



Committee History and Structure
Security Council¹

September 19, 2011

The United Nations Security Council was created by the United Nations Charter, which came into effect on 24 October 1945. According to the Charter, the UN has three purposes:

1. To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;
2. To develop friendly relations among nations based on ... equal rights and self-determination of peoples;
3. To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights...²

Responsibility for each of these goals is shared between the General Assembly, in which each member state has one vote, and the Security Council with limited membership and special voting rules.

The Security Council shares responsibility for the first goal (international peace and security) with the General Assembly (GA), especially the General Assembly First Committee (disarmament and security). Responsibility for the second goal (equal rights and self-determination) is shared by the GA and Trusteeship Council.³ Responsibility for the third goal (international economic and social cooperation, and human rights) was originally shared by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Since 2006, responsibility for the human rights portion of the third set of goals has rested with the GA and the new Human Rights Council (HRC).⁴

Although the Security Council, Trusteeship Council, Economic and Social Council, and Human Rights Council are each charged with supervising the achievement of one UN goal, these councils have very different capabilities. Specifically, the Security Council is much more powerful than the others. The UN Charter makes it clear that “the founders envisioned the Security Council as the UN’s premier body, charged with the most essential security tasks.”⁵ In addition, the Charter gave the Security Council far more authority to act on security matters

¹ This background guide was written by Karen Ruth Adams, faculty advisor, with contributions from David Shelton (2007), Aimee Ryan (2008), and Samantha Stephens (2010). Copyright 2011 by Karen Ruth Adams.

² United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” 26 June 1945, Chapter I, Article 1, available at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/>.

³ The Trusteeship Council suspended operations in 1994, when Palau, the last remaining United Nations trust territory, became independent. United Nations Trusteeship Council, <http://www.un.org/documents/tc.htm>.

⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council, website, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/> See also “Charter of the United Nations, Chapter XIII, Article 87.

⁵ Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, 3rd edition (Boulder: Westview, 2007), p. 27.

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than the other councils have to act on economic, social, and humanitarian matters.

The authority of the Security Council is evident in four ways. First, the Security Council's resolutions do not need to be passed by any other UN committee to go into effect. By contrast, the other councils simply make recommendations to the GA; their resolutions are not enacted until they are passed by the GA. Second, GA resolutions are simply recommendations, whereas Security Council resolutions are binding. When states join the UN, they agree to abide by Security Council decisions. Third, the GA can address issues related to international peace and security only if they are not currently under consideration by the Security Council. Finally, unlike other UN committees, the Security Council can take steps to enforce its decisions. The only exception to this is with regard to the UN budget, over which the GA exercises full control.⁶

Thus the Security Council plays a unique role at the United Nations. It also has a unique structure, in that there are five permanent members with veto power. Due to US-Soviet rivalry during the first 45 years of its existence, the Security Council was almost completely paralyzed, despite the high hopes of its founders. Although the Council has been more active since the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the interests of the permanent five members continue to determine the actions and effectiveness of the Security Council.

Membership, Voting, and Leadership

The membership of the Security Council consists of 15 member states, ten of which are elected biannually from the General Assembly. The other five members are permanent members to whom the Charter gave both permanent seats on the Council and permanent vetoes. These states are the United States, France, the United Kingdom, the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China. In 1963, the General Assembly agreed that the 10 rotating members should be geographically distributed, as follows:

- five from Africa and Asia (subsequently divided into two for Asia and three for Africa);
- one from Eastern Europe
- two from Latin America, including the Caribbean
- two from Western Europe and Other states (including Australia, Canada, and New Zealand)

Elections for the five rotating seats available annually can be contentious. In 2007, there was more than one candidate for all but one of the open seats.⁷

In voting procedure, according to Chapter V, Article 27 of the UN Charter, nine votes are required to pass all procedural matters, and all "non-procedural" or substantive matters (for example, resolutions and reports) require a vote of nine and an affirmation or abstention from all permanent members.⁸

The presidency of the Security Council changes monthly and passes from one member state to another according to the alphabetical ranking of state names (in English). Unlike the GA, which holds an annual conference opening in September of each year, the Security Council meets and passes resolutions continuously throughout the year.⁹

History and Challenges

⁶ United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter IV, Article 12; Chapter V, Article 25; Chapter VII; and Chapter IV, Article 19.

⁷ Security Council Report, "Security Council Elections 2007," 12 September 2007, p. 5, available at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/membership/election/2007/0912screform.pdf>.

⁸ United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter X, Article 27.

