59, 2.63, 6.08 and 0.63.
 - The US alone commands 16.5; add to it the votes of the UK (4.03), Germany (5.31) and the rest of the G-7 that tends to vote with the US, and that percentage approaches 30.
 - **Disbursal of Funds:**
 - Allocating **Special Drawing Rights** and most reform requires an 85% majority vote, effectively handing the US a powerful veto.
 - The IMF maintains global stability by promoting financial stability, offering advice, and providing funds to countries in financial difficulty, as long as they accept conditions set by the leadership of the Fund.
- **Against the Interests of Developing Countries:**
 - The UN system, based on international treaties now firmly entrenched in law, facilitated

global relations, though favouring original UN Charter signatories. Decolonization, the [Cold War](#), and the Soviet Union's dissolution challenged this framework.

- However, developing nations, including ex-colonies, struggled against the Security Council's veto and Bretton Woods' voting structures. China, notably, wielded influence as a rule maker in one arena but as a rule taker in another.

▪ **Various Contemporary Faultlines:**

- [COVID-19](#) shut down borders, for people, for goods, for vaccines, thereby undermining the promise of a shared global prosperity based on ever greater cooperation.
- Russia's invasion of Ukraine exposed the hypocrisy of a major power that is supposed to uphold global rules. Additionally, the conflict in Gaza has highlighted divisions between developed and developing nations.
 - This conflict tests the commitment of several of the Permanent Members to the bedrock of the UN system — a commitment to human rights and the genocide convention.

What are the Suggestions for Reforming UNSC?

▪ **Role of G-20:**

- [G-20](#) should first focus on setting proper narratives of multilateral reform. G-20 may constitute an engagement group dedicated to bring the narrative to the forefront of global discourse.
 - India should also urge the upcoming chairs of the grouping, Brazil and South Africa, **to place multilateral reforms in UNSC** as their presidential priorities.
- While supporting multilateral cooperation, **G-20 should continue encouraging minilateral groupings** as a new form of multilateralism and try to transform them into multi-stakeholder partnerships.
 - Creating networks of issue-based minilaterals, particularly in areas related to the governance of the global commons will be helpful in preventing competitive coalitions where other actors play the same game to their advantage, leading to a more fragmented world order.

▪ **Need for Comprehensive Reforms:**

- World needs an all-encompassing, comprehensive reform process which includes expansion in permanent as well as non-permanent categories of membership of the Security Council, the question of the veto, the relationship between the General Assembly and the Security Council and an improvement in the working methods.
 - India stressed that the primacy and legitimacy of the UNGA flow from the inclusive nature of its membership and the principle of sovereign equality of all its constituents.

▪ **India's Anticipated Role:**

- The global vacuum, shift in relative power and its own potential, provides India the capacity to articulate a benign multilateralism as a [NAM-Plus](#) that resonates with large parts of the world and brings both BRICS and the [G7](#) into the tent.
- India has been calling for the reform of the UNSC along with Brazil, Germany and Japan for a long time, emphasising that it rightly deserves a place at the UN high table as a permanent member.
 - The **G4 nations of Brazil, Germany, Japan and India** support each other's bids for permanent seats on the UNSC.

▪ **Understanding the Asian Century in UNSC Reforms:**

- The Asian Century should be defined in terms of peaceful co-existence, freezing postcolonial sovereignty. Non-interference in the internal affairs of others is a key lesson from the perspective of USA and also the rise of China.
 - Former US President Jimmy Carter rightly observed that while the US spent USD 3 trillion on military spending, "China has not wasted a single penny on war".

▪ **Need for Amendments in UN Charter to Accommodate Emerging Concerns:**

- Altering the council's size, terms for members, thresholds for approving resolutions or the powers of the permanent members require amending the charter.
 - Amendments enter into force when they have a $2/3^{\text{rd}}$ vote of support in the UNGA and $2/3^{\text{rd}}$ of the assembly's member states - including the UNSC P5 - have ratified them.

- With such barriers in place, amendments are rare. The UN Charter has been amended only five times since its adoption in 1945, with the most recent changes entering into force in 1973.
 - These amendments increased the Security Council's size from 11 to 15 members by adding four additional elected members. Similar amendments need to be explored to map the present realities.

Key UN reforms



Conclusion

The current global order, anchored in the UN and its agencies, was established post-World War II to prevent another global conflict, but it is now facing significant challenges. The power dynamics within the UN, particularly the veto power of the P5 of the UNSC reflect an outdated structure that does not account for the changing global landscape.

As the world grapples with new challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical conflicts, there is a pressing need to reevaluate and potentially reform the current global architecture to ensure it remains relevant and effective in addressing global issues.

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss the need for reforms in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in light of its current structure and challenges. What reforms would you propose?

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. With reference to the "United Nations Credentials Committee", consider the following statements: (2022)

1. It is a committee set up by the UN Security Council and works under its supervision.
2. It traditionally meets in March, June and September every year
3. It assesses the credentials of all UN members before submitting a report to the General Assembly for approval.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 3 only
- (b) 1 and 3
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) 1 and 2

Ans: (a)

Q. The Security Council of UN consists of 5 permanent members, and the remaining 10 members are elected by the General Assembly for a term of (2009)

- (a) 1 year
- (b) 2 years
- (c) 3 years
- (d) 5 years

Ans: (b)

Mains:

Q. What are the main functions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)? Explain different functional commissions attached to it.150 words **(2017)**

Q. Discuss the impediments India is facing in its pursuit of a permanent seat in UN Security Council. **(2015)**