⁹ To view the resolutions the Security Council passed in 2009/2010, visit the Security Council website at <http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/>

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When the United Nations was formed in 1945, the Allies (the US, UK, France, Russia, and China) were concerned, above all, with limiting the possibility of war. After all, in just 45 years, the world had seen two terrible wars. Together, World War I and World War II killed approximately 70 million people.¹⁰ The Allies gave the official name of their alliance (the United Nations) to an organization they created to replace the League of Nations, which had failed to prevent the outbreak of World War II. As scholars Karen Mingst and Margaret Karns explain,

The participants agreed that the organization would be based on the principle of the sovereign equality of members and that all “peace-loving” states would be eligible for membership, thereby excluding the Axis powers -- Germany, Italy, Japan, and Spain. It was also agreed that decisions on security issues would require unanimity of the permanent members of the Security Council -- the great powers.¹¹

In addition to giving the Security Council priority on issues related to international peace and security, the founders gave the Council important tasks related to the operation of the United Nations. For example, the UN secretary general is appointed and new Member States are admitted to the UN “by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.”¹² Similarly, both Security Council and GA approval is required to appoint judges to the International Court of Justice.¹³ The issue of UN reform is much the same. To revise the Charter, the GA and the Security Council must together call for a review conference. Amendments go into effect only with a two thirds vote in the General Assembly and ratification by “two thirds of the Members of the United Nations, including all the permanent members of the Security Council.”¹⁴

Together, these provisions mean that the Security Council, especially the permanent five members (P-5), have both short-term and long-term control over what happens at the UN. This makes it very difficult to address a wide variety of reform issues, from making GA resolutions binding, to changing the criteria for admitting new members to the UN or changing the structure of the Security Council.

In principle, these provisions would seem to enable the Security Council to alter the UN in ways the P-5 desire. In fact, however, disagreements between P-5 members mean that the Security Council is often stymied. From 1945-1990, the Council was largely paralyzed by the Cold War between the US and Soviet Union. Since the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and the emergence of capitalist Russia, there have been many more Security Council meetings and many more resolutions. This is largely because the unrivaled power of the United States has caused the US to encounter less opposition to resolutions it sponsors. Previously, the US had to worry not only about the Soviet veto but also the prospect of war with the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union fell apart, yielding a much-weaker Russia that needed US assistance in many ways, a major obstacle to the functioning of the Security Council was removed.

Yet the veto is still a very powerful and often-used tool because it is one of the only ways other states can stand up to the United States. For example, the threat of a veto by China, Russia, and France prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 meant that the US and UK simply withdrew a resolution authorizing the use of force. This was not the end of the story, however; the US and UK pursued the invasion without Security Council approval. Because Iraq had not attacked the US or UK, the invasion was a violation of the UN Charter, which requires all

¹⁰ Matthew White, “Source List and Detailed Death Tolls for the Twentieth Century Hemoclysm,” November 2005, available at <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat1.htm>.

¹¹ Mingst and Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, p. 27.

¹² United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter XV, Article 97; and Chapter II, Article 4.

¹³ International Court of Justice, “Statute of the International Court of Justice,” Chapter I, Article 4, available at <http://www.icj-cij.org/documents/index.php?p1=4&p2=2&p3=0>.

¹⁴ United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter XVIII, Article 108.

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member states to refer all matters of peace and security to the Council except in the case of self-defense.¹⁵ But because the US and UK can veto any Security Council resolution punishing them for the war against Iraq, no effort has been made pass such a resolution. Thus, although the Security Council has been more active since the end of the Cold War, its actions have not always conformed to the Charter. In fact, in many ways, the post-Cold War period confirms the failure of the Security Council to hold all states accountable for breaches of the peace and acts of aggression.¹⁶

When the P-5 agree that a non-P-5 member has violated the Charter, the Security Council can authorize military action, as it did in 2007 in Darfur, Sudan.¹⁷ Chapter VII of the UN Charter lays out the Council's options for the use of force in these situations. In general, the pertinent Security Council resolution authorizes member states to carry out certain military missions, using their own forces. This is because the Military Staff Committee established in the Charter has never been activated due to reluctance of the P-5 states to share military information, coordinate logistics, and contribute troops to jointly-commanded operations.¹⁸

In practice, most Security Council resolutions simply urge negotiation to settle disputes and offer the Council's "good offices" to investigate the situation, organize talks between the groups in question, etc. For example, in 2007

[t]he U.N. Security Council ... unanimously passed a resolution that expanded the mandate of its mission in Iraq. Resolution 1770 was hailed as a new phase of the U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq, or UNAMI. The resolution says the U.N. seeks to "foster regional dialogue" on matters such as "border security, energy and refugees." It also says the U.N. will work with Iraqis to "resolve disputed internal boundaries" and promote discussion on national reconciliation.¹⁹

Another tactic often used by the Security Council is to impose diplomatic and economic sanctions, as it did against Iraq from 1990 to 2003.²⁰ The goal of sanctions is to encourage a state to change its policy. But because sanctions can have an adverse effect on a state's economy and people, sometimes they back fire and make matters worse.

¹⁵ United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter I, Article 2.

¹⁶ Michael J. Glennon, "Why the Security Council Failed," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2003; [journal online]; available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20030501faessay11217/michael-j-glennon/why-the-security-council-failed.html>.

¹⁷ "Security Council Authorizes Deployment of United Nations-African Union 'Hybrid' Peace Operation in Bid to Resolve Darfur Conflict," United Nations News Centre, available online at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/sc9089.doc.htm>.

¹⁸ United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter VII.

¹⁹ "United Nations Considers a Greater Role In Iraq," *CNN*, September 23, 2007, available online at <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/09/22/un.iraq/index.html#CNNSTCVideo>. Like other Security Council resolutions, the full text of this resolution is available on the Security Council website, <http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/index.html>.

²⁰ "Sanctions against Iraq," *Global Policy Forum*, available online at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/sanction/indexone.htm> accessed September 19th, 2007.

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Recent and Current Events

In 2008, issues on the Security Council agenda included the situation in the Middle East, the Palestinian question, non-proliferation in Iran, and sanctions on Somalia.²¹ Other major issues were negotiations between the leaders of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities aimed at reunifying the island,²² and the situation in Georgia, where there were approximately 192,000 displaced persons due to the conflict between Russia and Georgia over the two break away regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.²³

The development of nuclear energy programs in many countries raises questions about whether and how the development and use of nuclear weapons can be controlled. The Security Council has been heavily involved in this issue, especially with regard to non-P-5 states that have nuclear programs, such as North Korea and Iran. In September 2009, when the United States held the Security Council presidency, US President Barack Obama chaired a rare Security Council session attended by heads of state. At the meeting, the Council passed Resolution S/RES/1887, which urged states to recommit to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, strengthen nuclear inspections, and secure nuclear materials within the next four years.²⁴ According to reporter David E. Sanger,

Mr. Obama accomplished that goal in part by acknowledging that the United States was part of the nuclear problem and would have to accept limits on its own arsenal — steps Mr. Bush always rejected. Mr. Obama committed to winning Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which President Bill Clinton could not get through the Senate, and acknowledged that the United States had an obligation under the treaty to move toward elimination of its own arsenal.²⁵

This was an important step by the US because both the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) have stipulations that pertain to states that already have nuclear weapons. According to the NPT, the only legal nuclear weapons states are those that had declared nuclear programs when the Treaty was written in 1968, namely the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China. All other state parties to the Treaty agreed to pursue nuclear programs only for energy, not for weapons. In exchange, the five existing nuclear states promised to “pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to ... nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”²⁶ Despite frequent discussions in the United Nations General Assembly, no progress has been made on general and complete nuclear disarmament.

Similarly, although the CTBT was negotiated many years ago, it cannot enter into force unless ratified by 150 countries, including:

²¹“Program of Work for the Current Month,” (September 2008), Security Council Report website, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/site/c.glKWLeMTIsG/b.1076015/>, accessed 7 September 2008.

²² “Security Council lauds launch of negotiations in reunifying Cyprus”, UN News Centre, 4 September 2008, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=27934&Cr=cyprus&Cr1=>.

²³ “Revised UN estimates show 192,000 uprooted during Georgia conflict”, UN News Centre, 12 September 2008, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=28032&Cr=Georgia&Cr1=>.

²⁴ United Nations, *Security Council Resolution 1887*, 24 September 2009, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/523/74/PDF/N0952374.pdf?OpenElement>.

²⁵ David E. Sanger, “Security Council Adopts Nuclear Arms Measure,” *New York Times*, 24 September 2009; [article online]; http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/25/world/25prexy.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=obama%20%22security%20council%2&st=cse.

²⁶ “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT),” 1968, Articles II, IV, VI, available at <http://www.un.org/events/npt2005/npttreaty.html>.

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all 44 of the States mentioned in Annex 2 of the Treaty – those which possessed nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons technology at the time it opened for signature in 1996... So far, 35 of these nations, including France, Russia and the United Kingdom, have ratified it, but China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the United States and Iran, among other nations, have not.²⁷

In April 2007, the Security Council held its first-ever discussion of climate change. The United Kingdom (UK), which held the Council presidency at the time, put the issue on the agenda to “highlight ‘what a sensitive, difficult issue’ climate change is and the importance of addressing its potential security ramifications -- from rising temperatures increasing water levels and swallowing up island nations to possible famine.”²⁸ Reaction to this meeting was mixed, with some states welcoming Security Council concern and calling for resolutions on the matter, and other states arguing that climate change was not a traditional security issue and should continue to be dealt with by the full-membership GA instead of by the limited-membership Security Council.

In 2010, the Security Council passed a resolution placing further economic sanctions on Iran for its noncompliance with the NPT in continuing to develop its nuclear weapons program, as well as a number of resolutions concerning the peacekeeping operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and security concerns in Somalia and Afghanistan.²⁹

In March 2011, the Security Council authorized “all necessary means” to protect civilians in Libya. In doing so, it acted on the principle of “The Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) civilians from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and other atrocities even if this means violating national sovereignty. This principle was adopted by the GA in September 2009.³⁰ Since March 2011, several members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have assisted Libyan rebels in their fight to depose President Moammar Kadafi. In doing so, they have exceeded the Security Council mandate to protect civilians. As a result, some observers, such as Philippe Boloignon of Human Rights Watch, argue that the international consensus behind R2P has weakened.³¹ According to others, such as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, “The history of atrocity crimes is not one of acting too boldly, but of doing too little, too late. ...[T]hose facing mass rape and violence ... look to us for protection, not comforting words or another five years of debate.”³²

Agenda Topics for the MMUN Conference

At the 2011 Montana Model United Nations Conference, the Security Council will address the following three topics:

1. The Situation in Iran
2. The Situation in Sudan
3. Global Warming as a Security Issue

²⁷ “Ratification of UN-backed nuclear treaty nears milestone of 150 countries,” UN News Centre, 19 August 2009, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=31809&Cr=Nuclear&Cr1=>.

²⁸ “UN to Discuss Climate as Security Issue,” *Associated Press*, April 5, 2007; [article online]; <http://www.globalpolicy.org/soecon/envronmt/climate/2007/0405climatesecurity.htm>

²⁹ United Nations Security Council, “Resolutions: 2010,” available from http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc_resolutions10.htm.

³⁰ “General Assembly agrees to hold more talks on responsibility to protect,” UN News Centre, 14 September 2009, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=32047>

³¹ Philippe Boloignon, “After Libya, the question: To protect or depose?,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 August 2011, available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/aug/25/opinion/la-oe-boloignon-libya-responsibility-t20110825>

³² UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service, “UN General Assembly discusses the Responsibility to Protect (R2P),” 25 July 2011, available at <http://www.un-ngls.org/spip.php?article3521>

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When writing your position papers and resolutions, think broadly about these issues, remembering the overarching goals of the United Nations and the Security Council, as well as the perspective of the country you represent.

Recommended Reading

Annan, Kofi. "In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security, and Human Rights for All." Report of the Secretary General. 21 March 2005. Available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/>.

This report by the former secretary general summarizes some of the problems of the Security Council, as well as many of the contemporary issues related to disarmament, peace, and security.

"The Charter of the United Nations." Available online at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/>.

This charter founded the United Nations and serves as its basis for procedure and authority. It is vital for delegates to be familiar with Chapters V, VI, VII, and VIII, which pertain to the Security Council.

"Security Council Report." Website. Available at <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/>.

This Columbia University web site monitors Security Council actions and resolutions. It is an excellent source for information on the Council's recent activities and challenges.

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). "Armed Conflicts and Conflict Management" and "Arms Control and Disarmament Documentary Survey." Website. Available at <http://www.sipri.org/>.

SIPRI provides information on the number, types, and locations of contemporary wars; the military forces, expenditures, and agreements of various states; the status of various arms control treaties; and contemporary security challenges. It is an excellent resource for learning about many vital issues in peace and security.

"UN News Centre." Available online at <http://www.un.org/News/>.

This site will help you keep up with the unfolding events in Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and other current conflicts, as well as Security Council briefings and actions.

"UN Security Council." Website. Available at <http://www.un.org/Docs/sc>.

This is the official website for the Security Council. It offers a wealth of information on the Council's current and past activities, including reports and resolutions.